

# A Muḥaddith Sūfī or a Sūfī Muḥaddith? An Evaluation of General Characteristics of the Sūfī Approaches to Ḥadīths

*Muhaddis bir Sufi mi yoksa Sufi bir Muhaddis mi? Sufilerin Hadislere Yaklaşımlarının Genel Özelliklerine Dair Bir Değerlendirme*

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**Abstract**

This study concentrates on central points of criticism addressed to Sufis by more traditionalist and normative scholars of Islam from classical period, especially by the ḥadīth authorities (*muḥaddithūn*), in the ḥadīth methodology (*uṣūl al-ḥadīth*). It analyzes peculiar characteristics of Sufis in ḥadīth narration in comparison with the mainstream methodology of the muḥaddithūn, with a special focus on the Sufis' emphasis on the internal and spiritual dimensions of the ḥadīths. The study lists a number of critical scholarly issues around which the Sufi approaches to ḥadīths are formulated and criticized, like their alleged omission of the transmission chains (*sanads*) of ḥadīths; their general tendency to narrate the ḥadīths in meaning (*ma'nā*) rather than in literal wording (*lafẓ*); their ḥadīth narration relying on spiritual unveiling (*kashf*), inspiration (*ilhām*) and dream (*ru'yā*); their interpretations (*ta'wīl*) of the ḥadīths on the basis of their specific way of thinking; and their belief of the existence of certain mysterious ḥadīths. Providing a survey of such scholarly issues between the members of the Sufis and muḥaddithūn, this study examines the nature of such criticisms on the basis of the writings of certain authoritative figures in the history of Sufism, including Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, and Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī.

**Keywords:** transmission chain (*sanad*), unveiling (*kashf*), inspiration (*ilhām*), dream (*ru'yā*), interpretation (*ta'wīl*), Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-'Arabī.

**Öz**

Bu çalışma bir kısım geleneksel ve muhafazakar İslam âlimlerinin, özellikle de hadis âlimlerinin, hadis usulü teknik ve kriterleri bağlamında Sufilere yönelik öne sürdükleri belli başlı eleştiriler noktasını konu edinmektedir. Sufilerin hadis rivayet yöntemleri ile ana akım hadis âlimlerinin hadis rivayet yöntemleri arasında karşılaştırmalar yaparak Sufilerin hadislerden çıkarsadıkları manevî ve derûnî anlamlar üzerine yaptıkları vurguları tahlil etmektedir. İslam ilimleri tarihi boyunca Sufiler hadislere yaklaşımları konusunda muhaddisler tarafından şiddetli tenkitlere maruz kalmışlardır: rivayet nakillerinde hadislerin senedlerini zikretmedikleri; hadislerin aslı lafızlarını gereğince itinayla muhafaza etmeden mânâları ile iktifa ederek hadisleri rivayet ettikleri; kendi bireysel keşif, ilhâm ve rüyalarına dayanarak hadis rivayetinde buldukları; kendi subjektif anlayışlarına göre hadisleri tevîl edip anlamlandırdıkları; birtakım gizemli ve sırlı hadislerin mevcudiyetine inandıkları gibi ithamlar bu tenkitlerin en bilindik örneklerindedir. Bu çalışma bu tür eleştiriler noktalarını sistematik bir yöntemle ele alıp hadis âlimleri ve Sufiler arasında zuhur eden anlaşmazlıkların teorik ve pratik çıkış sebeplerini açıklamaya çalışmaktadır. Ebü Talib el-Mekkî, Ebu'l-Kâsım el-Kuşeyri ve Muhyiddin İbnü'l-'Arabî gibi tasavvufî ilminin merkezî ve yetkin âlimlerinin eserlerinden hareketle sözkonusu tartışmaları çözümlenmeye odaklanmaktadır.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** rivayet zinciri (*sened*), keşif, ilhâm, rüya, tevîl, Ebü Talib el-Mekkî, Ebu'l-Kâsım el-Kuşeyri, Muhyiddin İbnü'l-'Arabî.

## Introduction

After the Qur’ān, the Prophetic Traditions (*aḥādīth* or ḥadīths) represent the second fundamental religious authority in Islam. Within various scholarly Islamic disciplines, reliability of newborn concepts has been evaluated and questioned on account of their accordance with the ḥadīths. In the case of Sufism (*taṣawwuf*), the ḥadīths play the same significant role. In addition to their engagement to Sufism, most of the early Muslim Sufis, such as al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) and Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 161/778) are considered ḥadīth scholars (*muḥaddithūn*). Yet throughout Islamic history, there has been a certain kind of disagreement between the representatives of Sufi tradition of Islam and the members of more traditionalist and normative (*‘ulamā’*) trends of the religion. While the *‘ulamā’* have been critical of what they observe on the Sufis with respect to their “careless” attitude toward the literal, external aspect of religious concepts (*Sharī‘a*), the Sufis have criticized the *‘ulamā’* on the basis of their inattention to deep esoteric, spiritual dimension of Islam.

In spite of their careful attention to the ḥadīths, the Sufis have been severely criticized by ḥadīth scholars in certain technical aspects of their understanding of the Prophetic traditions. In this study, I will attempt to discuss several criticisms addressed to Sufis in the ḥadīth methodology (*uṣūl al-ḥadīth*). I will argue that the crucial issue within all these discussions stems from the difference between the methodology of the *muḥaddithūn* and that of Sufis in the ḥadīth narration. The Sufis emphasize the internal and spiritual dimension of the ḥadīths, their general tendency in other religious texts as well, instead of exterior, formal and technical aspects of these Prophetic narrations. I will attempt to present a descriptive study of the criticism directed to the Sufi ḥadīth methodology by the *muḥaddithūn* through examining various topics, including, 1) the Sufis, most often, do not provide the transmission chains of the ḥadīths (*sanad*), 2) they generally narrate the meanings (*ma’nā*) rather than the literal wordings (*lafẓ*) of the ḥadīths, 3) they narrate the ḥadīths relying on their unveilings (*kashf*), inspirations (*ilhām*), and dreams (*ru’yā*), 4) they interpret (*ta’wīl*) ḥadīths in accordance with their specific way of thinking, and 5) they believe the existence of certain mysterious (*sirr*) ḥadīths. After a survey of these issues of criticism by the ḥadīth scholars,

I will highlight the attitude of some respected Sufi masters in using the Prophetic traditions.

Like other Islamic scholarly groups, the Sufis embrace the Prophet Muḥammad and his words and acts (*Sunna*) as an essential part of the religion. Given this basis, why do they not always strictly follow the technical rules in the ḥadīth transmission? Several explanations have been introduced by Muslim scholars -for example- their avoidance from hypocrisy (*riyā'*) and conceitedness (*kibr*), their strive against selfish desires, their personal spiritual conditions, their particular attention to religious rituals, the current position of the ḥadīth transmission in Muslim society, their objection to the ḥadīth transmission as a means of worldly living, their observation of the responsibility of the ḥadīth transmission, and their tendency to leave the ḥadīth transmission to professional, qualified ḥadīth scholars, and the like. Even with all these explanations, nevertheless, with respect to the formal and technical considerations, Sufis adopt different methods in the ḥadīth transmission. The *muḥaddithūn* narrate ḥadīths relying strictly on the rules of the *'ulūm al-ḥadīth*, i.e., memorizing (*ḥifẓ*) and transmitting (*riwāya*) of the Prophetic accounts.<sup>1</sup> For Sufis, since the meanings and indications of the ḥadīths are more significant than the forms of narration, they give preference to the former aspect over the latter. Consequently, their narrations have been subjected to criticism by the ḥadīth scholars. This criticism, however, is based mainly on the *sanad* part of the ḥadīths, rather than the text (*matn*).

We may elaborate the different forms of narration employed mainly by Sufis unlike the *muḥaddithūn* as follows.

## General Points of Criticism in Context

### 1. Their Omission of the *Isnād*

The *isnād* was developed by Muslim scholars as an indispensable part of the ḥadīths in order to reduce the risk of forgery and interpolations in

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1 Yıldırım, "Tasavvuf Ehlinin Hadis Rivayeti ve Rivayet Usulleri Açısından Tasavvuf Hadis Münasebeti", *İslam Araştırmaları Dergisi/Journal of Islamic Research* 10/1-4 (1997), 110-111.

the ḥadīth literature.<sup>2</sup> Despite the great care of the Muslim ḥadīth collectors, some weak or forged traditions are still encountered in their works.<sup>3</sup>

The Sufis do not often pay attention to the *sanad* part of the ḥadīths. Trusting the uprightness and piety of the people seems to be effective in their omission of the *sanads* (*asānīd*) in earlier times of the Muslim community. Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, for instance, on one occasion, upon narrating a ḥadīth, is asked about the person from whom he narrates the ḥadīth. In his response, al-Ḥasan advises the man to observe primarily the significance of the ḥadīth instead of the *sanad*. In early times of Islam, due to their sincere reliability on one another the false ḥadīth attributions to the Prophet Muḥammad were not very common among Muslim circles. Accordingly, they did not observe strictly the *sanad* part of the ḥadīths. Again, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, who was once recommended to introduce the *sanad* of a ḥadīth narrated by him, said, “By the name of God, we have neither lied nor denied (a true ḥadīth). We were together with three hundred Companions of the Prophet when we were in battle in Khorasan.”<sup>4</sup> These accounts support the idea that because of the sincere religious personality of early Muslims, the reliability of the narrations did not depend strictly on the *isnād*.<sup>5</sup>

During later times, when that early pure religious environment evaporated and lying increased among the Muslim community, in order to accept or deny a certain narration as ḥadīth, a sound *isnād* for that account became extremely important. That is one of the reasons for later disagreements between the Sufis and the *muḥaddithūn* concerning the ḥadīth narration. According to the *muḥaddithūn* a sound *isnād* is an

2 Muhammed Zubayr Siddiqi, *Hadīth Literature* (Cambridge UK: Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 81.

3 Siddiqi, *Hadīth Literature*, 81. Siddiqi also states that Muslim scholars accept that a considerable amount of forgery was committed in the *hadīth* literature. According to Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, together with the *tafsīr*, the *hadīth* has been more effected by forgery than any other branch of Muslim literature. A sizable amount of *mawḍū‘āt* (forged traditions) literature indicates this historical reality. Siddiqi, *Hadīth Literature*, 31-32.

4 Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī, *al-Tārīkh al-Kabīr*, ed. Muḥammad Şālīḥ al-Dabbāsī (Riyadh: Dār al-Naṣīḥa & al-Naṣr Mutamayyiz, 2019), 6/612.

5 Yıldırım, “Tasavvuf Ehlinin Hadis Rivayeti ve Rivayet Usulleri Açısından Tasavvuf Hadis Münasebeti”, 111-112.

essential testimony for a narration, and the omission of the *sanad* is one of the main means to make false attributions to the Prophet.<sup>6</sup>

Another reason for the Sufis omission of the *isnād* is that they did not consider their works as ḥadīth collections in a technical sense, even though they use the ḥadīths in their writings. Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d.386/996) does not present the *sanads* of the ḥadīths that he quotes in his famous work the *Qūt al-Qulūb*. He explains his position saying that his work is not a ḥadīth collection. He further invites careful attention to the possibility that a weak (*da'if*) ḥadīth might be narrated with a sound (*ṣaḥīḥ*) *sanad*, while a sound ḥadīth might be narrated with a weak *sanad*. Thus, introducing a sound *isnād* cannot guaranty that that ḥadīth is absolutely the word of the Prophet Muḥammad.<sup>7</sup>

Another critical attitude of the Sufis toward the *sanad* is based on the idea that all the sayings of the Prophet are not recorded and preserved in the ḥadīth form. It is possible that the Prophet has statements not included in the ḥadīth collections. Furthermore, as al-Makkī maintains, there exist some narrated ḥadīths that even ḥadīth scholars have disagreements regarding their authenticity. Therefore, the *sanad* alone is not able to authenticate the ḥadīths. In this respect, according to al-Makkī, a ḥadīth can be authentic only on account of its general accordance with the Qur'an, the sound *Sunna*, the consensus of Muslim scholars (*ijmā'*), the testimony of trustworthy scholars, and the reliability of the narrators. Al-Makkī also asserts that the authenticity of a narration requires three specific characteristics: a) that narration must be traced back to the first Islamic century, b) it must be narrated by the early three Muslim generations, c) it must not be denied by the scholars of the same century.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Their Narration in Meaning (*ma'nān*) Rather than in Literal Wording (*lafẓan*)

The question of the permissibility of the literal narration of the ḥadīths has been discussed among Muslim scholars throughout Islamic history.

6 Yıldırım, "Tasavvuf Ehlinin Hadis Rivayeti ve Rivayet Usulleri Açısından Tasavvuf Hadis Münasebeti", 112.

7 Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-Qulūb*, ed. Bāsīl 'Uyūn al-Sūd (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1997), 280.

8 Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-Qulūb*, 280-313.

For example, while a certain traditionalist Muslim group (*Salafīyyūn*), in general, does not approve of the ḥadīth narration in meaning, for the majority of Muslim scholars, literal ḥadīth narration is not an essential component in the ḥadīth transmission.

As far as the Sufis are concerned, the ḥadīth scholars criticize them because of their “careless” attitude toward the literal ḥadīth narration. We have some accounts illustrating the position of the Sufis and their attitude toward literal ḥadīth transmission. Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, for instance, was asked why he narrated the same ḥadīth in different times, but in different wording. He responded that as long as the signification of the ḥadīth indicates the same meaning, there is nothing wrong with this method. Similarly, al-Makkī explains the reason why he quotes ḥadīths in meaning (*maʿnan*), rather than literal wording (*lafẓan*). In order to support his position al-Makkī introduces Ibn Sīrīn’s (d. 110/729) words, “I was listening to the same ḥadīth from ten different persons, though their wordings were different, their meanings were the same.” In the same context, he recalls Yahyā b. Saʿīd al-Qaṭṭān’s (d. 198/813) response to someone who asks him about a minor change in his narration, “The most reliable book we have is the Qurʾān, and even in the Qurʾān we are allowed to read in accordance with seven letters. (*ʿalā sabʿati aḥrūfin*)” Thus for him, the narration of ḥadīth in meaning was common among early Muslim scholarly circles. Yet, al-Makkī maintains that he who attempts to narrate in meaning must have a thorough knowledge of Arabic so that he might be free from making many possible changes in original meaning.<sup>9</sup>

According to the *muḥaddithūn*, on the other hand, this method leads Sufis to embrace many weak and forged ḥadīth narrations. For example, the accounts “He who knows himself, knows his Lord” and “This world is the farm (*mazraʿa*) for the otherworld” are among the statements whose authenticity are questioned by the *muḥaddithūn*.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-Qulūb*, 313.

<sup>10</sup> Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-Qulūb*, 113.

### 3. Their Narration Relying on Unveiling (*kashf*), Inspiration (*ilhām*) and Dream (*ru'yā*)

The *kashf*, *ilhām* and *ru'yā* have been used mainly by the Sufis to verify the authenticity of the Prophetic narrations. Although the Sufis consider both reason ('*aql*) and transmission of religious teachings (*naql*) as means of acquiring knowledge, for them, the most reliable knowledge is acquired on the basis of individual unveilings and inspirations. Thus, in addition to the regular methods of the ḥadīth narration, the Sufis present these deep spiritual experiences as a means of verifying the Prophetic accounts. Muslim ḥadīth scholars usually do not approve of personal experience as a method of the ḥadīth narration. They generally maintain that personal experiences are only subjective, personal conclusions, far from meeting objective scholarly criteria about the authenticity of the ḥadīths. Some early and contemporary ḥadīth scholars such as 'Alī al-Qārī (d. 1014/1605), Jamāl al-Dīn al-Qāsimī (d. 1332/1914), and al-Mubārakpūrī (d. 1353/1935) do not approve the ḥadīth narration based on *kashf*, *ilhām*, and *ru'yā*. For them, this is a subjective attempt to authenticate the ḥadīths. Since the Prophetic traditions constitute the second important source of religious authority in Islam, we need more objective criteria to determine the authenticity of them. The *muḥaddithūn* also assert that the Prophetic Tradition (*Sunna*) was established and completed during the Prophet Muḥammad's lifetime. After his death, narration based on *kashf*, *ilhām*, or *ru'yā* means nothing except a religious innovation of a new and arbitrary *Sunna*.<sup>11</sup>

The *muḥaddithūn* themselves, however, do not unanimously agree in their criticism of the Sufis for their use of *kashf*, *ilhām*, and *ru'yā* in authenticating ḥadīths. For, the *kashf*, *ilhām* and *ru'yā* have been used by the ḥadīth scholars to examine the reliability of religious theories. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), who is not recognized generally among Sufis, for instance, asserts that in his spiritual experiences, he used to ask the Prophet Muḥammad about the authenticity of certain ḥadīths.<sup>12</sup> Likewise, some ḥadīth scholars have used dreams in order to distinguish the reliable ḥadīths from the weak ones. For example, Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal

11 Yıldırım, "Tasavvuf Ehlinin Hadis Rivayeti ve Rivayet Usulleri Açısından Tasavvuf Hadis Münasebeti", 116-117.

12 Yıldırım, "Tasavvuf Ehlinin Hadis Rivayeti ve Rivayet Usulleri Açısından Tasavvuf Hadis Münasebeti", 114.

(d. 241/855) is reported saying that, on one occasion, he saw the Prophet Muḥammad in a dream and asked him about the soundness of the traditions transmitted by Abū Hurayra (d. 58/678). The Prophet answered to his question affirmatively. Several other accounts related to some eminent ḥadīth scholars such as Yazīd b. Hārūn (d. 206/822) and Yaḥyā b. Maʿīn (d. 233/847) illustrate that in addition to other regular ḥadīth criteria, i.e., the evaluation of the ḥadīths transmitters on the basis of the discreditation and accreditation of their religious and scholarly reliability (*al-jarḥ wa al-taʿdīl*) and on the basis of their moral qualities (*ʿilm al-rijāl*), dreams have been put into practice as a means of evaluating ḥadīths.<sup>13</sup>

A later Sufi author, Ismāʿīl Ḥaqqī al-Bursawī (d. 1137/1724), relying on his spiritual contact with the Prophet Muḥammad, wrote an epistle, *Kanz-i Makhfī*, concerning the famous saying, “I was a hidden treasure and wanted to be known. Therefore, I created the creatures, that they might know Me.” (*kuntu kanzan makhfiyyan...*). He states that before writing his commentary on this specific account, a Prophetic vision in the spiritual world demonstrated that this is truly a saying of the Prophet Muḥammad. Al-Bursawī further maintains that beside himself, Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) also approves the authenticity of this very ḥadīth.<sup>14</sup>

The Sufis reliance on *kashf*, *ilhām*, and *ruʿyā* is supported by the Prophetic traditions. Even in the major ḥadīth collections, there are ḥadīths that refer to these sorts of personal experiences as reliable faculties. For example, Abū Dāwūd (d. 275/889) introduces a ḥadīth clearly supports the Sufis’ position in this respect. The Prophet Muḥammad says, “Has any of you seen a dream? For the dream is a kind of prophecy (*nubuwwa*).”<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the *kashf*, *ilhām* and *ruʿyā*, the Sufis mention another subtle human faculty by which they acquire a familiarity with the very nature of Prophetic Traditions. They call this capacity the *firāsa* (perspicacity).

13 Leah Kinberg, “Dreams as a Means to Evaluate Hadith”, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam (JSIAI)* 23 (1999), 79-99; Leah Kinberg, “Literal Dreams and Prophetic Ahadith in Classical Islam”, *Der Islam* 70/2 (1993), 279-300.

14 Ismāʿīl Ḥaqqī al-Bursawī, *Kanz-i Makhfī* (Istanbul: Hacı Mustafa Efendi Matbaası, 1290), 2-3; Yıldırım, “Tasavvuf Ehlinin Hadis Rivayeti ve Rivayet Usulleri Açısından Tasavvuf Hadis Münasebeti”, 115.

15 Sulaymān b. al-Ashʿath al-Sijistānī Abū Dāwūd, *al-Sunan*, ed. Haytham b. Nizār Tamīm (Beirut: Dār al-Arqam, 1999), “Kitāb al-Adab”, 88; William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 121.

Relying upon the ḥadīth, “Be wary of the perspicacity of the man of faith, for he sees with the light of Allah,”<sup>16</sup> they maintain that by the way of Sufi experiences, after a certain spiritual stage, a believer can receive a special faculty through which he can grasp the authenticity of Prophetic sayings.

Al-Bursawī presents his opinion maintaining that the *muḥaddithūn* narrate a ḥadīth on the basis of the *sanad*, while the Sufis verify a ḥadīth by consulting directly the Prophet. An uninterrupted, sound *isnād* cannot guaranty the authenticity of that *ḥadīth*. Rather, in spiritual world, the *kashf* provides the most reliable foundation for that account, and this introduces a certainty of knowledge (*ḥaqq al-yaqīn*).<sup>17</sup>

All these records, however, do not mean that the scholarly endeavors in the sciences of ḥadīth (*‘ulūm al-ḥadīth*) are useless struggles. Instead, many eminent Sufis such as Ibn al-‘Arabī and his pupil Şadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d. 673/1274) were simultaneously reputed ḥadīth scholars. Ibn al-‘Arabī is regarded one of the authoritative scholars who collected and wrote Divine Sayings (*ḥadīth qudsī*) under the name of the term *ḥadīth ilāhī*.<sup>18</sup> They both wrote masterly works, such as *Mishkāt al-Anwār* by Ibn al-‘Arabī and commentary on Forty Ḥadīth by al-Qūnawī in this field. They at the same time emphasize that the formal scholarly rules that we have in the ḥadīth methodology (*uṣūl al-ḥadīth*) do not give the ultimate evidence regarding the authenticity of the ḥadīths. Since all the Prophetic sayings are not preserved in the main Muslim ḥadīth collections, it is quite possible that the Prophet Muḥammad might have some other statements which are not preserved in those ḥadīth books. Therefore, neither the *sanad* alone nor the ḥadīth collections themselves provide unquestionable proofs concerning the authenticity of a ḥadīth. Instead, for them, we need a wider perspective to determine the reliability of the ḥadīths, and current formal rules do not encompass all the means of the ḥadīth narration.<sup>19</sup>

16 Abū ‘Īsā Muḥammad b. ‘Īsā Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, eds. Aḥmad Muḥammad Şākīr (Egypt: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1978), “Tafsīr al-Qur’ān”, 3127; Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimension of Islam* (Chapel Hill: The University of North California Press, 1975), 205.

17 Al-Bursawī, *Kanz-i Makhfī*, 2-3; Yıldırım, “Tasavvuf Ehlinin Hadis Rivayeti ve Rivayet Usulleri Açısından Tasavvuf Hadis Münasebeti”, 114-115.

18 William Graham, *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam* (Mouton: The Hague: Paris, 1977), 57.

19 Yıldırım, “Tasavvuf Ehlinin Hadis Rivayeti ve Rivayet Usulleri Açısından Tasavvuf Hadis Münasebeti”, 116.

#### 4. Their Interpretations (*ta'wīl*) of the Ḥadīths on the Basis of Their Specific Way of Thinking

As a specific explanation method, the *ta'wīl* has been introduced by Muslim scholars in various Islamic disciplines at different level of emphasis. For example, while the *fuqahā'* (jurisconsults) and the *mutakallimūn* (theologians) generally express their theories in a language literally quite close to the Qur'ānic doctrines, the *falāsifa* (philosophers) introduce their ideas with considerable symbolic and speculative references to the Qur'ān. Ibn Rushd (d. 595/1198) maintains that it is not necessary to embrace all religious doctrines with their literal and external meanings. He further asserts that the Sufis sometimes take an extreme position to interpret both the Qur'ānic verses and the Prophetic traditions. For Ibn Rushd, this position leads Sufis to some strange esoteric understandings of religious texts.<sup>20</sup> We have some examples of symbolic explanations through which the Sufis have been criticized by the ḥadīth scholars. In the case of the ḥadīth, "Seek knowledge as far as China," for instance, the Sufis maintain that this knowledge refers to divinely inspired knowledge (*'ilm ladunnī*), China stands for master (*murshid*) who possesses this certainty of knowledge (*yaqīn*). These masters are the sources of real knowledge (*'irfān*). Thus, for some Sufis, in order to reach real knowledge, a disciple (*murīd*) must pass through his spiritual journey under the guidance of a master.<sup>21</sup>

The Sufis understanding of the *ta'wīl* is closely related to their general belief that religious texts have two levels of meaning, i.e., the external (*ẓāhir*) and internal (*bāṭin*). These two levels, however, have a specific relationship that do not exclude one another. We can examine this point in the case of Ibn al-'Arabī. He never denies the external and literal meanings of religious texts. He often states that the reliability of Sufi interpretations depends on their accordance with the literal meanings. These Sufi interpretations are additional explanations that extend our understanding of the original meanings. Thus, they have no effect upon

20 Ibn Rushd. *al-Kashf 'an Manāḥij al-Adilla*, ed. and trs. Mahmut Kaya (Istanbul: Klasik, 2019), 65-66; Yıldırım, "Tasavvuf Ehlinin Hadis Rivayeti ve Rivayet Usulleri Açısından Tasavvuf Hadis Münasebeti", 117.

21 Yıldırım, "Tasavvuf Ehlinin Hadis Rivayeti ve Rivayet Usulleri Açısından Tasavvuf Hadis Münasebeti", 117-118.

the revealed Law with respect to adding or abrogating any religious commands and prohibitions. Ibn al-‘Arabī pays particular attention to each single word of religious texts, for neither God nor the Prophet use an accidental word in their speech. Rather, their words are related directly what they mean. No one has the authority over the exact words of the Qur’ān and the Ḥadīth to replace one single word with another claiming that his interpretation is “what was really meant.” Therefore, each individual word and phrase possesses crucial significance to understand their true meaning. The *ta’wil* is considered by the Sufis in a very subtle context. In fact, it refers to taking the word back to its archetype in the world of divine realities. Accordingly, for them, a true *ta’wil* cannot be introduced as opposed to the literal sense.<sup>22</sup> The ḥadīth scholars, nevertheless, criticize the Sufis for importing their own ideas into the ḥadīths.

## 5. Their Belief of the Existence of Certain Mysterious Ḥadīths

The *muḥaddithūn* criticize the Sufis for believing in the authenticity of some mysterious ḥadīths. Some of those mysterious ḥadīths, however, exist in the most reliable ḥadīth collections. For example, Imām al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) relates that Abū Hurayra said, “I have received two sorts of knowledge from the Messenger of God, peace be upon him. I told one of them, but if only had I told the second kind of knowledge, I would have been killed.”<sup>23</sup> A similar account is related from Hudhayfa b. al-Yamān (d. 36/656). Relying on such ḥadīth narrations, the Sufis believe that among the Companions of the Prophet, some distinguished Companions had possessed this mysterious knowledge, and this knowledge most often was not written down in the ḥadīth collections explicitly.<sup>24</sup>

According to the *muḥaddithūn*, the Sufis try to base some of their theories on these questionable sources that include weak points in both their transmission chains (*sanad*) and texts (*matn*). The ḥadīth scholars

22 Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, xvi.

23 Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Ismā‘il al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi‘ al-Ṣaḥīḥ* (Istanbul: al-Maktaba al-Islāmiyya, n.d.), “Kitāb al-‘Ilm”, 42.

24 Yıldırım, “Tasavvuf Ehlinin Hadis Rivayeti ve Rivayet Usulleri Açısından Tasavvuf Hadis Mūnasebeti”, 118-119.

attempted to evaluate such accounts that are found in several Sufi works. They came to conclusion that some of those records must be criticized as either not being authentic ḥadīths, or not including sound *isnāds*. For example, they examined al-Ghazālī's (d. 505/1111) *Iḥyā' 'Ulūm al-Dīn* in this respect. Upon his study on the ḥadīths exist in the *Iḥyā'*, Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī (d. 771/1370) asserts that the book is full of weak and false ḥadīths.<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Ibn al-Jawzī (d. 751/1350) criticizes al-Ghazālī on this point.<sup>26</sup>

On the other hand, al-Ghazālī himself seems to preempt the arguments of these critics in the *Iḥyā'*. He expresses his discontent with the spirit of current scholarly works in his time. He criticizes some scholars who spend all their time on the science of Prophetic traditions, "i.e., in the hearing of traditions and gathering together of variants and far-reaching strange *asānīd*." For al-Ghazālī, some of these scholars travel in various countries to meet ḥadīth scholars in order to be able to say, "I have obtained traditions of X or Y directly, Z I have seen himself, and I also possess *asānīd* as few other people have them." In the eyes of al-Ghazālī, this attitude is a sort of scholarly vanity, and without paying enough attention to the real meanings and contents of transmitted materials, these scholars are only the carriers of texts. He further states that this situation sometimes leads to ridiculous circumstances, as he argues,

You may see boys in the lecture rooms of learned sheikhs, the tradition is read, the sheikh drowns off the and the listening boy plays childish games. But he has heard the tradition from the sheikh and obtains a written certificate of this. When he grows up he then claims the right to spread this tradition as a link in the chain. Adults who hear traditions are often little different and do not fulfill the conditions of listening properly.<sup>27</sup>

25 Yıldırım, "Tasavvuf Ehlinin Hadis Rivayeti ve Rivayet Usulleri Açısından Tasavvuf Hadis Münasebeti", 120.

26 Ignaz Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, trans. C. R. Barber and S. M. Stern (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1971), 2/146.

27 Goldziher, *Muslim Studies*, 2/172.

## CASE STUDIES

### a) Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d.386/996)

In his *Qūt al-Qulūb*, Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī quotes the Prophetic traditions without introducing their *sanads*. His ḥadīth quotations begin with “the Messenger of God said... (*qāla rasūl Allāh...*)”, or sometimes he mentions the first transmitters (*rāwīs*) “Anas b. Mālik related from the Messenger of God... (*qāla Anas ‘an Rasūl Allāh...*)”. On the basis of his omission of the *isnād*, al-Makkī has been criticized by some learned Muslims.

It appears from his book that in technical terms, is neither al-Makkī a *muḥaddith*, nor is his work *Qūt al-Qulūb* a ḥadīth collection. He is a sincere follower of the Prophet Muḥammad. He declares this point in many places of his work. For example, al-Makkī announces that in the case of a disagreement between the Prophet’s words and his own explanations, one must leave aside his explanations.<sup>28</sup>

As for the ḥadīth transmission, al-Makkī criticizes the current situation of the ḥadīth narration in his time, for he states that some scholars try to make ḥadīth transmission as a means of their scholarly or social authority. Al-Makkī further criticizes their understanding of ḥadīth concept and narrations.<sup>29</sup> He points out that the study of ḥadīth is one of the most important areas of knowledge for all believers in general, and for Sufis in particular. He introduces Sarī al-Saqāṭī’s (d. 251/865) widely-known advice to his nephew, Junayd al-Baghdādī (d. 297/909) saying, “May God make you a *Muḥaddith* Sufi, rather than a Sufi *Muḥaddith* (*ja’alaka Allāhu ṣāhibā ḥadīthin ṣūfiyan wa-lā ja’alaka ṣūfiyan ṣāhibā ḥadīthin*).” He implies that before going into Sufi path, a sound scholarly ḥadīth background is essential for a Sufi. On this basis, a Sufi can improve and extend his understanding. Otherwise, a Sufi without intimate knowledge in the ḥadīth field is always likely to make grave mistakes in the course of his journey.<sup>30</sup>

Finally, al-Makkī concludes that we may have some authentic ḥadīths without sound *isnāds*, and some weak ḥadīths with sound *isnāds*. Therefore the *sanad* is not the only criterion to authenticate a ḥadīth narration.<sup>31</sup>

28 Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-Qulūb*, 50.

29 Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-Qulūb*, 280-281.

30 Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-Qulūb*, 283.

31 Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-Qulūb*, 314.

For each section of his book, al-Makkī introduces the related Qurʾānic verses and Prophetic traditions. For example, regarding repentance (*taḥbba*), he quotes the verses of the Qurʾān, “And turn you all to God, O you believers, that you may succeed.” (24; 31) and, “Truly God loves those who turn unto Him, and loves those who strive purify themselves.” (2; 222) Next, he presents the ḥadīths without *isnād*, “He who repents is lovely to God, and he who repents from sin is like one without sin.” Then al-Makkī provides al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī’s word concerning the sincere (*naṣūḥ*) repentance, “The sincere repentance is regretfulness by heart, asking forgiveness by tongue, leaving censure (*jawāriḥ*), and resolving not to do it again.”<sup>32</sup>

As for his writings on patience (*ṣabr*), al-Makkī introduces the Qurʾānic verse, “And the faire word of the Lord was fulfilled for the Children of Israel because of their endurance.” (7; 137) Al-Makkī continues his explanations with the ḥadīth quotations, again without *sanad*, such as, “Verily patience is the perfection of act and reward.” Then al-Makkī maintains his statements with some other Qurʾānic, Prophetic and Sufi statements.<sup>33</sup>

Another early Sufi classic, *Kitāb al-Taʿarruf* by al-Kalābādihī (d. 380/990), deals with similar Sufi concepts in a more brief manner. Like al-Makkī, he generally does not introduce the *sanads* of his ḥadīth quotations. Besides, his explanations are not always accompanied by the verses of the Qurʾān and ḥadīths for each chapter. The chapters on repentance and patience, for instance, does not include any Prophetic traditions.<sup>34</sup>

### b) Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d. 465/1072)

In his famous *Risāla*, al-Qushayrī’s Sufi explanations are introduced in a language very close to the Qurʾānic verses and ḥadīths without much speculative and symbolic interpretation. According to the historical records about his life, he had an intimate knowledge in the ḥadīth field, and he himself taught the ḥadīth in schools (*madrassa*) for twenty-seven years. Al-Qushayrī’s early ḥadīth teacher was his maternal uncle, Abū ‘Ubayd ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Muḥammad. In the course of his life, the

32 Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-Qulūb*, 317-318.

33 Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-Qulūb*, 342.

34 Abū Bakr Muḥammad al-Kalābādihī, *Kitāb al-Taʿarruf*, ed. Maḥmūd Jawād Sharīʿat (Iran: Diba, 1371), 92-95.

ḥadīth studies constituted his most important research area. He studied under the guidance of at least seventeen different authorities and about sixty-six students received his instructions in this field. Correspondingly, the ḥadīth records in the *Risāla* exhibit this scholarly mastery.<sup>35</sup>

As far as Al-Qushayrī's ḥadīth methodology is concerned, he pays particular attention to the *sanad* part of the ḥadīth. This point is one of the main factors that give al-Qushayrī an exceptional position in the Islamic scholarly tradition. The *Risāla* includes more than 150 ḥadīths and almost all of them (90%) are found in the major ḥadīth collections. Another interesting point in his work is that he consciously avoids introducing certain ḥadīths circulated mainly among the Sufi circles, such as, "I was a hidden treasure..." (*kuntu kanzan makhfiyyan...*), "If you had not been..." (*law-lāka law-lāka...*), "He who knows himself knows his Lord" (*man 'arafa nafsahu fa-qad 'arafa rabbahu*), and "Die before you die." (*mūtū qabla an-tamūtū*). By doing this he seems to observe carefully current ḥadīth criteria in technical terms, as well. Therefore, the ḥadīths that exist in the *Risāla* have generally been free from the criticism directed to the other classical Sufi sources, such as the *Qūt al-Qulūb* and *Iḥyā'*. In addition to the *sanads* of the ḥadīths, al-Qushayrī's quotations from early authorities are also accompanied by full *asānīd*. This represents another proof of his careful attention to the narrations.<sup>36</sup> With all these scholarly qualities, al-Qushayrī seems to be one of the leading representatives of sober (*ṣaḥw*) school of Sufism structured around Junayd, for this school of Sufism tries to compromise both internal and external meanings of religious doctrines in a well-balanced manner.

For each chapter of his book, al-Qushayrī first introduces the related verses of the Qur'ān and ḥadīths, then he continues his explanations with the other early Sufi sayings and his own explanations. For example, in the chapter on the *tawba* (repentance), he quotes the Qur'ānic verse, "And turn you all to God, O you believers, that you may succeed." (24; 31) Next, al-Qushayrī introduces the Prophetic tradition related by Anas b. Mālik (d. 93/712) and accompanied by full *isnād*, "Whoever repents

35 'Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī, *Principles of Sufism*, trans. B. R. Von Schlegell (Berkeley: Mizan, 1990), i-xvii.

36 'Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī, *Kuṣeyri Risalesi*, trans. Süleyman Uludağ (Istanbul: Dergah, 1978), 30-31.

from sin is like one without sin, and once God loves a servant, sin does not harm him. Then he (the Prophet) recited, “Truly God loves those who turn to Him (in repentance) and loves those who purify themselves. [2; 222] When the Prophet was asked, “O Messenger of God, what is the sign of repentance, he replied, regretfulness (*nadāma*).” (*Sunan Ibn Māja, Zuhd* 30). Another ḥadīth quotation presented by al-Qushayrī, is again accompanied by full *isnād*, “Nothing is more loved by God than the youth who repents.”<sup>37</sup> This quotation, however, is not found in the major ḥadīth collections, but in the al-Suyūṭī’s *Jāmi‘ al-Ṣaghīr*.<sup>38</sup>

As for his quotations from the previous Sufis, al-Qushayrī mostly introduces these sayings by full *isnād* as well. For example, one of the sayings of Junayd, “The *tawba* has three meanings. The first is regretfulness (*nadm*); the second is the firm decision (*‘azm*) to leave reverting to what God has forbidden, and the third is the striving (*sa‘y*) for the recovering injustices (*maẓālim*),” which is given by the line of Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī, Maṣū‘ b. ‘Abd Allāh, and Ja‘far b. Nāṣir.<sup>39</sup>

In his chapter on the *ṣabr* (patience), al-Qushayrī follows the same method. First, he quotes the Qur’ānic verse, “Endure patiently, your endurance is only by God.” (16; 127) Subsequently, he introduces the same ḥadīth, by through two different *asānīd*, one of which goes back to ‘Ā’isha the other to Anas b. Mālīk, “Patience is at the time of the first affliction (*ṣadma*).”<sup>40</sup> This ḥadīth is found both in the *Bukhārī (Janā’iz*, 32) and in the *Muslim (Janā’iz*, 8)

Al-Qushayrī again introduces early Sufi sayings by full *asānīd*. For example, he quotes Junayd’s words in this way, “The journey from this world to the Hereafter is easy for the man of faith, yet relinquishing (*hijrān*) creation for the sake of God, the Most Exalted is difficult. And the journey from the self to God the Most Exalted is extremely difficult, but with God is even more difficult.”<sup>41</sup>

The same use of the ḥadīths and the early Sufi sayings by full *isnād* are presented throughout the *Risāla*. At least as far as his own position

37 ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya* (Egypt: Halabi, 1940), 49.

38 Qushayrī, *Kuṣeyri Risalesi*, 186.

39 Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, 50-51.

40 Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, 92.

41 Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*, 92-93.

in Islamic scholarly tradition is concerned, al-Qushayrī has not been severely criticized. Therefore, he was able to hold on to the criteria of the ḥadīth and Sufi explanations in a well-balanced manner.

### c) Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240)

The Sufi ḥadīth compilations were mainly intended as pious scholarship rather than strictly legal or doctrinal presentations. In the case of traditional forty “most beautiful names of God” ḥadīths collections, for instance, they were recorded for purely religious purposes. Ibn al-‘Arabī declares this general intention of the Sufis by saying that he compiled the *Mishkāt al-Anwār* for the sake of the Prophetic tradition: “Whoever preserves for my community forty ḥadīths of *Sunna*, I shall be intercessor for him on the Day of Resurrection.” The Sufis embrace these narrations, which mostly in the form of Divine Sayings (*ḥadīth qudsī*), “as a mode of direct divine communication outside of the Qur’ān,”<sup>42</sup> for these ḥadīths construct the basis of the many Sufi doctrines. Furthermore, as far as Divine Sayings are concerned, which are used mainly by Sufis, a considerable amount of them are found in the major ḥadīth collections. Since their primary concern in these ḥadīth narrations is “the witness of the truth of the words themselves,” rather than the formal verification, the Sufis do not usually present full *asānīd* for such accounts.

One must recognize that the Sufis were not overly concerned with the formal criteria, specifically the *isnād*, of hadith scholarship, any more than were authors like al-Mas‘ūdī or al-Kisā’ī, who made use of similar materials in their historical and biographical legends. The absence of the apparatus of the formal ḥadīth is not proof of the “inauthentic” nature of a Sufi report any more than the presence of such an apparatus is proof of its “authenticity” in reductionist terms.<sup>43</sup>

On the other hand, some of those sayings are not literally the ḥadīths, rather, they appear a kind of “ecstatic saying” (*shath*) in the spiritual state of direct contact with the Reality. In this case, another form of *isnād*, which has a spiritual nature, authenticates the ḥadīths. “The voice of the ‘inmost self’ [*sirr*] or the ‘heart’ (*qalb*) becomes for the Sufi the absolute assurance of the ‘authenticity’ of a word from God; under such

42 Graham, *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam*, 67-69.

43 Graham, *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam*, 70-71.

circumstances a human ‘support’, or *isnād*, is hardly necessary, for the Sufi himself becomes the ‘mouthpiece’ of God”<sup>44</sup>

In technical terms, many Sufi reports regarded as ḥadīths, do not exist in the major ḥadīth collections. In addition to his ḥadīth quotations from the standard sources, Ibn al-‘Arabī often introduces examples from those sayings. These latter quotations have been condemned as forgeries by some ḥadīth scholars. “He who knows himself knows his Lord,” (*man ‘arafa nafsahu fa-qad ‘arafa rabbahu*) and “The first thing God created was the intellect,” are among the sayings because of which Ibn al-‘Arabī has been criticized for. As for the famous account, “I was a hidden Treasure (*kuntu kanzan makhfiyyan*) and wanted to be known. Therefore, I created the creatures, that they might know Me,” it is regarded by him as “sound on the basis of unveiling, but not established (*thābit*) by way of transmission (*naql*).” Thus, the authenticity of such ḥadīths has been examined by way of unveiling. Ibn al-‘Arabī, however, asserts that even though some friends of God among saints may receive reports directly from God, what they receive “cannot have any effect upon the rulings (*ḥukm*) of the Law.” For, the function of “Law-giving” (*tashrī*) is peculiar only to the Prophets.<sup>45</sup>

Ibn al-‘Arabī further clarifies his own specific standpoint with respect to the ḥadīth narration maintaining,

There is many a weak ḥadīth which is not put into practice because of the weakness of its line transmission-because certain forgers (*wāḍi*) transmitted it -yet which is sound in fact, since in this particular case the forger told the truth and did not forge it. The scholar of ḥadīth (*muḥaddith*) rejects it only because he cannot rely on that person’s transmission. But that is only when this forger is the only person to transmit it, or the ḥadīth goes back only to him. But if a reliable transmitter shares in having heard the ḥadīth, then the ḥadīth will be accepted by way of the reliable transmitter... There is also many a ḥadīth which is sound by way of its transmitters and which has been learned by this possessor of unveiling who sees this locus of manifestation. Then he asks the Prophet about this sound ḥadīth, and he denies it and says, “I did not say it or judge by it.” Thereby the friends comes to know of its weakness, so he ceases putting it

44 Graham, *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam*, 71.

45 Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 250-251.

into practice “upon a clear sign from his Lord,” even if the people of transmission put it into practice because of the soundness of its line, though in fact it is not sound.<sup>46</sup>

Furthermore, Ibn al-‘Arabī embraces a defiant methodology in order to elaborate his position saying,

The books we have composed -this and others- do not follow the route of ordinary compositions, nor do we follow the route of ordinary authors...My heart clings to the door of the Divine Presence, waiting mindfully for what comes when the door is opened. My heart is poor and needy, empty of every knowledge....When something appears to the heart from behind the curtain, the heart hurries to obey and sets it down in keeping with the commanded bounds.<sup>47</sup>

## Conclusion

In relation to their ḥadīth narrations, the Sufis have been criticized by *muḥaddithūn* for their omission of the *isnād* in their narration, their narration in meaning rather than in literal wording, their narration relying on *kashf*, *ilhām*, and *ru’yā*, their interpretation of the ḥadīths according to their specific way of thinking, and their belief of the existence of certain mysterious ḥadīths. As it is shown in the aforementioned case studies, the Sufis do not have unanimously agree on the ḥadīth methodology. While some of them pay strict attention to the *isnād*, others do not. While some of them prefer that their *ta’wīl* does not violate the external meaning, others do not share this concern. The criticisms of the Sufis’ methods of transmitting and understanding of ḥadīth, however, are misleading, because the Sufis do not object the methodology of the ḥadīth scholars. Yet often their purpose of citing a Prophetic tradition is not to discuss its authenticity, but rather, to benefit from its message. In this sense, Sufi works should not be denied consideration as ḥadīth scholarship, nor should they be expected to conform to the criteria of scholarly ḥadīth works.

On the basis of such concluding remarks, since most of the Sufi concepts have specific character, the Sufis themselves and their works should

<sup>46</sup> Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 251.

<sup>47</sup> Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, xv.

be examined in accordance with a specific methodology not through the methodology of *muḥaddithūn*. Otherwise, Sufi tradition in Islam would seem unorthodox and marginal, although it has exerted great intellectual and religious influence throughout Islamic history.

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