

**Hadith as Scripture: Discussions on the Authority
of Prophetic Traditions in Islam**

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This book treats the debate among Muslims over the authority of hadith, which by the ninth century had been raised to the level of scripture. The author's main purpose is to show that modern Muslim thinkers who question

its status as a source of law are not the first ones to do so and thus cannot be dismissed as inauthentic aberrations or the results of a western, colonialist plot to undermine Islam. In addition, modern arguments against this view have close parallels in the opinions attributed to those of their predecessors. *Hadith as Scripture* thus has a strong presentist concern, despite its treatment of classical Islamic sources, and can be seen as apologetic in that it seeks to defend the Qur'an-only position from unfair detraction.

The three-part work is divided into an introduction and six chapters. The "Introduction" points out that little work has been done on the medieval material associated with rejecting the hadith's authority beyond a few articles by Michael Cook and Gregor Schoeler, who focused on the opposition to writing down hadith in the early Islamic centuries. Unfortunately, while relying on the Qur'an as source material was an important view in the second and third centuries, no works by its proponents have survived, and thus we are forced to rely on refutations and comments in other works to learn about them.

Part 1 discusses the early opposition to recording the hadith (chapter 1); examines al-Shafi'i's arguments in his *Risalah* and *Kitab Jima' al-'Ilm* and Ibn Qutaybah's in *Ta'wil Mukhtalif al-Hadith* (chapter 2); and studies Abu Ja'far al-Tahawi's *Mushkil al-Āthar*, Ibn Furak's *Bayan Mushkil al-Hadith*, and al-Khatib al-Baghdadi's *Taqyid al-'Ilm* (chapter 3). Part 2 focuses on two modern Qur'an-only thinkers: Rashad Khalifa (d. 1990), an Egyptian who emigrated to the United States and founded an Islamic community based in Tucson, and Kassim Ahmad, a Malaysian religious thinker and author of *Hadith: A Re-evaluation* (chapter 4), and treats more recent Internet debates and scrutinizes the Turkish thinker Edip Yüksel, <http://Free-Minds.org>, and Ahl al-Qur'an (www.ahl-alquran.com) (chapter 5). Members of this Egyptian group, founded by Ahmad Subhy Mansour, were arrested in 2003 and 2007 and continue to face harassment and opposition in Egypt. Part 3 consists of an English-language translation of al-Shafi'i's *Kitab Jima' al-'Ilm*, chosen on the grounds that it is the single text that most coherently presents the Qur'an-only arguments of its classical-era proponents (chapter 6).

Rendering *Kitab Jima' al-'Ilm* into readable English prose is not easy, for al-Shafi'i's dense, elliptical style resembles a fast debate among experts who do not care whether the general public is following. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time it has been translated. Although much of the translation is accurate, there are some problems with the translation of key terms. For example, the English-language title, *The Book of the Amalgamation of Knowledge*, does not fit, as it does not designate a combination or

mixture of knowledge. The word *jima`* means “the instrument by which something is gathered together,” just as *nizam* is the string that holds the pearls of a necklace in a row, *qiwam* the support that enables something to stand, *`imad* the pillar that holds up a structure, *`iqal* the cord used to hobble the feet of a camel, and so on. The literal meaning is something like *The Cord That Binds Knowledge Together*, perhaps referring to the idea that the Qur’an and the hadith, bound together into an integral whole, make up the material on which the law is based.

The term *`adl*, translated as “justice” (pp. 125 and 147) denotes “moral probity,” a required quality for judges and witnesses, who must have a clean moral record and not be known liars, cheaters, gamblers, and so on. Al-Shafi’i’s term *ihata*, which Musa renders “comprehensive knowledge” (p. 116 and passim), should probably be “certainty.” Musa gives “Enough of this!,” an expression of al-Shafi’i’s exasperation with his opponent, as the English rendition of *fa-da` hadha*. It may simply mean, however, “Leave off this (line of argument and move on to the next issue)”; the opponent admits being convinced or bested in this instance, rather than protesting the fact.

One of the main difficulties of al-Shafi’i’s writings comes in identifying a pronoun’s antecedent. In addition, like many other translators, Musa has translated *qala* and its derivatives throughout as “say,” whereas in classical Arabic *qala* is an all-purpose introduction of speech. To render it properly, one needs to consider the context: “ask” before questions; “answer, reply, respond” before answers; and “object, state, aver,” and so on in other passages. The translation also includes many typographical errors, word omissions, and similar problems that often do not ruin the sense.

The omissions, pronoun referent problems, and the misconstrual of terms in combination can, however, render a passage utterly incomprehensible. Musa’s text, “Ibn Yasar has informed us of his trustworthiness on the authority of `Umar ibn `Abd al-`Aziz asked in Medina and he agreed with him that he did not explain carrying in less than three months.” (p. 153) should read, “He [= Ibn `Uyaynah, mentioned in the previous passage] informed us on the authority of Sadaqah b. Yasar that [reading *anna* for *`an* in the text] `Umar ibn `Abd al-`Aziz inquired in Medina, and the opinions collected for him indicated that a pregnancy is not evident before a term of three months.”

Hadith as Scripture succeeds in its limited goal: to show that rejecting the hadith’s position as scripture in the late twentieth century is not an “un-Islamic” innovation, since similar positions were held during the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries. However, many questions of interest are omit-

ted, such as: What happened in the meantime? Did the position die out completely? What brought about its demise and its revival? To what extent were the modern thinkers aware of their medieval predecessors?

With regard to the early period, Musa does not identify those thinkers or parties who rejected hadith's status as scripture. She claims that it is not possible to do so. A close reading of al-Shafi'i's writings, however, allows one to identify references to the opinions of Maliki, Hanafi, and Mu'tazili jurists. In the case in question, one statement in the text suggests that al-Shafi'i's Qur'an-only interlocutor is not a native speaker of Arabic, presumably a Persian or a native of Iraq or Egypt. Careful reading of this and other texts may help to at least partially answer these questions. In addition, Musa's treatment somewhat artificially separates out the Qur'an-only position from the consideration of both social movements and other ideas. This position, both in medieval and modern times, was associated with other complexes of ideas and motives, such as rejecting certain traditional rulings, maintaining the law's flexibility, rationalism, modernism, and so on.

Moreover, discussions over the status of scripture has almost always been tied up with another ignored issue: Who is in charge of the religion? Whose opinion counts? Which groups are winning the public battle for the authority to determine correct views on religious issues and the power to impose their views? In al-Shafi'i's work, only jurists who are well versed in hadith have authority; the opinions of theologians, rationalists, and jurists who are not experts in hadith do not count. His opponent clearly had differing views. With the modern proponents of excluding hadith from scriptural status as well, one supposes that questions regarding the human loci of authority are just as important as the debate over textual loci. *Hadith as Scripture* provides an intriguing introduction to these debates, but fails to answer many basic questions about them.

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