The Origin of the *Isnād* and al-Mukhtār b. Abī ʿUbayd's Revolt in Kūfa (66-7/685-7)[1]

El origen del *isnād* y la revuelta de al-Mujtār b. Abī ʿUbayd en Kūfa (66-7/685-7)

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During the past century of oriental studies, the question of when and where Muslim traditions (*ḥadīth*, pl. *aḥādīth*) came to be propped up with validating lines of transmission (*isnād*, pl. *asānīd*) has attracted a considerable amount of scholarly attention, for its bearing on the key issue of the historicity of *ḥadīth*. In this essay, I review the existing theories about the origin of the *isnād*, which alternate between the lifetime of the Prophet's Companions and the end of the second century AH/*c.* 816 CE. Based on a hitherto largely overlooked tradition and two general methodological premises, I associate the inception of corroborative attribution to past authorities in legal and theological *ḥadīth* with the aftermath of al-Mukhtār b. Abī ʿUbayd al-Thaqafī's revolt in Kūfa (66-7/685-7). Over the course of the second/eighth century, the *isnād* institution spread out across the major centers of learning in the caliphate and entered the field of historical reports. Such geographical and typological unevenness of the *isnād*'s evolution gave rise to conflicting theories about its chronology.

Key words: *isnād*; *sanad*; origin; development; *fitna*; civil war; Ibn Sīrīn; al-Mukhtār; *rijāl*; *ḥadīth*; *khabar*; criticism; *sunna*; *bidaʿ*.

Durante el último siglo de estudios orientales, la cuestión de cuándo y dónde llegaron a consolidarse las tradiciones proféticas (*ḥadīṯ*, pl. *aḥādīṯ*) con líneas válidas de transmisión (*isnād*, pl. *asānīd*) ha atraído la atención de un considerable número de investigadores que se dedicaron a la cuestión fundamental de la historicidad del *ḥadīṯ*. En este trabajo, revisaré las teorías existentes sobre los orígenes del *isnād*, orígenes que se datan o bien en la vida de los Compañeros del Profeta, o bien a finales del siglo II de la hégira, es decir 816 d.C. Basándome en una hasta ahora olvidada tradición y en dos premisas de tipo metodológico, asociaré el comienzo de la atribución de autoridad en hadices legales y teológicos con las postrimerías de la revuelta de al-Mujtār b. Abī ʿUbayd al-Ṯaqafī en Kūfa (66-7/685-7). En el curso del siglo II/VIII, la institución del *isnād* se expandió por los mayors centros de enseñanza en el califato y entró en la disciplina de la historia. Esta falta de igualdad geográfica y tipológica de la evolución del *isnād* dio lugar a esas teorías conflictivas respecto a su cronología.

Palabras clave: *isnād*; *sanad*; origen; desarrollo; *fitna*; Guerra civil; Ibn Sīrīn; al-Mujtār; *riŷāl*; *ḥadīṯ*; *jabar*; criticism; *sunna*; *bidaʿ*.

1. Introduction

In Muslim traditions (*ḥadīth*, pl. *aḥādīth*), the *isnād* (pl. *asānīd*; or *sanad*, pl. *asnād*) is the chain of narrators (*rāw^{in}*, pl. *ruwāt*) presumed to have passed on in succession the tradition's content (*matn*, pl. *mutūn*) from an original speaker, e.g. the Prophet, to a later collector, e.g. al-Bukhārī, who is usually removed from the original speaker by two or more generations of transmitters. Modern Western *ḥadīth* scholarship has regarded the *isnād* as critically important for assessing the historicity of the *matn*, that is, the likelihood that it is anchored in facts from the original speaker's lifetime. Not surprisingly, therefore, Western academics expended considerable efforts to study the early development of the *isnād* institution.

In the first part of this essay (sections 1 and 2), I review existing theories about the origins of the *isnād*, which alternate between the lifetime of the Prophet's Companions and the end of the second century AH/*c*. 816 CE. Often mentioned only in passing, the studies of scholars like Horovitz, Schacht, Robson, Azmi, Juynboll, and the revisionists need to be carefully summarized, in a manner that takes account of their conceptual nuances and evolution. In the second part (section 3), I take up a hitherto largely overlooked tradition and invoke two general methodological premises to associate the inception of corroborative attribution to past authorities with the aftermath of al-Mukhtār b. Abī ʿUbayd al-Thaqafī's revolt in Kūfa (66-7/685-7).

The modern debate about the first use of the *isnād* has largely revolved around the following statement by the Basran scholar Muḥammad b. Sīrīn (d. 110/728):

> *Lam yakūnū yasʾalūna ʿan al-isnād. Fa-lammā waqaʿat al-fitna qālū: "Sammū la-nā rijāla-kum fa-yunẓaru ilā ahl al-sunna fa-yuʾkhadhu ḥadīthu-hum wa-yunẓaru ilā ahl al-bidaʿ fa-lā yuʾkhadhu ḥadīthu-hum."*
>
> They were not asking about the *isnād*. When the fitna (civil war) broke out, they said, "Name to us your informants (*rijāl*), so that we can recognize the people of [orthodox] tradition and accept their *ḥadīth*, and recognize the people of [heretical][2] innovation and accept not their *ḥadīth*."[3]

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[2] I use the terms "orthodox" and "heretical" only as approximating metaphors, with full realization that Islam did not develop an institution similar to the Christian Church and its councils that might draw the boundaries of orthodox and heretical beliefs and practices. About the limitations of using the word "orthodox" with respect to Islam, see Van Ess, *Der Eine und das Andere*, 2, pp. 1302–6.

[3] The tradition is usually cited from Muslim al-Naysābūrī (d. 261/875) (*Ṣaḥīḥ, Muqaddima, Bab Bayān anna l-isnād min al-dīn*, p. 15). Earlier citations are found in Yaḥyā b.

Arguing from the premise that the third civil war (126-32/744-50), which put an end to the Umayyad caliphate, marked the end of the "good old time" of dogmatic accord,[4] Joseph Schacht (1902-69) regarded the association of the above tradition with Ibn Sīrīn as spurious.[5] Hence, he concluded, the *isnād* came into being after 126/744.[5] Schacht, nevertheless, qualified his above opinion in a noteworthy manner: "[i]n any case, there is no reason to suppose that the regular practice of using *isnād*s is older than the beginning of the second century A.H."[6] Thus, he allowed for an earlier inception of the *isnād* institution.

2. Modern theories about the emergence of the *isnād*

2.1. The traditional view

The traditional view holds that solicitude for transmission accuracy stretches back to the days of the Prophet's immediate successors, the "rightly-guided caliphs" (r. 11-40/632-61).[7] The second caliph, ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 13-23/634-44), is said to have requested from the Companion Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī (d. *c*. 42/662) a clear proof (*bayyina*) regarding a tradition Abū Mūsā related on the authority of the Prophet. Abū Mūsā went to the mosque and came back accompanied by the Helper Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī (d. *c*. 74/693), who testified before ʿUmar that the tradition was correct.[8] In another report, al-Ḥārith b. ʿAbdallāh al-Hamdānī al-Aʿwar (d. 65/684-5) consulted ʿAlī (r. 35-40/656-61) about traditions whose correctness he doubted.[9] Taken as they stand,

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Maʿīn's (d. 233/847) *Tārīkh* (3, p. 431), Ibn Ḥanbal's (d. 241/855) *ʿIlal* (2, p. 559, no. 3640), and al-Jūzajānī's (d. 259/873) *Aḥwāl al-rijāl* (pp. 35–6).

[4] Schacht, *Origins*, pp. 72, 78, 192. In an earlier publication, Schacht argued that fully-fledged *isnād*s going back to the Prophet came into being "only about the middle of the second century A.H., as a result of the activity of the traditionists" (Schacht, "Revaluation," p. 153).

[5] Schacht, *Origins*, p. 36-7.

[6] Schacht, *Origins*, p. 37.

[7] See, for instance, Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ, Muqaddima, Bab Wujūb al-riwāya ʿan al-thiqāt*, pp. 8 and following.

[8] Ibn Ḥibbān, *Kitāb al-Majrūḥīn*, 1, p. 37.

[9] Al-Mizzī, *Tahdhīb al-Kamāl*, 5, pp. 250-1.

these reports go against the grain of Ibn Sīrīn's statement and suggest that even before any *fitna* had broken out prominent Muslims were keen to examine the traditions they transmitted.

Early scholars of Muslim historical tradition in the 19th century embraced the traditional narrative about the onset of critical *ḥadīth* transmission. In the introduction to his monumental *Life of Mahomet*, Sir William Muir (1819-1905) singled out the tumultuous events ushered in by the murder of the third caliph, ʿUthmān (r. 23-35/644-55), as the driving force behind the emergence of partisan tradition and the ensuing engagement of political rivals in mutual *ḥadīth* criticism.[10] Muir did not address the history of the *isnād* directly, most likely because he never doubted that it originated in the lifetime of the Companions.[11] Aloys Sprenger (1813-1893) shared a similar view. In a short discourse about the *isnād*, he noted that, from the perspective of the ninth decade after the Prophet's death, "the early establishment of this system of transmission enabled Muslims to preserve a meaningful number of completely reliable reports, even if for more than one hundred years there existed no indigenous written tradition («Schrifttum»)."[12] Thus, Sprenger apparently assumed that the system of formal transmission was in place already at the dawn of Islam.

Among the modern Muslim scholars, Mohammad Azmi (b. 1932) has been the most outspoken exponent of the hypothesis that the *isnād* came into being as a result of the first civil war in Islam (35-40/656-61) between the Prophet's cousin ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/61) and the Umayyad governor of Syria Muʿāwiya b. Abī Sufyān (d. 60/680). Azmi rejected Schacht's chronology of the *isnād* on three grounds. First, the word "fitna" in Ibn Sīrīn's tradition stands for "civil war" in general. Second, Ibn Sīrīn must have had in mind the war between ʿAlī and Muʿāwiya, because it was the most traumatic, hence memorable, rent in the unity of the Islamic *umma*. Third, Ibn Sīrīn's detached expression "when the fitna broke out, they said" implies a significant chronological distance from the events, which must have unfolded not in his lifetime but in "very early days," that is, the first civil war.[13]

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[10] Muir, *Life*, pp. xxxvi-xxxvii, liii.
[11] Muir, *Life*, pp. xlvi-l and esp. lxxviii.
[12] Sprenger, *Leben*, p. 11.
[13] Azmi, *Studies*, pp. 216-17.

The traditional view found expression in Jamila Shaukat's article "Isnād in Ḥadīth Literature." Apparently accepting Juynboll's arguments to the effect that the word "fitna" in Ibn Sīrīn's tradition refers to the second civil war (see section 2.2 below), she nevertheless defended the traditional chronology of the *isnād*, based on two hypothetical arguments. First, "[t]he most alarming *fitnah* for *ḥadīth* could have been fabrication, which, as the sources suggest, had appeared even before the *fitnah* which occurred between ʿAbd al-Malik and Ibn al-Zubayr." Second, Ibn Sīrīn's statement does not mean that there was no use of the *isnād* "in the early period."[14]

Like Azmi, Bashshār ʿAwwād Maʿrūf (b. 1940) argued that the word "fitna" applies to every civil war in early Islam. In contrast to Azmi, Maʿrūf avoided specifying that, in the fitna-tradition, Ibn Sīrīn spoke about the first civil war. Rather, he had in mind "the spread of lies, fancies, and conflicts between the Muslims."[15] Although Maʿrūf did not propose a concrete chronology for the emergence of the *isnād*, his reference to a tradition in which Ibn ʿAbbās (d. *c*. 68/687-8) warns against uncritical acceptance of reports suggests that in his opinion already the Companions had transmitted and evaluated traditions.

To sum up, the nineteenth-century exponents of the traditional view about the emergence of the *isnād* worked on the assumption that *ḥadīth* transmission had begun immediately after the death of the Prophet, and it quickly gave rise to a critical evaluation of transmitters, especially after the first civil war. During the twentieth century, considerable scholarly efforts were expended to bolster the traditional view, predominantly by *ḥadīth* evidence. The chief disadvantage of this approach is its dependence on traditions with heterogeneous contents and questionable authenticity. Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī's exposition on the "transmission from the people of [heretical] fancies (*ahl al-ahwāʾ*),"[16] to take an example, illustrates the methodological inadequacy of using *ḥadīth* without its proper evaluation. Al-Khaṭīb's chapter is a rambling record of transmission-critical exertions that apparently began during the Prophet's lifetime and went on, in fits and starts, over the next two cen-

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[14] Shaukat, "Isnād", p. 447.
[15] Maʿrūf, "Introduction", 1, p. 13.
[16] Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Kifāya*, p. 120–5. See also Shaukat, "Isnād", pp. 445-6 and the sources thereto cited.

turies. The advocates of the traditional view who, after Schacht, centered their analysis on Ibn Sīrīn's fitna-tradition did not survey the meaning of the word "fitna" in early Muslim Tradition; they assumed, instead, that Ibn Sīrīn must have had in mind the first civil war. Even more inauspiciously, none of them paid attention to the dichotomy *ahl al-sunna*/*ahl al-bidaʿ* in Ibn Sīrīn's statement, which may be anachronistic with respect to the conflicts between ʿAlī and Muʿāwiya, and Ibn al-Zubayr and ʿAbd al-Malik.

2.2. The isnād *originated in the last quarter of the first century AH/c. 694-719 CE*

Schacht developed his chronology of the *isnād* in response to an earlier hypothesis mooted by Josef Horovitz (1874-1931). In a 1918 article, Horovitz argued that insofar as Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 124/742) and his generation were conversant with the *isnād*, "we may assume that it was introduced in *ḥadīth* literature no later than the last third of the first century AH."[17] In a later publication, Horovitz considered ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr's (d. 93-4/711-13) sporadic citation of his informants, including the Prophet's wife ʿĀʾisha, as suggesting that "in its primitive form" the *isnād* was already "established" by the year 75/694-5.[18] Horovitz' use in one breath of "primitive form" and "established" gives an inkling of his vacillation over the actual date of the emergence of the *isnād*. Strikingly, in his studies Horovitz refrains from relying on Muslim traditions; probably alert to their contradictory character, he gives prominence to the manner in which al-Zuhrī and ʿUrwa related early historical traditions. One ought not to forget, nonetheless, that these traditionists have left no works of their own. We make out the lineaments of their transmission from much later *sīra* works and *ḥadīth* collections, which may have altered both the contents of their material and the degree of its indebtedness to earlier informants.

In a 1953 article, James Robson (1890-1981) came close to Horovitz' chronology, without disregarding *ḥadīth* material. Against Schacht, Robson believed that, as he spoke about the fitna, Ibn Sīrīn

[17] Horovitz, "Alter und Ursprung", pp. 43-4.
[18] Horovitz, *Earliest Biographies*, pp. 26-7.

had in mind the second civil war in Islam between the Umayyads and the Zubayrids. In support of this hypothesis, he brought into play a tradition in Mālik's (d. 179/796) *Muwaṭṭaʾ*, according to which "during the fitna" ʿAbdallāh b. ʿUmar (b. *c*. 610, d. 73/693) feared that he might be barred from performing the lesser pilgrimage (*ʿumra*). Robson assumed that Mālik was most likely referring to the Umayyad siege of Mecca in either 64/683 or 72/692.[19] Both events took place during the second civil war, which must be, therefore, "the fitna" mentioned by Ibn ʿUmar. On the other hand, Ibn Sīrīn was born in 33/653-4, that is, too late to have had recollections about the first civil war, and he died in 110/728, that is, sixteen years before the eruption of the third civil war. Hence, as he mentioned "the fitna," he must have had in mind the same events that Mālik's tradition designates as "fitna."

Seven years later, Robson became less convinced about the referent of Ibn Sīrīn's fitna. While still refuting Schacht's chronology, he nevertheless asserted that the fitna mentioned by Ibn Sīrīn might have been either the first or the second civil war.[20]

Gautier H.A. Juynboll (1935-2010) took on the task of examining the chronological crux of Ibn Sīrīn's statement, to wit, the meaning of the word "fitna." Unlike Schacht, who associated the word with the third civil war, on the one hand, and in contrast to the Muslim scholars who held that by fitna is meant the first civil war, on the other hand, Juynboll observed that the earliest Muslim sources most frequently use this word with regard to the second civil war in Islam.[21] Hence, citing one's informant began to be required in the wake of that event.

In support of Juynboll's reading of the word "fitna," a hitherto unexploited indirect argument may be added. As early as the lifetime of Abū ʿĪsā al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892), the *matn* of Ibn Sīrīn's fitna-tradition had undergone a remarkable change. Where its earliest collectors, Ibn Ḥanbal, Muslim, and al-Jūzajānī, mention only "no one was asking about the *isnād*," al-Tirmidhī has, "in the earliest time (*fī al-zaman al-awwal*), they were not asking about the *isnād*."[22] Al-Tirmidhī's expres-

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[19] Robson, "*Isnād* in Muslim Tradition", pp. 21-2. Without mentioning Robson, Juynboll also endorsed this chronology, on *isnād*-analytical grounds (*Encyclopedia of Canonical Ḥadīth*, p. 337, note 1).

[20] Robson, "Standards", p. 460.

[21] Juynboll, "Great *Fitna*", pp. 152-9, esp. 154; Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, pp. 18-19.

[22] Al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan*, 6, p. 231.

sion does away with any hesitance that Ibn Sīrīn might be referring to an event other than the first civil war and asserts the traditional view about the emergence of the *isnād*. This comes at the expense of what seems to have been an earlier opinion alluding to the second civil war as this event's trigger.

Juynboll's study about the "great fitna" became a seminal step ahead in working out a reliable chronology of the *isnād* institution.[23] It put to rest Schacht's overly skeptical assessment of Ibn Sīrīn's tradition, but, at the same time, it showed the untenability of the traditional dating, which seems to have held certain allure even for astute researchers like Robson. As he spoke about the fitna, Ibn Sīrīn meant the second civil war in Islam.

2.3. Ḥadīth *transmission began immediately after the Prophet's death but morphed into formal* isnāds *towards the end of the first century AH*

The evolutionary theory, if I may so call it, tries to reconcile the traditional chronology of the *isnād* with teachings that set its emergence in late first or early second century AH. Its origins go back to James Robson's publications about the *isnād*. In the article "The *Isnād* in Muslim Tradition" (1953), Robson highlighted the second civil war as the historical framework in which the *isnād* came into being. Nevertheless, he believed that, in its primitive form, the *isnād* could have been present already "during the middle years of the first

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[23] Juynboll's assertion that the killing of 'Uthmān was described as *fitna* no earlier than the second half of the second century AH was disputed by Josef Van Ess ("Nachträge und Verbesserungen", p. 49, at p. 27). Although this article carries certain implications with regard to our present topic, Van Ess did not discuss Ibn Sīrīn's tradition explicitly, nor did he address the chronology of the *isnād*. The secondary exegetical origin of the word "*fitna*" in Van Ess' example against Juynboll has been noted by Michael Cook (*Dogma*, p. 12). Juynboll's dating of the first use of the *isnād* in the 70ies or 80ies of the first century AH was accepted by Donner, who regarded the emergence of the *isnād* institution as a sign of transition from the earlier pietistic, genealogical, and theocratic legitimation of the believers' community, which was intrinsically ahistorical, to historicizing legitimation through the reference to past events and authorities (Donner, *Narratives*, pp. 98-122, esp. 121). Regrettably, library unavailability prevented me from consulting Ahmed Ali as-Sirri's *Religiös-politische Argumentation im frühen Islam*, which deals with the early understanding of *fitna*.

century." By that time, many Companions, who had seen the Prophet, were dead, and the need to name one's authority, accordingly, increased.[24]

The logic behind Robson's reasoning is transparent in his later article "Ibn Isḥāq's Use of the *Isnād*" (1956).[25] First, Robson observed, Horovitz has dated the inception of the *isnād* to the last third of the first century AH. Second, Robson argued, the wide-scale fabrication of *isnād*s in the second century AH (719-816 CE) must have followed an already existing sound practice. Third, we may surmise that the *isnād* existed in oral transmission sometime before that period. Whereas Robson's first and second points may be viewed as consecutive stages in an evolutionary pattern, the legitimacy of his third point is impossible to prove. Horovitz was speaking about the emergence of the *isnād*, without presuming a still earlier—oral or otherwise—stage in its development.

In the same article, Robson mooted what we may call a "diversity criterion." Ibn Isḥāq cites *isnād*s of uneven levels of accomplishment: some of them terminate at the level of Ibn Isḥāq's direct informants, whereas others go back to Companions or the Prophet.[26] Along with Ibn Isḥāq's occasional use of expressions implying doubt in his informants' accounts, this diversity indicates, according to Robson, that Ibn Isḥāq "is a reliable retailer of information as he had acquired it."[27] Although Robson admitted the epistemological uncertainty of his thesis when it comes to the first-century section of the *isnād*s and the historical claim of the *matn*s, he went on to conclude, "[m]y inclination is to accept as genuine lines of transmission the *isnād*s which go back from Ibn Isḥāq to Companions or to the Prophet."[28]

As time went on, Robson's formulations grew vaguer. In "Standards Applied by Muslim Traditionists" (1960), he stated, "[t]he idea of quoting authorities was, I am sure, adopted before the first century of Islām was over."[29] The chronological fluidity of this expression reflects Robson's understanding that the *isnād* developed in two phases, at the ear-

[24] Robson, "*Isnād*", pp. 21, 26.
[25] Robson, "Ibn Isḥāq's Use", p. 450.
[26] Robson, "Ibn Isḥāq's Use", pp. 451-64; cf. Robson, "Standards", pp. 460-2.
[27] Robson, "Ibn Isḥāq's Use", p. 462.
[28] Robson, "Ibn Isḥāq's Use", pp. 463-4.
[29] Robson, "Standards", p. 461.

lier of which it was "more undefined than it came to be later."[30] That is to say, a transformation would have occurred from a primitive, and not entirely clear, notion of *isnād* to a more accomplished one, with which we are presently conversant. The former is signaled by Ibn Sīrīn's tradition,[31] although, as we have seen in the previous section, by 1960 Robson had grown uncertain about the historical referent of the word "fitna" in Ibn Sīrīn's statement.

Just as Robson allowed, tentatively, for the onset of *ḥadīth* transmission in the lifetime of the late Companions or that of the Prophet, with the fully-fledged *isnād* setting in towards the end of the first/seventh century or even later, so too Nabia Abbott (1897-1981) and Ursula Sezgin envisaged a protracted development of the transmission of knowledge in Islam. Their aim was to undermine Schacht's chronology, but eventually each of them conceded that the *isnād* in its classical form might have only emerged in the last decades of the first century AH.

Without citing Schacht explicitly, Abbott asserted, "[i]t was not until after the First Civil War of Islām that the Companions began to be questioned as to corroborative sources and the accuracy of their traditions."[32] Abbott based her argument on a swarm of traditions in which different authorities from the first three generations of Muslims admonish their contemporaries to be careful about those on whose authority they transmit knowledge.[33] Since Abbott takes the *isnād* evidence at face value, that is, to her the *matn* preserves the actual words of the earliest speaker in the line of transmission, treating the first civil war as the *terminus post quem* for the engagement in critical assessment of informants (*rijāl*) is only one of the possibilities that her evidence allows for. Thus, one of Abbott's witnesses formally dates back to the Prophet's lifetime, thereby suggesting a fledgling *rijāl* criticism long before the war's outbreak. Another one is associated with ʿAlī, that is, it sets the event *during* the war. Still others relate it to persons who flourished towards the end of the first/seventh century.[34] In order to make sense of the contradictory evidence, Abbott concludes,

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[30] Robson, "Standards", p. 461.
[31] Robson, "Standards", p. 460.
[32] Abbott, *Studies*, 2, p. 75.
[33] Abbott, *Studies*, 2, p. 75, note 10.
[34] Khaṭīb, *Kifāya*, pp. 121 and following.

"the *isnād* became *of primary importance* [italics added]" after the second civil war, because of political, religious, and ethnic conflicts.[35] Abbott does not explain what led her to this harmonizing chronology, but one may think that it is inferred from the fact that Ibn Sīrīn (d. 110/728) is an oft-cited authority in a considerable number of Abbott's corroborative traditions.[36]

In her study of the corpus of historical reports associated with Abū Mikhnaf Lūṭ b. Yaḥyā al-Azdī (d. 157/774), Ursula Sezgin came to conclusions that closely match Abbott's chronology of the *isnād* institution. Much like Abbott, Sezgin worked on the assumption that written transmission of knowledge persisted from the early days of Islam. On this basis, she challenged Schacht's chronology of the *isnād* in a manner that pushes its emergence well into the first/seventh century. According to Sezgin, already the late Companions, followed by the Successors, had set about collecting, often in writing, historical reports from the Prophet's Companions. To ensure the accuracy of subsequent citations, these early collectors would note down the names of their informants. In the lifetime of the Successors, that is, the second generation of transmitters after the eyewitnesses of the events (e.g. the battle of Ṣiffīn [37/657]), these citations acquired the form of an *isnād* chain involving three generations of transmitters (that is, Successor → late Companion → Companion). A considerable part of the Successor *ḥadīth* collections had been committed to writing.[37]

The hypothesis of Abbott and Sezgin seems to find limited support in an isolated report, preserved by al-Rāmahurmuzī (d. 360/970), about "the first time a scrutiny of the *isnād* had been undertaken" (*awwalᵘ mā futtisha 'an al-isnād*).[38] Juynboll, who made such "reports about the firsts" *(awāʾil)* the linchpin of his reconstruction of the origins of *ḥadīth* science,[39] used al-Rāmahurmuzī's tradition to bolster his chronology of the *isnād*.[40] According to the tradition, al-Shaʿbī (d. 103-10/721-8) asked his informant, the Successor al-Rabīʿ b. Khuthaym (d. 61/680), about the informants who had passed on to him a saying of

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[35] Abbott, *Studies*, 2, p. 75.
[36] Khaṭīb, *Kifāya*, p. 122.
[37] Sezgin, *Abū Miḥnaf*, pp. 74-84, esp. p. 78.
[38] Al-Rāmahurmuzī, *Muḥaddith*, p. 208.
[39] Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, pp. 10-23 and passim.
[40] Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, pp. 19-20.

homiletic content, upon which al-Rabīʿ named two Companions of the Prophet. Given al-Shaʿbī's birth date, which Juynboll calculated *c*. 40/660, the first examination of transmitters took place around 61/680. Jamila Shaukat disagreed with Juynboll's analysis of the al-Shaʿbī tradition, because, in her opinion, it conflicts with the evidence of other *awāʾil* reports regarding the origin of *isnād*-criticism.[41] Her argument, however, largely misses the point, as all of the *awāʾil* she cites refer to the same period, while, as noted by Shaukat, pointing to different regions of the caliphate.[42]

This is not to say that al-Shaʿbī's report is of unassailable authenticity. At face value, Ibn Khuthaym's reply indicates that—in line with the *isnād*-evolution theory—already before his conversation with al-Shaʿbī Ibn Khuthaym had been collecting Companion traditions while recording his informants' names and mentioning them when asked to. At the same time, a remarkable detail should not have evaded Juynboll's critical eye. Before he was asked to name his informants, Ibn Khuthaym had been voicing his personal opinion, and nothing suggests that he had in mind a statement by an earlier authority, be that the Prophet or one of his Companions. Al-Shaʿbī's question about Ibn Khuthaym's informants is, therefore, misplaced; it seems more like al-Shaʿbī's attempt to project a Successor statement back to Companions. Ultimately, the tradition took on the form of a Prophet's pronouncement.[43]

The evolutionary theory found recognition in Harald Motzki's (b. 1948) study of ʿAbd al-Razzāq's *Muṣannaf*. Motzki observed that in Ibn Jurayj's (d. 150/767) corpus of informants the use of *isnād*s tends to increase from those who flourished in the first/seventh century to those who died after 118/736. From this observation, Motzki inferred, "in the first/seventh century the supplying of an *isnād* was rather the exception than the rule, but [...] from the beginning of the second/eighth century the use of the *isnād* asserted itself more and more."[44] Although

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[41] Shaukat, "Isnād", p. 447.

[42] Shaukat, "Isnād", p. 447.

[43] The same tradition that al-Rāmahurmuzī reports as *mawqūf*, that is, stopped at a Companion level, is routinely reported, albeit not on the authority of Ibn Khuthaym, as *marfūʿ*, that is, reaching the level of the Prophet. See, for instance, Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *Kitāb al-Dhikr wa-l-duʿāʾ, Bāb Faḍl al-tahlīl wa-l-tasbīḥ*, p. 2071, nos. 3691, 3693.

[44] Motzki, *Origins*, p. 241. The work was first published in German in 1991.

the first part of Motzki's statement leans towards the chronology of Abbott and Sezgin, its second part dates the systematic use of the *isnād* in a manner that brings to mind Schacht's chronology of its emergence (that is, *c*. 101-26/719-44).

Scott C. Lucas (b. 1965), who rejects many of Juynboll's conclusions about the history of the *ḥadīth* science, does nevertheless agree that, conceivably, "*isnād*s were used by the first generation of *tābiʿūn*, as an oft quoted report by Ibn Sīrīn suggests." Their birth date falls "at the latest around the year 100/718," but their "wholesale employment" came about towards the end of the Umayyad period, in the generation of al-Zuhrī and his contemporary scholars.[45] This chronology goes well with Juynboll's conclusion that the beginning of "systematic *rijāl* criticism" was *c*. 130/747-8.[46]

As it turns out then, the scholars postulating a gradual evolution of the *isnād* acknowledge the rationale behind the theory setting its emergence in the last quarter of the first century AH. By presuming a process of development set in motion already in the early days of Islam, evolutionists like Abbott and Ursula Sezgin harmonize the relatively late dating of the *isnād*, which found wide acceptance in the Western academia after Schacht, with the traditional view, which shies away from conceding a time gap of half a century between the death of the Prophet and the onset of critical *ḥadīth* transmission about him. Because of the impossibility to ascertain that the traditions used to shore up this hypothesis go back in time to their purported original speakers, and because of the fact that these speakers are identified as different Companions and Successors, the chronology propounded by Abbott and Sezgin is untenable in its part postulating the early birth date of the *isnād*. The drift of this date towards the end of the first/seventh century in the works of Motzki and Lucas reflects their realization of the epistemological uncertainties enveloping the early history of the *isnād* institution.

[45] Lucas, *Constructive Critics*, pp. 347-8. Lucas' argument is based on the assumption that the generation following al-Zuhrī initiated *ḥadīth* criticism by frequently querying their teachers about their informants' names (*loc. cit.*).

[46] Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, p. 20.

2.4. The isnād *is a formal innovation introduced towards the end of the second century AH*

In 1907, Prince Leone Caetani (1869-1935) dated the emergence of the *isnād* between the death date of 'Urwa b. al-Zubayr (d. 93-4/711-13), who, as quoted by al-Ṭabarī, does not deploy *isnād*s at all, and Ibn Isḥāq (d. 150/767), who deploys them inconsistently and in an incomplete form.[47] A fortiori, the greater part of the *isnād*s were introduced to support Muslim traditions only towards the end of second century AH in an attempt "to construct hypothetically the historical process of the transmission."[48]

Caetani's skepticism came to a spectacular rebirth in the works of John Wansbrough (1928-2002) and his disciples. Led by his theory that the Qur'ān as a canonical document of revelation came into being only towards the end of the second century AH,[49] Wansbrough regarded the *isnād* in legal exegesis and Muslim Tradition in general as "an exclusively formal innovation" that "cannot be dated much before 200/815."[50] Wansbrough's student Andrew Rippin (1950-2016), who did not deal with the *isnād* at length, remarked once, "[t]he presence of the *isnād*s automatically dates a report to the second century or later."[51] This blanket formulation seems to tally with Caetani—if not methodologically, at least in its chronological implications—more than it tallies with Wansbrough. Unlike Rippin, Norman Calder (1950-1998) pushed Wansbrough's chronology of the *isnād* towards an even later period. In Calder's view, during the third century AH (816-913 CE) an originally oral scholarly milieu dominated by the expression of personal opinion (*ra'y*) gradually gave way to institutionalized and professionalized education characterized by the compilation of written books and the appeal to *ḥadīth*. In the middle decades of the same century, the existence of a body of orally transmitted knowledge on the authority of the Prophet and his Companions came to be perceived as a hallmark of Arab and Islamic identity that set it in contrast with the

[47] Caetani *apud* Robson, "*Isnād*", p. 18.
[48] Robson, "*Isnād*", p. 18.
[49] Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, pp. 44, 49.
[50] Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, p. 179.
[51] Rippin, "*Tafsīr*", p. 61.

neighboring cultures with their long-standing tradition of writing. This is the intellectual and sociological setting in which the *isnād* had come into existence. The field of its application were scholarly disputes in which each party sought to endorse its opinion by invoking past authorities, on the one hand, and, on the other, to subvert its opponents' opinion by discrediting their past authorities.[52]

Tilman Nagel (b. 1942) is another advocate of the late emergence of the *isnād*. Based on the manner 'Abdallāh b. al-Zubayr al-Ḥumaydī (d. *c*. 219/834) cites his master, Sufyān b. 'Uyayna (d. 198/814), Nagel argued that towards mid-second century (*c*. 864 CE) the *isnād* had been an innovation, which was yet to gain traction. The earliest association of uplifting statements with Companion-authorities cannot be dated before the end of the first/seventh century.[53] As the process went on, little-known fictitious intermediaries began to be inserted between the Companions and the second-century transmitters, thereby giving rise to the *isnād*.[54] The function of *ḥadīth* is, according to Nagel, to perpetuate "the state of salvation" ("Heilszustand") and, thus, to obliterate history understood as "a process of estrangement from the state of salvation." The *isnād* aims at abolishing the ever-growing temporal distance between the idealized formative epoch and the subsequent generations, and, consequently, at preserving the immediacy of the state of salvation enshrined in the acts and words of the Prophet and his Companions.[55]

More recently, Herbert Berg pressed home Wansbrough's theory, asserting that the *isnād*s in the exegetical traditions through Ibn 'Abbās (d. 68/687-8) were "epistemologically superfluous," whereas the harmonization of variant *matn*s was high on the commentators' agenda.[56] In the process of constructing the collective memory, the *matn* serves as the medium of that memory, whereas the *isnād* is a memorization technique with ritualistic overtones.[57] Berg acknowledges that the *isnād* ritual is probably a mimetic representation of a real process of oral

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[52] Calder, *Studies*, pp. 190-1, 235-7.
[53] Nagel, "Vernichtung", p. 120-2.
[54] Nagel, "Vernichtung", p. 123-4.
[55] Nagel, "Vernichtung", p. 125-8.
[56] Berg, "*Isnād*", pp. 269-70.
[57] Berg, "*Isnād*", pp. 273-4, 277.

transmission,[58] but he, nevertheless, does not define the nature of this relation nor does he specify the period in which the *isnād* ritual began to develop. Clearly, by the time al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) set about collecting Ibn ʿAbbās traditions the *isnād* institution had been firmly in place.

Just like the evolutionists, the radical sceptics seem to accept that the *isnād* institution developed from a primitive inception to a state of methodological accomplishment and became requisite for legitimate *ḥadīth* transmission. At which point in time are we, however, to set the starting point of this development? Was it the lifetime of the Prophet and the early Companions, the last quarter of the first century AH, mid-second century, or even fifty years thereafter? To find an answer to these questions, I turn to an important, though seldom exploited, tradition.

3. Chronological issues and additional evidence

During the last seven decades of oriental studies, Ibn Sīrīn's fitna-tradition has provided the most significant piece of evidence about the origins of the *isnād*. Juynboll has argued convincingly that, as he spoke about fitna, Ibn Sīrīn had in mind the second civil war in Islam, which, in his view, gave rise to the *isnād* attribution and *rijāl* criticism. There is a caveat, however. Robson has rightly observed that although Ibn Sīrīn's statement put into relief the adherence to the *sunna*, his concept of *sunna* is beyond our ken.[59] One must also bear in mind that the opposition *ahl al-sunna*/*ahl al-bidaʿ* is a theological cliché that may have been coined long after Ibn Sīrīn's death. To address these typological and chronological issues, a digression is in order to the transmission history of Ibn Sīrīn's fitna-tradition, not least because it was overlooked even by perspicacious *isnād* analysts as Juynboll and Motzki.

[58] Berg, "*Isnād*", pp. 281.
[59] Robson, "Standards", p. 460.

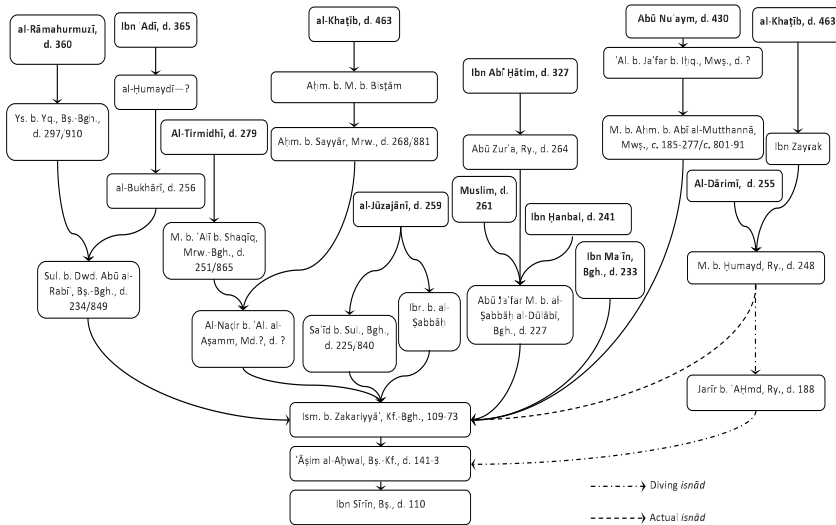## 3.1. Ibn Sīrīn's fitna-tradition: transmission history and theological back-projections

Fig. 1. The transmission history of Ibn Sīrīn's fitna-tradition

Jens Scheiner cautiously dated the Ibn Sīrīn tradition to "the *ḥadīth* compilation in which it is included,"[60] most likely alluding to Muslim al-Naysābūrī's *Ṣaḥīḥ*. In contrast to Scheiner, my examination of the *isnād*s carrying the fitna-tradition[61] (Fig. 1) suggests a somewhat earlier

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[60] Scheiner, "*Ḥadīth* and Sunna", p. 85.

[61] I opted for a simple review of the *isnād*s instead of a fully blown *isnād-cum-matn* analysis for two reasons. First, an exhaustive comparison of the *matn*s, which mandates their citation *in extenso* and treatment by a multifaceted text-critical apparatus, would have added several thousand words to the already sizeable text of the article. Second, the *isnād* bundle in Fig. 1 is in itself instructive about the transmission history of the fitna-*ḥadīth*. The only anomalous *isnād*, which bypasses the key figure, Ismā'īl b. Abī Zakariyyā', is al-Dārimī → Muḥammad b. Ḥumayd → Jarīr b. 'Abd al-Ḥamīd → 'Āṣim al-Aḥwal → Ibn Sīrīn (al-Dārimī, *Sunan*, 1, p. 396, no. 430). As noted by one of the anonymous readers, it carries a *matn* that does not mention the *fitna*. Ibn Sīrīn's expression, *kānū lā yas'alūna 'an al-isnād thumma sa'alū ba'dᵘ* ("They were not asking about the *isnād*, then they began to ask"), may be interpreted either as an indication of antiquity, as suggested by the reader, or, conversely, as an attempt to avoid the reference to the mysterious fitna. A deliberate altering of the *matn* and the *isnād* is suggested by several biographical reports about al-

chronology. These *isnād*s converge on Ismāʿīl b. Zakariyyāʾ b. Murra (b. Kūfa, active in Bagdad, d. 173/789), citing ʿĀṣim al-Aḥwal (b. Basra, active in Kūfa, d. 141-3/758-60) → Muḥammad b. Sīrīn.[62] Except for Ismāʿīl's student Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. al-Ṣabbāḥ (d. 227/841), who is quoted by two direct collectors (Ibn Ḥanbal and Muslim) and one later collector (Ibn Abī Ḥātim through his *shaykh* Abū Zurʿa al-Rāzī), the transmission above Ismāʿīl's level takes the form of unverifiable "spidery" structures (to use Juynboll's parlance), consisting of single-strand *isnād*s. A hint at Ismāʿīl's possible status as a common link is the reference to his transmission of the fitna-tradition by the early *ḥadīth*-critic Yaḥyā b. Maʿīn (d. 233/848).[63] But Ibn Maʿīn's citation does not include a full *isnād*, which suggests that he omitted his direct informant, presumably Muḥammad b. al-Ṣabbāḥ. If so, Ibn Maʿīn is not a direct collector above the level of Ismāʿīl b. Zakariyyāʾ b. Murra, thereby subverting an important evidence about the latter's common-link status.

Be that as it may, Ibn Maʿīn regarded Ismāʿīl b. Zakariyyāʾ as the only transmitter of Ibn Sīrīn's fitna-tradition.[64] Another prominent critic and Ibn Maʿīn's contemporary, ʿAlī b. al-Madīnī (d. *c*. 234/848), rejected three quarters of Muḥammad b. al-Ṣabbāḥ's transmissions through Ismāʿīl b. Zakariyyāʾ → ʿĀṣim al-Aḥwal for their being Ibn al-Ṣabbāḥ's illegitimate ascriptions to his teacher of third-persons' traditions.[65] Thus, although Ismāʿīl b. Zakariyyāʾ may have been the ear-

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Dārimī's informant, Muḥammad b. Ḥumayd al-Rāzī (d. 188/765–6). According to Yaḥyā b. Maʿīn, Ibn Ḥumayd would change the *matn* wording whenever someone suggested to him alternative readings (Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Jarḥ*, 7, p. 232). He would also transfer citations from one informant to another (al-Mizzī, *Tahdhīb*, 25, p. 103). More specifically, Ibn Ḥumayd was known to "take traditions from Basran and Kūfan transmitters and to transmit them on the authority of transmitters from Rayy" (al-Mizzī, *Tahdhīb*, 25, p. 105). Such is arguably the case with Ibn Sīrīn's tradition, which Ibn Ḥumayd most likely learned from an Iraqi source but subsequently reported on the authority of his Rāzī *shaykh*, Jarīr b. ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd. This maverick *isnād* should be dismissed as an artificial Juynbollian "dive" under the key figure; its *matn* was either inadvertently changed or deliberately doctored, as to suit the altered transmission circumstances.

[62] In addition to the sources listed in note 2, versions of Ibn Sīrīn's fitna-tradition are found in al-Dārimī, *Sunan* (see footnote 61 above); al-Tirmidhī, *Sunan*, 6, p. 231; Ibn Abī Ḥātim, *Jarḥ*, 2, p. 28; al-Rāmahurmuzī, *Muḥaddith*, pp. 208-9; Ibn ʿAdī, *Kāmil*, 1, p. 214; al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Kifāya*, p. 122; Abū Nuʿaym, *Ḥilya*, 2, p. 278.

[63] Ibn Maʿīn, *Tārīkh*, 3, p. 431.

[64] Ibn Maʿīn, *Tārīkh*, 3, p. 431.

[65] Ibn Maʿīn, *Maʿrifat al-rijāl*, 2, p. 204.

liest disseminator of the fitna-tradition, we ought not to discount the possibility that it was ascribed to him by Muḥammad b. al-Ṣabbāḥ. Sometimes described as *shaykh sunnī* ("an orthodox shaykh"), Ibn al-Ṣabbāḥ was on close terms with Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal[66] and, as such, would have been keen to uphold the cause of *ahl al-sunna* against *ahl al-bidaʿ* in the field of *ḥadīth* transmission.

The regional distribution of the *isnād*s suggests a similar chronology of the Ibn Sīrīn tradition. Above the level of the key figure, Ismāʿīl b. Zakariyyāʾ, there are four Baghdadi transmitters (Ibn Maʿīn [with qualifications], Sulaymān b. Dāwūd, Saʿīd b. Sulaymān, and Muḥammad b. al-Ṣabbāḥ) and one transmitter from Mosul (Muḥammad b. Abī al-Muthannā [*c*. 185-227/*c*. 801-91]), who cannot have met Ismāʿīl b. Zakariyyāʾ (d. 173/789), because he was born twelve years after his death. The remaining two transmitters on the authority of Ismāʿīl (Abū al-Naḍr al-Aṣamm and Ibrāhīm b. al-Ṣabbāḥ [could he have been mistaken for Muḥammad b. al-Ṣabbāḥ?]) are utterly unknown (*majhūl*). The next higher level of transmission is populated by three Baghdadis (Ibn Ḥanbal, Yūsuf b. Yaʿqūb, and Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. Shaqīq, the likely inventor of Abū al-Naḍr al-Aṣamm[67]), one Mosuli (ʿAbdallāh b. Jaʿfar b. Isḥāq), one transmitter who was active in Damascus (al-Jūzajānī), one *majhūl* (Ibn Zayrak), and five northeastern transmitters, who are known to have visited Baghdad during their scholarly travels (al-Bukhārī, Muslim, al-Tirmidhī, al-Dārimī, and Aḥmad b. Sayyār).

Thus, starting with Ismāʿīl b. Zakariyyāʾ we observe a clear pattern of dispersal of Ibn Sīrīn's tradition. First, it piqued the transmitters' interest in Baghdad towards the end of the second century AH (*c*. 816 CE), then, over the next few decades, it spread out in the northeastern parts of the caliphate. Strikingly, below the level of Ismāʿīl b. Zakariyyāʾ we find one Kūfan and one Basran transmitter, while not a single transmitter from these two centers of learning is present above Ismāʿīl's level. This is a strong indication that the single-strand *isnād* below Ismāʿīl represents a backward projection, which supports Schacht's thesis that the ascription to Ibn Sīrīn is spurious.

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[66] Ibn Ḥajar, *Tahdhīb al-Tahdhīb*, 9, pp. 230-1.
[67] Al-Naḍr is known to have passed on traditions from a single shaykh, Ismāʿīl b. Zakariyyāʾ, to a single pupil, Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. Shaqīq (Ibn Ḥibbān, *Thiqāt*, 9, p. 213).

The foregoing *isnād* analysis has highlighted Ismāʿīl b. Zakariyyāʾ as the possible original disseminator of the Ibn Sīrīn tradition, without excluding the possibility that it was ascribed to him by the "sunni shaykh" Muḥammad b. al-Ṣabbāḥ in the first decades of the third century AH. According to recent research, it was during this period that the qualification "partisans of the sunna" came to play a significant role in Islamic theology, *ḥadīth* scholarship, and jurisprudence.[68] In his preliminary study of the appellation *ṣāḥib sunna* ("upholder of [orthodox] tradition"), which invokes theological concepts similar to those attached to *ahl al-sunna*, Juynboll has noted a remarkable tendency. Although at the end of the first and during the first half of the second centuries AH (*c*. 718-68 CE) there was only a handful of *aṣḥāb sunna*, their number steadily increased in the second half of the second century AH (768-815 CE).[69] More recently, John Nawas has demonstrated that the expression *ṣāḥib sunna* was never used among the Companions of the Prophet but began to appear in the second century AH and became widespread in the third century AH, being overrepresented in the six canonical collections of Sunni *ḥadīth*.[70] Bearing in mind the conceptual overlap between *ṣāḥib sunna* and *ahl al-sunna*, we may interpret Juynboll's and Nawas' observations as indicating that, in the fitna-tradition, the division of transmitters into *ahl al-sunna* and *ahl-al-bidaʿ* is a most likely back-projection of a theological dichotomy that was worked out only a century after Ibn Sīrīn's death.[71] The historical referent of this dichotomy is difficult to determine, but, undoubtedly, it was an event epitomizing the split between orthodoxy and heresy.[72] Neither the conflict between Muʿāwiya and ʿAlī nor the war between Ibn al-Zubayr and the Umayyads resonates with such theological overtones con-

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[68] Melchert, "Piety", pp. 426-7. According to Josef van Ess (*Der Eine und das Andere*, 2, pp. 1273-9), the expression *ahl al-sunna wa-l-jamāʿa* ("adherents of the sunna and the community") was used, colloquially, in the lifetime of Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), but it acquired a terminological meaning as a group designation only towards the second half of the fourth/tenth century.

[69] Juynboll, "Excursus", pp. 319-30.

[70] Nawas, "Appellation", p. 18.

[71] About the possibility that this opposition had come into being only at the beginning of the fourth/tenth century, see Scheiner, "*Ḥadīth* and Sunna", p. 92.

[72] As noted by Maribel Fierro ("Heresy and Heretics", 1, pp. 320-1), the concept of *bidʿa* extends to the sphere of ritual practices (*ʿibādat*). From her exposition on the issue, one gains the impression that this contextualization of the term did not come into existence before the third/ninth century.

densed in specific terminology; both were political struggles that hardly fit under the heading *ahl al-sunna* vs. *ahl al-bid'a*.[73]

In a recent article, Najam Haider has proposed that the word "sunna" in Ibn Sīrīn's statement may refer to the ritual practice as the chief criterion for assessing transmitters. According to Haider, "scholars of the 1st/7th and early 2nd/8th centuries evaluated the veracity of individual transmitters by observing them in the mosque rather than questioning them on theological matters."[74] Although such a relationship between the transmitters' dependability and orthopraxy is certainly possible, two issues stand out in Haider's analysis. First, he bases his conclusion on a set of traditions, which he regards as correctly representing the opinion of the earliest authorities in their *isnād*s. Second, he seems to discount the fact that "sunna" in the Ibn Sīrīn tradition is accompanied by its conceptual opposite "bid'a," which signals theological ideas at work. In any case, the traditions cited by Haider require an extensive *isnād* and *matn*-analytical study in order to serve as clinching arguments about the type of *rijāl* criticism (if any) that was favored at the beginning of the second century AH.

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[73] Al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) reports on the authority of Abū Mikhnaf (d. 157/774) that during the battle of Ṣiffīn (37/657), one of 'Alī's lieutenants, Mālik al-Ashtar, encouraged his troops to persevere in fighting with the words that Mu'āwiya and his followers seek to "kill off the *sunna* and to revive the *bid'a*" (al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, p. 3298). A shorter variant of the report is found in Naṣr b. Muzāḥim's (d. 212/827) *Kitāb Waq'at Ṣiffīn* (251). Although Naṣr's report may be based on Abū Mikhnaf (Ursula Sezgin, *Abū Miḥnaf*, pp. 16-17, 139-45), his name is not present in the *isnād*. Since none of Abū Mikhnaf's works is extant, there is no way to ascertain his exact formulations in this case. In another report, al-Ḥusayn b. 'Alī (d. 61/680) is said to have mentioned "killing off the sunna" and "reviving the *bid'a*" in a letter he wrote to his supporters in Basra upon the death of Mu'āwiya in 60/680, that is, at the onset of the second civil war (al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, 2, p. 837). Al-Ḥusayn is also said to have called his supporters in Kūfa to "revive the manifest right [of 'Alī's family?]" (*iḥyā' ma'ālim al-ḥaqq*) and "kill off the *bid'a*" (al-Dīnawarī, *Akhbār*, p. 231). Even if such ascriptions are historically accurate, and not literary embellishment as many battlefield orations and early epistles are thought to be, one must note that (1) they do not include the phrases *ahl al-sunna* and *ahl al-bida'*, and (2) the understanding of sunna and *bid'a* therein is opaque, but, if my rendering of the last example is correct, it has clear political overtones.

[74] Haider, "Myth", p. 211-12.

3.2. Al-Mukhtār b. Abī ʿUbayd al-Thaqafī and the birth of the isnād in Kūfa

So far, my analysis of the Ibn Sīrīn tradition has strongly suggested that it was born in Baghdadi milieu at the end of the second century AH. Nonetheless, in the following lines I shall argue that its historical claim regarding the onset of the *isnād* is not baseless. An isolated tradition, duly noted but left unexplored by Western *ḥadīth* scholarship, may help us to identify the events that necessitated the introduction of the *isnād* institution.[75] According to Ibn Ḥanbal, based on the Kūfan *isnād* Jābir b. Nūḥ (d. 183/799-800) → al-Aʿmash (d. 147-8/764-5) → Ibrāhīm al-Nakhaʿī (d. *c*. 96/715), the latter said, *inna-mā suʾila ʿan al-isnād ayyām al-Mukhtār* (It was [first] asked about the *isnād* during al-Mukhtār's days).[76]

This tradition links the emergence of the *isnād* with the short-lived messianic revolt of al-Mukhtār b. Abī ʿUbayd al-Thaqafī in Kūfa, which began in 66/685 only to be quashed a year later by ʿAbdallāh b. al-Zubayr's brother, Muṣʿab.[77] Al-Mukhtār reportedly espoused beliefs that later came to be described as *ghuluww* ("[sectarian] extremism"), and he tried to associate his movement with ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib's son Muḥammad b. al-Ḥanafiyya (d. 81/700-1), whom al-Mukhtār ac-claimed as the coveted eschatological enunciator, al-Mahdī. Although many of the reports about al-Mukhtār's deviant beliefs may be inven-tions by later hostile propaganda, Gerald Hawting observed that, taken together, "they convey the impression that the movement led by al-Mukhtār was one with distinctive but not easily analyzable religious ideas."[78] It certainly caused a dangerous ideological rift in the ʿAlīd wing of the Hāshimīd party, not to speak about widening the chasm between the ʿAlīds and their Zubayrīd and Umayyad rivals. One may reasonably suppose that al-Mukhtār's movement conduced to the hard-

[75] The *ḥadīth* was alluded to in passing by Juynboll (*Muslim Tradition*, p. 18, n. 24) and Shaukat ("Isnād", p. 447).

[76] Ibn Ḥanbal, *ʿIlal*, 3, p. 379, no. 5673.

[77] The tradition mentions only al-Mukhtār and may, in theory, refer to al-Mukhtār b. ʿAwf's uprising in Mecca in the year 129/747, thereby lending support to Schacht's chronology of the *isnād*. One may hardly imagine, however, that Kūfan transmitters would put in al-Nakhaʿī's mouth a report about an event that took place in Mecca thirty-three years after his death.

[78] Hawting, "al-Mukhtār".

ening of sectarian boundaries, which, in turn, stimulated the search for new types of legitimacy, including such that derive from associating spurious reports with the Prophet and his Companions.

That this is not a mere conjecture is suggested by al-Jūzajānī's (d. 259/873) *Aḥwal al-rijāl*, which includes one of the earliest mentions of Ibn Sīrīn's fitna-tradition. In the introduction to his collection, al-Jūzajānī assails three groups of dogmatic adversaries: the *khawārij*, the followers of ʿAbdallāh b. Sabaʾ, the legendary inciter of the revolt against the caliph ʿUthmān, and the partisans of al-Mukhtār.[79] Although al-Jūzajānī mentions the Ibn Sīrīn tradition under the *khawārij* heading, it is hardly a coincidence that the largest part of his prefatory harangue is directed against the *Mukhtārī*s. Unlike the *Khawārij* and the *Sabaʾiyya*, about whom al-Jūzajānī speaks in general terms, the *Mukhtārī*s are denounced as pernicious in the field of *ḥadīth* transmission. Their leader is said to have paid one thousand dinars to anyone who would spread traditions furthering his cause.[80] From the textual evidence adduced by al-Jūzajānī,[81] one easily gathers that, to him, and likely to many of his contemporary scholars, the *Mukhtārī*s were the model spoilers of *ḥadīth* in pursuit of theological and political interests. The same life setting has found, arguably, an expression in Ibn Ḥanbal's tradition on the authority of Ibrāhīm al-Nakhaʿī.

An important non-Muslim witness mentioned by Juynboll makes it even more likely that the fitna-tradition refers to al-Mukhtār's movement. The Christian historian Agapius Maḥbūb al-Manbijī (d. 350/961) uses the word "fitna" to describe that movement,[82] thereby lending support to the proposed recontextualization of Ibn Sīrīn's tradition.

By now, it should have become clear that Ibn Sīrīn's fitna-tradition refers to the second civil war in Islam. Moreover, in this section I have argued, *pace* Juynboll, that it references not the conflict between Ibn al-Zubayr and Muʿāwiya, in which political loyalty overshadowed theological matters, but the messianic movement of al-Mukhtār b. Abī ʿUbayd, whom the third-century *ahl al-sunna* regarded as a model heretic. Nevertheless, it bears asking what entitles me to set so much

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[79] Al-Jūzajānī, *Aḥwāl*, pp. 33-40.
[80] Al-Jūzajānī, *Aḥwāl*, p. 40.
[81] Al-Jūzajānī, *Aḥwāl*, p. 40.
[82] Juynboll, "Date", pp. 157-8.

store by Ibn Sīrīn's report, which came into being only towards the end of the second century AH, and to trust al-Nakhaʿī's isolated report, whose *isnād* cannot be verified for authenticity.

Normally, methodological limitations as those outlined above would severely constrain, if not cancel altogether, the historical purport of the traditions at hand. I will, nevertheless, try to shore up the overall historicity of Ibn Sīrīn's and al-Nakhaʿī's traditions by two general arguments.

First, in a remarkable statement one of the earliest *ḥadīth* critics, Ibn al-Madīnī (d. *c*. 234/848), enumerates six men upon whom "the *isnād* turns" (*yadūru al-isnād*). Five of them, al-Zuhrī (Medina, d. 124/742), ʿAmr b. Dīnār (Mecca, d. 126/744), Qatāda b. Diʿāma (Basra, d. 117/735), Yaḥyā b. Abī Kathīr (Basra, d. 129-32/747-50), and Abū Isḥāq al-Sabīʿī (Kūfa, d. 127/745) flourished at the end of the first and the first quarter of the second century AH, whereas the sixth, al-Aʿmash (Kūfa), died slightly thereafter, in 147-8/764-5.[83] To modern scholars working with Muslim traditions, it is a truism that the earliest common links, who are equivalent to Ibn al-Madīnī's *madār*s, flourished during roughly the same period.[84] The credibility of these collectors' references to earlier informants is a matter of scholarly debate,[85] but this very uncertainty indicates that the end of the first century is the earliest point in time at which we may posit the existence of primitive *isnād* transmission.[86] For this reason, even if one were to undertake a meticulous *isnād-cum-matn* analysis of the traditions that in a way or another signal the onset of the *isnād*, one would hardly be able to cross below the threshold of *c*. 100/718. Nonetheless, such an analysis will certainly help us to weed out inauthentic material as, I suspect,

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[83] Ibn al-Madīnī, *ʿIlal*, pp. 36-7.

[84] In his magnum opus, *Encyclopedia of Canonical Ḥadīth*, Juynboll pointed out that the oldest common link discovered until today is Abū al-ʿĀliya Rufayʿ b. Mihrān al-Riyāḥī, died in 93/712 (Juynboll, *Encyclopedia of Canonical Ḥadīth*, p. xxviii). See also Juynboll, "Some Methods", pp. 352-3; Motzki, "Dating", p. 239. Even the sceptic Rippin recognized as sound the logic behind the common-link theory, concluding that, "once the mechanism of the *isnād* is firmly established, people will have to use it according to the rules of the game" (Rippin, "*Tafsīr*", pp. 61-2).

[85] About the different conceptions of the common link, see Görke, "Eschatology", pp. 188-95.

[86] A similar argument has been developed by Motzki (*Origins*, p. 241) and Juynboll ("Some Notes", pp. 296-8).

are traditions alleging the *ḥadīth*-critical awareness of ʿUmar, ʿAlī, ʿUthmān, and other early-Islamic figures.

Second, we may appeal to the "dissimilarity criterion," also called "the criterion of embarrassment," which has been an important method-ological tool of historical criticism.[87] If an isolated report contradicts in a discomfiting manner the established narrative about a historical event or an intellectual current, we are entitled to regard such a report as a repository of pristine information that evaded suppression by the triumphant narrative. In our case, Muslim *rijāl* experts have universally recognized the period immediately after the death of the Prophet as the time when the foundations of their profession had been laid. A few tra-ditions contravene this tendency with no clues as to why someone would bother inventing off-key reports that locate the event several decades later. One may reasonably consider such reports as relics of an old life setting that managed to avoid the pressure of the tendency. If so, some credence may be lent to the traditions of Ibn Sīrīn and al-Nakhaʿī.

In sum, the evidence presented in this section allows me to suppose that the onset of the *isnād* institution goes back to the second civil war and, more specifically, the days of al-Mukhtār's movement, which ush-ered in a dogmatic split unseen in the political struggle between ʿAb-dallāh b. al-Zubayr and the Umayyads. Accordingly, the first use of the *isnād* had come about in Kūfa.

4. Conclusion

Western *ḥadīth* scholars are yet to produce a comprehensive history of the *isnād*, using advanced analytical methods such as, for instance, *isnād-cum-matn* analysis. Such a history must first take up the seminal question of where and when *ḥadīth* transmitters began to cite their in-formants in the capacity of corroborating authorities. In this essay, I argued that the traditional view, according to which the *isnād* and its concomitant *rijāl*-criticism came into being immediately after the Prophet's death, derives from untenable evidence. The contradictory

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[87] This criterion was eloquently described by Muir (*Life*, p. lxxxi). See also Brown, *Hadith*, p. 203.

ḥadīth witnesses linking the event with different Companions are impossible to ascertain; their original goal was not so much to determine the beginning of *ḥadīth*'s transmission and critical evaluation as to aggrandize the figures who in the second/eighth and the third/ninth centuries had come to epitomize various political currents in Islam.

While realizing the deficiencies of the traditional view, modern scholars of the *isnād* institution were unable to proffer impeccable witnesses or new approaches to the existing material that eliminate all methodological challenges emanating from early *ḥadīth*. For one, the opposition *ahl al-sunna*/*ahl al-bidaʿ* in the *matn* of Ibn Sīrīn's celebrated fitna-tradition is anachronistic, and, being an indivisible part of its message, suggests the late origin of the entire tradition. Moreover, the *isnād* evidence indicates that this tradition was put into circulation in Baghdad in the later part of the second century AH (768-815 CE) and fitted out with a spurious transmission pedigree through Ibn Sīrīn.

These caveats notwithstanding, I still regard Ibn Sīrīn's statement as correctly representing the early history of the *isnād*, for three reasons. First, it anchors the emergence of the *isnād* in a period that coincides with the lifetime of the earliest collectors and disseminators of traditions. Conceivably, they were the first who had to answer questions about the genealogy of their transmissions. Second, it goes against the grain of the conventional dating of the *isnād*'s inception into the early post-Prophetic period. This contradiction suggests that, in their essence, Ibn Sīrīn's words faithfully depict the historical circumstances in which arose the need to cite one's informants. Third, it finds support in al-Nakhaʿī's tradition, which associates the introduction of the *isnād* with al-Mukhtār b. Abī ʿUbayd's revolt in Kūfa (66-7/685-7). Unlike the internecine struggle between Ibn al-Zubayr and Muʿāwiya for political control over the caliphate, al-Mukhtār's movement was precisely the type of event that from the standpoint of the third-century Sunni orthodoxy had come to exemplify the early rift between this orthodoxy and heterodox teachings propounded by pro-ʿAlīd *ghulāt*. Al-Nakhaʿī's tradition supports the opinion of those modern scholars who argued that Ibn Sīrīn's fitna-tradition refers to the second civil war, but, at the same time, it goes a step further in that it allows us to reckon Ibn Sīrīn's statement as bearing—in principle if not in its concrete wording—on the aftermath of al-Mukhtār's movement in Kūfa.

As we speak about the above two traditions, we must realize that they mark roughly the onset of the *isnād* in its primitive form. A number of modern studies have convincingly argued that a considerably long period of development ensued. Clashing theories regarding its stages may be explained in part by the scholars' neglecting, or altogether failing to observe, that during the second/eighth century the *isnād* evolved in two separate typological streams.

Ibn Sīrīn's statement undoubtedly refers to legal *ḥadīth*. Normative content regulating various aspects of orthopraxy and orthodoxy could not be transmitted on the authority of dissenters, that is, *ahl al-bidaʿ* in the parlance of the third-century *ahl al-sunna*. During the few decades following the second civil war, lines of political and dogmatic division stiffened up fostering the spread of partisan traditions, which, in turn, mandated a system of checks and balances in the form of primitive *isnād*s and rudimentary engagement with the qualities of *rijāl*. We may therefore accept with respect to legal and theological *ḥadīth* the conclusions of Juynboll and Lucas that "systematic *rijāl* criticism" and "wholesale employment" of *isnād*s dates to *c*. 130/747-8. Caution is in order, however, as the compilers of the first *rijāl*-critical works, which started to appear only a century thereafter, could have been tempted to project their scholarly agendas and methodological tools on notional founding fathers from the early second century AH.[88] From our analysis of the Ibn Sīrīn tradition, it is clear that the interest in the chronology of the *isnād* intensified in Baghdad towards the end of the second century AH (*c*. 816 CE), which probably coincided with the entrenchment of the *isnād* as an indispensable *ḥadīth*-authentication requisite.

On the other hand, the *isnād* in historical reports (*khabar*, pl. *akhbār*) was a belated development, because the transmitters of such reports felt no need of the same level of verification as required for the normative traditions. Robson was right as he spoke, based on his analysis of Ibn Isḥāq's use of the *isnād*, that the necessity of *isnād*s going back to the Prophet "was not realized before the middle of the second century."[89] Not only was the introduction of the *isnād* slower in historical reports, but it also met with opposition on behalf of the normative *ḥadīth* transmitters. They disliked the liberties that early collectors of

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[88] Dickinson, *Development*, pp. 42, 127-30.
[89] Robson, "Standards", p. 461.

historical traditions, such as Ibn Isḥāq (d. 150/767) and al-Wāqidī (d. 207/822), took with their lines of transmission, including, before all, historical contextualization and inaugurating a technique whereby the *matn*s of several traditions were knit together in a single narrative unit prefaced with a collective *isnād*.[90]

Those modern scholars who dated the emergence of the *isnād* in the second half of the second century AH or even later were probably drawing conclusions from the period when it became an established *ḥadīth*-critical institution. In this way, however, they were singling out as a starting point what was essentially the outcome of a development that took several decades to accomplish. The paramount role the *isnād* had come to play by the beginning of the third/ninth century is evinced by Ibn al-Madīnī's solicitude for the early points of convergence of *ḥadīth* transmission.

Several modern researchers have argued that the *isnād* evolved at different paces in different regions of the caliphate,[91] which finds support in Ibn al-Madīnī's list of the first pivotal transmitters. These are not to be seen as self-contained developments as one might think looking at Ibn al-Madīnī's catalogue. A hint at the early propagation of the *isnād* is the report according to which the Kūfan Successor Ḥammād b. Abī Sulaymān (d. 120/738) introduced the *isnād* to Basra, where it was adopted by the Basran *madār* Qatāda b. Diʿāma.[92] Although we do not know when exactly Ḥammād visited Basra, the tradition adds support to the two main conclusions of the present essay: first, the *isnād* was born in the period 66-7/685-7 or, perhaps, shortly thereafter; second, its birthplace was Kūfa.

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[90] Faizer, "Issue of Authenticity", pp. 100-1; Görke, "Relationship", pp. 174-7, 183-5.
[91] Abbott, *Studies*, 2, p. 75; Robson, "Ibn Isḥāq's Use", p. 449; Shaukat, "Isnād", p. 447; Scheiner, "*Ḥadīth* and Sunna", p. 83.
[92] Van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft*, p. 140.

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