

Hadith Al-Tafdhil, Investigating Its Authenticity

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:*Shaykh Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 728 H) states*

لا نسلم أن علياً أفضل أهل زمانه بل خير هذه الأمة بعد نبيها أبو بكر ثم عمر كما ثبت ذلك عن علي وغيره

We do not agree that ‘Ali was the overall best of his time. Rather, the best of this Ummah after its Prophet are Abu Bakr, then ‘Umar, as is authentically narrated from ‘Ali and others.¹ It is true that our Sunni brothers consider Abu Bakr to be the best of our Ummah, followed only by ‘Umar. However, during the lifetime of the Messenger of Allah, sallallahu ‘alaihi wa alihi, it was a different story entirely. There is irrefutable evidence in the Sunni books establishing that the Sahabah used to consider Amir al-Muminin, ‘alaihi al-salam, to be their best during the :lifetime of the Messenger. Imam Ahmad (d. 241 H) presents one of such proofs

حدثنا عبد الله قال حدثني أبي قتنا محمد بن جعفر نا شعبة عن أبي إسحاق عن عبد الرحمن بن يزيد عن علقمة عن عبد الله قال : كنا نتحدث ان أفضل أهل المدينة علي بن أبي طالب

Abd Allah (b. Ahmad b. Hanbal) – my father (Ahmad b. Hanbal) – Muhammad b. Ja’far – ‘Shu’bah – Abu Ishaq – ‘Abd al-Rahman b. Yazid – ‘Alqamah – ‘Abd Allah (b. Mas’ud):

“We used to say that the overall best of the people of Madinah was ‘Ali b. Abi Talib.”² “We” (in the hadith)³ apparently refers to the Sahabah generally, and more specifically to the most senior of them living in Madinah. Ibn Mas’ud was obviously making a reference to a past which was then different from the present. This was why he said “we USED TO”. In other words, at that point in time when he was making his statement, things had become different. People were now giving ‘Ali’s place to another person. Ibn Mas’ud was, no doubt, speaking about the time of the Prophet. All the most senior Sahabah and their neighbours were living in Madinah with the Messenger of Allah. The phrase “people of Madinah” originally referred to them (excluding only the Prophet, of course).⁴ These, needless to say, included Abu Bakr, ‘Umar and ‘Uthman.

:So, is the above report authentic? Al-Hafiz (d. 852 H) says about the first narrator

عبد الله بن أحمد بن محمد بن حنبل الشيباني أبو عبد الرحمن ولد الإمام ثقة

Abd Allah b. Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Hanbal al-Shaybani, Abu ‘Abd al-Rahman: son of the’

Imam, thiqah (trustworthy).⁵

:What about his father? Al-Hafiz answers

أحمد بن محمد بن حنبل بن هلال بن أسد الشيباني المروزي نزيل بغداد أبو عبد الله أحد الأئمة ثقة حافظ
فقيه حجة

Ahmad b. Muhammad b. Hanbal b. Hilal b. Asad al-Shaybani al-Maruzi, a Baghdad resident,
Abu 'Abd Allah: One of the Imams, thiqah (trustworthy), hafiz, jurist, hujjah (an authority).⁶

:Al-Hafiz also has these comments about the third narrator

محمد بن جعفر الهذلي البصري المعروف بغندر ثقة صحيح الكتاب إلا أن فيه غفلة

Muhammad b. Ja'far al-Hazali al-Basri, better known as Ghandar: Thiqah (trustworthy), sahih
al-kitab (i.e. ahadith from his books are sahih) except that there was some negligence in him.⁷
Whatever negligence he had does not affect his ahadith from Shu'bah at all. He used to
accurately record the latter's reports. So, he narrated them from his books with perfect
:precision. Al-Hafiz provides further information in this respect

وقال ابن مهدي كنا نستفيد من كتب غندر في شعبة وكان وكيع يسميه الصحيح الكتاب. وقال أبو حاتم عن
محمد بن ابان البلخي قال ابن مهدي غندر أثبت في شعبة مني وقال ابن المبارك إذا اختلف الناس في حديث
شعبة فكتاب غندر حكم بينهم وقال ابن أبي حاتم سألت أبي عن غندر فقال كان صدوقا وكان مؤدبا وفي حديث
شعبة ثقة

Ibn Mahdi said: "We used to benefit from the books of Ghandar on Shu'bah. Waki' named him
sahih al-kitab." Abu Hatim narrated from Muhammad b. Aban al-Balakhi that Ibn Mahdi said:
"Ghandar is more accurate than me as far as Shu'bah is concerned." Ibn al-Mubarak said,
"When the people disagree about the hadith of Shu'bah, the book of Ghandar used to judge
between them." Ibn Abi Hatim said: "I asked my father about Ghandar and he replied, 'He was
saduq (very truthful), and was a teacher and in the hadith of Shu'bah, he is thiqah
(trustworthy)."⁸

The fourth narrator, Shu'bah, is a pillar of Sunni ahadith. Al-Hafiz gives the catch-phrases
:about him

شعبة بن الحجاج بن الورد العتكي مولاهم أبو بسطام الواسطي ثم البصري ثقة حافظ متقن كان الثوري يقول
هو أمير المؤمنين في الحديث

Shu'bah b. al-Hajjaj b. al-Ward al-'Atki, their freed slave, Abu Bus am al-Wasi i, al-Basri:

Thiqah (trustworthy), hafiz, extremely precise. Al-Thawri used to say: "He was the amir al-muminin (the supreme leader) in al-Hadith."⁹
:Abu Ishaq al-Sabi'i is the fifth narrator, and al-Hafiz has this to say about him

عمرو بن عبد الله بن عبيد أبو إسحاق السبيعي بفتح المهملة وكسر الموحدة ثقة مكثّر عابد من الثالثة
اختلط بأخرة

Amr b. 'Abd Allah b. 'Ubayd Abu Ishaq al-Sabi'i: Thiqah (trustworthy); narrated a lot (of ahadith), a great worshipper (of Allah), from the third (abaqat). He became confused (in his narrations) during the end part of his lifetime.¹⁰
Of course, Shu'bah heard from him before the memory loss. 'Allamah al-Albani (d. 1420 H) :explains

وتابعهم سفيان الثوري وشعبة عن أبي إسحاق، ولكنهما لم يذكرنا النزول،
وروايتهما أصح، لأنهما سمعا منه قبل الاختلاط

Sufyan al-Thawri and Shu'bah also narrated from Abu Ishaq, although both did not mention the Descent. The reports of both of them (from Abu Ishaq) are more authentic, because they both heard from him BEFORE he became confused.¹¹
Another relevant point is that Abu Ishaq is a mudalis and has, on the surface, narrated the report of Ibn Mas'ud above is an 'an-'an form from 'Abd al-Rahman b. Yazid. However, the tadlis does NOT, in reality, affect the 'an-'an reports of Abu Ishaq – among others – as long as :it is Shu'bah narrating from him. Allamah al-Albani states further

قال الترمذي: " حديث حسن صحيح، رواه الثوري وشعبة عن أبي إسحاق ".
قلت: وهو كما قال، وهما قد روى عنه قبل اختلاطه، وشعبة لا يروي عنه إلا ما صرح فيه بالتحديث كما هو
مذكور في ترجمته، فبروايته عنه أمنا شبهة تدليسه.

Al-Tirmidhi said: "A hasan sahih hadith, al-Thawri and Shu'bah narrated it from ('an) Abu Ishaq."

I say: It is (truly hasan sahih) as he (al-Tirmidhi) has stated, and both of them (i.e. al-Thawri and Shu'bah) narrated from him (i.e. Abu Ishaq) before his confusion. As for Shu'bah, he never narrated anything from him (i.e. Abu Ishaq) except what he (Abu Ishaq) explicitly stated to have directly heard from the person he is narrating from (i.e. tahdith), as stated in his tarjamah (biography). Due to his (Shu'bah's) narration from him (i.e. Abu Ishaq), the problem of his tadlis is removed.¹²

In a clearer word, whenever Shu'bah narrates from Abu Ishaq (as in this case of Ibn Mas'ud's

hadith), all the problems associated with the latter's reports are removed. The former narrated from him before his confusion in his ahadith, and never transmitted any tadlis-infested reports from him. So, whenever Shu'bah narrates an 'an-'an report from Abu Ishaq, there actually is tahdith by the latter from his Shaykh. The 'an-'an form is only Shu'bah's convenience style. No wonder, Imam al-Bukhari (d. 256 H) includes this sanad in his Sahih

حدثنا سليمان بن حرب حدثنا شعبة عن أبي إسحاق عن عبد الرحمن بن يزيد

Sulayman b. Harb – Shu'bah – Abu Ishaq – 'Abd al-Rahman b. Yazid. **13**

This is an 'an-'an report by Abu Ishaq from 'Abd al-Rahman b. Yazid (the same Shaykh as in the athar of Ibn Mas'ud). Nevertheless, Imam al-Bukhari considers the chain to be sahih. Imam Ahmad b. Hanbal has also documented a similar 'an-'an chain

حدثنا عبد الله حدثني أبي قال حدثنا يزيد قال أنا شعبة عن أبي إسحاق عن أبي ميسرة

Abd Allah (b. Ahmad b. Hanbal) – my father (Ahmad b. Hanbal) – Yazid – Shu'bah – Abu' Ishaq – Abu Maysarah. **14**
:Al-Arnau comments

إسناده صحيح على شرط الشيخين

Its chain is sahih upon the standard of the two Shaykhs. **15**

:Allamah al-Albani too authenticates yet another 'an-'an chain of Abu Ishaq

إسناده: حدثنا حفص بن عمر: ثنا شعبة عن أبي إسحاق عن الأسود عن عبد الله.
قلت: وهذا إسناده صحيح على شرط البخاري

Its chain: Hafs b. 'Umar – Shu'bah – Abu Ishaq – al-Aswad – 'Abd Allah.

I say: This chain is sahih upon the standard of al-Bukhari. **16**

Imam Abu Ya'la (d. 307 H) also documents an 'an-'an chain by Abu Ishaq, from 'Abd al-Rahman b. Yazid, like al-Bukhari

حدثنا إسحاق حدثنا عبد الصمد حدثنا شعبة عن أبي إسحاق عن عبد الرحمن بن يزيد عن الأسود

Ishaq – 'Abd al-Samad – Shu'bah – Abu Ishaq – 'Abd al-Rahman b. Yazid – al-Aswad **17**
:Shaykh Dr. Asad gives this verdict

إسناده صحيح

Let us now move to the sixth narrator in the sanad of Ibn Mas'ud's athar: 'Abd al-Rahman b. Yazid. The status of 'Abd al-Rahman as a thiqah (trustworthy) narrator of Sahih al-Bukhari is already well-known. Nonetheless, we are pleased to present this further confirmation by al-Hafiz

عبد الرحمن بن يزيد بن قيس النخعي أبو بكر الكوفي ثقة

Abd al-Rahman b. Yazid b. Qays al-Nakha'i, Abu Bakr al-Kufi: Thiqah (trustworthy).^{19'} Finally, concerning the seventh and last narrator ('Alqamah), al-Hafiz al-'Asqalani proclaims :with full strength

علقمة بن قيس بن عبد الله النخعي الكوفي ثقة ثبت فقيه عابد

Alqamah b. Qays b. 'Abd Allah al-Nakha'i al-Kufi: Thiqah (trustworthy), thabt (accurate), faqih' (a jurist), 'abidun (a great worshipper of Allah).²⁰

With this, it is absolutely clear and undeniable that Ibn Mas'ud's report that the Sahabah used to consider 'Ali as the overall best among them has an impeccably sahih chain. All the narrators are thiqah, and the chain is fully and perfectly connected. Even then, the same athar has been recorded with a second sahih chain in that same Fadhail :al-Sahabah

حدثنا عبد الله قال حدثني جدي قثنا أبو قطن قثنا شعبة عن أبي إسحاق عن عبد الله بن يزيد عن علقمة عن عبد الله وهو بن مسعود قال : كنا نتحدث ان أفضل أهل المدينة علي بن أبي طالب

Abd Allah (b. Muhammad b. 'Abd al-'Aziz al-Baghwi) – my grandfather (Ahmad b. Muni' al-'Baghwi) – Abu Qa an – Shu'bah – Abu Ishaq – 'Abd Allah b. Yazid – 'Alqamah – 'Abd Allah b. Mas'ud:

"We used to say that the overall best of the people of Madinah was 'Ali b. Abi Talib."²¹ We already know the status of Shu'bah, Abu Ishaq and Alqamah. So, let's find out about these new names.

:This is al-Hafiz's verdict on the first narrator of this new sanad

عبد الله بن محمد بن عبد العزيز أبو القاسم البغوي الحافظ الصدوق مسند عصره قلت وقد وثقه الدارقطني والخطيب وغيرهما قال الخطيب كان ثقة ثبتا مكثرا فهما عارفا قلت الرجل ثقة مطلقا

Abd Allah b. Muhammad b. 'Abd al-'Aziz, Abu al-Qasim al-Baghwi: Al-hafiz, al-saduq (the'

extremely truthful), the top scholar of his time.... I (al-'Asqalani) say: He has been declared thiqah (trustworthy) by al-Daraqutni, al-Khatib and others. Al-Khatib said, "He was thiqah (trustworthy), accurate, and narrated a lot (of ahadith)".... I (al-'Asqalani) say: The man is absolutely thiqah (trustworthy).²²

:Concerning his grandfather, al-Hafiz further submits

أحمد بن منيع بن عبد الرحمن أبو جعفر البغوي ... ثقة حافظ

Ahmad b. Muni' b. 'Abd al-Rahman, Abu Ja'far al-Baghwi....: Thiqah (trustworthy), hafiz.²³

:Abu Qa an too is thiqah (trustworthy), as confirmed by al-Hafiz

عمرو بن الهيثم بن قطن ... أبو قطن البصري ثقة

Amr b. al-Haytham b. Qa an ... Abu Qa an al-Basri: Thiqah (trustworthy).²⁴

Of course, 'Abd Allah b. Yazid was a junior Sahabi, and therefore needed no investigation. He is automatically thiqah (trustworthy). Al-Hafiz states

عبد الله بن يزيد بن زيد بن حصين الأنصاري الخطمي بفتح المعجمة وسكون المهملة صحابي صغير ولي الكوفة لابن الزبير.

Abd Allah b. Yazid b. Zayd b. Husayn al-Ansari al-Khamsi: a junior Sahabi. He was the wali' (ruler) of Kufah for Ibn al-Zubayr.²⁵

So, we have a second impeccable sanad for the hadith.

References

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2. Abu 'Abd Allah Ahmad b. Hanbal al-Shaybani, Fadhail al-ahab (Beirut: Muasassat al-Risalah; 1403 H) [annotator: Dr. Wasiyullah Muhammad 'Abbas], vol. 2, p. 604, # 1033
3. We are calling it a hadith, rather than an athar, because it lays down a consensus of the ahabah, which they had during the lifetime of the Prophet of Allah. It is our firm belief that they could not have formed such a consensus except on the basis of what they had learnt from the Messenger.
4. See Qur'an 9:101 and 9:120
5. Ahmad b. 'Ali b. Hajar al-'Asqalani, Taqrib al-Tahdhib (Beirut: Dar al-Maktabah al-'Ilmiyyah; 2nd edition, 1415 H) [annotator: Mustafa 'Abd al-Qadir 'Ata], vol. 1, p. 477, # 3216

6. Ibid, vol. 1, p. 44, # 96
7. Ibid, vol. 2, p. 63, # 5805
8. Shihab al-Din Ahmad b. 'Ali b. Hajar al-'Asqalani, Tahdhib al-Tahdhib (Dar al-Fikr; 1st edition, 1404 H), vol. 9, p. 85, # 129
9. Ahmad b. 'Ali b. Hajar al-'Asqalani, Taqrib al-Tahdhib (Beirut: Dar al-Maktabah al-'Ilmiyyah; 2nd edition, 1415 H) [annotator: Mustafa 'Abd al-Qadir 'Ata], vol. 1, p. 418, # 2798
10. Ibid, vol. 1, p. 739, # 5081
11. Abu 'Abd al-Rahman Muhammad Nasir al-Din b. al-Hajj Nuh b. Tajati b. Ādam al-Ashqudri al-Albani, ahlih Abi Dawud (Kuwait: Muasassat al-Gharas li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi'; 1st edition, 1423 H), vol. 7, p. 410, # 2387
12. Abu 'Abd al-Rahman Muhammad Nasir al-Din b. al-Hajj Nuh b. Tajati b. Ādam al-Ashqudri al-Albani, Silsilah al-Ahadith al- ahilah wa Shayhun min Fiqhihah wa Fawaidihah (Riyadh: Maktabah al-Ma'arif li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi'; 1st edition, 1415 H), vol. 5, p. 481, # 2366
13. Abu 'Abd Allah Muhammad b. Isma'il b. Ibrahim b. Mughirah al-Bukhari al-J'ufi, al-Jami' al- ahil al-Mukhtasar (Beirut: Dar Ibn Kathir; 3rd edition, 1407 H) [annotator: Dr. Mustafa Dib al-Bagha], vol. 3, p. 1373, # 3551
14. Abu 'Abd Allah Ahmad b. Hanbal al-Shaybani, Musnad (Cairo: Muasassat Qurtubah) [annotator: Shu'ayb al-Arnaut], vol. 6, p. 182, # 25532
15. Ibid
16. Abu 'Abd al-Rahman Muhammad Nasir al-Din b. al-Hajj Nuh b. Tajati b. Ādam al-Ashqudri al-Albani, ahlih Abi Dawud (Kuwait: Muasassat al-Gharas li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzi'; 1st edition, 1423 H), vol. 5, p. 150, # 1267
17. Abu Ya'la Ahmad b. 'Ali b. Muthanna al-Mawsili al-Tamimi, Musnad (Damascus: Dar al-Mamun li al-Turath; 1st edition, 1404 H) [annotator: Dr. Husayn Salim Asad], vol. 8, p. 35, # 4541
18. Ibid
19. Ahmad b. 'Ali b. Hajar al-'Asqalani, Taqrib al-Tahdhib (Beirut: Dar al-Maktabah al-'Ilmiyyah; 2nd edition, 1415 H) [annotator: Mustafa 'Abd al-Qadir 'Ata], vol. 1, p. 596, # 4057
20. Ibid, vol. 1, p. 687, # 4697
21. Abu 'Abd Allah Ahmad b. Hanbal al-Shaybani, Fadhail al- ahilah (Beirut: Muasassat al-Risalah; 1403 H) [annotator: Dr. Wasiyullah Muhammad 'Abbas], vol. 2, p. 646, # 1097
22. Shihab al-Din Abu al-Fadhl Ahmad b. 'Ali b. Hajar al-'Asqalani, Lisan al-Mizan (Beirut: Manshurat Muasassat al-A'lami li al-Matbu'at; 2nd edition, 1390 H), vol. 3, pp. 338-339, # 1339

23. Ahmad b. 'Ali b. Hajar al-'Asqalani, Taqrib al-Tahdhib (Beirut: Dar al-Maktabah al-'Ilmiyyah; 2nd edition, 1415 H) [annotator: Mustafa 'Abd al-Qadir 'Ata], vol. 1, p. 47, # 114
24. Ibid, vol. 1, p. 748, # 5146
25. Ibid, vol. 1, p. 547, # 3715