THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SUCCESSORS (AL-TĀBI’ŪN) IN THE EARLY ḤADĪTH COLLECTIONS*

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Abstract

In the early generations of Islam, the Successors (al-tābiʿūn) played an important role by making significant contribution to the formation of Islamic sciences such as fiqh, ḥadīth, and tafsīr. Thus, it is not surprising to see various references to their opinions in the early examples of different Islamic literary genres. For example, early ḥadīth collections include a great number of traditions attributed to the Successors – which would later be called al-ḥadīth al-maqṭūʿ – alongside those attributed to the Prophet. This paper, focusing on the usages of al-ḥadīth al-maqṭūʿ in the early ḥadīth literature, is an inquiry into why the Successors’ opinions constituted such an important part of ḥadīth collections. It argues that the veneration of the Successors is derived from the common recognition that they were better qualified to understand religious texts than later generations and that even their personal opinions were either based on the religious texts or at least consistent with them. The historical basis of this widely accepted recognition is the existence of an intimate and close teacher-student relationship between the Companions and the Successors, which made it possible for the latter to inherit the knowledge of the former.

Key Words: the Successors, al-tābiʿūn, ḥadīth, Sunna, maqtūʿ ḥadīth

* This is a revised version of a paper presented at MEHAT (Middle East History and Theory Conference, Chicago, USA, May 14-15, 2010).
Introductory Remarks about the Successors

Scholars of Islamic studies commonly acknowledge that the early generations of Muslims played a fundamental role in the establishment and early development of Islamic civilization. The Companions of the Prophet (al-ṣabāba), the Successors (al-tābiʿīn), and the Successors of the Successors (atbāʾ al-tābiʿīn) all contributed to the flourishing of a new religious world not only by providing the essential manpower for the territorial spread of the early Islamic caliphate but also by laying the foundations of the Islamic sciences, which would later become independent fields of study known as ḥadith, fiqh, tafsir, etc. Thus, it is not surprising to encounter a multitude of references to the views or sayings of these early Muslims in various genres of Arabic literature.

This article will attempt to demonstrate the significant contributions of one of the above-mentioned generations, the Successors, as reflected in the early ḥadith literature and to provide answers as to why traditions coming from this generation constituted an important part of early ḥadith collections. It will argue that Muslims’ general conception of time, which places a greater value upon earlier generations, and ḥadith scholars’ belief in the consistency of the Successors’ personal opinions with other reliable traditions, were the two main factors that granted this generation a respected status within the ḥadith literature. However, before delving into this subject, it is worth defining a few key terms and touching upon the contributions of this generation of Successors to fields other than the ḥadith.

Successors are described as Muslims who never personally met the Prophet Muḥammad but were able to meet at least one of the Prophet’s Companions at some point during their lives. Historically, the generation of Successors spans roughly from 60-125/680-741, a period politically dominated by Umayyad rulers. Throughout these years, the Successors were major actors in virtually all fields of Islamic scholarship. For example, the early formation of the legal schools in Kūfah and Medina was mostly due to the efforts of Successors such as ʿAlqama ibn Qays (d. 62/682) and Aswad ibn Yazīd in the former city, and Saʿīd ibn Musayyab (d. 93/712) and ʿUrwa ibn al-Zubayr (d. 94/713) in the latter. Ibrāhīm al-Nakhāʾī (d. 96/715) of Kūfa is also

associated with the early formation of Ḥanafī legal doctrine. A group of jurists among the Successors in Medina was called the “seven jurists (al-fuqahā’ al-sab‘ā),” and their legal opinions were considered true representations of what is known as ‘amal ahl al-Madīna (common practices of the people of Medina).

In theology, figures such as al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110/728) argued for principles that would deeply influence later generations of the Sunnī majority. Al-Baṣrī also seems to have had a distinctive impact with his life and preachings upon early Muslim Sufis. As for Qur’ānic exegesis, Sa‘īd ibn Jubayr (d. 95/713) and Mujāhid ibn Jabr (d. 103/721), disciples of the famous companion ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abbās (d. 68/687-8), were the two major authorities whose interpretation of verses received careful attention from subsequent mufassirs. Tafsīr books, particularly ḥadīth-oriented ones, contain numerous references to the Successors’ opinions along with the explanations of the Prophet and his Companions.

The Successors’ scholarly enterprises were not confined to the Islamic sciences but included fields such as historiography. ‘Urwa ibn al-Zubayr narrated historical accounts regarding the life and cam-

3 For their identities and contributions to the development of the Medinan school of law, see Cengiz Kallek, “Fukahā-i Seb‘a [al-Fuqahā’ al-sab‘ā],” Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslâm Ansiklopedisi (DIA) [Turkish Religious Foundation Encyclopedia of Islam], XIII, 214.
5 In modern Turkish literature on Qur’ānic exegesis, ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abbās is portrayed as the founder of the Meccan school of tafsīr, see Muhammed Fatih Kesler, Mekke Tefsir Ekolü: Öncüleri ve Görüşleri [Pioneers and Opinions of the Meccan School of Tafsīr] (Van: n.p., 1996), 23-50. Of course, his distinguished disciples who advanced the Meccan school belong to the generation of Successors.
6 Ibn Abī Ḥātim’s (d. 327/938) tafsīr, for instance, is replete with traditions coming from the Successors; see Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad ibn Idrīs Ibn Abī Ḥātim al-Rāzī, Tefsir al-Qur‘ān al-‘aţīm musnad an Rasūl Allāh wa-l-ṣab‘āba wa-l-ṭabi‘īn (ed. As‘ad Muḥammad al-Ṭayyib, Mecca: Maktabat Nizār Muṣṭafā al-Bāz, 1997).
campaigns of the Prophet,\(^7\) while Ibn Shihâb al-Zuhra (d. 124/742) collected historical reports in an effort to systematically establish the Prophet's *sira*.\(^8\) Their works marked the beginnings of a Muslim historiographic tradition.

**The Successors in Early Ḥadīth Collections**

The Successors’ most remarkable contribution, however, lies in the development of the early ḥadīth endeavor. In addition to being credited as the first generation to use the *isnâds* (chains of transmission) prior to actual ḥadīth texts,\(^9\) most of the early systematic compilers of prophetic traditions belonged to this generation, including the famous Ibn Shihâb al-Zuhra.\(^10\) Moreover, recent studies have revealed that the specialists in early transmitter criticism (*al-jarḥ wa-l-taʾdil*) all shared the common feature of being dedicated disciples of certain Successors.\(^11\)

It is also noteworthy that the following generations recorded the sayings and deeds of the Successors alongside prophetic reports, using a very similar structure. In other words, the Successors were not only intermediaries in the transmission of reports pertaining to the

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\(^8\) Al-Zuhra’s reports concerning the Prophet’s biography are collected in the following work: *al-Maghâzî al-nabawiyya* (ed. Suhayl Zakkâr; Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1981). Evaluating al-Zuhra’s reports, Chase Robinson identifies him as a “historian by any fair definition of the term.” For the historiography of both ‘Urwa and al-Zuhra, see Chase F. Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 23-25. For Duri’s reconstruction of al-Zuhra’s work, see Duri, *ibid*.

\(^9\) It has been almost a convention in ḥadīth works to refer to the words of the prominent successor Muḥammad ibn Sîrin (d. 110/729), who dated the emergence of *isnad* to around the second half of the first century after *bijra*. See, for instance, Jonathan Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad’s Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 79.


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Prophet Muḥammad, but they also became a source, or a final reference point, of early Muslim reports.

The inclusion of numerous reports ascribed to the Successors within large ḥadīth volumes made it necessary for later Muslim scholars to develop a special terminology that would allow them to distinguish between those reports belonging to the Prophet Muḥammad and those attributed to the Companions and Successors. To that end, prophetic traditions came to be called al-ḥadīth al-marfu‘, whereas reports attributed to the Companions and Successors were termed al-ḥadīth al-mawqūf and al-ḥadīth al-maṣṭūt, respectively.¹²

Maṣṭūt traditions, or personal sayings and deeds of the Successors, appear both frequently and in various occurrences and contexts within the early ḥadīth literature. Here, a statistical consideration is in order. One of the most important early ḥadīth collections, Muwaṣṣaṭa by Mālik ibn Anas (d. 179/795), contains 285 maṣṭūt’s out of 1720 traditions,¹³ whereas his contemporary colleague Ābū Yūṣuf (d. 182/798) mentions 549 maṣṭūt’s out of 1068 traditions in his Kitāb al-āthār, at least 443 of which came from the well-known Kūfīan muḥaddith Ibrāhīm al-Nakha’ī.¹⁴ The fact that Mālik ibn Anas and Ābū Yūṣuf were distinguished for their knowledge on both Islamic law and the ḥadīth shows that the Successors’ views played a significant role not only in the early ḥadīth literature but also in legal ijtihād of the second/eighth-century jurists. ‘Ābd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī’s (d. 211/826-7) al-Muṣannafa includes only 4,000 marfu’ s out of 18,000 traditions, meaning that almost 14,000 of the remaining


traditions in his book stem from either the Companions or the Successors. Finally, of Ibn Abī Shayba’s (d. 235/849) Muṣannaf, which consists of 34,840 traditions, almost half, or 15,998, are maqṭū’s.

Having demonstrated the wide use of maqṭū reports in the early compilations, we can now pose the following central questions: What made the generation of Successors so important in the eyes of later Muslim generations? Why were their opinions transmitted alongside Prophetic traditions and included in early ḥadīth collections? Finally, why are the sayings and deeds of the Successors a subject of the science of ḥadīth?

The first thing that catches the researcher’s eye regarding the veneration of this generation is the presence of some commonly cited Qur’ānic verses and prophetic traditions. For example, a Qur’ānic verse in al-Tawba (9:100) reads as follows: The first and foremost (to embrace Islam and excel others in virtue) among the Emigrants and the Helpers, and those who follow them in devotion to doing good, aware that God is seeing them – God is well-pleased with them, and they are well-pleased with Him, and He has prepared for them Gardens throughout which rivers flow, therein to abide for ever. That is the supreme triumph. The first Emigrants and the Helpers in this verse, i.e., al-mubājirūn wa-l-anṣār, were usually interpreted as the Companions, and those who followed them in devotion to doing good were interpreted as the Successors by many ḥadīth scholars. Hence, the Successors were perceived as a group of people whose sincerity and devotion were praised in the Qur’ān.

The idea of the superiority of earlier generations to later ones also seems to have been supported by certain prophetic traditions. This sentiment is evident in the following ḥadīth: “khayr al-nās qarnī thumma lladhīn yalūnabum thumma lladhīn yalūnabum (The best of mankind is my generation, and then those who follow them

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16 Arif Ulu, Tābi’unun Sünnet Anlayışı [Sunna Perception of the Tābi’ün] (PhD dissertation; Ankara: Ankara University, 2006), X.
and then those who follow them).”

Virtually all the major Islamic prosopographical works contain references to these or similar religious texts that indicate the merits of the early Muslim generations. We also have some reports in which the Successors themselves complain about Muslim society’s gradual deterioration. On one occasion, for example, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī laments: “I remember a time among the Muslims when their men would shout (to remind their families) ‘O family! O family! (Look after) your orphan! Your orphan! O family! O family! (Look after) your orphan! Your poor! Your poor! O family! O family! (Look after) your neighbor! Your neighbor! Time has been swift in taking the best of you while every day you become baser.” Furthermore, Islamic eschatological traditions maintain that as the world approaches its end, unpleasant signs will emerge, such as the decrease of knowledge, the spread of miserliness, and people’s indulgence in grave sins, all of which stand in sharp contrast to the shining days of the Prophet and his Companions.

The emphasis on the merits of earlier generations, however, is not unique to Muslims but can also be found in other religious traditions in various forms. In Judaism, for instance, a special importance attached to customs (the minhāj) is a manifestation of reverence to the past and its people. The minhāj receives such a special treatment


22 With a brief look at the fitan and malāḥīm (tribulations and great battles) chapters of hadith collections, one quickly notices that the future is usually associated with social and physical deterioration. For an example in which some of the abovementioned signs are included, see Abū Dāwūd, “al-Fitan,” 1 (bāb dhikr al-ḥītan wa-dalā‘īlīhī).

23 “Originally, the term minhāj referred to a practice about which the law was unclear, perhaps where certain details were the subject of debate by the legal authorities. When it was observed that the people followed a particular interpretation or ruling, the practice of the people was decisive and this practice acquired full legal status.” Louis Jacobs, The Jewish Religion: A Companion (New York:
that it is preferred even when it conflicts with a written law.\textsuperscript{24} It is not
surprising to notice evident similarities between the role of minhâj in
Judaism and that of ‘urf and ‘amal in Islamic law, as they are both
based on the veneration of earlier generations and their practices.\textsuperscript{25}

Although this conception of time was one of the prominent factors
that paved the way for the veneration of the Successors, it still does
not explain the more specific issue of what led the early ḥadîth com-
pliers to collect a multitude of maqṭû’ ḥadîths in their works. As men-
tioned above, the maqṭû’ is a report whose text was not attributed to
an authority higher than a Successor; as such, it does not carry legal
authority as marfû’ and mawqûf reports do. A close study of major
ḥadîth collections reveals that the importance attached to maqṭû’
reports primarily stems from the recognition that the Successors’
opinions were reflective of, or compatible with, the original teachings
of the Prophet. For ḥadîth collectors, even if a Successor did not for-
mally elevate a legal statement to an authority higher than himself, it
is still possible for the opinion to have a Prophetic origin, or at least
to possess some relation to Prophetic traditions. Therefore, the Suc-
cessors were not perceived as people isolated from their predeces-
sors, but as heirs to religious knowledge inspired by the recent era of
the Prophet Muḥammad. Three examples of the use of maqṭû’ re-
ports in ḥadîth collections will help us better understand this point.

**Example One**

In the first example, Abû Dâwûd, one of the most famous ḥadîth
scholars of Baṣra, addresses the issue of accepting payment for pre-
paid harvests that have acquired damage prior to delivery:

\begin{quote}
ynchronize, "We learn from the Prophetic teaching that if a Successor
speaks, it is as if he was Prophet Muhammad."
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{25} I do not suggest that the minhâj and the ‘urf or ‘amal fully suit each other; but
there is no doubt that their justification and implementation by legal authorities
stem from very similar considerations. For ‘amal, see below.
... Narrated Jābir ibn ‘Abd Allāh: The Prophet said: “If you sell unharvested dates to your fellow Muslim and a jāʾiḥa destroys the crop, it is unlawful for you to ask for the price. By what right will you take your fellow Muslim’s property?”

Abū Dāwūd devotes the following chapter to determining the exact meaning of the term jāʾiḥa, and both of the ḥadiths he chooses to cite in this chapter are maqṭūʿ:

ขาดنًا صلى الله عليه وسلم بن ذاود المهمشي أخبرنا ابن وهب أخبرني عثمان بن الحكم عن ابن جريج عن عطاء قال الجوانح كل ظاهر مفسد من مطر أو برد أو جراد أو ريح أو حرب.

 ширأ عنه قال لا جائحة فيما أصيب ذون ثلث رأس المال. قال يحيى وذلک في سنة المسلمين.

(Chapter Regarding the Meaning of Jāʾiḥa)

... ‘Aṭāʾ ibn Abī Rabāḥ (d. 114/732) said: jāʾiḥas are obviously ruinous instances of rain, cold wave, locusts, wind, or fire.

... Yaḥyā ibn Saʿīd (d. 144/761) said: “That in which under a third of the capital-stock is lost is never a jāʾiḥa.” Yaḥyā said: “This is the sunna of Muslims.”

Apparently, because there was ambiguity in how jāʾiḥa should be defined, Abū Dāwūd needed to cite the opinions of later authorities such as ‘Aṭāʾ and Yaḥyā, both of whom belonged to the generation of the Successors. Abū Dāwūd was content with citing maqṭūʿ reports along with Prophetic traditions, almost in the same manner as them – i.e., with full isnāds from the Successors down to himself. Regardless of whether this is a correct explanation of what the Prophet meant by the term jāʾiḥa, what is important here is that, although these two reports initially appear to be personal sayings of ‘Aṭāʾ and Yaḥyā, their context and content suggest that ḥadith scholars noticed their close relationship with marfuʿ traditions. Although maqṭūʿ narrations were not accepted as a legal proof in Islamic law, they were still taken into account as clear guidelines to interpreting the Prophetic Sunna. The connection between the maqṭūʿ and the marfuʿ may not always be as obvious as it is in this example; yet, this does not affect

the approach generally taken by early ḥadīth scholars towards the Successors in their collections.

**Example Two**

The second – and more complex – example comes from Mālik’s *al-Muwatṭa*’, an earlier source of ḥadīth and Islamic law.

Narrated ‘Abd Allāh ibn ‘Abbās that the Messenger of Allāh said: “A woman who has been previously married is more entitled to her person than her guardian, and a virgin must be asked for her consent for herself, and her consent is her silence.”

And Yahyā narrated from Mālik that it reached him from Sa‘īd ibn al-Musayyab that he said: ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb said: “No woman is married but with the consent of her guardian, or someone of her family with sound opinion or the Sultan.”

And Yahyā narrated from Mālik that it reached him that al-Qāsim ibn Muḥammad (d. 107/725) and Sālim ibn ‘Abd Allāh (d. 107/725) were marrying off their daughters and they did not consult them.

Mālik said: That is the matter with us in the wedlock of the virgins.28

When looking at this example, it is important to remember that whenever a single ḥadīth contradicts common practices of the people of Medina (*‘amal abl al-Madīna*) Mālik tends to prefer the *‘amal* over a single narration, as is the case in this chapter. In Mālik’s view, the practice of the people of Medina is more reliable than a single narration in identifying the Prophet’s original deeds, because the

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The former was conveyed from one generation to another; whereas the latter was transmitted solely between individuals. For the purpose of this article, it is sufficient to note that in this example maqṭūʿ traditions were considered to be accurate representations of the ‘amal, the origin of which was assumed to date back to the Prophet. This specific usage of the maqṭūʿ report, as well as other references to the Successors throughout al-Muwatṭa’, clearly suggest that their opinions were more than individual reasoning, though not attributed to a higher authority with isnād.

Example Three

Another example of the use of maqṭūʿ comes from al-Bukhārī’s al-Adab al-mufrad, a topical ḥadīth work devoted to Muslim traditions about good manners. After quoting prophetic reports that emphasize the significance of neighbours, al-Bukhārī narrates al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī’s opinion to determine the neighborhood area.

 حدثنا الحسين بن حريث قال حدثنا الفضل بن موسى عن الوليد بن دينار عن الحسن: أنه سئل عن الجار فقال أربعين داراً أمامه وأربعين خلفه وأربعين عن يمينه وأربعين عن يساره.

Al-Ḥasan was asked about the [boundaries] of neighborhood, and he replied: Forty homes in the front, forty homes in the back, forty homes on the right side, and forty homes on the left.29

This maqṭūʿ report, clarifying the content of marfūʿ traditions, makes readers better understand the prophetic command and apply it in their lives. Having emphasized the extensive rights of a neighbor, al-Bukhārī uses a quotation from a Successor to address possible questions as to where the neighborhood physically ends.

Because maqṭūʿ traditions received a warm welcome from ḥadīth scholars, one might be curious as to what historical factors contributed to this reception. In other words, what historical facts served as the basis for the idea that the sayings and deeds of the Successors were compatible with Prophetic traditions? Early biographical accounts suggest that the answer lies in the close teacher-student relationships that existed between the Companions and the Successors, an arrangement that made it possible for the latter to inherit knowledge and wisdom from the former. The Companions living in Mecca and Medina, as well as those who were sent to cities such as Kūfa and

29 Al-Bukhārī, al-Adab al-mufrad, 37.
Baṣra established their own circles of learning, whose regulars were mostly from the generation of the Successors. The Successors not only received prophetic traditions from the Companions but also embraced their methods of reasoning. In fact, those students who were close to certain Companions were referred to as their aṣḥāb (companions), just as the Companions were called aṣḥāb al-Nabī. For instance, Zayd ibn Thābit (d. 45/665) in Medina, ʿAbd Allāh ibn Masʿūd (d. 32/652-3) and ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661) in Kūfa were among the Companions who had their own aṣḥāb. Thus, it is possible that the transmission of religious knowledge via an uninterrupted chain of early generations was a significant factor that many ḥadīth scholars had in mind when selecting material for their collections.

For the same reason, it is not surprising that certain Successors are described as the most knowledgeable people about certain Companions' transmissions. For example ʿUrwa ibn al-Zubayr, al-Qāsim ibn Muḥammad (d. 112/730), and ʿAmra bint ʿAbd al-Raḥmān (d. 106/724) were experts on ʿAʾisha’s (d. 58/678) traditions. Additionally, Saʿīd ibn al-Musayyab mastered ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb’s (d. 23/644) verdicts and legal decisions so deeply that he was called “ʿUmar’s transmitter” (rāwiyyat ʿUmar).

Conclusion

The Successors appear to be one of the major actors in the early ḥadīth literature, in parallel to their significance in other fields of the Islamic sciences. Figures such as ʿAlqama ibn Qays, Saʿīd ibn al-Musayyab, Ibrāhīm al-Nakḥāṭi, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, and Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhri can be easily identified as the founders of a Muslim scholarly tradition. The Successors were not only transmitters of prophetic reports, but were also sources of Islamic tradition, as their own words were recorded within the literature. Their sayings and deeds became a subject of investigation alongside the Prophet’s teachings. The Suc-

cessors also introduced the use of isnād and transmitter criticism to the Islamic sciences, both of which became hallmarks of ḥadīth tradition.

The veneration of the Successors and their significance in early ḥadīth literature were basically derived from two factors: Muslims’ general conception of time, where earlier generations are thought to be more virtuous and authoritative, and the common recognition that the Successors’ personal opinions were at least consistent with more authoritative and authentic traditions. The historical basis of this recognition is the existence of an intimate teacher-student relationship between the Companions and the Successors. This historical background, along with the two aforementioned factors, has made it possible for later scholars to attribute a privileged status to the Successors in ḥadīth literature.

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