

Tadwīn al-Ḥadīth: The Prohibition of Hadith & the Prophetic Legacy

The following is the second installment of Sayyid Aḥmad al-Madadī's lecture series regarding the circulation of hadith. The first article dealt with explaining the difference between sunnah and hadith and with the origin of Arabic writing. This section discusses the disagreement between Sunni scholarship on the original permissibility of writing other than the Qur'an and the evidence of the various perspectives. Finally, Sayyid al-Madadī briefly explains the Shi'i rejection of a prohibition of writing ever coming from the Prophet (ﷺ).

The history of hadith circulation cannot be studied without surveying the stances of the majority of Muslim scholars and historians. Sunni researchers have been divided on whether or not writing down hadith was even permissible. This is due to a variety of conflicting reports floating around the intellectual circles of the early Muslims. Scholars were forced to critically engage with this conflicting material in order to extract what they thought was the authentic teaching of the Prophet (ﷺ) with regards to his sunnah.

The prevailing opinion in the Sunni world has been that the Prophet (ﷺ) prohibited the recording of his hadith and that this prohibition continued after him for some time. Sunni scholars, however, differ regarding the degree of this prohibition. Indeed, this dispute can be traced back to the time of the Companions (*ṣaḥābah*) and Successors (*tābi'ūn*). We see that although the view of the majority of scholars in the early period was that writing prophetic hadith was forbidden, there were early proponents of recording and circulating hadith. For example, some early Muslims believed it was permissible to write hadith so that it could be memorized, but one must erase the writing thereafter.

Many aspects of this issue—for example, whether hadith writing is permissible, the origins of a possible prohibition, the reasons—are all subjects of debate among scholars and researchers to this very day. For example, Dr. Ṣubḥī Ṣāliḥ argues that the writing of hadith was, in fact, not prohibited, and that the circulation of hadith was permitted by the Prophet (ﷺ) himself—an opinion that stands notably in opposition to the majority. Another researcher, Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā, supports the view that the writing and circulation of hadith was prohibited.

The most important piece of evidence used in this regard is the hadith of Abū Sa'īd al-Khudrī, as narrated in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*:

لَا تَكْتُبُوا عَنِّي شَيْئًا إِلَّا الْقُرْآنَ ، فَمَنْ كَتَبَ عَنِّي شَيْئًا غَيْرَ الْقُرْآنِ ،
فَلْيَمْحُهُ .

“Do not record anything from me except the Qur’an. Whoever has recorded anything from me other than the Qur’an, let him efface it.”

Although other reports are also used as evidence for this prohibition, none are as important as this hadith because of its supposed reliability—after all, it is cited in Muslim’s *Ṣaḥīḥ*. Note that al-Bukhārī did not include this report in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, because according to him—and others—this report is not *marfūʿ*. Rather, it is *mawqūf*. (In Sunni hadith-chain evaluation (*ʿilm al-dirāyah*), a report that is traced back to the Prophet (ﷺ) is termed *marfūʿ* while a report that is traced back to a Companion is termed *mawqūf*. The term *marfūʿ* in Shiʿi hadith literature is used to denote an incomplete chain of transmission where a later narrator quotes a source—usually an Imam—with a clear generational gap between them.) What they mean is that this report gives us the words and opinion of Abū Saʿīd himself, and not the Prophet (ﷺ).

Although we can take issue with the provenance of this narration, if, for the sake of argument, we assume they are the words of the Prophet (ﷺ), there still remains a reasonable alternative explanation for this hadith. The report appears to allude to the issue of mixing up the text of the Qur’an with its commentary and interpretation. In that case, this hadith would pertain to the early days of the prophetic mission, when the Qur’an was not as well-known or widely memorized as it was near the end of the Prophet’s (ﷺ) life. This injunction would have been to prevent the mixing of the actual Qur’anic verse with what the Prophet (ﷺ) may have stated along with the verse, even though that interpretation (*taʾwīl*)—sourced in Allah’s Messenger (ﷺ)—was itself a type of revelation (*waḥy*). The Companions would also record the verses of the Qur’an along with their historical circumstances of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), exegesis (*tafsīr*), etc. You can see these types of narrations in *tafsīr* literature. For example, after “the straight path,” you may see “the path of ‘Alī.” This is not some sort of interpolation of the text; rather the Imam (ʿa) is here explaining an additional meaning—whether esoteric or exoteric—along with the formal Qur’anic verse.

The early Muslims were very particular about not mixing any other material with the text of the Qur’an. The Kufic script did not even have grammatical declension (*iʿrāb*), or dots (*niqāt*, sing. *nuqtah*). Per tradition, (Muslim tradition states that the foundations of the Arabic language were established by Abū al-Aswad al-Duʿālī on the instruction of Imam ʿAlī (ʿa). The sunni historian al-Dhahabī mentions the following: Abū ʿUbaydah said: Abū al-Aswad learned the foundations of Arabic language from ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib. Abū al-Aswad heard someone incorrectly recite the third verse of *Sūrat al-Tawbah*: “that Allah has forsaken the polytheists and so has His Messenger” as “...and (forsaken) His messenger.” And Abū al-Aswad said, “I did not think that the situation of society had come to this.” So Abū al-Aswad said to Ziyād, the governor, “Procure for me an intelligent scribe,” and one was provided. Abū al-Aswad said to his scribe, “When you see that I have vowelized a letter with an ‘a’ sound, write a dot above that letter, a letter with an ‘u’ sound, write a dot in front of that letter, a letter with an ‘i’ sound, write a dot under that letter. When I follow up any of these vowels with a *ghunnah*, then instead of one dot put two dots.” These were the dots of Abū al-Aswad al-Duʿālī (Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Dhahabī, *Siyar Aʿlām al-Nubalāʾ*, vol. 4, “*Min man adraka zamān al-nubuwwah*” (Beirut: Muʿassasah al-Risālah, 1982), p. 83)) Abū Aswad al-Duʿālī (His full name was Zālim b. ʿAmr, a successor (*tābiʿī*) whose life spanned the Era of Ignorance and Islam (termed in Sunni biographical works as a *mukhaḍram*), and who died at the age of

eighty-five in the sixty-ninth year after the hijrah. He accepted Islam during the life of the Prophet (ﷺ), and fought with Amīr al-Mu'minīn Imam 'Alī in the Battle of the Camel (Jamal). (al-Dhahabī, *Siyar A'lām al-Nubalā'*, vol. 4, 82.)) added them later, and the Muslims maintained that these dots cannot be written in the same script of the Qur'an. Thus, they would, for example, write the text of the Qur'an in black ink, but mark the vowels in red. This even led to a legal question: Do these vowels and other markings have the same ruling as the Qur'an itself, namely that they are impermissible to touch outside a state of ritual purity (*ṭahārah*)?

This seems to be the context for the hadith of Abū Sa'īd; it is as if the Prophet (ﷺ) had said, "If you want to write the Qur'an, then do not add its explanation (*ta'wīl*)." This is a reasonable understanding of the hadith, and if true, the hadith does not proscribe the writing of the sunnah or hadith; rather, it is only calling to preserve the Qur'an properly.

If we look at the large volumes of hadith literature comprising thousands of narrations, all compiled in the centuries following the prophetic era, none of the Muslims confused these with, or mistook them for the Qur'an. Thus, it is not tenable that the Prophet (ﷺ) forbade writing all else to protect the Qur'an from interpolation.

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Other evidence supports this view, as well.

Historians and biographers of the Prophet unanimously agree that following the hijrah, when the Prophet (ﷺ) entered Medina, he ordered that a legal agreement be written between the Muslims and the Jews in which approximately fifty-two rules were codified. In the famous incident known as the "Calamity of Thursday" (*raziyyat al-khamīs*), there is also a consensus that the Prophet (ﷺ) requested pen and paper in order to write something for the guidance of Muslims:

ائتوني بالكتف والدواة—أو اللوح والدواة—أكتب لكم كتاباً لن
تضلوا بعده أبداً

Bring me a shoulder blade and ink-pot (or a tablet and ink-pot) so that I may write for you a document, following which you will never go astray.

Other such evidence can also be marshaled. The Prophet (ﷺ) wrote to various individuals, such as certain poets and delegations. After the Treaty of Hudaibiyyah and the conquest of Mecca, delegations would come to meet the Prophet (ﷺ). After they returned to their homes, he would write to them. The contents of some of these letters survive today in manuscript form, often called *makātīb al-Rasūl*.

After the Prophet (ﷺ), Imam ‘Alī (‘a) categorically allowed writing prophetic hadith. Although Sunni evidence for this conclusion is not as explicit as that of the Shī‘ah, it is generally accepted that he and Imam Ḥasan (‘a) allowed writing *sunan* and hadith. Despite this, Maḥmūd Abu Riyah counts Imam ‘Alī among those companions who forbade circulation, and al-Ṭabarī included ‘Umar among those who permitted it. It is without doubt that Imam ‘Alī permitted and ‘Umar forbade it; Maḥmūd Abu Riyah and al-Ṭabarī erred in their attributions. If such an obvious error can be made regarding the heads of each side of this conflict, we can only imagine what other errors exist in the opinions attributed to lesser figures.

After the conquest of Mecca, the Prophet (ﷺ) stood amongst the people and delivered a sermon, after which a man by the name Abū Shāh arose and said:

اَكْتُبُوا لِي يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ ، فَقَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ: اَكْتُبُوا لِأَبِي شَاهٍ ، قَالَ
الْوَلِيدُ : فَقُلْتُ لِلْأَوْزَاعِيِّ : مَا قَوْلُهُ : اَكْتُبُوا لِي يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ ؟ قَالَ:
هَذِهِ الْخُطْبَةُ الَّتِي سَمِعَهَا مِنْ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ

“Write for me, oh Messenger of God.” The Prophet (ﷺ) then said, “Write for Abū Shāh.” Walīd said: “I asked al-Awzā‘ī what he meant by ‘Write for me, Messenger of God?’” He said, “He meant the sermon that he heard from the Prophet (ﷺ).”

In a report, Abū Hurayrah states:

ما من أصحاب النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم أحد أكثر حديثا عنه
مني إلا ما كان من عبد الله بن عمرو فإنه كان يكتب ولا أكتب

“None of the Prophet’s (ﷺ) companions exceed me in narrating his (the Prophet’s) hadith except ‘Abdullāh b. ‘Amr, for he would write while I would not.”

It was well known that ‘Abdullāh b. ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ wrote down hadith. ‘Abdullāh himself seems to have had doubts whether writing the hadith of the Prophet was permissible. Sunnis narrate from ‘Abdullāh:

قُلْتُ: يَا رَسُولَ اللَّهِ إِنَّا لَنَسْمَعُ مِنْكَ أَشْيَاءَ نُحِبُّ أَنْ نَحْفَظَهَا أَوْ نَكْتُبَهَا
 ؟ قَالَ: نَعَمْ. فَقُلْتُ: مَا يَكُونُ فِي الْغَضَبِ وَالرِّضَا؟ فَقَالَ: نَعَمْ فَإِنِّي لَا
 أَقُولُ فِي الْغَضَبِ وَالرِّضَا إِلَّا حَقًّا.

I said, “Messenger of God, we hear from you many things, hoping to preserve them. Shall we write them?” The Prophet (ﷺ), “Yes.” Then I said, “[Write even] what [you say] in anger and in joy?” He said, “Yes, for I do not say in anger or joy anything but truth.”

There is a wealth of evidence that the Prophet gave explicit permission to write hadith, some reports of which are transmitted by reliable means. However, these reports are not in the two *Ṣaḥīḥ* texts of al-Bukhārī and Muslim. This variation and apparent contradiction of evidence is what has led Sunni researchers to disagree over the question of permissibility of writing prophetic precedent. That is, their dispute relates to which set of narrations should be preferred and how the conflicting reports are to be reconciled. One group, mostly consisting of hadith scholars (*muḥaddithūn*), believes the Prophet (ﷺ) allowed the writing of hadith as a dispensation. However, all Sunni scholars concede, as a matter of consensus, that the recording of hadith was permissible after the second generation (*tābi‘ al-tābi‘īn*), about 120 A.H. Some of their scholars explained that it became permissible as a necessity. The strongest evidence of this shift in view is the large corpus of hadith inherited from those generations until today. It became a sort of de facto consensus (*ijmā‘*); everyone was writing hadith seeing as it was necessary to preserve the sunnah.

From the Shi‘i point of view, it is difficult to even imagine the Prophet (ﷺ) prohibiting the writing of his sunnah or hadith. We have Qur’anic verses (*āyāt*) and historical evidence that dismiss this as a possibility. Indeed, to forbid writing hadith would be tantamount to a call for the destruction of knowledge. It is inconceivable for the intricacies of religion to remain without writing, and against the practice of reasonable people (*al-sīrah al-‘uqalā’iyyah*). (The *sīrah ‘uqalā’iyyah* is an indicator of legal evidence as established in the science of juristic principles (*‘ilm uṣūl al-fiqh*) whereby the existence of a standing practice of reasonable people—whether they are Muslim or not—is known to be concurrent with the infallible while there is no evidence or sufficient evidence of the infallible rejecting that *sīrah* establishes the affirmation of that *sīrah* by the infallible. Sayyid al-Madadī may be mentioning this principle here because after establishing the recording of teachings in writing as the practice of reasonable people, sparse and conflicting evidence is insufficient to affirm the infallible’s rejection. With the lack of rejection established, affirmation of the *sīrah* is proven.) The Islamic tradition provides definitive evidence to the centrality of the prophetic legacy. The Book of Allah tells us that we find in the Prophet a beautiful example, and that whatever he gives to us we are to take. It is unconscionable for the man whose character is the Qur’an personified not to allow the recording of his sunnah. Such a prohibition would be especially egregious when we consider that: 1) among the first pieces of revelation, he recited how Allah taught with the pen; 2) upon entering Medina after the hijrah, he wrote a canon of

law between the Muslims and the Jews; 3) in his final days, he asked for pen and paper to guide the Muslims after his death.

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It is not reasonable to obligate emulating the sunnah, then prevent it from being written. This would mean that only the residents of Medina would have access to it, and that it would remain in their memory alone. Thus, the entire Muslim polity (ummah) would have to leave it all in the hands of a small group and their memories, hence negating the Prophet's (ﷺ) own objectives.

Now, it can be argued that the prophetic precedents and hadith were not written during his lifetime. That is, however, an entirely different issue. The idea that the Prophet (ﷺ) prohibited his ummah from writing them at all is categorically untenable. As discussed previously, he may have prohibited the writing of explanations of revelation together with the Qur'an to prevent confusion between the Qur'an proper and its exegesis. There was, without a doubt, no confusion among the Muslims about which texts were Qur'anic and which are of the prophetic hadith. The words of Allah have a special flavor and eloquence to them, a quality that cannot be matched by human speech. There is an exceptional report with strong chains of transmission, found in both Shi'i and Sunni sources, of an alleged verse of "stoning." The phrasing of the purported verse, however, is not at all Qur'anic. No matter the situation, the Qur'an is always distinct from any other text. There was also never a discussion of writing Qur'an and sunnah together, anyway. It has always been possible to easily record them separately.

In summary, the Sunni researchers have been divided on the issue of writing of hadith and remain divided up to this day, even if everyone has acquiesced to the pragmatic necessity of the matter. The school of Ahl al-Bayt ('a) unanimously holds that no such prohibition came from the Prophet (ﷺ), and in fact such a proscription would be inconceivable from the person of the Messenger as presented in the Qur'an and the sunnah transmitted by the Imams of his Household ('a).

Sayyid Aḥmad al-Madadī is a highly respected jurist and teacher in the holy city of Qumm. His teachers include the late Sayyid Abū l-Qāsim al-Khū'ī, and the current marjī', Sayyid 'Alī al-Sīstānī. He teaches baḥth al-khārij courses in fiqh and uṣūl al-fiqh, and has pioneered a new approach to hadith through bibliographical literature, called al-baḥth al-fihristī.

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