

Translator's Introduction

The present work by Imām Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī, a renowned Pakistani scholar, the author of a nine volume commentary on the Holy Qur'ān entitled *Tadabbur-i Qur'ān*, besides more than a dozen other books on various important Islamic disciplines, addresses some fundamental questions about the prophetic traditions, generally believed to be the second source of religious knowledge in Islam besides the Qur'ān. The author has taken up the fundamental questions about the prophetic *ḥadīth* including the authenticity of the traditions, the difference between the Sunnah and the Ḥadīth, role of *isnād*, its importance and its inherent limitations, and some basic questions about the process of *riwāyah* (transmission) and *dirāyah* (textual) investigation. He sets forth principles of understanding the *aḥādīth* as well as the methodology of sifting the sound from the unsound reports. It is not, by form and content, an introduction to the Science of Ḥadīth. Iṣlāḥī confines himself to the discussion of a few fundamental issues while presuming a basic technical knowledge of the Science of Ḥadīth at the end of the reader. It is a seminal work in the sense that the author has discussed and highlighted facts which answer many questions on the authenticity of the prophetic tradition – oral, textual (i.e. *aḥādīth*) and practical (i.e. *sunan*) – and their relation to the foundational text, the Qur'ān.

Muslims have always held that the Sunnah is the source of religious knowledge next only, in terms of reliability, to the Qur'ān. However, the question of its authoritativeness and its relation to the Divine text has always been debated among them. Many scholars came to hold that the prophetic tradition consists of the traditions handed down to the subsequent generations by individual-to-individual reports (*akḥbār-i aḥād*). Most of the authorities do not distinguish clearly between *ḥadīth* and *sunnah*. Presuming the terms *sunnah* and *ḥadīth* to be interchangeable, the scholars wrestled over the authenticity or lack of it in the prophetic tradition. Subsequently some people took extreme positions in this regard. Iṣlāḥī points out that a group of scholars declared all the *aḥādīth* as spurious tales while another declared the *aḥādīth* equal

to and even overruling the Qur'ān. Those who declared it equal to the Qur'ān in authenticity and historicity did so while admitting it to be *akhbār-i āḥād*. On the other hand those who rejected it altogether rejected something which formed fundamental and inseparable part of the religion transmitted through perpetual adherence of the *ummah* in each generation.

One cannot deny that there has always existed in Muslim scholarship, a vague understanding of the difference between the terms *ḥadīth* and *sunnah*, yet mostly the picture was blurred to admit of any clear distinction. I do not know of any treatise in the entire Islamic literature which so clearly posits this difference between the two and treats both on scales they individually merit, as the work presently before us. Iṣlāḥī tries to show that the most crucial issue and the critical question in major discussions around the interrelationship between the Qur'ān and the prophetic tradition and the authoritativeness and otherwise of *ahādīth* is resolved through recognizing a clear distinction between what is denoted by the two terms *ḥadīth* and *sunnah*. The author achieves this, in chapter 1, through an analysis of the terms, nature of the concepts denoted by *ḥadīth*, *sunnah*, and mode of transmission of each, and their respective roles in Islamic epistemology. The most crucial findings of Iṣlāḥī include his assertion that the Sunnah does not depend on *ahādīth* and is derived from the perpetual and consistent practice of each generation of the believers since the Prophet (sws) taught and instituted it in the first generation.

Having distinguished from the Sunnah, which is an absolutely authentic and reliable source forming the fundamental part of the religion, the *ḥadīth* literature can be treated on scientific principles. For example, Iṣlāḥī argues, there is no need to defy reason and declare individual-to-individual reports, whose vulnerability has always remained clear to the Muslim scholarship, as historically equal or superior to the Qur'ān. Similarly there is no need to defy academic principles and recklessly declare all the *ḥadīth* literature as spurious and unreliable. This distinction between *ḥadīth* and *sunnah* proves that the Qur'ān, an absolutely authentic source, does not stand in need of *ahādīth*, a probable truth. The Book of God and the Sunnah of the Prophet (sws) are the only sources of Islam. The *ahādīth* come next to these sources as very useful record of the

prophetic knowledge, explanation of the Qur'ānic text, historic details regarding the formative phase of Islam and the best example set by the Prophet (sws).

The remaining issues including the question of interrelation of the Book and the Sunnah and the Ḥadīth branch from and depend on the confusion regarding the boundaries of the Ḥadīth and the Sunnah. The question whether the Qur'ān depends on the Ḥadīth or vice versa is resolved once it is established that the Sunnah is an independent source which does not rely on *aḥādīth* and that the Sunnah is an absolutely authentic source of knowledge, equal to the Qur'ān as far as the historicity of the sources and their Prophetic origin is concerned. The precepts of the faith of Islam are set out in the Qur'ān in textual form and are complemented by the practices instituted by the Prophet (sws) in the form of the Sunnah. Then, whereas the Qur'ān is the word of God, the Sunnah is the demonstrative form of the religious performance instituted by the Messenger of God. Both these sources emanate from the Prophet (sws) who taught them to the generation of the Companions (rta) who, in turn, by their consensus and perpetual adherence, handed it down to the next generation and so on to our times.

In Iṣlāḥī's view, the relation of the Book to the Sunnah is that of the soul to a body. The body has to adjust according to the soul. It cannot mould or reshape the soul to accord to it. That the Sunnah and the Ḥadīth cannot overrule the commands of the Book has been argued by Iṣlāḥī through rational and received arguments with the help of examples. He terms the belief that Ḥadīth can override the Qur'ān as erroneous. Being clear on the authenticity of the Qur'ān and the Sunnah on the one hand and the probability of the *aḥādīth* on the other, he is able to show that the less reliable source has to be in accord with the more reliable one. This interrelation of the three important sources of religious law in Islam has been explicated in chapter 2.

The above mentioned facts and observations have a direct bearing on the process of *ḥadīth* interpretation. The principles of understanding the *aḥādīth* therefore assume clear and concrete shape. The cornerstone of Iṣlāḥī's approach towards understanding the *ḥadīth* literature is his concept of the overarching authority of the Qur'ān. While introducing the principle of understanding the *ḥadīth* literature (Chapter 3), the

author stresses the importance of the consequences of the interrelation of the Qur'ān, the Sunnah and the Ḥadīth, for Muslim jurisprudence. He highlights the status of the Qur'ān over the rest of the sources and asserts that, being the word of God, a textual evidence of absolute certainty, the Book is the basic criterion of true religious knowledge. A summary of the principles of interpretation of *ḥadīth* literature, that we find emerging in Iṣlāḥī's work is as follows:

a) The *aḥādīth*, which are only probably true, are to be interpreted in the light of the Qur'ān. They are a branch of the root, the book of God. The *aḥādīth* only explicate the themes of the Book. Therefore, the material of the *aḥādīth* must accord to the themes of the Book. For whatever the Prophet (sws) said or did always accorded perfectly to the dictates of the Book. This entails that a student of the *aḥādīth* should look for the basis of the traditions in the Book and understand them in the light of the word of God.

b) Since a *ḥadīth* report is to be seen as the part of a sprawling literature, one has to have comprehensive understanding of the whole corpus and one should interpret the part in the light of the whole. If a report does not fit well in the overall structure it has to be either reinterpreted to make it fit within the whole or has to be regrettably discarded.

c) One also needs to have a good understanding of the language of the prophetic traditions.

d) An interpreter of *ḥadīth* should also remain conscious of the fact that the prophetic traditions always speak in a given context. Losing the trail of the context risks a misunderstanding of the words of the Prophet (sws). There are examples which show that ignoring this fact has sometimes led people to hold what defies the foundations of the religion.

e) Similarly, one needs to appreciate that the Prophet (sws) is not expected to defy reason and the *fiṭrah* (human nature) for the Faith does not contain any element that violates the *fiṭrah* or the human reason. Therefore, the traditions should be pondered over in the light of the dictates of reason and *fiṭrah*. The Book of God itself adduces reason and *fiṭrah* to prove many of its fundamental premises.

Transmitted through individual-to-individual mode of transfer the *ḥadīth* narratives contain all types of reports, sound and the

unsound. Therefore, Iṣlāḥī advises caution in accepting a *ḥadīth* report solely on the basis of its *isnād*. Its contents have to be minutely discussed and assessed on various scales. In chapter 4, Iṣlāḥī discusses how it is incumbent to see if the *ḥadīth* under consideration is in accord with the religious taste (*zawq*) of the firm believers and those grounded in its knowledge. Here Iṣlāḥī invokes the valuable contributions of the traditional Muslim scholarship. The taste of the firm believers and established scholars of Islam is important for they are acquainted with the spirit of the religion and the nature of the Prophetic teachings based on their study of the Book of God. Their long and meaningful exposure to the corpus of prophetic knowledge enables them to assess whether a saying attributed to the Prophet (sws) is in line with the disposition of the Prophet (sws) and the essence of the religion. A true believer with a thorough knowledge of the religion can discern whether a statement can issue from the source they are familiar with. Similarly it must not contradict the customary practice of the *ummah* which is always based on the Qur'ān and the Sunnah whose authenticity is not disputed. The Qur'ānic teachings and the known Sunnah both have the overriding authority over the *ahādīth* reports. Collective reason of the human beings and any definitive argument should also help us discern whether a narrative ascribed to the Prophet (sws) is genuinely attributed to him or not.

It has been accepted by the scholars of the *ummah* from the earliest times that the Companions (rta) of the Prophet (sws) are not to be subjected to the principles of *isnād* investigation. However, the definition of a Companion has remained under discussion. Chapter 5 defines the term *ṣahābī*. It discusses the rationale of the view that the Companions (rta) are all just and establishes this principle on the authority of the Qur'ān and the prophetic traditions. After discussing the various views held by the earlier authorities, it sums up that only such persons may validly be called *ṣahābah* who had availed the company of the Prophet (sws) for a considerably long time and who received training at his hands in religion and morality. Not every person who happened to have occasionally seen the Prophet (sws) or met him once or twice can be taken as his Companion. This Iṣlāḥī shows through citing the Qur'ānic guidance and prophetic *ahādīth* on the subject.

The chain of narrators or the *isnād* begins with the name of a

Companion (rta) of the Prophet (sws), who claims to have witnessed him say or do anything. It travels through the individuals in the subsequent generations till it reaches one of the compilers. The Muslim traditionists evolved the discipline of *asmā' al-rijāl* (Biographies), one of the sciences of which the Muslims can be genuinely proud of, to help investigate the biographies of the individual narrators on scientific grounds and ascertain whether they are reliable narrators to transmit material which is likely to constitute the part of the Faith. They made sure that the narrators bringing in a report are persons of impeccable moral character, sound memory, followed the religion faithfully, avoided sinfulness and developed a fair understanding of the religion of God. They made sure that the persons involved in the *ḥadīth* transmission had met their authorities whom they quoted. No other nation or religious group matches the Muslim accomplishment in this regard. This, however, does not mean that the discipline of *asmā' al-rijāl* and the methodology of *isnād* criticism were flawlessly applied nor would it be incumbent to accept any *ḥadīth* merely because it is transmitted by the seemingly imposing *isnāds*.

Chapter 6 discusses the value of the *isnād* and its inherent limitations. It stresses that merely a sound *isnād* of a *ḥadīth* is not sufficient proof of its origin. There are other criteria of gauging the authenticity of the traditions which must also be carefully and vigorously applied. Among the possible inherent limitations of the *isnād* is the possibility that the data collected about individuals who lived decades or centuries ago is not always entirely objective. One cannot be sure if the data about a certain personality is absolutely certain or whether it takes into account his beliefs, ideals, moral conduct and ability to receive *aḥādīth* material and transmit them without affecting and altering its meaning. We often form incorrect opinions about the character of contemporary persons in our immediate environment. Therefore, it is not possible to give a conclusive judgment regarding persons living in far off places in remote times. We need to be aware of this limitation of *isnād* investigations. People on whose testimony we rely in the process of judging the characters were also human beings. They could have been affected by group allegiances, personal opinions and subjectivity. No human is expected to be perfectly free of all

types of biases and partiality. It is also important to note that many traditionists did not properly investigate the *isnād* if the *ḥadīth* transmitted by a chain did not pertain to legal rulings. This means that the traditions which discussed the Muslim beliefs and practices, exaltation of certain deeds and condemnation of some others were accepted rather liberally. The *muḥaddithūn* even accepted *aḥādīth* from the heretics, innovators and extremist sects including *shī'īs* (*rawāfiḍ*). It does not need much to explain that the innovators had the motivation to fabricate *aḥādīth*, namely to legitimize their views.

According to Iṣlāḥī, another problem in the process of *ḥadīth* transmission is that of narration by meaning instead of verbatim reporting. This makes it possible that the person communicating the narratives might have failed to properly understand and fully communicate a complex idea. Much subjectivity involves in transmission by meaning.

Chapter 7 takes up this question in detail. It warns the student of *aḥādīth* to remain alive to the fact that it was not possible to narrate everything verbatim and the *ummah* had to rely on the transmission of meaning to make the *ḥadīth* transmission possible. On the other hand there are instances in which the process has caused irreparable damage to the teachings contained in the tradition. Iṣlāḥī demonstrates this by citing a number of examples from the lifetime of the Prophet (sws) himself, in addition to examples from the later generations.

Having studied the major problems in the process of *isnād* criticism and the mode of transmission of *aḥādīth*, the discussion on the correct stance regarding the authoritativeness of *aḥādīth* is relatively easier to grasp.

Chapter 8 surveys the views of the major juristic schools including *ḥanafī*, *mālikī* and *shafī'ī* scholars on the question. It has been mostly acknowledged that the *aḥādīth* are an inconclusive and probable (*ẓannī*) source of knowledge. It does not yield conclusive, certain and immediate knowledge (*yaqīnī*). This does not mean that the individual narratives are worthless. One can rely on *aḥādīth* as a source of religious knowledge after examining them in the light of the teachings of the Qur'ān, the Sunnah of the Prophet (sws) and dictates of reason and *fiṭrah*. However, conclusiveness is still not the characteristic expected to mark these reports.

Chapter 9 comprises a discussion on the analysis of the causes of ḥadīth fabrication. It has been shown that the *aḥādīth* have been fabricated both for pious as well as impious motives. Many pious individuals sought to rely on fabricated traditions to spread virtue and piety. They tried to exhort the believers to do certain good deeds which they considered were being ignored and to warn them of evil consequences of vices. This has not escaped the notice of the vigilant *muḥaddithūn* who discovered this evil and tried to expose the ‘pious’ fabricators. However, the *muḥaddithūn* did not strictly follow the principles of *jarḥ wa ta’dīl* (investigation into the reliability of ḥadīth narrators) while analyzing the *aḥādīth* pertaining to exhortations and warnings. They observed the requisite caution only while investigating legal traditions containing teachings about *halāl wa ḥarām*. Thus the evil of ḥadīth fabrication remained operative. The pious fabricators spread the spurious traditions and these found entry even in the major ḥadīth works. The *aḥādīth* have also been invented to earn fame and support the innovatory beliefs and practices. Here too the *muḥaddithūn* did not show requisite vigilance. They opted for accepting *aḥādīth* from such innovators who did not openly confess their innovations and did not call others to follow their creed. This again opened the door to innovations on a large scale. Therefore, we can expect a great number of *aḥādīth* in the famous compilations which need to be reinvestigated. This demands that the student of the ḥadīth literature shows extra vigilance while relying on a narrative as a basis of any religious issue.

The author concludes his discussions by identifying the primary sources of *aḥādīth* (Chapter 10). He posits that it is extremely important to select the primary sources in any discipline. In the ḥadīth discipline, according to him, there are three works which can be considered the primary sources. He includes *Muwatṭā* of Imām Malik, *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Imām Muslim and *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Imām Bukhārī in the primary sources. He believes that a study of these books helps the student acquire sufficient knowledge of the discipline and there remains no need to thoroughly study other ḥadīth works. Other sources, however, can be resorted to for additional support and in-depth study of a particular issue.

As the author has stated in the preface, this is a compilation of his lectures on the issues. These lectures were delivered orally

and the reader should not expect it to be perfectly structured and well ordered. There are repetitions and redundancies in the text. I have sought to consider this fact in my translation and have tried to omit such repetitions. However, still there is much room to improve the overall structure and to further refine the way these discussions were held and recorded. The reader needs to keep this in mind while studying the book.

The book is not an introductory work and requires basic knowledge of the disciplines. It does not provide explanation of commonly used terms except when it is crucial to a particular discussion. I have tried to explain some terms and concepts in the footnotes. The readers are requested to forward suggestions and improvements in this regards so that the translation can be made more useful. I have also tried to provide proper references and citations to the sources quoted. I have tried to use the commonly accepted terms and to explain them in parenthesis wherever necessary. The most important ones, which are also employed more frequently, are the *ḥadīth* and *sunnah*. The term *ḥadīth*, it should be noted, is used both for individual narratives as well as the corpus of the *aḥādīth*. I have differentiated between the two by putting the term with the capital Ḥ when used in the latter sense. Similarly, the word *sunnah* has been used in two different senses. In the sense of the distinct category of prophetic traditions, it has been put as the *Sunnah* with a capital S whereas in the sense of a given practice it is mentioned in the lower case. Instead of the *ḥādīths* for plural of *ḥadīth* I have preferred *aḥādīth*, the original Arabic term. It also needs to be noted that the abbreviation (sws) written after a mention of the name of the Prophet Muḥammad (sws) stands for the formula *ṣallallāhu ‘alayhi wa sallam* which means peace be upon him. Similarly the names of the Companions of the Prophet (sws) are followed by the abbreviated form of the formula *radī allāhu ta‘ālā ‘anhu/‘anhum* which means may Allāh be pleased with him/them. The word Companion/s with a capital C denotes the Companions (rta) of the Prophet (sws).

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