

The Superiority Of Fiqh Over Hadith
By
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Allah Most High said, {He gives wisdom to whomever He will, and whoever receives wisdom receives immense good } (2:269).

The Holy Prophet ﷺ said, "He for whom Allâh desires great good, He grants him (superlative) understanding in the Religion (*yufaqqihhu/yufqihhu fî al-dîn*). I only distribute and it is Allâh Who gives. That group shall remain in charge of the Order of Allâh, unharmed by those who oppose them, until the coming of the Order of Allâh."¹

"It may be that one carries understanding without being a person of understanding; it may be that one carries understanding to someone who possesses more understanding than he."

Imâm al-Shâfi`î apparently took from Imâm Abû Hanîfa his famous statement, said: "You [the scholars of h.adîth] are the pharmacists but we [the Jurists] are the physicians." This is also reported from al-A`mash and Abu Sulayman Ibn Zubar and was probably proverbial. Mullâ `Alî al-Qâri commented: "The early scholars said: The h.adîth scholar without knowledge of fiqh is like a seller of drugs who is no physician: he has them but he does not know what to do with them; and the fiqh scholar without knowledge of h.adîth is like a physician without drugs: he knows what constitutes a remedy, but does not have it available."²

Imâm Ah.mad is related by his students Abû T.âlib and H.umayd ibn Zanjûyah to say: "I never saw anyone adhere more to h.adîth than al-Shâfi`î. No one preceded him in writing down h.adîth in a book." The meaning of this is that al-Shâfi`î possessed the intelligence of h.adîth after which Ah.mad sought, as evidenced by the latter's statement: "How rare is fiqh among those who know h.adîth!" This is a reference to the h.adîth: "It may be one carries understanding (fiqh) - meaning: memorizes the proof-texts of fiqh - without being a person of understanding (faqîh)."³ The Salaf and Khalaf elucidated this rule in many famous statements showing that, for all the exalted status of the Muh.addith, yet the Faqîh excels him:

H.adîth Misguides Those Devoid of Fiqh

Cautioning against the danger of misusing hadith to the point of committing sin, Imam Ahmad narrated from Muhammad ibn Yahya al-Qattan (d.233) that the latter said: "If one were to follow every *rukhsa* that is in the hadîth, he would become a transgressor (*fâsiq*)."

* Ibn Abî Zayd al-Mâlikî reports Sufyân ibn `Uyayna as saying: "H.adîth is a pitfall (*mad.illa*) except for the fuqahâ'," and Mâlik's companion `Abd Allâh ibn Wahb said: "H.adîth is a pitfall except for the Ulema. Every memorizer of h.adîth that does not have an Imâm in fiqh is misguided (*d.âll*), and if Allâh had not rescued us with Mâlik and al-Layth [ibn Sa`d], we would have been misguided."⁴ Ibn Abî Zayd comments: "He [Sufyân] means that other than the jurists might take something in its external meaning when, in fact, it is interpreted in the light of another h.adîth or some evidence which remains hidden to him; or it may in fact consist in discarded evidence due to some other [abrogating] evidence. None can meet the responsibility of knowing this except those who deepened their learning and obtained fiqh." Imâm al-Haytamî said something similar.⁵ Ibn Wahb is also reported to say: "I met three hundred and sixty learned people of knowledge but, without Mâlik and al-Layth, I would have strayed."⁶ Another version states: "Were it not for Mâlik ibn Anas and al-Layth ibn Sa`d I would have perished; I used to think everything that is [authentically] related from the Prophet - Allâh bless and greet him - must be put into practice."⁷ Another version has: "I gathered a lot of h.adîths and they drove me to confusion. I would consult Mâlik and al-Layth and they would say to me, 'take this and leave this.'"⁸ Ibn Wahb had compiled 120,000 narrations according to Ah.mad ibn S.âlih.⁹ Hence, Ibn `Uqda replied to a man who had asked

him about a certain narration: "Keep such h.adīths to a minimum for, truly, they are unsuitable except for those who know their interpretation. Yah.yâ ibn Sulayman narrated from Ibn Wahb that he heard Mâlik say: 'Many of these h.adīths are [a cause for] misguidance; some h.adīths were narrated by me and I wish that for each of them I had been flogged with a stick twice. I certainly no longer narrate them!'"¹⁰

By his phrase, "Many of these h.adīths are misguidance," Mâlik means their adducing them in the wrong place and meaning, because **the Sunna is wisdom and wisdom is to place each thing in its right context**.¹¹ An example of this is al-Shâfi`î's report that Mâlik regretted including in the Muwatta the hadith of the pond in which the Prophet ﷺ is told, "You do not know what they did after you" because of the inevitable abuse at the hands of Shî'is (or shî'ified Sunnis such as the Ghumârî school and others in our time).

* Ibn al-Mubâarak said: "If Allâh had not rescued me with Abû H.anîfa and Sufyân [al-Thawrî] I would have been like the rest of the common people." Al-Dhahabî relates it as: "I would have been an innovator."¹²

The Imâms of H.adīth Defer to the Imâms of Fiqh

* Imâm Ah.mad's teacher, Yah.yâ ibn Sa`id al-Qat.tân, despite his foremost status as the Master of h.adīth Masters and expert in narrator-recommendation and discreditation, would not venture to extract legal rulings from the evidence but followed in this the fiqh of Abû H.anîfa as he explicitly declared: "We do not belie Allâh. We never heard better than the juridical opinion (*ra`î*) of Abû H.anîfa, and we followed most of his positions."¹³ Similarly, Muh.ammad ibn `Abd Allâh ibn `Abd al-H.akam said: "If it were not for al-Shâfi`î I would not have known how to reply to anyone. Because of him I know what I know."¹⁴ As for Muh.ammad ibn Yah.yâ al-Dhuhlî (d. 258) of Khurâsân, whom Abû Zur`a ranked above Imâm Muslim and who is considered an *Amîr al-Mu`minîn fî al-H.adīth* ("Commander of the Faithful in the Science of H.adīth"), he never considered himself a non-*muqallid* but said: "I have made Ah.mad ibn H.anbal an Imâm in all that stands between me and my Lord."¹⁵ Mis`ar ibn Kidâm said the same with regard to Imâm Abû H.anîfa.¹⁶

Knowledge Is Not Memorization but a Light

Fiqh is the context of many statements of the *Imâms* on knowledge consisting in wisdom, benefit, deeds, and light rather than learning and memorization as we already mentioned. Mâlik said: "Wisdom and knowledge are a light by which Allâh guides whomever He pleases; it does not consist in knowing many things"¹⁷. Al-Shâfi`î: "Knowledge is what benefits. Knowledge is not what one has memorized."¹⁸ Al-Dhahabî: "[Knowledge (*al-`ilm*) is "not the profusion of narration, but a light which Allâh casts into the heart. Its condition is followership (*ittibâ`*) and the flight away from egotism (*hawâ`*) and innovation."¹⁹

Al-Khatîb in his brief *Iqtidâ' al-`Ilm al-`Amal* ("Learning Necessitates Deeds") narrates many statements to this effect from Ibn Mas`ûd, Abû Hurayra, Abû al-Dardâ, Abû Qilâba, al-Zuhrî, al-Tustarî, Ibn `Uyayna, and others of the *Salaf*. This Islamic understanding of knowledge elucidates al-H.asan al-Bas.rî report that the Prophet ﷺ said: "The energy of the Ulema is care and help while the energy of fools is to quote" (*himmat al-`ulamâ' al-ri`âya wa himmat al-sufahâ' al-riwâya*).²⁰ and the statement of the `Abbâsî Caliph `Abd Allah ibn Mu`tazz (249-296): "The learning of the hypocrite consists in his discourse while the learning of the Believer consists in his deed."

The H.adīth of the Jurists is Preferable to That of the Non-Jurists

Wakî` ibn al-Jarrâh preferred long-chained narrations through the *fuqahâ'* to short-chained ones through non-*fuqahâ'* and said: "The h.adīth current among the jurists is better than the h.adīth that is current among the h.adīth scholars."²¹ This is a foundational rule in the *H.anifi* School, which like Yah.yâ al Qat.tân, Wakî` followed.²²

Al-A`mash (Abû Muh.ammad Sulaymân ibn Mahrân al-Asadî the Tâbi`î 61/-148) also said: "The h.adîth that jurists circulate among themselves is better than that which h.adîth narrators circulate among themselves."²³

Ibn Rajab said that Abû Dâwûd in his Sunan was more concerned with the jurisprudence of the h.adîth than with its chains of transmission.²⁴

This is also the case with al-Bukhârî's *Sahîh* while Muslim, Ibn Mâjah, and al-Nasâ'î focussed on the benefits of its transmission chains and text variants - Muslim being the most thorough and reliable in these regards. Al-Tirmidhî gave equal weight to the *fiqh* of the hadîth and the study of its transmission although Abû Dâwûd is somewhat stricter in hadîth authentication while al-Nasâ'î surpasses them both.

Knowing the H.adîth is Different From Practicing It

Sufyân al-Thawrî used to say to the h.adîth scholars: "Come forward, O weak ones!"²⁵ He also said: "If h.adîth were a good thing it would have vanished just as all goodness has vanished," and "Pursuing the study of h.adîth is not part of the preparation for death, but a disease that preoccupies people." Al Dhahabî commented: "He said this verbatim. He is right in what he said because pursuing the study of h.adîth is other than the h.adîth itself."²⁶

Understanding the Hadîth is Superior to Knowing It

Ish.âq ibn Râhûyah said: "I would sit in Iraq with Ah.mad ibn H.anbal, Yah.yâ ibn Ma`în, and our companions, rehearsing the narrations from one, two, three routes of transmission... But when I said: What is its intent? What is its explanation? What is its fiqh? They would all remain mute except Ah.mad ibn H.anbal."³⁰

Sufyân al-Thawrî said: "The explanation (*tafsîr*) of the h.adîth is better than the h.adîth."²⁷ Another wording has: "The explanation of the h.adîth is better than its audition."²⁸

Abû `Alî al-Naysabûrî said: "We consider understanding superior to memorization."²⁹

Ibn Mahdî regretted not having written, after every hadîth he had recorded, its explanation.

The perspicuity and *fiqh* of Abû Thawr among the h.adîth Masters is famous. A woman stood by a gathering of scholars of h.adîth comprising Yah.yâ ibn Ma`în, Abû Khaythama, Khalaf ibn Salim, and others. She heard them saying: "The Prophet ﷺ said," and "So-and-so narrated," and "No one other than So-and-so narrated," etc. Whereupon she asked them: "Can a woman in her menses wash the dead?" for that was her occupation. No one in the entire gathering could answer her, and they began to look at one another. Abû Thawr arrived, and they referred her to him. She asked him the same question and he said: "Yes, she can wash the dead, as per the h.adîth of al-Qâsim from `A'isha: 'Your menses are not in your hand,'³¹ and her narration whereby she would scrub the Prophet's ﷺ hair at a time she was menstruating.³² If the head of the living can be washed [by a woman in her menses], then a fortiori the dead!" Hearing this, the h.adîth scholars said: "Right! So-and-so narrated it, and So-and-so told us, and we know it from such-and-such a chain," and they plunged back into the narrations and chains of transmission. The woman said: "Where were you all until now?"³³

Ibn `Abd al-Barr cites Imâm Ah.mad as saying: "From where does Yah.yâ ibn Ma`în know al-Shâfi`î? He does not know al-Shâfi`î nor has any idea what al-Shâfi`î says!"³⁴ Ibn Râhûyah similarly conceded defeat before al-Shâfi`î's jurisprudence although himself reputed for fiqh.³⁵

Most Hadīth Scholars Do Not Possess Intelligence of the H.adīth

* `Abd al-Razzâq al-S.an`ânî, Sufyân's contemporary, was the teacher of the pillars of h.adīth memorization in their time - Ah.mad, Ibn Râhûyah, Ibn Ma`în, and Muh.ammad ibn Yah.yâ al-Dhuhlî. Yet when Muh.ammad ibn Yazîd al-Mustamlî asked Ah.mad: "Did he [`Abd al-Razzâq] possess fiqh?" Ah.mad replied: **"How rare is fiqh among those who know h.adīth!"**³⁶

Anas ibn Sîrîn said: "I came to Kûfa and found in it 4,000 persons pursuing h.adīth and 400 persons who had obtained fiqh."³⁷

Sufyân al-Thawrî: "Knowledge in our view is only the dispensation of a trustworthy learned person. As for strictness, anyone can be strict!"

Hujjat al-Islâm al-Ghazâlî in *al-Mustasfâ* and Imâm Ibn Qudâma in *Rawdat al-Nâzir* both said that an `Âlim may be an Imâm in a particular science and an uneducated common person in another.

Ibn `Abd al-Salâm said: "Most h.adīth scholars are ignorant in *fiqh*."³⁸ A majority of 90% according to Anas ibn Sîrîn - among the *Salaf*!

Al-Dhahabî said: "The majority of the h.adīth scholars have no understanding, no diligence in the actual knowledge of h.adīth, and no fear of Allâh regarding it."³⁹ All of the authorities al-Dhahabî listed as "those who are imitated in Islâm" are Jurisprudents and not merely h.adīth masters.

Al-Sakhâwî in his biography of Ibn H.ajar entitled *al-Jawâhir wa al-Durar fi Tarjamat Shaykh al-Islâm Ibn Hajar* states that al-Fâriqî said: "One who knows chains of h.adīth but not the legal rulings derived from them cannot be counted among the Scholars of the Law." His student Ibn Abî `As.rûn (d. 585) also followed this view in his book *al-Intis.âr*.⁴⁰

Not Every Sound Hadīth Forms Evidence

Ibrâhîm al-Nakha`î said: "Truly, I hear a h.adīth, then I see what part of it applies. I apply it and leave the rest."⁴¹ Shaykh Muh.ammad `Awwâma said: "Meaning, what is recognized by the authorities is retained while anything odd (*gharîb*), anomalous (*shâdhah*), or condemned (*munkar*) is put aside."

Yazîd ibn Abî H.abîb said: "When you hear a h.adīth, proclaim it; if it is recognized, [keep it,] otherwise, leave it."⁴²

Ibn Abî Laylâ said: "A man does not understand h.adīth until he knows what to take from it and what to leave."⁴³

`Abd al-Rah.mân ibn Mahdî, the Commander of the believers in H.adīth, said: "It is impermissible for someone to be an Imâm [i.e. to be imitated] until he knows what is sound and what is unsound and until he does not take everything [sound] as evidence, and until he knows the correct way to infer knowledge [in the Religion]."⁴⁴

Al-Shâfi`î narrated that Mâlik ibn Anas was told: "Ibn `Uyayna narrates from al-Zuhrî things you do not have!" He replied: "Why, should I narrate every single h.adīth I heard? Only if I wanted to misguide people!"⁴⁵

Shaykh `Abd al-Fattâh. Abû Ghudda mentioned some of the above examples and commented: "If the likes of Yah.yâ al-Qat.t.ân, Wakî` ibn al-Jarrâh., `Abd al-Razzâq, Yah.yâ ibn Ma`în, and those who compare with them, did not dare enter into *ijtihâd* and *fiqh*, then how rash are the claimants to *ijtihâd* in

our time! On top of it, they call the *Salaf* ignorant without the least shame nor modesty! Allâh is our refuge from failure."⁴⁶

The blessings and peace of Allah on the Prophet ﷺ his Family and his Companions!

NOTES

1. H.adîth of the Prophet ﷺ narrated from Mu`âwiya by al-Bukhârî and Muslim.
2. Al-Qârî, Mu`taqad Abî H.anîfata al-Imâm fî Abaway al-Rasûl `Alayhi al-S.alât wa al-Salâm (p. 42).
3. A nearly-mass-narrated (*mashhûr*) sound h.adîth of the Prophet - Allâh bless and greet him - reported from several Companions by al-Tirmidhî, Abû Dâwûd, Ibn Mâjah, and Ah.mad.
4. 4Ibn Abî H.âtim in the introduction of al-Jarh. wa al-Ta`dîl (p. 22-23); Ibn Abî Zayd, al-Jâmi` fî al-Sunan (p. 118-119); Ibn `Abd al-Barr, al-Intiqâ' (p. 61); al-Dhahabî. See Shaykh `Abd al-Fattah Abû Ghudda's comments on this statement in his notes on al-Lacknawî's al-Raf' wa al-Takmil (2nd ed. p. 368-369, 3rd ed. p. 90-91).
5. In al-Fatâwâ al-H.adîthiyya (p. 283).
6. Narrated by Ibn H.abbân in the introduction to al-Majrûh.în (1:42). He then narrates from Ibn Wahb a similar statement where he adds the names of `Amr ibn al-H.ârith and Ibn Mâjishûn.
7. Narrated by Ibn `Asâkir and al-Bayhaqî cf. Ibn Rajab, Sharh. al-`Ilal (1:413) and `Awwâma (p. 76).
8. Narrated by Qâd.î `Iyâd.. in Tartîb al-Madârik (2:427).
9. In Ibn al-Subkî, T.abaqât al-Shâfi`iyya al-Kubrâ (2:128).
10. Narrated by al-Khat.îb, al-Faqîh wal-Mutafaqqih (2:80).
11. Shaykh Ismâ`îl al-Ans.ârî as quoted by `Awwâma, Athar (p. 77).
12. Ibn H.ajar, Tahdhîb al-Tahdhîb (10:449-452 #817) and al-Dhahabî's Manâqib Abî H.anîfa.
13. Narrated by al-Dhahabî in Tadhkirat al-H.uffâz. (1:307) and Ibn H.ajar in Tahdhîb al-Tahdhîb (10:450).
14. Narrated by Ibn `Abd al-Barr in al-Intiqâ' (p. 124).
15. Narrated by al-Dhahabî in the Siyar (10:205).
16. Cf. Ibn Abî al-Wafâ, last page of the Karachi edition of al-Jawâhir al-Mud.iyya.
17. In Ibn `Abd al-Barr, Jâmi` Bayân al-`Ilm (1:83-84), al-Qâd.î `Iyâd.., Tartîb al-Madârik (2:62), al-Shât.ibî, al-Muwâfaqât (4:97-98).
18. "The Knowledge That Benefits is That Whose Rays Expand in the Breast and Whose Veil is Lifted in the Heart." Ibn `At.â' Allâh, H.ikam (#213).
19. Siyar (10:642).
20. Narrated mursal from al-H.asan by Ibn `Asâkir in his Târîkh and al-Khat.îb in al-Jâmi` li Akhlâq al-Râwî (1983 ed. 1:88 #27) cf. al-Jâmi` al-S.aghîr (#9598) and Kanz (#29337).
21. Cited by al-Dhahabî in the Siyar (al-Arna'ût. ed. 9:158, 12:328-329).
22. Cf. al-Dhahabî, Tadhkirat al-H.uffâz. (1:307) and Ibn H.ajar in Tahdhîb al-Tahdhîb (11:126-127).
23. In al-Sakhâwî, al-Jawâhir wa al-Durar (p. 21).
24. Ibn Rajab, Sharh. `Ilal al-Tirmidhî (1:411).
25. Cited from Zayd ibn Abî al-Zarqa' by al-Dhahabî, Siyar (al-Arna'ût. ed. 7:275).
26. Al-Sakhâwî, al-Jawâhir wa al-Durar (p. 20-23).
27. Narrated by al-Harawî al-Ans.ârî in Dhamm al-Kalâm (4:139 #907).
28. In Ibn `Abd al-Barr, Jâmi` Bayân al-`Ilm (2:175).
29. In al-Dhahabî, Tadhkirat al-H.uffâz. (2:776).
30. Narrated by Ibn Abî H.âtim in the introduction to his al-Jarh. wa al-Ta`dîl (p. 293), Ibn al-Jawzî in Manâqib al-Imâm Ah.mad (p. 63), and al-Dhahabî in Târîkh al-Islâm (chapter on Ah.mad).
31. In Muslim and the Four Sunan.
32. In al-Bukhârî and Muslim.
33. Ibn al-Subkî in T.abaqât al-Shâfi`iyya, al-Sakhâwî in his introduction to al-Jawâhir wa al-Durar, and al-Haytamî in his Fatâwâ H.adîthiyya (p. 283). Something similar is narrated of Ah.mad by Ibn Rajab in his Dhayl T.abaqât al-H.anâbila (1:131) and al-`Ulaymî in al-Manhaj al-Ah.mad (2:208).
34. Ibn `Abd al-Barr, Jâmi` Bayân al-`Ilm (2:160).
35. Ish.âq ibn Ibrâhîm ibn Makhlad, known as Ish.âq ibn Râhûyah or Râhawayh, Abû Ya`qûb al-Tamîmî al-Marwazî al-Hanzali (d. 238), one of the major h.adîth Masters. Abû Qudâma considered him greater than Imâm Ah.mad in memorization of h.adîth, a remarkable assessment considering

Ah.mad's knowledge of 700,000 to a million narrations according to his son `Abd Allâh's and Abû Zur`a al-Râzî's estimations. He once said of himself: "I never wrote anything except I memorized it, and I can now see before me more than 70,000 h.adîths in my book"; "I know the place of 100,000 h.adîths as if I were looking at them, and I memorize 70,000 of them by heart - all sound (*s.ah.îh.a*) - and 4,000 falsified ones." [Narrated by al-Khat.îb in al-Jâmi` li Akhlâq al-Râwî (2:380-381 #1832-1833).] He did not reach the same stature in fiqh. Al-Bayhaqî and others narrate that he unsuccessfully debated al-Shâfi`î on a legal question, as a result of which the latter disapproved of his title as the "jurisprudent of Khurâsân." To a Jahmî scholar who said: "I disbelieve in a Lord that descends from one heaven to another heaven," Ibn Râhûyah replied: "I believe in a Lord that does what He wishes." [Narrated by al-Dhahabî who identifies the scholar as Ibrâhîm ibn (Hishâm) Abî S.âlih. in Mukhtas.ar al-`Uluw (p. 191 #234).] Al-Bayhaqî comments: "Ish.âq ibn Ibrâhîm al-Hanzali made it clear, in this report, that he considers the Descent (*al-nuzûl*) one of the Attributes of Action (*min s.ifât al-fi`l*). Secondly, he spoke of a descent without `how'. This proves he did not hold displacement (*al-intiqâl*) and movement from one place to another (*al-zawâl*) concerning it." [See post titled, "The `Descent' of Allâh Most High".] Sources: Ibn Abî Ya`lâ, T.abaqât al-H.anâbila (1:6, 1:184); al-Bayhaqî, Manâqib al-Shâfi`î (1:213) and al-Asmâ' wa al-S.ifât (2:375-376 #951); al-Dhahabî, Siyar (9:558 #1877); Ibn al-Subkî, T.abaqât al-Shâfi`iyya al-Kubrâ (2:89-90, 9:81).

36. Narrated by Abû Ya`lâ in T.abaqât al-H.anâbila (1:329) and cited by Shaykh Abû Ghudda in his introduction to Muh.ammad al-Shaybânî's Muwat.t.a' and his short masterpiece al-Isnâd min al-Dîn (p. 68).
37. Narrated by al-Râmahurmuzî in al-Muh.addith al-Fâs.il (p. 560).
38. Ibn `Abd al-Salâm, al-Fatâwâ al-Maws.iliyya (p. 132-134).
39. In al-Sakhâwî, al-Jawâhir wa al-Durar (p. 18).
40. Al-Sakhâwî, al-Jawâhir wa al-Durar (p. 20-23).
41. Narrated from Ibn Abî Khaythama by Abû Nu`aym in the H.ilya (4:225) and Ibn Rajab in Sharh. `Ilal al-Tirmidhî (1:413).
42. In Ibn Rajab, Sharh. `Ilal al-Tirmidhî (1:413).
43. In Ibn `Abd al-Barr, Jâmi` Bayân al-`Ilm (2:130).
44. Narrated by Abû Nu`aym in the H.ilya (9:3).
45. Narrated by al-Khat.îb in al-Jâmi` li Akhlâq al-Râwî (2:109).
46. Abû Ghudda, al-Isnâd min al-Dîn (p. 68). He means by his remarks al-Albânî and others of his ilk. Abû Ghudda's student, Shaykh Muh.ammad `Awwâma, listed several examples of this rule of the Salaf in his Athar al-H.adîth al-Sharîf fi Ikhtilâf al-A'immat al-Fuqahâ' ("The Mark of the Noble H.adîth in the Differences of the Imâms of Jurisprudence").

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