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THE DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF IMAM AL-TIRMIDHI'S WORK "SUNAN"

Abstract. *This article examines the life, scholarly contributions, and distinctive methodological features of Imam Abu Isa Muhammad al-Tirmidhi (209–279 AH), one of the most eminent hadith scholars of the classical Islamic tradition. Special attention is given to his monumental compilation "Sunan al-Tirmidhi" (also known as "Al-Jami"), its various titles in the scholarly tradition, its unique technical terminology – including the categories of hasan, gharib, and hasan sahih – and its structural and jurisprudential characteristics. The study draws on primary Islamic scholarly sources and contextualizes Tirmidhi's contribution within the broader history of hadith science and its integration with Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh).*

Keywords: *Imam al-Tirmidhi, Sunan al-Tirmidhi, hadith science, hasan, gharib, Islamic jurisprudence, Sihahi Sitta, hadith classification, Central Asian scholars.*

INTRODUCTION

An examination of the history of our nation reveals that the lives and literary legacies of its great scholars have played a pivotal role in its spiritual development. The fact that many world-renowned scholars originated from Central Asia stands as clear evidence of this. In particular, as their works continue to serve as fundamental academic resources for global scientific research, the significance of their contributions to the development of world scientific civilization is held in high esteem. In this regard, as emphasized by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyayev (2021:14): "The names of many geniuses, such as Imam al-Bukhari and Burhaniddin Marghilani, Isa Tirmidhi and Hakim Tirmidhi, Mahmud Zamakhshari and Qaffal Shashi, Bahauddin Naqshband and Khaja Ahrar Wali, Muhammad Kharazmi and Ahmad Farghani, Abu Rayhan Biruni

and Abu Ali ibn Sina, Mirza Ulugbek and Alisher Navai, have been inscribed in golden letters in the history of world civilization.”

Studying the life, creative work, and scholarly activities of Imam Tirmidhi, who hailed from our region, along with the works he authored during his lifetime and the unique characteristics that distinguish his esteemed “Sunani at-Tirmidhi” from other classical collections, holds significant importance in illuminating the unexplored chapters of our history.

His full name is Abu Isa Muhammad ibn Isa ibn Sawra ibn Musa ibn Zahhak al-Bughi as-Sulami at-Tirmidhi, most renowned by his kunya Abu Isa. He was born in 209 AH and passed away on Monday, the 13th of Rajab, 279 AH, in Tirmidh. He spent his youth in Tirmidh and undertook extensive academic travels across Iraq, Isfahan, Khurasan, Mecca, and Medina. Among his esteemed mentors were Imam al-Bukhari, Imam Muslim, Imam Abu Dawud, Qutayba ibn Sa’id, Is’haq ibn Musa, and Mahmud ibn Ghaylan. Imam Tirmidhi distinguished himself from his contemporaries through his extraordinary memory and sharp intellect, comparable to those of his teacher, Imam al-Bukhari. Al-Dhahabi (1985:270) notes in his “Tadhkirat al-huffaz”: “He [Tirmidhi] learned fiqh from al-Bukhari through the study of hadith.” Imam al-Bukhari held his student in such high esteem that he famously remarked: “I have benefited from you more than you have benefited from me.”

METHODS

This study is based on a theoretical and analytical approach. The primary methods include literature review, comparative analysis, conceptual synthesis, and systematization of primary Islamic scholarly sources on Imam al-Tirmidhi and his “Sunan.”

The analysis focuses on major classical and modern sources pertaining to Imam Tirmidhi’s biography, methodology, and the distinctive features of his “Jami’ as-Sunan.” These include: biographical accounts in al-Dhahabi’s (1985) “Tadhkirat al-huffaz”; bibliographical data from Haji Khalifa’s (1835) “Kashf al-zunun”; critical assessments in Ibn al-Athir’s (1997) “Al-Kamil fi al-tarikh”; and contemporary scholarship by Mansur (2008). The study examines how these sources describe Tirmidhi’s methodology, technical terminology, and the organizational structure of his collection.

RESULTS

The full title of Imam Tirmidhi's masterpiece is "Al-Jami' al-Mukhtasar min as-Sunan 'an Rasulillah wa ma'rifatu as-Sahih wal-ma'lul wamaa 'alayhi al-'amal." This work is recognized as one of the six canonical collections of hadith. According to al-Dhahabi (1985:272), upon completing this work, Imam Tirmidhi presented it to the scholars of Khurasan, Hijaz, Egypt, and Sham for expert feedback. The leading scholars of hadith of the era validated the collection and granted their approval for its dissemination. Imam Tirmidhi himself stated: "Whoever has this book, that is al-Jami' in his house, it is as if Prophet is speaking within his home." He also declared: "In my book, I have included hadiths upon which certain fuqaha (jurists) have based their legal rulings."

Hafiz Abu al-Fadl al-Maqdisi reported that Imam Abu Isma'il al-Ansari stated: "His book is more beneficial to me than those of Bukhari and Muslim. For only the most advanced scholars can derive full benefit from the works of Bukhari and Muslim, whereas from Abu Isa at-Tirmidhi's book, every seeker of knowledge can derive benefit" (Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, 1984:634). Ibn al-Athir (1997:345) characterized the work as: "At-Tirmidhi's work is considered among the finest of books: it is highly beneficial, well-organized, and contains minimal repetition of hadiths. It includes references to the various legal schools along with their evidences, explains the classifications of hadith such as sahih, hasan, and gharib, and incorporates discussions of al-jarh wa al-ta'dil. It concludes with a compiled section on 'ilal (hidden defects in hadith)."

Al-Idrisi asserted that Tirmidhi was the first to systematically categorize hadiths into distinct classes such as sahih, hasan, and da'if, describing him as "an Imam of hadith whom others follow" (al-Dhahabi, 1985:275). Sheikh Abdulaziz Mansur (2008:47) observes that in Sunan Tirmidhi, Hanafi legal perspectives are carefully considered; Imam at-Tirmidhi articulates the viewpoints of the Hanafi school under the designation of "the people of Kufa" (Kufa ahli).

Sunan Tirmidhi is referred to by various titles in the scholarly tradition. Ibn al-Athir (1997:346) referred to it as "Al-Jami' al-Kabir," while al-Dhahabi (1985:271) and Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani (1984:630) categorized it as "Al-Jami'," and Ibn Kathir

classified it as “As-Sunan.” Haji Khalifa (1835:436) in his “Kashf al-zunun” uses the title “Al-Jami’ as-sahih.” The term “As-Sunan” remains widely used due to the work’s thematic arrangement based on fiqh topics. According to the critical edition (tahqiq) by Ahmad Muhammad Shakir, the work comprises 46 sections, 2,496 chapters, and 3,956 hadiths.

The work functions simultaneously as “jami” and “sunan.” The term “Jami” is applied because the collection encompasses eight major thematic categories: Sirah (Prophetic biography), Adab (ethics), Tafsir (exegesis), ‘Aqa’id (theology), Fitnah (tribulations), the signs of Qiyamah, Ahkam (legal rulings), and Manaqib (virtues). Simultaneously, it is identified as “sunan” because it is arranged according to chapters of jurisprudence. At-Tirmidhi consistently provides a critical assessment of every hadith, explicitly noting its sahih, hasan, or da’if status. Each chapter presents one or two hadiths and, by employing the phrase “wa fi al-bab” (“in this chapter...”), alludes to other transmitters from whom hadiths on the same subject have also been narrated, thus opening avenues of inquiry for later muhaddithun (al-Dhahabi, 1985:273).

Imam at-Tirmidhi also provides information regarding the names of narrators, their place of origin, their rank among Companions (sahabah) or Successors (tabi’un), and whether they are considered weak (da’if) or reliable (thiqah), demonstrating his expertise in the science of rijal. Haji Khalifa (1835:437) positions “Jami’ as-Sunan” immediately after the Sahihayn – in third position after Imam al-Bukhari’s and Imam Muslim’s compilations. Al-Dhahabi (1985:274) likewise ranks it immediately after the Sahihayn. While Ibn al-Jawzi (1966:23) classified 23 hadiths transmitted by Imam at-Tirmidhi as fabricated, it is well known that Ibn al-Jawzi was notably strict (mutashaddid) in his classifications – a stance that has been individually identified and criticized by scholars.

It is of particular significance that Imam Tirmidhi was the first to systematically introduce the term hasan (good/acceptable) into the technical classification of hadith within his “Sunan.” He defines “hadith hasan” as a hadith whose isnad is hasan, in which there is no narrator accused of lying, the hadith is not shadh (anomalous), and it is also supported by another narration through a different route. He defines “gharib hadith” as one transmitted through only a single chain, or deemed gharib due to an addition (ziyadah) in its wording, or based on the condition of its isnad. The expression

“hasan sahih gharib” is used when a hadith has multiple chains, its narrators are not accused of dishonesty, the report is not shadh, yet some chains are graded sahih while others are graded hasan.

DISCUSSION

The findings from classical and modern scholarship confirm that “Jami’ as-Sunan” occupies a unique position among the six canonical hadith collections. Its dual nature as both “jami’” and “sunan” – encompassing eight major thematic categories while simultaneously being arranged according to chapters of jurisprudence – reflects Imam Tirmidhi’s exceptional ability to integrate the sciences of hadith and fiqh (Ibn al-Athir, 1997:347).

One of the most significant contributions of Imam Tirmidhi to hadith science is the systematic introduction and definition of the term “hasan.” This technical innovation allowed for a more nuanced and graduated classification of hadith, filling the gap between “sahih” (fully authentic) and “da’if” (weak). Al-Idrisi’s assertion that Tirmidhi was the first scholar to formally categorize hadiths into these distinct classes represents a landmark development in the history of Islamic scholarship (al-Dhahabi, 1985:275).

The practical accessibility of “Jami’ as-Sunan” has made it particularly valuable in educational settings. As noted by Mansur (2008:51), the reason scholars in India and Pakistan begin teaching the “Sihahi Sittah” with “Jami’ as-Sunan” is precisely because it presents hadith science in close integration with Islamic jurisprudence, greatly assisting students in correctly understanding hadiths. This pedagogical value distinguishes it from Sahih al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim, which are fully accessible only to advanced specialists (Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani, 1984:634).

The high ranking accorded to “Jami’ as-Sunan” by classical authorities such as Haji Khalifa (1835:437) and al-Dhahabi (1985:274), who position it immediately after the Sahihayn, underscores its exceptional scholarly value. This consensus across different scholarly traditions and centuries affirms that Imam Tirmidhi’s contribution to the preservation and classification of prophetic traditions remains indispensable to Islamic scholarship.

CONCLUSION

Imam Abu Isa Muhammad al-Tirmidhi stands as one of the most significant figures in the history of Islamic hadith scholarship. His “Sunan,” known as “Al-Jami’,” represents a unique synthesis of hadith science and Islamic jurisprudence, setting it apart from all other canonical collections. Through its distinctive methodology – including the systematic classification of hadiths as sahih, hasan, and da’if; the presentation of juristic opinions across legal schools; and the introduction of original technical terminology – Tirmidhi’s work continues to serve as an indispensable reference in both hadith science and Islamic legal reasoning.

The work’s enduring relevance is confirmed by the high regard in which classical authorities such as al-Dhahabi (1985), Ibn al-Athir (1997), Ibn Hajar al-‘Asqalani (1984), and Haji Khalifa (1835) held it, as well as by its continued central role in Islamic educational institutions across the world. Future research should focus on comparative analysis of Imam Tirmidhi’s methodology with those of other hadith collectors, as well as on exploring the impact of his technical terminology on subsequent generations of hadith scholars.

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