

Verifiable Transmission (*Isnād*) and the Sects

by GF Haddad – Shawwāl 1425

The Commander of the Believers, our liege-lord ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb ؓ was careful to prevent the dissemination of unverified knowledge – chainless knowledge – that was to proliferate after his time. He said: “**Whoever finds a book containing knowledge that he did not hear from a person of learning, let him dip it in water until its ink is diluted.**”¹ This hyperbolic ruling stresses the rigorous normative method in the conveyance of knowledge in Islām – encapsulated in Ibn al-Mubārak’s axiom on *isnād* – and underlines, in passing, that such conveyance is personal and both oral and written because the pedigrees of books are their unbroken chains of transmission back to their authors.

Western-Minded Anti-Traditionists and Purists

In complete contrast, today, many purportedly educated Muslims – both purists and anti-traditionists – revere bookish knowledge and non-Muslim institutions of learning over and even at the exclusion of Islamic ones. They accredit Western titles and disciplines above the Islamic offices of learning and *mashyakhas*. They speak, write, read, study, teach, debate after the fashion of non-Muslims just as they may also eat, dress, marry, divorce, and die as Westerners, without a second thought other than implicit or expressed hostility at the heritage of the forerunners in the Religion of Truth (although purists have managed to trumpet the art of lip service to “The *Salaf*” into a full-fledged ideology).² Their approach to learning in our time is to orphan themselves of the principles of the learned Muslims of previous generations – their spiritual fore-parents as Imām al-Nawawī defined one’s Muslim teachers in *al-Taqrīb wal-Taysīr ilā Sunan al-Bashīr al-Nadhīr* ؓ. They still have *isnād* – not so much to the people of the Prophetic Way and the Muslim Congregation as to the culture of the non-Muslim world and the ideas of “progressive” journalists, activists, news analysts, social scientists, and, at the other end of the spectrum, Marxist-Leninists and anarchists born-again as purists. Such are the manufactured imāms that have infiltrated the ranks of Muslim leadership and pose as the very Ulema they and their followers desert and belie. The Seal and Last of all Prophets said ؓ:

“There will be, towards the end of time, Anti-Christ and arch-liars who shall say to you what neither you nor your foreparents ever heard before. Beware of them and keep away from them! Do not allow them to lead you astray nor sow discord among you.”³

A commentator of *Mishkāt al-Maṣābīh* said: “The Prophet ؓ meant **those that will say to the people, ‘We are scholars and shaykhs and are calling you to the Religion’ whereas, in fact, they are liars and deceivers.**” In another ḥadīth, Ḥudhayfā ؓ asked about the trials of the ends of time:

¹Narrated by al-Khaṭīb in *al-Kitāya* (p. 352) and al-Sakhāwī in *Faḥ al-Mughīth* (2:153).

²“Qur’ān-only,” feminists, Mawdūdists, and other “downgraded” neo-Mu’tazilites such as the Californian Khālīd Abū al-Faḍl and, at opposite extremes, the Quṭbīan Ḥizb al-Taḥrīr, Muḥājirūn, Ikhwānīs, and other Islamists. They are all one in their modernist re-formism and fluid reinterpretations of the Qur’ān and Sunna.

³Narrated from Abū Hurayra by Muslim and Aḥmad.

“I said, ‘Is there, after this good, any evil, O Messenger of Allāh?’ He said, ‘Yes, the evil of those who call others while standing at the gates of the Fire.’ I said, ‘Messenger of Allāh! Describe them for us.’ He said: ‘They are a people of our complexion saying the same exhortations as we do and speaking our languages.’ I said, ‘What are your orders for me concerning them in case this happens in my lifetime?’ He said, ‘Stick to the Congregation of the Muslims.’ I said, ‘What if there is no Congregation?’ He said: ‘Isolate yourself from those sects even if you must chew on a tree-trunk [for food], until death comes to you while you are in that state!’”⁴

Ill-Prepared Tradition-Minded Muslims

Some tradition-minded Muslims rush to the opposite extreme and emphasize supererogatory works and garb, forgetting that a servant must approach his Lord with obligatory works first – including the pursuit of necessary knowledge. Their solution to what they rightly view as a corrupt form of Muslim consciousness is to promote a few ostensible facets of tradition out of many but they neglect the intellectual formation that underlies it. The reason for such neglect is either that their defense of tradition is not genuine or that they come to such defense unequipped. As Imām Sufyān al-Thawrī رحمته said, “The chain of transmission (*al-isnād*) is the weapon of the believer. Whoever has no weapon, how can he fight?”⁵ So they leave the long-term formative work to others but aspire to claim its fame and receive credit for it anyway. They might even oppose those that are better prepared when they should aid them or learn from them. “There is no rarer *zuhd* than the renouncing of leadership!” (Sufyān again) All of the above has also the trappings of sectarianism and deviation.⁶

The Resulting Salad

In such a context thrive the modern types of false teaching, this one in the name of tradition, that one in the name of reform, the third one in the name of purism. The Law-bending Sufis, Shī‘īs, and perennialists invoke tradition (or claim to in the case of the latter). The tie-clad Mu‘tazilīs and other hybrid or anti-traditional havana-puffing *dā‘īs* that curse the Awliya and worship the worldly powers that be, invoke reform on the theme of a return to caliphate, or to the gold dinar, or on keeping a kennel at home and praying behind one’s wife. The less nescient but hypocritical, corrupt-to-the-bone purists invoke “The *Salaf*” to justify the Samson-like self-immolating murder of civilians. Such types have now replaced the *murabbī* in the education of the character and the *‘ālim* in the education of the mind – to Allāh we belong and to Him we return!

But if “*Every Community has its Zoroastrians, and every Community has its Jews, and every Community has its Christians,*”⁷ it remains also true that “*There shall not cease to be a group in my Community who shall always overcome and stand for truth until the end of time.*”⁸

The Prophet ﷺ declared that victorious group invulnerable to the wrong of their enemies when he said, in another narration: “*That group shall remain in charge of the*

⁴Narrated from Ḥudhayfā ibn al-Yamān by al-Bukhārī and Muslim.

⁵Cf. Ibn Rajab, *Sharḥ Ṭal al-Tirmidhī* (Itr ed. 1:56-62).

⁶As do the pseudo-Sufi *mudhabdhabūn* who are alternately traditional and anti-traditional depending on convenience but who positively adore the West and bow to the darkest sides of its ethos, such as the Scottish Hitler-eulogizing ex-actor who calls himself “Shaykh Dr. ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Murābiṭ” cf. http://mac.abc.se/home/onesr/ez/dc/sdph_e.html.

⁷Narrated from Sahl ibn Sa‘d al-Sa‘dī by al-Ṭabarānī in *al-Awsaṭ*.

⁸A mass-transmitted ḥadīth cf. al-Kattānī in *Naẓm al-Mutanāthir* (p. 141).

Command of Allāh ﷻ, unharmed by those that oppose them, until the coming of the Command of Allāh!⁹ In the chapter of his *Ṣaḥīḥ* in which he cites this ḥadīth, Imām al-Bukhārī states: “**These are the People of Knowledge**” in the sense, of course, of **traditional Sunni knowledge of the Companion-*fiqh*-based Schools of Law** and not the orphaned, newfangled knowledge of the sects.

The Prophet ﷺ also said, in praise of the latter-day generations (*al-Khalaf*):

“From every succeeding generation its upright folk shall carry this knowledge in turn. They shall repeal from it the distortions of the extremists (*taḥrīf al-ghālīn*), the misinterpretations of the ignorant (*ta’wīl al-jāhilīn*), and the pretenses of the liars (*intihāl al-mubṭilīn*).”

This is an authentic narration graded *ḥasan gharīb ṣaḥīḥ* by al-‘Alā’ī in *Bughyat al-Multamīs* and *ṣaḥīḥ* according to Aḥmad, Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr (per Ibn Kathīr and al-Ṣan‘ānī), and Ibn al-Wazīr but *ḍa‘īf muḍal* according to others.¹⁰ Narrated:

[1] from Abū Hurayra ؓ by al-Ṭabarānī with two chains, one of which is fair (*ḥasan*), and by al-Khaṭīb in *Sharaf Aṣḥāb al-Ḥadīth* and *al-Jāmi‘* with a very weak chain because of Maslama ibn ‘Alī,¹¹

[2] from Abū Umāma ؓ by al-‘Uqaylī with a weak chain;¹²

[3] from Usāma ibn Zayd ؓ by al-Khaṭīb;¹³

[4] from Abū Hurayra and ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Umar ؓ by al-Bazzār, Tammām al-Rāzī, Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, and al-‘Uqaylī (the latter two stating “ibn ‘Amr”) with very weak chains because of ‘Umar ibn Khālīd who is discarded as a narrator (*matrūk*) as indicated by al-Haythamī;¹⁴

[5] from ‘Abd Allāh ibn Mas‘ūd ؓ – the first sentence only, and with “inherit” instead of “carry” – by al-Khaṭīb;¹⁵

[6-9] From a number of other Companions – Abū al-Dardā’, ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib, Jābir ibn Samura, and Mu‘ādh ibn Jabal ؓ – through weak chains as stated by Abū Nu‘aym followed by al-‘Irāqī and al-Qārī.¹⁶

[10] *mursal* from the *Tābi‘* Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibrāhīm ibn ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-‘Udhri by al-Bayhaqī, Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, Ibn Abī Ḥātim, Ibn Ḥibbān, and al-Khaṭīb. The latter narrates that Imām Aḥmad declared it sound (*ṣaḥīḥ*), a grading faulted by

⁹Narrated from Mu‘āwiya by al-Bukhārī and Muslim as well as from Abū Hurayra and Ibn ‘Abbās. The complete narration states: “*He for whom Allāh desires great good, He grants him (superlative) understanding in the Religion (yufaqqihhu/yufqihhu fīl-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.*” The scholars have explained that the first command in the ḥadīth is Law and Religion, while the second is the Day of Resurrection and Judgment.

¹⁰Al-‘Alā’ī, *Bughyat al-Multamīs* (p. 34-35), Ibn Kathīr, *Bidāya* (1993 Turāth ed. 10:371), al-Ṣan‘ānī, *Thamarāt al-Nazar* (p. 144), Ibn al-Wazīr, *‘Awāṣim* (1:312), Ibn al-Mulaqqin, *Muqni‘* (1:246), ‘Abd al-Ḥaqq al-Ishbīlī, *al-Aḥkām al-Wuṣṭā* (1:121), Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bā‘ith al-Ḥathīth*, al-‘Irāqī, *Taqyīd* (p. 116), and al-Bulqīnī, *Maḥāsīn al-Iṣṭilāḥ* (p. 219).

¹¹Al-Ṭabarānī, *Musnad al-Shāmiyyīn* (1:344) and al-Khaṭīb, *Sharaf Aṣḥāb al-Ḥadīth* (p. 28 §52) and *al-Jāmi‘* (1991 ed. 1:193 §137=1983 ed. 1:128).

¹²Al-‘Uqaylī, *Du‘atā’* (1:9).

¹³Al-Khaṭīb, *Sharaf Aṣḥāb al-Ḥadīth* (p. 28 §53).

¹⁴Ibn Ḥajar, *Mukhtaṣar Musnad al-Bazzār* (1:122 §86), Tammām al-Rāzī, *Fawā’id* (1:350), Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *Tamhīd* (1:59), al-‘Uqaylī, *Du‘atā’* (1:10), and al-Haythamī (1:140).

¹⁵In *Sharaf Aṣḥāb al-Ḥadīth* (p. 28 §54).

¹⁶Al-Qārī, *Mirqāt* (1994 ed. 1:509 §248), al-Arna‘ūt, notes on *Sharḥ Mushkil al-Āthār* (10:18 §3884).

Yaḥyā ibn Sa‘īd al-Qaṭṭān as cited by Ibn ‘Adī from al-Khallāl’s *Ilal*. Ibn ‘Adī then cites a chain of trustworthy narrators for it. Al-Dhahabī in the *Mizān* states that Mu‘ān ibn Rifā‘a (who reports from al-‘Udhri) is not reliable (Ibn Ḥajar grades him *layyin*) but in *al-Mughnī* states that Ibn al-Madīnī declared him trustworthy as did Aḥmad, as also reported by al-Khaṭīb. Al-‘Irāqī said: “This narration is missing at least two narrators (*mu‘dal*) or missing the Companion-link (*mursal*). And this Ibrāhīm, who related it without naming the Companion, is not known to relate any narration other than this.”¹⁷

In view of al-Ṭabarānī’s fair chain, Ibn ‘Adī’s chain of reliable transmitters, Aḥmad and Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr’s grading of *ṣaḥīḥ*, al-‘Alā’ī’s similar grading, the number of Companions related to narrate it, and the widespread acceptance of this narration among the Masters, the correct grading appears is that of “sound” (*ṣaḥīḥ*) and Allāh knows best.¹⁸

Imām Jamāl al-Dīn al-Ḥubayshī (712-782) said: “This narration is a proof that **the Ulema of *Ahl al-Sunna* are all upright and there is no higher honor than the commendation of the Prophet ﷺ himself!**”¹⁹ May Allāh Most High continue to raise their honor here and hereafter and bring the scheming of their detractors to nothing.

¹⁷Al-Bayhaqī, *al-Sunan al-Kubrā* (10:209 §20685-20686) and *Shu‘ab al-Īmān* (10:209), Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *Tamhīd* (1:59), Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *al-Jarḥ wal-Ta‘dīl* (2:17), Ibn Hibbān, *Thiqāt* (4:10), al-Khaṭīb, *Sharaf Aṣḥāb al-Ḥadīth* (p. 28-29 §52-56), Ibn ‘Adī, *Kāmil* (1:153), al-Dhahabī, *Mizān* (1:45 §137), *Mughnī* (2:308 §6309), Ibn Ḥajar, *Taqrīb* (§6747), al-‘Irāqī, *Taqyīd* (p. 116) and *Tabsīra* (1:298).

¹⁸Cf. also al-Harawī’s *Dhamm al-Kalām* (3:294-330), *al-Bidāya* (Turāth ed. 6:287=al-Ma‘ārif ed. 6:258), *al-Īṣāba* (1:225), *Tadrīb al-Rāwī* (1997 ed. 2:356-357=2:302-303) and *Kashf al-Khaṭā’* (§143). This is the very first ḥadīth the writer heard the late Shaykh Abd al-Qādir al-Ārna‘ūt narrate, in his study in Damascus.

¹⁹Al-Ḥubayshī, *Nashr Tay al-Ta‘rīf fī Faḍl Ḥamalāt al-‘Ilm al-Sharīf* (p. 40).