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High and low: *Al-isnād al-‘ālī* in the theory and practice of the transmission of science

Jan Just Witkam

The question may be asked, what is the purpose of authoritative texts, and more specifically, why is there authority of knowledge in Islam? The knowledge of the law, *fiqh*, jurisprudence, in Arabic, is the Law itself, a set of rules for all aspects of human conduct.¹ The ultimate authoritative source is God’s uncreated word, the Qur’ān, which is His literal Word, His eternal attribute, and thereby in terms of hierarchy the highest possible source of knowledge and law. It contains everything and it is God’s final and complete revelation to mankind, formulated in clear Arabic of incomparable quality. However, that divine revelation to mankind abruptly ended with the death of the Prophet Muḥammad in 11/632, and embodied as it is in the book which we know as the Qur’ān, it is a relatively short text. It was soon felt within the young Muslim community that the Qur’ān was sometimes cryptic and generally too succinct to give a full set of rules of conduct for the believers which is valid for all times and all places and under all circumstances. Hence came into being an immense corpus of human-made texts, elucidating cryptic passages of the divine Word, elaborating on the circumstances under which the Revelation had come about, and adding to the rules embodied in the Qur’ān. This is usually called Tradition, *ḥadīth*, although the word rather means “storytelling”, and mainly constitutes the fragments of information that we have from the life and times of the Prophet and his companions. The scriptural basis for this is in Qur’ān 33:21, where God says: “For you there is in the Messenger of God a good example (*uswa ḥasana*) ...” The same is said, for that matter, of the example given by the Prophet Ibrāhīm and those who are with him (Qur’ān 60:4, 60:6), but it is the good example of the Prophet Muḥammad that has given birth to an elaborate science of precedent, coated in a myriad of little stories. In course of time, Revelation (Qur’ān) and Tradition (*ḥadīth*) have become the two material sources of Islamic law, the code of conduct for each and every Muslim. The other sources of the Law are not really material sources but rather procedures for the derivation of rules of conduct, namely reasoning by analogy and consensus of the scholars of a certain period. Much later, and rather on the periphery of the Islamic world, local cus-

¹ I gratefully acknowledge the help I received at several occasions from the late Dr. Gauthier Juynboll (Leiden), and especially from Prof. Ibrahim Hatiboğlu (University of Bursa) on matters of *riwāyat al-ḥadīth*. A generous grant of the *Thesaurus Islamicus* enabled me to complete the final version of this essay in July 2009 in the tranquillity of a private study in Pembroke College, Cambridge.

tomary law has played a role as well and was sometimes used as a third material source of the Law. Caretakers of this sacral knowledge and guardians of its proper use were the Muslim scholars, *‘ulamā’*, and jurists, *fuqabā’*.

As neat as the theoretical picture of the Law and its sources looks like, so problematic it is sometimes in practice. The authenticity and meaning of the Qurʾān have been subject of discussion ever since the complete divine text was first committed to parchment, some twenty years after the death of the Messenger of God. Was the text complete? How should the text be read in view of the defective script which was used for Arabic? What did the text actually mean for the believers in the rapidly changing world around them? Should the interpretation of the divine text be restricted or expanded, must it be only literal or can it also be metaphoric? These were just a few of the questions that raged around in the early theologian milieu. In the end, after the formative period, which lasted some two and a half centuries, the jurists of *sunni*, orthodox, Islam left little room for free and independent reasoning. The scholars closed the gate of independent research, no doubt a wise measure if the community was to survive without too much of doctrinal strife, and at the same time they refined their methods of deduction of rules from the existing material sources. The emergence of the canonical collections of Tradition, from which the spurious elements had been removed, and the simultaneous emergence of auxiliary sciences, such as linguistics and logic, show how the idea that new rules could very well be mined from the existing sources, further developed.

The text of the divine revelation was fixated in an authoritative edition in c. 650. The texts of storytelling, Tradition (*ḥadīth*), were only fixated about two centuries later, in c. 850, most importantly in six authoritative collections. The two best known and most authoritative compilers of such collections were al-Bukhārī and Muslim. The generic title of such canonical books was *Ṣaḥīḥ*, “sound”, “correct”, which implies that their authenticity is not to be cast in doubt. In their composition the development of a critical approach can be observed, as opposed to the uncritical and tendentious inclusion during the formative period of Islam of all sorts of legendary material, Jewish traditions, fraudulent practice of transmitters, undesired innovations, and the like. Al-Bukhārī is said to have included in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*-compilation only a small part of the anecdotal material that floated around and that he had collected. Most of it he rejected as suspect, either because of content, or for lack of support or for both reasons. However critical al-Bukhārī and the other compilers of the canonical collections were in sifting their material, this has not spared them the criticism of modern Western scholarship, which has argued that Muslim Tradition in fact still contains numerous elements which are mere projections of a later period on the earliest years of Islam. This is, of course, fiercely rejected by modern Muslim scholarship and it is considered to be an attack on the very foundations of the Law, as the authenticity of its basis was severely compromised by it.

But criticism in modern times comes sometimes also from inside the Muslim community. A single example may suffice. The reliability of the companions of the Prophet Muḥammad (and therefore the best authorities on the circumstances of his life) was in the first half of 2007 such a fiercely debated issue in Egypt, that Dr. Muḥammad Shaykh Ṭanṭāwī, the Shaykh al-Azhar, in the heat of public discussions exclaimed that it would be best to give Islam a sixth pillar, namely the obligation to respect the Prophet and his companions.² What had happened? Several books by a Lebanese (?) author, writing under the pseudonym Zakariyā' Uzūn, had given rise to a number of articles in the secular press.³ In his book entitled "The Crime of/to al-Bukhārī", Uzūn, who does not express his opinions in an Orientalist discourse, professes that he is averse of the sanctification of the past (*taqḍīs al-māḍī*). With a small number of well-chosen anecdotes told in al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ* he shows that much of what is nowadays accepted as fact is actually resting on a basis of textual quicksand. He investigates a number of themes which appeal to the modern reader. He scrutinizes for instance what sort of anecdotes al-Bukhārī transmitted about the Qur'ān, about the Prophet Muḥammad and about the position of women. On this basis he underlines the internal contradictions that can be found in the stories, and reflects on how we must understand a text that has come into being more than a thousand years ago. Uzūn comes to the conclusion that the *Ṣaḥīḥ* abounds of contradictions and absurdities. At one place we find that the Prophet Muḥammad was visited during Ramaḍān two or three times by the angel Gabriel, and elsewhere al-Bukhārī reports that this happened in fact every night in Ramaḍān. At some place it is said that King David visited one hundred women on one day, yet elsewhere it is reported by al-Bukhārī that he only visited seventy women that day. At one place we read that seventy thousand Muslims will enter Paradise, yet elsewhere their number is given as seven hundred thousand. In one passage the Prophet Muḥammad is preparing date wine himself, in another he is issuing a prohibition against doing so, and so on and so forth.

The non-Muslim reader of Uzūn's book is hardly impressed, but these absurdities and contradictions severely affect the delicate building of the Law with all its intricately interconnected holy texts and pious adagia, which are all considered to be literally true. Transposed to Christian conditions it is difficult to imagine how the reliability of one of Christ's Disciples, or even of one of the venerable Church Fathers, would cause a roaring controversy of the same intensity as did the discussions on the alleged lack of reliability of the Prophet's companion Abū Hurayra caused in the Egyptian press in 2007. That fact precisely il-

² I have described the affair in some detail in my article "De zesde zuil van de islam", *De Gids* 171/1 (January 2008), 9-19.

³ Zakariyā' Uzūn, *Jināyat al-Bukhārī. Inqāḍ al-dīn min Imām al-Muḥaddithīn*, Bayrūt (Riyāḍ al-Rayyis) 2004, and his work by the same publisher *Jināyat al-Shāfi'ī. Takhlīṣ al-umma min fiqh al-a'imma*, Bayrūt 2005.

illustrates the difference between the approach to holy texts in Islam and Christianity. Christians see their holy texts as divinely inspired, but in Islam the Qurʾānic text is much more than that. It is in an absolutist way the literal word of God, and ignoring or rejecting this simply constitutes apostasy. Casting doubt on the historical truth of the Tradition is at least tantamount to calumny of the *ṣahāba*, the Companions of the Prophet, it can be considered as *tashkīk*, sowing doubt within the community, and could even be constructed as the vilification of the Prophet, which is even worse than apostasy.

The usual fragment of a Tradition, a story, consists of two parts, which are equally important and which validate each other. First there is the text of the anecdote from the life of the Prophet Muḥammad or one of his companions, for which the term *matn*, “content” is used. The *matn* is supported by a chain of authorities, by which the last transmitter traces back the ancestry of his *matn* to an authoritative personality, preferably the Prophet Muḥammad himself, or an important personality around the Prophet. For this support the term *isnād*, “support” is used. Without this “support” the “content” loses much of its value and trustworthiness. Such “support” might be compared to the critical apparatus in an edition, and repeatedly the “support” occupies more space than the “content”. The somewhat dull reading of the support is compensated by its doctrinal importance, and the intricacies of the construction of the “support” have been at the forefront of the attention of the *muhaddithūn*, the specialists of Muslim Tradition, ever since al-Bukhārī, Muslim and their colleagues have come with their canonical collections. This is not so strange, as the human element in the transmission of the sacral anecdotes is in fact considered to be the weakest part of it, as we will see.

The concern of traditional Muslim scholarship in ensuring that the transmission of science finds place with as little loss of authenticity as possible is almost proverbial. The very idea that the content of a text could only be accepted as authentic if the way along which that text was transmitted is known to be complete and sound, is the practical implication of this concern. The stakes were high, of course, because the knowledge in question was far from gratuitous. The critique of *isnāds* is a well-developed science among the traditionists, and practically all possible features, including all hypothetical errors and mistakes, have been described by them. Such works do not only give us insights into the subject for which they were actually written but also, in a more general way, on scholarship and the making of books. Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ included into his *Introduction to the Science of Tradition* a chapter on recording traditions and the writing of books. Normative as such texts are meant to be for the traditionists, for the later researcher they have an immense descriptive value as well.⁴ Such instructions include both gen-

⁴ *Muqaddimat Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ fi ʿilm al-ḥadīth*, chapter 25: *Fī kitābat al-ḥadīth wa-kayfiyat dabt al-kitāb wa-taqyīdih* (“On the writing down of Tradition, on establishing the text and on the way of writing it down”). For editions see below n. 15.

eral attitudes and all sorts of practical details (*umūr muḥfida*, useful matters, Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ calls them) that have apparently bothered the traditional scholars. In addition to the sources given by Franz Rosenthal⁵ there are the fairly explicit works by al-Rāmāhurmuḥzī (d. 360/971),⁶ al-Samʿānī (d. 562/1166),⁷ Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ (d. 643/1245), and many others. Works of the genre *Ādāb ṭalab al-ʿilm* or *Akblāq al-ʿulamāʾ* also give us insights in the making and handling of books and texts, which are often not found elsewhere.

To give an example, in his chapter on bookmaking Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ mentions sixteen subjects which the scholar who wishes to write a book must take into consideration. These range from writing in a clear script, with diacritics, *ihmāl* signs and vowels where necessary, from formal procedures about copying and collation, to practices of correction, use of abbreviations, on appropriate manners during the taking of courses, and so on. That chapter is full of interesting details and abounds of technical terminology.

A related subject discussed by Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, but in a separate chapter in his *Muqaddima*, is *ʿulūw* (highness, or “going up”) and accordingly (because everything has its opposite) also *nuzūl* (lowness, or “going down”) in the *isnād*. The *isnād* which is characterized by highness is called *al-isnād al-ʿālī* and its opposite, the one characterized by lowness, is called *al-isnād al-nāzil*. These two concepts are at the back of the mind of every *muḥaddith*, traditionist, but few such scholars have made explicit mention of these two concepts, let alone that they have dedicated a theoretical treatment to them. The idea at the basis of the concept of high and low *isnāds* is that the *muḥaddithūn* have realized that with each transmission of information there is a risk that details of the *matn*, the text of the *ḥadīth*, are lost. Oral transmission is only human, and therefore feeble. They strive, therefore, to have as short supports as possible, and may even wish to bypass the revered compilers of the canonical collections of *ḥadīth*.

In order to counteract the inevitable deterioration of the quality of the text, the *ḥadīth*-scholars have come up with several stratagems. The repeated insistence on accurate work is one of them. Another of their tactics is perhaps more surprising. It consists of encouraging transmitters to make the single moments of transmission in the *isnād* as few as possible or in other words: let the chain be as short as possible. From that must follow that the risk of deterioration of the text can only be very little. Repeatedly, this is taken to the extreme: Very young scholars listen to very old authorities, then they store the knowledge which they have obtained from

⁵ *The technique and approach of Muslim scholarship*, Roma 1947. Adam Gacek in the bibliographical part of his *The Arabic manuscript tradition*, Leiden 2001, has followed-up the subject.

⁶ *Al-Muḥaddith al-fāṣil bayn al-rāwī wa-l-wāʿī*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAjjāj al-Khaṭīb, Beirut 1971.

⁷ *Die Methodik des Diktatkollegs. Adab al-implāʾ wa-l-istimlāʾ*, ed. M. Weisweiler, Leiden 1952.

their teachers in their memory, and many years later, after they themselves have become old men, or women for that matter, they in turn offer their knowledge to a very young audience indeed, and so on. It is as if retired university professors are teaching to pupils of a kindergarten, who generations later become professors themselves, retire, and only then start teaching to a class of the very young, and so on. In this way there are only short *isnāds* covering an enormous period of time, and, according to the prevalent ideas, enhancing the quality of the text which is transmitted. The obsession of the dangers of the long *isnād* must have come up in a period, well after the fixation of the canonical collections, when *isnāds* started to grow and grow, which must have worried the scholars. By constructing their *isnāds* in this way scholars may have tried to escape from the inevitable deterioration of the texts which they were transmitting. One of the places where one can observe such very short lines of transmission is in the *riwāya* notices on the title-page of manuscripts. In the following, I will analyse one pertinent example.

Although high *isnāds* are often recorded on the title-page of a manuscript, it takes generally a detailed analysis of the *riwāya*, the transmission history of a text, to realize that we have, in fact a high *isnād* here. Examples of this feature abound. The Leiden manuscript Or. 580,⁸ which was copied in the years 594-595/1198-1199 in Damascus by Ismāʿil b. ʿAbdallāh Ibn al-Anmāṭī al-Anṣārī al-Miṣri, from the author's copy (as is stated on the title-page of each *juzʿ*), contains in 15 *ajzāʿ* the entire text of the compilation work *Fawāʿid al-ḥadīth* by Abū l-Qāsim Tammām b. Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh Ibn al-Junayd al-Rāzī (d. 414/1023).⁹ The title-page of the first quire (all quires have title-pages of their own) has, apart from a great number of owners' and readers' notes, the following text written by the copyist:

⁸ This manuscript has been the subject of a detailed analysis in my inaugural lecture *Van Leiden naar Damascus en weer terug. Over vormen van islamitische lees- en leercultuur*, Leiden 2003, 33-142. The corpus of Damascene texts as published and analyzed by Stefan Leder, Yāsīn Muḥammad al-Sawwās, Maʾmūn al-Ṣāgharjī, *Muʿājam al-samāʿ al-dimashqīyya = Les certificats d'audition à Damas: 550-750 h./1155-1349* and *Ṣuwar al-makḥṭūʿāt al-muntakhaba min sanat 550 ilā 750 H/1155 ilā 1349 M = Recueil de documents: fac-similés des certificats d'audition à Damas 550-750 H/1155-1349*, Damascus 1996-2000, has been of indispensable help to me.

⁹ C. Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur*, Leiden, Grundbd. I, 166; F. Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*, Leiden 1967, I, 226-227. It is mentioned in Voorhoeve, *Handlist of Arabic manuscripts in the Library of Leiden University and other collections in the Netherlands*, The Hague/Boston 1980², 81. The entirely unorganized presentation of tradition materials in the collection by Tammām has been rearranged by Abū Sulaymān Jāsim b. Sulaymān al-Fuhayd al-Dawsarī under the title *al-Rawḍ al-bassām bi-tartīb wa-takbrīj jawāʿid Tammām*, Beirut (Dār al-Bashāʿir al-Islāmiyya) 1408/1987-1414/1994, 5 vols. This edition was made on the basis of the Leiden manuscript, which is referred to by al-Dawsarī as *al-Aṣl*, "the original". The other manuscript used by al-Dawsarī is the one preserved in the Zāhirīya Library in Damascus (now Maktabat al-Asad), which is divided into 30 *ajzāʿ*.

الجزء الأول من فوايد حديث أبي القسم تمام بن محمد بن عبد الله
 ابن جعفر الرازي الحافظ عن شيوخه رضي الله عنه وعنهم.
 رواية الشيخ ابي محمد عبد العزيز بن احمد بن محمد الكتاني الحافظ عنه
 رواية الشيخ ابي محمد عبد الكريم بن حمزة بن الخضر بن العباس السلمى عنه
 رواية الشيخ ابي طاهر بركات بن ابراهيم بن طاهر القرشي الخشوعي عنه
 سماع اسمعيل بن عبد الله بن عبد المحسن الانصارى عرف بابن الانماطى نفعه الله به امين

Translation:

- The first *juz'* of the *Fawā'id al-ḥadīth* by Abū l-Qāsim Tammām b. Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh b. Jaʿfar al-Rāzī, the one who knows the Qurʾān, on the authority of his *shaykhs*, may God be satisfied with him and with them.
- In the transmission of the Shaykh Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Kattānī, the one who knows the Qurʾān, on the latter's authority.
- In the transmission of the Shaykh Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Karīm b. Ḥamza b. al-Khiḍr b. al-ʿAbbās al-Sulamī, on the latter's authority.
- In the transmission of the Shaykh Abū Ṭāhir Barakāt b. Ibrāhīm b. Ṭāhir al-Qurashī al-Khushūʿī, on the latter's authority.
- In the certified listening session of Ismāʿīl b. ʿAbdallāh b. ʿAbd al-Muḥsin al-Anṣārī, known as Ibn al-Anmāṭī, may God make him useful, Amīn.¹⁰

This part of the text on the title-page can be analyzed as follows:

1. Between the compiler/author Tammām, who was born in 330/941-42 and who died on 3 Muḥarram 414/1023 and the copyist of the Leiden manuscript, Ibn al-Anmāṭī, who copied the first quire on the manuscript in Jumādā I 594/1198 there is a period of about two centuries. This stretch of time is bridged by the chain of authorities mentioned directly under the quire title.
2. The first transmitter of the text after the author/compiler Tammām is the Shaykh Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Kattānī who died in Jumādā II 466/1074 in Damascus. The session which is recorded for this purpose took place in the year 458/1065-66. That session cannot have taken place in the presence of Tammām, but it is not impossible that al-Kattānī has personally witnessed a session in which Tammām, who died forty years before the demise of al-Kattānī, functioned as the teacher.
3. On the authority of al-Kattānī the text is further transmitted by ʿAbd al-Karīm b. Ḥamza al-Sulamī. The session which is recorded for this purpose took place

¹⁰ For the sake of simplicity I leave out one listening session which was later added to the title-page of this manuscript. The transmission process described in this part of the title-page took place *before* the manufacture of the Leiden manuscript.

on 14 Jumādā I 525/1131. Al-Sulamī died in the following year, in Dhū l-Qa‘da 526/1132, in Damascus.

4. On the authority of al-Sulamī the text is further transmitted by the Abū Ṭāhir Barakāt al-Khushū‘ī who died in 597 or 598/1200-02. Al-Ṣafadī informs us that he originated from a family of traditionists and that he was an enthusiastic collector of reading certificates.¹¹
5. It is from al-Khushū‘ī that the copyist of the Leiden manuscript Or. 580, Ibn al-Anmāṭī, has heard the text, which he then copied. That took place, for the first quire of the manuscript, in the private mosque of al-Khushū‘ī in Damascus on 11 Jumādā 594/21 March 1198. The authenticity of the text copied by al-Khushū‘ī is greatly enhanced by the fact that he had the original author’s copy of the text available. He writes in the margin of the title-page: “*naqaltu min aṣl Tammām*” (“I copied from the original manuscript of Tammām”).¹²

When we consider more closely the chronology of the textual transmission on the basis of the *rivāyāt*, the transmissions, on the title-page, it strikes us that the period between author/compiler and copyist, of approximately two centuries, is covered in remarkably few steps. The transmission from the author to transmitter No. 2 must have taken place before 414/1023. The transmission from transmitter No. 2 to transmitter No. 3 takes place in 1065, more than 40 years later. The next transmission from No. 3 to No. 4 occurs in the year 1133, that is 66 years later. Finally, the text is transmitted from No. 4 to transmitter No. 5 68 years later in the year 1198. From the accounts of the sessions of transmission it is evident that there are no transmitters omitted from the chain, and therefore a pattern emerges of quite young tradition scholars, listening *ḥadīth* with an old *shaykh*, who then passes his knowledge, which he acquired a long time ago, on to another, quite young pupil. The Leiden manuscript Or. 580, from which the present example is taken, is far from exceptional in this respect.¹³ These are witnesses of the grave concern of the *muḥaddithūn* who need to have as few points of transfer of knowledge in an *isnād* as possible. This is the same concern that we see in the process of employing *al-isnād al-‘ālī*, the “high *isnād*”, which at first sight look rather artificial and hardly in touch with the reality of the teaching of Tradition.

¹¹ Khalīl b. Aybak al-Ṣafadī, *al-Wāfi bi-l-wafayāt*, eds. ‘Alī ‘Amāra and Jacqueline Sublet, Stuttgart/Berlin 1980, X, 117, No. 4573.

¹² MS Leiden, Or. 580, fol. 2a. This information is repeated by the copyist in his colophons in each quire of the Leiden manuscript.

¹³ MS Leiden Or. 122 has exactly such a list of *rivāyāt* on the title-page of each quire, to name but one of the many more examples. In a larger context of book history one might raise the question whether these *rivāyāt* have not been an important intermediate stage in the development of the title-page, which is a distinguishing feature between Islamic and later Western manuscripts. The answer to that question could be supplementary to what François Déroche states about the title-page in his *Islamic codicology. An introduction to the Study of Manuscripts in Arabic script*, London 2005, 311-317.

Tradition scholars have collected information and written about this phenomenon of *al-isnād al-‘ālī*. One of the relatively early authors on the subject is al-Khaṭīb al-Baġhdādī (d. 463/1071).¹⁴ He and other early authors stress the importance of short and reliable *isnāds*, but their ideas on the “high *isnād*” must be gathered from disparate fragments throughout their books. With the progress of time, and the ever increasing gap between *ḥadīth* scholars on the one hand and the lifetime of the Prophet Muḥammad on the other, the problem became more urgent, and that gave rise to a special treatment of the “high *isnād*”. An informative introduction to the subject of high and low *isnāds* can be found in the 29th chapter of *al-Muqaddima fi ‘ilm al-ḥadīth*, a work by a much later authority, Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ al-Shahrazūrī, a Damascene scholar who died in 643/1245. The text goes as follows in my tentative translation:¹⁵

Chapter 29: About the high and the low *isnād*.

First of all, the fundamental idea of the *isnād* is one of the good characteristics of this nation, and it is one of its most excellent habits. We transmit from more than one side on the authority of ‘Abdallāh b. al-Mubārak, may God be pleased with him: “The *isnād* is part of the religion, and if there was no *isnād*, people would just say what they want to say.” Aspiring at the high variety of the *isnād* is also a good habit. That is why it is recommended to explore this field, as we have said before.

Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal, may God be pleased with him, has said: “The search for a high *isnād* is a good habit done on the authority of the forefathers. We received a transmission from Yahyā b. Ma‘īn, may God be pleased with him, that someone asked him during

¹⁴ Brockelmann, *GAL*, Grundbd. I, 329. Cf. particularly his book *al-Jāmi‘ li-akblāq al-rāwī wa-ādāb al-sāmi‘*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Ajjā al-Khaṭīb, Beirut (Mu’assasat al-Risāla) 1414/1994², 2 vols.

¹⁵ *Muqaddimat Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ wa-maḥāsīn al-iṣṭilāḥ*. ed. ‘Ā’isha ‘Abd al-Raḥmān (Bint al-Shāṭi’), Cairo (Maṭba‘at Dār al-Kutub) 1974, 378-388. In this edition extensive quotations are given from the *Ziyādāt* by al-Bulqīnī on the *Muqaddima*. This is much less the case with the edition by Usāma al-Balkhī of the *Muqaddima*, published by Dār al-Kitāb al-‘Arabī in Beirut in 1426/2005, which also claims to contain these *Ziyādāt*. On the other hand, al-Balkhī’s edition has far fewer typing errors than that of ‘Ā’isha ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, whose list of errata (pp. 1031-1052) is obligatory reading. I have not seen the edition of al-Bulqīnī’s *Maḥāsīn al-iṣṭilāḥ* by ‘Ā’isha ‘Abd al-Raḥmān, to which al-Balkhī refers at several instances. For the purpose of this article I have not used the edition of Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ’s introduction by Nūr al-Dīn ‘Itr (Damascus/Beirut 1998), nor was I aware, at the time of writing of the present article, of the English translation of the *Muqaddima* (Ibn al-Salah al-Shahrazuri, *An Introduction to the Science of Hadīth. Kitāb ma’rifat anwā’ ‘ilm al-Hadīth*. Translated by Dr. Eerik Dickinson. Reading 2005). Al-Zarkashī’s notes on this work (*al-Nukat ‘alā Muqaddimat Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ*, ed. Muḥammad ‘Alī Samak, Beirut (Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmīya) 1425/2004, are useful for our further knowledge on book culture in Islam, but do not separately treat the “high *isnād*”. On the other hand, the compendium by al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Abdallāh al-Ṭībī, *al-Khulāṣa fi uṣūl al-ḥadīth*, ed. Ṣubḥī al-Badrī al-Samarrā’ī, Baġhdād (al-Khansā’) 1423/2002², 49-51, gives highly useful insights into the question of *al-isnād al-‘ālī*, which will be quoted hereafter. Al-Rāmahurmuzī has a chapter on high and low *isnāds*, *al-Muḥaddith al-Fāṣil*, 214-228.

his last illness: “What would you like best?” And then he answered: “An empty house and a high *isnād*.”

To this I add: The highness avoids that the *isnād* is affected by imperfections, because it is possible that one of the authorities in the *isnād* has made a mistake, accidentally or on purpose. When there are few authorities in the *isnād*, there are few possibilities that there are flaws. If there are many authorities, there are as many possibilities for defects. This is eminently evident. Therefore the requested highness in the transmission of the *ḥadīth* can be looked at in five different ways:

One. Nearness to the Messenger of God (God bless him and grant him peace) through a clean *isnād* which is not weak. This is the most elevated form of highness. We received a transmission on the authority of Muḥammad b. Aslam al-Ṭūsī, the learned ascetic, may God be pleased with him, that he said: “Nearness by *isnād*, is nearness or proximity to God, may He be honoured and elevated.” And this applies also to this matter because the nearness of the *isnād* is a proximity to the Messenger of God (God bless him and grant him peace), and proximity to the Prophet means being near to God.

Two. Al-Ḥākim Abū ‘Abdallāh al-Ḥāfiẓ has given the following statement: “It is the proximity to one of the *imāms* of *ḥadīth*, even if the number of that type of *imām* is great, to the Messenger of God (God bless him and grant him peace). If that exists in an *isnād*, that *isnād* is described as ‘high’ in view of its proximity to that *imām*, even if it is not a high *isnād* to the Messenger of God (God bless him and grant him peace).” The words of al-Ḥākim suggest that “highness” to the Messenger of God (God bless him and grant him peace) is not considered as the “highness” which is sought after in principle. Whoever says so is mistaken, because proximity to him (God bless him and grant him peace) by way of a clean *isnād* which is not weak, is most appropriate in this respect. This is not contested, not even by someone who has only the slightest amount of knowledge. It is as if al-Ḥākim with these words of him wanted to confirm the importance of “highness” of the *isnād* because of its nearness to an *imām*, even if that *imām* is not near to the Messenger of God (God bless him and grant him peace). And [it is as if] he wanted to argue against those who in this respect only take the nearness to the Messenger of God (God bless him and grant him peace) into account, even if it is a weak *isnād*. And that is why he used the example of the *ḥadīth* of Abū Hudba, Dinār, al-Ashajj and similar scholars. God knows best.

Three. It concerns the “highness” in regard to the transmission through the two *Ṣaḥīḥs* or through either one of the two, or through another trustworthy book different from these two. This finally concerns what is known as “agreement” (*al-muwāfaqa*), as “substitution” (*al-ibdāl*), as “equality” (*al-musāwāt*) and as “personal oral transmission” (*al-muṣāfaḥa*). The *ḥadīth*-scholars of the later generations have occupied themselves with this type, and I have found a treatment of this type by Abū Bakr al-Khaṭīb al-Ḥāfiẓ and some of his *shaykhs*, and in the words of Abū Naṣr Ibn Mākūlā, Abū ‘Abdallāh al-Ḥumaydī, and others from his generation and the generations thereafter.

– With agreement (*al-muwāfaqa*) is meant that you get a *ḥadīth* through a *shaykh* of the *shaykhs* of Muslim, in whom there is an example to be followed, and which is “high” in the sense that the number [of transmitters] is smaller than the number [of transmitters] through whom you would have received that *ḥadīth* when you would have transmitted it on the authority of Muslim.

– With substitution (*al-badl*) the following is meant: If you receive in case of that *ḥadīth* such “highness” on the authority of a *shaykh* who is not a *shaykh* of Muslim, then this

substitution is attributed to “agreement” and then one can say as we have already formulated: This is a high “agreement”, in the case of one of the *shaykhs* of Muslim. And if this is not high, it is agreement and substitution at the same time, but the term agreement and substitution are not used for this because they are not applicable.

–Equality (*al-musāwāt*) is understood as follows: That is when in our times the number [of transmitters] in your *isnād* is small, and that there is no *shaykh* of Muslim, nor a *shaykh* of his *shaykh* in it, but that there is rather someone who is further away in that *isnād*, e.g. a companion (*ṣaḥābī*) or the relative of a *ṣaḥābī*, and it might even be directly to the Messenger of God (God bless him and grant him peace), in such a way that there is a certain number [of transmitters] between you and the *ṣaḥābī*, e.g. the number [of transmitters] that would be there between Muslim and that *ṣaḥābī*. In that case you are equal to Muslim, so to say, in the nearness of the *isnād* and in the number of authorities mentioned therein.

– With “personal oral transmission” (*al-muṣāfaḥa*) is meant that this “equality” which we have just mentioned, is applicable to your *shaykh* and not to you, and that then it is applicable to you by way of oral transmission, as if when you would meet Muslim in that *ḥadīth* and you would have heard it from him personally, because you met your *shaykh* who has equality with Muslim. When the “equality” is to the *shaykh* of your *shaykh*, the “personal oral transmission” is of your *shaykh*. And if the “equality” is to the *shaykh* of the *shaykh* of your *shaykh*, then the “personal oral transmission” is of the *shaykh* of your *shaykh*. Then you say about this phenomenon: “It is as if the *shaykh* of my *shaykh* has met Muslim and has made a personal oral transmission on his authority.” You cannot then mention for yourself such a relationship, but you should say: “as if so-and-so has heard [it] from Muslim” without that you can say in this matter “my *shaykh*” or “the *shaykh* of my *shaykh*.”

It cannot escape the attentive observer that the “equality” and the “personal oral transmission” that are applicable to you, your *isnād* and the *isnād* of Muslim or so do only very remotely meet the authority of the *shaykh* of Muslim. They come together in the *ṣaḥābī* (Companion) or near the *ṣaḥābī*. If the “personal oral transmission” which you mention is not yours but belongs to someone higher up in the chain of authorities of the *isnād*, it is possible that the two *isnāds* meet one another in the person of the *shaykh* of Muslim or in a person like him. In such a case the “personal oral transmission” interferes with “agreement,” because the meaning of the term “agreement” to a special type of “equality” and “personal oral transmission”. That is because what it produces is that some earlier authorities in your high *isnād* are “equal” to or “personally transmitted” from Muslim or al-Bukhārī, because he has listened to someone who has listened to a *shaykh* of these two (Muslim or al-Bukhārī), notwithstanding that his generation is much later than the generation of those two. In many of the reports with a high *isnād*, which go back to the persons who first treated the subject and their generation, there are examples of “personal oral transmission” together with examples of “agreement” and of “substitution”, as what we have mentioned.

You should know then that this type of “highness” is highness which is dependent of “lowness” at the same time, because if there is no going down of that *imām* in his *isnād*, you cannot go up in your *isnād*. I have read in Merw together with our prolific *shaykh* Abū al-Muẓaffar ‘Abd al-Raḥīm b. al-Ḥāfiẓ al-Muṣannif Abū Sa‘d al-Sam‘ānī (may God have mercy with them both) in *al-Arba‘ūn* by Abū l-Barakāt al-Farāwī. There we read a *ḥadīth* of which I claim that it was as if he heard it, he or his *shaykh*, from al-Bukhārī. *Shaykh* Abū al-Muẓaffar said: “You have no tradition going up, but this is a tradition of al-Bukhārī going down.” This is a nice and pleasant saying, but it is against rules set for this type of highness. And God knows best.

Four. Another type of highness is the highness which is elucidated by the fact that the transmitter dies earlier. By way of example: I transmit a tradition on the authority of a *shaykh* who transmits it on the authority of a person, on the authority of al-Bayhaqī al-Ḥāfīz, on the authority of al-Ḥākim Abū ‘Abdallāh al-Ḥāfīz. This is higher than my transmission on the authority of a *shaykh* who transmitted it to me on the authority of Abū Bakr b. Khalaf, on the authority of al-Ḥākim. Although the two *isnāds* equal one another in the number [of transmitters], the death of al-Bayhaqī occurs earlier than the death of Ibn Khalaf, because al-Bayhaqī died in the year 458 and Ibn Khalaf died in 487. We received a tradition on the authority of Abū Ya‘lā al-Khalīl b. ‘Abdallāh al-Khalīlī al-Ḥāfīz (may God have mercy upon him). He said: “The *isnād* may be higher as compared to anything else because of the early death of its transmitter.” And he adduced the example from the *ḥadīth* itself, in the way as we have mentioned.

Now, this idea of the “highness”, which is based on the precedence of demise, is derived from the relation of one *shaykh* to another *shaykh*, and the comparison between one transmitter and another transmitter. The “highness”, which is merely derived from the earlier demise of your *shaykh* without taking into account how one transmitter compares to another one, is defined by some specialists in this field with the limit of fifty years. This is in conformity with what we have transmitted on the authority of Abū ‘Alī al-Ḥāfīz al-Nisābūrī, who said: “I have heard Aḥmad b. ‘Umayr al-Dimashqī, who was one of the pillars of *ḥadīth*, say: ‘An *isnād* of fifty years from the demise of the *shaykh* is an *isnād* of ‘highness.’” And concerning what we transmit on the authority of Abū ‘Abdallāh b. Manda al-Ḥāfīz he said: “When thirty years have passed over an *isnād*, it is ‘high.’” This leaves more space than the first saying. And God knows best.

Five. The highness that is derived from the precedence of hearing. We received information on the authority of Muḥammad b. Nāṣir al-Ḥāfīz, on the authority of Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir al-Ḥāfīz, who said: “One of the types of highness is the precedence of hearing.” On this I say: Much of this falls under the type of highness which has been mentioned before. However, there are aspects which do not fall under this subject and which are to be distinguished from it, for example that two persons hear *ḥadīth* from one *shaykh*. One of these two has heard [the *ḥadīth*] sixty years ago, whereas the other person has heard it forty years ago. Even if there is an equality for either one of them in the number of transmitters, the *isnād* of the first one, whose listening preceded [the listening of the other one], is higher.

These are the types of “highness” elucidated in as comprehensive a way as possible. All Praise be to God, may He be glorified and elevated. And God knows best. What we have transmitted on the authority of al-Ḥāfīz Abū Ṭāhir al-Salafī (may God have mercy upon him) comes from what he has remarked in lines of poetry by himself: “No, the highness exists among those who remember and the perfection as found in the correctness of the *isnād*.”

And what has been transmitted to us on the authority of the vizier Niẓām al-Mulk comes from his words: “I am of the opinion that the high *ḥadīth* is what is correct on the authority of the Messenger of God (God bless him and grant him peace), even if its transmitters have reached the age of a hundred years.” However, this and similar sayings are not in conformity with what is generally acknowledged as “highness” among the experts of *ḥadīth*, since this is “highness” according to the content only. And God knows best.

Paragraph. “Lowness” is the opposite of “highness”. There is not one of the five parts of “highness” which does not have an exact pendant in “lowness”. That too has five parts, and the way these parts are divided is approximately the same as how the parts of highness are divided, which we have explained before. Al-Ḥākīm Abū ‘Abdallāh stated: “Maybe there is someone who has said: ‘Lowness is the opposite of highness, and whoever knows highness also knows its opposite.’ But this is not true, because lowness has stages which are only known to experts [...]”. This is not a denial of the fact that “lowness” is the opposite of “highness” in the sense which I have mentioned. Nevertheless, it is a refutation of the opinion that it may be known in exactly the same way as “highness”. This is in conformity in what he said on the way of knowing “highness”, because he was succinct in his explanation and mentioning details, but it does not agree with what we said about the knowledge of “highness” because that is explained in such detail that it provides understanding of the stages of “lowness”. The science is with God, He be blessed and elevated.

“Lowness” is something not to be preferred and not to be loved. The virtue of “highness” was exposed in the preceding explanations and indications. Ibn Khallād told a story on the authority of a man who indulged in speculative philosophy, saying that a person stated: “Going down in the *isnād* is better”, and that he adduced as an argument in favour of that opinion that it is obligatory to use your own judgment and your faculty of speculation on the righteousness of each transmitter or his lack of righteousness. The more they have expanded, the more personal judgment must be applied, and the greater the award will be. Now, this is a weak train of thinking, weak by argumentation. We received by the way of transmission on the authority of ‘Alī b. al-Madīnī, Abū ‘Amr al-Mustamli al-Nīsābūrī, that they said: “Going down is a bad omen.” This and similar notions have been proffered against “lowness”, especially certain kinds of “lowness”, because if “lowness” would be known without its connotation with “highness” it would be a way to more profit than “highness” would provide, because it is an excellent concept and far from despicable. And God knows best.

Al-Ṭībī,¹⁶ who mainly compiled his compendium on the basis of the works by Ibn al-Ṣalāh, al-Nawawī and Badr al-Dīn Ibn Jamā’a summarizes the phenomenon of *al-isnād al-‘ālī* as follows:¹⁷

The high *isnād*

The *isnād* is something special of this nation, and it is one of the approved customs. Striving after the highness in it is also recommendable and therefore travelling is a recommendable act. The highness of the *isnād* exists by its distance from the fault that adheres to each transmitter. The desired highness in the *ḥadīth* consists of five parts. One of these is the nearness to the Messenger of God (may God bless him and grant him peace) by way of a sound and clean *isnād*, such as the three-knotted *isnāds* of al-Bukhārī.¹⁸ Muḥammad b. Aslam al-Ṭūsī has said: “Nearness of *isnād* means nearness or proximity to God, may He be exalted.” Secondly, there is the nearness to one of the *imāms* of *ḥadīth*, even if their number between him and the Messenger of God (may

¹⁶ Died 743/1343, Brockelmann, *GAL*, Grundbd. II, 64; Suppl., II, 67.

¹⁷ Al-Ṭībī, *Kbulāṣa*, 49-51.

¹⁸ *Ṭbulāṭḥiyāt al-Bukhārī*, a term explained by Al-Ṭībī, *Kbulāṣa*, 50, note 44, as the *isnād* which consists of only three authorities between al-Bukhārī and the *ṣaḥābī*. Seemingly, only twenty-two traditions supported by such an ultra-short *isnād* exist.

God bless him and grant him peace) is great. Thirdly, there is the highness in relation to the transmission of the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī and of Muslim, or of just one of them or to another of the important works. Fourthly, there is highness because of the early demise of the transmitter. Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ said: “Take this example. What I transmit on the authority of a *shaykh* who has informed me of it on the authority of someone, on the authority of al-Bayhaqī al-Ḥāfiẓ, on the authority of Abū ‘Abdallāh al-Ḥāfiẓ, is higher than my transmission about this subject on the authority of a *shaykh* who has informed me of it on the authority of someone, on the authority of Abū Bakr ‘Abdallāh b. Khalaf, on the authority of al-Ḥākīm. And although the two *isnāds* are of equal height in the number [of transmitters, this is the case] because of the fact that the demise of al-Bayhaqī was about twenty-nine years earlier than the demise of Ibn Khalaf.” Fifthly, there is highness by earlier listening. And much of this comes under the heading of the preceding, in view of the nearness in time, not by the possible elimination of an intermediate authority, because the possibility with regard to demise is stronger and the transmitter can be excellent there, when two persons listen to one *shaykh*, whereas the listening of one of them e.g. dates back sixty years, whereas the listening of the other person dates back [only] forty years. Even if these two *isnāds* are equal in the number of transmitters to this *shaykh* and there is no intermediate authority between them, then the first one is higher, and God knows best.

So far al-Ṭibī, whose compendium, apart from being in itself clear and informative on the subject, gives, when compared to the relevant passage in the *Muqaddima* by Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, a good impression of the way he summarizes the work: an extreme reduction of content, the suppression of all subtleties in description, the omission of repetitions and divagations, yet still with a few quotes maintained.

How can one combine, or reconcile, the facts found in the manuscripts with the theories which scholars such as Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ and al-Ṭibī present us with in their handbooks? On the one hand there are the scholars, who often theorize about practical matters while entirely being out of touch with the requirements of daily practice. With the explanation by Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ on “high” and “low” one becomes well informed about the ideas of the traditionists on these concepts, but not so much about the information which is contained in the chain of transmission on the title-pages of the manuscripts made by those same scholars. Only once in his *Muqaddima* Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ speaks about the possible length of the single part of the chain of a high *isnād*: fifty years, and then only in the form of a quotation. His second quotation, that a period of thirty years is possible as well, is apparently given as a next-best solution, also as a quotation. It would seem that the implication of what we see in the manuscripts, namely the traditionist’s ambition to compose high *isnāds* for the sake of merit and reward, escapes the *ḥadīth*-scholars, or is ignored by them. The obvious danger is, of course, that the reliability of a *matn*, the content part of the *ḥadīth*, becomes questionable if the scholars strive to construct as high *isnāds* as possible, or rather: as short *isnāds* as possible, with disregard of all practical circumstances. However, there are a few more questions to be addressed.

A secular, non-Islamic, approach of the phenomenon of the high and low *isnāds* puts the authenticity of the transmitted material seriously in question. And this comes on top of all other questions on the authenticity already raised by Western scholarship since more than a century of *ḥadīth* criticism.¹⁹ But is the type of transmission with high *isnāds* as we have seen illustrated on the title-page of the Leiden manuscript of Tammām's *Fawā'id*, really so absurd? The function of memory in a predominantly orally transmitted branch of scholarship cannot simply be equated with the way we use our memories today. In this respect one must also consider that these very young pupils of these very old teachers may in fact have been extremely receptive in absorbing transmitted knowledge, much more so than we can imagine. Investigations in also these directions and with this perspective should be included in the future research of *ḥadīth* and *ḥadīth* manuscripts.

Looking back to the high *isnāds* as we find them on the title-pages of a manuscript, such as the aforementioned Leiden manuscript Or. 580, and many others, we can observe a parallel between the manuscript on the one hand and the *ḥadīth* and its *isnād* on the other. If the enumeration of the *riwāyāt* on the title-page proves to be the collective high *isnād* by which the authenticity of the content of the book in question is guaranteed, the text of the book, with all its detailed sections, with numerous *isnāds* and *matns*, of support and content, is a long collective *matn* in itself. Precisely because of the shortness of the chain of authorities between the copyist of the manuscript (who is the last transmitter involved) and the author or compiler of the text (from whom the transmission ultimately emanates), the genuineness and authenticity of that *matn* is best protected, or in other words: the shorter the chain, the safer the text. In this sense, the *riwāya*-notes on the title-page of a manuscript can be regarded as circumstantial evidence for the existence of an early form of textual criticism.

But this is largely an imaginary issue, and few of the chains of transmission on the title-pages of manuscripts are connected with real life. As we have seen, Ibn al-Anmāṭī, the copyist of the Leiden manuscript of the *Fawā'id* of Tammām, *copied his text from the author's copy*. Is a better textual witness thinkable? What added value could the high *isnād* have which he concealed in the chain of *riwāyāt* on the title-page? Why was there a need to bridge the two centuries between the compiler and the copyist? The manuscript itself, an autograph in the second degree, would seem, at least to us, the best material witness for the soundness of the text, not the readings and transmissions. These *riwāyāt* and their implicit high *isnāds* rather seem to be expressions of an ideal. With their highly stylized chain of transmission they are almost the abstraction of such a chain. Real life gets its own

¹⁹ I take 1890, the year of publication of the second volume of I. Goldziher's *Muhammed-anische Studien*, as an easily memorable starting point of the critical and rationalist consideration of *ḥadīth* material.

back at the end of each quire of such a manuscript, however, where in the numerous reading protocols and listening notes the actual lecture sessions are described, with the many names of the participants, a true cross section of society. The title-page itself that contains the high *isnād* concealed in the chain of transmission, also carries an overflow from the reading protocols in the shape of the numerous short reading and ownership notes.²⁰ There one can learn how texts were read, listened at, how they were consumed, so to speak, in actual reality.²¹

²⁰ Witkam, *Van Leiden naar Damascus*, 81-88 analyses the thirty-four scholars' notes in detail.

²¹ See further on that aspect of reading my essay "The human element between text and reader. The *Ijāza* in Arabic manuscripts", in: Yasin Dutton, ed. *The codicology of Islamic manuscripts*, London 1995, 123-136.

Illustrations

