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Ghamidi's Critique of the Seven Aḥruf Report

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Abstract:

Muslims have always upheld the multiplicity of the Qur'anic readings (*qirā'āt*), as sanctioned by the Prophet of Islam, who proclaimed that the Book was revealed in seven *aḥruf*. The Companions of the Prophet transmitted these readings faithfully to the next generations. These variant readings were subsequently standardized during the second and the third century of the Islamic era. The Muslims developed a consensus on reading the Qur'an according to one of the ten well-known canonical readings. This process continued until modern times when some Muslim modernists embraced scripturalism. Muslim modernists from Pakistan including Amīn Aḥsan Iṣlāḥī (d. 1997) and Javed Ahmad Ghamidi have rejected all the variant readings except the reading of Ḥafṣ ᵉan ᵉĀṣim, declaring the rest of the canonical readings as non-Qur'anic. Ghamidi has repudiated the seven-*aḥruf* narrative as militating against the Qur'an,

commonsense, and history. This article studies Ghamidi's criticism of the seven-*aḥruf* narrative through a historical-critical and philologicals method. This investigation shows that the Ḥadīth about the seven *aḥruf* enjoys overwhelmingly certain support, provides conclusive proof for the permissibility of the variant readings of the Qur'ān, contrary to the claim of Ghamidi, who rejects it as militating against commonsense and the Qur'an.

Keywords: Scriptural Interpretation, Seven Aḥruf Narrative, *qirā'a*, *qirā'āt*, Amin Ahsan Islahi, Javed Aḥmad Ghamidi.

1. Introduction

Scriptural interpretation is central to every religion as it enables the believers to act upon the divine commands. Traditionally, the scriptures of all religions have been interpreted in a multivalent manner. Muslims of classical and Medieval times also adopted a multivalent interpretation of the Holy Qur'an as is clear from the exegetical (*tafsīr*) literature of the Muslims. After the rise of Protestantism in Christianity, a shift from multivalent to the monovalent interpretation of the scriptures appeared in the west. Due to the spread of modernity through colonialism these ideas reached the other parts of the world including the Muslim world leading to the rise of scripturalism, resulting in epistemological shifts similar to those spawned in the Christian world.¹ Extra-scriptural material, including but not confined to the Ḥadīth literature and the variant readings of the Qur'an, came in the way of an effort to demonstrate concrete monovalency in the exegesis of the Book.² The modernist Muslim reformers, therefore, sought to purge the tradition of the elements that thwarted monovalent exegesis. The Ḥadīth, the traditions about the occasion of revelation, and above all the variant readings of the Qur'an were, therefore, questioned and seen as extra-scriptural adulterations. One important group of Ḥadīth narratives that came under attack was about the revelation of the Qur'an in seven *aḥruf* (modes).³ Most modernist reformers reject the report as vague and unreliable, and the variant readings of the Qur'an as extra-Qur'anic. Muslim modernists from Pakistan including Tamannā 'Imādī (d. 1972), Amin Ahsan Islahi (d. 1997), and Javed Ahmad

¹ Scripturalism as a hermeneutical approach views the scriptures as the only valid source of truth in a religion. All forms of extra-scriptural material are discardable. It assumes that all the believers, over history and geography, have equal belief in the authority of the scripture and must follow a single understanding of the verses of the scripture (See: Carl W. Ernst, *Muhammad: Rethinking Islam in the contemporary world*, (Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 54-5.

² In the case of the Qur'an, for example, the pre-scriptural sources include the previously revealed divine books and the pre-Islamic Arabic literature. Similarly, the post-scriptural materials including the Ḥadīth, the historical reports about the Prophet's life and circumstances of revelation, and the traditional exegesis find no part in the interpretive exercise.

³ The seven *aḥruf* narrative has been recorded by a host of Ḥadīth compilers. A representative authentic version is quoted below.

Ghamidi reject all the variant readings except one on the two grounds of Ḥadīth criticism of its text (*matn*) and chain of narrators (*isnād*). This article studies the argument of Ghamidi about the seven *aḥruf* narrative and his criticism on the *matn* and *isnād* of the report through a historical-critical and philological method. This article argues that the Ḥadīth about seven *aḥruf* is *mutawātir* (enjoying overwhelmingly certain support) and provides conclusive proof for the permissibility of multiple variant readings of the Qurʾān, contrary to the claim of Ghamidi, who rejects it as militating against commonsense and the Qurʾan. The paper will restrict to the objections raised by Ghamidi against the seven *aḥruf* narrative which include *isnād* and *matn* criticisms of the narrative. Only those historical sources which are cited by Ghamidi will be studied along with other such works as discussing the authenticity or otherwise of the issues raised against the narrative.

This paper is divided into three main sections. Section one introduces the objections leveled against the text and narrators' chain of the seven *aḥruf* narrative. Section two analyzes the modernists' arguments related to its *matn*. The third section studies the criticism of the *isnād* of the narrative. The last section summarizes conclusions and the wider implications of the study.

2. Ghamidi's Criticism

Ghamidi has introduced creative and innovative principles of defining the sources of the religion and understanding them. One of his principles postulates that the Qurʾan is the criterion (*mīzān*) and distinguisher (*furqān*) in all religious matters, and it must rule over everything religious.⁴ Though no Muslim authority has ever negated that the Qurʾan is a distinguisher (*furqān*), as attested by the Almighty, to Ghamidi, it implies that even the Prophet, upon whom the book was revealed, had no right to modify or specify the divine commands let alone add to or abrogate its rulings.⁵ He maintains that this principle leads to two foundational rules: a) the language of the Qurʾan is consummately certain and there is no possibility of polyvalency (multiplicity of the meaning) in it. Since accepting the differences of the variant readings (*qirāʾāt*) invalidates his position, Ghamidi rejects all the canonical readings except

⁴ Javed Ahmad Ghamidi, *Mīzān*, 13th ed., (Lahore: Al-Mawrid, 2020), 24. Ghamidi bases this principle on the following Qurʾanic verses: Q 25:1 and 42:17. Q 25:1 refers to the Qurʾan as *furqān*. However, the term *Mīzān* appears in 42:17 which is subject to difference of opinion. The majority of the exegetes holds that it does not refer to the Qurʾan.

⁵ Ghamidi, *Mīzān*, 25.

one, namely the reading of ʿĀṣim b. Abī Najūd as transmitted by Ḥafṣ b. Sulaymān al-Kūfī (d. 180/796). Ghamidi writes:

The Qurʾan is only that which is inscribed in the *mushaf* (hard copy of the Qurʾan) which an overwhelming majority of the believers recite all over the world today with the exception of some regions in the Maghrib.⁶ No *qirāʾa* [variant reading] other than this reading can be considered the Qurʾan, nor can it be presented as the Qurʾan. For this reason, the question [whether the variant readings can affect the supreme authority of the Qurʾan] does not arise at all.⁷

Ghamidi holds that Q. 87:6-7 and Q. 75: 16-19 assured the Prophet “the reading (*qirāʾa*) practiced during the period of revelation” would be followed by another reading.⁸ The second reading would be done after the arrangement and compilation of the Qurʾan in a book form. “Subsequently, the Prophet would be obliged to follow the final reading and would not be allowed to read it (that is, the Qurʾan) in previous reading.”⁹ He claims:

Consequently, it [*qirāʾa of arḍa akhīra*]¹⁰ is the only *qirāʾa* which has always enjoyed the *qawlī tawātur* of the believers since the time of the Companions of the Prophet, to this day. In this *qirāʾa*, the technical subtleties of the accents of the Arabs are taken from the *riwāya* of Ḥafṣ. This is why our scholars call it the “*qirāʾa* of Ḥafṣ.” Therefore, it is believed (erroneously though), that just like other *qirāʾāt*, this *qirāʾa* is also based on his choices (from existing reading

⁶ This generalization is incorrect because hard copies of the Qurʾan in variant readings are popular in regions outside al-Maghrab as well. Printed Maṣāḥif in Abū ʿAmr’s reading are in use in Somalia, Sudan, Chad, Nigeria, and Central Africa. Similarly, Qurʾan has been printed in Nāfī’s reading in Nigeria. Geographical location called al-Maghrab does not apply to these countries, neither in traditional nor in modern sources (See: Shihāb al-Dīn Abū ʿAbd Allah Yāqūt b. ʿAbd Allah al-al-Ḥamawī al-Rūmī al-Baghdādī, *Muʿjam al-Buldān*, (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1977), 1: 1:54 and 5:161.

⁷ Ghamidi, *Mīzān*, 27.

⁸ “[Prophet], We shall teach you [the Qurʾan] and you will not forget unless God wishes; He knows both what is open and what is hidden” (Q 87:6-7).

[Prophet], do not rush your tongue in an attempt to hasten [your memorization of] the Revelation: We shall make sure of its safe collection and recitation. When We have recited it, repeat the recitation and We shall make it clear.” (Q 75:16-9).

⁹ Ghamidi, *Mīzān*, 28.

¹⁰ *Arḍa akhīra*, literally “the last review.” See: Abū ʿAbd Allah Muhammad b. Ismāʿīl al-Bukhārī, al-Jāmiʿ al-Ṣaḥīḥ, (Beirut: Dār Ṭawq al-Nijāt, 2001), 6:186. In this final review, in the last Ramaḍān of the Prophet, the angel Jibrīl recited the Qurʾan before him twice.

traditions). Whereas it is the “*qirāʾa* of the generality (*ʿamma*)”. The previous generations would commonly¹¹ refer to it in these terms as stated above.¹²

The commonly held views about the concurrent (*mutawātir*) narrative of the seven *aḥruf* stands in contradistinction to Ghamidi’s view. Therefore, Ghamidi criticizes the seven *aḥruf* narratives and rejects it on various grounds. He has selectively quoted one version of the report from the *al-Muwattā* of Mālik and rejected it as historically inauthentic, devoid of meaning, and suffering from internal contradiction. The text of the narrative follows:

Mālik→Ibn Shihāb→ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr→ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. ʿAbd al-Qārī→ʿUmar b. Al-Khaṭṭāb:

I heard Hishām b. Ḥakīm reading Sūra al-Furqān in a way different from my reading that accorded to the way the Prophet taught it to me. I was about to rush up (and object) but I delayed my dispute till he finished (the prayer). Then I held him by his cloak and brought him to the Messenger of Allah. I said: “O Messenger of Allah, I have heard him reciting Sūrah al-Furqān differently from the way you have taught it to me.” The Prophet of Allah said (to me): “Let him go.” Then he said: “Recite O Hishām.” He recited it the way I heard him recite (earlier). The Messenger of Allah said: “It was revealed like that.” Then he said to me: “Recite.” I recited it. He said: “This is how it was revealed. Indeed, this Qur’an has been revealed in seven *aḥruf*. So recite from it as is easy for you.”¹³

¹¹ Ghamidi has used the word “commonly” (Urdu “*umūman*”) to give the impression that during the period preceding the canonization of the readings in the fourth Century Hijra, the expression “*qirāʾa al ʿamma*” was the general usage for this reading. However, this claim lacks evidence. The reason is that Ghamidi has cited only one report ascribed to Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Sullamī. We know that al-Sullamī died at the end of the first century after Hijra (circa 74 AH) but his saying is brought to the light in our sources for the first time four centuries after his death, by Abū Muḥammad Ḥusayn b. Masʿūd b. Muḥammad al-Farrāʾ al-Baghawī (d. 516/1122), which is not referred to by Ghamidi. There is no chain of authorities attached to the text in al-Baghawī’s, leaving the reader with no possibility to investigate the authenticity of the report. See: Al-Baghawī, Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥusayn b. Masʿūd, *Sharḥ al-sunna*, (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1983), 4:525). Ghamidi uses a latter authority, Al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1392) who records this saying in his *Burhān*. Unfortunately, al-Zarkashi too does not give a chain of narrators, leaving the investigator clueless as to its reliability. See Badr al-Dīn Al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān*, vol., 1 (Cairo: Maktaba Dār al-Turāth, nd.), 1:237.

¹² Ghamidi, *Mīzān*, 29. Ghamidi’s argument in as much as it is based on the passage of the Qur’an (Q 75:16-19) deserves independent treatment.

¹³ Mālik b. Anas, *al-Muwattā*, (Abu Dhabi: Muʾassasa Zāyid b. Sulṭān āl Nahyān li al-ʿamāl al-Khayriyya wa al-Insāniyya, 2004), 281.

2.1 Criticism of the Text (*matn*)

Ghamidi has rejected the narrative as meaningless. He claims that if four “facts” about the narrative are considered, it becomes absolutely clear that the narrative is void of meaning (*bey ma‘nā*) and “must never be considered worthy of merit in such issues.”¹⁴ His arguments are summarized below:

First, Ghamidi’s objection on the text of the report is that it is meaningless because it is impossible to pin down its meaning. He argues that no one among the entire Muslim history has ever been able to decipher its meaning.¹⁵ He says that “through the narrative is part of the foundational Ḥadīth compilations, yet its meaning is an enigma which no one in the entire history of the umma has even been able to solve.”¹⁶ Ghamidi claims that al-Suyūfī has enumerated several interpretations of the narrative and finally admitted that the narrative is *mutashābih* (unclear).¹⁷

Secondly, the only plausible explanation (*wāḥid ma‘qūl tawjīh*) of the expression seven *ahruf* could be the different dialects of the Arab tribes but the text of the report itself negates this possibility of this meaning as both ‘Umar and Hishām belonged to the Quraysh tribe. It is not probable that the two persons from the same tribe differed in their reading of the Qur’ān.

Thirdly, Ghamidi further argues that the allowance to read the Qur’an in different dialects was understandable. However, “how can one accept” that it was revealed in seven dialects “as the report uses the verb “*unzila*”, that is, it was revealed”. To further complicate the issue, Ghamidi claims that the Qur’an has already stated that it was revealed in the language of the Quraysh and, therefore, this interpretation is not tenable too, and the report should be repudiated.

Fourthly, Ghamidi claims, Hishām entered the fold of Islam after the Conquest of Makkah (8 AH). Ghamidi argues, “If we accept the narrative, then we must also believe that the senior Companions of the Prophet, the likes of ‘Umar, who used to accompany him day and night, did not know that the Prophet was stealthily (*chupke chupke*) teaching the Qur’an differently to the people. ... Everyone can understand how grave this position is how extensive

¹⁴ Ghamidi, *Mizān*, 30. Note the emphatics “absolutely clear” and “must never be,” which seem to compensate the lack of evidence as will become clear shortly.

¹⁵ Ghamidi refers to the narrative as a whole, claiming that it is enigmatic. However, as will be seen, his argument is based on the meaning of the term *ahruf*, plural of *harf* alone.

¹⁶ Ghamidi, *Mizān*, 30.

¹⁷ The exact wording of al-Suyūfī and his view on the subject will be discussed in the next section.

its mischief can be.”¹⁸ He goes on to claim that, along with this, the narratives about the collection of the Qur’an are also unsound. “Neither the Qur’an nor common sense (*‘aql-e ‘ām*) accepts these narratives (on both the issues).”¹⁹

Though Ghamidi seeks to pile up several points to discredit the narrative and enumerates four points, the actual criticism he offers is confined to the two points. The first and the fourth point Ghamidi raises can validly be considered a criticism of the text, while the second and the third are his response to a possible criticism to his first point. The first point involves historical criticism. He points out that the meaning of the narrative has always been a subject of difference of opinion. It could be said in response: “this is not true. Several authorities have given the narrative a plausible meaning. It is taken to mean the different dialects of the Arabs.” As if apprehending this objection, Ghamidi explains that this is not tenable due to two reasons. The second and the third point, thus involve an effort to deal with a possible criticism. Therefore, these two points cannot be proper criticisms on the narrative. Including these points in the list of problems serves as a rhetorical device rather than an honest presentation of the issue. The fourth point, however, involves historical criticism.

2.2 Criticism of *Isnād*

Ghamidi asserts that though these narratives were included in the foundation Ḥadīth (*ummahāt*) yet basically (*aṣlan*) they have entered the sound works (*ṣiḥāḥ*) on the authority of Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 124/741). Ghamidi claims that al-Zuhrī has been accused by the scholars of Ḥadīth transmitter criticism (*jarḥ-o-ta’dīl*) of obfuscation in transmission (*tadlīs*) and making insertions in the Ḥadīth text (*idrāj*).²⁰ Moreover, considering al-Zuhrī’s traits mentioned by Imām Layth b. Sa’d in a letter to Imām Malik, it becomes clear that no narrative by al-Zuhrī should be considered in the important matters like these.²¹

Ghamidi mentions in passing that the experts in Ḥadīth criticism have declared al-Zuhrī guilty of obfuscation and insertion, however, he has briefly discussed the alleged internal contradictions and confusions of al-Zuhrī. According to Ghamidi, a reference to these

¹⁸ Ghamidi, *Mizān*, 31.

¹⁹ Ghamidi, *Mizān*, 31.

²⁰ Ghamidi, *Mizān*, 31.

²¹ Ghamidi, *Mizān*, 31.

contradictions and confusions have been made by Imām Layth b. Saʿd in his letter to Imām Mālik. A rendition of Ghamidi’s Urdu translation of the part of the letter follows:²²

And when we used to meet with Ibn Shihāb, a host of (internal) contradictions would appear. And when someone among us would ask him something in writing, then al-Zuhri despite his eminence in knowledge and wisdom, would respond in three different ways on a single matter, each contradicting the other, without being conscious of what he had previously said about the same matter.

It was precisely for these things that I abandoned him which you did not like.²³

3. Analysis of Ghamidi’s Arguments

Ghamidi’s criticism of the seven *ahṛuf* report needs critical evaluation. Most conspicuously, it must be brought out first that according to almost all experts of the Ḥadīth science, the report is reliable beyond any criticism. Some of the Ḥadīth experts – like Abū ʿUbayd Qāsim b. Sallām, Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, Imām Muhammad b. al-Jazarī and others²⁴ – have declared that the report rises up to the level of *mutawātir* category.²⁵ Dr Ḥasan Diyāʾ al-Dīn ʿItr notes that

a researcher witnesses the abundance of the *isnāds* of this narrative and its wide circulation after the (age of) the Companions. Similarly, the researcher notes that a great number of its *isnāds* is sound, rather some of the *isnāds* (of this narrative) are considered *the golden chains* which lend enough credence to it even if it were not transmitted through any additional chain. An example

²² The correct translation of the quoted text will be presented in the analysis of the argument. Here I have not rendered the original Arabic text into English. I have rendered Ghamidi’s Urdu translation of it. The official translation of Ghamidi’s work *Mizān*, done by Shahzad Saleem, could be used for our purpose but I have decided not to use it because the translator, at times, misconstrues Ghamidi and, as a result, produces incorrect translation. For example, he has misunderstood the following words from the passage under discussion leading to incorrect rendition. Ghamidi wrote: *boht sey taḍādāt sāmney ātey*, “a host of [internal] contradictions would appear”. Saleem’s renders these words as “there would arise a difference of opinion” See: Shehzad Saleem, “A Critical Analysis of the “First Revelation” Narratives”, *Monthly-Renaissance.Com*, 2019, <http://www.monthly-renaissance.com/issue/content.aspx?id=31554>.

²³ Ghamidi, *Mizān*, 31-2. Ghamidi has misconstrued the statement of Imām Layth b. Saʿd as discussed below.

²⁴ Abū al-Fidāʾ Ismāʿīl b. ʿUmar b. al-Kathīr al-Qurashī al-Baṣrī, *Tafsīr al-qurʿan al-ʿaẓīm*, (Riyadh: Dār al-Ṭayyiba li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzīʿ, 1999), 1:42; ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Abī Bakr Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Tadrīb al-rāwī fī sharḥ taqrīb al-nawāwī*, (Riyadh: Dār Ṭayyiba, 2006), 2:630; Abu al-Khayr, Muhammad b. Muhammad, Al-Jazrī, *al-Nashr fī qirāʾat al-ʿashr*, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1:21).

²⁵ *Mutawātir* is a term which applies to a report 1) transmitted by such “a number of people” for whom “it is impossible to have conspired and forge it.” 2) The strength of the report remains equal (that is, it does not fall the initial level) in each layer. 3) The reported matter is empirical in nature. 4) The report “yields certain knowledge” to the hearer. See: Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Nuzha al-naẓar fī tawdʿiṣ nuḥba al-fikr*, (Damascus: Maṭbaʿa al-Ṣabāḥ, 2000), 43.

of the golden chain is the chain in question: Mālik from Ibn Shihāb, from °Urwa from al-Miswar al-Makhrama and °Abd al-Raḥmān b. °Abd al-Qārī, from °Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb.”²⁶

Dr. °Itr points out that al-Suyūṭī has mentioned twenty-one companions who reported the Ḥadīth. Dr °Itr’s claims that his research shows that the number of companions who transmitted this Ḥadīth is, in fact, twenty-four.²⁷ The wide knowledge of the seven *aḥruf* narrative, abundance of its *isnāds*, and the multiplicity of its narrators rule out the possibility of fabrication. Therefore, °Itr argues, it is a *mutawātir* narrative, as has been clearly stated by Abū °Ubayd al-Qāsim b. Sallām, a third century scholar and author.²⁸

Similarly, the narrators of the report proliferate in the next generation (*tabaqa*) exponentially. Such a large number of people could not possibly have conspired and concocted a report. If someone claims that the *ḥadīth* report is not *mutawātir*, he can be referred to other corroborating facts. For example, the other reports about the existence and currency of the variant readings of the Qur’an, which themselves are *mutawātir*, lend further support to this narrative.²⁹

The points °Itr raises are cogent. Additionally, one notes that the reports about the compilation of the Qur’an by °Uthmān b. °Affān and the agreement of Muslims of all ages on the °Uthmānic text also provide a strong corroboration of the seven *aḥruf* report. All the accounts of the compilation of the Qur’an by the caliph °Uthmān affirm the existence of the variant readings and their practice in the community. Similarly, the innumerable accounts of the variant readings of the Companions reported and discussed in the Ḥadīth, Tafsīr and Fiqh literature conclusively establish the fact that the Companions of the Prophet acknowledged the variant readings, read, and taught them to the people.

The Muslim modernists, in their bid to champion the primacy of the Qur’an at the cost of the Ḥadīth --as a valid source of Islamic law and creed-- and established historical facts, often ignore the traditional Muslim position on the variant readings of the Qur’an. The historical reports about the seven *aḥruf*, the compilation of the Qur’an, and the currency of the readings during the time of the Companions and the Successors are parts of a collective tradition. Therefore, one must note that the viewpoint of Ghamidi (°Imādī, Iṣlāḥī, and others)

²⁶ Ḥasan Ḍiyā° al-Dīn °Itr, *al-Aḥruf al-sab°a wa manzila al-qirā°āt minhā*, (Beirut: Dār al-Bashā°ir al-Islāmiyya, 1988), 107.

²⁷ Ḥasan Ḍiyā° al-Dīn °Itr, *al-Aḥruf al-sab°a*, 107.

²⁸ Ḥasan Ḍiyā° al-Dīn °Itr, *al-Aḥruf al-sab°a*, 109.

²⁹ Ḥasan Ḍiyā° al-Dīn °Itr, *al-Aḥruf al-sab°a*, 109-110.

betrays the larger objectives of the modernist Islamic reform project. Now we turn to the major flaws in the argument of Ghamidi regarding the criticism of *matn* of the seven *aḥruf* narrative.

3.1. Matn Criticism

First, we should remind ourselves that an apparently meaningless *ḥadīth* is not necessarily inauthentic. For example, no definitive meaning could be determined in case of several Qur’anic passages. There is a sharp and irresolvable difference of opinion on several Qur’anic expressions. The most prominent example is the “mysterious letters” (*ḥurūf muqatta‘āt*), the meaning of which has been endlessly debated. The narrative of seven *aḥruf* has been invoked by the Companions of the Prophet, the Successors (*tābi‘ūn*), and the scholars of the subsequent generations in order to uphold the permissibility of variant readings. Therefore, they all agree that the Ḥadīth confirms the fundamental permissibility of variant readings, despite recognizing the difference of opinion on the precise meaning of the term *aḥruf*.

Moreover, al-Suyūṭī has not declared the narrative as unclear (*mutashābih*) and liable to be rejected. He has expressed doubts about the precise meaning of the term *aḥruf* alone, not the entire narrative as Ghamidi asserts. Ghamidi has partially quoted the statement of al-Suyūṭī. A fuller version of Al-Suyūṭī’s statement follows:

The scholars have differed among themselves over the meaning of seven *aḥruf*. There are about forty opinions which I have cited with authorities, in my book *al-Itqān*. To me, the soundest among these is that the expression is *mutashābih* (unclear) the meaning of which is not known, for there are clear (*muḥkam*) and unclear (*mutashābih*) passages in Ḥadīth just as we have them in the Qur’an.³⁰

Ghamidi has confined himself to the parts of the statement that suits his claim and omitted the last sentence. This omission deserves more than a passing reference. It is not an inadvertent mistake on the part of Ghamidi. Rather, it is very important for the discourse of Ghamidi to suppress this part. He has sought to cite al-Suyūṭī to give the impression that due to the term seven *aḥruf*, which is enigmatic, the report should be rejected. However, this part of al-Suyūṭī’s statement undermines Ghamidi’s argument. In the traditional Muslim understanding, and to al-Suyūṭī for that matter, the presence of *mutashābih* expressions in a *ḥadīth* report does not de-value it. Rather, it raises the prestige of the report and makes it at par with the divine discourse. Obscurity of meaning, something that makes the *ḥadīth* share a

³⁰ ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Abī Bakr Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *Tanwīr al-ḥawālik sharḥ muwaṭṭā Mālik*, (Egypt: al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya al-Kubrā, 1969), 1:160.

characteristic with the Qur'an in the eyes of Al-Suyūṭī, has been presented by Ghamidi as a flaw. Just as the Qur'ānic *mutashābih* verses cannot be rejected, this *ḥadīth* report too cannot be rejected for being *mutashābih*. Ghamidi's approach in this case, is characteristic of the modern reformers to deploy the tradition selectively to bring down the rest of the traditional argument.

The discussion by al-Suyūṭī does not support the effort to depict a legendary case of countless views. In his work *al-Itqān*, al-Suyūṭī mentions thirty-five views of the past authorities, and before concluding the discussion, quotes in affirming tone, a very significant explanation, ascribing it to al-Mursī. The latter noted that these are not in fact thirty-five in number, rather, there is much overlapping amongst them. Moreover, the upholders of those views are not known. It was not, therefore, clear whether those interpretations were really upheld by known authorities. Al-Mursī declares the majority of the views in the list as untenable as they go against the authentic seven *aḥruf* reports, particularly, the report under study.³¹

Al-Suyūṭī has himself clarified his stance on the meaning of the term *aḥruf*, concluding that one aspect of the meaning is clear: the permissibility of variant readings. While discussing the narrative in his commentary on the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim, he repeats the above statement and adds a very important point: “The known meaning of the term is the multiplicity of the readings (*wa al-ma'ālūm minhu ta'addud al-qirā'āt*).”³² Al-Suyūṭī has delineated that the basic point, for which the Ḥadīth has been quoted since the days of the Companions, is that it affords the permissibility of variant readings. There is another instance where al-Suyūṭī offers his opinion on the meaning of the term. In his work *al-Tawshīḥ*, he states that he has mentioned nearly forty interpretations of seven *aḥruf* in his compendia *al-Itqān*: of these: “the most plausible are two views: first, seven dialects. ... Second, seven kinds of synonymous terms such as *aqbil*, *ta'āl*, *halumma*, *‘ajjil*, and *asri'*” (all these expressions mean “Come!”).³³ Having mentioned this, al-Suyūṭī presents his final preference, that is, “it is like the *mutashābih* of the Qur'an and the Ḥadīth (*ka mutashābih al-Qur'ān wa al-Ḥadīth*)”. Al-Suyūṭī ascribes this view to Ibn

³¹ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'an*, (Egypt: al-Hay'ā al-Miṣriyya al-‘amma li al-Kitāb, 1984), 1:176.

³² Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Dībāj ‘alā ṣaḥīḥ Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj*, (Saudi Arabia: Dār Ibn ‘Affān li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzī', 1996), 2:409.

³³ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Tawshīḥ sharḥ jāmi' al-ṣaḥīḥ*, (Riyadh: Maktaba al-Rushd, 1998), 7:3172. Al-Suyūṭī ascribes the first view to Abū ‘Ubayd, Tha‘lab, al-Azharī, Ibn ‘Aṭīyya and al-Bayhaqī among others. The second view has been ascribed to Sufyān b. ‘Uyayna, Ibn Wahb, and Khallād.

Saʿdān al-Naḥwī.³⁴ There is no doubt that most classical scholars have not considered it a *mutashābih* statement: al-Suyūfī does not represent the entire scholarship in this case.

Secondly, Ghamidi claims that the only commonsensical interpretation of the seven *aḥruf* could be that it refers to the different local and tribal dialects of the Arabs. However, Ghamidi points out that both persons differing in the reading of the Qurʾan, ʿUmar and Hishām, belonged to the same tribe of Quraysh. Therefore, Ghamidi argues, that this commonsensical interpretation is not tenable. Ghamidi is, however, presuming too much: pure monoglossic societies have been rare in the world, and Arabia was no exception.³⁵ It is likely that people alternated between several languages and dialects. Though there is a difference of opinion over the precise nature of the *aḥruf*, as already explained, but it is not altogether impossible for a Qurayshite’s speech to oscillate among several dialects. Ghamidi also assumes that all the clans of the Quraysh had the same dialects as if they were living together in one family in one place. Dialects change with slight geographical displacements and clan affiliations. Some of the Quraysh were settled in Makka (called Quraysh al-Baṭṭāh) and others lived in the suburbs and surroundings of the city (called Qurayh al-Zawāhir).³⁶ Unlike the former, the latter Qurayshites were not true settlers. Their lifestyles could be diverse as their ways of life were more akin to the Bedouin style. It is not certain that all the clans of Quraysh possessed identical accents.³⁷ The settled Qurayshi clans would sometimes send their children to live among the Bedouin tribes so that they could learn pure Arabic. According to the biographers of the Prophet, he spent his childhood in Banū Saʿd b. Bakr, a non-Quraysh tribe.³⁸ Admittedly, ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb of Banu ʿAdī and Hishām b. Ḥakīm of Banū Asad both belonged to Quraysh tribe; their lineage merges in Luʿay b. Kaʿb, after eight generations.³⁹ It is possible that there was a variation in the dialects of the two clans. Finally, the difference allowed doesn't need to be

³⁴ Al-Suyūfī, *al-Tawshīh sharḥ jāmiʿ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, 7:3173.

³⁵ M. M. Bakhtin, *The dialogic imagination: Four essays*, Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 12.

³⁶ Abū ʿAbd Allah Muhammad b. Ishāq b. al-ʿAbbās al-Makkī al-Fākihī, *Akhbār Makka fī qadīm al-dahr wa ḥadīthihī* (Beirut: Dār Khīḍar, 1993), 5:149-50. Quraysh al-zawāhir included Banū Maʿīṣ b. ʿAmir b. Luʿayy, Banū Tamīm al-Adram b. Ghālib b. Fihir, Banū Maḥārib b. Fihir, and Banū al-Ḥārith b. Fihir (Muhammad b. Saʿd, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kabīr*, (Cairo: Maktaba al-Khānjī, 2001), 1:58.) These clans were just like Bedouin tribes as clarified by Ṭāhā ʿAbd al-Raʿūf, the editor of Ibn Hishām’s *al-Sīrah*. See: ʿAbd al-Malik b. Hishām b. Ayyūb al-Ḥimyarī Abū Muhammad Jamāl al-Dīn, *al-Sīrah al-nabawīyya*, (Egypt: Maktaba Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1955), 1:148.

³⁷ This is why the authorities who hold that the Qurʾan was revealed in the language of the Quraysh, explain the seven *aḥruf* as the dialects of seven clans (*buṭūn*) of the Quraysh. This view ascribed to the Ibn Quraybah and Abū ʿAlī al-Aḥwāzī. See: Aḥmad b. ʿAlī b. Ḥajar Abū al-Faḍl al-ʿAsqalānī, *Fath al-bārī sharḥ ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifā, 1379), 9:27.

³⁸ ʿAbd al-Malik b. Hishām, *al-Sīrah al-nabawīyya*, 1:160.

³⁹ Muhammad b. Saʿd, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kabīr*, 6:50, 3:245.

confined to the different tribes. There are instances in the existing canonical readings where the dialects of the tribes do not matter. Rather, the nature of the difference is entirely confined to possible grammatical variations in one consonantal form. For example, the expression N-Gh-F-R-L-K-M (Q 2:58) has been read in three ways:

Naghfir lakum khaṭāyākum, (active, 1st person pl., *we will forgive you your sins*),

Yughfar lakum khaṭāyākum (passive, 3rd person sing. Masc., *your sins will be forgiven*),

tughfar lakum khaṭāyākum (passive, 3rd person pl. fem., *your sins will be forgiven*).⁴⁰

Differences of this type exists without a reference to the different dialects. This difference in reading has nothing to do with the variation in tribal dialects.

Thirdly, Ghamidi claims that the Qur'an was revealed in the language of the Quraysh and, therefore, the word *unzila* (*it has been revealed*) in the narrative cannot apply as it would mean that the Qur'an was revealed in seven different languages. This criticism is not tenable for the following reasons. First, the Ḥadīth narratives have not been reported verbatim. The process of transmission by meaning (*riwāya bi al-ma'nā*), concerning the Ḥadīth reports, has been acknowledged from the beginning.⁴¹ This is why other versions of the seven *aḥruf* narrative contain different words and expressions such as in the following versions:

I was taught (*ʿuqriʿtu*) to read the Qur'an in seven *aḥruf*,

Indeed, Allah commands you to teach (*tuqriʿa*) your umma the Qur'an in one *ḥarf*,

Jibril said: They should read (*falyaqraʿū*) the Qur'an in seven *aḥruf*, and

Jibril commanded me to read the Qur'an (*an aqraʿa*) in one *ḥarf*.⁴²

These versions of the report use a range of terms in place of *unzila*.

Moreover, contrary to the claim of Ghamidi, the Qur'an has not clearly stated that it was revealed in the language of the Quraysh. Various verses in the Book of Allah refer to the language of the Qur'an. The Holy Quran says that every Messenger has been sent with a message in the language of his nation (*lisāni qawmihī*) (Q 15:4). Elsewhere it describes itself as a book in Arabic language (*lisān ʿarabī*) (Q 16: 103, 26:195, and 46:12). It also states that the Book was revealed in the Prophet's language (*lisānika*, your tongue)' (Q 19:97 and Q 44:58). The scholars have differed over the question to what the expressions "language of the

⁴⁰ *Tughfar lakum* is the reading of Ibn ʿĀmir. *Yughfar lakum* is the reading of Abū Jaʿfar and Nāfiʿ. The reading of the rest of the ten is *naghfir lakum*. See: Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr fī qirāʾāt al-ʿashr*, 2:215.

⁴¹ Imām al-Shāfiʿī, for example, argues that the narration by meaning is allowable in the Prophetic Ḥadīth. He seeks to establish this stance by quoting the seven *aḥruf* narrative and states that if the Qur'an could be read differently, transmission of the rest of the statements coming from the Prophet by meaning should be allowed all the more. (Muhammad b. Idri al-Shāfiʿī, *al-Risāla*, (Egypt: Muṣṭafā al-Babī al-Ḥalbī, 1938), 273-4.

⁴² Mannāʿ b. Khalīl al-Qaṭṭān, *Nuzūl al-Qurʿan ʿalā sabʿ aḥruf*, (Cairo: Maktaba Wahba, 1991), 102.

nation of the Messenger” and the language of the Messenger precisely refer. The question is: does the term *lisān* refer to the language of the tribe or a group of tribes? If a group of tribes, then which tribes? Who are the people making up the nation (*qawm*) of the Prophet? Who are Arabs? The decisive factor in the solution to these questions is the Qur’anic statement that the Prophet was sent to the Arabs and the language of his Book is Arabic. Arabic is the language of the Arabs and not of the Quraysh alone. Many verses in the Qur’an contrast its language with the non-Arab languages rather than the language of the Quraysh with the languages of the rest of the Arab tribes. Therefore, after referring to the above-mentioned verses of the Qur’an, Dr. Jawwād °Alī concludes his view on these questions about the language of the Qur’an:

Allah has not said “*Qurayshī* language” (*lisān qurashī*). Had the Qur’an been revealed in the language of the Quraysh alone, Allah would not leave it unmentioned. A reference to the language of the Quraysh, if it were the most eloquent language of all the Arabs, would [be very useful as it would] imply that the Qur’an had an argument (*hujja*) against all the Arab (tribes) in being the most eloquent and clear language. It would work as a miracle (*mu’jiza*) with reference to the Quraysh, being the most eloquent and the cogent of all the (Arab) people. It would mean that it is not the language of the generality of the Arabs who are distinct from the Quraysh in language and speech, in the definition of the *akhbārīs*. And the verse “We have never sent a messenger who did not use his own people’s language to make things clear for them” (Q 14:4) is nothing but an argument and evidence for that the Qur’an was revealed in the language of the Arabs rather than the language of the Quraysh or a specific Qurayshite clan or some specific tribes.⁴³

Works on the history of the Arabs and their language as well as the anthologies of the ancient Arabic poetry reveal that with rare exceptions the bulk of the poetry comes from the non-Quraysh tribes. According to Muhammad b. Sallām al-Jumahī (d.231), the pre-Islamic Arabic poets came from the Rabī°a tribe. Subsequently, the art was mastered by the Qays tribe.⁴⁴ What corroborates the view of Ibn Sallām is the known fact that none of the seven

⁴³ Dr Jawwād °Alī, *al-Mufaṣṣal fī tārikh al-°Arab qabl al-Islam*, (Beirut: Dār al-Sāqī, 2001), 16:241.

⁴⁴ Muhammad b. Sallām al-Jumahī, *Ṭabaqāt fuḥūl al-shu°arā°*, (Jeddah: Dār al-Madanī, 2009), 1:40.

famous poets of *mu'allaqāt* was a Qurayshi. It is this poetry which the Muslim scholars of the past and present often cite to determine meanings of the Qur'anic words.⁴⁵

Finally, it needs to be appreciated that the dispute among ʿUmar and Hishām was possibly limited to a part of only one surah of the Qur'an, Sūrah al-Furqān. It does not follow from it that ʿUmar and other companions did not know the allowance to read the other Surahs and verses of the Qur'an variously. Nor does it follow that the Prophet divulged the information to ʿUmar for the first time. ʿUmar could have challenged Hishām's reading of a part of the surah. The Prophet, after hearing both sides, could have reminded them of the known fact: the Qur'an was revealed in seven *ahruf*. Moreover, it is not necessary that the close companions of the Prophet knew everything. For example, ʿUmar himself was not aware of the details of the command about seeking permission before entering someone's house. He was not aware of the Prophetic command that a person should not continue to seek permission to enter. Rather, he should seek permission to enter thrice. If the master of the house does not respond, the visitor should return. When Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī revealed this information to ʿUmar, the latter was not convinced. It is only after seeking confirmation of the report from other sources, ʿUmar acknowledged his failure to know the command. He also explained the cause of his lack of knowledge on the issue: his involvement in trade activities.⁴⁶ There is no doubt in that the question of reading a Qur'anic verse differently was not a more conspicuous issue than the practice to ask permission before entering another's house.

3.2. Isnād Criticism

Ghamidi's claim that the Ḥadīth has found its way in the major sound Ḥadīth works (*ṣiḥāḥ*) through Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī is factually incorrect. The various versions of the Ḥadīth of seven *ahruf* in the canonical Ḥadīth works do not depend on the person of al-Zuhrī. Among the various such *ṣaḥīḥ* versions of the Ḥadīth, Muslim has recorded the *ḥadīth* affirming seven *ahruf* on the authority of Ubayy b. Ka'b through the following *isnād*: Imām Muslim → Muhammad b. ʿAbd Allah b. Numayr → ʿAbd Allah b. Numayr → Ismāʿīl b. Abī Khalid → ʿAbd Allah b. ʿĪsā b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Abī Laylā → ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Abī Laylā → Ubayy b. Ka'b. Also, a few other chains of narrators in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim do not include al-Zuhrī as a transmitter.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Rather, Ghamidi himself has raised the role of the pre-Islamic poetry above all the other sources of Qur'an *tafsīr* including the Ḥadīth and the interpretations ascribed to the Companions (Ghamidi, *Mīzān*, 15-20).

⁴⁶ Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj b. Muslim, *al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, (Beirut: Dār Ṭawq al-Najāt, 2011), 6:177-80.

⁴⁷ Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj b. Muslim, *al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, 2:202.

Moreover, the Ḥadīth has not been reported by one companion, ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb. A great majority of these versions do not contain the name of Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī as a transmitter. In the Ṣaḥīḥ of al-Bukhārī himself, there is another version on the authority of ʿAbd Allah b. ʿAbbās. Other sound (*ṣaḥīḥ*) versions come down on the authority of Abū Hurayra, Sulaymān b. al-Ṣurad al-Khuzāʿī, ʿAmr. B. al-ʿĀṣ, Anas b. Malik, Abū Bakra, ʿUbāda b. al-Ṣāmit, Ibn ʿAbbās, ʿAbd Allah b. Masʿūd, Ḥudhayfa b. Yamān, Muʿādh b. Jabal, Abī Juyaym, and Samura b. Jundub.⁴⁸ The remaining traditions though weak in themselves, are supported by the sound ones and add to the strength of the narrative. This is a representative case of the transmission in which the number of narratives is so large that it crosses the point where it becomes clear that due to the dispersion of the reporters across the Muslim lands, they could not have collaborated to forge it. In parallel transmission, society affirms the report through their perpetual practice. In such situations, there remains no point to reject the Ḥadīth based on the character of the individual narrators.

Therefore, the fact that the seven *aḥruf* narrative was transmitted by more than forty successors, from twenty-four companions, renders any effort to find faults with an individual narrator, meaningless. Similarly, reports about the currency and existence of the variant readings are supported by innumerable chains of narrators, rendering the practice of the first generations certain. The successors involved in reporting the seven *aḥruf* narrative are not confined to one geographical location. Of the forty *tābiʿūn* reporting the seven *aḥruf* narrative, nine are Basrans, two Egyptians, eighteen Kūfans, six Madinans, and five Makkans. This is not an exhaustive count. Nor is the transmission of the seven *aḥruf* narrative and the practices associated with it confined to these *isnāds*. Rather, the *isnāds* work as a definer of the practice which is common among the entire generation; they only partake of the prevailing norms. Moreover, numerous religious practices are authenticated by reports carried by Ibn Shihāb and discrediting him would invalidate those practices as well. One can understand why Ibn Shihāb has been singled out for such criticisms by religious groups who in general delegitimize the *ḥadīth* reports, of which the seven *aḥruf* narrative is only one.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ The reports ascribed to these companions have been declared *ṣaḥīḥ* by Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Banī, in his various books.

⁴⁹ The modernists seldom leave an opportunity to attack al-Zuhrī. Shehzad Saleem has taken al-Zuhri to task more recently while rejecting the *Hadīth* of the first revelation of the Qurʾān. See: Shehzad Saleem, “A critical analysis of the “first revelation” narratives”, *Monthly-Renaissance*, 29, no. 3 (2019): Saleem has tried to amass more material against al-Zuhri, which will be analyzed in a separate paper.

Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī is one of the foundational pillars of the transmission of the Ḥadīth and Sīra (biography of the Prophet). There are more than one thousand narratives by al-Zuhrī's in the works of Imām Mālik, Imām al-Bukhārī, Imām Muslim and other canonical Ḥadīth compilers. The sheer volume of his narratives and his abundant following reveal the widespread level of authenticity he wielded. The earlier biographers do not condemn him for anything that injures his reliability and trustworthiness as a Ḥadīth narrator. For example, there is no criticism (*jarḥ*) against him in the *Ṭabaqāt* of Ibn Saʿd, the *Tārīkh* of al-Bukhārī, and other earlier works, rather all the trustworthy scholars have attributed lofty qualities to him. They praise him for his memory, understanding, wide knowledge, and clarity of transmission. He has been accused by some of the authorities of insertions (*idrāj*) and obfuscations (*tadlīs*). These accusations should be duly understood in the light of the fact that these ill-defined terms belonged to the earliest age when the nature of his insertions and obfuscations can be applied to all the prominent Ḥadīth reporters of the earliest age, a time when the Ḥadīth criticism terms such as *idrāj* and *tadlīs* were not even coined. A strict application of these rules would even severely injure the Companions of the Prophet, including e.g. ʿĀʿisha and Ibn ʿAbbās, not to say of the next generation of transmitters. Since Ghamidi has not provided a detailed *jarḥ* of al-Zuhrī concerning *idrāj* and *tadlīs*, and has merely referred to, though incorrectly, the past authorities, the accusation does not deserve any detailed rebuttal. Ghamidi's unsupported claim does not affect the testimony of Imām Malik, Imām al-Bukhārī, Imām Muslim and the rest of the earliest Ḥadīth compilers who recorded al-Zuhrī's reports and declared him a leader in the discipline. It suffices us to quote the conclusion of a detailed study of Nāṣir b. Aḥmad al-Saʿd. In the following extract, al-Saʿd explains that it is incorrect to accuse al-Zuhrī of *idrāj* and *tadlīs*:

Muhammad b. Muslim b. Shiāb al-Zuhrī, al-Hāfiz, al-Imām: I did not find any scholars from among the earliest generations of scholars (*mutaqaddimīn*) attributing *tadlīs* to him [al-Zuhrī]. However, Ibn Ḥajar mentions that al-Shāfiʿī and al-Dāra Quṭnī attributed it [that is, *tadlīs*] to him. Apparently the two [scholars] meant *irsāl* not *tadlīs*, as a term of the later authorities in its specific meaning. Alternatively, they meant to mention *tadlīs* in its general sense, an attribute that does not affect the reliability of a Ḥadīth transmitter (*ghayr qādiḥ*). [Imām al-Shāfiʿī and al-Dāra Quṭnī] meant that al-Zuhrī would, at rare occasions (*aḥyānan*), commit it [that is, the *tadlīs* in general sense]. It is extremely rare that al-Zuhrī committed *tadlīs* in its specific meaning [as a term] as is clear from a comparison between [reports involving *tadlīs*] and the total

number of Ḥadīth narratives he transmitted. No one among the Imams [that is, the Ḥadīth compilers] ever hesitated to accept his transmissions, rather he is one of the pillars of the Prophet Ḥadīth.... Coming to the authorities from the later generations of the scholars, we find the following: Al-°Alā°ī writes: “Muhammad b. Shihāb al-Zuhrī, al-Imām, famous for his (*tadlīs*). However, the imams have accepted his narratives even when he uses °*an°ana*.”

Subsequently, Ibn Ḥajar counted Imām al-Zuhrī in the third category of the *mudallis* narrators. He wrote: “al-Zuhrī, al-Madanī, *faqīh*, who settled in Syria, famous for his *imāma* (leadership) and *jalālah* (glory), one of the Successors. Imām al-Shāfi°ī, al-Dāra Quṭnī and others have attributed *tadlīs* to him.”

We see that these two authorities declare al-Zuhrī famous for *tadlīs*. This is in spite of the fact that none of the earliest authorities have attributed *tadlīs* to him.... It is extremely difficult to prove *tadlīs* (as a specific term) of al-Zuhrī, not to say of declaring him famous for it. As for rejecting the Ḥadīth of al-Zuhrī unless he clarifies the mode of receiving the Ḥadīth from the earlier authority, I do not think you will be able to find any such example from the earlier authorities.⁵⁰

3.3. Imām al-Layth’s Letter to Imām Malik

Ghamidi has misunderstood or misrepresented the part of the letter of Imām Layth addressed to Imām Malik. This can be established on two grounds: Ghamidi has mistranslated the quoted text. Second, the context of the quoted saying proves that Imām al-Layth is referring to evolution in the legal opinions of Imām al-Zuhrī rather than his Ḥadīth transmission. Before explaining the erroneous translation of Ghamidi, it would be rewarding to provide the context in which the quoted statement occurs:⁵¹ Imām Malik wrote a letter to Imām al-Layth b. Sa°d in which he noted that he had heard that the latter (i.e., al-Layth) was issuing responsa which violated the consensus viewpoint (*mukhālifatan li mā*) of the people of Madinah. Imām Mālik advised Imām al-Layth not to endanger himself by differing with the authoritative consensus of the Madinans. Imām Mālik quotes the Qur°ānic verses 9:100 and 39:18, which direct the

⁵⁰ Nāṣir b. Ḥamd b. al-Fahd, *Manhaj al-Mutaqaddimīn fī al-tadlī*, (al-Riyadh: Maktaba Aḍwā° al-Salaf, 2001), 84-86.

⁵¹ For the text of Imam Mālik’s letter to Imam al-Layth, and the response of the latter to it, refer to: °Abd al-Salām b. Muhammad °Allūsh, *Taqrīb al-madārik bi sharḥ risālatay al-Layth b. Sa°d wa al-imām Mālik*, (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1995), 35-45.

believers to follow the pious predecessors (*al-sābiqūn*) and their followers. He claims that all the people are obliged to follow the people of Madinah and offers several arguments for this position from the Qur'an and the tradition. Imām Mālik claims that "if a legal religious matter is being practiced in Madinah, I do not believe that a view opposing it (*khilāf*) would be allowable."⁵² Imām Malik emphasizes the importance of the Madinan practice, usually referred to as *ʿamal ahl al-Madīnah*, and counsels Imām al-Layth not to go against it in his response.

In response, Imām al-Layth takes up the issue of the *ʿamal* of the Madinans and explains to Imām Malik: "It has reached you that I issue responsa differing with (*mukhālifatan limā ʿalayhi*) the view of the people around you (in al-Madinah)." He also refers to Imām Malik's argument that the practice of people of Madinah is the example for the rest of the people, who should follow this precedent because Madinah was the place the Prophet settled in after migration, and the Madinans were the people who witnessed the revelation of the Qur'an. Imām al-Layth acknowledges the fact that the Prophet lived in Madinah, and it was indeed the center of knowledge and authority. However, he points out that the Companions of the Prophet traveled to other regions among the Muslim armies and settled at different places. These companions adjudicated the issues and gave legal rulings under the guidance of the first three caliphs. Imām al-Layth also points out that the Companions and the Successors differed among themselves (*ikhtalafū*) after the death of the Prophet. The likes of Ibn al-Musayyib differed with others greatly (*ashadd al-ikhtilāf*). Imām al-Layth explains:

The later generation [of scholars], whom we witnessed (*ḥaḍarnāhum*) in Madinah and elsewhere differed [with others]. At that time, the leading authorities among them who issued legal opinions (*futyā*) were Ibn Shihāb and Rabīʿah b. Abī ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, who themselves gave differing views (*ikhtalafū*).

Rabīʿa opposed the views of the past authorities (*kān khilāfu Rabīʿah li baʿḍi mā maḍā*), may Allah forgive him, as you yourself witnessed. I heard your view on that. I also know the views of the authorities in Madinah who were senior to him, about [his approach]. These [senior authorities] included Yaḥyā b. Saʿīd, and ʿUbaid Allah b. ʿUmar, Kathīr b. Farqad and a great number of men senior

⁵² ʿAbd al-Salām b. Muhammad ʿAllūsh, *Taqrīb al-madārik bi sharḥ risālatay al-Layth b. Saʿd wa al-imām Mālik*, 37.

to Rabīʿa. [This situation went on] till you felt compelled, due to what you disliked of that (opposition), to abandon his [Rabīʿa's] sessions.⁵³

The above discussion sets the context in which Imām al-Layth discusses Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī. The entire issue involves legal opinions. Imām al-Layth discusses how a difference of opinion on legal issues has been vibrant in the past generations. He frequently uses the terms *khilāf*, *ikhtilāf* and the verbs of the same root to refer to differing legal opinions. He also uses the terms denoting responsa (*fatwā/futyā*) just as he uses the term *al-raʿy*, rather than *riwāyah*, report. Imām al-Layth concludes his examples at Rabīʿah with praising his excellent knowledge, even though his whose novel views he disliked. At this point, Imām al-Layth refers to the practice of Ibn Shihāb about issuing legal rulings differing from the past authorities and even revising his own, in these words:

When we met Ibn Shihāb, he [too] used to issue [legal opinions] frequently differing [from the past authorities] (*ikhtilāf kathīr*). When one of us [from outside Madinah] wrote to him (*kātabahū*) [seeking his view], Ibn Shiāb would, despite his excellent opinion and knowledge (*fadli raʿyihī and ʿilmihī*), at times, issue three different and mutually contradicting views on a single matter, without being conscious of his past opinion on that matter. So, this is the matter that invites me (*yadʿūnī*) to abandon (the opinions)- which abandonment you have disliked (*mā ankarta tarkī iyyā hu*).⁵⁴

Imām al-Layth goes on to detail the issues about which he had differed with the view of the people of al-Madinah. He uses the verbs *tark* (departing from) and *inkār*, and their cognitive terms several times, each time referring to the legal opinions in dispute. He writes: “I know what you find questionable (*ʿibta*) in my departure (*inkārī iyyāhu*) on the issue of combining the two prayers in rainy nights . . . adjudicating the dispute on the bases of one witness and an oath by the plaintiff . . . the question of the dower of a wife agreed in advance to be paid later on . . . and the views of the people of al-Madinah on *ilāʿ*.” He explains the reasons for his departure from the Madinan approach on these legal issues and notes:

Several of your responsa have reached me which I dislike (*istankartu hā*). I have written to you on some such opinions. You did not respond to my letter on those

⁵³ ʿAbd al-Salām b. Muhammad ʿAllūsh, *Taqrīb al-madārik bi sharḥ risālatay al-Layth b. Saʿd wa al-imām Mālik*, 40-41.

⁵⁴ ʿAbd al-Salām b. Muhammad ʿAllūsh, *Taqrīb al-madārik bi sharḥ risālatay al-Layth b. Saʿd wa al-imām Mālik*, 41.

issues. I feared that my writing (those observations) to you might be distasteful for you. That is why I abandoned (*taraktu*) writing to you about the things (in your responsa) that I found strange (*ankartu*) and about which I needed to ascertain your view.⁵⁵

Here again, he discusses a couple of disputed legal issues and gives his arguments. Finally, he writes: “I have abandoned a great number of such views (*taraktu ashyāʾ kathīran min ashbāhi hādihā*)” and concludes the letter with good wishes and praises for Imām Malik.

Keeping the context of the part of Imām al-Layth’s letter in view, it becomes clear that Ghamidi’s understanding of the letter is not correct, and the flaws in his translation include:

1. Ghamidi translates the words *kāna yakūnu min Ibn Shihāb ikhtilāfan kathīran idhā laqīnā hu* thus: “and when we used to meet with Ibn Shihāb, a host of (internal) contradictions (*taḍādāt*) would appear”. As is clear from the textual analysis offered above, Imām Al-Layth has continuously used the terms *khilāf*, *ikhtilāf* and *ikhtalafa/ū* to refer to the difference of opinion on legal issues on which Imām al-Layth had departed from the views of the Madinan scholars. His concern was not about al-Zuhrī’s contradictions and inconsistencies (*taḍādāt*) in transmission (*riwāya*), as Ghamidi would have us believe.

2. Ghamidi’s Urdu translation of the phrase *idhā kātabahū baḍūnā* is also incorrect. Ghamidi’s translation gives an impression as if a person in attendance at a session with Ibn Shihāb would write a question on a piece of paper and put it before the latter for a response. Al-Zuhrī would then issue contradicting views in response, in the same breath. The Arabic expression *kātabahū* is not used in this sense. Given the context, it means: the people from other centers of learning would write letters to al-Zuhrī and seek his opinion on legal issues, and al-Zuhrī would issue responsa different from his past views.

3. In his drive to discredit al-Zuhrī, Ghamidi commits another blatant mistake in his rendition of the sentence: *fa huwa al-ladhī yadūnī ilā tarki mā ankarta tarkī iyyāhu*. He renders this sentence as follows: “It is because of this that I had parted ways with him (Urdu: *main ney aisī hī chīzūn ki waja sey unhain chorha thā*)– which you disliked.”⁵⁶ The correct rendition of the statement is this: This is what that calls me (*yadūnī*) to abandon something (*ilā tarki mā*), my abandonment of which you disapproved of (*ankarta tarkī iyyāhu*).” That is, I have

⁵⁵ ʿAbd al-Salām b. Muhammad ʿAllūsh, *Taqrīb al-madārik bi sharḥ risālatay al-Layth b. Saʿd wa al-imām Mālik*, 43.

⁵⁶ Ghamidi, *Mīzān*, 31-2.

abandoned some legal points of view. You have disliked my act to depart from these views. Ghamidi commits two grammatical mistakes here:

a. He translates *fa huwa al-ladhī yadʿūnī* (literally: this is what calls me to) as *main ney aisī hī chīzūn ki waja sey*. The verb *yadʿūnī* is in the present/future tense. However, Ghamidi's translation avoids the tense by rendering it through a nominal expression. Still the next part of his translation *unhain chorha thā* (I had abandoned him) brings the tense to clarity. He translates it as something that happened in the distant past when al-Zuhrī was alive and could be abandoned. The fact of the matter is that al-Layth uses present tense: *yadʿūnī*, calls me to (abandon/depart from). Therefore, it is a statement that seeks to give the rationale of the current position of Imām al-Layth on the opinions of the Madinans, is clear from the context.

b. Ghamidi translates the words *tarki mā ankarta tarkī iyyāhu* as *chorha thā jisay tum nai pasand nahīn kiyā*. What Imām Layth abandoned, and the abandonment that Malik disliked has been clarified in the light of the context: it refers to Madinan legal positions. Grammatically the word *mā* (relative pronoun), occurring as the object of the verbal noun *tark*, is not used for a person. It can be an idea or an inanimate thing. The verbal noun *tark* (abandoning) in this expression is a verbal noun in the infinitive, has no tense, and therefore cannot be translated in the past. The verb clarifying the tense has already preceded, *yadʿūnī* (it calls me to) in the present tense. Therefore, here again, Ghamidi's translation is incorrect.

4. Conclusion

Ghamidi's rejection of the narrative(s) about the seven *ahruf* is not maintainable because his case is grounded in weak arguments, misreading of classical resources, and a pervasive disregard for the linguistic standards and Islamic sciences. Ghamidi has criticized the seven *ahruf* report on two grounds: textual (*matn*) and historical (*isnād*). His claim that the Ḥadīth in question is ambiguous and enigmatic is not sound because the thrust of the report is about the permissibility of variant readings which is not affected by the variety of ways in which the term *ahruf* has been construed. The Muslim scholarship has always cited it to affirm the permissibility of variant readings of the Qur'an. The difference of opinion on the precise nature of the term *ahruf* does not render the report inauthentic, any more than the ambiguity of the mysterious letters (*hurūf muqattaʿāt*) could create doubts about the authenticity of the Qur'an; the Qur'an remains authentic even if an element of it defies complete understanding. Ghamidi claims that the report goes against the Qur'ānic statements that describe the Qur'an as "Arabic," which in Ghamidi's view means "the Arabic dialect of the tribe of Quraysh". This is also based on a misreading of the relevant Qur'ānic verses, an inadequate understanding of the social dimension of language and dialects, and a disregard for the fact that the Ḥadīth

narratives were not necessarily transmitted verbatim. Similarly, Ghamidi's responses to the possible counter objections to his view are also invalid, namely, because Ghamidi's is not correct when he argues that two persons from the same tribe cannot recite the Qur'an variously. Finally, his critique of the reliability of Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī as a transmitter is unfounded, and his claims are not borne out by the evidence. In this connection, it has been shown that Ghamidi misconstrues the letter of Imām al-Layth which he had invoked to delegitimize al-Zuhrī. To conclude, the traditional position (on the variant readings) remains legitimate being fully rooted in reported facts. One must not underestimate the implications of our investigation for the broader issues, such as the approaches to the understanding of the Qur'an. The traditional mode of understanding the Qur'an relies heavily on the possibilities opened up by the variant readings, and on the richness of meaning and diversity of religious practices that it inspires and enables. Similarly, this research has deep implications for Ghamidi's thought structure. For his larger modernization project, Ghamidi's reliance on the rejection of the traditional reports provides him a critical prop. His skeptic approach to the variant readings is necessary to achieve his overall objectives, namely the promotion of modernization reform through his reliance on the Qur'anic text alone, at the cost of and in defiance of the extremely valuable and necessary insights transmitted through the Ḥadīth reports. The foregoing account shows that this modernizing approach is rooted in weak scholarship, feeble evidence, and arbitrary claims. Finally, as a result of this work, the traditional Muslim viewpoint on variant readings emerges unscathed and provides a window to appreciate the resilience and cogency of the Islamic tradition in general and the risks involved in underestimating and questioning its intellectual vigor.



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