

Chapter 7: Prohibition of Transcribing the Hadith

﴿بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ وَالزُّبُرِ وَأَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الذِّكْرَ لِتُبَيِّنَ لِلنَّاسِ مَا نُزِّلَ إِلَيْهِمْ وَلَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ﴾¹

(We sent them) with Clear Signs and Scriptures; and We have sent down unto thee (also) the Message; that you may explain clearly to men what is sent for them, and that they may reflect. (Holy Qur'an, 16:44)

Without a doubt, the art of writing separates the truth from falsehood, maintains agreements, and reminds people of what has passed and many other important things. Even during the pre-Islamic era, writing was a rare but honored skill. According to Ibn Sa'd, "The accomplished among them in the time before Islam were those who wrote Arabic, mastered swimming, and mounted archery."¹ Various schools in Mecca, Madinah and Taif taught the difficult art of the Arabic script.

When Islam came, its teachings prioritized writing and the advancement of knowledge and imagery of books and writing permeate the verses of the Qur'an. One of the first verses which Allah revealed was, "[He] **Who taught by the use of the pen,**"² thus making the pen as an instrument used for a binding oath, such as in *Surah al-Qalam*, "**By the pen and by what they write.**"³ Therefore, despite the difficulties of writing at that time, gradually the *jahiliyyah* (pre-Islamic) society slowly became literate.

After establishing the mosque in Madinah, one of the priorities of the Prophet had was to appoint a teacher, Abdullah Ibn Sa'd al-Aas to teach reading and writing. This skill was so important that the Prophet even allowed some of the captives taken during the Battle of Badr to earn their freedom in exchange for teaching ten Muslims how to read and write.⁴ Between forty-three and forty-five scribes recorded the revelations of the Qur'an at the Prophet's request, and in addition, he would constantly urge the people to "write (*uktubu*)"⁵ and "document (*qayyidu*),"⁶ and would advise, "Help yourself to memorize by writing."⁷

Most significant, the Prophet commanded that his hadith (sayings and actions) be written down. He instructed the Muslims, "Write everything that comes out of my mouth, for by the One whose Hands my

soul is in, nothing comes from it except the truth.”⁸ Abu Bakr narrates from the Holy Prophet that, “Whoever writes down a piece of knowledge from me or a hadith will receive *ajr* (reward) as long as it (the writing) exists.”⁹

A companion, Abdullah Ibn al-Aas used to put everything the Prophet said in writing to such an extent that some companions of the Prophet ordered him to stop doing so because they felt that the Prophet was just a human being whose utterance should not be recorded. He consulted with the Prophet and the Prophet replied, “Yes, write down everything that I say.”¹⁰ Similarly, on the authority of Rafi Ibn Khadij we read that:

The Prophet of Allah passed by us one day and we were talking. He said, “What are you talking about?” We replied, “What we heard from you.” He said, “So talk about it, but whoever deliberately attributes false statements to me reserves his place in the hell-fire,” and then the people stopped talking.

The Prophet asked why they were not talking anymore, and they replied that they had stopped talking because of his serious words. He said, “I did not say not to talk. I said, ‘speak, but speak the truth.’ I only ask you not to attribute false statements to me.” They said to him, “O Prophet of God, we hear things from you, should we write them down?” He said, “Yes, by all means, write them down. By thy Lord, everything that comes out of my mouth is the truth.”¹¹

In addition, the Prophet emphasized the transmission of his teachings through other means. He repeated twice saying, “Therefore, the witness must inform the absent,”¹² regarding those who were not present to hear his words. He also encouraged the Muslims to memorize his sayings in order to transmit them and as a way to verify their authenticity. In this regard, the Prophet would say, “Whoever memorizes and conveys forty hadith from my tradition, I will admit him into my intercession on the Day of Judgment,”¹³ and “Whoever from my ummah memorizes forty hadith, Allah will raise him on the Day of Judgment as a scholar.”¹⁴

Despite all this significance and attention given to recording the hadith of the Prophet, during the reign of the first three caliphs, the Muslims were absolutely forbidden from recording any hadith.¹⁵ In the words of Lady Aishah:

My father collected the hadith of the Messenger of Allah and they numbered five hundred. He spent the night turning back and forth. He saddened me and I said to him, “Are you turning around because of pain, or because of bad news which you have received?” In the morning, he said to me, “Bring me the hadith of the Prophet which I have left with you.” I brought him all the hadith. At this point, he asked for fire and burned all the hadith in the fire. I said to him, “Why do you burn these hadith?” He said, “I fear that I will die while I have these hadith. I took them from the man I trusted, but maybe some hadith are not his or maybe the sayings are not authentic.”¹⁶

The excuse proffered in the above quote is that the hadith might not have been authentic. However, Abu Bakr could hardly have had reason to doubt traditions that he heard with his own ears and from other

companions whom he himself says he trusted.

This position becomes even more difficult to accept when coupled with the idea subsequently introduced by scholars, such as Ibn Hajar that Allah did not allow the companions to lie or make mistakes!

In later times, in order to support Abu Bakr's action, a false saying was cited on the authority of Abu Sa'id al-Khudri stating, "Whoever took from me other than the Qur'an and wrote it down, let him erase it."¹⁷ Aside from the fact that this hadith contradicts previous hadith in which the Prophet ordered the Muslims to write down his traditions and the spirit of the Holy Qur'an which encourages writing, if this hadith was authentic then Abu Bakr would certainly have been aware of it and would never have narrated any hadith.

To placate the people, Abu Bakr said, "Between us and you is the book of Allah, so follow the lawful in it and refrain from the prohibited." Across the board, both Shi'a and Sunni scholars believe that the Qur'an alone does not suffice for a comprehensive explanation of Islam and it is in need of the Prophet's explanation as a supplement.

Even more, the verses of the Qur'an fall into many categories, such as *mujmal* (having equal possibilities) and *mubayan* (clearly recognized); *muhkam* (fundamental or basic) and *mutashabih* (vague); *aam* (general) and *khass* (specific); and *naasikh* (abrogating) and *mansukh* (abrogated). It is for this reason that Allah did not leave the Muslims without a guide to the proper interpretation thereof. Allah says in the Holy Qur'an,

"Whoever obeys the Prophet has obeyed Allah,"¹⁸

and

"Your Companion (Muhammad) errs not, nor is he led astray, nor does he speak of his own inclination."¹⁹

Similarly, the Prophet said, "By Allah, I have commanded and admonished and prohibited things, and just like the Qur'an, you have to follow what I say,"²⁰ and "Verily, I have been given the Qur'an and something equivalent to it [the hadith]."²¹ One of his final injunctions to the Muslims was, "I am leaving among you the Book of Allah and my family (*itrati*);" "*itrati*," also refers to the hadith of the Prophet and his family.

In a hadith narrated in the Sunni books, the Messenger of Allah prophesized:

It is imminent that a man will narrate from me while leaning on his couch and then he will say, 'Between us and between you is the Book of Allah. When we find something permissible in it, we will follow it, and when we find something impermissible in it, we will refrain from it.'²²

'Umar continued the hadith precedent of Abu Bakr during his caliphate. However, at one point, he

consulted the companions of the Prophet about recording hadith and they encouraged him to do so. After considering the matter for a month, 'Umar then declared:

My intention was to record hadith but then I realized that some people (nations) before you kept writing down the sayings of their prophets, and kept reading them; as a result, they forgot the book of Allah (their scriptures). I fear that the same will happen if I order you to document the sayings of the Prophet, or if I do it myself. I do not want to make the Book of Allah a victim here because of the hadith; nothing has precedence over the Book of Allah. 23

He then wrote to the Ansar, "Whoever has anything should erase it."²⁴ Even afterwards 'Umar decreed, "These (the hadith of the Prophet) are just like the Jewish scripts (*mushnat*), and they must be burnt."²⁵ He then gathered all of the hadith written on leather, tablets, and pieces of wood and ordered them to be burnt.²⁶

However, it is important to note that the People of the Book (Jews and Christians) did not neglect their scriptures (Holy Revelations) in favor of the sayings of their prophets [hadith]. Their problem was not that they were overly fastidious in transcribing the sayings of their prophets. Instead, they neglected almost all of the traditions of their prophets, as well as the commands of their Divinely sent books (i.e. the Tawrah). They also refused to follow the successors that their prophets named, such as Asif Ibn Barkhiyah, the successor of Prophet Sulayman, and Yushaa, the successor of Prophet Musa.

As agreed by both schools of thought, the Messenger of Allah forewarned that the Muslims would follow the pattern of previous generations when he said, "You will follow the footsteps and tradition of the nations before you step by step."²⁷ Since the first three caliphs enforced the policy of not recording the sayings, fabricators such as Ka'ab al-Ahbar²⁸ and Tamim Ibn Aus al-Dari²⁹ flourished and spread thousands of false hadith, forever affecting Islam.

Furthermore, fearing that they would spread the sayings of the Prophet outside Madinah, the second caliph summoned many of the prominent companions, such as Abdullah Ibn Hudaafah, Ibn Masud,³⁰ Abu Dardah,³¹ Abu Dharr al-Ghifari,³² and Uqbaah Ibn Aamir to Madinah and rebuked them saying, "What is it that you have done! You spread the hadith of the Prophet in other places. You have to stay here (in Madinah) and you will not depart or separate from me as long as I live." Thus, they were confined to Madinah until 'Umar was assassinated.³³

Al-Shibi says that the Muhajireen from the Quraysh despised 'Umar for confining them to Madinah, so that they would not spread the hadith elsewhere. The situation reached to a point that some of the men would ask permission to accompany the *ghazw* (military dispatch) and 'Umar would tell them, "No, you had your share with the Prophet, and you had enough reward for that, so today it is better for you that you do not see the world and for the world not to see you either."³⁴

In contrast, others who were not known for their honesty in conveying the hadith of the Prophet, such as al-Waleed Ibn Uqbah, Hanbal Ibn Abu Sufyan, and Abdullah Ibn Abi Sarh were permitted to travel

wherever they wanted, even to the conquered lands of Iraq and Persia. However, those who were known for their integrity in transmitting the hadith of the Prophet were forced to remain behind.

Unlike Abu Bakr who expressed fear that the hadith he possessed were not authentic, 'Umar argued that the hadith should be destroyed because the people might follow them instead of the Qur'an or that they might confuse them with the Qur'an. However, the true hadith hardly led people away from the Qur'an. In fact, the hadith contain an explanation of the Qur'an itself and the more people know about the hadith, the more one would heed to the Qur'an. Allah assigned the Prophet to ***“make clear to humankind what has been sent down to them,”***³⁵ hence the hadith are extremely vital to understanding the Qur'an.

Similarly, the fear that people might mix up the Qur'an and the hadith is also difficult to understand, since even the average modern reader can readily distinguish between the text of the Qur'an and that of a hadith. The style of the Qur'an is inimitable among human beings and the Qur'an itself says that it is a miracle, and challenges human beings to produce one verse like it – a challenge that the Prophet never issued for his hadith. Such a fear, were it genuine, would imply a severe lack of confidence in the reasoning abilities of the *sahabahs* (companions) who had the additional advantage of hearing the Prophet himself speak.

Muslim analysts believe that the real reason why there was a calculated ploy to prevent the hadith from being recorded was that there were innumerable hadith about the virtues of the household of the Prophet and their right to the leadership after the Holy Prophet's death. Had these sayings circulated in written form amongst the predominant *sahih* books then they would have undermined the political legitimacy of the first three caliphs.

As a result, the sad reality developed that, although, the hadith are second only to the Qur'an in Islamic legislation, many authentic sayings of Prophet Muhammad were lost, while many others were forged.

The situation degenerated to the level where Mu'awiyah Ibn Abu Sufyan ordered Kab al-Ahbar to sit in the mosque and invent hadith to read to the people, and no one could disprove what he said because no written sources existed among those masses. It was not until the time of the Umayyah caliph, 'Umar Ibn Abd al-Aziz (99 ah) that Muslims were allowed, for a short but unsuccessful period, to record the hadith.³⁶

Anyone who tried to compile the hadith of the Prophet faced severe punishment and this state of affair lasted for more than a century – spanning from the periods of the first four³⁷ caliphs thru to the Bani Umayyah dynasty and until the time of Abu Ja'far al-Mansur of the Abbasid dynasty. Ironically, Mu'awiyah told the people, “Narrate less from the Prophet, and if you want to mention a hadith from him, say what used to be said about him during the time of 'Umar.”³⁸

In reality, the policy of not writing hadith took form right before the death of the Prophet when 'Umar prevented the Prophet from writing his will while the Messenger was on his deathbed, as recorded in prominent Sunni sources, 'Umar proclaimed that, “The Book of Allah is enough for us.”³⁹

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1. Ibn Sa'd, Al-Tabaqat al-Kubra, 3:2 91
 2. Holy Qur'an, 96:4
 3. Holy Qur'an, 68: 1
 4. Ibn Sa'd, Al-Tabaqat al-Kubra, 2:22
 5. Sunan al-Tirmidhi, 4: 146, hadith 2805
 6. Mustadrak al-Hakim, 1: 106
 7. Sunan al-Tirmidhi, 4: 145, hadith 2804
 8. Al-Mustadrak ala al-Sahihayn, I 5: 106; Musnad Ahmad, 2: 162; Jami Bayan al-Ilm, 1: 71
 9. Kanz al-Ummal, 5: 237, hadith 4845
 10. Rashid Ridha, Tafseer al-Manar, 10: 766
 11. Ibn Uday, Taqid al-Ilm, 73; Al-Kamil, 1: 36
 12. Sahih al-Muslim, 5: 108; Sunan Ibn Majah, 1: 85; Al-Tirmidhi, 2: 152; Mustadrak al-Hakim, 3: 174, and others
 13. Kanz al-Ummal, 10: 158, hadith 28817
 14. Kanz al-Ummal, 10: 158, hadith 28818, and others
 15. Despite being forbidden from doing so, the followers of Ahlul Bayt continued to record the hadith.
 16. Tadhkirat al-Huffaz, 1: 5; Hujjiyat al-Sunnah, p. 394
 17. Al-Nawawi; Sharh Sahih al-Muslim, 17-18; Musnad Ahmad 3: 12
 18. Holy Qur'an, 4: 80
 19. Holy Qur'an, 53: 2-4
 20. Ibn Hazm, Al-Ahkam, 1: 159
 21. Musnad Ahmad, 4: 131
 22. Musnad Ahmad, 4: 132; Sunan Ibn Majah, 1: 6, hadith 12; Sunan Abu Dawood, 4: 200, hadith 4604; Sunan al-Bayhaqi, 9: 331
 23. Kanzl Ummal, 10, hadith 29474
 24. Taqid al-Ilm, 49; Hujjiyat al-Sunnah, 3: 95
 25. Ibn Sa'd, Tabaqat al-Kubra, 1: 140
 26. Kanz al-Ummal, 5: 239
 27. Al-Mu'jam al-Kabeer, 7: 281; Tafseer al-Qurtubi, 7: 273
 28. His full name is Ka'ab Ibn Mate'ah al-Himyari, a prominent Jewish rabbi from Yemen. He accepted Islam during the reign of 'Umar Ibn al-Khattab and migrated from Yemen to Syria. Mu'awiyah favored him and made him one of his important right hand aids and advisors. He is one of the main sources of the Israelite folklore that infected the Islamic tradition and was known for his lies. He died during the reign of 'Uthman in 32 ah.
 29. Tamim Ibn Aus al-Dari was a prominent Christian monk in Palestine. He embraced Islam in 9 ah. He was the first person to introduce story telling in the mosque during the reign of 'Umar al-Khattab and it was only during Imam 'Ali's reign that he put an end to it. He infiltrated Islamic tradition with unsubstantiated Israelite stories and died in the year 40 ah.
 30. Mustadrak al-Hakim, 1: 110; Tarikh Abu Zarah, 270
 31. Ibid
 32. Ibid
 33. Kanz al-Ummal, 10, hadith 29479
 34. Ibn al-Atheer, Al-Kamil fi al-Tarikh, 3: 180-181
 35. Holy Qur'an, 16: 44
 36. The writing of the hadith was short-lived because the reign of 'Umar Ibn Abd al-Aziz lasted for only two years.
 37. Although Imam 'Ali removed the ban on writing the hadith; nonetheless, it was not enough time to take full effect because his reign lasted for only four years and nine months.
 38. Kanz al-Ummal, 10: 291; Ibn Abil Hadid, Sharh Nahjul-Balaghah, 1: 360; Tarikh Abi Zaah, p. 270
 39. Sahih al-Bukhari; Bab Marad al-Nabi; Kitab al-Marda wa al-Tib, 7: 9

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