

The Superiority of *Fiqh* over Ḥadīth

by GF Haddad
Qasyoun@ziplip.com

﴿He gives wisdom to whomever He will, and whoever receives wisdom receives immense good﴾ (2:269). “He for whom Allāh desires great good, He grants him (superlative) understanding in the Religion (*yufaqqihhu/yufqihhu fī al-dīn*). I only distribute and it is Allāh Who gives. That group shall remain in charge of the Order of Allāh, unharmed by those who oppose them, until the coming of the Order of Allāh.”¹

Imām al-Shāfi‘ī said: “You [the scholars of ḥadīth] are the pharmacists but we [the jurists] are the physicians.” Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī commented: “The early scholars said: The ḥadīth scholar without knowledge of *fiqh* is like a seller of drugs who is no physician: he has them but he does not know what to do with them; and the *fiqh* scholar without knowledge of ḥadīth is like a physician without drugs: he knows what constitutes a remedy, but does not have it available.”²

Imām Aḥmad is related by his students Abū Ṭālib and Ḥumayd ibn Zanjūyah to say: “I never saw anyone adhere more to ḥadīth than al-Shāfi‘ī. No one preceded him in writing down ḥadīth in a book.” The meaning of this is that al-Shāfi‘ī possessed the intelligence of ḥadīth after which Aḥmad sought, as evidenced by the latter’s statement: “How rare is *fiqh* among those who know ḥadīth!” This is a reference to the ḥadīth: “It may be one carries understanding (*fiqh*) – meaning: memorizes the proof-texts of *fiqh* – without being a person of understanding (*faqīh*).”³ The *Salaf* and *Khalaf* elucidated this rule in many famous statements showing that, for all the exalted status of the *Muḥaddith*, yet the *Faqīh* excels him:

Ḥadīth Misguides Those Devoid of Fiqh

- Ibn Abī Zayd al-Mālikī reports Sufyān ibn ‘Uyayna as saying: “Ḥadīth is a pitfall (*maḍilla*) except for the *fuqahā*,” and Mālik’s companion ‘Abd Allāh ibn Wahb said: “Ḥadīth is a pitfall except for the Ulema. Every memorizer of ḥadīth that does not have an Imām in *fiqh* is misguided (*dāll*), and if Allāh had not rescued us with Mālik and al-Layth [ibn Sa’d], we would have been misguided.”⁴ Ibn Abī Zayd comments: “He [Sufyān] means that other than the jurists might take something in its external meaning when, in fact, it is interpreted in the light of another ḥadīth or some evidence which remains hidden to him; or it may in fact consist in discarded evidence due to some other [abrogating] evidence. None can meet the responsibility of knowing this except those who deepened their learning and obtained *fiqh*.” Imām al-Haytamī said something similar.⁵ Ibn Wahb is also reported to say: “I met three hundred and sixty learned people of knowledge but, without Mālik and al-Layth, I would have strayed.”⁶ Another version states: “Were it not for Mālik ibn Anas and al-Layth ibn Sa’d I would have perished; I used to think everything that is [authentically] related from the Prophet ﷺ must be put into practice.”⁷ Another version has: “I gathered a lot of ḥadīths and they drove me to confusion. I would consult Mālik and al-Layth and they would say to me, ‘take this and leave this.’”⁸ Ibn Wahb had compiled 120,000 narrations according to Aḥmad ibn Sāliḥ.⁹ Hence, Ibn ‘Uqda replied to a man who had asked him about a certain narration: “Keep such ḥadīths to a minimum for, truly, they are unsuitable except for those who know their interpretation. Yahyā ibn Sulayman narrated from Ibn Wahb that he heard Mālik say: ‘Many of these ḥadīths are [a cause for] misguidance; some ḥadīths were narrated by me and I wish that for each of them I had been flogged with a stick twice. I certainly no longer narrate them!’”¹⁰ By his phrase,

¹ Ḥadīth of the Prophet ﷺ narrated from Mu‘āwiya by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.

² Al-Qārī, *Mu‘taqqad Abī Hanīfata al-Imām fī Abaway al-Rasūl ‘Alayhi al-Salāt wa al-Salām* (p. 42).

³ A nearly-mass-narrated (*mashhūr*) sound ḥadīth of the Prophet ﷺ reported from several Companions by al-Tirmidhī, Abū Dāwūd, Ibn Mājah, and Ahmad.

⁴ Ibn Abī Hātim in the introduction to *al-Jarḥ wa al-Ta’dīl* (p. 22-23); Ibn Abī Zayd, *al-Jāmi‘ fī al-Sunan* (p. 118-119); Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *al-Intiqā’* (p. 61); al-Dhahabī. See Shaykh ‘Abd al-Fattah Aḥū Ghudda’s comments on this statement in his notes on al-Lacknawī’s *al-Raf‘ wa al-Takmil* (2nd ed. p. 368-369, 3rd ed. p. 90-91).

⁵ In al-Fatāwā al-Ḥadīthiyya (p. 283).

⁶ Narrated by Ibn Hibbān in the introduction to *al-Majrūhīn* (1:42). He then narrates from Ibn Wahb a similar statement where he adds the names of ‘Amr ibn al-Hārith and Ibn Mājishūn.

⁷ Narrated by Ibn ‘Asākir and al-Bayhaqī cf. Ibn Rajāb, *Sharḥ al-‘Ilal* (1:413) and ‘Awwāma (p. 76).

⁸ Narrated by Qādī ‘Iyād in *Tartīb al-Madārik* (2:427).

⁹ In Ibn al-Subkī, *Tabaqāt al-Shāfi‘iyya al-Kubrā* (2:128).

¹⁰ Narrated by al-Khatīb, *al-Faqīh wal-Mutafaqih* (2:80).

“Many of these ḥadīths are misguidance,” Mālik means their adducing them in the wrong place and meaning, because the Sunna is wisdom and wisdom is to place each thing in its right context.¹¹

- Ibn al-Mubārak said: “If Allāh had not rescued me with Abū Ḥanīfa and Sufyān [al-Thawrī] I would have been like the rest of the common people.” Al-Dhahabī relates it as: “I would have been an innovator.”¹²

The Imāms of Ḥadīth Defer to the Imāms of Fiqh

- Imām Aḥmad’s teacher, Yaḥyā ibn Sa‘īd al-Qaṭṭān, despite his foremost status as the Master of ḥadīth Masters and expert in narrator-recommendation and discreditation, would not venture to extract legal rulings from the evidence but followed in this the *fiqh* of Abū Ḥanīfa as he explicitly declared: “We do not belie Allāh. We never heard better than the juridical opinion (*ra’ī*) of Abū Ḥanīfa, and we followed most of his positions.”¹³ Similarly, Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abd al-Ḥakam said: “If it were not for al-Shāfi‘ī I would not have known how to reply to anyone. Because of him I know what I know.”¹⁴ As for Muḥammad ibn Yaḥyā al-Dhuhlī (d. 258) of Khurāsān, whom Abū Zur‘a ranked above Imām Muslim and who is considered an *Amīr al-Mu‘minīn fī al-Ḥadīth* (“Commander of the Faithful in the Science of Ḥadīth”), he never considered himself a non-*muqallid* but said: “I have made Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal an Imām in all that stands between me and my Lord.”¹⁵ Mis‘ar ibn Kidām said the same with regard to Imām Abū Ḥanīfa.¹⁶

Knowledge Is Not Memorization but a Light

- *Fiqh* is the context of Mālik’s statement: “Wisdom and knowledge are a light by which Allāh guides whomever He pleases; it does not consist in knowing many things”¹⁷ and al-Shāfi‘ī’s: “Knowledge is what benefits. Knowledge is not what one has memorized.”¹⁸ Similarly, al-Dhahabī defined knowledge in Islām (*al-‘ilm*) as “Not the profusion of narration, but a light which Allāh casts into the heart. Its condition is followership (*ittibā‘*) and the flight away from egotism (*hawā*) and innovation.”¹⁹ All this elucidates al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī report that the Prophet ﷺ said: “The purpose and energy of the Ulema is towards addressing needs while the purpose and energy of fools is to narrate” (*himmat al-‘ulamā’ al-ri‘āya wa himmat al-sufahā’ al-riwāya*).²⁰

The Ḥadīth of the Jurists is Preferable to That of the Non-Jurists

- Wakī‘ preferred long-chained narrations through the *fuqahā’* to short-chained ones through non-*fuqahā’* and said: “The ḥadīth current among the jurists is better than the ḥadīth that is current among the ḥadīth scholars.”²¹ This is a foundational rule in the School of Imām Abū Ḥanīfa. Like Yaḥyā al-Qaṭṭān, Wakī‘ did not make *ijtihād* but followed the positions of Abū Ḥanīfa.²²
- Al-A‘mash (Abū Muḥammad Sulaymān ibn Mahrān al-Asadī the Tābi‘ī 61/-148) also said: “The ḥadīth that jurists circulate among themselves is better than that which ḥadīth narrators circulate among themselves.”²³
- Ibn Rajab said that Abū Dāwūd in his *Sunan* was more concerned with the jurisprudence of the ḥadīth than with its chains of transmission.²⁴

¹¹ Shaykh Ismā‘īl al-Ansārī as quoted by ‘Awwāma, *Athar* (p. 77).

¹² Ibn Hajar, *Tahdhīb al-Tahdhīb* (10:449-452 #817) and al-Dhahabī’s *Manāqib Abī Ḥanīfa*.

¹³ Narrated by al-Dhahabī in *Tadhkirat al-Huffāz* (1:307) and Ibn Hajar in *Tahdhīb al-Tahdhīb* (10:450).

¹⁴ Narrated by Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr in *al-Intiqā’* (p. 124).

¹⁵ Narrated by al-Dhahabī in the *Siyar* (10:205).

¹⁶ Cf. Ibn Abī al-Wafā, last page of the Karachi edition of *al-Jawāhir al-Mudīyya*.

¹⁷ In Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *Jāmi’ Bayān al-‘Ilm* (1:83-84), al-Qaḍī ‘Iyād, *Tartīb al-Madārik* (2:62), al-Shātibī, *al-Muwāfaqāt* (4:97-98).

¹⁸ “The Knowledge That Benefits is That Whose Rays Expand in the Breast and Whose Veil is Lifted in the Heart.”

Ibn ‘Atā’ Allāh, *Hikam* (#213).

¹⁹ *Siyar* (10:642).

²⁰ Narrated *mursal* from al-Ḥasan by Ibn ‘Asākir in his *Tārīkh* and al-Khaṭīb in *al-Jāmi’ li Akhlāq al-Rāwī* (1983 ed. 1:88 #27) cf. *al-Jāmi’ al-Saghīr* (#9598) and *Kanz* (#29337).

²¹ Cited by al-Dhahabī in the *Siyar* (al-Arna’ūt ed. 9:158, 12:328-329).

²² Cf. al-Dhahabī, *Tadhkirat al-Huffāz* (1:307) and Ibn Hajar in *Tahdhīb al-Tahdhīb* (11:126-127).

²³ In al-Sakhāwī, *al-Jawāhir wa al-Durar* (p. 21).

²⁴ Ibn Rajab, *Sharḥ ‘Ilal al-Tirmidhī* (1:411).

Knowing the Ḥadīth is Different From Practicing It

- Sufyān al-Thawrī used to say to the ḥadīth scholars: “Come forward, O weak ones!”²⁵ He also said: “If ḥadīth were a good thing it would have vanished just as all goodness has vanished,” and “Pursuing the study of ḥadīth is not part of the preparation for death, but a disease that preoccupies people.” Al-Dhahabī commented: “He said this verbatim. He is right in what he said because pursuing the study of ḥadīth is other than the ḥadīth itself.”²⁶

Understanding the Ḥadīth is Superior to Knowing It

- Sufyān also said: “The explanation (*tafsīr*) of the ḥadīth is better than the ḥadīth.”²⁷ Another wording has: “The explanation of the ḥadīth is better than its audition.”²⁸ Abū ‘Alī al-Naysabūrī said: “We consider understanding superior to memorization.”²⁹
- Ishāq ibn Rāhūyah said: “I would sit in Iraq with Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, Yahyā ibn Ma‘īn, and our companions, rehearsing the narrations from one, two, three routes of transmission... But when I said: What is its intent? What is its explanation? What is its *fiqh*? They would all remain mute except Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal.”³⁰
- The perspicuity and *fiqh* of Abū Thawr among the ḥadīth Masters is famous. A woman stood by a gathering of scholars of ḥadīth comprising Yahyā ibn Ma‘īn, Abū Khaythama, Khalaf ibn Salim, and others. She heard them saying: “The Prophet ﷺ said,” and “So-and-so narrated,” and “No one other than So-and-so narrated,” etc. Whereupon she asked them: “Can a woman in her menses wash the dead?” for that was her occupation. No one in the entire gathering could answer her, and they began to look at one another. Abū Thawr arrived, and they referred her to him. She asked him the same question and he said: “Yes, she can wash the dead, as per the ḥadīth of al-Qāsim from ‘Ā’isha: ‘Your menses are not in your hand,’³¹ and her narration whereby she would scrub the Prophet’s ﷺ hair at a time she was menstruating.³² If the head of the living can be washed [by a woman in her menses], then *a fortiori* the dead!” Hearing this, the ḥadīth scholars said: “Right! So-and-so narrated it, and So-and-so told us, and we know it from such-and-such a chain,” and they plunged back into the narrations and chains of transmission. The woman said: “Where were you all until now?”³³
- Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr cites Imām Aḥmad as saying: “From where does Yahyā ibn Ma‘īn know al-Shāfi‘ī? He does not know al-Shāfi‘ī nor has any idea what al-Shāfi‘ī says!”³⁴ Ibn Rāhūyah similarly conceded defeat before al-Shāfi‘ī’s jurisprudence although himself reputed for *fiqh*.³⁵

²⁵ Cited from Zayd ibn Abī al-Zarqa’ by al-Dhahabī, *Siyar* (al-Arna’ūt ed. 7:275).

²⁶ Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Jawāhir wa al-Durar* (p. 20-23).

²⁷ Narrated by al-Harawī al-Ansārī in *Dhām al-Kalām* (4:139 #907).

²⁸ In Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *Jāmi’ Bayān al-‘Ilm* (2:175).

²⁹ In al-Dhahabī, *Tadhkirat al-Huffāz* (2:776).

³⁰ Narrated by Ibn Abī Ḥātim in the introduction to his *al-Jarḥ wa al-Ta’dīl* (p. 293), Ibn al-Jawzī in *Manāqib al-Imām Aḥmad* (p. 63), and al-Dhahabī in *Tārīkh al-Islām* (chapter on Aḥmad).

³¹ In Muslim and the Four *Sunan*.

³² In al-Bukhārī and Muslim.

³³ Ibn al-Subkī in *Tabaqāt al-Shāfi‘iyya*, al-Sakhāwī in his introduction to *al-Jawāhir wa al-Durar*, and al-Haytamī in his *Fatāwā Ḥadīthiyya* (p. 283). Something similar is narrated of Aḥmad by Ibn Rajab in his *Dhayl Tabaqāt al-Ḥanābila* (1:131) and al-‘Ulaymī in *al-Manhaj al-Aḥmad* (2:208).

³⁴ Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *Jāmi’ Bayān al-‘Ilm* (2:160).

³⁵ Ishāq ibn Ibrāhīm ibn Makhlad, known as Ishāq ibn Rāhūyah or Rāhawayh, Abū Ya‘qūb al-Tamīmī al-Marwazī al-Hanzali (d. 238), one of the major ḥadīth Masters. Abū Qudāma considered him greater than Imām Aḥmad in memorization of ḥadīth, a remarkable assessment considering Aḥmad’s knowledge of 700,000 to a million narrations according to his son ‘Abd Allāh’s and Abū Zur‘a al-Rāzī’s estimations. He once said of himself: “I never wrote anything except I memorized it, and I can now see before me more than 70,000 ḥadīths in my book”; “I know the place of 100,000 ḥadīths as if I were looking at them, and I memorize 70,000 of them by heart – all sound (*ṣaḥīha*) – and 4,000 falsified ones.” [Narrated by al-Khaṭīb in *al-Jāmi’ li Akhlāq al-Rāwī* (2:380-381 #1832-1833).] He did not reach the same stature in *fiqh*. Al-Bayhaqī and others narrate that he unsuccessfully debated al-Shāfi‘ī on a legal question, as a result of which the latter disapproved of his title as the “jurisprudent of Khurāsān.” To a *Jahmī* scholar who said: “I disbelieve in a Lord that descends from one heaven to another heaven,” Ibn Rāhūyah replied: “I believe in a Lord that does what He wishes.” [Narrated by al-Dhahabī who identifies the scholar as Ibrāhīm ibn (Hishām) Abī Sālih in *Mukhtaṣar al-‘Uluw* (p. 191 #234).] Al-Bayhaqī comments: “Ishāq ibn Ibrāhīm al-Hanzali made it clear, in this report, that he considers the Descent (*al-nuzūl*) one of the Attributes of Action (*min ṣifāt al-‘fī‘l*). Secondly, he spoke of a descent without ‘how’. This proves he did not hold displacement (*al-intiqāl*) and movement from one place to another (*al-zawāl*) concerning it.” [See post titled, “The ‘Descent’ of Allāh ﷻ.”] Sources: Ibn Abī Ya‘lā, *Tabaqāt al-Hanābila* (1:6, 1:184); al-Bayhaqī, *Manāqib al-Shāfi‘ī* (1:213) and *al-Asmā’ wa al-Ṣifāt* (2:375-376 #951); al-Dhahabī, *Siyar* (9:558 #1877); Ibn al-Subkī, *Tabaqāt al-Shāfi‘iyya al-Kubrā* (2:89-90, 9:81).

Most Ḥadīth Scholars Do Not Possess Intelligence of the Ḥadīth

- ‘Abd al-Razzāq al-Ṣan‘ānī, Sufyān’s contemporary, was the teacher of the pillars of ḥadīth memorization in their time – Aḥmad, Ibn Rāhūyah, Ibn Ma‘īn, and Muḥammad ibn Yaḥyā al-Dhuhlī. Yet when Muḥammad ibn Yazīd al-Mustamlī asked Aḥmad: “Did he [‘Abd al-Razzāq] possess *fiqh*?” Aḥmad replied: “How rare is *fiqh* among those who know ḥadīth!”³⁶
- Anas ibn Sīrīn said: “I came to Kūfa and found in it 4,000 persons pursuing ḥadīth and 400 persons who had obtained *fiqh*.”³⁷
- Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām said: “The majority of ḥadīth scholars are ignorant in *fiqh*.”³⁸ A majority of 90% according to Anas ibn Sīrīn – among the *Salaf*!
- Al-Dhahabī said: “The majority of the ḥadīth scholars have no understanding, no diligence in the actual knowledge of ḥadīth, and no fear of Allāh regarding it.”³⁹ All of the authorities al-Dhahabī listed as “those who are imitated in Islām” are Jurisprudents and not merely ḥadīth masters.
- Al-Sakhāwī in his biography of Ibn Ḥajar entitled *al-Jawāhir wa al-Durar* relates similar views:

Al-Fāriqī said: “One who knows chains of ḥadīth but not the legal rulings derived from them cannot be counted among the Scholars of the Law.” His student Ibn Abī ‘Aṣrūn (d. 585) also followed this view in his book *al-Intiṣār*.⁴⁰

Not Every Sound Ḥadīth Forms Evidence

- Ibrāhīm al-Nakha‘ī said: “Truly, I hear a ḥadīth, then I see what part of it applies. I apply it and leave the rest.”⁴¹ Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Awwāma said: “Meaning, what is recognized by the authorities is retained while anything odd (*gharīb*), anomalous (*shādh*), or condemned (*munkar*) is put aside.” Yazīd ibn Abī Ḥabīb said: “When you hear a ḥadīth, proclaim it; if it is recognized, [keep it,] otherwise, leave it.”⁴²
- Ibn Abī Laylā said: “A man does not understand ḥadīth until he knows what to take from it and what to leave.”⁴³
- ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Maḥdī, the Commander of the believers in Ḥadīth, said: “It is impermissible for someone to be an Imām [*i.e.* to be imitated] until he knows what is sound and what is unsound and until he does not take everything [sound] as evidence, and until he knows the correct way to infer knowledge [in the Religion].”⁴⁴
- Al-Shāfi‘ī narrated that Mālik ibn Anas was told: “Ibn ‘Uyayna narrates from al-Zuhrī things you do not have!” He replied: “Why, should I narrate every single ḥadīth I heard? Only if I wanted to misguide people!”⁴⁵

Shaykh ‘Abd al-Fattāh Abū Ghudda mentioned some of the above examples and commented: “If the likes of Yaḥyā al-Qaṭṭān, Wakī‘ ibn al-Jarrāḥ, ‘Abd al-Razzāq, Yaḥyā ibn Ma‘īn, and those who compare with them, did not dare enter into *ijtihād* and *fiqh*, then how rash are the claimants to *ijtihād* in our time! On top of it, they call the *Salaf* ignorant without the least shame nor modesty! Allāh is our refuge from failure.”⁴⁶

Blessings and peace on the Prophet, his Family, his Companions, the Four Imāms, and those who imitate them until the Day of Judgment.

³⁶Narrated by Abū Ya‘lā in *Tabaqāt al-Hanābila* (1:329) and cited by Shaykh Abū Ghudda in his introduction to Muḥammad al-Shaybānī’s *Muwaṭṭa’* and his short masterpiece *al-Isnād min al-Dīn* (p. 68).

³⁷Narrated by al-Rāmahurmuzī in *al-Muḥaddith al-Fāsil* (p. 560).

³⁸Ibn ‘Abd al-Salām, *al-Fatāwā al-Mawṣiliyya* (p. 132-134).

³⁹In al-Sakhāwī, *al-Jawāhir wa al-Durar* (p. 18).

⁴⁰Al-Sakhāwī, *al-Jawāhir wa al-Durar* (p. 20-23).

⁴¹Narrated from Ibn Abī Khaythama by Abū Nu‘aym in the *Hilya* (4:225) and Ibn Rajab in *Sharḥ ‘Ilal al-Tirmidhī* (1:413).

⁴²In Ibn Rajab, *Sharḥ ‘Ilal al-Tirmidhī* (1:413).

⁴³In Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *Jāmi‘ Bayān al-‘Ilm* (2:130).

⁴⁴Narrated by Abū Nu‘aym in the *Hilya* (9:3).

⁴⁵Narrated by al-Khaṭīb in *al-Jāmi‘ li Akhlāq al-Rāwī* (2:109).

⁴⁶Abū Ghudda, *al-Isnād min al-Dīn* (p. 68). He means by his remarks al-Albānī and others of his ilk. Abū Ghudda’s student, Shaykh Muḥammad ‘Awwāma, listed several examples of this rule of the *Salaf* in his *Athar al-Ḥadīth al-Sharīf fī Ikhtilāf al-‘Immat al-Fuqahā’* (“The Mark of the Noble Ḥadīth in the Differences of the Imāms of Jurisprudence”).