

# A Critical Evaluation of Some Problematic Hadith Narratives

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## **Abstract**

This study examines some issues critical to understanding the hadith literature in the modern context. It argues that this literature, despite its widely accepted status as a foundational source of Islam second in importance only to the Qur'an, continues to be a subject of controversy in some Muslim and non-Muslim quarters. This article brings together a small sample of problematic hadith narratives for the purpose of critically evaluating them according to certain criteria. This will be the basis for passing judgment over these pre-selected hadith that are, for instance, textually incompatible with the purport of the Qur'an.

## **Introduction**

The subject of hadith literature continues to be contested, given its wide circulation in both textual and Internet form, as a normative guide for those who seek to learn/understand more about their faith. Some point out that these narratives include teachings or contents that range from the sublime to the ridiculous, despite the critical and textual analysis that took place during the early Islamic centuries to get rid of such traditions. This essay seeks to evaluate a select number of them according to criteria that will be spelled out below.

My study's basic premise is that the existence of textual analysis of hadith by previous Muslim scholars notwithstanding, further studies are called for if we are going to either partially or completely dispel the dark shadow of unease that continues to hang over this corpus of literature due to the lingering presence of some that remain dubious. This long overdue

exercise is necessary to salvage the body of hadith from the limbo of uncertainty and doubtfulness that seems to surround it in the eyes of the still Doubting Thomases.

My approach does not call for debunking the whole hadith tradition, however, as some Ahl al-Qur'an groups have contended and demanded.<sup>1</sup> If this tradition were to be completely abandoned, all that would be left is an unbridgeable gap between us and the Prophet, whose prophetic activity laid the foundation for Qur'anic discourse. In fact, this is not a radical deconstruction of hadith but rather a salvaging project meant to entrench further the process begun by earlier scholars to separate or sort out and discard some of what may seem, at least to us, to be indefensible hadiths regardless of their categorization in terms of the traditional Muslim criteria of *matn* (text) and *isnad* (chain of transmission) considerations.

Needless to say, far more able or qualified scholars of the formative age of early Islamic history have raised some of the types of questions or concerns that this paper discusses. If that is the case, one may legitimately ask why this essay does not undertake a detailed study of classical sources on the issues examined here? My response is to pose my own query: If the classical scholars had made such criticisms as those that are modestly made in this paper (they, in fact, did), why are we still having this discussion of problematic hadiths a millenium or so later? What has happened between the age of hadith compilers and our modern period that necessitates the asking of the same or similar critical questions? This is the crux of my paper. Accordingly, it is the task of other scholars to engage the classical texts on their own grounds if that is what they wish to do. My objective here is to examine a small sample of problematic hadiths that contemporary Muslims have to deal with in different contexts in their daily discourses with each other.

It is worth repeating that earlier Muslim scholars diligently applied their critical methodology to the hadith literature in the context of their time and the needs of their age. Nevertheless, there is room for further rethinking and tweaking of their ideas to go beyond their methodology. We can begin by asking the types of questions that require problematizing hadith in terms of the issues relevant to our day.

This paper argues that such an undertaking is necessary, given the conservative attitude one encounters in mosques, Islamic centers, organizations, and some traditional or Islamic institutions of learning, especially in this age of resurgent Islam. This uncritical acceptance of the corpus of hadith inherited from earlier generations needs to be questioned. Whenever the issue of

some hadiths that make little sense is raised, the dominant position in a number of Muslim circles is to place them beyond criticism by claiming that they appear in *Sahih Bukhari* or *Sahih Muslim*, thereby closing off any critical discussion. The problem, however, is that al-Bukhari's methodology, while sound, did not completely remove all of the unreliable hadiths from the hadith collections. As a result, substantive issues remain and explain why Muslims have various views on them, ranging from complete rejection (the hard-line position of the Ahl al-Qur'an groups, which is more extreme than even that of the Orientalists) to accepting all hadith but reserving the right to reject those that are considered to be, for instance, misogynist, to give just one example.

Muslims (as a religious community) and their scholars (as a body of interpreters of a hallowed tradition) clearly remain conservative and, with some exceptions, have not embraced new methodologies that seek to advance the science of hadith criticism beyond what it was in the early Islamic centuries. Serious attempts to deal with some aspects of an unwieldy tradition, which includes narratives reflecting particular ethnic, regional, gender, and other biases held during the time of hadith collection, need to be undertaken. Some notions of the Qur'an's conceptual space or universe may be helpful in determining what lies outside its boundaries.

Muslims need to seriously engage this body of literature, which has been very contested,<sup>2</sup> by reflecting on its multiple uses, functions, and relationship to the Qur'an.<sup>3</sup> But first, what is this oral literature/tradition's relevance in the greater scheme of things in Islam? Does it function, in terms of its uses, the same way as the oral traditions of non-literate societies, or is it more like Judaism's rabbinical traditions? Why were so many hadiths collected and later written down in the first place, when we are told that the first Muslims mainly avoided writing down the Prophet's sayings so as not to confuse them with scripture? What purpose do oral narratives, as they are crafted, serve? Are they carriers of specific messages embodying the thinking of the time when they were created? What do they reveal about a particular situation, and what do they legitimate? Do people remember "selective" truth, and is this why al-Bukhari had to apply his method of hadith criticism by authenticating or de-authenticating certain hadiths to separate the wheat from the chaff? Is this literature constructed as an aid to understanding the Qur'an's message and prescriptions, or as a separate entity that has taken on a life of its own beyond its original purpose for existence? Can we today formulate a method that advances the process of hadith criticism further than was originally intended and, if so, how do we accomplish this?

Such an engagement would get rid of misogynist strands as well as problematic narratives that tend to emphasize certain views current in the past. Examining hadith formulations in terms of the concrete historical and political developments that occurred in those early centuries would help contextualize the relationship between oral traditions and the development of Muslim society during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods. It is here that the debate over the Qur'an versus traditions (where they contradict each other) can be located.

## **The Context of the Study: Oral Tradition**

What purpose do oral traditions serve, and do they possess any historical value? Western scholarship did not initially consider such information from pre-literate societies to have much historical relevance or value. The person largely responsible for transforming this view in the academic community was Jan Vansina, who considered an oral tradition to be “verbal messages which are reported statements from the past beyond the present generation.”<sup>4</sup> In his formulation of this ethno-history, each tradition could be viewed as “a series of historical documents all lost except for the last one and usually interpreted by every link in the chain of transmission.”<sup>5</sup> The tradition serves as evidence not necessarily for a specific event, but perhaps for later ones.

There is, as in the case of hadith, a chain of transmission that one needs to investigate to ascertain the validity of the oral “text” or information. Unlike hadith, however, an oral tradition is a collective form of knowledge possessed by an ethnic group and is crucial to its survival. This knowledge is kept alive, for instance, by being performed in ritual dances (drumming, dancing, and singing) and festive ceremonies (blending it into one or more stories) and, as such, becomes part of the social system. This does not, however, preclude the presence of individuals with a special role in society, for example, *griots* (the praise singers or gate keepers of culture, history, and genealogies, such as those in West Africa) and those elders who have accumulated a lot of wisdom and are conversant with local folklore. In such a society, the oral tradition (constantly performed or reenacted to keep it alive) is the “scriptural text,” the interpretation of which is inextricably bound to changing historical and cultural contexts. To commit a tradition to writing in such a culture is to disembody it from the social structure, which removes it from the collective or societal domain.<sup>6</sup>

Oral history emphasizes conducting interviews to ascertain the source of information; oral historians often attempt to record the memories of many people when studying a particular event. Given that some of the interviewees may provide half-forgotten or distorted information, researchers are interested in the point(s) of agreement (much like the hadith compilers) by as many interviewees (or sources of information) as possible in order to reconstruct an event within a tradition.

## Discussion

Turning from the oral traditions of Africa and elsewhere to hadith narratives, one can say that the Prophet's example (*sunnah*) comes closest in some sense to these traditions. This is primarily due to the fact that like oral traditions, the Sunnah has been communicated mostly through the practical examples of living and practicing Muslim communities. As long as this was the case, it had far more flexibility than was the case later on, when it became "fixed" (i.e., equated with the hadith literature), although understandably to provide an additional source for deriving law for the expanding Muslim community. Al-Shafi'i (d. 819) made the Sunnah (read hadith, for the two became synonymous)<sup>7</sup> equal to Qur'an in authority due to his reasoning that obeying the Prophet was obeying God (Qur'an 4:80). This caused the process of writing the hadith literature down to assume some urgency by the ninth century, when major hadith compilers emerged.

In contrast to al-Shafi'i, Malik (d. 795) was far more practical and responded differently to the Sunnah-hadith relationship. He tended to give prime importance to the *sunnah* current in Madinah (or, more properly, its inhabitants' *`amal* [practice]), the constituent parts of which were the Qur'an, the Sunnah dating to the Prophet's time, and the *ra'y* (opinions) of later authorities. For instance, if a case should arise in which there was a conflict between the *ijma`* (consensus; in effect, *`amal*) of Madinah and any hadith narratives, the former would take precedence, for he believed that each hadith helped explicate a legal principle. Thus he differed from al-Shafi'i, who used the hadith literature to lay a foundation for authority. This provided for more flexibility, as the hadith literature was not privileged over the Sunnah. In other words, hadiths had normative value only as long as they did not contradict the Sunnah preserved in the *`amal* of Madinan scholars. The above notwithstanding, this literature remained important for Malik and his *Al-Muwatta'* (The Well Trodden [or Smoothed] Path) is a collection of legal/juristic traditions compiled for a specific *fiqhi* (jurisprudential) purpose.

The development of hadith compilations exhibited important parallels to that of the diverse texts of rabbinic Judaism (and, to a lesser extent, the Christian Gospels, although these are not a source of legal authority per se). In other words, just as in the formulation of rabbinic Judaism (a post-Temple-destruction innovation or development), Jewish scholars introduced the Mishna (the corpus of legal and non-legal matters) and in so doing created more rules (“self-imposed hardship”) than were necessary. Similarly, Muslims achieved the same results when they wrote down the hadiths (until then for the most part circulating orally) during the Abbasid era (viz., the ninth century), when non-Arabs (especially Persians) were in the ascendancy and the Muslim community was characterized by great ethnic diversity. This is reflected in the fact that none of the six major hadith scholars/compiler mentioned below was an Arab. In this period of Islamic history, hadith literature emerged and in some sense came to mediate or mirror transformations and even debates taking place within the larger Muslim society.

The number of hadiths in oral circulation before being subjected to critical examination was enormous, reaching way over half a million. Many had been forged in order to glorify not just the Prophet (mythicizing him) but also his successors, his family and their progeny; advance or legitimate the political or religious agendas of various factions related to the Sufiyyah, Qadariyyah, Jabariyyah, Mu`tazilah, Shi`ah, Khawarij, Umayyad, Abbasid, Jewish/Christian converts to Islam, and so on; advance ethnic or regional interests; and cash in on the storytelling skills by those narrators (*qussas*) who could manufacture numerous tales. Under these circumstances, both texts and chains of narrators were fabricated. The distortions of memory, especially with the long passage of time, further compounded the problem. This is why Muhammad Haykal rejected the miraculous stories found in the Prophet’s biography.<sup>8</sup> Legendary stories, such as a tree speaking to the Prophet, were created later probably for their awe-inspiring quality and wide appeal to ordinary Muslims.

Some opine, however, that these stories violate the Qur’an’s appeal to reason and emphasis on (not so much the supernatural) but the wonders of nature and creation.<sup>9</sup> Others point out that while such stories were fabricated and should be discarded, they should not be rejected due to the presence of miracles, because does not the Qur’an itself mention miracles performed by earlier prophets to further their prophetic missions? Be that as it may, this does not get us around the fact that the Prophet’s ultimate miracle is, according to the Qur’an itself, the Qur’anic revelation and not

the fantastic stories that one finds in the hadith literature but not in the Qur'an.

Since variants of reports were transmitted by different individuals from one generation to another, a way to control for accuracy needed to be established. Within this context, al-Bukhari formulated his critical methodology for determining degrees of reliability. Yet one can raise questions about overplaying the reliability of memory for information pertaining to the mythic age of Islam (seventh century) that had occurred two or more centuries earlier.

One may be tempted to argue that within the Sunni tradition, the wholesale rejection of hundreds of thousands of hadiths (with less than ten thousand accepted) demonstrates that the strict standards of the early compilers like Muhammad ibn Isma'il al-Bukhari (d. 256/870), Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj al-Qushayri (d. 261/875), Muhammad ibn Isa al-Tirmidhi (d. 279/892), Abu Da'ud al-Sijistani (d. 261/875), Ahmad ibn Shu'ayb al-Nasa'i (d. 303/915), and Muhammad ibn Majah (d. 273/886) totally succeeded in the hadith recension project.<sup>10</sup> Yet as Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami (writing within the Muslim tradition) notes, many scholars still had reservations about eighty narrators and some 110 hadiths.<sup>11</sup>

Al-Bukhari, whose selection criteria for sound/authentic hadiths were the most strict, and Muslim's compilations were considered the most reliable, followed by the *sunan* (plural of *sunnah*) works of Abu Dawud, al-Tirmidhi, al-Nasa'i, and Ibn Majah. While these compilers also recorded weak hadiths (e.g., Abu Dawud and al-Tirmidhi), they made it a point to indicate this, whereas Ibn Majah apparently did not do so.<sup>12</sup> On this account, some have indicated a preference for al-Darimi's *Sunan* over his.

## The Criteria

The traditional Muslim attitude toward hadith is best summed up by Mustafa al-Azami:

[T]he sunna, or we may say hadith, of the Prophet ... is the second main source of Islamic law, valid forever, and the life of the Prophet is a model which ought to be followed by Muslims irrespective of time and place. For this reason, the Companions, even in the life of the Prophet, began to diffuse the knowledge of the sunna and they were ordered by the Prophet to do so.<sup>13</sup>

Given this understanding, Muslim scholars consider Islamic law and jurisprudence as having grown continuously together on the basis of the two foundational sources of Islam and elaborated further by the consensus of

analogy. In contrast, the western view has been that in the centuries following Muhammad's death and the establishment of the Islamic empire of faith, members of the early community, which included converts from other religions, sought guidance in the face of radically new situations and asked questions emerging from their own cultural tradition that had never occurred to Muhammad's Arab followers. To respond to such questions, instances from his life were recalled, but not always accurately. This led to a body of recollections that came to be known as the *sunnah* of Muhammad, consisting of tens upon tens of thousands of hadiths that purported to describe his words and deeds accurately. Such scholars as Ignaz Goldziher, Joseph Schacht, and Patricia Crone nevertheless assume that many hadiths were made up despite the efforts of hadith compilers to authenticate them.

Other scholars, both Muslim and non-Muslim, such as Nabia Abbot and Fazlur Rahman, take a far more moderate or nuanced middle position between that of hardcore skeptics such as Schacht on one hand and al-Azami on the other, who represents the more traditional Muslim view on hadith literature. Rahman, perhaps influenced by Schacht, considered most of the hadith corpus to be the *sunnah-ijtihad* of the first generations that, after a serious struggle, received the sanction of *ijma`*.<sup>14</sup> In other words the hadith literature, rather than conferring "absolute permanence on the living *sunnah* synthesis of the first three centuries" as the post-Shafi'i consensus contended and succeeded in bringing about in practice, is normative precisely insofar as it confirms the Sunnah as a living practice of interpretation.<sup>15</sup> For him, *ijma`* was a continuous process that allowed for creativity and flexibility, much as Malik contended, as it linked the Sunnah to *ijtihad* in a dynamic relationship that was undermined by al-Shafi'i's concept of the Sunnah as ideal, literal, and specific.

Later scholars, among them Harald Motzki and Yasin Dutton, have challenged the more hardcore skeptical views by scrutinizing the methodologies and analyses of those critics who cast doubt on the hadith literature (especially those relating to or supporting legal rulings), the historicity of hadith transmissions, and Schacht's claim that this corpus emerged only later as a secondary phenomenon. Dutton thinks that al-Shafi'i's formulae of equating the Sunnah with hadith is one reason why Schacht was misled into making the erroneous assumption that the hadiths, for the most part, belong to a later stage of legal development and therefore can only be considered as fabrications.<sup>16</sup> Similarly, Motzki analyzed Abd al-Razzaq's *Musannaf* and was able to establish a correlation between the qualities of many hadiths and the *isnads* through which they were allegedly transmitted. For him, this correla-



tion implied that the *isnads* were generally not randomly attached to *matns* and that, therefore, the latter were for the most part likely to be accurately attributed.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, in relation to the development of early jurisprudence in Makkah and Madinah, Dutton wrote:

That Medinan *`amal* as depicted in the *Muwatta`* represents a continuous development of the "practice" of Islam from its initial origin in the Qur'an, via the Sunna of the Prophet ... and the efforts (*ijtihad*) of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs and the other Companions, right through the time of the early Umayyad caliphs and governors and other authorities among the Successors and the Successors of the Successors up to ... Malik.<sup>18</sup>

The above notwithstanding, the assault on hadith literature continues even among Muslims for some of the reasons already mentioned. My view is that the hadith, as a body of literature, is valid and has its place as a foundational source of Islam next in importance to the Qur'an; however, the process of house cleaning needs to be taken further to eliminate those that make absolutely no sense. Unfortunately, Muslim scholars (traditional *ulama*) have done very little to advance the cause of Islam by coming up with new strategies to deal with such hadiths. For the most part, they seem to think that attacking this literature will weaken the foundations upon which Islamic teachings are based. By doing so, however, they implicitly (if not explicitly, in the eyes of their critics) simultaneously advance the belief in the hadiths' inerrancy. The assumption underlying this position is the fear that hadith criticism would do away with information that provides insight into certain aspects of early Islamic history and serves as an important source for deriving laws.

There is no question that early voices need to be heard. But perhaps they should be checked, at the very least, against Qur'anic teachings to ascertain their genuineness. This should be the final arbiter for internal self-criticism, given that Muslims, especially those writing and thinking within the Islamic framework, accept the Qur'an as the ultimate authority.

We should mention here that such modern Muslim reformers or revivalist thinkers as Shibli Nu'mani (influenced by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan), Rashid Rida (*Al-Manar*, 29/1, 1928, influenced by Muhammad Abduh), Maulana Muhammad Akram Khan (belonging to the Khilafat and Ahl-i-Hadith movements of the Indian Subcontinent), such Ikhwan al-Muslimin scholars as Muhammad al-Ghazali and Hasan al-Turabi, have each, in their own way, made or added their contributions to the growing body of literature calling for the right to *ijtihad* (independent reasoning) in engaging

Islam's religious texts. Some, such as Rahman, go much further and call for a substantial rethinking of Islam's "social content" and not simply just returning to its basic texts, as the old Salafi revivalists have insisted upon doing.

In any case, for the purpose of this essay I need to revisit the criteria that will help me thresh out the contradictions in hadith production by tentatively suggesting what shape the contours of modern hadith criticism could take. These criteria, which may or may not differ from those of the classical scholars, are applied to only a few select hadiths. My objective is relatively modest – a recognition of the fact that a far more detailed study awaits a team of Muslim scholars from different disciplines working together to devise a broad-based criteria that can be applied to this body of literature. With training in various disciplines, both classical Islamic and modern (e.g., the social sciences and the humanities), these scholars will be far better positioned to apply their expertise within a far-reaching modern methodological approach to the subject.

With the above caveat, I will now outline the limited criteria by which the issue of hadith criticism can be approached in terms of the questions guiding this exercise. The criteria already include some of the general rules (far more complex than are presented here) that guided earlier scholars. My criteria are as follows:

1. Is a particular narrative to be taken literally, and is there a historical context for it? Alternatively, is a mythic rather than a literal interpretation intended?
2. Do internal inconsistencies and anachronisms invalidate the narrative? For instance, does it mention a clearly extra-Qur'anic event or story that is derived from another religious tradition or pre-Islamic Arab folklore?
3. What is the reasoning/wisdom behind the narrative, or what moral does it teach?
4. Does the narrative contain an exaggerated statement that the Prophet could not have made or present an unlikely attribution to him that makes no sense in light of the historical conditions of his time? Does it have evidence from the Qur'an to back it up? Is the material too contradictory to make any sense? Does it contradict the Qur'an?
5. Does the hadith advance doctrines/positions that contradict what the Qur'an says about, for instance, how women should be treated/viewed within Islam or promote a doctrine of unbridled intercession that undermines Qur'anic teachings of personal responsibility, fairness, and so on?

6. Does the hadith prescribe a sentence/judgment/ruling that supersedes what the Qur'an clearly states? Does it contradict the clear meanings or intents of the Qur'anic wording?
7. Does it support particular political/theological or sectarian agendas?
8. Does it emphasize miracles of the Prophet that are nowhere mentioned in the Qur'an, miracles that are clearly embellished and may be the work of imaginative storytellers? Does it make statements that contradict facts or general knowledge?
9. Does it reveal misogynist attitudes or what is unreasonable, contrary to reason, and unfair?
10. Is it futuristic or representative of messianic motifs?

To test any hadith's validity we must examine a small sample of hadiths according to the criteria outlined above and check the language for anachronisms (e.g., a hadith being tailored to the time of its writing), internal inconsistencies, misogyny, unbridled miracle-promoting (incidental departures from physical laws) with respect to the Prophet, and so on. Muslim literalists have used some of these hadiths as a club with which to beat others (e.g., to put women in their "place"). Yet is any defense possible within the Muslim tradition for those hadiths that clearly violate what the Qur'an says and what common sense tells us? Serious inquiry will not rescue such hadiths, but it will put to rest hadiths of this type that have circulated for far too long.

## Applying the Criteria

As mentioned above, we need to have a clear idea of the Qur'anic vision or worldview against which individual hadiths can be compared/measured. I will select a few areas (e.g., themes of intercession, sectarianism, miracles, and others) to illustrate this point.<sup>19</sup> I am not interested in the degrees of genuineness according to the traditional criteria used by past Muslim scholars/compilers. A sample of such hadiths<sup>20</sup> is presented below.

### *Intercession*

As a general rule, any hadith that disagrees, either explicitly or implicitly, with or is opposed to what has been revealed in the Qur'an should be discarded, even if it is a *hadith sahih* or *hadith qudsi*. Let's begin by considering a recorded *hadith qudsi*:

Allah's Messenger said: "On the Day of Resurrection, my Ummah (nation) will be gathered into three groups. One sort will enter Paradise without rendering an account (of their deeds). Another sort will be reckoned on easy account and admitted into Paradise. Yet another sort will come bearing on their backs heaps of sins like great mountains. Allah will ask the angels though He knows best about them: 'Who are these people?' They will reply: 'They are humble slaves of yours.' He will say: 'Unload the sins from them and put the same over the Jews and Christians, then let the humble slaves get into Paradise by virtue of My Mercy.'"<sup>21</sup>

This hadith clearly violates criteria 4, 5, and 6 because it contains a certain arbitrariness and gross unfairness in the service of the doctrine of intercession and also contradicts the Qur'an on issues of justice. Therefore it should be rejected. It unjustly victimizes Jews and Christians by transferring moral responsibility to them for something they did not do. Finally, it makes no sense that a merciful and just God would be so arbitrary and unfair as to render such a one-sided judgment. Moreover, the Qur'an states:

And no bearer of burdens shall be made to bear another's burden; and if one weighed down by his/her load calls upon (another) to help him/her carry it, nothing thereof may be carried [by that other] even if it be one's near of kin. (35:18)

In addition, one must consider the following verses:

Verily, those who have attained to faith [in this divine writ], as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians, and the Sabians – all who believe in God and the Last Day, and do righteous deeds – shall have their reward with their Sustainer; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve. (2:62)

Today, then, no human beings shall be wronged in the least, nor shall you be requited for aught but what you were doing [on Earth]. (36:54)

O you who have attained to faith, spend [in Our way] out of what We have granted you as sustenance ere there come a Day when there will be no bargaining, and no friendship, and no intercession. (2:254)

Moreover, Qur'an 7:188 and 46:9 assert that even the Prophet, whose powers are exaggerated out of all proportion in the popular imagination of Muslims, has no power to benefit or harm anyone, except as God wills.

Say [O Prophet]: “It is not within my power to bring benefit to, or avert harm from, myself, except as God may please. And if I knew that which is beyond the reach of human perception, abundant good fortune would surely have fallen to my lot and no evil would ever have touched me. I am nothing but a warner and a herald of glad tidings unto people who believe. (7:188)

These verses, which we do not deal with exegetically here, clearly negate those hadiths that emphasize intercession. While the Qur’an does not endorse this doctrine – it merely hints at it in, for example, the “Throne” verse – this hadith promotes it fully, throwing all caution to the wind. Rahman concludes that the whole temper of the Qur’an is against both saviorship (the Christian doctrine) and the intercession that goes with it.<sup>22</sup> The traditional Muslim view that took shape in the second and third Islamic centuries, ironically, denied this possibility to non-Muslims even as it affirmed it for sinful Muslims. This belief was later extended from the Prophet to the saints in popular Sufism, with its emphasis on saintly veneration.

Thus there is no ground for accepting hadiths that promote intercession. Given that its emphasis is on personal responsibility, the Qur’an specifically rejects the Christian idea of Original Sin, which makes one person carry the sins of another or others, and condemns any form of mediation by living or dead family members, saints, or prophets as creating partners with God.

Therefore, the most that one can make of Qur’an 10:3 and 19:87 is that they allude to God’s granting prophets the “permission to ‘intercede,’ symbolically, for such of the sinners as will have already achieved His redemptive acceptance (*rida’*) by virtue of their repentance or basic goodness.”<sup>23</sup> In other words, this simply confirms God’s approval of the sincere repenters by extending His mercy to them, as is evident from “[on that Day] none will have [the benefit of] intercession unless he/she has [in his/her lifetime] entered into a bond with the Most Gracious” (19:87).

### *Contradictory to the Qur’an*

Narrated by Anas ibn Malik: A group of eight men from the tribe of Ukil came to the Prophet and then they found the climate of Medina unsuitable for them. So, they said, “O Allah’s Apostle! Provide us with some milk.” Allah’s Apostle said, “I recommend that you should join the herd of camels.” So they went and drank the urine and the milk of the camels (as a medicine) till they became healthy and fat. Then they killed the shep-

herd and drove away the camels, and they became unbelievers after they were Muslims. When the Prophet was informed by a shouter for help, he sent some men in their pursuit, and before the sun rose high, they were brought, and he had their hands and feet cut off. Then he ordered for nails which were heated and passed over their eyes, and they were left in the Harra (i.e., rocky land in Medina). They asked for water, and nobody provided them with water till they died.” (Abu Qilaba, a sub-narrator said, “They committed murder and theft and fought against Allah and His Apostle, and spread evil in the land.”)<sup>24</sup>

Other versions<sup>25</sup> report that up to eighty of these nomads from Ukil or Uraynah came to Madinah. Captured and then punished for their crime with amputation and blinded by having their eyes branded with heated iron pieces before being left in al-Harra, their request for water was denied so that they would die from the sun’s unbearable heat.

This hadith contradicts the Qur’an based on criteria 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6. The story, supposedly narrated by Malik, teaches no moral (criterion 3), is an example of arbitrary justice, promotes cruelty and even torture of the worst kind (not the Qur’anic teaching of being merciful and returning good for evil [28:54]). The bizarre recommendation to drink camel’s urine for medicinal purposes is not in keeping with the Qur’anic teachings on cleanliness and eating clean food (16:114-16). Furthermore, not even the most conservative literalist Muslims tell other Muslims to drink camel urine based on this supposed *sunnah*.

Ibn Kathir, the two Jalals, and other Muslim Qur’anic commentators cite this hadith in the context of explaining 5:33, which reads as follows (Muhammad Asad’s translation):

It is but a just recompense for those who make war on God and His apostle, and endeavour to spread corruption on earth, that they are being slain in great numbers, or crucified in great numbers, or have, in result of their pervasiveness, their hands and feet cut off in great numbers, or are being [entirely] banished from [the face of] the earth: such is their ignominy in the world.

Asad rejects the position of those classical commentators who interpret or consider this passage a legal injunction that spells out the punishment for those who make war on God and His Messenger and spread corruption on Earth. His challenge is grounded in arguments based upon both the linguistic usage or rules of grammar as well as the intent or meaning behind the words of the Qur’an.<sup>26</sup>

First, as he points out, the verse's four passive verbs (i.e., slain, crucified, cut off, and banished) are used in the present tense and do not necessarily suggest the future or even the imperative mood, as commentators believe. Second, in accordance with a fundamental rule of Arabic grammar, the four passive verbs (in the plural form in which they appear) denote being slain, crucified, cut off, and banished in great numbers. If we accept the view of many commentators that these are ordained punishments, this would imply a certain arbitrariness to large numbers of people being punished in this way. How could such a legal injunction devised for punishing many people be applied to one or two persons? Third, in terms of application, how is one to interpret "they shall be banished from the [face of the] earth" if this is, indeed, a legally enforceable injunction? In other words, to where are they to be banished if they are no longer welcome on Earth? To get around this difficulty, some commentators have been forced to substitute the words "the land of Islam" (others have conjectured that a subterranean dungeon is meant) for the word "Earth." Fourth, and the most convincing objection, is the inconsistency and irony involved if the Qur'an were to enunciate a divine law in the exact same terms it attributes to Pharaoh, an "enemy of God" who called for the mass crucifixion and mass mutilation of his opponents.<sup>27</sup>

In light of the above, Asad understands "cutting off of one's hands and feet" as being synonymous with "destroying one's power" or, alternatively, denoting "being mutilated physically or metaphorically," just as "being crucified" is used metonymically to mean "being tortured." For him, the verse refers to the spiritual and other consequences accruing to those who make war on God. It goes without saying that Asad rejects the hadith we mentioned above, which was the basis for the exegetes interpreting Qur'an 5:33 the way that they did.

One final note here on the related subject of *hadd* (criminal) punishments is that *Sahih al-Bukhari*,<sup>28</sup> as reported by Ibn Abbas, prescribes the penalty for *zina* (the term as used in the Qur'an covers both fornication and adultery) as stoning (this is clearly Mosaic law), whereas the Qur'an prescribes flogging (24:2-3). Similarly, while Islam considers apostasy a grave sin, nowhere does the Qur'an specifically call for any punishment solely for apostasy in this world. Thus it is a matter left to God and the apostate, a position that affirms the Qur'anic teaching of the freedom of faith (2:256). It is, in fact, the hadith literature that calls for capital punishment for anyone who leaves Islam.<sup>29</sup> Clearly, therefore, the corpus of hadith has been the theological foundation for the death sentence wherever it is found.

## Misogynism

Narrated by Abu Sa`id al-Khudhri: “Once, Allah’s Messenger went out of the *musalla* (to offer the prayer) of `Id al-Adha. Then he passed by the women and said, ‘O women! Give alms, as I have seen that the majority of the dwellers of Hell-fire were you (women).’ They asked, ‘Why is it so, O Allah’s Messenger?’ He replied, ‘You curse frequently and are ungrateful to your husbands. I have not seen anyone more deficient in intelligence and religion than you.’ The women asked, ‘O Allah’s Messenger! What is deficient in our intelligence and religion?’ He said, ‘Is not the evidence of two women equal to the witness of one man?’ They replied in the affirmative. He said, ‘This is the deficiency in her intelligence. Isn’t it true that a woman can neither pray nor fast during the menses?’ The women replied in the affirmative. He said, ‘This is the deficiency in her religion.’<sup>30</sup>

Compare this hadith with Qur’an 2:223, 4:19, 16:97, 33:35, and 48:5-6, all of which show women to be spiritually good followers of Islam (just as men) whom God will reward equally with men. Nowhere does the Qur’an attribute to them a deficiency in their religion. This is unlike some hadiths and the fanciful stories advanced by such earlier Muslim scholars/exegetes as al-Tabari<sup>31</sup> in which, for instance, Hawwa/Eve is strangely blamed (contradicting the Qur’an) for Adam’s downfall, without which women would not have menstruated, would have been wise, and would have given birth with ease!

The following hadith is challenged by none other than A’isha, who reported that:

The things which annul the prayers were mentioned before me. They said, “Prayer is annulled by a dog, a donkey and a woman (if they pass in front of the praying people).” I said, “You have made us (i.e., women) dogs. I saw the Prophet praying while I used to lie in my bed between him and the *qiblah*. Whenever I was in need of something, I would slip away, for I disliked to face him.”<sup>32</sup>

It is embarrassing to read such hadiths and the commentators’ prejudicial comments (criterion 5) as the above, which demean women and provide fodder for feminists, among them Leila Ahmed and Fatima Mernissi, to poke holes in such narratives.<sup>33</sup> Such hadiths simply reinforce men’s stereotypes of women by portraying them as crooked (seemingly like the Biblical Eve) and more evil than men. Their supposed lack of intelligence has led them to be grouped with dogs and donkeys. These stories, which later



became embroidered, circulating as hadith and quoted by Qur'an exegetes, contradict the Qur'an by portraying women as Satan's tools. Modernist scholars such Muhammad Abduh have de-emphasized such hadiths, and Islamic ideologues such as Sayyid Qutb have rejected models of female exclusion derived from such materials.<sup>34</sup> Such hadiths negate the Qur'anic teaching that the most noble people are the most pious, irrespective of their gender, ethnicity, or social class (49:13).

One popular hadith among conservative Muslims seeks to exclude women from political involvement by claiming that any nation that elects a female leader is doomed to failure. Mernissi demonstrates very well the baseless nature of this hadith.<sup>35</sup> It is clear from reading the Qur'anic account of the Queen of Sheba that she is presented as a very able and sagacious leader whose only transgression, and that of her people, was their belief in polytheism. In the Qur'anic narrative she is not asked to give up her leadership position, but only to submit to the One God (27:44).

Riffat Hassan, a female modernist scholar, has critically examined the *isnads* and *matns* of some hadiths and contrasted them with the Qur'an. She concluded her article with the following remarks:

It is imperative for the Muslim daughters of Hawwa to realize that the history of their subjugation and humiliation at the hands of the sons of Adam began with the story of Hawwa's creation and that their future will be no different from their past unless they ... challenge the authenticity of the *ahadith* which make them ontologically inferior, subordinate and crooked. It is gratifying to know that these *ahadith* cannot be the words of the Prophet of Islam ... Regardless of how male chauvinist Muslims project their androcentrism and misogyny upon their Prophet....<sup>36</sup>

The above pessimistic indictment of prevailing Muslim attitudes and its allusion to the rib Adam took to get Eve, a clearly Biblical (as opposed to Qur'anic) story, reveals the frustration of those who criticize the tendency of men in later Islamic history to exclude women from public and intellectual life. As Khalid Abou El Fadl reports, Muhammad al-Ghazzali once referred to this phenomenon – still found in much of contemporary Muslim culture, in which the world revolves around men and everything is channeled to their service – as the “ascendancy of Bedouin *fiqh* (jurisprudence).”<sup>37</sup> Whereas the earliest period of Islamic history produced female narrators of jurisprudence, teachers, Islamic scholars, narrators of hadith, poets, and so on, contemporary Islamic society is notorious for failing to repeat this feat. There are, however, some hopeful signs here and there of efforts to reverse this pro-

cess. But to critics such as Abou El Fadl, these efforts do not go far enough, as evidenced by the fact that there is still a near total absence or paucity of female jurists, famous Qur'anic exegetes, or hadith scholars.

In response to this situation, Turkey's Directorate of Religious Affairs has charged a group of Turkish theologians with filtering the hadith literature for misogynist elements that will be deleted from the collection. This project, which is unique in the Muslim world, seeks to produce a pro-woman five-volume hadith collection that is free of traditions advocating violence or hatred against women. This is a long overdue corrective that Muslim scholars elsewhere (for instance, at al-Azhar University) have not envisioned in their reforms and have certainly not duplicated. It is not clear, though, what critical hadith methodology is guiding this project. In other words, is this exercise motivated mainly by the Turkish government's desire, nay obsession, to join the European Union, whose membership calls for the pursuit of gender equality in all fields of life?<sup>38</sup>

We have seen that based on the criteria of providing moral lessons (3), substantiating what the Qur'an teaches (4), promoting (not contradicting) its teachings (5), and advancing misogynistic views (9), the above hadith cannot be accepted as valid.

### *Sectarianism*

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "The Jews were split up into seventy-one or seventy-two sects; and the Christians were split up into seventy-one or seventy-two sects; and my community will be split up into seventy-three sects."<sup>39</sup>

The problem with this hadith (see criterion 7) is that no one can identify what these seventy-two sects are, were, or will be and how (in the case of the Muslims) this number has miraculously remained the same for over a millennium. This is the sort of hadith that a Takfiri, a strict Salafi, or any other group of Muslims advancing its exclusivist view would conceivably use to say that all Muslims who do not belong to its group are going to Hell. This hadith surely rose out of the various political, theological, sectarian, and other struggles for authority and legitimacy that became acute during the Umayyad and Abbasid periods. Interestingly enough, it does not say which of the seventy-three Muslim sects is the truly guided one. Even so, Muslim scholars ranging from Ibn Taymiyyah to Ahmad al-Sirhindi (d. 1034/1624) considered it to refer to the Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jama'ah. In his *Aqidat al-Wastiyah*, Ibn Taymiyyah elaborates upon this group:

Also in one hadith he [the Prophet] said, “They are those people who will follow this path which I and my Sahaba follow today.” Therefore they have caught hold of Islam unalloyed from every adulteration and these are the people of Ahl as-Sunnah Wa’l Jama’ah. This group includes the truthful, the martyrs and the virtuous; it includes the minarets of guidance, lamps in the darkness and owners of such superiorities and virtues who have been already mentioned. It includes the saints and also those Imams on whose guidance Muslims are unanimous. It is this successful group about which the Prophet (Peace be upon him) has said: “One group from my Ummah will always remain dominant with truth; the opponents will never be able to harm its members or afflict them up to the Doomsday.”<sup>40</sup>

But this sect or *jama`ah*, however we define it (viz., saints, martyrs, imams, and others) provides for a restricted membership that leaves out the mass of ordinary Muslims.

### *Hadiths Unbecoming of a Prophet*

Narrated by Abu Hurayrah. The Prophet said, “The (people of) Bani Israel used to take baths naked (all together) looking at each other. The Prophet Moses used to take a bath alone. They said, ‘By Allah! Nothing prevents Moses from taking a bath with us except that he has a scrotal hernia.’ So once Moses went out to take a bath and put his clothes over a stone and then that stone ran away with his clothes. Moses followed that stone saying, ‘My clothes, O stone! My clothes, O stone!’ till the people of Bani Israel saw him and said, ‘By Allah, Moses has got no defect in his body.’ Moses took his clothes and began to beat the stone.” Abu Hurayrah added, “By Allah! There are still six or seven marks present on the stone from that excessive beating.” Abu Hurayrah narrated: “The Prophet said, ‘When the Prophet Job (Ayyub) was taking a bath naked, golden locusts began to fall on him. Job started collecting them in his clothes. His Lord addressed him, ‘O Job! Haven’t I given you enough so that you are not in need of them?’ Job replied, ‘Yes! By Your Honor (power)! But I cannot dispense with Your Blessings.’”<sup>41</sup>

This hadith borders on the ridiculous, as it has no moral to teach (criterion 3). Moreover, its tone and style stand in sharp contrast to the language and narrative depictions found in the Qur’an. This is clearly a fantastic story made up by someone with a very vivid imagination. What is the point of this morbid curiosity about whether or not Moses had the alleged condition? This hadith is about gossip mongering and fits within the purview of modern

tabloids – hardly what the hadiths are supposed to be about. There is nothing morally uplifting about this story, neither in the way it is told nor in the way it is concluded with Moses beating the stone and leaving marks on it.

The above story is mere conjecture and has nothing to do with the truth that the Qur’anic stories are supposed to teach. Qur’an 31:6 and 10:31 warn about people who spread idle tales without knowledge (or meaning) to mislead others from the path of righteousness and throw ridicule (on that path).

Narrated by Abu Hurayrah: “Allah’s Apostle said, ‘(The Prophet) Solomon once said, Tonight I will sleep with ninety women, each of whom will bring forth a (would-be) cavalier who will fight in Allah’s Cause. On this, his companion said to him, Say Allah willing! But he did not say Allah willing. Solomon then slept with all the women, but none of them became pregnant but one woman who later delivered a half-man. By Him in Whose Hand Muhammad’s soul is, if he (Solomon) had said, Allah willing (all his wives would have brought forth boys) and they would have fought in Allah’s Cause as cavaliers.’”<sup>42</sup>

The above story is neither found in nor collaborated by the Qur’an, which emphasizes the excellent services of both David and his son Solomon toward their Lord (38:30). The story, embellishing on Solomon’s alleged powers of sexual virility, transforms him into some fantastic version of a superhuman Casanova who can sleep with ninety women in one night. The fact that he was out to beget ninety boys reveals the cultural bias found in many societies, which the story clearly helps to bring out (the Qur’an hints at this gender bias in 16:57-59). In other words, there is a widespread preference for boys over girls in many societies, even if, in this case, the occasion is related to a military purpose.

This hadith makes very little sense based on criteria 8 (an embellished story or a work of imagination) and 9 (women appear as sexual objects, whereas men are presented as warriors and possible martyrs). Abu Hurayrah (d. 676-77) was clearly influenced or inspired by stories from the Jews. One can see this even in Qur’anic exegetical works in which Muslims repeated Biblical stories. This is especially true when they sought to explain certain Qur’anic verses in the absence of sufficient information within the Muslim tradition. In any case, Muslim feminist critics of Abu Hurayrah note that despite knowing the Prophet for only three years, tens of thousands of hadith are attributed to him.

There is extensive evidence of hadiths (see criterion 3) being bound up with forms of Judaic narratives.<sup>43</sup> For instance, a hadith recorded in *Sahih*

*Muslim* on the authority of Abu Hurayrah<sup>44</sup> recounts the creation sequence day-by-day in a manner that strongly resembles that of the creation story found in Genesis 1, in which seven (instead of six) days/epochs (32:4, 10:3, 11:7, and 50:38) are mentioned. Ka`b al-Ahbar, a Jewish scholar who converted to Islam, is supposedly its source. The hadith in question reads as follows:

Abu Hurayrah is reported to have said: “Allah’s Messenger (may peace be upon him) took hold of my hands and said: ‘Allah, the Exalted and Glorious, created the clay on Saturday and He created the mountains on Sunday and He created the trees on Monday and He created the things entailing labour on Tuesday and created light on Wednesday and He caused the animals to spread on Thursday and created Adam (peace be upon him) after *ʿasr* on Friday; the last creation at the last hour of the hours of Friday, i.e. between afternoon and night.’”

This hadith contradicts the Qur’an (criteria 2 and 4) by leaving out or not mentioning the creation of the heavens/universe from which Earth was “separated” (21:30). It also adds an additional seventh day of creation that is equivalent to the Biblical seventh day of God’s rest.

### *Futuristic Hadith (The Dajjal and the Mahdi)*

Keep criteria 10 in mind as you look at the following narrations from *Sunan Abi Dawud*, which even mention the times when the predicted events will take place.

Narrated by Abdullah ibn Busr: “The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: ‘The time between the great war and the conquest of the city (Constantinople) will be six years, and the Dajjal (Antichrist) will come forth in the seventh.’”<sup>45</sup>

Narrated by Mu`adh ibn Jabal: “The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: ‘The greatest war, the conquest of Constantinople, and the coming forth of the Dajjal (Antichrist) will take place within a period of seven months.’”<sup>46</sup>

It is very difficult to make sense of this hadith, given the historical reality of Constantinople’s fall to the Ottoman forces in 1453. Who was the Antichrist who came forth after seven months, or perhaps seven decades? The only way to make sense of this hadith is to be generous and understand it in the mythic sense (i.e., it does not refer to literal time but to the duration of a process).

The Prophet was far more modest in plotting out an eschatological time line. In this context, this is what the Qur'an says in relation to what the Prophet should say:

Say [O Prophet:] "Knowledge thereof rests with God alone; and I am only a plain warner." (67:26)

Say [O Prophet]: "I do not say unto you, 'God's treasures are with me'; nor [do I say], 'I know the things that are beyond the reach of human perception'; I but follow what is revealed to me.'" (6:50)

Say: "I am not the first of [God's] apostles, and [like all of them] I do not know what will be done with me or with you, for I am nothing but a warner." (46:9)

Furthermore, consider the following hadith from *Sahih al-Bukhari* that indicates the Prophet's lack of knowledge of the Unseen.

Narrated by Masruq: "A'isha said, 'If anyone tells you that Muhammad has seen his Lord, he is a liar, for Allah says, No vision can grasp Him (6:103). And if anyone tells you that Muhammad has seen the Unseen, he is a liar, for Allah says, None has the knowledge of the Unseen but Allah.'" (6:103)<sup>47</sup>

Why are there so many hadiths on the Mahdi and the Dajjal/Anti-christ, and yet none of these figures are mentioned in the Qur'an? Based purely on the Qur'anic text, such hadiths pose a credibility problem. The Qur'an is clear on this point, for it indicates in no uncertain terms that the Prophet did not know the future, especially as relates to the signs of the Hour. Of course one can be generous and accept such hadiths as serving mythic purposes. For instance, Asad considers the Mahdi to be a mythical figure projected into the future as a model of the coming to terms with a materialistic world far removed from the idyllic age of the Prophet. As a modernist, Asad explains the eschatological traditions about the coming of Dajjal (the anti-Messiah figure) in a purely metaphorical way. The Dajjal, who has only one eye, is characterized by civilizations that are materialistic and worldly, blind or oblivious to the Hereafter: loving this fleeting life at the expense of the life to come (75:20-21), possessing the power to speak at one end of the world and be heard elsewhere (representing the power of satellites), being worshipped (the global trend to emulate western materialistic culture), causing rain to fall (referring to cloud seeding), and so on.<sup>48</sup>

It is also possible to argue that the Prophet taught the Book (meaning the Qur'an) and wisdom (which scholars take to mean extra-Qur'anic knowledge/information – hence the hadith). This is indicated in 2:129 and 151, as well as in 62:2, where the Qur'an declares that the Prophet was sent to convey God's revelations/messages, cause people to grow in purity, and impart wisdom unto those who had been lost in error. Thus while he had no knowledge of the Last Hour (17:187) and people generally had little knowledge of revelation or the soul (*nafs*) (17:85), he, like other prophets, was granted wisdom with which to teach and guide humanity. Those who use this line of argument would presumably consider information on such figures as the Mahdi, as found in the corpus of hadith literature, part of this wisdom. Others, however, would point out that one does not need to conjure up a Mahdi in order to understand the events of the Last Hour; enough signs are indicated or hinted at, especially in the Qur'an's final chapters.

### *Promoting Animal Cruelty*

Some hadiths claim that the Prophet ordered the killing of dogs (especially black ones), whereas others prohibit keeping dogs, except for hunting and guarding, due to their unclean status. Yet the Qur'an does not endorse this view. On the contrary, it mentions the morally instructive story of the Seven Sleepers (chapter 18), in which the dog is part of the narrative involving the pious believers who are under divine protection during their long sleep. Nowhere does the Qur'an order Muslims to be cruel or inhumane to dogs by killing them just because they are black. Furthermore, such a view contradicts other hadiths that mention a woman who was sent to Paradise for saving a dog from imminent death by quenching its thirst and another one that indicates that a woman would go to Hell because of how she treated a cat.

In light of the above, what should one make of such hadiths, especially the one with a lone narrator (*ahad*) who alleges that the Prophet said that the black dog is a devil!<sup>49</sup> One online posting by a Muslim has a clever explanation: In the context of Arabia during the Prophet's time, the reference to "black dogs" was, in fact, to hyenas. He suggested that Muslims were directed to kill hyenas because they were deemed dangerous. By this logic, then, the Prophet should have ordered Muslims to kill all wild animals. If so, what purpose would the story of Noah and the Ark serve in the Qur'anic narrative (11:40), for was he not asked to save a male and female of every kind

of animal indigenous to the region where he lived (i.e., in the lands bordering the eastern side of the Mediterranean Sea)? Incidentally, Asad considers the reference in the above verse to refer only to the domesticated animals already in his possession.<sup>50</sup>

## Conclusion

This study has argued that the hadith literature in circulation today has major flaws that need to be addressed. The traditional Muslim attitude that only scholars are competent enough to interpret dubious narrations merely evades the serious questions confronting problematic narratives. Worse, these scholars have not rethought hadiths in terms of the Qur'an's inner logic and contemporary social realities. Had they done so, they would have come up with or proposed new methodological strategies to systematically deal with the types of hadiths that have gained wide acceptance or circulation throughout the Muslim world. We have suggested that employing the Qur'an as the ultimate judge of Muslim affairs should be applied as a crucial test for evaluating certain hadiths critically.

This would be followed up with the preparation, by scholars, of new editions of hadith collections that specifically weed out dubious ones based on the strictest standards of scrutiny. We have provided only a small sample in order to show the types of hadiths that need to be expunged from the corpus of the recorded traditions. Considering the hadiths as co-equal with the Qur'an should be rejected; instead, they should be viewed and authenticated (as modernists have argued) through the lenses of the Qur'an and general Islamic worldviews (not the other way round).

We need to ask ourselves some questions: How did the early Muslims use the Sunnah before the hadiths were written down and what can we learn from this? What is the Qur'an's inner logic in terms of the type of society it seeks to create by its moral principles, worldview, and general teachings? It should not be forgotten that the Qur'an provides mainly general principles, thereby allowing Muslims some flexibility when fleshing out details for themselves on various matters, whereas the hadiths provide too much specific information, which takes away the ambiguity or subjectivity found in the Qur'an precisely by entrenching positions and attitudes that limit that very flexibility.

The guidance to be followed here is the Qur'an, even as Muslims explore possibilities of more inclusive traditions that open (rather than shut) doors to certain groups (e.g., women) by promoting positive views regarding equal-



ity, justice, and universalism. As the Qur'an says: "And thus have We willed you to be a community of the middle way, so that [with your lives] you might bear witness to the truth before all humanity, and the Apostle may bear witness to it before you" (2:143). In the absence of a Vatican-like organization to convene councils for settling dogmatic and creedal issues, Muslim scholars working and collaborating with each other under the aegis of some international Muslim organization need to rethink and reapply Islamic concepts to contemporary issues. Failing to do so, they will be left to depend upon conservative transnational-funded organizations to perform a task for which their own narrow religious orientation does not prepare them. Even the prestigious al-Azhar University, despite its efforts, has not been up to the task of devising the types of reform we have suggested.

Yet the problems we have mentioned, all of which arise from the ulama's lack of critical scholarship when it comes to reviewing, discussing, researching, and revising the work of past scholars in order to advance Islamic scholarship to new levels, continue to affect the Muslim world. As a result, the internal and external assaults on the hadith literature continues, even as Muslims seek to do justice to the Prophet's image: "Verily, in the Apostle of God you have a good example for everyone who looks forward [with hope and awe] to God and the Last Day, and remembers God unceasingly" (33:21).

The attempts of the world renowned al-Azhar scholar Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi, currently mufti of Qatar and president of the International Union for Muslim Scholars, to suggest reforms fall short of what is required and points to the dilemma that Muslims are facing. He wrote the following:

Basically, definitive texts of the Qur'an and the Sunnah cannot contradict each other because one truth cannot be at odds with another truth. So any assumed contradiction between such definitive texts is apparent rather than real. Our role then is to dispel the assumed contradiction either by reconciling texts and thereby accepting them all – but without abusing or twisting them – or by giving preference (*tarjih*) to some over others. Attempts to reconcile should take priority over preferring one to another because, unlike reconciling, preferring means rejecting one of the two contradicting texts.<sup>51</sup>

His concern mainly seems to be with ruling out any assumptions of contradiction among what he considers to be authentic hadiths. Our approach to prophetic traditions goes much further, however, as it calls for subjecting all narratives to the same critical evaluations advocated in this paper, without privileging authentic ones over others. In other words, we

do not need to construct an exegesis or explanatory model that seeks to defuse or neutralize authentic hadith narratives that contradict each other. Rather, what we need to do is to confront these hadiths head-on once and for all. The sad thing to note is that while leading Muslim scholars are well versed in Islamic teachings and scholarly traditions, they lack the courage to undertake the necessary critical analysis by combing through hadith collections, as their ninth-century predecessors did, in order to assess which ones are authoritative or unacceptable based upon some set of expanded criteria.

In this context, the courageous efforts being made by a number of scholars should be applauded and supported because they seek to deal with contemporary problems that Muslims face. One such reform-minded scholar, Tariq Ramadan, generated quite an angry response within traditional Muslim ranks when he called for a moratorium on *hadd* laws as his way of engaging the Muslim scriptural texts to devise critical tests for dealing with and interpreting the law as it is applied to women and members of the oppressed lower classes in today's society.<sup>52</sup> Asad would agree with this position<sup>53</sup> and, in fact, argued that contemporary Muslim societies failed to fulfill their duties with regard to each member of the community in terms of providing him/her with sufficient material to sustain his/her physical and other needs, an adequate home, equal opportunities and facilities for education, and free medical services.

We may also add here an equitable share of the national wealth/resources, which should not be the exclusive monopoly of certain privileged royal families, ruling/military elites/dictatorships, members of certain business classes, or favored ethnic groups from certain districts/regions of the country. If there is no fully functioning security system along the lines suggested above in which the interdependence between men's/women's rights and corresponding duties were safeguarded, then the state had no business invoking the full sanction of criminal law, which would only be applied to the most vulnerable members of society. Instead, according to him, the state should concern itself with instituting milder forms of administrative punishments rather than victimizing women and generally the poor in society.

Thus we see the efforts to critically evaluate hadiths as going hand in hand with attempts to engage the Qur'an itself as an ongoing project of interpreting and applying its teachings to different social and historical contexts. Unlike what the literalists may think, the Qur'an is not a static book/scripture with its interpretation or understanding frozen in time; rather, it is

a multi-layered dynamic text that opens out to new, nuanced understandings of its message or teachings. If this is the case, then the hadith literature, by definition, should reflect its higher values and not the common prejudices of the time, which some hadith narratives reinforce.

Finally, is it not time that the still not-fully-realized Islamization of Knowledge project be more successfully redirected toward, among other things, a “re-authentication” of this literature as part of the Muslim effort to reconstruct Muslim thought in the contemporary period? Do we not need new directions for Islamic methodology and thought, as AbuSulayman once put it, but in a different context?<sup>54</sup>

## Endnotes

1. A variant of this fringe position within Islamic scholarship goes back to the first century of Islam and is echoed in the Kharijite insistence on basing law on the Qur'an (hence “judgement by Qur'an alone”) and not the Sunnah. See G. R. Hawting, “The Significance of the Slogan *la hukmah illa lillah* and the References to the *hudud* in the Traditions about the Fitna and the Murder of `Uthman,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 41 (1978): 453-63. See also John Burton, *The Sources of Islamic Law: Islamic Theories of Abrogation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990), 11, 22-25.

During the last couple of centuries, groups variously labeled or self-labeled as Qur'anists, Qur'an alone, Ahl al-Qur'an, Qur'aniyyun, anti-hadith Muslims, or simply Muslim critics of hadith have emerged to champion this modernist theme of attacking hadith. They include Ghulam Ahmad Parvez (d. 1985) founder of Tolu-e-Islam (Resurgence of Islam) literature in the Subcontinent; the Egyptian numerologist Rashad Khalifa (d. 1990), founder of the United Submitters International and a translator of the Qur'an in English (based in Tucson, AZ); Kassim Ahmad of Malaysia, (the author of *Hadith: A Reevaluation* – apparently this book was banned in Malaysia), and others. The anti-hadith movement, while very small and appealing to certain groups of modernists (with very little influence on the worldwide Muslim community), has representatives among both Sunni and Shi'i Muslims. Here in the West some individual Muslims and even groups identify with this type of thinking and post their views on the Internet. See, for instance, the Free Minds Website. There is also an “Ahl-Al-Qur'an” site of the International Qur'anic center at [www.ahl-alquran.com/English/terms/terms.php](http://www.ahl-alquran.com/English/terms/terms.php), which features a list of writers/contributors (many Egyptians) who exchange views based on the Qur'an alone. All references to hadith are forbidden. The commentary/exegesis of these groups on the Qur'an by necessity is what is called

- tafsir bi al-ra'y* (exegesis by sound opinion), since they reject hadith, an important source for explanation of Qur'anic verses.
2. On western critics of hadith, see, for instance, Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies* (Muhammedanische Studien) (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1971), 2:25-26; Joseph Schacht, "A Reevaluation of Islamic Traditions," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1949): 143-54; and G. H. A. Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition: Studies in Chronology, Provenance and Authorship of Early Hadith* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1983). For a Muslim critic of Schacht's work, see M. Mustafa al-Azami, *On Schacht's Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1996).
  3. Muhammad Rajab al-Bayyumi, "The Authenticity of the Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad," *The Islamic Review* (March 1967). Maulana Muhammad Akram Khan's Bengali-language *Biography of the Prophet*, 4th ed. (Mostafa Charit: 1975, 42-51) applies higher standards of scrutiny to examine some hadith. A list of such hadith can be found at Dr. Mohammad Omar Farooq's Resource Study Page: [www.globalwebpost.com/farooqm/studies/res/islam/hadith/akramkhan\\_hadith.html](http://www.globalwebpost.com/farooqm/studies/res/islam/hadith/akramkhan_hadith.html). See his own writings, some of which are available on the Internet, such as "Islamic Law and the Use and Abuse of Hadith." Meherally's *Myths and Realities of Hadith Hadith: A Critical Study* (Burnaby, Canada: Mostmerciful.com Publishers, 2001) is another good source for some of the dubious hadiths that are necessary to argue our point. See also Sayed Abdul Wadud, *Conspiracies against the Qur'an* (Lahore: Khalid Publishers, 1990), 53; Shabbir Ahmed, *The Criminals of Islam* (Lauderhill, FL: Galaxy Publications, 2000), 4-13; Jeffery Lang, *Struggling to Surrender: Some Impressions of an American Convert to Islam* (Beltsville, MD: amana publications, 1994), 25; Murad Wilfried Hofmann, *Islam 2000* (Beltsville, MD: amana publications, 1996); Mohammed Abdul Malek, *A Study of the Qur'an* (Sutton, Surrey, UK: M. A. Malik, 2000), 137-54; and Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997).
  4. See Jan Vansina's seminal *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1985), 27.
  5. *Ibid.*, 29.
  6. *Ibid.*, 40.
  7. See Majid Khadduri, trans., *Al-Shafi'i's Risala: Treatise on the Foundation of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1987). See also Aisha Yusef Musa, "A study of early and contemporary Muslim attitudes toward Hadith as scripture with a translation of al-Shafi'i's "Kitab Jima' al-'Ilm" (Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i) (Ph.D. diss., Harvard, 2004).
  8. Muhammad Haykal, *The Life of Muhammad*, trans. Ismail al-Faruqi (Indianapolis: North American Trust Publications, 1976).
  9. Lang, *Struggling*, 76-78.

10. See Imam Muslim, *Sahih Muslim: Being Traditions of the Sayings and Doings of the Prophet Muhammad as Narrated by His Companions and compiled under the Title Al-Jami'-Us-Sahih*, trans. A. Siddiqi, 4 vols. (Riyadh: International Islamic Publishing House, 1971); al-Bukhari, *The Translation of the Meaning of Sahih al-Bukhari*, trans. M. M. Khan, 9 vols. (Dar Ihya' al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyah) (Arabic & English); and Imam Abu Dawud, *Sunan Abi Dawud*, trans. Ahmad Hasan, 3 vols. (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf Publications, 1984; reprinted 1996); Maulana Muhammad Ali, *A Manual of Hadith* (London: Curzon Press, 1988); Muhammad Siddiqi, *Hadith Literature: Its Origin, Development, Special Features and Criticism* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993); and Mazhar U. Kazi, *A Treasury of Ahadith* (Jeddah: Abul Qasim Publishing House, 1992). Shaykh Wali ud-Din, *Mishkat al-Masabih* (Niche of Lights) is a summary of the six books of hadith and serves the same purpose as does the rabbinical Mishnah in Talmudic Judaism.
11. M. A. Azami, *Studies in Hadith Methodology and Literature* (Kuala Lumpur: Islamic Book Trust, 1977), 92.
12. Suhaib Hasan Abdul Ghaffar, *Criticism of Hadith among Muslims with reference to Sunan ibn Maja* (Riyadh: Presidency of Islamic Research, IFTA and Propagation, 1984). An entire Salafi list of weak hadith is analyzed at [www.allahuakbar.net/ahaadeeth/weak\\_fabricated\\_&\\_baatil\\_ahaadeeth.htm](http://www.allahuakbar.net/ahaadeeth/weak_fabricated_&_baatil_ahaadeeth.htm).
13. Azami, *Studies in Hadith Methodology*, 46; Muhammad Abdul Rauf, "The Development of the Science of Hadith," in *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983). For a good summary on the development of Islamic law, see Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Principles of Islamic Jurisprudence* (Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 2003).
14. Fazlur Rahman, *Islamic Methodology in History* (Karachi: Central Institute of Islamic Research, 1965), 74-75.
15. Ibid.
16. Yasin Dutton, *The Origins of Islamic Law: The Qur'an, the Muwatta' and Madinan 'Amal* (Richmond, UK: Curzon Press, 1999), 180. See Imam Malik, *Al-Muwatta* (New Dehli: Taj Co., 1985). Selections can be accessed at [www.knowtheprophet.com/files/2discoverislam\\_com\\_Muatta.pdf](http://www.knowtheprophet.com/files/2discoverislam_com_Muatta.pdf).
17. Harald Motzki, "The *Musanna*f of `Abd al-Razzaq al-San`ani as a Source of Authentic Ahadith of the First Century A.H.," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 1 (1991) 50:1: 1-21. See also Harald Motzki, *Islamic Law: Origins and Development* (Aldershot, Burlington, VT: Variorum, 2004) attacks Schacht's book on Muslim jurisprudence and its premises, conclusions, and methods. He, like Mustafa Azami, places hadith origins earlier than did Schacht.
18. Dutton, *Origins*, 180. See also Wael B. Hallaq, "The Authenticity of Prophetic Hadith: A Pseudo-problem," *Studia Islamica* (1999), 75-90.
19. On content-based criticism of hadith, see, for instance, Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah, *Al-Manar al-Munif fi al-Sahih wa al-Da'if*, 5th impr., ed. `Abd al-

- Fattah Abu Ghuddah (Halab: Maktab al-Matbu`at al-Islamiyyah, 1994). See also Mohsen Hareedy, "Hadith Matr Criticism: A Reconsideration of Orientalists' and Some Muslim Scholars' Views" (M.A. thesis, Leiden Institute of the Study of Religions, Leiden, 2001).
20. Muhammad Nasir al-Din Albani, *Silsilat al-Ahadith al-Da`ifah wa al-Mawdu`ah wa Atharuha al-Sayi' fi al-Ummah*, 3d ed. (Damascus/Beirut: 1392 AH). The following works are easily accessible in English and can be skimmed through quickly: Meherally's *Myths and Realities of Hadith* is a good source for some of these dubious hadith. See also Wadud, "Conspiracies"; Ahmed, "The Criminals"; Lang, *Struggling*; Hoffman, *Islam*; and Abdul Malek, *A Study*, from which Meherally has drawn some of his information.
  21. Syed Masood-ul-Hasan, trans., *110 Hadith Qudsi* (Riyadh: Darussalam, 1996/1417 ah), hadith no. 8, 19/20.
  22. Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1989), especially p. 31.
  23. Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus Ltd., 1980), 288, footnote 7.
  24. *Sahih al-Bukhari*, vol. 4, book 52, no. 261.
  25. See, for instance, *Sunan al-Nasa'i*, "The Book of Fighting," vol. 5, nos. 3971-78).
  26. Asad, *Message of the Qur'an*, 148-49, footnote 45.
  27. Qur'an 7:124, 20:71, and 26:49.
  28. *Sahih al-Bukhari*, vol. 8, book 86, no. 6829.
  29. *Ibid.*, vol. 9, book 84, no. 57.
  30. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, book 6, no. 301.
  31. *Tafsir al-Tabari*, vol. 1, 529 and 539.
  32. *Sahih al-Bukhari*, vol. 1, book 9, no. 490.
  33. Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven, CT: Yale Univ., 1992); Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Muslim Society* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1975, 1987); Azizah al-Hibri, "Redefining Muslim Women's Roles in the Next Century" (Democracy and the Rule of Law, *Congressional Quarterly*, 2001); Kaukab Siddique, *The Struggle of Muslim Women* (Singapore: Thinkers Library, 1983); Kecia Ali, *Sexual Ethics in Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Oneworld Pubs., 2006); Amina Wadud, *Inside the Gender Jihad: Women's Reform in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Pubs., 2006); Khaled Abou El Fadl, *Speaking in God's Name: Islamic Law, Authority and Women* (Oxford: Oneworld Pubs., 2001), 23.
  34. Barbara Stowasser, *Women in the Qur'an, Traditions, and Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994)
  35. Fatima Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, trans. Mary J. Lakeland (Reading, MA: Perseus Books, 1991), 49-84.

36. Riffat Hassan, "Made from Adam's Rib: The Woman's Creation Question," *Al-Mushir* 27 (1985): 124-55.
37. See Khalid Abou El Fadl, *Voices* 1, no. 2 (Dec./Jan. 1992); reproduced with some editing at [www.muslim-Canada.org/lawwomen.html](http://www.muslim-Canada.org/lawwomen.html).
38. See "Turkey orders scholars to purge key Islamic text of 'misogyny,'" *Middle East Times*, 21 Jun. 2006.
39. *Sunan Abi Dawud*, book 40, no. 4579.
40. Ibn Taymiyyah, *Aqidat al-Wasitiyah* (154).
41. *Sahih al-Bukhari*, vol. 1, book 5, no. 277.
42. *Ibid.*, vol. 8, book 79, no. 711.
43. Abdulaziz Sachedina, "Early Muslim Traditionists and Their Familiarity with Jewish Sources," in *Studies in Islamic and Judaic Traditions II*, ed. William Brinner and Stephen Ricks (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 49-59.
44. *Sahih Muslim*, book 38, no. 6707.
45. *Sunan Abi Dawud*, book 37, no. 4283.
46. *Ibid.*, book 37, no. 4282.
47. *Sahih al-Bukhari*, book 9, no. 477.
48. See Muhammad Asad, *The Road to Mecca* (New York: Simon and Schuster: 1954), 292-93. See also his translation of the Qur'an with extensive comments: Asad, *Message of the Qur'an*.
49. *Sahih Muslim*, book 4, no. 1032.
50. Asad, *Message of the Qur'an*, 319, footnote 63.
51. See Yusuf al-Qaradawi, "Towards a Proper Understanding of the Sunnah: Reconciling vs. Preferring: Dealing with Apparently Contradicting Hadiths," posted on IslamOnline.net-Living Shari'ah (12 Mar. 2007).
52. "Ramadan Calls for a Moratorium on Corporal Punishment," *The Muslim News*, 30 Mar. 2005 at [www.nospank.net/ramadan.htm](http://www.nospank.net/ramadan.htm). Tariq Ramadan's published works include *Islam, the West, and the Challenges of Modernity* (Leicester: The Islamic Foundation, 2000).
53. Asad, *Message of the Qur'an*, 149-50, footnote 48.
54. AbdulHamid AbuSulayman, *The Islamic Theory of International Relations: New Directions for Islamic Methodology and Thought* (Herndon, VA: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1987).