CHAPTER NINE

CANON AND SYNECDOCHE:
THE $SAHĪḤAH$ IN NARRATIVE AND RITUAL

Introduction

So far, we have discussed the $Ṣaḥīḥ$ $a$'yn $a$ canon as a practical and powerful tool of scholarly debate and exposition. It is the $kānōn$ of truth, the measure of authenticity through which the redemptive media of the Prophet’s legacy can be applied decisively. It is the authoritative reference and exemplum that can be invoked to set the rule of a genre. Yet to remain focused solely on jurisprudence or the study of $ḥadīth$ inexcusably limits the role of the Prophet’s sunna in Muslim life. It ignores important dimensions of how text, authority and communal identification can interact through the medium of the Prophet’s charismatic legacy. Our view has also been limited to the form of canonicity that Sheppard and Folkert conceived of as a criterion of distinction (Canon 1). As we widen our lens beyond the scholarly world, we must examine what functions al-Bukhārī and Muslim fulfilled in their capacity as Canon 2: a fixed collection and delimited set of texts.\(^1\)

The Prophet’s persona has cast a commanding shadow in Islamic civilization, but it has often remained intangible. In the centuries after their canonization, the $Ṣaḥīḥ$ $a$‘yn would thus meet a pressing need beyond their strictly scholarly functions: that of a trope representing the Prophet’s legacy in the broader Sunni community. In both the realms of ritual and the construction of historical narrative in Islamic civilization, al-Bukhārī and Muslim would symbolize the Prophet’s role as the pure wellspring of the faith and the liminal point through which his community could access God’s blessings. The two works would be the part that symbolized and essentialized the whole, a synecdoche for Muhammad himself.

As a literary trope, synecdoche closely resembles metonymy, or the replacement of one word with another because of some common

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association between them. Scholars like Hayden White, however, have distinguished between metonymy’s function as a part representing the whole and synecdoche’s function as a part essentializing it. 2 ‘Fifty sails’ indicates fifty ships metonymically, but the synecdoche of ‘the English Crown’ is the part of the royal person that essentializes the power and sovereignty of the British state. Due to the tremendous veneration that the Sahihayn had earned in Sunni Islam as the most authentic reservoirs of the Prophet’s legacy, they were ideally suited to essentialize it.

Delimiting the Infinite: Managing the Sunna through the Hadith Canon

As Norman Calder observed, “One feature of Muslim tradition is that it acknowledges an indeterminately large body of hadith literature.” 3 The Prophet’s oral legacy within his community is amorphous and boundless, subsuming a seemingly infinite number of reports ranging from the most well-authenticated hadiths to common household sayings popularly attributed to the Prophet. As al-Shafi’i noted in the second/eighth century and Ibn Taymiyya emphasized at the turn of the seventh/thirteenth, any claim to have encompassed all the extant hadiths attributed to the Prophet was absurd. 4 In order to fulfill its important role in society, ritual and law, the Prophet’s sunna thus needed to be contained in a manageable form. It is in this capacity that the Sahihayn canon, and the Sunni hadith canon as a whole, has served admirably.

To the extent that there existed a simple need for some sort of synecdochic delimitation, the Sunni hadith canon has been relatively

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