

BOOK REVIEW

Ajis Ayinde Oladosu

Israr Ahmad Khan, *Authentication of Hadith: Redefining the Criteria*, London/Washington: IIIT, 2010 (215 pgs.).

When the renowned American writer, Norman Mailer, said “writing is the closest men ever come to childbearing”, it was probably to depict the rigour and stress which the whole idea of scholarship and writing means for the writer. Israr Ahmad Khan, an Associate Professor in International Islamic University of Malaysia (IIUM), must have gone through this “childbearing” process before the book was published by the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT) in London in 2010. The cover of the book itself is emblazoned with the artistic image of a scholar who is apparently involved in an interface probably with the best book ever known to humanity, the Qurān. *Authentication of Hadith: Redefining the Criteria* has an acknowledgement, a table of content and a foreword. It has an introduction which is followed by eight chapters, notes, bibliography and an index.

In the “Introduction,” the author discusses the status and importance of *ḥadīth* (tradition) in Islam. He reiterates that all aspects of Muslim life are guided by the Qurān and the *ḥadīth*. Whereas the Qurān “represents the precisely revealed words of Allah (SWT)” the *ḥadīth*, on the other hand, “constitutes the practical and methodological dimensions of the Qurānic commands and instructions” (p. xiii). This, he argues, is in line with the fourfold mission which Prophet Muhammad, as the messenger of God, had to carry out. The mission includes: (1) to rehearse the messages of the Qurān to people in general and to his followers in particular, exactly as he received them from God; (2) to transform the whole nation of Arabia conceptually as well as behaviourally; (3) to unfold the truth revealed in the Qurān; and (4) to demonstrate Qurānic principles in his life and to teach those who entered the fold of his faith” (ibid).

The author proceeds thereafter to discuss existing approaches

of contemporary Muslim scholars to *ḥadīth*. These include those who “totally reject the relevance of *ḥadīth* in Islamic (Muslim) life; those who fall blindly into accepting everything that appears to be ḥadīth regardless of its authenticity; 3) those who make indiscriminate selection from *ḥadīth* for practical purposes; 4) those who believe in the sanctity of the Prophetic traditions, but opt for an extremely careful approach with regard to their logical and practical relevance to Islamic (Muslim) life and civilization” (p.xiv).

After his analysis of the contours and patterns inherent in each of these streams and approaches, the author examines the traditional classifications of *ḥadīth*. These are collections of *ḥadīth* that are acclaimed to be the most authentic, i.e., al-Bukhārī’s and Muslim’s, collections that contain only a few dubious reports as in al-Tirmidhī, al-Nasāī and Abu Dawūd, collections that comprise many spurious traditions, and Ibn Mājjah’s and Aḥmad’s collections that have too many weak and fabricated traditions (ibid). He, therefore, focuses on the parameters usually deployed by *ḥadīth* scholars into the authentication of the chain of narration of *ḥadīths*. According to him, these include continuity in the chain of narrators (*ittiāl al-sanad*), integrity of character (*‘adālah*), infallible retention (*ḍabt*), freedom from any hidden defect (*ghayr al-‘illah*) and safety from any aberrance (*‘adam al-shudhūdh*). Once a ḥadīth satisfies all these criteria, it is deemed authentic. The last two criteria, he reminds the reader, are also usually employed in determining the authenticity of the text (*matn*) of traditions. However, he quickly notes that the above criteria are rarely applied and that they feature only in debates and discussions in the works of *‘ulūm al-ḥadīth*.

Thus given the importance of *ḥadīth* in Muslim life, authenticating traditions of the Prophet from a textual angle becomes both important and urgent. In fact, according to the author, the following arguments make such an exercise a categorical imperative: existence of controversies among ḥadīth scholars over the reliability of some narrators, inability of some narrators to maintain the preciseness of reports, textual conflicts in reports, “delusion of reliable narrators,” practical correction of narrations, the problem of lack of contemporaneity and relevance of some of the reports, the unceasing problem of fabrication, the challenge of methodology,