

The Problem With Human Error

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The scholars are unanimous in their view that the Companions (radiallahu anhum) were all reliable narrators ['adul]. They can neither be criticized nor censured. In his Isaba, Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani (ra) describes this as the unanimous opinion of the People of the Sunna [Ahl al-Sunna]. However, everyone is afflicted with forgetfulness, errors and other human shortcomings. Hence, there is a possibility of making a mistake while narrating a hadith.

Imrān ibn Husayn (ra), said, **“By Allah! I know so many hadiths that I can go on narrating for a very long time. However, I am restrained by the fact that there are some Companions who heard the hadiths from Allah’s Messenger (saw) like I did, but in spite of this they are prone to making mistakes while narrating. Obviously, they are not doing this intentionally. If I had to narrate, I fear I would also fall into the same abyss.”**

Likewise, whenever Ali (ra) would hear a hadith from anyone other than Abu Bakr (ra), he used to make the narrator swear an oath that he had reported it exactly the way he heard it from Allah’s Messenger (saw).

The inevitable existence of these types of errors explains why, among other things, it is incumbent to compare narrations with one another to determine if there are any errors. If there are any contradictions on the part of the narrator, the contradictions will be resolved. The specialists in the field of hadith have prohibited the people from acting upon the hadiths directly until they have the capability to distinguish between the authentic and the unauthentic, between the correct and the incorrect, and between the truth and the fabricated.

There are scores of examples of such errors in the books of hadith. One such example involves a narration from Abdullah ibn Umar (ra) which states that **Allah’s Messenger (saw) performed ‘umra in the month of Rajab**. When 'A'isha (ra) heard of his account, she said; **“Ibn Umar has forgotten. Allah’s Messenger (saw) did not perform any ‘umra in the month of Rajab.”** (Bukhari 1776; Muslim 1255)

In another case, Abdullah ibn Umar (ra) said, **“The deceased is punished in his grave if his family cries or mourns over him.”** (Bukhari 1287; Muslim 2143) His report was rejected by 'A'isha (ra), who insisted that Ibn Umar (ra) had erred in narrating the hadith. According to her, the hadith is as follows: **“On one occasion, Allah’s Messenger (saw) passed by a deceased Jewish woman who was being mourned over by her family members. He remarked; ‘These people are crying over her whereas she is being inflicted with the punishment of the grave!’** (Bukhari 1289; Muslim 2156). **According to 'A'isha (ra), their crying had nothing to do with her punishment.**

Likewise, **Abu Hurayra (ra) says if a person is in need of a compulsory bath [ghusl] at the time of true dawn [subh sadiq], he is not permitted to fast on that specific day. He narrates this (ruling)**

from Allah's Messenger (saw), and this was also his personal ruling [fatwa] on the issue. Such narrations are compiled in detail in Fath al-Bari, the commentary on Sahih al-Bukhari, under the chapter dealing with fasting. **However, in opposition to this, 'A'isha and Umm Salama (raa) report that at times the Messenger (saw) used to be in need of bathing [ghusl] at dawn, but he would fast on those days as well.** (Bukhari 1925)

Similarly, a group of narrators relate that the salat is nullified if a woman or dog passes in front of one performing salât. (Muslim 1139). **'A'isha (ra) rejected this view, saying this narration is incorrect.** (Muslim 1142)

Finally, **Fatima bint Qays (ra)** narrated that a woman who has been issued an irrevocable divorce has no right to claim food, clothing, or shelter from her husband. When Umar (ra) heard this he remarked, **"How can I relinquish a Qur'anic verse for the statement of one woman?"** (Abu Dawud 3710)

To sum up, one of the reasons for the contradiction of narrations stems from the differences in how the hadiths were preserved. At times, those narrating the hadiths tended to slip up in their narrations. This is not impossible. Sometimes, even the most intelligent person can become confused with comprehending, transmitting, or relating the meaning of a statement. There are many such cases in which the narrators erred in spite of being reliable and truthful. This is why the scholars have laid down stringent rules for accepting the narration of a lone narrator. One of the rules is to compare the narration with other narrations. If it is conforming to the juridical principles, it will be accepted; otherwise it will not.

The aforementioned incident of Umar (ra) also supports one of the principles of the Hanafi school. According to the Hanafis, the hadith that is in greater conformance with the Qur'an will be awarded preference over the hadith that is not as conforming to it, even if the latter has relatively more reliable narrators or there are other narrations supporting it.

All of these incidents also verify that the only person who can practice upon the hadith directly is the one who has the capacity to recognize right from wrong. It is quite bewildering to note that to determine the purity of gold, one avails himself of the services of a bullion dealer, but to practice upon the hadiths, he considers the services of an analyst as dispensable. The one who does this is quite proud of his own knowledge in spite of his ignorance. We beseech the assistance of Allah alone.