

12. Hadith Al-Tafdhil, Investigating Its Authenticity

Shaykh Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728 H) states:

لا نسلم أن علياً أفضل أهل زمانه بل خير هذه الأمة بعد نبيها أبو بكر ثم عمر
كما ثبت ذلك عن علي وغيره

We do not agree that 'Ali was the overall best of his time. Rather, the best of this Ummah after its Prophet are Abu Bakr, then 'Umar, as is authentically narrated from 'Ali and others.¹

It is true that our Sunni brothers consider Abu Bakr to be the best of our Ummah, followed only by 'Umar. However, during the lifetime of the Messenger of Allah, *sallallahu 'alaihi wa alihi*, it was a different story entirely. There is irrefutable evidence in the Sunni books establishing that the Sahabah used to consider Amir al-Muminin, *'alaihi al-salam*, to be their best during the lifetime of the Messenger. Imam Ahmad (d. 241 H) presents one of such proofs:

حدثنا عبد الله قال حدثني أبي قثنا محمد بن جعفر نا شعبة عن أبي إسحاق عن
عبد الرحمن بن يزيد عن علقمة عن عبد الله قال : كنا نتحدث ان أفضل أهل
المدينة علي بن أبي طالب

'Abd Allah (b. Ahmad b. Hanbal) – my father (Ahmad b. Hanbal) – Muhammad b. Ja'far – Shu'bah – Abu Ishaq – 'Abd al-Rahman b. Yazid – 'Alqamah – 'Abd Allah (b. Mas'ud):

“We used to say that **the overall best** of the people of Madinah was 'Ali b. Abi Talib.”²

“We” (in the *hadith*)³ apparently refers to the Sahabah generally, and more specifically to the most senior of them living in Madinah. Ibn Mas’ud was obviously making a reference to a past which was then different from the present. This was why he said “we USED TO”. In other words, at that point in time when he was making his statement, things had become different. People were now giving ‘Ali’s place to another person. Ibn Mas’ud was, no doubt, speaking about the time of the Prophet. All the most senior Sahabah and their neighbours were living in Madinah with the Messenger of Allah. The phrase “people of Madinah” originally referred to them (excluding only the Prophet, of course).⁴ These, needless to say, included Abu Bakr, ‘Umar and ‘Uthman.

So, is the above report authentic? Al-Hafiz (d. 852 H) says about the first narrator:

عبد الله بن أحمد بن محمد بن حنبل الشيباني أبو عبد الرحمن ولد الإمام ثقة

‘Abd Allah b. Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Hanbal al-Shaybani, Abu ‘Abd al-Rahman: son of the Imam, **thiqah (trustworthy)**.⁵

What about his father? Al-Hafiz answers:

أحمد بن محمد بن حنبل بن هلال بن أسد الشيباني المروزي نزيل بغداد أبو
عبد الله أحد الأئمة ثقة حافظ فقيه حجة

Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Hanbal b. Hilal b. Asad al-Shaybani al-Maruzi, a Baghdad resident, Abu ‘Abd Allah: One of the Imams, **thiqah (trustworthy)**, *hafiz*, jurist, *hujjah* (an authority).⁶

Al-Hafiz also has these comments about the third narrator:

محمد بن جعفر الهذلي البصري المعروف بغندر ثقة صحيح الكتاب إلا أن فيه
غفلة

Muhammad b. Ja’far al-Hazali al-Basri, better known as Ghandar: **Thiqah (trustworthy)**, *sahih al-kitab* (i.e. *ahadith* from his books are *sahih*) except that there was some negligence in him.⁷

Whatever negligence he had does not affect his *ahadith* from Shu’bah at all. He used to accurately record the latter’s reports. So, he narrated them from his books with perfect precision. Al-Hafiz provides further information in this respect:

وقال ابن مهدي كنا نستفيد من كتب غندر في شعبة وكان وكيع يسميه الصحيح الكتاب. وقال أبو حاتم عن محمد بن أبان البلخي قال ابن مهدي غندر أثبت في شعبة مني وقال ابن المبارك إذا اختلف الناس في حديث شعبة فكتاب غندر حكم بينهم وقال ابن أبي حاتم سألت أبي عن غندر فقال كان صدوقا وكان مؤدبا وفي حديث شعبة ثقة

Ibn Mahdi said: “We used to benefit from the books of Ghandar on Shu’bah. Waki’ named him *sahih al-kitab*.” Abu Hatim narrated from Muhammad b. Aban al-Balakhi that Ibn Mahdi said: “Ghandar is more accurate than me as far as Shu’bah is concerned.” Ibn al-Mubarak said, “**When the people disagree about the *hadith* of Shu’bah, the book of Ghandar used to judge between them.**” Ibn Abi Hatim said: “I asked my father about Ghandar and he replied, ‘He was *saduq* (very truthful), and was a teacher and **in the *hadith* of Shu’bah, he is *thiqah* (trustworthy).**”⁸

The fourth narrator, Shu’bah, is a pillar of Sunni *ahadith*. Al-Hafiz gives the catch-phrases about him:

شعبة بن الحجاج بن الورد العتكي مولاهم أبو بسطام الواسطي ثم البصري ثقة حافظ متقن كان الثوري يقول هو أمير المؤمنين في الحديث

Shu’bah b. al-Hajjaj b. al-Ward al-‘Atki, their freed slave, Abu Busāam al-Wasīi, al-Basri: ***Thiqah* (trustworthy), hafiz, extremely precise.** Al-Thawri used to say: “**He was the *amir al-muminin* (the supreme leader) in *al-Hadith*.**”⁹

Abu Ishaq al-Sabi’i is the fifth narrator, and al-Hafiz has this to say about him:

عمرو بن عبد الله بن عبيد أبو إسحاق السبيعي بفتح المهملة وكسر الموحدة ثقة مكثر عابد من الثالثة اختلط بأخرة

‘Amr b. ‘Abd Allah b. ‘Ubayd Abu Ishaq al-Sabi’i: ***Thiqah* (trustworthy)**; narrated a lot (of *ahadith*), a great worshipper (of Allah), from the third (ʿ*abaqat*). He became confused (in his narrations) during the end part of his lifetime.¹⁰

Of course, Shu’bah heard from him before the memory loss. ‘Allamah al-Albani (d. 1420 H) explains:

وتابعهم سفيان الثوري وشعبة عن أبي إسحاق، ولكنهما لم يذكرنا النزول،

وروايتهما أصح، لأنهما سمعا منه قبل الاختلاط

Sufyan al-Thawri **and** **Shu’bah** also narrated from Abu Ishaq, although both did not mention the Descent. The reports of both of them (from Abu Ishaq) are more authentic, **because they both heard from him BEFORE he became confused.** 11

Another relevant point is that Abu Ishaq is a *mudalis* and has, on the surface, narrated the report of Ibn Mas’ud above is an ‘*an-‘an* form from ‘Abd al-Rahman b. Yazid. However, the *tadlis* does NOT, in reality, affect the ‘*an-‘an* reports of Abu Ishaq – among others – as long as it is Shu’bah narrating from him. Allamah al-Albani states further:

قال الترمذي: " حديث حسن صحيح، رواه الثوري وشعبة عن أبي إسحاق "

قلت: وهو كما قال، وهما قد رويَا عنه قبل اختلاطه، وشعبة لا يروي عنه إلا ما صرح فيه بالتحديث كما هو مذكور في ترجمته، فبروايته عنه أمنا شبهة تدليسه.

Al-Tirmidhi said: “A *hasan sahih hadith*, al-Thawri and Shu’bah narrated it from (‘*an*) Abu Ishaq.”

I say: It is (truly *hasan sahih*) as he (al-Tirmidhi) has stated, and both of them (i.e. al-Thawri and Shu’bah) narrated from him (i.e. Abu Ishaq) before his confusion. **As for Shu’bah, he never narrated anything from him (i.e. Abu Ishaq) except what he (Abu Ishaq) explicitly stated to have directly heard from the person he is narrating from (i.e. *tahdith*),** as stated in his *tarjamah* (biography). **Due to his (Shu’bah’s) narration from him (i.e. Abu Ishaq), the problem of his *tadlis* is removed.** 12

In a clearer word, whenever Shu’bah narrates from Abu Ishaq (as in this case of Ibn Mas’ud’s *hadith*), all the problems associated with the latter’s reports are removed. The former narrated from him before his confusion in his *ahadith*, and never transmitted any *tadlis*-infested reports from him. So, whenever Shu’bah narrates an ‘*an-‘an* report from Abu Ishaq, there actually is *tahdith* by the latter from his Shaykh. The ‘*an-‘an* form is only Shu’bah’s convenience style. No wonder, Imam al-Bukhari (d. 256 H) includes this *sanad* in his *Sahih*:

حدثنا سليمان بن حرب حدثنا شعبة عن أبي إسحاق عن عبد الرحمن بن يزيد

Sulayman b. Harb – **Shu’bah** – **Abu Ishaq** – ‘**Abd al-Rahman b. Yazid**. 13

This is an ‘*an-‘an* report by Abu Ishaq from ‘Abd al-Rahman b. Yazid (the same Shaykh as in the *athar* of Ibn Mas’ud). Nevertheless, Imam al-Bukhari considers the chain to be *sahih*.

Imam Ahmad b. Hanbal has also documented a similar ‘*an-‘an* chain:

حدثنا عبد الله حدثني أبي قال حدثنا يزيد قال أنا شعبة عن أبي إسحاق عن أبي
ميسرة

‘Abd Allah (b. Ahmad b. Hanbal) – my father (Ahmad b. Hanbal) – Yazid – **Shu’bah** – **Abu Ishaq** – Abu Maysarah. 14

Al-Arnau⁹ comments:

إسناده صحيح على شرط الشيخين

Its chain is *sahih* upon the standard of the two Shaykhs. 15

‘Allamah al-Albani too authenticates yet another ‘*an-‘an* chain of Abu Ishaq:

إسناده: حدثنا حفص بن عمر: ثنا شعبة عن أبي إسحاق عن الأسود عن عبد
الله.

قلت: وهذا إسناده صحيح على شرط البخاري

Its chain: Hafs b. ‘Umar – **Shu’bah** – **Abu Ishaq** – al-Aswad – ‘Abd Allah.

I say: **This chain is *sahih*** upon the standard of al-Bukhari. 16

Imam Abu Ya’la (d. 307 H) also documents an ‘*an-‘an* chain by Abu Ishaq, from ‘Abd al-Rahman b.

Yazid, like al-Bukhari:

حدثنا إسحاق حدثنا عبد الصمد حدثنا شعبة عن أبي إسحاق عن عبد الرحمن
بن يزيد عن الأسود

Ishaq – ‘Abd al-Samad – **Shu’bah** – **Abu Ishaq** – ‘Abd al-Rahman b. Yazid – al-Aswad¹⁷

Shaykh Dr. Asad gives this verdict:

إسناده صحيح

Its chain is *sahih*¹⁸

Let us now move to the sixth narrator in the *sanad* of Ibn Mas’ud’s *athar*: ‘Abd al-Rahman b. Yazid. The status of ‘Abd al-Rahman as a *thiqah* (trustworthy) narrator of *Sahih al-Bukhari* is already well-known. Nonetheless, we are pleased to present this further confirmation by al-Hafiz:

عبد الرحمن بن يزيد بن قيس النخعي أبو بكر الكوفي ثقة

‘Abd al-Rahman b. Yazid b. Qays al-Nakha’i, Abu Bakr al-Kufi: **Thiqah (trustworthy)**.¹⁹

Finally, concerning the seventh and last narrator (‘Alqamah), al-Hafiz al-‘Asqalani proclaims with full strength:

علقمة بن قيس بن عبد الله النخعي الكوفي ثقة ثبت فقيه عابد

‘Alqamah b. Qays b. ‘Abd Allah al-Nakha’i al-Kufi: **Thiqah (trustworthy)**, *thabt* (accurate), *faqih* (a jurist), *‘abidun* (a great worshipper of Allah).²⁰

With this, it is absolutely clear and undeniable that Ibn Mas’ud’s report that the Sahabah used to consider ‘Ali as the overall best among them has an impeccably *sahih* chain. All the narrators are *thiqah*, and the chain is fully and perfectly connected.

Even then, the same *athar* has been recorded with a second *sahih* chain in that same *Fadhail al-*

Sahabah:

حدثنا عبد الله قال حدثني جدي قتنا أبو قطن قتنا شعبة عن أبي إسحاق عن
عبد الله بن يزيد عن علقمة عن عبد الله وهو بن مسعود قال : كنا نتحدث ان
أفضل أهل المدينة علي بن أبي طالب

‘Abd Allah (b. Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz al-Baghwi) – **my grandfather** (Ahmad b. Muni’ al-Baghwi) –
Abu Qaṣān – Shu’bah – Abu Ishaq – ‘Abd Allah b. Yazid – ‘Alqamah – ‘Abd Allah b. Mas’ud:

“We used to say that **the overall best** of the people of Madinah was ‘Ali b. Abi Talib.”²¹

We already know the status of Shu’bah, Abu Ishaq and Alqamah. So, let’s find out about these new names.

This is al-Hafiz’s verdict on the first narrator of this new *sanad*:

عبد الله بن محمد بن عبد العزيز أبو القاسم البغوي الحافظ الصدوق مسند
عصره.... قلت وقد وثقه الدارقطني والخطيب وغيرهما قال الخطيب كان ثقة
ثبتا كثيرا فهما عارفا قلت الرجل ثقة مطلقا

‘Abd Allah b. Muhammad b. ‘Abd al-‘Aziz, Abu al-Qasim al-Baghwi: *Al-hafiz*, ***al-saduq*** (the extremely truthful), the top scholar of his time.... I (al-‘Asqalani) say: **He has been declared *thiqah* (trustworthy) by al-Daraqutni, al-Khatib and others.** Al-Khatib said, “He was *thiqah* (trustworthy), accurate, and narrated a lot (of *ahadith*)” I (al-‘Asqalani) say: **The man is absolutely *thiqah* (trustworthy).**²²

Concerning his grandfather, al-Hafiz further submits:

أحمد بن منيع بن عبد الرحمن أبو جعفر البغوي ثقة حافظ

Ahmad b. Muni’ b. ‘Abd al-Rahman, Abu Ja’far al-Baghwi....: ***Thiqah* (trustworthy), *hafiz*.**²³

Abu Qaṣān too is *thiqah* (trustworthy), as confirmed by al-Hafiz:

عمرو بن الهيثم بن قطن ... أبو قطن البصري ثقة

‘Amr b. al-Haytham b. Qaṭan ... Abu Qaṭan al-Basri: **Thiqah** (trustworthy).²⁴

Of course, ‘Abd Allah b. Yazid was a junior Sahabi, and therefore needed no investigation. He is automatically *thiqah* (trustworthy). Al-Hafiz states:

عبد الله بن يزيد بن زيد بن حصين الأنصاري الخطمي بفتح المعجمة وسكون
المهمله صحابي صغير ولي الكوفة لابن الزبير.

‘Abd Allah b. Yazid b. Zayd b. Husayn al-Ansari al-Khāṣmi: **a junior Sahabi**. He was the *wali* (ruler) of Kufah for Ibn al-Zubayr.²⁵

So, we have a second impeccable *sanad* for the *hadith*.

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1. Abu al-‘Abbas Ahmad b. ‘Abd al-Halim b. Taymiyyah al-Harrani, Minhaj al-Sunnah al-Nabawiyyah (Muasassat Qurtubah; 1st edition, 1406 H) [annotator: Dr. Muhammad Rashad Salim], vol. 6, p. 475
 2. Abu ‘Abd Allah Ahmad b. Hanbal al-Shaybani, Fadhail al-Ṣahabah (Beirut: Muasassat al-Risalah; 1403 H) [annotator: Dr. Wasiyullah Muhammad ‘Abbas], vol. 2, p. 604, # 1033
 3. We are calling it a *hadith*, rather than an *athar*, because it lays down a consensus of the Ṣahabah, which they had during the lifetime of the Prophet of Allah. It is our firm belief that they could not have formed such a consensus except on the basis of what they had learnt from the Messenger.
 4. See Qur’an 9:101 and 9:120
 5. Ahmad b. ‘Ali b. Hajar al-‘Asqalani, Taqrib al-Tahdhib (Beirut: Dar al-Maktabah al-‘Ilmiyyah; 2nd edition, 1415 H) [annotator: Mustafa ‘Abd al-Qadir ‘Ata], vol. 1, p. 477, # 3216
 6. Ibid, vol. 1, p. 44, # 96
 7. Ibid, vol. 2, p. 63, # 5805
 8. Shihab al-Din Ahmad b. ‘Ali b. Hajar al-‘Asqalani, Tahdhib al-Tahdhib (Dar al-Fikr; 1st edition, 1404 H), vol. 9, p. 85, # 129
 9. Ahmad b. ‘Ali b. Hajar al-‘Asqalani, Taqrib al-Tahdhib (Beirut: Dar al-Maktabah al-‘Ilmiyyah; 2nd edition, 1415 H) [annotator: Mustafa ‘Abd al-Qadir ‘Ata], vol. 1, p. 418, # 2798
 10. Ibid, vol. 1, p. 739, # 5081
 11. Abu ‘Abd al-Rahman Muhammad Nasir al-Din b. al-Hajj Nuh b. Tajati b. ‘Adam al-Ashqudri al-Albani, Ṣahih Abi Dawud (Kuwait: Muasassat al-Gharas li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi’; 1st edition, 1423 H), vol. 7, p. 410, # 2387
 12. Abu ‘Abd al-Rahman Muhammad Nasir al-Din b. al-Hajj Nuh b. Tajati b. ‘Adam al-Ashqudri al-Albani, Silsilah al-Ahadiith al-Ṣahihah wa Shayhun min Fiqhiyah wa Fawaidihah (Riyadh: Maktabah al-Ma’arif li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi’; 1st edition, 1415 H), vol. 5, p. 481, # 2366
 13. Abu ‘Abd Allah Muhammad b. Isma’il b. Ibrahim b. Mughirah al-Bukhari al-J’ufi, al-Jami’ al-Ṣahih al-Mukhtasar (Beirut: Dar Ibn Kathir; 3rd edition, 1407 H) [annotator: Dr. Mustafa Dib al-Bagha], vol. 3, p. 1373, # 3551
 14. Abu ‘Abd Allah Ahmad b. Hanbal al-Shaybani, Musnad (Cairo: Muasassat Qurtubah) [annotator: Shu’ayb al-Arnaut], vol. 6, p. 182, # 25532

15. Ibid
16. Abu ‘Abd al-Rahman Muhammad Nasir al-Din b. al-Hajj Nuh b. Tajati b. ‘Adam al-Ashqudri al-Albani, ‘Ishahih Abi Dawud (Kuwait: Muasassat al-Gharas li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi’; 1st edition, 1423 H), vol. 5, p. 150, # 1267
17. Abu Ya’la Ahmad b. ‘Ali b. Muthanna al-Mawsili al-Tamimi, Musnad (Damascus: Dar al-Mamun li al-Turath; 1st edition, 1404 H) [annotator: Dr. Husayn Salim Asad], vol. 8, p. 35, # 4541
18. Ibid
19. Ahmad b. ‘Ali b. Hajar al-‘Asqalani, Taqrib al-Tahdhib (Beirut: Dar al-Maktabah al-‘Ilmiyyah; 2nd edition, 1415 H) [annotator: Mustafa ‘Abd al-Qadir ‘Ata], vol. 1, p. 596, # 4057
20. Ibid, vol. 1, p. 687, # 4697
21. Abu ‘Abd Allah Ahmad b. Hanbal al-Shaybani, Fadhail al-Sahabah (Beirut: Muasassat al-Risalah; 1403 H) [annotator: Dr. Wasiyullah Muhammad ‘Abbas], vol. 2, p. 646, # 1097
22. Shihab al-Din Abu al-Fadhl Ahmad b. ‘Ali b. Hajar al-‘Asqalani, Lisan al-Mizan (Beirut: Mansurat Muasassat al-A’lami li al-Matbu’at; 2nd edition, 1390 H), vol. 3, pp. 338–339, # 1339
23. Ahmad b. ‘Ali b. Hajar al-‘Asqalani, Taqrib al-Tahdhib (Beirut: Dar al-Maktabah al-‘Ilmiyyah; 2nd edition, 1415 H) [annotator: Mustafa ‘Abd al-Qadir ‘Ata], vol. 1, p. 47, # 114
24. Ibid, vol. 1, p. 748, # 5146
25. Ibid, vol. 1, p. 547, # 3715

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