CHAPTER EIGHT

THE CANON AND CRITICISM: ICONOCLASM AND THE REJECTION OF CANONICAL CULTURE FROM IBN AL-ṢALĀḤ TO THE MODERN SALAFĪ MOVEMENT

Introduction

Discussing the standing of the Ṣaḥīḥayn, Goldziher concluded that veneration for them “never went so far as to cause free criticism of the sayings and remarks incorporated in these collections to be considered impermissible or unseemly…”¹ He insightfully observed that “veneration was directed at this canonical work [of al-Bukhārī] as a whole but not to its individual lines and paragraphs.”² In his Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought, Daniel Brown concurs. He states that in the “classical” period there was a great deal of leeway for the criticism of the canonical collections.³ As we have seen, Goldziher’s and Brown’s assessments accurately describe the pre-canonical period as well as the continued criticism of the two books even after their canonization. They do not, however, recognize the important change that occurred in the dynamic of the canon and criticism in the early modern and modern periods.

Especially in recent times, criticisms of the Ṣaḥīḥayn canon have met with remarkable hostility. Mohammad Abd al-Rauf has recognized the dramatic change in the reaction to criticism, but identifies it as the result of Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ’s buttressing the canonical culture in the seventh/thirteenth century. He asserts that in the wake of Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ’s writings, “no more criticism could be tolerated.…”⁴ Although Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ and al-Nawawī certainly did demand a charitable reading of the Ṣaḥīḥayn, their contributions to the canonical culture marked neither a moratorium on criticism nor an actual end to it.

¹ Goldziher, 236–7.
² Goldziher, 247.
³ Daniel Brown, Rethinking Tradition in Modern Islamic Thought (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 111.
Indeed, criticism of the Şahihayn continued in force well after Ibn al-Şalāḥ’s and al-Nawawī’s seminal careers. In the century after their deaths, a number of ḥadīth scholars rejected the canonical culture built around al-Bukhārī and Muslim. These objections gave voice to the long-standing tension between the drive for institutional security that had transformed the Şahihayn into authoritative references and the iconoclastic strain in ḥadīth scholarship that remained steadfastly focused on the critical evaluation of individual reports.

It was the emergence of the Salafi reform movement in the eighteenth century that brought this simmering tension to a boil. Its revitalized focus on the critical study of ḥadīth, its prioritization of ḥadīth above the hermeneutic traditions of the madhhab and its willingness to question ijmā‘ attacked the very foundation of the ḥadīth canon. Two of its premier ḥadīth scholars, Muḥammad b. Ismā‘il al-ʿAmīr al-Ṣan‘ānī (d. 1768) and Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (d. 1999), exemplified this critical rejection of the Şahihayn canonical culture. For early modern and modern advocates of the traditional schools of law or reformists concerned with defending an increasingly beleaguered Islamic civilization, these criticisms of the Şahihayn came to represent a rejection of the institutions that had authorized the canon and that it served. The ferocity with which proponents of the madhhab have attacked al-Albānī’s criticism of the Şahihayn in particular reflects both the canon’s role as a symbol of the classical Islamic institutional tradition and the canon’s important function in scholarly culture.

Rejection of the Canonical Culture: Criticism after Ibn al-Şalāḥ

The Şahihayn canonical culture existed to safeguard the institution of the canon and the important functions it served in the Sunni scholarly tradition. The charity extended to the two works in order to overcome the tension between the methods of their authors and the independent rules of ḥadīth criticism reflected the needs of non-ḥadīth specialists, who relied on the Şahihayn as a measure of authenticity and authoritative reference. The Şahihayn canon was supposed to provide these jurists with the authority of the Prophet’s authentic sunna in a manageable form, sifted by those two scholars who had come to epitomize the critical rigor of the ḥadīth tradition and approved by the umma’s infallible consensus.