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ISLAMIC SECONDARY SOURCES

Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

Joseph A. Islam

The Arabic word 'Hadith' means a report, tale, story, statement, narration, a communication or a discourse. Its plural form is 'Ahadith'. In common parlance, 'Hadith' has now become synonymous with a specific body of work within Islamic literature which constitutes narrations that depict the words and practices of the Prophet Muhammad ^(pbuh) and are attributed to him.

DEFINITION OF ISLAMIC SECONDARY SOURCES

The terms 'Islamic secondary source(s)' or 'secondary sources' are often used throughout my articles. This term has been utilised to denote all manner of literature within Islamic thought which constitutes 'Ilm-e-Rijaal' (Knowledge of men) **and resides outside the actual text of the Quran** (i.e. anything that is not scripture) **and which are used to make theological inferences and judgments.**

These include canonised **Ahadith reports**, the Maghazi genre, Prophetic biographies, Islamic jurisprudence, consensus, opinions of Muslim jurists, analogical deductions, 'Ra'y' (independent reasoning), Muslim practices and all manner of sources **which are not part of the Quranic text or used solely to understand its language.**

006:114

"Say: "Shall I seek for judge other than God? - when He is the One who has sent to you **the Book, explained in detail (Arabic: Mufassalan).**" They know full well, to whom We have given the Book, that it has been sent down from your Lord in truth. Never be then of those who doubt"

PRESERVATION OF THE LANGUAGE

The protection of the 'dhikr' (reminder) is assured by the Quran (15:9). This implies both the 'words' of the Quran and **an appropriate ability to discern its 'meanings'**. Otherwise, the 'dhikr' would be meaningless.

Therefore any source, including classical lexicons, works of grammarians, dictionaries or indeed, any Islamic secondary source as defined above **which is used to understand the classical Arabic language** is implicitly ratified by the Quran (15:9).

The Prophet was tasked with a responsibility to convey the message of the Quran in Arabic to his people. His people had a responsibility en masse to pass the message to mankind (22:78) both in Arabic and to convey its **meaning** to those who did not understand the language.

THE CLAIM OF THE QURAN

The Quran claims to be the direct word of God, the Divine scripture, a revelation to Prophet Muhammad ^(pbuh) and hence the '**primary source**' of any interpretation, the absolute first principle for analysis.

It also presents itself as a discourse (Hadith) to mankind (45:6). It is not the personal property of any religious elite, divide, group, sect or individual. Non Muslims have as much right to reflect, ponder, scrutinise, question, criticise the arguments presented by the Quran (and Muslim interpretations of it) as those who have 'inherited' their religion and have been born into Muslim households.

The Quran is simply a message to **all** mankind from a Divine Creator.

068.052

"But it is nothing less than a Reminder to all nations **(Arabic: Alameen)**"

Please see article: [Understanding the Quranic term 'Alameen'](#)

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HADITH AND SUNNA

There remains a crucial, yet often unappreciated difference between the two sources. A brief discussion is covered in the following article:

[The Difference Between Hadith and Sunna](#)

Both sources remain subservient to the **actual text** of the Quran which is the only source which has been fully protected and preserved by God. God has only vouched for the protection of the 'dhikr' (The Quran) and not the practices of the people or of their literature.

015.009

"Surely We have revealed **the reminder (Arabic: Dhikr)** and We will most surely be its **guardian (Arabic: Hafizun)**"

However, it is also unreasonable to suggest complete corruption of the Islamic secondary sources. Classical scholars should be fully appreciated in the endeavours they have made to pass on their efforts to succeeding generations of Muslims. However, it is also a mistake to consider them as 'authorities' in such a way that their works become the source of guidance themselves and beyond reproach. Classical or modern works should **always** be understood, appreciated and critically evaluated **in the light of the Quran**.

A befitting statement is noted by a modern scholar which is worthwhile reproducing as an excerpt.

"It would, therefore, be improper to ignore or underestimate the significance of the Ahadith literature as a historical source even if its authenticity may appear doubtful. The modern Occidentalists are of the opinion that in spite of the fact that Apocrypha are of doubtful authenticity, we can still peep through them into the social life and behaviour of their fabricators, hence their significance as a source of history should not be denied. Similarly, even such portions of the hadith material as have been declared fake, unauthentic and of doubtful nature, contain most valuable hints regarding one or the other aspect of the early Islamic society" [1]

[1] SINGH. N.K, Encyclopaedia Historiography of the Muslim World, Global Vision Publishing House, First Edition 2003, Page 319

MUSLIM UNAWARENESS

Regrettably, most Muslims remain tacitly unaware of an understanding of their own sources, what their sources constitute, how they have developed and what impact it has had on Islamic thought. Hadith criticism for example, is not a new enterprise initiated by Western scholarship within the past couple of centuries. It is an enterprise that took provenance from the earliest classical Muslim period.

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENCE

It is significant to appreciate that there is a crucial difference between an 'earliest' extant report and a 'contemporaneous' report to the source.

Islamic secondary sources are **later documents (often centuries removed)** purporting to be continuously orally narrated and claiming to be from an earlier period. There is a crucial difference to appreciate between a later extant document claiming to be derived from an earlier source **and actually having that earlier source**.

Whether these narratives have been faithfully transmitted orally and actually originate from the period they are depicting is usually a matter of individual faith in the sources and trustworthiness of their chains of narrators (Arabic: isnad) and **not** evidence. **We do not have any original sources from the companions, or their followers.**

To provide some context as an example, many Muslims attack the veracity of the New Testament based on the fact that they were written 'later'. In fact, the Biblical documents are much closer to the source that they attempt to capture (within decades). This is in stark contrast to the Muslims secondary sources which are often centuries removed. Also there are many contemporaneous sources (such as of the Gospel writers) available for verification who all give their versions of the ministry of Prophet Jesus. ^(pbuh)

There is as much reason not to suspect the sincerity of the early Christians to pass on to later generations what they believed was true as there is reason not to suspect the sincerity of early companions of Prophet Muhammad. ^(pbuh) For example, if Biblical narratives show differences in details and a possible development of theology between the Gospels of Mark through to John, one can only imagine how accentuated the problem would be for Muslim sources which are often centuries removed from the period they attempt to narrate, often with no immediate contemporaneous verifications.

SCHOLARSHIP DISCUSSIONS

No doubt, it is one's understanding of the origin and development of the 'isnad' (chain of narrators) and its application which ultimately determines how one construes Islamic texts and understands the Islamic history it attempts to depict. The 'isnad' has indisputably played a fundamental role in authenticating 'hadith' through classical Muslim scholarship. The body of literature itself (Ahadith corpus) relies on the authenticity of its chain of narrators (isnads).

Fierce debates have always ensued with regards the authenticity of this body of literature not only amongst classical Muslim scholars but equally with modern scholarship in the West. The need for 'isnads' clearly demonstrates some degree of scepticism and the need for justification of authenticity that the Ahadith body of literature has always attracted, even amongst the earliest Islamic communities. **Never has any such 'isnad' been demanded of the Quran or of its verses.** In this way, the Quran stands as an exception and clearly depicts a more rigid, accepted body of text right from the earliest Muslim communities.

Views with regards 'isnads' are sharply contested and divided. Albeit in the West, discussions with regards authenticity started with the likes of Alois Sprenger, it was undoubtedly Ignaz Goldziher that spearheaded the argument in his work "Muhammedanische Studien" more commonly known today as Muslim Studies in Volumes I and II. S.M. Stern and C.R. Barber provide English translations from the German text. From Goldziher's 'Muslim Studies' initiates the methodology of analysing the 'matn' (content of the hadith) to determine the provenance of a particular hadith. His impeccable scholarship, even today remains undisputed as does his in-depth research presenting extremely cogent arguments.

Joseph Schacht concurring with much of Goldziher's views further scrutinised the literature in a more legal context focusing on Islamic jurisprudence. He equally provided in-depth scholarship and

powerful arguments. His conclusions however remain not much different with regards the spurious nature of much of the hadith narratives. Schacht's methods are challenged by scholars such as Mohammad Mustafa (M.M) Azami, Fuat Sezgin, Mustafa al-Sibai and Norman Calder. M.M Azami in particular, focused on dismantling Schacht's theories and the premises underlying them. M.M Azami's counter arguments with regards Schacht's theories are also worth reading.

One could argue that there exist three main divisions in serious modern scholarship. Those that place little trust in the authenticity of the 'isnad' and subsequent Ahadith corpus, those that do maintain trust and finally those that seek the middle ground. Though there is much overlap between the middle camp (seeking middle ground) and those that take a more favourable approach towards the authenticity of the corpus, there is little in common between those that doubt the authenticity outright and those that don't. Much scholarship literature is imbued with vehement exchanges though often disguised in scholarly gloss.

Those that do place trust in the reliability of the 'isnad' include scholars such as Nabia Abbott, Fuad Sezgin, M.M Azami, Harald Motzki, Gregor Schoeler, Harris Birkeland, Isaiah Goldfeld and Heribert Horst. Examples of sceptics include, Ignaz Goldziher, Joseph Schacht, John Wansborough and Patricia Crone. Those that take the middle ground include scholars such as G.H.A Juynboll, C.H.M. Versteegh, Miklos Muranyi, Fred Leemhuis, Fazlur Rahman and Claude Gilliot. Each scholar brings forward their own premises for the positions they take.

Studying Ahadith in the West is rather different from studying it through traditional lenses of Muslim scholarship which seems to have a very different emphasis such as authenticating chains of transmissions and grading Ahadith to determine its authenticity. Western scholarship on the other hand, seems to be focused on the historical reliability of the narratives making use of their own particular methodologies.

Having spent much of my academic endeavour researching and scrutinising Islamic secondary sources with their intricate detailed arguments and counter arguments, I personally find the following verse of the Quran a very apt depiction of the human condition.

018.054

"We have explained in detail in this Quran, for the benefit of mankind, every kind of similitude: but man is, in most things, contentious"

THE APPROACH TAKEN WITH REGARDS SECONDARY SOURCES AND WHY

Islamic secondary sources have been discussed in my articles in a holistic, cursory manner without delving into its intricacies as the site primarily remains an analysis from a Quranic perspective. Therefore, much of secondary source discussions and theology dependant on them, remain superfluous to the arguments being presented from a Quranic perspective. Where Islamic secondary sources have been mentioned, they have been used as an example to illustrate a point and **not as a basis for the argument itself.**

No Muslim, regardless of sect or divide, Non Muslim, classical or contemporary scholar of any discipline or 'mufassir' (Quranic exegetic) has the sole right to claim ownership of the interpretation of the Quran.

The Quran is a message to all mankind and provides its own 'tafsir' (explanation) and claims to be **fully detailed (Arabic: Mufassalan)** for purposes of necessary guidance. The best interpretation can therefore only be one that is fully consistent with the Quran's own narrative, its own internal consistency and its own coherency. This approach also provides the platform for the most cogent argument.

The Quran convincingly argues for the use of no other source to be used in conjunction with its own interpretation. This is clear from various Quranic verses hence why Islamic secondary sources have not been utilised in my articles to interpret the Quran. This is indeed consistent with the Quran's own advice as to how it should be studied. This however does not imply that all Ahadith are automatically false. Rather, the Quran admits no other source to be used in conjunction with the Quran's interpretation or as a separate source for law or judge.

Therefore, the question of 'authenticity' of the Ahadith corpus is relatively mute from a Quran's perspective. Rather, a more pertinent question is with regards the 'authority' of the Ahadith corpus and if the Quran recognises any other authoritative source except for itself.

THE QURAN IS FULLY DETAILED FOR JUDGMENT AND GUIDANCE

006.114

"Say: "Shall I seek for judge other than God? - when He it is Who has revealed to you the Book, explained in detail **(Arabic: Mufassalan)**". They know full well, to whom We have given the Book, that it has been sent down from thy Lord in truth. Never be then of those who doubt"

Arabic: Mufassalan - Clearly explained, fully detailed.

Please see article: [The Quran Stands Alone As Sole Religious Guidance](#)

THE QURAN PROVIDES ITS OWN EXPLANATION (TAFSIR)

025:033

"And no example do they bring to you but We bring you the truth and the best explanation (of it) **(Arabic: Hasana Tafsir)**"

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