

CHAPTER TWO

WHITHER ḤADĪTH STUDIES?

Harald Motzki

We have to adopt a *highly critical* attitude towards our own theories if we do not wish to argue in circles: the attitude of trying to *refute* them.

– Karl Popper, *The Logic of Scientific Discovery*

I. INTRODUCTION: JUYNBOLL ON NĀFI', THE MAWLĀ OF IBN 'UMAR

Two problems face historical research into the textual sources on early Islam. First, the sources are – apart from a few “remnants”, such as inscriptions, coins, etc. – only “traditions” and most of these are of Muslim provenance.¹ Secondly, these traditions are available only in sources originating more than one and a half centuries *after* the events they purport to relate. Scholars have quite reasonably felt justified in questioning the epistemic value of these traditions as a basis for reconstructing the historical events in early Islam.

On the question of the historical value of *aḥādīth* late nineteenth century Western scholarship provided different answers. Opinions range from a broad acceptance of these traditions as historical sources to complete rejection. *Aḥādīth* are rejected because they are thought to have been influenced by later political, religious and legal developments. What's more, some scholars are convinced that their point of origin can be traced to these developments, and that they can plausibly be considered projections of them. As long as the value of the traditions as historical sources is a subject of dispute, any attempt to reconstruct the political, religious and legal developments in early Islam is on shaky ground.

¹ On “remnants” (*Überreste*) and “traditions” (*Überlieferungen*) as technical terms in the field of the historical evaluation of sources see Ahasver von Brandt, *Werkzeug des Historikers*, Stuttgart 1973, 51–64.

There are ways to escape this sterile situation. On the one hand, we can critically examine the previous attempts to assess the historical value of the Muslim traditions and seek to establish whether their premises, methods and conclusions are really satisfactory. On the other, we can examine anew the sources themselves, with the aim of finding criteria which will allow safe judgements on their historical value. In the present chapter, this dual path will be pursued by scrutinising a study which deals with the historical value of traditions allegedly going back to Nāfi', a client (*mawlā*) of one of the Prophet's Companions, 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Umar.²

It is well known that the majority of Muslim traditions about the first century consists of a text (*matn*) and of corresponding information on how this text was handed down (*isnād*). The chain of transmission or *isnād* allegedly provides detailed information on how the text got to the author of the compilation in which it is to be found. Muslim *ḥadīth* criticism judged the reliability of a given tradition first of all from the standpoint of its *isnād*. In contrast, Western scholarship, with its aim of assessing the historical value of a tradition, has restricted its attention mainly to the text. The latter approach was prompted by the conviction that the *isnād* is, in the most cases, purely fictional. This opinion was shared by Ignaz Goldziher, one of the founding fathers of Western *ḥadīth* studies. On the other hand, due to the scarcity of sources, it was extremely difficult, if not impossible, to verify the reliability of the *asānīd*. This could not be done without referring to information given by the early Muslims themselves in the biographical dictionaries on the traditionists. Yet this information was not considered to be very reliable by Western scholars.

One of the few scholars in Western *ḥadīth* studies who tried to find methods which include the *isnād* as a criterion to value the sources was Joseph Schacht. Although he relied on the contents and structure of the texts in his attempt to evaluate and date the traditions, he also developed premises and methods to improve the dating of texts by studying the evidence of how they were handed down. Josef van Ess and G.H.A. Juynboll took over Schacht's attempts and Juynboll in particular has developed and improved them. Michael Cook, however, was highly critical of Schacht's method of dating the traditions

² G.H.A. Juynboll, "Nāfi', the *Mawlā* of Ibn 'Umar, and his Position in Muslim *Ḥadīth* Literature," *Der Islam* 70 (1993), 207-244.