

ISNĀD AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE

MUḤAMMAD MUSTAFĀ A'ZAMĪ

The Beginning of *Isnād*

It appears that *Isnād* was used casually in some literatures in the pre-Islamic period, in a vague manner, without attaching any importance to it. The *Isnād* system was also used — to some extent — in transmitting pre-Islamic poetry.¹ But it was in the Hadīth literature that its importance culminated till it was counted a part of the religion.² The advantage of the system was utilized to the full, and in some cases to extravagant limits, for documenting the Hadīth literature, the store room for the Sunnah. The Sunnah of the Prophet being the basic legal source, it was natural to deal with these documents with utmost care. Thus with the introduction of *Isnād*, a unique science, *'Ilm al-Jarh wa al-Ta'dil* came into existence for the valuation of *Isnād* and Hadīth.

It was the common practice among Companions even during the lifetime of the Prophet s.a.w. to transmit the Hadīths of the Prophet when they saw each other. Some of them had even made special arrangements to attend the Prophet's circle in shifts and to inform each other of what they had heard and seen in the presence of the

Prophet.

Naturally in informing their fellows they would have used sentences like 'the Prophet did so and so' or 'the Prophet said so and so'. It is also natural that one of them who had gained knowledge at second hand, while reporting the incident to a third man, might have disclosed his sources of information and might have given the full account of the incident. There are references of this kind in the Hadīth literature. I may quote here only one:

When Dimām b. Tha'labah came to the Prophet and said to him, "Muhammad, your messenger came to us and told us",

These methods, which were used in the early days for the diffusion of the Sunnah of the Prophet, gave birth to *Isnād*, and this was the rudimentary beginning of this system.

In this regard Ibn Sīrīn's statement would be very helpful. He says:

They did not ask about the *Isnād*, but when civil war — *Fitnah* — arose they said 'Name to us your men'; those who belong to *Ahl al-Sunnah*, their traditions were accepted and those who were innovators their traditions were neglected.³

It gives the impression that the *Isnād* was used even before the *Fitnah*, but the narrators were not so perfect in applying it. Some times they employed it and at others neglected it, but after civil war they became more cautious and began to enquire about the sources of information and to scrutinize them. At the end of the first century the science of the *Isnād* was fully developed. Shu'bah used to watch the lips of Qatādah, in the lecture, to discriminate between his first and second-hand information. There are ample references to asking and enquiring about the *Isnād* in the first century of the Hijrah.

Flourishing of *Isnād* in the later part

It is the common phenomenon of *Isnād* system that as we go further the number of transmitters increases. Sometimes a tradition

transmitted by one companion acquires ten students in the next generation, in the class of Successors, and in turn these ten students have in some cases twenty or thirty students belonging to different countries and provinces.

I give here two examples of the spread of *Isnād*.

Abū Hurayrah reported that the Prophet said when anyone amongst you wakes up from sleep, he must not put his hand in the utensil till he has washed it three times, for he does not know where his hand was during the sleeping.

At least thirteen students of Abū Hurayrah transmitted this from him.

- 8 out of 13 belong to Madīnah.
- 1 out of 13 belongs to Kūfah.
- 2 out of 13 belong to Basrah.
- 1 out of 13 belongs to Yemen.
- 1 out of 13 belongs to Syria.

There are sixteen scholars who transmitted this tradition from the students of Abū Hurayrah.

- 6 out of 16 belong to Madīnah.
- 4 out of 16 belong to Basrah.
- 2 out of 16 belong to Kūfah, Iraq.
- 1 out of 16 belongs to Makkah.
- 1 out of 16 belongs to Yemen.
- 1 out of 16 belongs to Khurāsān.
- 1 out of 16 belongs to Hims, Syria.

The common feature of a good many traditions in the early part of the second century A.H. is the great number of transmitters who belong to different provinces and countries as we have seen just now. It was hardly possible for all these persons to consult each other so as to give a similar form and sense in transmitting a particular tradition. So if a particular tradition is transmitted by so many persons with a similar form and sense, then its genuineness cannot be questioned, while the trustworthiness of the individuals has been

confirmed by their contemporaries. It is general practice that if a man's honesty is proved by his dealing with the people, then his words are accepted as a true statement unless it is proved otherwise by facts. For the past generation with whom personal contact is impossible one needs to rely to a large extent on the testimony of contemporary sources. The standard fixed by the *Muhaddithīn* from the very early days was that if someone tells a lie in his personal life, though he was honest in the transmitting of Hadīth, his Hadīths would not be accepted.⁴ They criticised their fathers, brothers, friends and close relatives. And, perhaps, it was the highest possible standard that could be set for documentation of any source. Therefore, there is no good reason to reject the testimony of the contemporaries.

Furthermore, the Hadīth literature still offers an opportunity to satisfy one. The other method to test their trustworthiness and honesty in certain cases is by cross references to the statements of scholars. The method was employed by *Muhaddithīn* in early days.

The same method can be utilized to compare the statements of later authorities; then going one step back to compare their teachers' statements till we reach the Prophet. If in a number of cases this method works and gives satisfactory results, it will provide confidence as a whole in the Hadīth literature. In my work, *Studies in Early Hadīth Literature*, it has been shown positively, that there is more than sufficient grounds to accept the Hadīth literature as a whole. The study also indicates the early beginning of the *Isnād* system in Hadīth. Abū Hurayrah died in 58 A.H. or thereabouts, but there are other Companions who died earlier than Abū Hurayrah and their traditions are also transmitted through *Isnād*. As it is found in many cases that 5, 6, 10 or more students belonging to different countries transmit a tradition from one Companion and they provide *Isnād* going back to the Prophet, their statement should be accepted as authentic. We even find that some early Companions, e.g., 'Umar and 'Uthmān, etc., transmitted traditions giving as their immediate authorities not the Prophet but some other Companions. Had the system of *Isnād* not existed, it would not have been possible for them to transmit in this way.

Orientalists and *Isnād*

Among the orientalists there have been differences of opinion about the beginning of *Isnād* and its value. According to Caetani, Urwah (d. 94 A.H.), the oldest systematic collector of traditions, as quoted by al-Ṭabarī, used no *Isnād* and quoted no authority but the Qur'an. He therefore, holds that in the time of 'Abd al-Mālik (cr. 70-80 A.H.), more than sixty years after the Prophet's death, the practice of giving *Isnād* did not exist. So he concludes that the beginning of the *Isnād* system may be placed in the period between Urwah and Ibn Ishāq (d. 151 A.H.). In his opinion the greater part of the *Isnād* was put together and created by traditionists of the end of the second century (A.H.), and perhaps also of the third.⁵

Sprenger has also pointed out that the writing of Urwah to 'Abd al-Mālik does not contain *Isnād* and only later on he was credited with it.⁶ The quotations from the writing of Urwah to 'Abd al-Mālik are not only preserved in Ṭabarī but in many classical collections of Ḥadīth as well⁷ which are earlier than Ṭabarī. In one of the quotations, through the same *Isnād* which are utilized by al-Ṭabarī, we find Urwah quoting his authority 'Ā'ishah.⁸ In other places he quotes other Companions and Successors. The main difficulty which arises in searching for the sources of Urwah is the lack of original work existing in a separate form. The available material is only in the form of quotations. It was left to the later scholars to quote from the work certain lines or passages as they required. As Urwah had personal contact with most of the Companions his authority must have been a single name or the very person who was present at the incident, hence the *Isnād* consisted of a single name. And it is easy to omit or overlook a single man's name in quoting. In certain cases they might have quoted from the middle of a very lengthy passage, overlooking *Isnād*. The other versions of Urwah's work, especially the one transmitted by al-Zuhrī, have *Isnād*. Urwah even uses composite *Isnād*⁹ in the writing, as well as the single one.

Horovitz, who has studied the problem of *Isnād*, has answered the arguments of Caetani and other scholars thoroughly in his article "Alter und Ursprung des Isnād".¹⁰ He points out that those who

denied the use of *Isnād* by Urwah did not notice all his *Isnād*. Furthermore he argues that there is a difference between what one writes when one is asked questions and what one does within learned circles. His conclusion is that the first entry of the *Isnād* into the literature of tradition was in the last third of the first century.

A Scottish scholar, J. Robson, who has studied the subject at some length, says:

It is during the middle years of the first century of Islam that one would first expect anything like an *Isnād*. By then many of the Companions were dead, and people who had not seen the Prophet would be telling stories about him. It might therefore naturally occur to some to ask these men for their authority. The growth of a hard and fast system must have been very gradual.¹¹

He concludes:

We know that Ibn Ishāq, in first half of the second century, could give much of his information without an *Isnād*, and much of the remainder without a perfect one. His predecessors would almost certainly be even less particular than he in documenting their information. But we are not justified in assuming that the *Isnād* is a development of Zuhri's period and was unknown to Urwah. While the developed system had a slow growth, some element of *Isnād* would be present from as early a period as people could demand it.¹²

Professor Schacht and *Isnād*

Schacht has dealt with the legal traditions and their development. In his opinions *Isnād* are the most arbitrary part of traditions. They were developed within certain groups who traced back their doctrines to early authorities.¹³ Commenting on Schacht's criticism, Professor Robson says:

The criticism levelled at the *Isnād* is very thoroughgoing, and some strong arguments are brought forward to suggest that the use of *Isnād* is a late development; but one hesitates to accept it to the full extent... Schacht is dealing primarily with legal traditions, a sphere where his

argument may apply more closely than elsewhere, as changing conditions and the development of legal thought must have demanded new regulations; but one wonders whether the argument is not too sweeping.¹⁴

We have just seen the statement of Ibn Sīrīn about *Isnād*. Schacht thinks that this statement was falsely attributed to Ibn Sīrīn. He says:

It is stated on the authority of the Successor Ibn Sīrīn that the demand for and the interest in *Isnāds* started from the civil war (*Fitnah*), when people could no longer be presumed to be reliable without scrutiny; we shall see later that the civil war which began with the killing of the Umayyad Caliph Walīd b. Yazīd (126 A.H.), towards the end of the Umayyad dynasty, was a conventional date for the end of the good old time during which the Sunnah of the Prophet was still prevailing; as the usual date for the death of Ibn Sīrīn is 110 A.H., we must conclude that the attribution of this statement to him is spurious. In any case, there is no reason to suppose that the regular practice of using *Isnāds* is older than the beginning of the second century A.H.¹⁵

But his whole argument is based on his arbitrary interpretation of the word *fitnah*. The assassination date of Walīd b. Yazīd has never been a conventional date in Islamic history and was never reckoned as the end of the "good old time". This title is given only to the period of four Righteous Caliphs. Furthermore, there were many *Fitnahs* before this date. There was the civil war between Ibn al-Zubayr and 'Abd al-Mālik b. Marwān about 70 A.H. But the biggest of all was the civil war between 'Alī and Mu'āwiyah, which produced a breach among Muslims which exists to the present day. Tāhā Husayn has described it rightly as the most fierce quarrel known in Islamic History.¹⁶

So, on what grounds does the word *fitnah* need to be interpreted in the sense of the civil war after the killing of Walīd b. Yazīd? To take the word arbitrarily in this sense is equal to interpreting it as the *Fitnah* of Tatar and Halaku. Schacht takes this word in the sense which suits him, without any historical justification, to prove his own theory, which is absurd.

Prof. Robson inclines to take the word in the sense of the *Fitnah* of Ibn al-Zubayr, considering the birth date of Ibn Sīrīn, as well as the occurrence of the word *fitnah*, in the text of *al-Muwatta'* of Mālik which refers to this period.¹⁷ The present research indicates that it should be taken back to the first and the most dangerous civil war in the history of Islam. For this suggestion, there are the following reasons:

1. Professor Robson has pointed out that at the middle of the first century, when many of the Companions were dead and people who had not seen the Prophet would be telling the story of the Prophet, someone naturally had asked them to name the authority. If we accept the status of the Prophet as it is shown in Robson's statement — which is quite unfair — this is possibly what might have occurred.

Yet before reaching this stage, there was a great upheaval in the fourth decade. Most likely the first fabrication of Ḥadīth began in the political sphere, crediting and discrediting the parties concerned. In the well-known work of al-Shawkānī, concerning spurious and similar traditions we find:

- 42 spurious Ḥadīth about the Prophet
- 38 spurious Ḥadīth about the first three Caliphs
- 96 spurious Ḥadīth about 'Alī and his wife Fātimah
- 14 spurious Ḥadīth about Mu'āwiyah¹⁸

This large number of spurious Ḥadīth about 'Alī and Fātimah shows that the large number of Ḥadīth was fabricated for political purpose. We have other evidence which shows that the spurious traditions began to originate at and about the period of the war between 'Alī and Mu'āwiyah, and continued later on as a counter-attack on the Umayyad Dynasty. *Muhaddithūn* and other scholars found it necessary from that time onwards to be more cautious in selecting their authorities.

2. The second reason for this assumption is the statement of Ibn Sīrīn itself. There is no reason whatsoever to discredit it and challenge its authenticity. Ibn Sīrīn's wording suggests that he relates a practice earlier than his own period. He uses the words "They did

not ask," "they said 'Name to us your men'" "were accepted", etc. He does not use the first person of the personal pronoun in a period when its usage was common. So it seems that he points to a practice in very early days. Furthermore, he says "they did not ask", which implies that the practice of *Isnād* was in existence, but people did not usually inquire, and it was left to the transmitter whether or not to disclose his sources.

3. The third reason is that the chart of the flourishing of *Isnād*, proves beyond doubt that if the system of *Isnād* had not been in use from the very beginning, it would have been impossible to fabricate the system of *Isnād* in those days of poor communication, and to produce all the minute details. Thus to claim that all these were fabricated is a revolt against reason.

Prof. Schacht has tried to prove his theory of 'back projection' of *Isnād* and its artificial creation in the second and third century, by providing some examples from the early work of Hadīth-*Fiqh* literature, such as the *Muwatta'* of Mālik and of al-Shaybānī and *al-Umm* of al-Shāfi'ī, and *al-Khirāj* of Abū Yūsuf. He brings a few Hadīth from these books with imperfect *Isnād* and traces them later in the classical books with full *Isnād*, consequently he shows the improvement in *Isnād*. The theory might seem very convincing to a layman.

But actually it involves a kind of forgery. Because, as it has been known to Schacht himself, these authors have described their method, saying that, had they not been afraid of the volume of the book they would have given all the Hadīth with full *Isnād*.

Al-Shāfi'ī says:

I lost some of my books but have verified what I remembered from what is known to scholars; I have aimed at conciseness, so as not to make my work too long, and have given only what will be sufficient, without exhausting all that can be known of the subject.

The same kind of statement has been made by Abū Yūsuf. But there is another more fundamental fact which goes against Schacht's theory, that is the very nature of the books he referred to.

It seems quite clear that he has not paid any attention to the

nature of a legal work. A lawyer, a judge or a *muftī*, whenever he gave his verdict, was not bound to give the full documents to support his verdict. When a scholar writes to another scholar, he may make only slight allusions to his references, so his colleague can recall the necessary items to his mind.

These were the methods used by the prominent lawyers of the early centuries of Islam. Though most of the writings of that period are not available in separate form, yet still we have a few legal books which belong to the second century A.H. A glance at their methods of quoting traditions would reveal this very fact. Al-Shāfi'ī has utilized the material from *al-Muwatta'* of Mālik, and Abū Yūsuf has utilized the work of Ibn Ishāq and others.

The above evidence and its implications

In the writings of early scholars, mostly in non-Hadīth literature, the following features are very common:

1. The cutting of *Isnāds* and retaining the least possible quotations to serve the purpose, as the complete *Isnād* and ample references would make the work bulky.
2. The omission of the complete *Isnād* and quotation direct from the highest authority.
3. The use of *Isnād* by Abū Yūsuf reveals that he uses the complete *Isnād*, cuts it off, puts the anonymous word *rajl*, while he himself has mentioned a few pages earlier the exact name.
4. To use the word *al-Sunnah* and other words derived from it to mention the practice of the Prophet, without giving the text or *Isnād*, as the Hadīth in question was well-known to the scholars.

Let us summarise what has been said until now about *Isnād*. For the passing of information about the Prophet, *Isnād* was used. The first fact is that the system of *Isnād* began from the time of the Prophet and within the quarter century from the death of the Prophet, I mean from the beginning of the *Fitnah*, scholars became more cautious in the matter of *Isnād*.

The system as a whole is genuine, while any single *Isnād*'s authority can be challenged if there is sufficient ground for it.

A fabricated *Isnād* was almost impossible to pass off as genuine without being detected. The Hadith-*Fiqh* and *Sīrah* literatures are not proper material for *Isnād* study. The researches of the orientalist are based on the investigation of the wrong materials, consequently producing wrong result.

Isnād has been utilized until now for the criticism of Hadīth. But beside this fundamental task, now we may utilize this system for the reconstruction of early works which have lost their identity as independent works. To understand the procedure for this sort of research, we have to grasp meanings of the terms employed by *Muhaddithīn* in transmitting the records.

Isnād usually goes like this:

قال عبد الله ، حدثني أبي ، حدثنا روح اخبرنا سعيد
بن أبي عروة قتادة

The words like *haddathanā*, *akhbaranā* etc., are vehicles for transporting the documents. It was understood by some scholars that these terms mean only oral recitation. Mingana says that in his opinion the terms *rawā* and *haddatha* mean only oral transmission. He further says that to the best of his knowledge neither expression has ever referred to a written document lying before the narrator.

To refute this false assumption, I cite only two or three examples. Imam Ahmad b. Hanbal says:

حدثنا يحيى بن آدم ، قال حدثنا عبد الله بن ادريس
أُملاه على من كتابه عن عاصم بن قليب

Yahyā b. Ādam informs us that 'Abdullāh b. Idrīs transmitted the Hadīth through dictation from his book.

Here the book is employed for the teaching of the *Hadīth*, by way of dictation yet the same word *haddathanā* is used.

قال عبد الله، حدثني أبي، ثنا روح من كتابه، ثنا
سعيد بن أبي عروبة

Ibn Hanbal says that Raūh transmitted *Hadīth* to us from his book.

أخبرنا محمد بن المثنى قال حدثنا ابن أبي عدي هذا
من كتابه . . . وحدثنا ابن أبي عدي من حفظه

Here Nasai gives an example of a *Hadīth* which was read to students twice by the teacher, once from memory and once from the book.

There are hundreds of clear examples for this but I confine myself to only three examples.

Now it has been clarified that the *Muhaddithūn* used these terms even in the existence of the written documents.

If we find a scholar through whom *Hadīths* have been transmitted by different students, we may trace the existence of written records very easily. To be on the safe side, we have to compare the materials transmitted by his different students. In the case of agreement in contents and form we can bring out the early text. But if there is no agreement in form, and they tally in meaning only, here it means that either oral transmission has been applied, or some of the narrators or all of them have expressed the meaning in their own words. This can be clarified by an example. Al-Zuhrī compiled the biography of the Prophet. His material has been utilized by his students, such as Ibn Ishāq, Ma'mar, Yūnus, etc. Ibn Ishāq's work has been printed several times. Going through their works it becomes clear that Ma'mar, Yūnus and Muḥammad b. 'Abdullāh are three scholars whose versions go together with very little variations which are usually found in the different manuscript of any work,

while the version of Ibn Ishāq is in marked difference in its form and even in some of its contents. Here we may say that either Ibn Ishāq has expressed the meaning in his own words, or al-Zuhrī himself revised his work, but what we can say with certainty is that these three versions or the version of these three students presents the work of al-Zuhrī in its original written form. I have carried out some research on the *Sīrah* of al-Zuhrī, and a specimen page testifying to the result is available. Unfortunately I was not able to print it.

One of the outstanding historians of Islamic literature, Fuād Sezgin, has over-stressed written documents. Even the journeys of the scholars for collecting the Hadīth have been described by him as false tales. In the light of the written documents we cannot discard the journeys of *Muhaddithūn* to collect the materials. His argument is that there were eight kinds of learning certificate, almost all of which involved written documents except two, in which sometimes written and sometimes oral transmission was carried out. Thus the whole system of learning Hadīth rested on written documents. But the problem is that not all of those methods were in operation equally. No doubt there have been eight different ways to accumulate the knowledge, but the most important ones were to read to the teacher or to listen to him while the teacher was reading, and these were the most common features.

Furthermore, even in the case of written documents a scholar has no right to utilize the contents without the permission of the teacher, otherwise he would be counted unreliable and would be blamed of stealing Hadīth (*sāriq al-hadīth*). Therefore, even in the case of written documents one had to obtain the permission of the *Shaykh*, to avoid the title of *sāriq al-hadīth*, and thus losing credibility. In early days even to obtain permission to transmit a written record, without reading, was not encouraged. They used to say that one should not learn from *al-Suhufī*, meaning one who has collected the knowledge through the books without reading it to *Shuyūkh* though he had permission to transmit them, as it was bound to produce many mistakes. Meanwhile it is a fact that many *Muhaddithūn*, having books, transmitted orally, as it gave them a kind of prestige.

NOTES

1. Nāṣir al-Asad, *Musādir al-Sh'r al-Jāhili*, 2nd. ed., (Cairo 1962), pp.255-267.
2. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* (Cairo 1374 A.H.), ed. M.F. 'Abdul Bāqī, intro. pp.14-16.
3. *Ibid.*, intro. p.15.
4. 'Abd al-Rahmān Suyūṭī, *Tadrib al-Rāwī* (Cairo 1379 A.H.), ed. A.R. Laṭīf, pp.220-21.
5. J. Robson, *Oriental Society Transaction* (Glasgow Univ. 1955), ch. "The Isnad in Muslim Traditions", vol.xv, p.18, quoting *Annali dell' Islam*.
6. *Ibid.*, p.19.
7. Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, vol.iv, pp.323-6, 328-331.
8. *Ibid.*, vol.vi, p.212.
9. *Ibid.*, vol.iv, pp.323-6, 328-331.
10. *Der Islam* (1918), vol.viii, pp.39-47.
11. Robson, *op. cit.*, p.21.
12. *Ibid.*
13. This is a well summarised theory of Schacht by Robson, p.20.
14. *Ibid.*, p.20.
15. Joseph Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (London 1950), pp.36-37.
16. Tāhā Husayn, *Uṭhmān* (Cairo 1951), p.5; See also Nicholson, *Literary History of the Arabs*, p.193.
17. Robson, *op. cit.*, vol.xv, p.22.
18. Al-Shawkānī, *al-Fawā'id al-Majmū'ah fī Bayān al-Aḥādīth al-Mawḍū'ah*, pp.320-408.