



PROGRESSIVE MUSLIMS' APPROACH TO ḲADĪTH
TEXTS: A CRITICAL EVALUATION

BY

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ABSTRACT

Questions on the authenticity of Sunnah have long been of central importance to the study of Islam. Among the crucial points that are fiercely debated in this matter is the issue of textual criticism, which appears to have the effect of discrediting the existing record of Sunnah. This study explains and clarifies the relevance of the classical methodology of *Īadġth text criticism* in modern times. By using the case of Progressive Islam as the focal-point, it explores the impact of modernity on contemporary Muslims' attitudes towards religious authorities especially the *Īadġth* of the Prophet f . It traces back the intellectual origin of Progressive Muslims' approach to *Īadġth texts and* investigates its salient features. It also examines the extent to which this so-called new approach is in line with the classical *Īadġth scholars'* methodology. *It* assesses the interpretational implications of their approach to *Īadġth* related to the Islamic belief system (*'aqġdah*), metaphysical issues (*ghaybiyyġt*) and Muslim social affairs (women and racist issues). In a nutshell, this work provides a major contribution to the understanding of the attitudes of the modernists in particular the Progressive Muslims towards the Prophetic texts in modern times.

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*Dedicated to
my beloved husband and daughter,
my loving parents & parents in-law,
my dear siblings and family,
my awesome teachers,
Your endless prayers and encouragement have been supporting me
throughout this life ...*

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

Nurul Jannah binti Zainan Nazri

Signature.....

Date.....

steadfast on the path of truth. May He I bestow His Love and Blessings upon all of us and grant us successful life in this world and the Hereafter.

May peace be upon His Servant and Messenger, *Muġammad f* , his household and Companions m.

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aḥadīth

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

edn.	edition
e.g.	<i>(exempligratia)</i> ; for example
etc.	<i>(et cetera)</i>
ibid	<i>(ibidem)</i> : at the same place
cf	cited from
PM	Progressive Muslims
n.d.	no date
n.p.	no place/publisher
no.	Number
Trans	Translated by
vol.	Volume

TRANSLITERATION

Table of the system of transliteration of Arabic words and names used by the International Islamic University Malaysia.

b =	z =	f =
t =	s =	q =
th =	sh =	k =
j =	=	l =
=	=	m =
kh =	=	n =
d =	=	h = Ô
dh =	ñ =	w =
r =	gh =	y =
	' =	

SHORT: A = â; I = ä ; U =

LONG: = ; = ; =

Diphthong: ay = ; aw =

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

10 Q

“We have, without doubt, sent down the Message; and We will assuredly guard it (from corruption).”

The authenticity of the Qur’Ēn is not questioned because it is a part of the Muslim’s creed to agree that the Qur’Ēn is preserved by Allah since its revelation until the Day of Judgment.² Yet, the reliability of the Sunnah of the Prophet MuĀammad Y has always been the victim of modern skepticism and rationalism.³ Some Muslims seem to forget that the above divine promise also includes the Sunnah. Given that it is the practical example of the Qur’Ēn and its teachings, by necessity, Allah’s protection covers the Sunnah similarly as He promised to preserve the Qur’Ēn. Neither Qur’Ēn nor the Sunnah can be understood accurately without recourse to the other.⁴

Allah l protected the Qur’Ēn from any corruption and alteration. He safeguarded it by guiding the pious caliphs to compile the scattered ĒyĒt and *suwar*

¹ SĒrah al-Hijr: 9.

² See: Al-ĪabarĒ, Abu Ja’far MuĀammad Bin JarĒr, *JĒmi’ al-BayĒn ‘an Ta’wĒl al-Qur’Ēn* (Cairo: DĒr lĪyĒ’ al-Kutub al-‘Arabiyyah, 3rd edn., 1968), vol. 17, 68; Ibn KathĒr, Abu al-FidĒ’ IsmĒ’Ēl Bin ‘Umar, *TafsĒr al-Qur’Ēn al-‘AzĒm* (n.p.: DĒr Ūayyibah, 2nd edn., 1999), vol. 4, 527; Al-QurĪubĒ, MuĀammad Bin AĪmad, *al-JĒmi’ li AĪkĒm al-Qur’Ēn* (Beirut: DĒr al-Fikr, 2003), vol. 10, 5.

³ Brown, Daniel. W., *Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 84.

⁴ The text of the Qur’an will not be protected if its understanding which is contained in the sunnah is not protected. Therefore, the protection of the Qur’an indicates the protection of the Sunnah and the DĒn as a whole. Therefore, belief in the authentic Sunnah is obligatory upon all Muslims as stated by Ibn Taymiyyah: “The Sunnah that is a must to be followed for which one is praised due to following it and blamed for going against it, is the Sunnah of the Messenger Y in matters of belief, worship and the rest of the affairs of the religion and what is known only by knowledge of the *ĀadĒth* of the Prophet Y that are confirmed on his authority”.

See: Ibn Taymiyyah, AĪmad bin ‘Abd al-×alĒm al-×arĒnĒ AbĒ al-‘AbbĒs, *MajmĒ’ al-FatĒwĒ*, edited by AnwĒr al-BĒz ‘Ōmir al-×azĒr (n.p.: DĒr al-WafĒ’, 3rd edn., 2005), vol. 3, 387.

into one volume as well as preserving it in millions of faithful hearts. He preserved its teachings by enabling thousands of students of knowledge to learn from its deep treasures and conveying them to the people. Likewise, Allah ﷻ protected the Sunnah by allowing the Companions to learn and commit his words and the episodes of his life ﷺ to memory, and practice them in their daily life. They were zealous to follow him meticulously in everything he did and said. Some of the Companions also committed the *Ḥadīth* to pen and ink for their preservation.⁵ Then, they carefully transmitted them to their Successors who also exploited every possible way in order to learn and collect as many *Ḥadīth* as they could with immense care to ensure accuracy in their reception, transmission and documentation of *Ḥadīth*. They followed each and every foot-step of the Companions in protecting the Sunnah. They undertook lengthy and difficult journeys, courting poverty and various hazards to track down the *aḤadīth* of the Prophet ﷺ and to distinguish the true *aḤadīth* from those corrupted by weak memories and from forgeries by unscrupulous liars.⁶

The Sunnah during the very lifetime of the Prophet ﷺ was initially the words, deeds, tacit approvals and character of the Prophet ﷺ. In subsequent centuries, the scholars of Islam began to include certain aspects in the Sunnah, such as the gradual development of the Science of *Ḥadīth*, for the sake of its preservation when the forgery of *Ḥadīth* took place on a massive scale. The *Ḥadīth* had also been divided into two important features: *sanad* (chain of transmitter) and *matn* (text of *Ḥadīth*).⁷ A formal system of *Ḥadīth* criticism became necessary during that critical era when the integrity of *Ḥadīth* was threatened by the widespread fabrication of *Ḥadīth*. The pious Muslim

⁵ Al-Khalīb, MuḤammad ‘AjjĒj, *al-Sunnah qabl al-Tadwīn* (Cairo: n.p., 1383), 29-74.

⁶ Ibid., 155, 176-184; Al-Khalīb al-BaghdĒdĒ, AḤmad bin ‘Ōif bin ThĒbit AbĒ Bakr, *al-RiḤlah fĒ Ūalab al-Ḥadīth*, edited by Nur al-DĒn ‘Itr (Beirut: DĒr al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1974), 40-42.

⁷ Al-Khayr ŌbĒdĒ, MuḤammad AbĒ al-Layth, “al-Manhaj al-‘Ilmi ‘inda al-MuḤaddithĒn fi al-Ta‘Ēmul ma‘a MutĒn al-Sunnah,” *IslĒmiyyah al-Ma‘rifah*, vol. 13, Summer (1998): 13.

scholars responded to this crisis by giving precise attention to the texts of *Ḥadīth* and detailed familiarity to the biographies of the thousands of reporters of *Ḥadīth*. They collected and wrote down *Ḥadīth* of the Prophet ﷺ systematically and formalized the use of the *isnād* (chain of transmitters) as a means of documenting *Ḥadīth*. Ibn ʿAlī has described the development of the system of *isnād* (chain of transmitters) in the study of the Prophet's *Ḥadīth* as a remarkable achievement of Muslim scholarship that no other religious communities had ever invented such a scientific tool to determine the authenticity of their traditions.⁸ Ibn al-Mubārak even goes so far as to characterise the importance of *isnād* (chain of transmitters) in this regard as indispensable to Muslim scholarship in general, without which anyone could say whatever they wanted of this religion.⁹

As we have seen, during the revelation period, there was no argument about the reliability of *Ḥadīth* as a basis for religious authority. Upheavals in the Muslim world have threatened the position of Sunnah in a variety of ways which later on have developed into the most important dimension of a modern Muslim crisis of religious authority.¹⁰ The challenges to classical *Ḥadīth* criticism often begin by pointing out the lack of efficacy of *isnād* (chain of transmitters)) criticism to distinguish authentic and spurious *Ḥadīth* beside the issue of *ʿadālah* (religious integrity) of Companions and the manner in which *Ḥadīth* were preserved and transmitted.¹¹ Such topics initially dominated modern debates on the authenticity of *Ḥadīth* which then lead to other controversial issues suggesting arguments large amount of *Ḥadīth* literature should be regarded as spurious and that legal *Ḥadīth* must be assumed fictitious until

⁸ Ibn ʿAlī, ʿUthmān Ibn ʿAbd al-Raʿmān, *al-Muqaddimah (ʿUlūm al-Ḥadīth)*, edited by Nur al-Dīn ʿItr (Medina: al-Maktabah al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1326), 231.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 1.

¹¹ Ibid., 85.

the contrary is proven.¹² Some also claim that the entire *ḥadīth* literature should be submitted to an extensive reexamination as the classical scholars ignored the textual criticism of *ḥadīth*¹³ and their methodology is no longer relevant to the present time. A new and fresh approach to *ḥadīth* should be developed to keep up with the times.¹⁴

In general, the widespread call to re-examine the Sunnah has been stimulated since the middle of the nineteenth century and during the twentieth century until today by orientalist and Muslim modernists.¹⁵ In recent years we have heard similar reform voices calling for re-evaluation of the Sunnah. They also argue that *the* verification of the reports that have been recorded are not on the basis of text authentication but merely chain verification.¹⁶ This argument and other critics on the classical *ḥadīth* methodology have allowed some to conclude that the existing *ḥadīth* literature is vulgar, absurd, theologically objectionable and morally repugnant as classical *ḥadīth* criticism is entirely inadequate, the damage is irreparable and the existing problematic *ḥadīth* literature can never be restored. This is the attitude of some modernists who completely reject *ḥadīth* and only accept the Qur'ān.¹⁷

There are those who just accept selected *ḥadīth* which meet their philosophy and belief, and call for re-evaluation and reinterpretation the Prophetic *ḥadīth* according to their values and ideologies.¹⁸ Since they claim that certain early

¹² For instance Goldziher bluntly states “Less attention is paid to the contents of the tradition itself than to the authorities in the *isnād*...traditions are only investigated in respect of their outward form and judgment of the value of the contents depends on the judgment of the correctness of the *isnād*...nobody is allowed to say: because of the *matn* contains a logical or historical absurdity I doubt the correctness of the *isnād*...”

Goldziher, Ignaz, *Muslim Studies*, translated by C.R. Barber and S. M. Stern (London: Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1971), vol. 2, 75.

¹³ Hallaq, Wael B., “The Authenticity of Prophetic Hadith: A Pseudo-problem,” *Studia Islamica*, vol. 89 (1999): 75-90.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ See: Brown, *Rethinking Tradition*, 32-42.

¹⁶ Ibid., 93-100.

¹⁷ Ibid., 32-42.

¹⁸ See: Bangga, Ahmed al-Mogtaba, “Qawā'id Naqdiyyah fi al-ḥadīth al-Musykilah,” *al-Dir'āsāt al-Is'lāmiyyah*, no. 45, January-March (2010): 77-78.

interpretations fail to offer modern Muslims sufficient guidance today, the classical methodology need to be reformed. They suggest, in order to move beyond certain traditional interpretations of *ʿadāth*, modern Muslims must go critically through them and experience them first hand.¹⁹ Progressive Islam is essentially among those movements which have such an attitude toward *ʿadāth*. This is a part of a new wave of liberal Muslims who openly demand reformation in Islam, and call for a progressive reinterpretation of Islam and its sacred texts in a manner that suits modern cultures and values.²⁰

The doctrines of progressive Islam initially began to spread to the masses in the late 1980-s,²¹ though the liberal Muslim activists in Southern California started to use this label and officially declared themselves the Progressive Muslim Network on the first of January 1999 as an email discussion group that connect all liberal and modern Muslims around the world.²² Prior to the Progressive Muslim Network was “Sisters in Islam” which was born in Malaysia in 1988. In Indonesia they are known as “Jaringan Islam Liberal” and at the international level “Musawah movement”.²³

Amongst the Progressive Muslims are academics, professionals, journalists and self-styled activists who have been enticed by the lucrative opportunities that arise out of media’s voracious appetite for apologetic Muslims speaking about the “problems within Islam”. Omid Safi, Farid Esack, Ebrahim Moosa, Khaled Abou El

¹⁹ Safi, Omid, “Introduction: The Times they are a-changin’- a Muslim Quest for Justice, Gender Equality and Pluralism” in *Progressive Muslims*, edited by Omid Safi (Oxford: One World Publication, 2003), 7.

²⁰ See: Kayum, Sajid A., “A Critical Analysis of the Modernists and Hadith Rejecters,” Qurʿān and Sunnah Educational Programs www.qsep.com, <<http://www.kalamullah.com/Books/Modernists%20And%20Hadith%20Rejecters.pdf> > (accessed September 25, 2009), 40-53.

²¹ Esack, Farid, “In Search of Progressive Islam beyond 9/11”, in *Progressive Muslims*, edited by Omid Safi (Oxford: One World Publication, 2003), 79-82.

²² Progressive Muslim Network, “Definition of Progressive Islam,” <<http://www.progressive-muslims.com>> (accessed 22 February, 2010); See: Adian Husaini (January 8, 2010), “Islam Progresif dan Seks Bebas,” <<http://www.lintasberita.com/go/917797>> (accessed 5 March, 2010).

²³ Ibid.

Fadl, Amina Wadud, Fatima Mernissi, Scott Siraj al-Haqq Kugle, Zainah Anwar, Sa'diyya Shaykh, Kecia Ali and others are among the Progressive Muslims front.²⁴ They have worked on women's issues, having women imams, supporting homosexual marriages, promoting human rights and unity of religions. Though they are labeled as heretic and apologetic by the traditional schools, their thoughts and views can be accessed everywhere around the world encompassing European countries, the Middle East and Asian regions. They have made use of the media and internet efficiently to spread out their doctrines and ideas. Their internet-based groups undoubtedly have had a big impact on the contemporary Muslims' paradigm as the public can catch their thoughts easily through websites and blogs. Their well-known slogans "humane Islam" and "Progressive Islam" have extracted large number of supporters and state funding and favours. They have been seen as more gender-neutral, very tolerant and as promoters of humanism in the sense that they fulfill the demands of modern-day skepticism and rationalism.²⁵

The truth or otherwise behind all the above-mentioned perceptions and insights about them, and many of their approaches toward the Qur'Ēn and Sunnah especially their approach to *Ādĥth* texts undoubtedly remains unchallenged. Their discussions about the *Ādĥth* of the Prophet Y usually relate to what should be rejected or accepted and how to interpret them according to the general values of Progressive Islam which promotes universal justice, gender equality and unity amongst different religions. This point is crucial to the researcher and has become the main thrust of this work which attempts to understand the new approach to *Ādĥth* texts which has been introduced by them. There is no doubt that there are scholars, academicians and students of Islam who have given immediate responses to the emergence of this new

²⁴ Safi, Omid, *Progressive Muslims* (Oxford: One World Publication, 2003), i-xi.

²⁵ Kayum, *A Critical Analysis of the Modernists and Hadith Rejecters*, 40-53.

wave of liberal Islam, yet most of them have reacted to the symptoms and scattered issues. A systematic methodological issue is rarely touched by them. The work of this study is an attempt to remedy this deficiency. Although a comprehensive examination of all aspects related to Progressive Islam would be highly beneficial, this study concentrates on its approach to *ʿadlīth* texts, specifically in its criticisms and interpretation the texts.

This study does not claim of being comprehensive. The brief historical account of the development of *ʿadlīth* criticism and the glimpse of introduction about the Progressive Muslim Movement that have been mentioned here so far are meant to place the topic in its proper perspective. It must be made clear that the research has nothing to do with the demands of supporting the Progressive Muslims Movement which is calling for reinterpreting the *ʿadlīth* in the context of liberal ideologies and modern notions of human rights, nor does it in any way represent the pseudo-traditionalist position which is not open to any development in *ʿadlīth* methodology, rather it is an objective research which aims at identifying the gap between the two and seeking possibilities to find the best approach to the Sunnah. It does not claim to possess the prescriptions for overnight remedy for this critical issue, it is however a humble attempt to bring both methodologies together, appreciating the successful contributions and achievements of classical scholars in preserving the Sunnah, and examining the validity of the alternate methodology which has been suggested by Progressive Muslims and seeking to provide supplement and adjustment to any aspect that might need further improvements, corrections and modifications.

After all, the researcher remains faithful to the divine reminder to check any news that we have heard in order to avoid any misunderstanding or misinterpretation