

Critical Analysis of the Salafist Perspective on the Hadith: “The Love of Imam 'Ali (AS) Erases Sins as Fire Consumes Wood”

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ABSTRACT

The hadith "Ḥubbu 'Alī ya'kulu al-sayyi'āt kamā ta'kulu al-nār al-ḥaṭab" (The love of 'Alī consumes sins as fire consumes wood) ranks among the prophetic traditions transmitted in numerous Sunnī sources concerning the virtues of the Commander of the Faithful, 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (AS), in various phrasings. Nevertheless, the contemporary Salafist current, adopting a skeptical approach, has challenged both the chain of transmission (sanad) and semantic indication (dalāla) of this hadith, classifying it among weak (da'īf) or fabricated (mawḍū') traditions. Employing a descriptive-analytical method and drawing upon authoritative biographical evaluation (rijāl) and hadith sources from Sunnī and Shī'ī traditions, this study critically evaluates the chain-of-transmission and semantic objections raised by Salafists against this hadith. The research findings indicate that the claim of weakness regarding transmitters like Muḥammad ibn Salama al-Wāsiṭī and Aḥmad ibn Shabawayh is contradicted by numerous statements of prominent Sunnī hadith scholars—including al-Hākim al-Nisābūrī and Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī—who explicitly affirmed their trustworthiness (thiqāt) or veracity (ṣaḏūq). Furthermore, the transmission of this hadith in early, authoritative sources such as Al-Mustadrak 'alā al-Ṣaḥīḥayn, Tārīkh Dimashq, Kanz al-'Ummāl, and Riyāḍ al-Naḍara, alongside explicit affirmations of its authenticity by scholars like Zaynī Daḥlān, attests to its well-received status within the Sunnī hadith corpus. Semantically, objections such as the charge of exaggeration (ghulūw), alleged contradiction with the primacy of love for God and His Messenger, and incompatibility with the practical stance of Imam 'Alī (AS) are addressed through an ontological analysis of love and the distinction between "true love" (maḥabbat ḥaqīqī) and "professed love" (maḥabbat iddī'ā'ī). Ultimately, the Salafist approach to weakening this hadith, rather than being grounded in rigorous hadith-critical criteria, is rooted in theological presuppositions and reductionism concerning the virtues of the Prophet's Household (Ahl al-Bayt) (AS).

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1. Introduction

The doctrine of imāma (leadership) as the locus for the articulation of religion, and wilāya (spiritual authority) as the heartfelt bond between the believer and the Imam, constitute two of the most central theological tenets of the Imāmī Shī'ī school. Within this framework, love (maḥabba) for the Commander of the Faithful, 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭālib (AS), occupies a position of exceptional distinction—not merely as an ethical virtue, but as an index of faith (īmān) and a criterion for the acceptance of deeds, as attested in numerous prophetic traditions. Among the most celebrated of these traditions, widely transmitted in the sources of both major Islamic schools (al-farīqayn—Shī'ī and Sunnī), is the hadith: "Ḥubbu 'Alī ya'kulu al-sayyi'āt kamā ta'kulu al-nār al-ḥaṭab" — "The love of 'Alī consumes sins as fire consumes wood." Through a vivid simile, this hadith likens love for Imam 'Alī (AS) to a fire that rapidly reduces the fuel of sins to ashes, thereby preparing the ground for the soul's spiritual sublimation (ta'ālī) and inner purification (taḥīr bāṭinī).

In the contemporary period, however, the Salafist and Wahhābī intellectual current—adopting a constrictive approach influenced by the theological presuppositions of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328)—has sought to undermine the credibility of this virtue through two principal instruments: chain-of-transmission criticism (taḍīf al-ruwāt) and semantic challenge (tuhmat al-ghulūw). This movement, relying upon a particular reading of the methodology of the "pious forebears" (al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ), has adopted a posture of skepticism, weakening, and diminishment in its engagement with traditions concerning the virtues (faḍā'il) of Imam 'Alī (AS). The intellectual axis of this approach is the emulation of Ibn Taymiyya and his later commentators, who, in their respective works, have mounted extensive and selective critiques of the chains and texts pertaining to the virtues of the Prophet's Household (Ahl al-Bayt) (AS). Scholars such as al-Albānī (d. 1999) in his *Silsilat al-Aḥādīth al-Ḍa'īfa* and Fayṣal Nūr in his various treatises, employing unconventional and overly stringent bibliographical standards, have deemed this tradition flawed.

The urgency of the present research is underscored by several factors. First, the Salafist movement, availing itself of extensive media platforms, continuously propagates doubts (shubuhāt) concerning the virtues of the Ahl al-Bayt (AS), and the present study offers a scholarly and well-documented response to these doubts. Second, insofar as this current presents itself as the exclusive representative of Sunnī Islam and the "saved sect" (al-firqa al-nājiya), this investigation clearly demonstrates that their positions regarding the virtues of Imam 'Alī (AS) are not only at odds with the Imāmī perspective but also stand in contradiction to the hadith heritage and the approach of numerous major Sunnī scholars. Thus, this study makes a significant contribution to distinguishing between mainstream Sunnī discourse and Salafist-Wahhābī discourse. The primary objective of this article is to provide

a scholarly and documented response to the Salafist doubts and to establish the chain-of-transmission validity and the semantic soundness of this hadith within the theological framework of Sunnī tradition.

2. Methodology

This research has been conducted employing a "descriptive-analytical" method, drawing upon authoritative biographical evaluation (*rijāl*) and hadith sources from both major Islamic schools (*al-farīqayn*). The investigative process unfolds through the following sequential stages:

Stage One: Through a terminological analysis (*wākāwī-yi iṣṭilāḥ-shinākhtī*) of the concept of "love" (*ḥubb*) within the Islamic intellectual system, its doctrinal, practical, and mystical dimensions are elucidated.

Stage Two: Adopting a critical approach, the chain-of-transmission (*sanad*) and semantic (*dalāla*) objections raised by the Salafist current are evaluated on the basis of the established criteria of the science of biographical evaluation (*rijāl*) and historical-hadith evidence.

Stage Three: In responding to these doubts, both methods of "positive response" (*pāsukh-i ḥallī*)—establishing validity through citation of authoritative sources—and "refutational response" (*pāsukh-i naqdī*)—critiquing Salafist foundations by highlighting their internal contradictions, particularly their acceptance of supernatural favors (*karāmāt*) for figures within their own tradition—are employed.

3. Findings

The findings of this research may be categorized into chain-of-transmission and semantic dimensions as follows:

3.1. Chain-of-Transmission Analysis (*Taḥlīl-i Sanadī*)

The most significant Salafist challenge concerns the weakening of the transmitters of this hadith, particularly Muḥammad ibn Salama al-Wāsiṭī. A careful biographical (*rijālī*) investigation reveals that numerous early scholars—including Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1449) and al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī (d. 405/1014)—have explicitly affirmed the trustworthiness (*thiqāt*) or at least the veracity (*ṣadūq*) of these individuals. The stringent criticisms advanced by al-Albānī are, in many instances of "weakening" (*tadʿīf*), devoid of scholarly criteria and arise from "ideological rigidity" (*taṣallub ʿidyūlūjīk*). When the traditionists (*ḥuffāz*) of earlier centuries have included the traditions of these transmitters in their compilations and adduced them as evidence (*iḥtijāj*), the subsequent weakening by later critics—absent new evidence—lacks scholarly validity.

3.2. Presence in Early Texts (*Jāygh dar Mutūn-i Kuhan*)

This hadith is cited in dozens of authoritative Sunnī compilations and has never throughout history been designated as "fabricated" (*mawḍūʿ*) by

prominent scholars of the four major schools of jurisprudence. The explicit affirmation of its authenticity by Zaynī Daḥlān (the Shāfi'ī muftī of Mecca, d. 1304/1886) in response to opposing currents demonstrates that within the fabric of Sunnī religious culture, love for the Ahl al-Bayt (AS) has been regarded as a salvific element (‘unṣur-i najāt-bakhsh).

3.3. Semantic Critique (Naqd-i Dilālī): Response to the Charge of Exaggeration (Ghulūw)

Salafists contend that this hadith conflicts with monotheistic principles (uṣūl-i tawḥīdī) and constitutes a form of exaggeration (ghulūw) regarding ‘Alī (AS). In response, it must be emphasized that "love" (maḥabba) in religious discourse is a concept that transcends mere sentiment; love for the Imam signifies "acceptance of spiritual authority" (wilāyat-padhīrī) and "following in spiritual wayfaring" (payrawī dar sulūk). When the Imam's authority (wilāya) is the embodiment of divine authority (wilāya ilāhīya), its purifying effect is likewise derivative of that same lordly authority. Thus, there exists no conflict between love for the Imam and monotheism (tawḥīd).

3.4. Refutational Method (Rawish-i Naqdī)

This research has demonstrated that the Salafists fall into a "criterion contradiction" (tanāquḍ-i mi‘yār) in their critique of this tradition. They affirm supernatural favors (karāmāt) for figures within their own tradition that are far more ambiguous and exceed the significance of the efficacy of love for ‘Alī (AS), yet they treat these with leniency (tasāmuh), whereas in the case of the Commander of the Faithful (AS), they apply stringent chain-of-transmission and semantic scrutiny to dismiss the tradition.

4. Conclusion

Through a comprehensive investigation of the chains of transmission and the text of the hadith “Ḥubbu ‘Alī ya’kulu al-sayyi’āt,” this research has arrived at the conclusion that the contemporary Salafist current—relying upon a "rigid chain-of-transmission critical foundation" (mabnā-yi naqd-i sanadī mutaṣallibāna) and the "fallacy of exaggeration" (mughālaṭa-yi ghulūw)—seeks to weaken the virtues of the Ahl al-Bayt (AS). The validity of this hadith is established through its inclusion in early hadith compilations and the trustworthiness of its transmitters. From a theological standpoint, love for Imam ‘Alī (AS) occupies a strategic position within the Islamic intellectual system in the processes of "soul purification" (taḥīr-i nafs) and "return to God" (bāzgasht bih su-yi Khudāvand). The elimination of such traditions inflicts damage upon the rich heritage of love for the Ahl al-Bayt (AS) among Muslims.

In conclusion, the following recommendations are offered: To further strengthen these discussions, the mystical dimensions of the "existential effects of love" (āthār-i takwīnī-yi maḥabbat) in other hadiths should be subjected to independent research, so that the connection between theological doctrines and

existential realities (ḥaqā'iq-i wujūdī) may be rendered more perspicuous. This article establishes that "love for 'Alī (AS)" is not a mere theological claim but a life-giving and sin-purifying principle within the prophetic tradition that has enjoyed consensus among traditionists throughout history.

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