ĦADĪTH ON THE EXCELLENCE OF AL-FĀTIĦAH; THE EXAMINATION OF ITS CHAIN OF TRANSMISSION

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Abstract
Hadīth, as commonly defined by hadīth scholars (al-muhāddithūn), is a record of the Prophet’s sayings, deeds and tacit approval. Even it may include the description of the Prophet’s features and physical appearance. Hadīth contains details of faith and doctrine, ritual issues, ethics and many others which are related with the contents of the Quran and on the Quranic verses as well. This article is aimed at assessing the validity of a hadīth on the excellence of al-Fātihah, the opening chapter of the Quran. In doing so, this article presents the chain of transmission of the hadīth by assessing the details of all persons involved in relating the hadīth. It is found the hadīth assessed is reliable and may be relevant for Muslims to use as a source for their religious activities.

Keywords
hadīth, excellence, al-Fātihah, opening chapter, the Quran

Abstrak:

Kata Kunci
hadis, keutamaan, al-Fatihah, surah, al-Qur’an
I. Introduction

Next to the Qur’an itself, the most important Islamic textual source is the Ḥadīth. A hadith may be a record of the Prophet’s actual words or a report on his deeds and tacit approvals, transmitted by one of his trusted Companions, who in turn related it to someone of the next generation. The Companions, known as sahābah, played a key role in preserving the Prophetic traditions. A hadith may treat of ritual issues, discuss details of faith and doctrine, describe the Prophet’s behavior or simply explain the excellent merit of the Qur’an’s chapters (sūrah) or verses (āyah). To the chain of transmitters, or isnād, every generation added new members, until long lines of authorities developed, each link connected with the previous one in a well-documented relationship.

Many western scholars do not consider the hadith a reliable source. They have taken a critical approach to the study of hadith and have questioned whether or not the Prophet and his Companions truly transmitted what is related on their authority. The literature on this subject is extensive and has its origin in the works of Ignaz Goldziher. In his Muhammedanische Studien or Muslim Studies, Goldziher maintained that the chains of transmission of hadith attributed to the Prophet were easily completed by “simply adding without much scruple a few names at random.” Joseph Schacht in fact later arrived at a similar conclusion in his The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence, where he asserts that most traditions were originally the products of second-century scholarship. He was convinced that the chains of transmission had undergone a kind of “projecting backwards”, “from the original creator of the tradition back to higher authorities.”

Uri Rubin, on the other hand, argues that this notion cannot be applied to an investigation of the chain of transmission or isnād. Although he does not say whether or not he believes the traditions to be authentic, he does not agree with Goldziher’s and Schacht’s thesis regarding the tradition. He stated:

‘…there is no evidence that the name of the Prophet was merely added—to use Goldziher’s terminology—to an already existing Companion isnād. The name of the Prophet seems rather to have been part of the hardcore of the isnād in which it occurs. Likewise, there is no evidence that the Companion’s name was merely added to an already existing Successor isnād…Even if one could find an incompletiveersions in which the Companion is missing, the equally logical possibility would always remain that his name was omitted from the “perfect” isnād, rather than added to the “imperfect” isnād’

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3 Annemarie Schimmel, And Muhammad is His Messenger, p. 26.
Rubin therefore argues against Schacht’s proposal, insisting that there is no reason to discard “the possibility of traditions with Prophetic and Companion isnāds were put into circulation…during the first century A.H.”

Besides, Muslims of early times, such as the Companions and the Successors, did not pay more attention to the chain of hadith transmission. Criticism of the transmitters of hadith was not common at that time. This was because the Companions could not lie easily against the Prophet. However, in the period when political and theoretical factions like the Shi‘ah, Khawārizj and Mu ‘tazilah were founded, it seems, every faction tried to support and to maintain its views by using the sayings of the Prophet. This resulted in the emergence of spurious hadith which then caused the attention of hadith scholars who, in turn, had inherited a great authenticating remark in order to prove the authenticity of a sanad. Among those scholars were Shu‘bah (d. 160 A.H.), ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Mubārak (d. 181 A.H.), ‘Abd al-Rahmān b. Mahdī, Bahz b. Asad (d. 197 A.H.) and Shāfi‘i (d. 204 A.H.).

Many hadiths refer to Sūrat al- Fātiḥah, which is fundamental to the Qur‘ān and to which Muslims refer daily in both their religious and social life. It is basic to the performance of ritual prayer. Often mentioned for its merits, it is the greatest sūrah in the Qur‘ān. It has

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10 Suhaib Hasan Abdul Ghaffar, Criticism of Hadith, p. 90-1.
11 It was reported that he was asked by Waki‘ when a reporter (transmitter) should be abandoned. He replied: “When he happens to report from well known people what is not recognized even by them.” See Suhaib Hasan Abdul Ghaffar, Criticism of Hadith, p. 92.
12 His opinion about a trustworthy person is recorded by Wālid b. Muslim who said: “We [myself, Ibn al-Mubārak, and Marwān al-Fazārī] were sitting beside Sufyān al-Thawrī and Sa‘īd b. Sālim al-Qaddāh when Sufyān b. ‘Uyyānah turned up. We discussed who is reliable [‘ādil] in Islam. We looked to Sufyān al-Thawrī, but ‘Abd Allāh b. al-Mubārak hastened to say: “The one who is liked by the learned people to the extent that they record his hadith is reliable and eligible to give witness.” On hearing this, Sufyān al-Thawrī smiled and said: “By Allāh, Abū ‘Abd al-Rahmān has spoken truly.” See Suhaib Hasan Abdul Ghaffar, Criticism of Hadith, p. 92.
13 He classifies the reporters into three groups. According to Abu Mūsa he said: “Take it from me, people are of three kinds: A person who is ḥāfīẓ [good memorizer or preserver] and Mutqīn [preserver with utmost care]. No one differs about such a person. The other who speculates [wahima] but most of his hadith is saḥīh. His ahādīth [plural of hadith] should not be forsaken. If such a person is deserted, a great portion of hadith will be wasted. The third one, who speculates and most of his hadith, has nothing but speculation. Such a man should be deserted completely.” See Suhaib Hasan Abdul Ghaffar, Criticism of Hadith, p. 92.
14 Bahz b. Asad, comparing a reporter with the claimant of a debt, argues in this way: “If a man owes ten dirhams to another person who refuses to pay, the owner will not be able to take back his money until after producing two reliable witnesses. So the Din of Allāh deserves more to be taken from reliable persons. He used to say as well: Do not accept hadiths from someone who does not say ‘haddathan?’ See Suhaib Hasan Abdul Ghaffar, Criticism of Hadith, p. 92.
15 He was a well-known jurisconsult and traditionist. About an unknown reporter who committed too many mistakes, he remarked: “The one who reports from a liar, is not free from lies himself. A well-known person should be accepted as a reporter. Allāh does not oblige any person to take his Din from an unknown person. A traditionist known for many mistakes without having a true source to which he may refer back would not be accepted, like the witness whose testimony is rejected because of his many errors in the testimony itself.” See Suhaib Hasan Abdul Ghaffar, Criticism of Hadith, p. 93.
16 A case in point is: Abū Hurayrah reported the Apostle of Allāh (may peace be upon him) as saying: If anyone observe a prayer in which he does not recite Unm al-Qur‘ān (sūrat al-Fātihah), it is incomplete, it is incomplete, it is incomplete and deficient…[‘al-Hadīth]. See Sulaymān b. Ash‘ath Abū Dawūd al-Sijistānī al-Azadi, Sunan Abī Dawūd, trans. Ahmad Ḥasan (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1988), vol. 1, p. 209.
attracted even as medicine, in places like Indonesia, where it is recited and memorized more than any other sūrahs. In view of this, a question emerges whether or not a sūrah or more can be made as exception. However, this article will not be concerned with this question as a whole; it merely examines the validity of the chain of ḥadīth transmission regarding the excellence of sūrat al-Фāṭihah used, in particular, to justify Muslims’ special interest in this sūrah.

In his Ḍaḍā’īl al-Qur’ān, al-Nasā’ī (d. 303 A.H.) includes at least five ḥadīths regarding the excellence of sūrat al-Фāṭihah. I will examine only one of them, i.e., the ḥadīth which contains the Prophet’s statement that the Fāṭihah is the greatest sūrah in the Qur’ān.

II. Examination on Ḥadīth of the Excellence of Sūrat al-Фāṭihah.


Matn (text): The Messenger of Allah passed by me when I was praying. He then called me but I did not come. I prayed and then I went to him. He asked: “What prevented you for coming to me?” I replied: “I was praying.” He said: “Didn’t Allah say ‘O you who believe, respond to Allāh and His Messenger…”” He said: ”I will teach you the greatest sūrah in the Qur’ān, before I leave the mosque.” When he intended to leave (the mosque) I reminded him. He then said: “al-Ḥamad li Allāh al-Rab al-‘Ālamīn (praise be to Allāh, the lord of the words) which is al-Sab’ al-Mathānī (i.e. seven repeatedly recited verses) and the Grand Qur’ān which has been given to me.”

A. J. Wensinck’s al-Mu’jam al-Mufāhrs li Alfāţ al-Ḥadīth al-Nabawī, shows that this ḥadīth has been textually and contextually recorded by five out of nine ḥadīth scholars whose books are covered. Al-Bukhārī (d. 869 A.H.), whose Šaḥīḥ has long been highly appreciated by the Muslim community and even regarded as “second in importance only to the Qur’ān,” records four ḥadīths which are almost similar in form to that of al-Nasā’ī. Abū Dāwūd (d. 275

17 One of its chains of transmission will be discussed in this article.
18 For example, Khārijah b. al-Ṣaḥīl al-Tamīmī quoted his paternal uncle as saying that he came to the Apostle of Allāh (may peace be upon him) and embraced Islam. He then came back from him and passed some people who had a lunatic fettered in chains. His people said: We are told that your companion has brought some good. Have you something by which you can cure him? I then recited sūrat al-Фāṭihah and he was cured. …([al-Ḥadīth]). See Abū Dāwūd, Sunan Abī Dāwūd, vol. 3, p. 1092.
19 Many scholars also admit and attempt to prove that sūrat al-Фāṭihah is the core of the entire sūrah of the Qur’ān. Muḥammad ‘Abdūh, for instance, maintains that there are at least five reasons of revealing the Qur’ān: Tawḥīd, Wa’d and Wa’îd, ‘Ībādah, Sa‘īdah and Stories. Those purposes are concluded in sūrat al-Фāṭihah. See Muḥammad ‘Abdūh, Mushkilāt al-Qur’ān al-Kārīn wa Taṣīr Sūrat al-Фāṭihah (Bayrūt: Manshūrāt Dār Maktabat al-Ḥāyāh, 1980), p. 27.
22 Annemarie Schimmel, And Muḥammad is His Messenger, p. 27.
A.H.), al-Dārīmī (d. 255 A.H.) and ʿAḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241 A.H.) also reported this ḥadīth in their canonical hadith compilations.23 All the ḥadīths reported by these scholars are under the authority of ʿAbū Mūsā b. al-Muʿallā through the way of ʿAbbās b. ʿĀsim, Khubayb b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān and Shuʿbah. After Shuʿbah, more than one muḥaddith then transmitted this ḥadīth.24 This sort of ḥadīth is said to be gharīb25 since it is reported by a single transmitter through a single line of transmission.

In this article, I will examine the above chain of transmission of al-Nasāʾī as follows:

1. al-Nasāʾī (d. 303 A.H.)

al-Nasāʾī was one of the six famous traditionists who compiled the traditions of the Prophet. His complete name was ʿAḥmad b. Shuʿayb b. ʿAlī b. Sinan ʿAbū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Nasāʾī. In ḥadīth studies, his al-Sunan al-Sughrā or al-Muṣṭaḥabbah is considered one of the al-Kutub al-Sittah,26 which al-Nasāʾī himself admits contained only reliable traditions.27

2. Muhammad b. Bashshār (d. 252 A.H.)

His proper name was Muḥammad b. Bashshār b. ʿUṭhμān b. Dāwūd b. Kaysān al-ʿAbdī. Abū Bakr al-Hāfīz al-Bašrī. In ḥadīth literature, he was well known by his surname Bundār. He transmitted ḥadīth from ʿAbd Wahhāb al-Thaqafī, Muḥammad b. Jaʿfar,28 Yahyā b. Saʿīd29 and many others.

There has been no agreement among ḥadīth experts concerning his capacity to transmit ḥadīth. ʿAbd Allāh b. Muḥammad b. Siyār, for instance, stated that he had heard ʿAmr b. ʿAlī say under oath that Bundār lied as having transmitted under the authority of Yahyā. Such a notion was also addressed to him by ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAlī b. al-Madīni in transmitting ḥadīth under the authority of al-Mahdī. On the other hand, al-Azadī said that Bundār was acceptable. Regarding the above notion, he argued that it was not intended to deceive Bundār, since Bundār was always mentioned as doing good and being reliable. His reliability was also admitted by Abū Ḥātim.30 al-Nasāʾī, and al-ʿIjī the Basran.31

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23 See note 18.
24 See table 1.
25 Ḥadīth Gharīb is ‘mā rāwā rāwi faqaṭ’ a hadith reported by a single transmitter through a single line of transmission. Such a hadith, according to al-Tirmidhī, “is not necessarily daʿī but it might be saḥīḥ [sound] or hasan [good] if it comes through a single line of transmission. In some cases it might be daʿī because a single reporter, alone reporting a particular hadith or a part of it, is more liable to forget or make a mistake than a host of other reporters saying the same thing.” See Suhaib Hasan Abdul Ghaffar, Criticism of Ḥadīth, p. 125.
26 Al-Kutub al-Sittah literally means the six books. It refers to the six authoritative ḥadīth compendia, which are generally accepted and used among Muslims. They are Ṣaḥīḥ of al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ of Muslim, Sunan of Abī Dāwūd, Sunan (al-Jānī) al-Ṣaḥīḥī of al-Tirmidhī, Muṣṭaḥabbah of al-Nasāʾī, and Sunan of Ibn Mājah.
30 Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. al-Imām al-Kāẓim Abū Ḥātim Muḥammad b. Idrīs b. al-Mundhir al-Rāzī in his Kitāb al-Jarḥ wa al-Taʿdīl (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1970), vol. 7, p. 214 says that his father (Abū Ḥātim) was asked about Bundār, he answered that Bundār was a reliable man.
Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqallānī added that his reliability in the transmission of ḥadīth rests on the amount of his transmission included by al-Bukhārī (205 ḥadīths) and Muslim (460 ḥadīths) in their Ṣaḥīḥs.\(^{32}\)


Muḥammad b. Jaʿfar was an erudite ḥadīth scholar in his time. He was popularly known as Ghundār. It was reported that Ghundār transmitted ḥadīth from many muḥaddithūn but he was specifically related to Shuʿbah, having been his master in ḥadīth transmission. Ibn al-Madīnī said that he liked Ghundār’s transmission from Shuʿbah more than ‘Abd al-Raḥmān’s. Ibn Mahdī cited that he had benefited the writings of Ghundār in elaborating the life of Shuʿbah. Even Ibn al-Mubārak claimed that for people who disputed about ḥadīth of Shuʿbah, Ghundār’s writing became the judge. Ibn Abī Ḥātim and Ibn Saʿd also acknowledge his authority in ḥadīth transmission and described him as trustworthy.\(^{33}\)

4. Shuʿbah (d. 160 A.H.)

Shuʿbah’s complete name was Shuʿbah b. al-Ḥajjāj b. al-Ward al-‘Itkī al-Azādī. During his lifetime, he transmitted ḥadīth from more than three hundred scholars including Khubayb b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān.\(^{34}\) He was described as having a special gift in preserving ḥadīths of legal import. Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal even exaggerated by claiming that if Shuʿbah did not come, such ḥadīths would cease to exist.

Many ḥadīth critics admitted his trustworthiness in ḥadīth transmission. Among them were al-‘Ijīlī and Ibn Ḥībān. Although Ibn Saʿd credited him with this authority, he also criticized him for some errors in reporting the name of ḥadīth transmitters. Such criticism was also addressed by al-Dāruqutnī in his al-Ilāl.\(^{35}\)

5. Khubayb b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān (d. 132 A.H.)

His proper name was Khubayb b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Khubayb b. Yasāf al-Anṣārī al-Khazārī Abū al-Ḥarīth al-Madīnī. He died in 132 A.H. in the reign of the caliph Marwān b. Muḥammad. In ḥadīth transmission, he received ḥadīth from some scholars like Ḥāfṣ b. ‘Aṣim b. ‘Umar b. Khaṭṭāb and was considered and described trustworthy by Ibn Maʿīn, Ibn Saʿd and Ibn Ḥībān.\(^{36}\)

6. Ḥāfṣ b. ‘Aṣim.

He was Ḥāfṣ b. ‘Aṣim b. ‘Umar b. Khaṭṭāb. In transmitting ḥadīth, he received from his father and other well-known Companions, such as Abū Hurayrah, Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī and Abū
Sa'id b. al-Mu'allā. Al-Nasā’ī, Hibat Allāh al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Ḥibbān, Abū Zara‘ah and al-‘Ijī described him trustworthy. Even Muslim placed him among the eminent people of Madīnah.37

7. Abū Sa‘īd b. al-Mu‘allā (d. 74 A.H.)

He is Abū Sa‘īd b. al-Mu‘allā al-Anṣāri. There are several views regarding his name. One is that it was al-Hārīth b. al-Mu‘allā. Another claims that he was called Aws b. al-Mu‘allā and the other Abū Sa‘īd b. al-Mu‘allā. Even he was called Rāfi‘ b al-Mu‘allā but Abu ‘Umar said that whoever called him Rāfi‘ must be wrong because Rāfi‘ was killed in the war of Ba’dr.38 Instead, he offered Abu Sa‘īd’s complete name as al-Hārīth b. Nūfay‘ b. al-Mu‘allā b. Lawdān b. Hārīthah b. Zayd b. Tha‘labah of the son of Zurayq al-Anshārī al-Zuraqī. His mother was Umaymah b. Qarat b. Khansā‘.39

It is said that only two Successors received his only two-ḥadīth transmissions. The first one was Ḥafṣ b. ‘Āṣim who transmitted the ḥadīth which is under consideration in this article, and the other was ‘Ubayd b. Ḥunayn, who transmitted another ḥadīth starting with ‘Kunnā Naghdū īlā al-Suq’.40

Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqallānī disagreed with the historians who gave 74 A.H. for Abū Sa‘īd’s death date while he lived for just 64 years. He argued that if he had really met the prophet, he would have been too young. However, the matn or statement of ḥadīth discussed in this article contradicts that condition.41 Ibn Ḥajar added that the correct age of Abū Sa‘īd is 84 years.42

III. Evaluation.

The accusation that Muḥammad b. Bashshār had lied about having transmitted ḥadīth from Yahyā by ‘Amr b. ‘Āli could not easily weaken the chain of transmission of this ḥadīth. Muḥammad b. Bashshār is also supported by the fact that most critics of ḥadīth admitted his reliability, among them Abū Ḥātim, al-Nasā‘i and al-‘Ijī. Even al-Bukhārī and Muslim who were very strict in receiving a ḥadīth into their respective Ṣaḥīḥ included some ḥadīths under Muḥammad b. Bashshār’s authority. Another supporting point is that Muḥammad b. Bashshār transmitted this ḥadīth not only by way of Yahyā but also by way of Muḥammad b. Ja‘far, whose transmission was reported by al-Bukhārī.43

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TAHDIS Volume 12 Nomor 1 Tahun 2021
IV. Conclusion.

The chain of transmission of this hadith seems to be solid, judging from the continuity of its transmitters. The transmitters themselves seem reliable and even praised by the critics of hadith. In sum, this hadith may be taken to be good in sanad, which in turn may be referred for Muslims for their religious activities.
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