

Introduction

The Musnad of Ibn Hanbal is probably the first of the six books of hadith considered authentic by Sunni Muslims, since its author died 15 years before the death of the senior-most of the six hadith compilers, Muhammad bin Isma'il al-Bukhari (d. 256 AH), and 62 years before the last of them, Ahmad bin Shu'ayb al-Nasa'i, passed away (303 AH). Throughout history, Sunni scholars have attached great importance to Ibn Hanbal's Musnad and eulogized it. Hafiz Abu Musa Madyani (581 AH), writes:

This book is a great source and a reliable reference work for researchers of hadith. The author has selected from the bulky hadith literature, a large number of narrations to serve as guidelines and support for the people so that when differences arise they take refuge in them and cite them as authentic.^{[1](#)}

Shams al-Din Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Dhahabi (748 AH) writes:

This book focuses on the hadith of the Prophet. There are very few hadith not included (in this collection) whose authenticity has been confirmed...One of the fortunate things about the Musnad is that we find very few hadith which are considered inauthentic.^{[2](#)}

Ibn al-Jazari (833 AH) is even more ecstatic about Ibn Hanbal's Musnad, and says:

On the face of the earth no better book of hadith has been compiled.^{[3](#)}

Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani writes in *Tajrid Zawa'id al-Musnad al-Bazzaz*:

If a hadith is mentioned in Musnad Ibn Hanbal, other Masanid are not cited for its sources.

Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (849–911 AH)^{[4](#)} says:

Even the weak hadith found in it are near to hasan (fair).^{[5](#)}

Although these expressions are a clear exaggeration, they nonetheless confirm the importance of this book for the Sunnis. In the light of historical accounts, it was a habit among the Sunnis of the past to recite this book in the presence of scholars of hadith, and at times such a recitation would be held in a sacred place. For instance, during the first half of the 9th century AH, Ibn Hanbal's Musnad was recited

in the presence of Shams al-Din Muhammad bin Muhammad al-Jazari in the Masjid al-Haram of Mecca with the last session ending in the month of Rabi' al-Awwal 828 AH.⁶ It is also reported that during the 12th century AH (18th century CE), a group of pious Sunnis gathered in the Prophet's Mosque in Medina to recite Ibn Hanbal's Musnad in 56 sessions.⁷

However, the most outstanding characteristic of the Musnad is that it contains several eye catching hadith on the merits of the Prophet's Ahl al-Bayt ('a), whereas most of the compilers of the other masanid, siyah and sunan, have either ignored these ahadith or related only a few of them. Ibn Hanbal got into trouble with the authorities for having related these ahadith on the merits of the Ahl al-Bayt ('a) and his house was searched on the orders of the 'Abbasid caliph Mutawakkil on suspicion of supporting the Alawid cause.⁸

It is a well known fact that Ahmad bin Shu'ayb al-Nasa'i, the last of the six Sunni compilers of the siyah al-sittah, relied on Ahmad bin Hanbal's narrations for writing his excellent work titled Khasa'is Amir al-Mu'minin 'Ali bin Abi Talib ('a).⁹ In short, the Musnad contains narrations, many of which are considered authentic from the Shi'ite point of view.

These are so pronounced when compared to the other Sunni collections of hadith that orientalists and researchers have attempted to investigate the cause, and after drawing a comparison between Ahmad bin Hanbal and his contemporary compilers of the siyah al-sittah, have come to the conclusion that Muhammad bin Isma'il al-Bukhari and Muslim bin Hajjaj al-Qushayri, for fear of the 'Abbasids, left out these ahadith but since Ahmad was courageous he showed no fear in relating the ahadith on the merits of Imam 'Ali ('a) and the Ahl al-Bayt ('a).¹⁰

Ibn Hanbal did not confine the merits of the Prophet's Ahl al-Bayt ('a) to his book, but whenever necessary he opened his mouth to speak about these virtues. Despite the fact that he held all the companions of the Prophet in great esteem and considered those who cursed them to be outside the pale of Islam,¹¹ he strongly defended the superiority of the Prophet's immediate family against their enemies, especially against Mutawakkil who left no stone unturned in his enmity to the Ahl al-Bayt ('a). His son 'Abdullah bin Ahmad relates:

Once, when I was sitting with my father, a group of the people of Karkh (a locality of Baghdad) came and started a discussion on the caliphate of Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman and (Imam) 'Ali ('a). My father raised his head and facing them said:

O people, you have said enough concerning (Imam) 'Ali ('a) and the caliphate. Be informed that the caliphate did not embellish (Imam) 'Ali ('a) but it was (Imam) 'Ali ('a) who embellished the caliphate.

Ibn Abi al-Hadid Mu'tazili (d. 655 AH), commenting on the above remarks of Ahmad bin Hanbal says:¹²

The meaning of this statement is that the other caliphs adorned themselves with the caliphate and the caliphate covered their flaws, but there was no shortcoming or deficiency in (Imam) 'Ali ('a) to be made

up by the caliphate. [13](#)

‘Abdullah bin Ahmad bin Hanbal also quotes his father as saying:

No narration with genuine isnad (chain of authority) has been related on the merits of anyone else (of the companions), as in the case of (Imam) ‘Ali (‘a). [14](#)

He further states:

I asked my father what credence he had concerning the preferential merits of the companions? He replied:

In the matter of caliphate, Abu Bakr, ‘Umar and ‘Uthman are superior to all others.

I asked him what about (Imam) ‘Ali (‘a)? He answered:

O my son! (Imam) ‘Ali bin Abi Talib (‘a) is from a family concerning whom (whose merits) no one can deliberate. [15](#)

One of the students of Ibn Hanbal narrates:

We were in the presence of Ahmad bin Hanbal when a person asked:

O Aba ‘Abdillah! What is your opinion about the hadith which says that (Imam) ‘Ali (‘a) stated:

“I am the distributor of hell?”

Ibn Hanbal replied:

From what aspect do you doubt its credence? Has it not been related that the Prophet told (Imam) ‘Ali (‘a): “None will love you but the faithful believer and none will hate you but the hypocrite?”

We said: Yes.

He asked: Where is the place of the faithful believer?

“In paradise”, we answered.

He asked: Where is the place of the hypocrite?

“In hell”, we replied.

He said: ‘Ali is thus the distributor of hell. [16](#)

Ibn Hanbal’s belief thus bears close resemblance to that of his teacher, Shafi‘i, who also recorded the merits and virtues of Imam ‘Ali (‘a) and his descendants and considered himself their devotee. When Ibn

Hanbal was asked about the battle between Imam ‘Ali (‘a) and Mu‘awiyah bin Abi Sufyan, he said regarding them he knew nothing but good,^{[17](#)} but added that in the field of jurisprudential studies he found Imam ‘Ali (‘a) to be linked to the truth.

For instance, when in his presence Shafi‘i was accused of tashayyu for listing Imam ‘Ali’s (‘a) battles with Mu‘awiyah and the Khawarij under the rules of transgressors, he replied that among the companions of the Prophet, Imam ‘Ali (‘a) was the first leader who had to deal with the sedition and revolt of opponents.

This reply makes it clear that Shafi‘i’s categorizing of the battles between Imam ‘Ali (‘a) and Mu‘awiyah under rules for transgressors, does not expose him to the fault-finding of his critics. In fact, for any fair observer, the verdict between Shafi‘i and his critics is that Mu‘awiyah was a transgressor, as could be further confirmed by the famous saying of the Prophet to his companion ‘Ammar bin Yasir: “taqtuluka al-fi’ah al-baghiyah” (you will be killed by a party of transgressors).^{[18](#)}

No one can deny that ‘Ammar, while fighting on the side of Imam ‘Ali (‘a), was killed by the forces of Mu‘awiyah during one of the battles of the Siffin War, and thus in the light of this hadith, beyond an iota of doubt, Mu‘awiyah is a transgressor.^{[19](#)}

Ibn Hanbal was a contemporary of four of the infallible Imams of the Prophet’s Household – Imam Musa al-Kazim (‘a), Imam ‘Ali bin Musa al-Ridha’ (‘a), Imam Muhammad al-Jawad (‘a) and Imam ‘Ali al-Hadi (‘a). The author of Rawzat al-Jannat relates on the authority of Daylami’s Irshad al-Qulub that Ahmad bin Hanbal was a student of Imam al-Kazim (‘a).^{[20](#)}

Shaykh al-Ta’ifah Tusi considers him among the students of Imam al-Ridha’ (‘a).^{[21](#)} A contemporary researcher pointing out Ibn Hanbal’s links with Imami scholars, writes that he studied under many of those known to be followers of the school of Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq (‘a), and for this reason he has often been criticized by the enemies of the Shi‘ites.^{[22](#)}

In view of the above facts it could be said that since Ahmad bin Hanbal was under the influence of the Infallible Imams (‘a) or their disciples or that he had a spirit of courage and fair-mindedness, he did not hesitate to include in his Musnad many of the hadith on the virtues and merits of the Ahl al-Bayt (‘a). These hadith are so eye-catching that one of the contemporary scholars has collected them in an exclusive work titled Musnad al-Manaqib.^{[23](#)}

In this article the writer has selected some hadith from the Musnad and highlighted them with brief explanations.

^{[1.](#)} Abu Musa al-Madyani, Khasa’is al-Musnad (This treatise has been published at the beginning of Ibn Hanbal’s Musnad by Ahmad Muhammad Shakir), p. 21.

^{[2.](#)} Al-Jazari, Muhammad bin Muhammad, al-Mus‘ad al-Ahmad fi Khatm-i Musnad al-Imam Ahmad, p. 39. This treatise has also been included by Shakir in his introduction to the Musnad.

^{[3.](#)} Ibid, p. 28.

- [4.](#) Al-Suyuti, Jalal al-Din, Jami' al-Ahadith, compiled and arranged by 'Abbas Ahmad Saqar and Ahmad 'Abd al-Jawad, published in 21 volumes by Dar al-Fikr, Beirut, 1994.
- [5.](#) Hasan or fair, according to Sunni traditionists is the term used to classify a hadith which is traced to the Prophet or his companions or the second generation of Muslims, on the authority (sanad) of a person of short memory but considered reliable. This type of hadith is also free of shadh, which means a tradition of reliable isnad but contrary to another similarly attested tradition.
- [6.](#) Ibn al-Jazari, al-Mus'ad al-Ahmad fi khatm Musnad al-Imam Ahmad, pp. 53-55.
- [7.](#) Al-Muradi, Silk al-Durar, vol. 4, p. 160
- [8.](#) On Ibn Hanbal's accusation of support for the Alawids refer to Abu al-Faraj 'Abd al-Rahman bin 'Ali bin al-Jawzi's Manaqib al-Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal with a foreword by 'Adil Nuwayhiz, Dar al-Afaq al-Jadidah Publishers, Beirut, pp. 359-362, 1973.
- [9.](#) This work brought about the death of al-Nasa'i. It is said that when on a trip to Damascus he found the people of Syria ignorant of the lofty personality of Imam 'Ali ('a), he decided to write a book on the merits of the Commander of the Faithful. When al-Nasa'i started reading his work from the pulpit of the Mosque of Damascus, the enemies of the Prophet's Household pulled him down and beat him so severely that he succumbed to his injuries in Palestine.
- [10.](#) Ahmad Amin, Zuha al-Islam, 6th edition, vol. 2, pp. 122-123, published by Maktabah al-Nihzat al-Misriyyah, 1961.
- [11.](#) Ibn al-Jawzi, Manaqib al-Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal, p. 165.
- [12.](#) Ibid.
- [13.](#) Ibn Abi al-Hadid, Sharh Nahj al-Balaghah, vol. 1, p. 17.
- [14.](#) Ibn al-Jawzi, Manaqib al-Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal, p. 163.
- [15.](#) Ibid.
- [16.](#) Abu al-Husayn Muhammad bin Abi Ya'la, Tabaqat al-Hanabilah, vol. 1, p. 320, edited by Muhammad Hamid al-Faqi, Cairo, 1952. It is interesting to note that Ibn Hanbal's reply bears close resemblance to the answer given by Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq ('a) to Mufazzal bin 'Umar concerning this same hadith. Imam 'Ali bin Musa al-Ridha' ('a) also gave a similar reply to Ma'mun; refer to 'Allamah Majlisi: Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 39, pp. 193-194, Dar al-Ihya' al-Turath al-'Arabi, Beirut. It is essential to know that according to many narrations, Imam 'Ali ('a) has stated: I am the distributor of heaven and hell", Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 39, p. 199.
- [17.](#) Ibn al-Jawzi, Manaqib al-Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal, p. 164.
- [18.](#) Baghi is used to describe a person who on the basis of a wrong cause rebels against and fights the just leader. In the view of Imami scholars, such a baghi is a kafir. Refer to al-Miqdad bin 'Abdullah al-Suyuri's Kanz al-'Irfan fi fiqh al-Qur'an, edited by Muhammad Baqir Behbudi, al-Maktabah al-Murtazawiiyyah, vol. 1, p. 386, Tehran 1384 AH.
- [19.](#) For more details refer to Shaykh Muhammad Abu Zuhrah's book Ibn Hanbal: Hayatuhu wa 'Asruhu, Ara'uhu wa Fiqhuh, pp. 148-149.
- [20.](#) Muhammad Baqir al-Musawi al-Khwansari, Rawzat al-Jannat, vol. 1, p. 187, Maktabah Isma'iliyan, Tehran, 1390 AH.
- [21.](#) Al-Tusi, Muhammad bin al-Hasan, al-Rijal, p. 367, edited by Muhammad Sadiq Al-i Bahr al-'Ulum, 1st edition, Najaf, 1381/1961. Also refer to Sayyid Abu al-Qasim al-Khu'i: Mu'jam Rijal al-Hadith, vol. 2, p. 260, 3rd edition, Dar al-Zahra', Beirut, 1403/1983.
- [22.](#) Asad Haydar, al-Imam al-Sadiq wa al-Madhab al-Arba'ah, vol. 2, pp. 503-506, 2nd edition, Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi, Beirut, 1392/1971. The author has listed the names of Ibn Hanbal's teachers, who according to him had Shi'ite tendencies, but a review of Shi'ite narrators in Sayyid al-Khu'i's Mu'jam Rijal al-Hadith shows that no hadith has been related from Ahmad bin Hanbal in authoritative Shi'ite books of hadith.
- [23.](#) Ustadi, Ridha', Musnad al-Ridha' ('a) in 40 articles, p. 154, 1st edition, published by Kitab-Khaneh Ayatullah Mar'ashi Najafi, Qum, 1413/1371.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/message-thaqalayn/vol-6-no-2-winter-2001/glimpses-shiism-musnad-hanbal>

