

## The Rules of *Matn* Criticism: There Are No Rules

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### Abstract

In an effort to avoid the subjectivity of individual reason, Sunni Islam elaborated a method of ḥadīth criticism that subordinated evaluating the meaning of a report to an examination of its chain of transmission. With the fourth/tenth-century epistemological compromise of Ashʿarism, however, Sunni ḥadīth scholars adopted rationalist criteria of content criticism that included explicit rules for rejecting ḥadīths because of their meaning. This resulted in a strong internal tension within Sunni ḥadīth criticism from the fifth/eleventh century onwards, with one and the same scholar upholding rigid rules of content criticism but not employing them or even rejecting them in application. The inherent subjectivity of content criticism resulted in different Muslim scholars either rejecting or affirming the same ḥadīths. Some scholars were much more inclined to reject a ḥadīth out of hand because of its meaning, while others were willing to extend a ḥadīth more interpretive charity. The tension created by the subjectivity of content criticism emerged in unprecedented relief in the modern period, when ‘science’ and modern social norms presented an unmatched challenge to the interpretive awe in which pre-modern (and Traditionalist scholars today) held attributions to the Prophet.

*I am afraid to tell you how many ships there are on this river, for fear I should be called a liar.*

—Marco Polo on the river commerce of China<sup>1</sup>

*When Marco Polo was the first and only one to speak of the grandeur and population of China, he was not believed, but nor could he demand such belief. The Portuguese, who entered that vast empire several centuries later, began making*

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<sup>1</sup> Marco Polo, *The Travels*, trans. Ronald Latham (New York: Penguin Books, 1958), 201.

*such [claims] probable. Today it is a certainty born of the unanimous testimony of a thousand eyewitnesses from different nations, without any person claiming the opposite.*

– Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*<sup>2</sup>

## Introduction

The extent to which Muslim ḥadīth critics examined the contents of reports attributed to the Prophet has been hotly debated by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars of Islam alike.<sup>3</sup> In an earlier article, I demonstrated how formative figures in the Sunni ḥadīth tradition such as al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) and Muslim (d. 261/875) explicitly rejected certain ḥadīths because they found their contents unacceptable. Among the reasons for which such third/ninth and fourth/tenth-century Sunnis dismissed ḥadīths we find historical anachronism, logical impossibility and, most prominently, incompatibility with historical, legal and dogmatic received opinion.<sup>4</sup> However, it is also obvious that these same ḥadīth critics often approved of ḥadīths that we might view as suffering from exactly these same flaws. Short of discovering manuscripts in which a scholar like al-Bukhārī demystifies his methods, we can never know why a scholar rejected anachronism in one ḥadīth while accepting it in another, why one scholar found a ḥadīth to be logically absurd

<sup>2</sup> Voltaire, "Histoire," in *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (Paris: Boudouin Frères, 1829), 56:18.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, trans. S.M. Stern and C.R. Barber (Chicago: Aldine Atherton, 1971), 2:140-1; Alfred Guillaume, *The Traditions of Islam: An Introduction to the Study of the Hadith Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1924), 80; *Encyclopaedia of Islam* 2 (Brill CD-ROM 1.0 1999, henceforth *EP*), idem, s.v. "Matn" (A.J. Wensinck); Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1950), 3; James Robson, "Muslim Tradition: The Question of Authenticity," *Memoirs and Proceedings of the Manchester Literary and Philosophical Society* 93 (1951-52): 88; idem, "Djarḥ wa ta'dil," *EP*; Gustave E. von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1953), 111; Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 64-6; G.H.A. Juynboll, *The Authenticity of the Tradition Literature: Discussions in Modern Egypt* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969), 139; F.E. Peters, "The Quest of the Historical Muhammad," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23 (1991): 299, 302; Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1991), 71; Tarif Khalidi, *Classical Arab Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1985), 42.

<sup>4</sup> Jonathan Brown, "How We Know Early Ḥadīth Critics Did *Matn* Criticism and Why It's So Hard to Find," *Islamic Law and Society* 15, no. 2 (2008): 143-84.

while his coreligionist did not. This quandary places us squarely in front of the great challenge of content criticism: its inherent subjectivity. The valence of a text and whether its meaning clashes with some greater authority are decided by the reader. And readers all too often differ.

It was precisely the pitfall of the subjectivity of reason that Sunni Islam was designed to avoid. One of the original hallmarks of the *ahl al-ḥadīth*/Sunni movement<sup>5</sup> was the principle of subordinating reason to revealed text. Human reason, with its idiosyncrasies, whims, and mercurial understandings of the possible and impossible, cannot provide a sound religious guide. True guidance comes from revelation alone. Sunni scholars never doubted the attribution of the Qurʾān to its divine source, but individual ḥadīths were frequently not immediately traceable to the Prophet. The Prophet's true words might be divinely revealed guidance, but how could one evaluate whether a statement attributed to him was authentic or not? The Muʿtazilī rationalist school proposed that putative ḥadīths be compared against the Qurʾān and first principles of reason. Early Sunnis saw this as, once again, making human reason the judge over revelation. One person might think that a ḥadīth contradicts the Qurʾān; another might feel it merely explains a non-obvious meaning in the holy book. One person might think that a ḥadīth has a logically impossible meaning; another might conclude that its meaning is figurative. Again, religion finds itself beholden to the subjective whims of reason.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The synonymy of the term 'The People of the Sunna and the Collective (*ahl al-sunna wa'l-jamā'a*)' and the 'People of Ḥadīth (*ahl al-ḥadīth*)' among those who identified themselves as such in the third/ninth century is, in my view, beyond dispute. See, for example, the *Jāmi'* of al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892), where the author refers to the *bilā kayf* treatment of ḥadīths on God's attributes as being the school of Mālik, Ibn al-Mubārak and others, calling them the '*ahl al-sunna wa'l-jamā'a*' (I believe this is one of the earliest attested usages of this phrase) on one occasion and the '*ahl al-ḥadīth*' on another. At another point in the book, al-Tirmidhī quotes his teacher, al-Bukhārī, as saying that the 'party (*tā'ifa*)' that will always hold to the truth, as mentioned in ḥadīths, is the *ahl al-ḥadīth* (al-Bukhārī quotes his own teacher 'Alī b. al-Madīnī as his source); *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī: kitāb al-zakāt, bāb mā jā'a fī faḍl al-ṣadaqa; kitāb ṣifāt al-janna, bāb mā jā'a fī khulūd ahl al-janna wa ahl al-nār; kitāb al-ḥudūd, bāb mā jā'a fī al-a'imma al-muḍillīn*.

<sup>6</sup> For an in-depth discussion of this subject, see Brown, "How We Know Early Ḥadīth Critics," 164 ff.

The early Sunnis proposed their system of transmission criticism as a way to exclude reason from the evaluation of a ḥadīth's authenticity. Yet they nonetheless sensed the problematic meanings of some ḥadīths. On rare occasions they openly stated this. On all occasions, however, the cult of submission to the transmitted text was maintained. These scholars assumed that flawed *matns* were the result of some flaw in transmission and phrased their criticism in the language of transmission criticism. This upheld the image of an impersonal and objective system of criticism, but in fact the subtle machinations of subjectivity continued to affect Sunni ḥadīth critics.

In time, the role of content criticism received open recognition. Despite their triumph over Abbasid Mu'tazilism in the mid-third/ninth century, Sunni scholars adopted much of Mu'tazilī epistemology into Sunni theology and legal theory. Part of this acquired heritage was a list of criteria for identifying a forged ḥadīth based solely on its contents.<sup>7</sup> This set of criteria has since been upheld by generations of Sunni ḥadīth scholars up to the present day.

At the same time, however, and often by the same people, we find Sunni scholars reasserting the original Sunni rejection of content criticism in favor of submission to the cult of transmission. The inherent and inevitable subjectivity of content criticism appears clearly in Sunni critics' treatment of specific ḥadīths—where one jurist or commentator sees an absurd or sacrilegious attribution to the Prophet, another sees a piece of Prophetic wisdom that had perhaps simply been misunderstood. Moreover, we see that certain ḥadīth scholars from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries CE were consistently more at ease with content criticism than others who favored interpretive charity and submitting to transmitted text.

Although the subjective tensions inherent in content criticism have appeared since the early Islamic period, they have manifested themselves with novel salience in the modern age. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many Muslim reformists found themselves confronted with the same quandary faced by European Christians in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Should the world and our scientific perception of it conform to scripture, or does something that claims

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<sup>7</sup> Brown, "How We Know Early Ḥadīth Critics," 150–3.

to be scripture need to conform to our understanding of the world? Is scripture and the narrative it presents “ontologically precedent” to history and the external world?<sup>8</sup> Many ḥadīths that were rejected by Muslim reformists like Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) in the light of modern scientific discoveries or rational sensibilities had in fact been investigated on similar grounds in the pre-modern period. Whereas medieval Muslim ‘ulamā’ had adopted figurative or charitable readings of these ḥadīths out of awe for Prophetic transmission,<sup>9</sup> the heady winds of modernity led Muslim reformists to dismiss them roundly because of their content.

### Affirming the Rules for Content Criticism in Sunni Islam

Since the fifth/eleventh century, Sunni scholarship on the methodology of ḥadīth evaluation has consistently and explicitly affirmed the role of content criticism as a method of evaluating a ḥadīth’s reliability with no reference to its *isnād*. The notion that the contents of a ḥadīth alone can reveal its unreliability is rooted in opinions attributed to pioneering ḥadīth masters in works as early as that of Ibn Sa’d (d. 230/845). Such reports include the Successor Rabīʿ b. Khuthaym (fl. 80/700) stating, “Indeed there are ḥadīths that have a light as bright as day that we know [to be authentic], and there are others possessed of a darkness that is rejected.” This declaration was widely cited in discussions of ḥadīth critical methodology in the fifth/eleventh-century works of al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī (d. 405/1014) and al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. 463/1071).<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: a Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 5.

<sup>9</sup> Here I am consciously building on what Gershom Scholem called “the awe of the text,” which, he explains, is “founded on the assumption that everything already exists in it, and the presumptuousness of imposing the truth upon ancient texts”; Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), 290. I thank Joel Blecher for this citation.

<sup>10</sup> Muḥammad Ibn Sa’d, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-kabīr*, ed. ‘Alī Muḥammad ‘Umar, 11 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 2001), 8:306; Abū Yūsuf Ya’qūb b. Sufyān al-Fasawī, *al-Ma’rifat wa’l-tārikh*, ed. Akram Ḍiyā’ al-‘Umarī, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 3 vols. (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risāla, 1401/1981), 2:564; Abū Aḥmad ‘Abdallāh Ibn ‘Adī, *al-Kāmil fī du’afā’ al-rijāl*, 7 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1405/1985), 1:69; al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī, *Ma’rifat ‘ulūm al-ḥadīth*, ed. Mu’azzim Ḥusayn (Hyderabad: Dā’irat al-Ma’ārif al-‘Uthmāniyya, 1385/1966), 78;

A famous statement attributed to ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib also gained currency in this period: “Indeed the truth is not known by men/transmitters. Rather, know the truth and you will know its men/transmitters.”<sup>11</sup> This maxim was immortalized by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) in his *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, in which he used it to argue that a science should not be judged by the failures of some of its practitioners.<sup>12</sup> This saying has been repeated in ḥadīth writings up to the present day, with some incorrectly attributing it to the Prophet.<sup>13</sup> Most recently, the Moroccan ḥadīth scholar Aḥmad al-Ghumārī (d. 1960) phrased it as a final conclusion of his work on forged ḥadīths: “Look at what is said, do not look at who said it (*unẓur ilā al-maqāl wa lā tanẓur ilā man qāl*).”<sup>14</sup>

The legitimacy and methodological prominence of content criticism, however, became most clearly enshrined in Sunni works on the methods, practice and technical terms of ḥadīth study (*muṣṭalahāt al-ḥadīth*). In the fifth/eleventh century, Sunni ḥadīth scholars imported from Mu‘tazilī epistemology a set of criteria by which the contents of a ḥadīth could be used to determine its authenticity.<sup>15</sup> Amongst Sunnis, the taxonomy of these telltale content features originates in the work of al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, who listed them in his monumental treatise on the ḥadīth sciences, *al-Kifāya fī ‘ilm al-riwāya*.

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al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *al-Kifāya fī ma‘rifat uṣūl ‘ilm al-riwāya*, ed. Abū Ishāq Ibrāhīm Muṣṭafā al-Dimyāṭī, 2 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Hudā, 1423/2003), 2:555. The third/ninth-century transmitter critic Ibrāhīm b. Ya‘qūb al-Jūzajānī (d. 259/873) states, “I seek refuge with God that I would mention the Messenger of God (ṣ) in a ḥadīth that digs into my heart (*yahuzzu*)”; Ibrāhīm b. Ya‘qūb al-Jūzajānī, *Aḥwāl al-rijāl*, ed. Ṣubḥī al-Badrī al-Sāmarrā’ī (Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Risāla, 1405/1985), 163.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Alī says to al-Ḥārith b. Ḥūṭ: *yā Ḥārith innahu malbūs ‘alayka inna al-ḥaqq lā yu‘rafu bi’l-rijāl i‘rif al-ḥaqq ta‘rif ahlahu*. See Abū ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li-ahkām al-Qur‘ān*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Ḥifnāwī and Maḥmūd Ḥāmid ‘Uthmān, 20 vols. in 10 (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1414/1994), 1:350 (in the context of Qur‘ān 2:42).

<sup>12</sup> Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, 4 vols. ([Cairo]: al-Maṭba‘a al-‘Uthmāniyya al-Miṣriyya, 1352/1933), 1:47.

<sup>13</sup> For a discussion of this mistaken attribution to the Prophet, see Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī, *al-Maṣnū‘ fī ma‘rifat al-ḥadīth al-mawḍū‘*, ed. ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda, 6th ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Bashā’ir al-Islāmiyya, 1426/2005), 206.

<sup>14</sup> Aḥmad b. al-Ṣiddīq al-Ghumārī, *al-Mughbīr ‘alā al-aḥādīth al-mawḍū‘a fī al-Jāmi‘ al-ṣaḡhīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Rā’id al-‘Arabī, 1402/1982), 139.

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Brown, “How we Know Early Ḥadīth Critics,” 151-2.

In this work, al-Khaṭīb explains that there exists an entire category of ḥadīths that are immediately clear as forgeries on the basis of their contents alone. These consist of reports that either:

- 1) reason (*al-‘uqūl*) rejects as impossible, such as the notion that there is no Creator;
- 2) contradict the Qur’ān, the massively transmitted Sunna of the Prophet (*al-sunna al-mutawāṭira*) or the consensus of the Muslim community;
- 3) are transmitted by limited narrations but address a topic so important for Muslims that, if the ḥadīth were truly the Prophet’s words, it would have been much more widely transmitted;
- 4) Or recount events so momentous that if the report were true it would have been more widely transmitted.<sup>16</sup>

The list of culpatory contents registered by al-Khaṭīb influenced almost every significant Sunni scholar writing on ḥadīth criticism after him. It formed the basis for later discussions of content criticism. In his famous *Muqaddima*, Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ (d. 643/1245) adds a summary of al-Khaṭīb’s list that encompasses form as well as content: clear signs of forgery include feeble or preposterous wording or meaning (*rakākat al-fāṣihā wa ma’ānīhā*).<sup>17</sup> A separate stream of empirically-based content criticism was introduced by ‘Umar b. Badr al-Mawṣilī (d. 622/1225) and al-Ḥasan al-Ṣaghānī (d. 650/1252), an Indian ḥadīth scholar who traveled to Baghdad and eventually returned to his homeland as the Abbasid emissary to the Delhi Sultanate. Al-Mawṣilī compiled a book entitled *al-Mughnī ‘an al-ḥifẓ wa’l-kitāb fī-mā lam yaṣīḥḥa shay’ fī al-bāb* (*Sufficing one from Memorization and Books on Issues on which there are No Reliable Ḥadīths*). In his collection of forged ḥadīths, al-Ṣaghānī lists topics on which one only finds forged ḥadīths.<sup>18</sup> This notion was further developed by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 750/1351), who provided a more comprehensive list of categories of forged ḥadīths, such as ḥadīths

<sup>16</sup> Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *al-Kifāya fī ma’rifat uṣūl ‘ilm al-riwāya*, 1:89; idem, *al-Faqīh wa’l-mutaḥḥiq*, ed. Ismā‘īl al-Anṣārī, 2 vols. in 1 ([n.p.]: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Sunna al-Nabawiyya, 1395/1975), 1:132-3.

<sup>17</sup> Abū ‘Amr ‘Uthmān Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, *Muqaddimat Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ*, ed. ‘Ā’isha ‘Abd al-Raḥmān (Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1411/1990), 279.

<sup>18</sup> Abū al-Faḍā’il al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad al-Ṣaghānī, *al-Mawḍū‘āt*, ed. ‘Abdallāh al-Qāḍī (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1405/1985), 4-18.

on the enigmatic sage al-Khaḍīr, ḥadīths denigrating black Africans, ḥadīths predicting that on such-and-such a date such-and-such a thing will happen, ḥadīths promising excessive rewards or punishments for insignificant deeds, and ḥadīths resembling the instructions of a doctor more than those of the Prophet.<sup>19</sup>

The content criteria developed by al-Khaṭīb, Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, and, in the case of later Salafī scholars, those of Ibn al-Qayyim,<sup>20</sup> were further upheld and digested by jurists and ḥadīth critics from every part of the Sunni scholarly spectrum. These include scholars such as: Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201) (who stated famously that “any ḥadīth that you see contradicting what is known by reason [*al-ma‘qūl*] or fundamental principles [*al-uṣūl*], know that it is forged”),<sup>21</sup> Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277), Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348), Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), Zayn al-Dīn al-‘Irāqī (d. 806/1404), Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 852/1449), Shams al-Dīn al-Sakhāwī (d. 901/1497), Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), Ibn al-‘Arrāq (d. 963/1556), Muḥammad Ibn al-Amīr al-Ṣan‘ānī (d. 1768 CE), Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (d. 1791 CE), Shāh ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Dihlawī (d. 1824 CE), ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Laknawī (d. 1886–7 CE), Muḥammad Maḥfūz al-Turmusī (d. 1911 CE), Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī (d. 1914 CE), Aḥmad Shākīr (d. 1958 CE), Ṣubḥī al-Ṣāliḥ (d. 1986 CE), Aḥmad al-Ghumārī (d. 1960 CE), the Indian Deobandi scholar Muḥammad Idrīs al-Kāndhlawī (d. 1974), Nūr al-Dīn ‘Itr and Mohammad Hashim Kamali.<sup>22</sup> Of course, these schol-

<sup>19</sup> Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *al-Manār al-munīf fī al-ṣaḥīḥ wa’l-ḍa‘īf*, ed. ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Abū Ghudda, 11<sup>th</sup> ed. (Beirut: Maktab al-Maṭbū‘āt al-Islāmiyya, 1325/2004), 51 ff.

<sup>20</sup> Interestingly, Ibn al-Qayyim’s list of criteria was drawn from and quoted directly by Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī (d. 974/1566), an avowed opponent of Ibn al-Qayyim’s mentor Ibn Taymiyya; Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī, *al-Fatāwā al-ḥadīthiyya*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mar‘ashlī (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1419/1998), 252; Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Manār al-munīf*, 76–7.

<sup>21</sup> Aḥmad al-Ghumārī understands ‘uṣūl’ differently, contending that by ‘*yunāqīdu al-uṣūl*’ Ibn al-Jawzī meant the established body of ḥadīths recorded in collections. In other words, if you find a ḥadīth that has not been previously recorded anywhere, then you know it is a forgery. See Aḥmad al-Ghumārī, *al-Mathnūnī wa’l-battār fī naḥr al-‘anīd al-mi‘thār al-tā’in fī-mā ṣaḥḥa min al-sunan wa’l-āthār* (Cairo: al-Maṭba‘a al-Islāmiyya, 1352/1933), 34.

<sup>22</sup> ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Mawḍū‘āt*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad ‘Uthmān, 3 vols. (Medina: al-Maktaba al-Salafiyya, 1386–88/1966–68), 1:106; Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Tadrib al-rāwī fī sharḥ Taqrīb al-Nawāwī*, ed. ‘Abd al-Wahhāb ‘Abd al-Laṭīf, 3<sup>rd</sup>



ars regularly reminded their readers that, before dismissing a problematic *matn*, one should first try to find an exonerating interpretation for it. As al-Suyūṭī puts it tersely, “What contradicts the Qur’ān or the massively transmitted Sunna must be reconciled through interpretation (*ta’wīl*), and what cannot be reconciled is false.”<sup>23</sup>

In what may be an acknowledgement of the inevitably subjective nature of determining unacceptable contents, many Sunni scholars sought to ground content criticism in a sort of expert subjectivity. Early works on ḥadīth criticism had compared the ability of a critic to pick

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ed. (Cairo: Maktabat Dār al-Turāth, 1426/2005), 213; Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī, *al-Mūqīza fī ‘ilm muṣṭalah al-ḥadīth*, ed. ‘Abd al-Fattāh Abū Ghudda, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 1421/2000), 36-7; Ibn Kathīr and Aḥmad Shākīr, *al-Bā’ith al-ḥathīth sharḥ Ikhtisār ‘Ulūm al-ḥadīth*, ed. Aḥmad Shākīr (Cairo: Dār al-Turāth, 1423/2003), 65-70; Zayn al-Dīn ‘Abd al-Raḥīm al-‘Irāqī and Zakariyyā al-Anṣārī, *al-Tabṣira wa’l-tadhkira wa yalibi Fath al-Bāqī ‘alā Alfīyyat al-‘Irāqī*, ed. Muḥammad al-Ḥusayn al-‘Irāqī al-Ḥusaynī, 2 vols. in 3 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, [n.d.]), 1:280-1; Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalānī, *al-Nukat ‘alā kitāb Ibn al-Ṣalāh*, ed. Mas‘ūd ‘Abd al-Ḥamid al-Sa’dafi and Muḥammad Fāris (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1414/1994), 361; Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sakhāwī, *Fath al-mughīth bi-sharḥ Alfīyyat al-ḥadīth*, ed. ‘Alī Ḥusayn ‘Alī, 5 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Sunna, 1424/2003), 1:330-3; ‘Alī b. Muḥammad Ibn ‘Arrāq, *Tanzīh al-sharī‘a al-marfū‘a ‘an al-akḥbār al-shanī‘a al-mawḍū‘a* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Qāhira, [1964]), 1:6-8; Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl al-Amīr al-Ṣan‘ānī, *Tawḍīḥ al-afkār li-ma‘ānī Tanqīḥ al-anzār*, ed. Ṣalāḥ Muḥammad ‘Uwayḍa, 2 vols. in 1 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1417/1997), 2:72-5; Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī, *Bulghat al-arīb fī muṣṭalah āthār al-ḥabīb*, ed. ‘Abd al-Fattāh Abū Ghudda (Beirut: Maktab al-Maṭbū‘at al-Islāmiyya, 1408/[1988]), 193; Shāh ‘Abd al-‘Azīz al-Dihlawī, *‘Ejāle-ye nāfe‘e* (Karachi: Nūr Moḥammad Kārkḥāne, 1964/1383), 25; Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Laknawī, *Zafar al-amānī bi-sharḥ Mukhtaṣar al-sayyid al-sharīf al-Jurjānī*, ed. ‘Abd al-Fattāh Abū Ghudda, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Beirut: Maktab al-Maṭbū‘at al-Islāmiyya, 1416/[1996]), 429-31; Muḥammad Maḥmūd al-Turmusī, *Manhaj dhawī al-naẓar* (Cairo: Maṭba‘at Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1406/1985), 108-9; Ṣubḥī Ṣāliḥ, *‘Ulūm al-ḥadīth wa muṣṭalahihī* (Dār al-‘Ilm li’l-Malāyīn, 2000), 264 ff.; Aḥmad b. al-Ṣiddīq al-Ghumārī, *al-Mughīr ‘alā al-aḥādīth al-mawḍū‘a fī al-Jāmi‘ al-ṣaghīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Rā‘id al-‘Arabī, 1402/1982), 136-9; Muḥammad Idrīs al-Kāndhlawī, *Minḥat al-mughīth sharḥ Alfīyyat al-‘Irāqī fī’l-ḥadīth*, ed. Sājid ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Ṣiddīqī (Beirut: Dār al-Bashā‘ir al-Islāmiyya, 1430/2009), 323; Nūr al-Dīn ‘Itir, *Manhaj al-naqd fī ‘ulūm al-ḥadīth*, 28<sup>th</sup> ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr al-Mu‘āsir, 1428/2007), 312-17; Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *A Textbook of Ḥadīth Studies* (Markfield, U.K.: The Islamic Foundation, 2005), 194-7. An example of a Salafī scholar who drew heavily on Ibn al-Qayyim’s list is Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī, *Qawā‘id al-taḥdīth*, ed. Muḥammad Bahjat al-Bayṭār (Beirut: Dār al-Nafā‘is, 1427/2006), 157-8.

<sup>23</sup> Al-Suyūṭī, “Inbāh al-adhkiyā’ fī ḥayāt al-anbiyā’ ‘alayhim al-salām,” in *Rasā’il li’l-imām al-ḥafīz Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī*, ed. Rāshid al-Khalīlī (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-‘Asriyya, 1431/2009), 137.

out unreliable ḥadīths to that of a moneychanger intuitively knowing a counterfeit coin. Such intangible expertise “comes from long hours of study (*tūl al-mujālasa*), discussion, and experience,” explained the critic Ibn ‘Adī (d. 365/975–6).<sup>24</sup> In his writings on ḥadīth methodology in the seventh/thirteenth century, the Egyptian Ibn Daqīq al-‘Īd (d. 702/1302) introduces the notion of an experiential faculty (*hay’a naf-sāniyya aw malaka*)—a ‘nose’—that one acquires through long exposure to Prophetic ḥadīths and that allows one to know what can and what cannot be the Prophet’s speech, based on both form and content.<sup>25</sup> This theme has also been echoed by subsequent generations of scholars.<sup>26</sup>

Interestingly, this notion of an experiential faculty developed most comprehensively in the twentieth century. The Salafī scholar of Damascus, Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī, links this intuitive taste for true Prophetic speech to a scholar’s highly developed piety.<sup>27</sup> He builds this partially on Ibn Taymiyya’s (d. 728/1328) argument that, in the absence of strong legal evidence, the moral intuition of a scholar whose “heart is edified by the fear of God (*taqwā*)” can be accepted as proof in determining the legal status of an action.<sup>28</sup> Al-Qāsimī also cites at length the writings of Ibn ‘Urwa al-Ḥanbalī (d. 837/1433–4) and the early Sufi Shāh al-Kirmānī (d. ca. 300/900), who argued that pious and god-fearing believers possess an intuitive ability to discern truth from falsehood, authentic ḥadīths from spurious ones, citing as evidence ḥadīths such as, “Beware the perspicacity of the believer, for he sees with the light of God (*ittaqū firāsāt al-mu’min fa-innahu yanzuru bi-nūr Allāh*).” Shāh al-Kirmānī even recounts how he witnessed a pious Muslim reject a ḥadīth as a forgery merely by hearing it. Later, al-Kirmānī researched the ḥadīth and found that the pious man was right.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Ibn ‘Adī, *al-Kāmil*, 1:118. This comparison is attributed to ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Maḥdī. Cf. al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Kitāb al-Jāmi‘ li-akhlāq al-rāwī wa ādāb al-sāmi‘*, ed. Muḥammad Ra’fat Sa’id, 2 vols. (Mansoura: Dār al-Wafā’, 1423/2002), 2:272.

<sup>25</sup> Ibn Daqīq al-‘Īd, *al-Iqtirāḥ fi bayān al-iṣṭilāḥ*, ed. ‘Amir Ḥasan Ṣabrī (Beirut: Dār al-Bashā’ir al-Islāmiyya, 1427/2006), 228.

<sup>26</sup> Ibn ‘Arrāq, *Tanzīh*, 1:6; al-Ṣan‘ānī, *Tawḍīḥ al-afkār*, 2:72; al-Laknawī, *Zafar al-amānī*, 429; al-Turmusī, *Manhaj*, 107; al-Qāsimī, *Qawā’id*, 171–2.

<sup>27</sup> Al-Qāsimī, *Qawā’id*, 172 ff.

<sup>28</sup> See Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū‘at al-fatāwā*, ed. Sayyid Ḥusayn al-‘Affānī and Khayrī Sa’id, 35 vols. (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Tawfiqiyya, [n.d.]), 20:26.

<sup>29</sup> Al-Qāsimī, *Qawā’id*, 172–4. Al-Qāsimī cites from Abū al-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Ḥusayn Ibn

This intuitive sense was further elaborated by the Moroccan ḥadīth scholar and paragon of ‘neo-Sufism’, Aḥmad b. al-Ṣiddīq al-Ghumārī.<sup>30</sup> For him, the ḥadīth critic’s sensitivity to content or form unbecoming the Prophet is distinctly phrased in the Sufi idiom. In the conclusion of his list of the forged ḥadīths that he determines al-Suyūṭī to have erroneously included in his *al-Jāmi‘ al-ṣaḡhīr*, al-Ghumārī describes how forged ḥadīths are obvious immediately to master critics. These are the virtuosos who have practiced “until they have tasted the flavor of the Prophetic utterances, and their heart and mystery has mixed with his flesh and blood so that his soul accepts authentic ḥadīths and the Prophetic word, inclining to it upon merely hearing it,” and conversely with forgeries. This is only possible for those whose “souls are blended with the Sunna, with the light of the heart and purity of mind (*ṣafā’ al-dhihn*).” Al-Ghumārī extends this ability to those elite Sufis who are the “gnostics, those possessed of sound unveiling (*ahl al-kashf al-ṣaḡhīḥ*) and piercing perception by the light of God.”<sup>31</sup>

### The Converse: Sunni Rejection of Content Criticism in Theory and Practice

Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī represents well the paradox of content criticism in Sunni ḥadīth scholarship. Although he provided the basis for all later rules of content criticism, at no point in his many works on ḥadīth criticism (such as the *Kifāya* or the *Jāmi‘ li-akhlāq al-rāwī wa ādāb al-sāmi‘*) does he ever actually employ it explicitly. In the case of the dozens of ḥadīths that he criticizes as forged (*mawḍū‘*) or unacceptable (*munkar*) in his *Tārīkh Baghdād*, not once does the author cite the contents of a ḥadīth as the reason for his verdict.<sup>32</sup> He may indeed have

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‘Urwa’s (a.k.a. Ibn Zaknūn) unpublished *al-Kawākib al-darārī fī tartīb Musnad al-imām Aḥmad ‘alā abwāb al-Bukhārī*.

<sup>30</sup> For debates over the concept of reformist, ‘Neo-Sufism’, see R.S. O’Fahey and Bernd Radtke, “Neo-Sufism Reconsidered,” *Der Islam* 1 (1993): 52–87; John Voll, “Neo-Sufism: Reconsidered Again,” *Canadian Journal of African Studies*, 42, no. 2–3 (2007): 314–30, 560–97; John Voll and Nehemiah Levzion, eds., *Eighteenth-Century Renewal and Reform in Islam* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1987).

<sup>31</sup> Al-Ghumārī, *al-Mughīr*, 137.

<sup>32</sup> Brown, “How We Know Early Ḥadīth Critics,” 153.

found the contents of many of these ḥadīths reprehensible, but phrasing his rejections in the language of *isnād* criticism and not content criticism was the established Sunni way. As I discussed in an earlier article, the methodological vision of the early Sunnis was built on the cult of the *isnād* and on the subordination of reason to transmission criticism. As the Sunni Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889) asserted in his rebuttal of the Muʿtazilīs:

We do not resort except to that to which the Messenger of God (ṣ) resorted. And we do not reject what has been *transmitted authentically* from him because it does not accord with our conjectures (*awhāmīnā*) or seem correct to reason ... we hope that in this lies the path to salvation and escape from the baseless whims of heresy (*ahwāʾ*).<sup>33</sup> (my emphasis)

The contents of a ḥadīth might be problematic, but, for the early Sunnis, deeming it a forgery had to be couched in terms of flaws in transmission. Ibn Qutayba points out the dangers that the early Sunnis saw in open and unrestricted content criticism. Consider, for example, Muʿtazilī criticisms of the infamous Ḥadīth of the Fly, which states that, if a fly lands in one's drink, one should submerge it fully and then remove it, since if there is disease on one wing the cure is on the other.<sup>34</sup> Ibn Qutayba's rationalist opponents deemed it absurd that the same fly could carry both a disease and its cure. Ibn Qutayba counters that a Muslim who refuses to follow ḥadīths because of rational objections and accepts religious texts based solely on the suitability of their contents "is rejecting what the Prophet and the Companions left us."<sup>35</sup>

Listing a set of rules for unacceptable contents was thus very un-Sunni. It is no surprise that this list was imported from Muʿtazilism by Ashʿarīs like al-Khaṭīb as part of the Ashʿarī epistemological compromise.<sup>36</sup> In the centuries after al-Khaṭīb, leading Sunni ḥadīth scholars mirrored his paradoxical approach to content criticism. The prolific

<sup>33</sup>) Abū Muḥammad ʿAbdallāh Ibn Qutayba al-Dīnawarī, *Taʾwīl mukhtalif al-ḥadīth*, ed. Muḥammad Zuhri al-Najjār (Beirut: Dār al-Jil, 1393/1973), 208.

<sup>34</sup>) This ḥadīth reads: *idhā waqaʿa dhubāb fi ināʾ aḥadikum faʾl-yaghmishu kullahu thumma ʾl-yatrahhu fa-inna fi aḥad jināḥayhi shifāʾun wa fi al-ākhar dāʾun*. See Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: *kitāb al-ṭibb*, *bāb idhā waqaʿa al-dhubāb fi al-ināʾ*.

<sup>35</sup>) Ibn Qutayba, *Taʾwīl mukhtalif al-ḥadīth*, 228-9.

<sup>36</sup>) Brown, "How We Know Early Ḥadīth Critics," 151-2.

and encyclopedic Egyptian scholar Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī upheld the list of content criteria originated by al-Khaṭīb in his work on ḥadīth methodology.<sup>37</sup> In a treatise attempting to prove that the Prophet's parents had attained salvation despite having died before the call of Islam, however, al-Suyūṭī finds himself roundly rejecting the principle of content criticism. One piece of evidence marshaled by al-Suyūṭī in his salvation argument is a ḥadīth stating that the Prophet's mother was actually brought back to life briefly in order to embrace his message. A whole cadre of Sunni scholars, however, had objected to this ḥadīth on the grounds that its meaning was untenable. The Andalusian peripatetic ḥadīth scholar Ibn Diḥya (d. 633/1235) lambastes the ḥadīth for breaking with the consensus that the Prophet's mother had never been revived and for contradicting numerous Qur'ānic verses. These include the Qur'ānic injunction, "Do not ask about the people of Hellfire (*wa lā tas'al 'an aṣḥāb al-jahīm*)," which, according to Ibn Diḥya, was revealed to the Prophet after he had exclaimed that he hoped his parents had found bliss in the afterlife, and verses stating that those who disbelieve can find no comfort in their good deeds on the Day of Resurrection. Finally, Ibn Diḥya argues, it is absurd to think that someone can be credited for believing in the message of Islam if he has been revived from the dead to do so! This is analogous to the Qur'ān's common-sense statement that unbelievers' regrets on the Day of Judgment will avail them nothing.<sup>38</sup>

Al-Suyūṭī responds with a scathing attack on Ibn Diḥya's methodology: "Ibn Diḥya's finding fault (*ta'līl*) in the ḥadīth for contradicting the evident meaning of the Qur'ān does not accord with the method of the scholars of ḥadīth." He quotes the fifth/eleventh-century ḥadīth scholar Abū al-Faḍl al-Maqdisī's (d. 507/1113) rebuke of Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064) for his criticism of a ḥadīth found in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*<sup>39</sup> on the grounds that it contradicted several accepted ḥadīths:

<sup>37</sup> Al-Suyūṭī, *Tadrib al-rāwī*, 213.

<sup>38</sup> Al-Suyūṭī, "al-Ta'zīm wa'l-minna fī anna abaway Rasūl Allāh (ṣ) fī al-janna," in *Silsilat maṭbū'āt Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-'Uthmāniyya* 50 (1915-6): 7-8. For a modern discussion of how one's belief in God and Islam must be made freely and before the coming of God's manifest judgment, see Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, *al-Hurriyya al-dīniyya wa'l-ta'addudiyya fī naẓar al-Islām* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1428/2007), 22.

<sup>39</sup> This ḥadīth is narrated by Sharīk b. 'Abdallāh and describes the Prophet's night journey to Jerusalem as occurring "before his revelation (*qabla an yūḥā ilayhi*)."

Indeed Ibn Ḥazm, although he was a master in diverse sciences, did not follow the method of the ḥadīth masters in his criticism of that ḥadīth. And that is because the ḥadīth masters criticize a ḥadīth by means of its *isnād*, which is the means of approaching it (*mirqāt ilayhi*), while that man [Ibn Ḥazm] criticized it for its text (*lafẓ*).<sup>40</sup>

### Tension between Subjective Reason and Submission to Claims of Revelation within the Ḥadīth Corpus

The tension between submission to the omniscience of divine revelation and contesting such attributions on grounds of natural reason is found in foundational texts of the Sunni ḥadīth corpus itself. Later Muslim scholars invoked these reports to argue for or against admitting specific ḥadīths as evidence in their arguments. We will not consider here whether these competing reports can be traced back to the time of the Prophet. Instead will we only take into consideration their use in the period after the mainstay ḥadīth collections in which they first appear. These reports and the manner in which scholars used them demonstrate that the inherent tension and subjectivity of content criticism was embedded in Sunni scholarly discourse from its earliest days.

Consider the following two reports. The first is a well-known Prophetic ḥadīth that we will refer to as the Ḥadīth of Cringing. Dating from at least the early third/ninth century (respected Sunni scholars considered it reliable), it is narrated by the Successor ‘Abd al-Malik b. Sa‘īd from Abū Ḥamīd and Abū Usayd and states that the Prophet said:

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would seem to contradict blatantly the consensus that the *Isrā’* and *Mi‘rāj* occurred during the Prophet’s preaching in Mecca. For Ibn Ḥazm’s criticism, see ‘Alī b. Muḥammad Ibn Ḥazm, [Two Ḥadīths from the *Ṣaḥīḥayn*—One from al-Bukhārī and One from Muslim—that Ibn Ḥazm Considers Forgeries],” MS Ahmet III 624, Topkapı Sarayı Library, Istanbul: 29a. Ibn Ḥajar rejects this criticism. He suggests numerous interpretations for the ḥadīth, including the notion that “before the revelation” meant before a particular instance of revelation. In other words, the Prophet was transported on the *Isrā’* without being warned by the means of revelation. See Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath al-bārī sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. ‘Abdallāh b. Bāz and Muḥammad Fu‘ād ‘Abd al-Bāqī, 16 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1418/1997), 13:591-3; *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: kitāb al-tawḥīd, bāb mā jā’a fi qawlihi ‘azza wa jalla wa kallama Allāhu Musā taklīm<sup>an</sup>*.

<sup>40</sup> Al-Suyūṭī, “al-Ta’zīm wa’l-manna,” 9.

If you hear a ḥadīth that your heart accepts, that your mind and body are at ease with, and you feel that it is acceptable to you, then it is even more acceptable to me. If you hear a ḥadīth that makes your skin cringe, and your hearts or minds turn against it, and you feel that it is inconceivable (*baʿīd*) to you, then it is even more inconceivable to me.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>41</sup> “*Idhā samiʿtum al-ḥadīth taʿrifuhu qulūbukum wa talīnu lahu ashʾarukum wa abshārukum wa tarawn annahu minkum qarīb fa-anā awlākum bihi wa idhā samiʿtum al-ḥadīth taqshaʾirru minhu julūdukum wa tataghayyaru lahu qulūbukum aw ashʾarukum wa tarawn annahu baʿīd fa-anā abʾadukum minhu.*” For this ḥadīth, see Ibn Saʿd, *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-kabīr*, 1:333; Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), *Musnad Ibn Ḥanbal* (Maymaniyya edition): 3:497, 5:425; Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl al-Bukhārī, *al-Tārīkh al-kabīr*, ed. Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā, 9 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1422/2001), 5:259; Abū Bakr al-Bazzār (d. 292/904-5), *Musnad al-Bazzār*, ed. Maḥfūz al-Raḥmān al-Salafī, 10 vols. (Beirut, Medina: Muʾassasat ʿUlūm al-Qurʾān, 1409/1989), 9:168; Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ Mushkil al-āthār*, ed. Shuʿayb al-Arnāʿūṭ (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 1415/1994), 15:344; Ibn Ḥibbān al-Bustī, *al-Iḥsān bi-tartīb Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Ḥibbān*, ed. Kamāl Yūsuf al-Ḥūt, 10 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1407/1987), 1:140-1; al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdadī, *al-Kifāya fī maʾrifat uṣūl ʿilm al-riwāya*, 2:551; ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq Ibn al-Kharrāṭ al-Ishbīlī, *Kitāb al-Aḥkām al-sharʿiyya al-kubrā*, ed. Ḥusayn ʿUkāsha, 5 vols. (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Rushd, 1422/2001), 1:297-8; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Mawḍūʿāt*, 1:103; Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Bahādur al-Zarkashī, *al-Nukat ʿalā Muqaddimat Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ*, ed. Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn Bilā Furayj, 4 vols. (Riyadh: Aḍwāʾ al-Salaf, 1998), 2:262; Aḥmad b. Saʿd al-Dīn al-Miswārī, *al-Risāla al-munqidha min al-ghiwāya fī ṭuruq al-riwāya*, ed. Ḥamūd al-Aḥnūmī (Sanaa: Maktabat Badr, 1997), 64; al-Ghumārī, *al-Mughīr*, 137. Ibn Kathīr, al-Fatānī, al-Suyūṭī and al-Shawkānī say this ḥadīth is *ṣaḥīḥ*; al-Albānī says it is *ḥasan*; Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Mufid, [n.d.]), 2:458; al-Suyūṭī, *al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1425/2004), 49 (#699), Muḥammad Ṭāḥir al-Fatānī (d. 986/1578-9), *Tadhkirat al-mawḍūʿāt* ([Damascus]: Amīn Damaj, [n.d.]), 28; Muḥammad b. ʿAlī al-Shawkānī, *al-Fawāʿid al-majmūʿa fī al-aḥādīth al-mawḍūʿa*, ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Muʿallimī and Zuhayr Shāwīsh (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1392/[1972]), 281; Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, ed. Zuhayr Shāwīsh, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1408/1988), 1:166. Cf. Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Iḥkām fī uṣūl al-aḥkām*, ed. Muḥammad Aḥmad ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz, 8 vols. in 2 (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Imtiyāz, 1398/1978), 2:250; cf. Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī, *Mizān al-iʿtidāl fī naqd al-rijāl*, ed. ʿAlī Muḥammad al-Bijawī, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa, [n.d.], reprint of 1963-4 Cairo ʿIsā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī edition), 1:271; Aḥmad al-Ghumārī, *al-Mudawwī li-ʿilal al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaḥīḥ wa Sharḥay al-Munāwī*, 6 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub, 1996), 1:398-400. Similar ḥadīths have been rejected by Sunni critics: “*man ḥaddatha ʿannī ḥadīth<sup>um</sup> huwa li-llāh riḍ<sup>um</sup> fa-anā qultuhu wa bihi ursiltu*”; see Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Mawḍūʿāt*, 1:98; “*idhā balaghakum ʿannī ḥadīth yaḥsunu bī an aqūlahu fa-anā qultuhu, wa idhā balaghakum ʿannī ḥadīth lā yaḥsunu bī an aqūlahu fa-laysa minnī wa lam aqulhu*”; see Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī, *ʿIlal al-ḥadīth*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa, 1405/1985), 2:310 (#2445); al-Dhahabī, *Mizān*, 1:308.

The second report is a Companion statement that appears in mainstream Sunni sources from the third/ninth century onward. It is attributed to both ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and Ibn Mas‘ūd and states, “If you are told a ḥadīth from the Prophet, think of it what is most fitting, most pious and best guided.”<sup>42</sup> We will refer to this as the Command to Charity.

These two reports appear to be at loggerheads. The Ḥadīth of Cringing clearly instructs Muslims to evaluate claims about the Prophet making a statement on the basis of their own subjective understanding of right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate. The Command to Charity, however, tells Muslims to subordinate their natural reaction and moral judgment to an assumption of charity—if one understands a report attributed to the Prophet negatively, then one must find a better and alternative interpretation more befitting Islamic teachings. One might assume that the Command to Charity addresses how Muslims should interpret ḥadīths that *have already been authenticated*, and this is certainly how one of the scholars discussed below understood it. But, as we will also see below, this is explicitly not the case for most scholars examined.

Sunni scholars affirmed the evident meanings and messages of these two edicts. The early Ḥanafī jurist of Egypt Abū Ja‘far al-Ṭahāwī (d. 321/932) ruminates on the Ḥadīth of Cringing and concludes that it confirms that the Prophet’s teachings, like God’s words in the Qur’ān, accord with man’s natural perception of right and wrong.<sup>43</sup> In the introductory chapters of his dictionary of impugned transmitters, the *Kāmil fī du‘afā’ al-rijāl*, the Shāfi‘ī ḥadīth scholar Ibn ‘Adī cites a version of the Cringing Ḥadīth as the basis for his chapter on ‘Fearing the ḥadīths

<sup>42</sup> “*Idhā ḥuddithtum bi-ḥadīth min al-Nabī fa-ḡannū bihi mā huwa aḥya’ wa mā huwa atqā wa mā huwa abdā.*” For this report, see *Musnad* Ibn Ḥanbal: 1:122, 130, 385, 415; *Sunan Ibn Mājah*: introductory chapters, bāb 2 *ta’ẓīm ḥadīth rasūl Allāh (ṣ) wa’l-taghlīẓ ‘alā man ‘araḍahu*; Abū Ya‘lā al-Mawṣilī, *Musnad Abi Ya‘lā al-Mawṣilī*, ed. Ḥusayn Salim Asad, 16 vols. (Damascus: Dār al-Ma‘mūn, 1407/1987), 9:170; Abū Nu‘aym al-Iṣbahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyā’*, 10 vols. (Beirut and Cairo: Dār al-Fikr and Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1416/1996), 7:247; Khwāje ‘Abdallāh al-Anṣārī al-Harawī, *Dhamm al-kalām wa ahlihi*, ed. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Shibl, 5 vols. (Medina: Maktabat al-‘Ulūm wa’l-Ḥikam, 1418/1998), 2:76–7; Abū ‘Abdallāh Muḥammad Ibn Muflīḥ al-Maqdisī, *al-Ādāb al-shar‘iyya*, ed. Shu‘ayb al-Arnā’ūṭ et al., 3 vols. (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risāla, 1996), 2:295.

<sup>43</sup> Al-Ṭahāwī, *Sharḥ Mushkil al-āthār*, 15:346; cf. Qur’ān 39:23.



of the Messenger of God (ﷺ) except what is known, understood and of which one is certain.’<sup>44</sup> Ibn Kathīr invokes the Cringing Ḥadīth in his *Tafsīr*, using it as evidence that the Prophet only ordered what was right and shunned what was wrong.<sup>45</sup> This ḥadīth inspired a maxim coined by Ibn al-Jawzī in his *Kitāb al-Mawḍū‘āt* and parroted by generations of Sunni scholars into the twentieth century: “Unacceptable ḥadīths, the student’s skin cringes at them, and his heart is averse to them in general.”<sup>46</sup>

Interestingly, none of these scholars saw in the Ḥadīth of Cringing any risk of making reason or moral sensibility paramount over revealed texts. They did not overtly connect the ḥadīth to the danger that Sunni Muslims had been trumpeting since the birth of the movement, namely that it was precisely an overconfidence in man’s frail reason to decide matters of religion and religious law that had led countless communities astray in the past.

Not surprisingly, the reliance on subjective reason inherent in the Ḥadīth of Cringing was a double-edged sword. In the enduring debate over the acceptability of music in Islam, we see the Cringing Ḥadīth brought into direct competition with the transmission-based system of authentication that Sunnis hoped would remove reason from the process of ḥadīth criticism.<sup>47</sup> The Alexandrian scholar Aḥmad Ibn al-Muza-yyan al-Qurṭubī (d. 656/1258) employs the Cringing Ḥadīth to argue for the inherent truthfulness of ḥadīths condemning music in the face of serious criticisms of the *isnād* reliability of these reports. He admits

<sup>44</sup> Ibn ‘Adī, *al-Kāmil*, 1:26. Ibn ‘Adī was actually a student of al-Ṭahāwī (see Ibn ‘Adī, *al-Kāmil*, 1:53). See also ‘Alī b. ‘Umar al-Dāraqutnī and Shams al-Dīn al-‘Aẓīmābādī, *Ta’līq al-mughnī ‘alā Sunan al-Dāraqutnī*, 4 vols. in 2 (Multan, Pakistan): Nashr al-Sunna, [1980], 4:208. Interestingly, al-Khaṭīb narrates this ḥadīth from a vizier whom he respected a great deal; see al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh Baghdād*, ed. Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā, 14 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1417/1997), 11:390.

<sup>45</sup> Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr*, 2:255, 458. These discussions occur in the context of Qur’ān 7:107 and 11:88.

<sup>46</sup> “*Al-ḥadīth al-munkar yaqsha’irru minhu jild al-tālib wa yanfiru minhu qalbuhi fī al-ghālīb*”; Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Mawḍū‘āt*, 1:103; al-Sakhāwī, *Fath al-mughīth*, 1:331; al-Suyūṭī, *Tadrīb al-rāwī*, 212; al-Laknawī, *Ẓafar al-amānī*, 430; al-Qāsimī, *Qawā’id al-taḥdīth*, 172.

<sup>47</sup> For a useful article on this debate, see Arthur Gribetz, “The *Samā’* Controversy: Sufi vs. Legalist,” *Studia Islamica* 74 (1991): 43–62.

that ḥadīths condemning music, which appear in collections like al-Tirmidhī's *Jāmi'*, are routinely criticized by critics like al-Tirmidhī himself for both weak transmitters and a lack of corroboration. Al-Qurṭubī retorts, however, that these flawed ḥadīths are buttressed by general Islamic "legal principles (*al-qawā'id al-shar'iyya*)," as the ḥadīths accord with the values of the Shariah and instruct Muslims not to engage in foolish and vain activities. He then cites the Ḥadīth of Cringing as evidence that Muslims know a sound ḥadīth when they hear it. Al-Qurṭubī quotes an earlier Andalusian scholar who also drew on this ḥadīth to hammer home his argument: "As 'Abd al-Ḥaqq [Ibn al-Kharrāṭ al-Ishbīlī] (d. 581/1185) said, 'What these ḥadīths include in terms of condemning singing and singers, the hearts of the scholars accept it and their minds and bodies are at ease with it....'"<sup>48</sup>

In his commentary on al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (d. 1791 CE) dives into the debate, arguing against those who prohibit music by pointing to the many *isnād* flaws of the anti-music ḥadīths. The inevitable subjectivity of content criticism actually affords al-Zabīdī an opening to rebut al-Qurṭubī's argument. Turning the Ḥadīth of Cringing against his opponent, al-Zabīdī argues that the extent to which music promotes "softening of the heart, the soul's longing for those beloved people and places, benefit for the body and bringing joy to the heart" means that one could just as easily use one's moral sense to *reject* ḥadīths banning music.<sup>49</sup>

All the Sunni scholars examined in this research have been uniform in their interpretation of the Command to Charity, which they have understood as embodying an important hermeneutic principle. The famous Shāfi'ī scholar of Naysābūr, Ibn Khuzayma (d. 311/923), who acted as the pivot for the transmission and dispersion of al-Shāfi'ī's teachings in Khurasan, invokes this saying of 'Alī in his vehemently traditionist theological treatise the *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd*. The author notes that this saying articulates an important rule that should govern scholars' interpretations of Prophetic reports: it is essential to read ḥadīths

<sup>48</sup>) Aḥmad b. 'Umar al-Anṣārī al-Qurṭubī, *Kashf al-qinā' 'an ḥukm al-wajd wa'l-samā'* (Tanta: Dār al-Ṣaḥāba li'l-Turāth, 1412/1992), 37-40; Muḥammad Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī, *Iḥāf al-sāda al-mutaqqin bi-sharḥ asrār Iḥyā' 'ulūm al-dīn*, 10 vols. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, [1973?]), 6:523.

<sup>49</sup>) Al-Zabīdī, *Iḥāf al-sāda*, 6:525.

in the proper light so that they accord with the entirety of the Sunna. If a scholar proceeded otherwise, he might understand one ḥadīth as contradicting or invalidating another. For example, Ibn Khuzayma explains, a Prophetic report stating that a Muslim who commits a certain sin will not enter heaven should not be understood as an absolute statement (since Sunni orthodoxy holds that all monotheists, and all Muslims, will one day enter Heaven). Rather, it should be understood as meaning that this person will not enter heaven as easily as someone who has *not* committed that sin.<sup>50</sup>

Although he adhered to the rival Ḥanafī school of law and legal theory, Ibn Khuzayma's contemporary in Naysābūr, Abū Bakr al-Jaṣṣāṣ (d. 370/981), also invoked the Command to Charity. In a discussion of ḥadīths stating that children born of fornication cannot enter Heaven, he emphasizes that, if deemed authentic, such ḥadīths should not be interpreted literally.<sup>51</sup> In this case they would contradict the Qur'ānic principle that 'No bearer of burdens can bear the burdens of another (*lā tazīru wāzira wizrā ukhrā*) (Qur'ān 6:164). Instead, these ḥadīths must have been addressed at specific individuals only. "All this proves," concludes al-Jaṣṣāṣ, "that the ruling of a report that seems to contradict the ruling of the Qur'ān or established Sunna (*al-sunna al-thābita*) should be interpreted in a correct way if possible and not used in a way that contradicts those two sources."<sup>52</sup>

Are Muslims supposed to reject ḥadīths that seem unacceptable or unbefitting the teachings of the Prophet? Or should they reinterpret

<sup>50</sup> Ibn Khuzayma, *Kitāb al-Tawḥīd wa ithbāt ṣifāt al-rabb 'azza wa jalla*, ed. 'Abd al-'Azīz Ibrāhīm al-Shahwān, 2 vols. (Riyadh: Dār al-Rushd, 1408/1988), 2:877–8. Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya summarizes this meaning succinctly. He notes how important it is "that the intended meaning of the Messenger (ṣ) be understood without exaggeration (*ghuluww*) or understatement (*taqṣīr*). Therefore, his speech is not to be interpreted in a way that it does not allow or makes it fall short of its intended meaning and what guidance and elucidation Muḥammad intended."; Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, *Kitāb al-Rūḥ*, ed. 'Arif al-Ḥājj (Beirut: Dār Ihya' al-'Ulūm, 1408/1988), 121–2.

<sup>51</sup> Such ḥadīths include Abū Hurayra's narration '*walad al-zinā sharr al-thalātha*' and Ibn 'Umar's '*lā yadkhulu al-janna walad al-zinā*.' See *Sunan Abī Dāwūd: kitāb al-'itq, bāb fī 'itq walad al-zinā*; Abū Nu'aym al-Iṣbahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyā' wa ṭabaqāt al-aṣfiyā'*, 11 vols. (Beirut, Cairo: Dār al-Fikr and Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1416/1996), 3:308.

<sup>52</sup> Abū Bakr Aḥmad al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *Uṣūl al-Jaṣṣāṣ*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥammad Tāmīr, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1420/2000), 1:107–9.

such problematic reports in a favorable and pietistic light? Although no Muslim scholar that I know of has addressed the dichotomous tension between the Ḥadīth of Cringing and the Command to Charity, several have dealt with it implicitly by using the two maxims to check one another.

Our earliest attestation for the Command to Charity comes from the *Sunan* of ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Dārimī (d. 255/869), a major *ahl al-ḥadīth* scholar of the Khurasan region. In the introductory chapters of his *Sunan*, which constitute a veritable manifesto of *ahl al-ḥadīth* methodology, one subchapter deals with “Interpreting the Reports of the Messenger of God (*ta’wīl ḥadīth rasūl Allāh*)”. Two of the four reports in this subchapter consist of the Command to Charity, the first attributed to Ibn Mas‘ūd and the second to ‘Alī. Interestingly, the third report features Ibn ‘Abbās warning his audience, presumably his students, “If you hear me narrate something from the Messenger of God (ﷺ) but do not find it in the Book of God or accepted among the people (*ḥasan<sup>an</sup> ‘ind al-nās*), then know that I have ascribed something falsely to him (*kadhābtu ‘alayhī*).”<sup>53</sup> Although not the Ḥadīth of Cringing *per se*, Ibn ‘Abbās’ words convey the same message: if the meaning of the putative ḥadīth does not seem correct to your sensibilities as Muslims, the narrator must be incorrectly representing the Prophet. Reading al-Dārimī’s chapter, one comes away with a dynamic tension rather than a clear rule: interpret a ḥadīth attributed to the Prophet in the most charitable way possible, but if it contradicts how the Muslim community understands Islam then it must not really be from Muḥammad. How exactly the ‘Muslim community’ ‘understands Islam’ is, of course, a matter of considerable debate.

The Ḥadīth of Cringing and the Command to Charity appear together on later occasions as well. Immediately after invoking the Ḥadīth of Cringing in his *Tafsīr* to underscore the unfailing righteousness of the Prophet’s guidance, Ibn Kathīr brings to bear ‘Alī’s Command to Charity without any intervening comment or explanation. I can only interpret this as Ibn Kathīr’s cautioning the reader that the consistent truth of Muḥammad’s words means that we must be humble before judging them. Ibn al-Mufliḥ (d. 763/1362), like Ibn Kathīr a

<sup>53</sup>) *Sunan al-Dārimī*: introductory chapters, *bāb* 50 (*ta’wīl ḥadīth rasūl Allāh*).

student of Ibn Taymiyya, sees the Ḥadīth of Cringing and the Command to Charity as successive steps, not principles in tension. After listing a number of variations of the Ḥadīth of Cringing, he adds, “Whatever [Prophetic] reports *have proven reliable* (ṣaḥḥa) must be interpreted in the best and most fitting way (‘alā aḥsan al-wujūh wa awlāhā)” (my emphasis). He then he cites ‘Alī’s Command to Charity.<sup>54</sup>

### Two Extremes on Content Criticism: Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī and Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī

The inevitable subjectivity of content criticism surfaces in the manner in which different scholars approached ḥadīth criticism. Some ḥadīth critics were consistently more likely to reject ḥadīths based on content, while others steered sharply away from content criticism in favor of charitable interpretation. We have already seen Ibn Ḥazm singling out a ḥadīth from the revered *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī for content criticism, while the great Iraqi ḥadīth scholar al-Dāraquṭnī (d. 385/995) criticized 217 ḥadīths in al-Bukhārī’s and Muslim’s collections for *isnād* reasons without ever mentioning an objection to content.<sup>55</sup> Two noted scholars afford a useful comparison in attitude towards content criticism: the Damascene ḥadīth scholar Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) and the resident Ḥanafī master of Mecca, Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī (d. 1014/1606). The first was a Shāfi‘ī with strong Salafī leanings who produced definitive biographical dictionaries and ḥadīth works, the second was a staunch Ḥanafī and Ash‘arī<sup>56</sup> known for his encyclopedic commentaries on numerous mainstay ḥadīth texts.

Al-Dhahabī engages in content criticism with remarkable frequency in his *Mīzān al-i‘tidāl fī naqd al-rijāl*, a compendium of impugned ḥadīth transmitters. His criticism of individual ḥadīths comes as he lists reports that he feels indict a problematic ḥadīth narrator or forger.

<sup>54</sup> Ibn Muflīḥ, *al-Ādāb al-shar‘iyya*, 2:287–95.

<sup>55</sup> See Jonathan Brown, “Criticism of the Proto-Ḥadīth Canon: al-Dāraquṭnī’s Adjustment of the *Ṣaḥīḥayn*,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 15, no. 1 (2004): 1–37.

<sup>56</sup> I do not know if we have a record of Mullā ‘Alī explicitly professing Ash‘arism, but his theological positions are in line with those of the school. He also notes the position of the Ash‘arīs and affirms them. See Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī, *Sharḥ al-Fiqh al-akbar*, ed. Marwān Muḥammad al-Sha‘ār (Beirut: Dār al-Nafā‘is, 1417/1997); 63, 114–15.

Al-Dhahabī rejects some ḥadīths based on their illogical or unreasonable content. For example, he criticizes a ḥadīth in which the Prophet is quoted as saying that guarding the coast for one night is better than the good deeds of 1,000 years, each day of which was the equivalent of 1,000 normal years. Al-Dhahabī objects to this report because it would lead to an outrageously large reward in the Afterlife. Based on his rough calculation, this act would be the equivalent of doing good deeds constantly for 360,000,000 days.<sup>57</sup> Evaluating a ḥadīth describing how the Byzantine emperor supposedly sent the Prophet a gift of ginger (*zanjabīl*), al-Dhahabī objects that this was implausible for two reasons. First, there is no record of the Byzantine emperor sending the Prophet any presents and, second, it would be like sending coal to Newcastle: “A present of ginger from Anatolia to the Hijaz is something that reason rejects, for it is similar to sending a gift of dates from Anatolia to Medina.”<sup>58</sup>

Al-Dhahabī frequently jettisons ḥadīths due to anachronism. He rejects a ḥadīth in which the Prophet recounts how “Gabriel came to me with a dish of fruit from Heaven, so I ate it. Then I slept with Khadija and [she became pregnant with] Fāṭima... (*jā'anī Jibrā'il bi-safrajalla min al-janna fa-'akaltuhā fa-wāqa'tu Khadija fa-'allaqat bi-Fāṭima...*). Al-Dhahabī snarls, “Even children have learned that Gabriel did not descend on the Prophet until some time after the birth of Fāṭima.”<sup>59</sup> Al-Dhahabī also criticizes a ḥadīth narrated by Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī on the Prophet's teenage trips to Syria with his uncle Abū Ṭālib. “What shows that this [version] is false is the part that says, ‘And Abū Ṭālib sent him back, and Abū Bakr sent Bilāl with him’, because Bilāl had not even been born yet, and Abū Bakr was but a youth.”<sup>60</sup> Al-Dhahabī also rejects a ḥadīth that “[t]he Prophet set as places to

<sup>57</sup> Al-Dhahabī, *Mizān*, 2:132 (bio of Sa'īd b. Khālid). This ḥadīth of Sa'īd appears in the *Sunan* of Ibn Mājah: *kitāb al-jihād, bāb faḍl al-ḥars wa'l-takbīr fī sabīl Allāh*. For a similar implicit objection to the rewards supposedly granted someone who writes ‘*Bismillāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm*’ properly, see al-Dhahabī, *Mizān*, 2:384.

<sup>58</sup> Al-Dhahabī, *Mizān*, 3:254 (bio of 'Amr b. Ḥakkām).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 2:416 (bio of 'Abdallāh b. Dāwūd al-Wāsiṭī al-Tammār). Al-Tammār narrates at least three ḥadīths in al-Tirmidhī's *Jāmi'*.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 2:581 (bio of 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ghazwān). This transmitter transmits one ḥadīth in the *Sunan* of Abū Dāwūd, two in the *Jāmi'* of al-Tirmidhī and one in the *Sunan* of al-Nasā'ī.

enter the state of ritual pilgrimage for the people of Madā'in al-ʿAqīq and for the people of Basra Dhāt ʿIrq (*waqqata al-Nabī [ṣ] li-ahl al-Madā'in al-ʿAqīq wa li-ahl al-Baṣra Dhāt ʿIrq*).” This report must be a forgery because Basra did not exist at the time of the Prophet, notes al-Dhahabī, “rather it was established as a garrison city in the time of ʿUmar.”<sup>61</sup>

A notion of physical impossibility also constituted part of al-Dhahabī’s critical toolkit. He notes a ḥadīth recorded by Ibn ʿAdī from Ibn ʿUmar in his *Kāmil*, that “the Prophet came out of his house one day and had in his hand two books with the names of the People of Heaven and the People of Hell [written in them], identifying each by their names, the names of their fathers and their tribes (*kharaja rasūl Allāh (ṣ) dhāt yawm...*).”<sup>62</sup> Al-Dhahabī objects, “That is a totally unacceptable ḥadīth (*munkar jiddan*), and it would be enough to determine that the weight of the two books would be tremendous.”<sup>63</sup>

The above examples of content criticism occur within the context of transmitter criticism in al-Dhahabī’s compendium of impugned transmitters. As such, one might argue that al-Dhahabī may have considered uncovering flaws in the meaning of these ḥadīths only because he was already convinced of the unreliability of those who transmitted them. Certainly, the author’s discussion of these problematic *matns* in his *Mizān* is intended as an indictment of their transmitters. But not all the ḥadīths transmitted by these narrators were considered unreliable.<sup>64</sup> Five of the above six transmitters in whose biographies al-Dhahabī notes

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 4:313 (bio of Hilāl b. Zayd). This transmitter narrates a ḥadīth in the *Sunan* of Ibn Mājah.

<sup>62</sup> A version of this ḥadīth from ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAmr b. al-ʿĀṣ appears in *Jāmiʿ al-Tirmidhī: kitāb al-qadar, bāb mā jāʿa anna Allāh kataba kitābun li-ahl al-janna*.

<sup>63</sup> Al-Dhahabī, *Mizān*, 2:684 (bio of ʿAbd al-Wahhāb b. Hammām al-Ṣanʿānī [brother of ʿAbd al-Razzāq]). Al-Dhahabī says the weight would be “a number of *qanāṭir*,” with each *qinṭār* being roughly 143 kg. See ʿAlī Jumʿa, *al-Makāyil waʾl-mawāzīn al-sharʿiyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Risāla, 1424/2002), 19.

<sup>64</sup> The observation of one of the last senior religious officials of the Ottoman empire, Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī (d. 1952), is instructive here: “There is no narrator [of ḥadīths] except that he is praised by some and impugned by others, but instruction [on this] should come only from the opinions of those trustworthy and devoted to the criticism of transmitters”; Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī, *Maqālāt al-Kawtharī* (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Azhariyya, 1414/1994), 138.

problems with content are narrators used in one or more of the canonical Six Books. Moreover, two of the ḥadīths mentioned above by al-Dhahabī are themselves included in those canonical works. Al-Dhahabī thus chose to include his criticisms of the above ḥadīths first and foremost because their meanings struck him as objectionable.

Furthermore, al-Dhahabī engages in content criticism in ḥadīths whose *isnāds* he admits have no weaknesses. He remarks that a ḥadīth in which the Prophet is described as saying the *basmala* out loud in prayer was forged “even though its *isnād* is like the sun.”<sup>65</sup> Here, al-Dhahabī’s reader would recognize the great controversy to which he refers: the Shāfi‘ī school’s stubborn insistence on reciting the *basmala* aloud in prayer despite the strong ḥadīths stating that the Prophet never did this as well as the clear falsity of ḥadīths supporting the Shāfi‘ī position.<sup>66</sup> Al-Dhahabī also states that another ḥadīth perennially criticized for its flawed meaning, in which the newly converted Abū Sufyān asks the Prophet to marry his daughter Umm Ḥabība, was “an unacceptable tradition (*aṣl munkar*)” even though this ḥadīth appeared in the revered *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim (as other critics had pointed out, the Prophet had married Umm Ḥabība earlier, upon her return from Ethiopia).<sup>67</sup> Although not a Prophetic ḥadīth, al-Dhahabī reacts with similar disbelief to a report of Ibn Ḥanbal grudgingly acknowledging the truth of Sufism as practiced by his rival al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī: “This story has an authentic *isnād* but is unacceptable (*munkar*). It does not sit easily with my heart (*lā taqa’u ‘alā qalbī*), and I considered it highly unlikely that this would take place with someone like Aḥmad.”<sup>68</sup>

<sup>65</sup> Al-Dhahabī, *Mizān*, 1:480; see also *ibid.*, 2:612-3.

<sup>66</sup> Al-Dhahabī notes that al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī included this ḥadīth in his treatise written in support of the Shāfi‘ī position on the *basmala*. Previously, Ibn al-Jawzī had lambasted al-Khaṭīb for this work (his *Kitāb al-Jahr bi’l-basmala*), which used unreliable ḥadīths to argue the Shāfi‘ī position. See Ibn al-Jawzī, *al-Muntaẓam fī tārikh al-umam wa’l-mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā and Muṣṭafā ‘Abd al-Qādir ‘Aṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1412/1992), 16:133. For more on the debate over the authenticity of the *basmala* ḥadīths, see Jonathan Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 257-8.

<sup>67</sup> Al-Dhahabī, *Mizān*, 3:93. For more on criticisms of this ḥadīth, see Brown, *Canonization*, 304.

<sup>68</sup> Al-Dhahabī, *Mizān*, 1:430 (bio of al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī).



Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī’, however, represents the opposite extreme of the content-criticism spectrum. In his compilation of forged ḥadīths, the *Asrār al-marfū‘a fī al-aḥādīth al-mawḍū‘a*, Mullā ‘Alī repeatedly instructs the reader on the duty to submit rational objections to the authoritativeness of the *isnād*. Addressing a controversial ḥadīth affirming that anything someone says after he sneezes is true, Mullā ‘Alī dismisses critics like Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, who had declared the ḥadīth forged in part due to its absurd meaning, by asserting: “It is not hidden at all that if something has been established by transmission [from the Prophet], then one should not heed (*lā ‘ibra*) any contradiction with sense perception or reason.”<sup>69</sup> Instead of questioning the reliability of a ḥadīth on the grounds of reason, one should accept a viable *isnād* and rely on charitable interpretation. Discussing the controversial ḥadīth narrated by Ḥammād b. Salama in which the Prophet tells how he saw God in the image of “a beardless youth (*amrad*),” Mullā ‘Alī rejects the opinion of Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 771/1370) and others who declare it a clear forgery, possibly of ignorant Sufis.<sup>70</sup> There is no problem with the ḥadīth’s meaning, explains Mullā ‘Alī, since it describes something that the Prophet saw in a dream. Dreams have no necessary link to reality and are merely representational. He concludes:

For indeed if the [evaluation of the] ḥadīth is based on something in its *isnād* that demonstrates its being a forgery, then we concede the point [that it is forged]. But if not, then the realm of possible interpretation is definitely wide (*fa-bāb al-ta’wīl wāsi‘ muḥattam*).<sup>71</sup>

Mullā ‘Alī contests the conclusion of Ibn Ḥajar and others that there is no basis for the ḥadīth: “The foolish rabble of Mecca are the filling of Heaven (*sufahā’ Makka ḥashw al-janna*).” Again, Mullā ‘Alī emphasizes the absolute priority of basing evaluations of ḥadīth on the strength of their transmission, not their meaning. “First things first (*thabbīt*

<sup>69</sup> Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī, *al-Asrār al-marfū‘a fī al-akḥbār al-mawḍū‘a*, ed. Muḥammad Luṭfī al-Ṣabbāgh, 2nd ed. (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1406/1986), 407.

<sup>70</sup> Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī, *Ṭabaqāt al-shāfi‘iyya al-kubrā*, ed. ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Muḥammad al-Ḥalw and Maḥmūd Muḥammad al-Ṭanāḥī, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cairo: Hujr, 1413/1992), 2:312.

<sup>71</sup> Mullā ‘Alī, *al-Asrār*, 210.

*al-‘arsh thumma unqush*),”<sup>72</sup> he instructs, “for the issue centers first on the authenticity of the attribution (*mabnā*). Then it branches out to the correctness of the meaning.” Mullā ‘Alī then advances several possible interpretations of the ḥadīth, such as reading it as a testimony to the standing of the Ka‘ba and Mecca in God’s eyes.<sup>73</sup>

Mullā ‘Alī even reprimands al-Dhahabī for his facility with content criticism. Al-Dhahabī had claimed that the ḥadīth “The lord of the Arabs is ‘Alī (*sayyid al-‘arab ‘Alī*)” was falsely attributed to the Prophet. Mullā ‘Alī comments, “Perhaps he was looking at the meaning, although [the ḥadīth] is established with certainty with regards to the authenticity of the attribution (*ma‘a qat‘ al-naẓar ilā ṣiḥḥat al-mabnā*).”<sup>74</sup>

The perennial inconsistency of scholars’ approach to content criticism, however, plagues Mullā ‘Alī himself. He relies on content criticism in his condemnation of the following ḥadīth: “Strangers [or Sufis] are the heirs of the prophets, for God did not send a prophet except that he was a stranger amongst his people (*al-ghurabā’ warathat al-anbiyā’ wa lam yab’ath Allāh nabiyyan illā wa huwa gharīb fi qawmihi...*).” Mullā ‘Alī judges that this ḥadīth cannot come from the Prophet (i.e., it is *bāṭil*) because the Qur’ān says that Noah, Hud, and Ṣāliḥ were all sent by God to their own peoples.<sup>75</sup>

## The Subjectivity of Content Criticism on Specific Ḥadīths in Pre-Modern Islam

The inherent subjectivity of content criticism and the tension between critical and charitable readings are clear in the drastically different ways

<sup>72</sup> This loose translation of the phrase certainly draws on the license of functional equivalence. The original could be translated as “stabilize the chair firmly before engraving it.” Dekhodā gives another example of this phrase drawn from Rūmī’s *Masnavī*: *Goft qādī thabbet al-‘arsh ay pedar—tā bar ūw naqshī konī az khayr ū sharr*; ‘Alī Akbar Dekhodā, *Amthāl ū ḥekam*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 4 vols. (Tehran: Chāpkhāne-ye Sepehr, 1370/[1992]), 2:573.

<sup>73</sup> Mullā ‘Alī, *al-Asrār*, 221. For Ibn Hajar’s verdict (that it is not a ḥadīth), see his protégé Shams al-Dīn al-Sakhāwī, *al-Maqāṣid al-ḥasana*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Uthmān al-Khisht (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī, 1425/2004), 249.

<sup>74</sup> Mullā ‘Alī, *al-Asrār*, 224; cf. al-Dhahabī, *Mizān*, 3:185 (bio of ‘Umar b. al-Ḥasan al-Rāsibī).

<sup>75</sup> Mullā ‘Alī, *al-Asrār*, 250.

in which ḥadīth critics reacted to the same reports. An example comes from our earliest surviving compilation of forged ḥadīths, the *Tadhkirat al-mawḍūʿāt* of Abū al-Faḍl Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir al-Maqdisī (d. 507/1113). This book lists 1,119 ḥadīths that the author deems forgeries, and in the case of all but one ḥadīth the author declares his subject matter forgeries based on some problematic transmitter in the *isnād*. Only once does al-Maqdisī base his ruling on content criticism. This is the report in which the Prophet says: “The parable of my community is that of the rain. It is not known which is better, its beginning or its end (*mathalu ummatī mathal al-maṭar lā yudrā awwaluhu khayr aw ākhiruhu*).” Although al-Maqdisī presents the technical proof for this ḥadīth being a forgery as the presence of the problematic transmitter Hishām b. ʿUbaydallāh al-Rāzī in the *isnād*, he adds a sharp criticism about its contents: “It has been transmitted authentically that [the Prophet] said, ‘The best generation is my generation, then the one that follows me (*khayr al-qurūn qarnī thumma alladhī yalūnahum*).”<sup>76</sup> Indeed, unlike the plethora of other ḥadīths describing the historical entropy of Muslim society as it deteriorates from the time of the Prophet, the Parable of the Rain Ḥadīth suggests that later generations of Muslims will perhaps be more righteous than earlier ones.

This ḥadīth, however, has been widely considered to be perfectly reliable and without any objectionable content. Ibn Ḥibbān (d. 354/965) included it in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, al-Tirmidhī included it in his *Jāmiʿ*, and Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr (d. 463/1070) and al-Suyūṭī considered it *ḥasan*.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>76</sup> Abū al-Faḍl Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir al-Maqdisī, *Tadhkirat al-mawḍūʿāt*, ed. Muḥammad Muṣṭafā al-Ḥadārī al-Ḥabṭī (Mecca: al-Maktabat al-Salafiyya, 1401/1981), 106. Al-Maqdisī’s ostensible *isnād* criticism for this ḥadīth does not sustain his objection to the ḥadīth’s contents. Hishām is found only in a fraction of the narrations of this ḥadīth, occurring in al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī’s and Abū Yaʿlā al-Mawṣilī’s versions. For the ḥadīth, see *Musnad Ibn Ḥanbal*: 3:130, 143; 4:319; al-Bazzār, *Musnad al-Bazzār*, 4:244; 9:23; Abū Yaʿlā al-Mawṣilī, *Musnad Abī Yaʿlā*, 6:380; Abū Nuʿaym al-Iṣbahānī, *Ḥilyat al-awliyāʾ*, 2:231; al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārikh Baghdad*, 11:115.

<sup>77</sup> *Jāmiʿ al-Tirmidhī*: *kitāb al-adab*, 81; *kitāb al-amthāl*, *bāb mathal al-ṣalawāt al-khams* in some editions; Ibn Ḥibbān, *al-Iḥṣān bi-tartīb Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Ḥibbān*, 9:176; Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *al-Tamhīd li-mā fī al-Muwaṭṭaʾ min al-maʿānī waʾl-asānīd*, ed. Muṣṭafā b. Aḥmad al-ʿAlawī and Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Kabīr al-Bakrī, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 26 vols. ([Rabat]: Wizārat ʿUmūm al-Awqāf waʾl-Shuʿūn al-Islāmiyya, 1402/1982, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. 1387/1967), 20:254; al-Suyūṭī, *al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣagḥīr*, 102 (#1620), 499 (#8161).

Indeed, it was precisely the non-entropic view of the *umma*'s future that endeared this ḥadīth to many Muslim scholars. In the introduction to his biographical dictionary of famous Sufis, al-Sulamī (d. 412/1021) saw the Parable of the Rain ḥadīth as complementing perfectly reports asserting that the greatest generation was that of the Companions. He understood that, taken together, these two ḥadīths mean that neither the early Muslims nor the later generations of the community would be bereft of pious figures.<sup>78</sup> Later biographical dictionaries, like the *Kawākib al-sā'ira bi-a'yān al-mi'a al-āshira* of Najm al-Dīn al-Ghazzī (d. 1061/1651), cite the Parable of the Rain ḥadīth precisely for the purpose of assuring the presence of worthy Muslims in later generations.<sup>79</sup>

The ḥadīth chosen by al-Jaṣṣāṣ as an example of a report with a meaning ripe for problematic interpretation affords another excellent example: "The child born of adultery will not enter Heaven (*lā yadkhulu al-janna walad al-zinā*)." Abū al-Khayr Aḥmad al-Ṭāliqānī (d. 590/1194) recounts that in 576/1180 an energetic discussion about this ḥadīth broke out among students at the Baghdad Nizāmiyya. One party insisted that the ḥadīth was forged because it violated the Qur'ānic principle that "no bearer of burdens bears the burdens of another" (Qur'an 6:164), while al-Ṭāliqānī argued that, unlike other Muslims who die as children, this child of adultery would not join its Muslim parents in heaven because its paternity was uncertain.<sup>80</sup> In his famous *Kitāb al-Mawḍū'āt*, Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 597/1201) asserts that none of the narrations of this ḥadīth are authentic and reaffirms that it violates that venerable Qur'ānic principle.<sup>81</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim, Ibn Hajar al-ʿAsqalānī,

<sup>78</sup> Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfiyya*, ed. Nūr al-Dīn Sudayba, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1418/1997), 2. See also al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li-ahkām al-Qur'ān*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Ḥifnāwī, 11 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1423/2002), 2:529 (in the context of Qur'an 3:110).

<sup>79</sup> Najm al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazzī, *al-Kawākib al-sā'ira bi-a'yān al-mi'a al-āshira*, ed. Jibrā'il Sulaymān Jabbūr, 3 vols., 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Āfaq al-Ḥadītha, 1979), 1:4. See also Abū al-Faḍl Muḥammad b. Khalīl al-Murādī, *Silk al-durar fī a'yān al-qarn al-thānī 'ashar*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir Shāhīn, 4 vols. in 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1418/1997), 1:6.

<sup>80</sup> 'Abd al-Karīm b. Muḥammad al-Rāfi'ī, *al-Tadwīn fī akhbār Qazwīn*, ed. 'Azīz Allāh al-ʿUṭāridī, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1987), 2:146.

<sup>81</sup> Ibn al-Jawzī, *Kitāb al-Mawḍū'āt*, 3:109-11; cf. al-Dhahabī, *Mizān al-i'tidāl*, 1:68; 3:619, 623.

Shams al-Dīn al-Sakhāwī, the Indian Jamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad Ṭāhir al-Fatanī (d. 986/1578–9) and Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī’ have all repeated this criticism, although some have also tried to advance interpretations of the ḥadīth that eliminated its problematic meaning.<sup>82</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim states that this child is created from an impure zygote and that only pure, good souls enter heaven. Ibn Ḥajar and his student al-Sakhāwī suggested that this ḥadīth assumes that the child would commit the same sin as its parents.

### Continuity and Intensification in the Modern Period

Content criticism burgeoned with the Muslim confrontation with Western modernity and science. Influential reformist scholars like Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1898) in India and Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905) in Egypt sought to recast Islam as a religion compatible with rationalism. They did whatever possible to distance it from ‘superstition’ and Ptolemean cosmology.

These Muslim reformists found themselves treading a thin line. Khan, ‘Abduh and their followers were devout Muslims committed to affirming the overall value of the Islamic scholarly tradition. Yet they also critiqued what they saw as its excesses and deviations, arguing that the religion’s true message was compatible with and representative of the best of the modern world. If the Sunni ḥadīth tradition had authenticated seemingly absurd reports like the Ḥadīth of the Fly, how could the corpus of ḥadīth be defended in a modern context? How deeply were the reformists willing to critique the ḥadīth tradition, and how could they justify revamping it? Material like the Ḥadīth of the Fly called into question whether classical Sunni ḥadīth scholars had actually carried out content criticism at all.

Some modern Muslim thinkers have insisted that their premodern forbearers rigorously carried out content criticism. One of Khan’s more conservative disciples, the Indian writer Shibli Numani (d. 1916), explains in the introduction to his modern rendition of the *Sīra* that

<sup>82</sup> Ibn al-Qayyim, *al-Manār al-munif*, 133; Mullā ‘Alī, *al-Asrār al-marfū‘a*, 362, 370–71; al-Sakhāwī, *al-Maqāṣid al-ḥasana*, 476; Muḥammad Ṭāhir al-Fatanī, *Tadhkirat al-mawḍū‘āt*, 180.

Muslim ḥadīth scholars did indeed engage in content criticism (he terms it *dirāya* criticism, or “judging the truth of a report in the light of one’s previous knowledge or experience”) as early as the time of the Companions. He then cites the well-worn lists of content criticism criteria found in the works of al-Khaṭīb and Ibn al-Jawzī.<sup>83</sup> More recently, Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī has concurred.<sup>84</sup> Other reformists following in ‘Abduh’s footsteps, such as the Egyptian intellectual Jamāl al-Bannā (brother of Ḥasan al-Bannā), believe that early ḥadīth critics totally failed to examine the *matn* and see this failure as a prime argument for the general unreliability of the ḥadīth corpus as it is today.<sup>85</sup>

Other modern ‘ulamā’ have tried to reconcile Sunnis’ stated methodological commitment to content criticism with their evidently inconsistent application. Ahmad Khan argued that the Islamic ḥadīth tradition had in general cultivated a heritage of *matn* criticism, pointing to the omnipresent list of content criteria discussed above. But he admitted that the great Sunni ḥadīth collectors of the third/ninth century had not actually engaged in content criticism while compiling their works. He opined that they had left this for later generations—thus explaining any absurd material found in their books and excusing its revaluation.<sup>86</sup> The Egyptian Azharī reformist Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī (d. 1996) states proudly in his influential work *al-Sunna al-nabawiyya bayn ahl al-fiqh wa ahl al-ḥadīth* that two of the five conditions for a ḥadīth to be declared *ṣaḥīḥ* involve vetting its meaning (namely, the absence of hidden transmission flaws [*illa*] and of an anomalous meaning [*shudhūdh*]).<sup>87</sup> In a later work, al-Ghazzālī reiterates the standard

<sup>83</sup> Shibli Numani, *Sirat-un-Nabi*, trans. M. Tayyib Bakhsh Budayuni, 2 vols. (Lahore: Kazi Publications, 1979), 1:40-1.

<sup>84</sup> Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī, *Kayfa nata‘āmalu ma‘a al-sunna al-nabawiyya* (Herndon, VA: International Institute for Islamic Thought, 1990), 33.

<sup>85</sup> Noha El-Hennawy, “In Word and Deed: Reformist thinker Gamal El-Banna re-ignites an age-old debate, contesting the role of Sunnah in modern-day Islam; [Http://www.egypttoday.com/article.aspx?ArticleId=3351](http://www.egypttoday.com/article.aspx?ArticleId=3351).

<sup>86</sup> Christian Troll, *Sayyid Ahmad Khan: A Reinterpretation of Muslim Theology* (New Delhi: Vikas Press, 1978), 138-9.

<sup>87</sup> Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī, *al-Sunna al-nabawiyya bayn ahl al-fiqh wa ahl al-ḥadīth*, 11<sup>th</sup> ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 1996), 19. This statement brings up a significant if understudied debate among Sunni ḥadīth scholars. Does the definition of a *ṣaḥīḥ* ḥadīth assume that, in the case of a ḥadīth declared *ṣaḥīḥ*, the ḥadīth’s meaning has already been vetted and

list of content criteria and celebrates the notion of the ‘nose’ (*malaka*) that scholars like Ibn Daqīq al-‘Īd boasted for detecting forgeries.<sup>88</sup> This compliment, however, follows closely on the heels of a semi-sarcastic remark that, in light of the absurd contents of some of their ḥadīths, scholars like Ibn Ḥanbal seem to have completed only rough drafts of their books.<sup>89</sup>

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approved? The requirement for *ṣiḥḥa* has been considered almost uniformly from the time of Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ to be: a ḥadīth with an *isnād* of upstanding (*‘adl*), accurate (*ḍābiṭ*) narrators one from another with no breaks, hidden flaws (*illa*) or ‘anomalousness’ (*shudhūdh*). From the fifth/eleventh century onwards, a *shādhdh* ḥadīth has been understood as meaning a ḥadīth that contradicts a source more reliable than it. The potential for a *shādhdh* qualification to open the door to *matn* criticism is clear: a faulty meaning would entail that the ḥadīth is contradicting some more powerful normative source, like the Qur’ān or reason, thus rendering the ḥadīth *shādhdh* and precluding a *ṣaḥīḥ* rating. The majority opinion of late medieval and modern Muslim ḥadīth scholars, however, has also been that the term *ṣaḥīḥ* applies *only* to the *isnād* of a ḥadīth, and thus that ‘the authenticity of a ḥadīth does not necessarily follow from the authenticity of its *isnād* (*ṣiḥḥat al-isnād lā yalzamu minhā ṣiḥḥat al-ḥadīth*),’ since its *matn* might be flawed or contradict more reliable sources; ‘Umar b. Muḥammad al-Bayqūnī and ‘Abdallāh Sirāj al-Dīn, *Sharḥ Manzūmat al-Bayqūniyya* (Aleppo: Maktabat Dār al-Falāḥ, [n.d.]). 35; Ibn Kathīr, *Ikhtisār ‘Ulūm al-ḥadīth*, 36; Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī, *Turāthunā al-fikrī*, 8<sup>th</sup> ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Shurūq, 2003), 173; al-Albānī in Nu‘mān al-Ālūsī, *al-Āyāt al-bayyināt fī ‘adam samā’ al-amwāt*, ed. Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1405/[1985]), 54. Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ provides a countervailing opinion, reminding his readers that any ḥadīth with a flawed meaning would by definition not have a *ṣaḥīḥ isnād*, since that would undermine the whole reliance on *isnāds* to begin with. Rather, such a ḥadīth would necessarily be suffering from some undetected flaw in its *isnād*. If a *matn* is not *ṣaḥīḥ* in its meaning, says Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, then it is “impossible (*muḥāl*)” that it have a *ṣaḥīḥ isnād*. This disparity in understanding the definition of *ṣiḥḥa* led the modern Moroccan traditionalist ‘Abdallāh b. al-Ṣiddīq al-Ghumārī (d. 1993) to the very controversial act of compiling a book of ḥadīths that he considered *shādhdh* due to their meaning even though some appeared via authenticated *isnāds* in the *Ṣaḥīḥayn* of al-Bukhārī and Muslim. Revealing his understanding that previous scholars had not taken *shudhūdh* into consideration when declaring the *matns* of ḥadīths reliable, he remarks about one anthropomorphic report that such a ḥadīth could not be accepted even if it were narrated “by the soundest of chains (*aṣaḥḥ al-asānīd*); Abū ‘Amr ‘Uthmān b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, *Fatāwā wa masā’il Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ*, ed. ‘Abd al-Mu’ṭī Amīn Qal‘ajī, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dar al-Ma’rifā, 1406/1986), 1:174–5; ‘Abdallāh al-Ghumārī, *al-Fawā'id al-maḥṣūda fī bayān al-aḥādīth al-shādhdhā wa'l-mardūda* (Casablanca: Dār al-Furqān, [n.d.]), 105, 149.

<sup>88</sup>) Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī, *Turāthunā al-fikrī*, 157.

<sup>89</sup>) Ibid., 147.

Other modern Muslim orthodox defenders of the ḥadīth tradition, as well as conservative reformers, explained the seemingly glaring lack of content criticism in much of the ḥadīth corpus through a division of labor: whereas ḥadīth critics had focused on the *isnād*, jurists (*fuqahā'*) had evaluated whether the meanings of ḥadīths accorded with Islamic teachings. Responding to Goldziher's critique of the lack of content criticism among early ḥadīth critics like al-Bukhārī, the Ottoman arch-traditionalist Muḥammad Zāhid al-Kawtharī (d. 1952) actually concedes the point. Content criticism (*naqd dākhilī*), he rebuts, was not undertaken by ḥadīth critics. It was, however, performed by jurists: "The two groups divided up the [different] aspects of ḥadīth criticism (*wa'l-fariqān taqāsamā wujūh naqd al-ḥadīth*)."<sup>90</sup>

This division of labor and the admission that early ḥadīth critics did not see content criticism as part of their duties provides a solution for dealing with problematic ḥadīths today: even if a particular *isnād* is *ṣaḥīḥ*, it is ultimately the jurist who decides whether the accompanying *matn* truly represents the Prophet's teachings. For scholars like al-Ghazzālī and the current rector of al-Azhar, Shaykh Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib, this division of labor serves as part of their effort to subordinate the ḥadīth corpus to the jurists' framework for interpreting Islamic law (*uṣūl al-fiqh*).<sup>91</sup>

Muslim reformist scholars like 'Abduh and Riḍā upheld the divine origin of the Qur'ān and the Prophet's teachings. In effect, however, they accepted that modern science and ethical sensibilities are ontologically and epistemologically equal to or greater than the message of revealed text. In the case of the Qur'ān, its historical reliability as a document meant that defending it was not a question of authenticity but of finding charitable interpretations for any verses that seemed to clash with modernity. The ḥadīth corpus, plagued by forgery from the beginning, has not enjoyed this protection.

The pre-modern Sunni surrender to the authority of *ṣaḥīḥ* ḥadīths as authenticated revelation, however, has survived alongside these reformers and their ruminations on content criticism. For Traditionalist

<sup>90</sup> Al-Kawtharī, *Maqālāt*, 150-1.

<sup>91</sup> Aḥmad al-Ṭayyib, personal communication, July 2008; al-Ghazzālī, *al-Sunna al-nabawiyya*, 32.



Salafi<sup>92</sup> scholars, who see themselves as a direct continuation of the early *ahl al-ḥadīth* movement, the moral and scientific world is still quite literally constructed from and around the Qurʾān and ḥadīths. For Late Sunni Traditionalists,<sup>93</sup> who see themselves as direct continuations of the later-Middle Period (in the Hodgsonian sense, i.e. *circa* 1200–1500 CE) institutional traditions of Islamic civilization, modernity is similarly an upstart force that should quiver before the revealed truth and the *umma*’s preserved embodiment of it.

We see the tension between the notion of content criticism as an objective method and fears of the subjective empowerment of reason over revelation played out fiercely between Muslim reformists and traditionalists. An excellent example is the Ḥadīth of the Sun Prostrating, which acted as the centerpiece in a debate that raged furiously in Egypt between Rashīd Riḍā and a leading Mālikī scholar and al-Azhar traditionalist, Yūsuf al-Dijwī (d. 1946). These two opponents contended vociferously in the pages of their respective journals, *al-Manār* and *Majallat al-Azhar*. In this particular ḥadīth, the Prophet explains to his Companions that when the sun sets it proceeds before the throne of God and seeks permission to rise once again. The ḥadīth is found in the *Ṣaḥīḥayn* and other relied-upon Sunni texts, and most versions of the ḥadīth include a prediction that one day the sun will rise in the west as a harbinger of the end of time.<sup>94</sup>

<sup>92</sup> I use this term to distinguish the group referred to here from modernist Salafīs like Muḥammad ‘Abduh and Rashīd Riḍā. For the questionable appropriateness of the term Salafī as a description of ‘Abduh’s school, see Henry Lauzière, “The Construction of *Salafīyya*: Reconsidering Salafism from the Perspective of Conceptual History,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 42 (2010): 369–89. For a more extensive discussion of Traditionalist and Modernist Salafism, see Jonathan Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad’s Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 243 ff.

<sup>93</sup> This term has emerged as a useful moniker for modern Sunni ‘ulamā’ who both perceive and present themselves as the continuation of the very same medieval intellectual traditions and institutions that Salafīs and Islamic Modernists reject. See further Brown, *Hadith*, 261 ff.

<sup>94</sup> The report is narrated via Abū Dharr: *a-tadrūna ayna tadhhabu hādhabhi al-shams...?* See *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: kitāb bad’ al-khalq, bāb ṣifat al-shams wa’l-qamar*; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim: kitāb al-imān, bāb bayān al-zaman alladhī lā yuqbalu fihī al-imān*; *Jāmi’ al-Tirmidhī: kitāb al-ḥudūd, bāb mā jā’a fī ṭulū’ al-shams min maghribihā*; *ibid.*, *kitāb tafsīr al-Qurʾān, bāb min sūrat Yāsīn*; cf. *Sunan Abī Dāwūd: kitāb al-ḥurūf wa’l-qirā’āt, bāb 1*.

Pre-modern Muslim commentators like al-Nawawī had devoted cursory discussions to the metaphoric nature of the sun's prostration, but they had not spilled any great amount of ink on the ḥadīth's meaning.<sup>95</sup> For Rashīd Riḍā, however, the ḥadīth provides the perfect example of the limitations of pre-modern Muslim scholars' transmission criticism and how modern Muslims must reevaluate it. Classical critics like al-Bukhārī mastered transmission criticism, Riḍā attests, but content criticism "was not in their craft." Moreover, they had no inkling of modern scientific discoveries. Today, Riḍā explains, we know based on the "certainties of sense perceptions" that the Ḥadīth of the Sun Prostrating is false. To lend his argument classical credibility, he refers explicitly to the post fifth/eleventh-century rule of content criticism that rejects a report if it contradicts certainties and reason. Riḍā acknowledges that one might understand this ḥadīth metaphorically but rejects this option because it is riddled with "affectedness (*taklif*)" and because it breaks with the evident, literal meaning of the ḥadīth.<sup>96</sup> For Riḍā, the ḥadīth's embarrassing clash with modern astronomical reality seems to have closed the space for charitable interpretations that could have reconciled the two. Or perhaps Riḍā was merely demanding an honest and unaffected reading of the text.

Riḍā expressed unmasked contempt for those scholars who insisted on the authenticity of such ḥadīths. In his reflections on his many longstanding debates with al-Dijwī and *Majallat al-Azhar*, Riḍā refers to the Ḥadīth of the Sun's Prostration as a crystalline example of the stubborn obscurantism of the unreformed al-Azhar scholars. Praising 'Abduh for challenging the Azharī emphasis on blind obedience to established texts, Riḍā bemoans how criticizing a ḥadīth that had been deemed *ṣaḥīḥ* could nonetheless result in a person being accused of disbelief (*kufṛ*). This could occur even though material in ḥadīth books clearly contradicts scientific empirical evidence and sense perception.<sup>97</sup> Interestingly, Riḍā marshals evidence of how classical Muslim jurists had themselves intimated that the Ḥadīth of the Sun's Prostration was problematic. He cites the influential Shāfi'ī jurist and legal theorist

<sup>95</sup> Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath*, 6:368; al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 19 vols. in 10 (Beirut: Dār al-Qalam, [n.d.]), 2:555.

<sup>96</sup> Rashīd Riḍā, *al-Manār* 27, no. 8 (1926): 615-6.

<sup>97</sup> Riḍā, *al-Manār wa'l-Azhar* (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Manār, 1353/[1934]), 19-20.

Imām al-Ḥaramayn al-Juwaynī (d. 478/1085) as saying that the sun is always visible somewhere, setting and rising in different places according to latitude (it should be noted that al-Juwaynī's comment comes in a discussion of prayer times and is not directly connected to the Ḥadīth of the Sun Prostrating).<sup>98</sup> Riḍā's exasperation mounts as he recounts how some benighted al-Azhar scholars still defend the evident (*ẓāhir*) meaning of the ḥadīth. He is stunned that some, like Yūsuf al-Dijwī, even declare anyone who does not believe it an unbeliever.<sup>99</sup>

In truth, however, Riḍā seems to have been exaggerating al-Dijwī's position. Al-Dijwī was furious with Riḍā for choosing to opine arrogantly on all matters political and scientific without deference to the interpretive tradition built up by Muslim scholars. In the case of the Ḥadīth of the Sun's Prostration, Riḍā preferred to go so far as to claim that Prophetic knowledge does not cover scientific matters rather than to find some figurative interpretation for the ḥadīth. "And how wide the Arabic language is in the hands of one who knows it!" al-Dijwī protests.<sup>100</sup> From al-Dijwī's perspective, Riḍā not only dismissed the authentication process of al-Bukhārī and Muslim but also constrained the Prophet's knowledge and rejected his words, "an audaciousness that is not permissible for a Muslim who believes in God and His Messenger."<sup>101</sup> For al-Dijwī, it is not the contents of the ḥadīth that are really in question in this debate. The sun's prostration can always be interpreted figuratively. Rather, it is the ontological and epistemological standing of scripture vis-à-vis competing epistemologies, in this case, 'modern science.'

Interestingly, Muslim clerics had faced this competition before, if only on the margin of their intellectual world. The Ḥanbalī scholar of Damascus, Ibn Rajab (d. 795/1392), rejects with complete scorn those skeptical astronomers who had used their observations to dismiss

<sup>98</sup> Ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī, *al-Fatāwā al-ḥadīthiyya*, 249.

<sup>99</sup> Riḍā rebuts the ḥadīth from another front as well, stating that he had found a flaw (*illa*) in its *isnād*; Riḍā, *al-Manār wa'l-Azhar*, 19–20.

<sup>100</sup> Yūsuf al-Dijwī, *Maqālāt wa-fatāwā al-Shaykh Yūsuf al-Dijwī*, ed. 'Abd al-Rāfi' al-Dijwī, 4 vols. (Cairo: Dār al-Baṣā'ir, 2006), 4:1325. This article was originally published as "Ṣāhib al-Manār wa'l-Ṣalāt 'alā rasūl Allāh (ṣ) ba'd al-adhān," in *Majallat al-Azhar* 3, no. 5 (1351/1932).

<sup>101</sup> Al-Dijwī, *Maqālāt*, 4:1327.

ḥadīths like the Ḥadīth of God's Descent (*Ḥadīth al-nuzūl*), in which the Prophet states that God descends to the lowest heavens during the last third of the night to hear the prayers of believers. The last third of the night, protested these scientists, actually occurs at different times in different lands. How could God descend in all of them? Ibn Rajab responds sharply that, if the Prophet and the Companions had heard such an objection, they would have immediately considered its author a hypocrite and a rejector of Islam.<sup>102</sup>

A similar case illustrates the extent to which objections to the meanings of a ḥadīth are amplified or diffused by the hegemonic context. A ḥadīth appearing in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* tells how, when Moses was approached by the Angel of Death to take his life, he struck the angel and knocked out its eye. The angel complained to God, who healed the eye, and then returned to Moses and completed his task.<sup>103</sup> Premodern Muslim scholars sensed the incomprehensibility of a human being knocking out an angel's eye as well as the problem of why a prophet would resist an angel to begin with. Al-Nawawī reports that some "godless folk (*malāḥida*)" overtly doubted the ḥadīth based on what they saw as its absurd meaning.<sup>104</sup> Sunni scholars, however, resolved the confusion by resorting to creative interpretations rather than questioning the authenticity of the statement's attribution to the Prophet. Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ b. Mūsā (d. 544/ 1149) proposed that this "authentic report (*al-khabar al-ṣaḥīḥ*)" be understood as Moses defending himself against an unknown attacker, for the Angel of Death had appeared initially in human form.<sup>105</sup>

Modern reformists have allowed no such charity for this ḥadīth. A student of Riḍā who advanced a far more serious critique of the

<sup>102</sup> Ibn Rajab al-Ḥanbalī, *Faḍl 'ilm al-salaf' alā 'ilm al-khalaf*, ed. Zuhayr Shāwīsh (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1430/2009), 23. Interestingly, Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ b. Mūsā uses the natural motion of heavenly bodies to defend against skepticism about ḥadīths reporting that the Prophet had miraculously split the moon as a sign for the unbelievers in Mecca. Responding to the criticism that, if the moon had really been split, there would be reports of this happening from lands and peoples throughout the world, Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ notes that the moon appears in different areas at different times, rising and setting as night passes over various locals. The moon might have been split only when it was visible to a certain area; Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ b. Mūsā, *Kitāb al-Shifā bi-ta'rīf ḥuqūq al-Muṣṭafā* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1423/2002), 176.

<sup>103</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim: kitāb al-faḍā'il, bāb faḍā'il Mūsā*.

<sup>104</sup> Al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 15:138-9.

<sup>105</sup> Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ, *Kitāb al-Shifā*, 365-6.

ḥadīth corpus than his teacher would ever have allowed, Maḥmūd Abū Rayya (d. 1970), considered this ḥadīth to be a perfect example of an idiotic *matn*.<sup>106</sup> Muḥammad al-Ghazzālī also admits that its meaning is unacceptable, since it is not conceivable that a prophet would resist his fate.<sup>107</sup>

The Ḥadīth of the Fly affords a fascinating example of the diachronic tension over the content criticism of one ḥadīth. Third/ninth-century Muʿtazilīs dismissed the ḥadīth as absurd, questioning how an animal could carry both a disease and its cure. Classical Sunnis like Ibn Qutayba committed themselves to countering this skepticism. The fourth/tenth-century Shāfiʿī jurist Ḥamd al-Khaṭṭābī (d. 388/998) rebutted these critics by pointing out that other animals, such as bees, do indeed combine a poison and some benefit. Responding more directly to the rationalist criticism, he stated that the flesh of certain poisonous snakes is used in concocting the antidote to their venom.<sup>108</sup> Perhaps more succinctly than anyone, he reiterated the Sunni outlook on reason versus revelation:

This is one of the issues denied by those who accept as proof only what their external or internal senses apprehend (*ḥassuhu wa mushāhadātuhu*) and only what they affirm according to current convention (*al-ʿurf al-jārī*) and experience (*al-tajriba al-qāʾima*). As for those whose hearts God has illuminated with His knowledge and whose chests He has expanded with the establishment of the prophethood of His Messenger (ṣ), indeed they do not reject (*yastankiru*) it if it is established by narration (*al-riwāya*)... and the authenticity of narration and receiving it via transmission together both obligate submission to it (*al-taslīm*) and dispense with the substance of any deviant objections (*yaqṭaʿāni māddat al-ashghīb*).<sup>109</sup>

<sup>106</sup> Maḥmūd Abū Rayya, *Aḍwāʾ ʿalā al-sunna al-muḥammadiyya* (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat Dār al-Taʿlīf, 1958), 198.

<sup>107</sup> Al-Ghazzālī, *al-Sunna al-nabawiyya*, 35–38.

<sup>108</sup> Abū Sulaymān Ḥamd al-Khaṭṭābī, *Aʿlām al-ḥadīth fī sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. Muḥammad Saʿīd Āl Suʿūd, 4 vols. (Mecca: Maʿhad al-Buḥūth al-ʿIlmiyya, 1409/1988), 3:2142; Ibn Ḥajar, *Fath*, 10:309. In an episode in the writings of Lucian of Samosata (d. ca. 180 CE), this seems to be the motivation behind a man who has just been bitten by an adder trying to catch it. See Lucian, *The Works of Lucian of Samosata*, trans. H.W. Fowler & F.G. Fowler, 4 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1905), 3:236.

<sup>109</sup> Al-Khaṭṭābī, *Aʿlām al-ḥadīth*, 3:2141–2.

In the modern period, these same arguments have been repeated, with the added ingredient of modern medicine. In a landmark 1906 article in *al-Manār*, the Egyptian physician Muḥammad Tawfīq Ṣidqī (d. 1920) launched a scathing attack on the Shariah's reliance on ḥadīths. He cited the Ḥadīth of the Fly as a key example of how Muslims had admitted ridiculous material into their body of scripture. Not only is pushing a fly into one's drink and then drinking it unsanitary, it also contradicts other reports from the Prophet that instructed Muslims to pour out oil or liquid butter into which a rodent had fallen.<sup>110</sup> Although he did not share Ṣidqī's extreme critique of the ḥadīth corpus, Riḍā had to admit that the Ḥadīth of the Fly was problematic. Riḍā concluded that, since the ḥadīth was not massively transmitted (*mutawātir*), believing in its meaning was optional. He directly repeated al-Khaṭṭābī's statement about the flesh of a poisonous snake, however, to buttress the scientific merit of the ḥadīth.<sup>111</sup>

A vigorous traditionalist defense of the authenticity and literal truth of the Ḥadīth of the Fly has been mounted recently by the Syrian 'ālim Khalīl Mullā Khāṭir. In his work *al-Iṣāba fī ṣiḥḥat ḥadīth al-dhubāba*, Mullā Khāṭir defends both the *isnād* and the *matn* of the ḥadīth, arguing that it is fully reliable and has been widely used by jurists from almost every school of law. More importantly, he challenges the extreme credence that many people have in modern science to begin with. He remarks that throughout history much of what we thought was impossible has turned out to be otherwise.<sup>112</sup> Especially in the twentieth century, rapid changes in science continually render our notion of the possible and impossible obsolete. For example, only a few years before the United States landed a man on the moon many would have thought such an accomplishment impossible.<sup>113</sup>

Mullā Khāṭir introduces an interesting methodological distinction that he feels is lacking amongst ḥadīth skeptics: the difference between what is considered bizarre or unlikely (*yastaghribūn*) and what is impossible (*mustaḥīl*). Impossibility is a quality inherent in a thing itself,

<sup>110</sup> Juynboll, *The Authenticity of the Tradition Literature*, 141.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>112</sup> Khalīl Mullā Khāṭir, *al-Iṣāba fī ṣiḥḥat ḥadīth al-dhubāba* (Riyadh: Dār al-Qibla, 1405/[1985]), 101.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 104.

whereas when we consider something bizarre or highly unlikely, we do so because of the limitations of our own reason. It seems, says Mullā Khāṭir, that skeptics of ḥadīth have confused what is impossible with what is inconceivable or unacceptable to the Western worldview.<sup>114</sup>

A call for a humbler approach to Islamic scripture also comes from Yūsuf al-Qaraḍāwī. Regarding scientific skepticism towards ḥadīths, he explains that the difference between Sunnis and Muʿtazilīs is that “we [Sunnis] look for possible interpretations (*taʾwīl*, *maḥmal*) for ḥadīths.” This entails that, if a report is established by *isnād* criticism as having come from the Prophet (*idhā ṣaḥḥa thubūtuhu*), then it is a grave error to reject it simply because one considers it rationally improbable (*istibʿādāt ʿaqliyya*).<sup>115</sup> In the case of ḥadīths long considered *ṣaḥīḥ*, al-Qaraḍāwī states that he prefers to trust them “out of the fear that perhaps the meaning has not been revealed to me yet.”<sup>116</sup> After all, he reminds his readers, revealed religion can bring to mankind ideas or rules that they cannot understand, such as the Ḥadīth of the Fly. This is not objectionable so long as an item of attributed revelation does not go *against* reason.<sup>117</sup>

## Conclusion

On the one hand, a scholar confronted with a ḥadīth can be governed by a methodological sense of awe towards attributed revelation and a commitment to reading it charitably. On the other hand, the scholar’s willingness to accept the ḥadīth as revelation might be overpowered by the extra-textual hegemony of ‘reason,’ ‘science’ or ‘common sense.’ The tension between these two reactions to texts has been a central theme in Sunni scriptural scholarship. This tension is, in fact, built into the very corpus of authoritative narrations on which the Sunni intellectual tradition is built. The method of transmission criticism developed by early Sunnis was designed to remove the inherently subjective mechanism of reason from the evaluation of a ḥadīth’s authenticity. Yet

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 101–2.

<sup>115</sup> Al-Qaraḍāwī, *Kayfa nataʾamalū*, 45–6.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 174.

even if scholars focused on transmission to determine reliability, a *matn* that struck them as problematic or deviant invited special criticism of its *isnād* and perhaps made finding some damning flaw inevitable. Thus, subjectivity remained ingrained in the process.

The Ash‘arī amalgamation of Mu‘tazilī rationalism with Sunni tenets of faith raised this tension to the level of systemic, if minor, schizophrenia in the Sunni methodology of ḥadīth criticism. Sunni ḥadīth scholars from the fifth/eleventh century onward were committed to definitive rules of content criticism even though these same scholars often affirmed the original Sunni/*Ahl al-ḥadīth* principle of subordinating reason to the power of revelation. Certainly, Sunni scholars agreed that one could dismiss a ḥadīth for content reasons only *after* one had searched for reconciliatory readings. But the extent to which one might comfortably depart from the literal meaning of a ḥadīth or the amount of charity one extended it depended on both the perspective and inclination of the scholar in question. As such, the same ḥadīth might strike some Muslim scholars as having an unacceptable meaning while others might integrate it into their religious worldview. A scholar like al-Dhahabī leapt on the evident meaning of ḥadīths that struck him as false without exerting much effort at finding an acceptable interpretation. Conversely, Mullā ‘Alī al-Qārī tended to exhaust alternative interpretations for ḥadīths whose *isnāds* were passable.

The most noticeable shift in discourse over content criticism occurs with the Muslim confrontation with Western modernity. Like European Christian scholars in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Muslim clerics in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries had to contend with a force that, for the first time, presented a daunting challenge to the supremacy of revelation (or attributions of revelation in the case of ḥadīths) as the chief structure behind their scientific, historical and ethical world. Ḥadīths like that of the Fly or the Sun Prostrating had raised eyebrows in the premodern era, but in the modern period reverence for the text and willingness to indulge hermeneutic gymnastics shriveled before a fear of appearing backwards or unscientific.

The great question underlying this discourse is the broader problem of distinguishing between the absolute and the relative, between a reality existing apart from us and our own convention. In Greek this dichotomy was conceived of as that of *Physis* (nature) and *Nomos* (law)—what



is the truly real and natural order as opposed to a culture's convention. Our species has erred frequently in confusing *Nomos* with *Physis*. This was Paul's mistake when he told his Corinthian audience that "*physis* (nature)" tells us that long hair is beautiful on women but shameful on men (the royal family of the Merovingian Franks would disagree). This is where Seneca erred in his criticism of transvestites: "Do you not think that it is living unnaturally (*contra naturam*) to exchange one's clothes for women's?"<sup>118</sup> Ibn Khaldūn (d. 808/1406) manifested the same naïveté when he dismissed a report of Harun al-Rashid's sister seducing one of the Barmakid viziers, objecting that she was a noble Arab woman "descended from the men around Muḥammad and his uncles," so such a sin would be beneath her.<sup>119</sup>

The distinction between *Physis* and *Nomos* underlies the challenge of drawing the line between the probable and improbable, the possible and impossible. Our own *Nomos* almost always defines what we believe. It seems much rarer for an agnostic attitude to lead us to an openness to the possible rather than skepticism of it. Only a scholar as humble as Montaigne (d. 1592), fresh in the wake of the European discovery of the wondrous New World, could warn his readers against pretending "to a knowledge of the farthest extent of possibility" and conflating "the impossible and the unusual."<sup>120</sup> The founding ethos of Sunni Islam was to subordinate man's inevitably limited *Nomos* to the certainty of revelation. One can imagine Mullā Khāṭir enjoining both Paul and Seneca to heed the distinction between what is unnatural and what a person's own bias and background make him reject. Mullā Khāṭir is very Sunni in his writing, reminding us that reason is never free from the blinders of convention and ignorance. As Pindar observed early on in human memory, "custom (*Nomos*) is king of all."<sup>121</sup>

<sup>118</sup> 1 Corinthians 11: 15–16; Seneca, *Epistulae Morales ad Lucilium*, xxii:7.

<sup>119</sup> Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, ed. N.J. Dawood (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989), 18–19.

<sup>120</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *Les Essais*, ed. Denis Bjai et al. (Paris: La Pochothèque, 2001), 278 (Book I: 26).

<sup>121</sup> Herodotus, *Histories*, Book III: 38. See also Montaigne, who observes that "we seem to have no other criterion for truth and reason than the type and kind of opinions and customs current in the land where we are"; Montaigne, 318 (Book 1: 30).