Review Essay

Reviving the Balance: The Authority of the Qur'an and the Status of the Sunnah

Taha Jabir Alalwani
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Ibn Wahb (d. 197/813), a disciple of Malik (179/795), is reported to have said, "We were once with Malik and made mention of the Sunnah. [Upon hearing this] Malik proclaimed, The Sunnah is Noah's Ark—whoever boards it will be saved, and whoever refuses will drown.'" Sentiment like Malik's is not difficult to locate. Many of the early jurists rooted the legitimacy of their legal hermeneutic in a steadfast commitment to the traditions of the Prophet. Thus, the oft-quoted remark of al-Shafi'i, "If a hadith is authentic, then it is my *madhhab*." This rhetorical commitment, however, was a negotiated one. Prophetic traditions proliferated in the early period, and distinguishing sound narrations from weak ones was not a simple task. Further complicating matters, jurists were responsible for determining divine intent not only in light of evolving cultural, social, and political realities, but for matters that were not immediately resolved by recourse to the Qur'an and prophetic tradition. Moreover, how to interpret prophetic instruction required knowledge of the mitigating circumstances present at the time of utterance. Were the Prophet's words conditional or general? Were his words abrogated by later command? Under what circumstances were they said? Did the underlying circumstances even matter? These questions and more occupied the early juristic community as they canonized a defensible legal heuristic that situated the Prophet's words and actions within a normative framework.

Pursuant to this effort, the interplay between the Qur'an and prophetic Sunnah had to be sorted out, leading itself to variable conclusions elaborated in works of legal theory (*uṣūl al-fiqh*). Though the jurists unanimously

recognized the absolute and unqualified authority and authenticity of the Qur'an (the latter of which was not taken for granted in the case of the Sunnah), it was in operationalizing the Qur'anic message that they were compelled to take extensive recourse to extra-Qur'anic sources. Praying, divinely-mandated charity, fasting, the ritual Hajj, and more were not exhaustively detailed in the Qur'an. The Qur'an, for instance, makes no explicit mention of five prayers, nor does it mention how to perform the prayer, how to compensate for mistakes, or what to do in the event that one forgets to pray altogether. Some of the most basic considerations needed to functionally practice Islam had to be delineated carefully by jurists through a complex interplay of the Qur'an with ongoing reference to the Prophet's narrative tradition along with a number of extratextual considerations (some of which were subject to disagreement among the various legal schools). It is in this process of establishing complex hermeneutical techniques that Islam, as it is normatively understood today, emerged.

In his newly translated book *Reviving the Balance*, the late scholar Taha Jabir Alalwani sets out to examine this development and restore an understanding of Islam that foregrounds the Qur'an over the many extra-Qur'anic canons, axioms, and narratives which have grown to predominate over Qur'anic imperatives. It is here that we encounter Alalwani's central thesis, namely, that the Qur'an as the receptacle of word and command has been subordinated to the weight of "narrative" hegemony represented by the prophetic Sunnah, allowing jurists to postulate any number of rulings that, at best, reflect merely circumstantial and discretionary opinion and, at worst, subversions of the divine command whilst maintaining attribution to God.

The book begins with a brief introduction followed by six chapters exploring the canonization of extra-Qur'anic juridical, theological, and moral epistemologies with proposals for remediation.

The introduction commences with a provocative critique and ambitious aim. Alalwani argues that as early as the formative period, the Muslim community came to neglect the Qur'an "in favor of narrations of what the Prophet had done and said on the pretext that such narratives 'contained' the Qur'ān" (p. xii). Accordingly, Alalwani's ensuing disquisition aims to correct this allegedly errant development by examining the prophetic community, the relationship of the Qur'an to the prophetic practice, the rise of "narrative generations" prizing prophetic practice, and finally, the authoritativeness of the Sunnah and its concomitant sciences (*muṣṭalaḥ al-ḥadīth*).

The first ("Prophethood and the Prophet's Duties") and second ("Sunnah as Concept and Technical Term") chapters speak of the prophetic

mission and attempt to problematize conceptions assimilated into Islamic thought by juxtaposing their acquired meanings with the lexical meanings supported by revelation alone. Examination of terminology serves as a theme in Alalwani's work. *ʿiṣma*, *nabī*, *rasūl*, *waḥy*, *naṣṣ*, *bayān*, and *fiqh* are but a few terms interrogated by Alalwani throughout the book. For him, these terms fell victim to appropriation and subsequent manipulation by those with an ideological agenda to offset Qur'anic dictums vis-à-vis the Sunnah. To then secure a faithful meaning that accords with the divine intent, Alalwani follows his interrogations with proposals for their reconceptualization. *ʿiṣma* (divine protection afforded to prophets), for instance, is delimited by Alalwani to apostles (*rusul*) and entails "(i) "protection from being killed" (in order to fulfill the prophetic mission), and (ii) "protection against error when proclaiming the words of the revealed message (p. 5)." Likewise for *nabī* (prophet) and *rasūl* (apostle): the former denotes a historically and culturally contingent message, whereas the latter a universal one. For Alalwani, it was what came to be known as the Prophet's Sunnah that necessarily expresses this historical and cultural contingency, i.e., *nubuwwa*, whereas the universal message (*risāla*) is found in the Qur'an alone (p. 6). Here, the Prophet's role as teacher and community leader is laden with discretionary and—critically—non-divine judgment. When the Prophet instructs his community, he is carrying out a higher purpose in method by anchoring himself in the Qur'an, but is nonetheless producing conclusions which are the result of his own, human *ijtihād*.

Alalwani takes repeated issue with those who privileged the Sunnah over the Qur'an, citing statements such as, "the Sunnah stands in judgment over the Qurʾān" (p. 84) and "the Qurʾān needs the Sunnah more than the Sunnah needs the Qurʾān" (pp. 84, 87, 100) as demonstrations of wayward attenuations of the Qur'anic message. The classical hadith topos maintained the autonomous jurisdiction of the Sunnah, averring that although scriptural command can be interpreted in multifarious ways, it is in the Sunnah that one locates a functional and material practice against which scriptural prescriptions can be realized. In contrast to this normative reasoning, Alalwani proposes a conception of the Sunnah that is necessarily circumscribed by Quranic scripture and cannot function independent of it (see pp. 69, 79). Here, passages conventionally used to justify the Prophet's unreserved authority to command and prohibit such as those prescribing obedience to "God and His Messenger" are delimited to scriptural dissemination and preservation (pp. 64-68). In other words, the mistake, according to Alalwani, is in interpreting the obedience spoken about in the Qur'an as re-

ferring to anything other than the Prophet's role as revelation's transmitter and direct explicator. By commanding obedience to the Prophet, God is assuring the believers of the Qur'an's integrity, preservation, and the Prophet's ability to uphold its intended meanings in the most limited of ways. To construe the Qur'anic imperative of compliance with the prophetic order as an endorsement of the Prophet's unassailable role of legislator in all aspects of his life, such that any act, no matter how trivial, constitutes a binding legal understanding is to make a mountain out of a molehill and radically to misread revelational discourse.

Chapters three ("The Qurʾan as Creative Source and the Sunnah as Practical Clarification"), four ("The Expanding Role of Narrative"), and five ("The Chronicling of the Sunnah and its Historical Context") buttress the previous chapters in further problematizing the "narrative generation." Many of the chapters take on a storytelling prose with predictable contours: it begins with a courageous and spiritually upright generation interacting with the divine, followed by an era of confusion which quickly leads to degradation and ultimate decay. The Qur'an's putative authority as the sole source for juridical epistemology with only as-needed reference to prophetic practice was purportedly in place until 40 AH (p. 104), but becomes subject to question due to aberrant ideologies. Forgery, charlatanism, and heterodox innovation take hold, and orthodox response, unable to navigate effectively within the limitations of Qur'anic discourse taken as inherently subjective and vulnerable to interpretive disagreement, surrenders to a Sunnah-centric hermeneutic to which the Qur'an is little more than a handmaiden. Within two to three generations, the damage becomes irremediable, and slavish imitation then follows suit (p. 108).

The final chapter ("The Authoritativeness of the Reporting of the Sunnah") chronicles the development of hadith sciences (*muṣṭalaḥ*), concluding with a problematizing of key instruments used as part of hadith criticism. Purported gaps in narrator examination, oral vs. written dichotomies, and *isnād* vs. *matn* criticism are all explicated in the concluding chapter of Alalwani's work.

Storytelling features heavily in the book, with much simply attributed to "some scholars" without further specification ("some scholars have divided hadiths into three categories," p. 76; "some scholars held that the Sunnah…," p. 82; "some scholars referred to the Qurʾān…," p. 82; etc.). Apposite quotations are rarely sourced, and even fewer are properly cited. A number of contentions are thinly substantiated and some far-fetched, such as the variant readings of the Qur'an being a temporary permission grant-

ed by the Prophet in his era to those with speech impediments (p. 110). Though such an explanation may account for why a *ḍād* is vocalized as a *zā*' in variant readings, it cannot explain instances in which variations are more substantial such as the transposition of wordings, morphological differences, and the like. It is also unclear in this contention which recitation Alalwani presumes to represent the "original" recitation of the Prophet and to which divine protection has been afforded.

Alalwani's arguments often betray an irony in his proposed hermeneutic: in contesting the role afforded to the Sunnah, Alalwani is forced to remain inside the very frame he problematizes. For instance, he substantiates his critical treatment by recurrent reference to the Prophet's proscription on writing down his words out of fear of admixture of the non-Qur'anic with the Qur'anic. Abu Bakr's reported burning of a private hadith collection containing 500-some reports, Abu Hurayrah's alleged narrating of midrashic and prophetic traditions in gatherings, and 'Umar, Ibn Mas'ud, and other Companions' disapproval of recording prophetic narrations are all presented as apodictic (with the notable exception of Abu Hurayrah's, which Alalwani references as "inauthentic"). The Prophet's infamous instruction provided to Mu'adh ibn Jabal upon his departure to Yemen, however, is dismissed in summary fashion and alleged as fabricated, given its inclusion of resorting to the Prophet's Sunnah if an answer cannot be gleaned from the Qur'an alone (p. 86) (no scholar of hadith classified it as such).

Meanwhile, Alalwani applies little scrutiny to the many hadiths marshaled in support of his argument, a number of which are in fact highly contested. Take for example the report of Abu Bakr's burning a private hadith collection containing some 500-odd hadiths (which, as an aside, would suggest some sort of permission for hadith writing during the Prophet's time or insubordination on the part of Abu Bakr for having written during the prophetic era) alongside 'Umar's disapproval of hadith writings (p. 120). Though the book purports the Abu Bakr and 'Umar report as being related in al-Hakim's *sanad*, no such work by al-Hakim exists by that name, and it is possible that we are here encountering translation error as the probative texts record the tradition with attribution to al-Hakim via a *sanad* (*bi-sanadi-hi*) and not in his sanad, the latter of which would imply authorship. In point of fact, the actual report of burning appears in al-Muttaqi al-Hindi's (d. 975/1567) *Kanz al-'ummāl*, though it possesses a number of infirmities including, but not limited to, unknown and unreliable narrators. For this reason, al-Dhahabi (d. 748/1348) regarded the report as inauthentic, while Ibn Kathir too casted doubt upon its reliability. Elsewhere, Alalwani cites a

hadith from al-Sarakhsi's work on *uṣūl* from the Prophet, saying, "After I am gone you will have numerous accounts of things I said and did. If someone attributes some action or saying to me, compare it to the Book of God. If it agrees with the Book of God, accept it and know that it is from me. If it conflicts with the Book of God, reject it, and know that I had had no part in it" (p. 77). However, the hadith is classified by al-Khattabi (d. 388/988) as fabricated.

Alalwani's epistemological inconsistencies are not limited simply to insufficient scrutiny in citing hadith reports, but at times selectivity in the very presentation and rendering of them. For example, Alalwani recounts the narration of Abu Saʿīd al-Khudrī concerning the Prophet's prohibition of writing partially, quoting the Prophet as saying, "Write nothing down on my authority. Whoever records anything but the Qurʾān on my authority must erase what he has written" (p. 119). A full rendering of the hadith in question, however, yields the following:

> Write nothing down on my authority. Whoever records anything but the Qurʾān on my authority must erase what he has written. And narrate from me, for there is no harm in it (emphasis mine) and he who attributed any falsehood to me—and Hammām said: I think he also said: "deliberately"—shall find his abode in the Fire.

The interdiction related to writing, therefore, is coupled with an explicit encouragement to narrate the Prophet's own words alongside the Qurʾān, a fact that conflicts with Alalwani's proposed hermeneutic. It should also be noted that the Abu Saʿīd al-Khudrī report is far less definitive than the words would otherwise suggest given other reports permitting writing during the Prophet's life for certain companions including ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ, as well as the sheer number of Companions who recorded hadith traditions during their lifetime following the Prophet's death.

Alalwani also makes much ado of the now hackneyed *isnād*/*matn* dichotomy. Alalwani's typecasting of hadith scholarship as solely concerned with isnād interrogation to the exclusion of matn criticism accords with the views of several scholars including Alfred Guillaume, Goldziher, Joseph Schacht, James Robson, and Fazlur Rahman. Though a detailed treatment of this topic is beyond the scope of this review, interested readers are encouraged to review Jonathan Brown's "How We Know Early Ḥadīth Critics Did Matn Criticism and Why It's So Hard to Find" as well as his "The Rules

of Matn Criticism: There Are No Rules," for a detailed rejoinder of this traditional take.

Overall, *Reviving the Balance* is an important contribution to the ongoing reform discursive dominating the thought of many modern Muslims. Alalwani offers a narrative for consideration, though it is one in need of refinement and elaboration, with special attention given to examples of Sunnah-Qurʾān contention and discrete examples that illustrate inappropriate Qurʾān subordination. Like all his English-language works, Reviving the Balance is a translation of Alalwani's original Arabic writing. In this reviewer's opinion, the work would benefit from a substantial revision focused on citations, particularly for quotes and reports that are central to the thesis being advanced. In addition, one hopes that Alalwani's thought can be furthered by future scholars invested in traditional Muslim epistemologies, specifically in regards to the appropriate use of the Sunnah as subordinate to Quranic fiat. May God's mercy envelop the shaykh.

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