148009 - Status of Muhammad ibn Ishaaq, the narrator of al-Maghaazi, in the view of hadith scholars

the question

What is your opinion of Ibn Ishaaq? I have heard that his narration of hadith was not very sound and he was not precise in his narration of hadith, which caused the scholars not to accept any report from him. Is this correct?

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

The biography of al-‘Allaamah Muhammad ibn Ishaaq may be discussed as follows:

1. His name, lineage and place of birth

His name was Muhammad ibn Ishaaq ibn Yasaar. His grandfather Yasaar was one of the freed slaves of Qays ibn Makhramah ibn al-Muttalib, so he is known as al-Qurashi al-Muttalibi by virtue of being their freed slave. His kunya was Abu Bakr or, it was said, Abu ‘Abdullah. He was born in 80 AH in al-Madinah al-Munawwarah, may blessings and peace be upon the best of its inhabitants. It was not long before he departed from there in order to seek knowledge and hear hadith, and he settled in Baghdad where he remained until he died (may Allah have mercy on him).

2. His acqusition of knowledge from his shaykhs

His early academic career was in the greatest seat [?] of knowledge, namely the noble city of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), Madinah. He studied and acquired knowledge from its scholars and fuqaha’, and heard hadith from its muhadditheen (hadith scholars). Thus he attained the highest levels of learning, and it was said that he met the noble Sahaabi Anas ibn Maalik, and the leader of the Taabi‘eenSa‘eed ibn al-Musayyab.

Among the most well-known of his shaykhs were: Sa‘eed al-Maqbiri, ‘Abd ar-Rahmaan ibn Hormuz,

‘Amr ibn Shu‘ayb, Muhammad ibn Ibraaheem at-Taymi, Abu Ja‘far al-Baaqir, az-Zuhri, ‘Abdullah ibn Abi Bakr ibn Hazm, Muhammad ibn al-Munkadir and many others.

He travelled in the pursuit of knowledge at an early stage of his life to Mesopotamia, Kufa, ar-Rayy and Baghdad, and he even reached Alexandria during his travels in 115 AH, and he narrated from a number of Egyptian scholars. Ibn Sa‘d (may Allah have mercy on him) stated that he left Madinah a long time ago, but no one among them narrated from him except Ibraaheem ibn Sa‘d. He was with al-‘Abbaas ibn Muhammad in Mesopotamia, and he came to Abu Ja‘far in al-Heerah, for whom he wrote al-Maghaazi. The people of Kufa heard reports from him for that reason, and the people of ar-Rayy also heard reports from him. Therefore his narrators among the people of these cities are more numerous than those who narrated from him among the people of Madinah.

3. His scholarly status

Ibn Ishaaq was held in high esteem among the scholars of his own time, because of the vastness of his knowledge. Imam adh-Dhahabi said of him: He was the first one to write down knowledge in Madinah; that was before Maalik and Dhawayh. He was like a wondrous ocean of knowledge, but he was not as precise as he should have been.

Therefore scholarly praise of him was persistent from the earliest times.

‘Ali ibn al-Madeeni (may Allah have mercy on him) said: The hadith of the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) was mainly conveyed by six – and he mentioned them, then he said: And knowledge of the six ended up with twelve, one of whom is Muhammad ibn Ishaaq.

Imam az-Zuhri said: There is a great deal of knowledge in Madinah so long as Ibn Ishaaq remains among them.

4. His vast knowledge of maghaazi (Prophet’s military campaigns) and siyar (Prophet’s biography)

Muhammad ibn Ishaaq is famous for his intense interest in knowledge of maghaazi (Prophet’s military campaigns), as he was the first one to compile the reports of maghaazi into a book. Imam

ash-Shaafa‘i (may Allah be pleased with him) said concerning him: Whoever wants to acquire detailed knowledge of maghaazi has no choice but to rely on Muhammad ibn Ishaaq. Ibn ‘Adiyy said: If Ibn Ishaaq had no virtue other than the fact that he diverted rulers from focusing on books from which nothing may be learned to focusing on the military campaigns of the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), how his mission began, and the beginning of creation, this virtue would be enough to put him ahead of others. Imam adh-Dhahabi said: He was a great scholar of maghaazi.

5. His books

His book for which he is famous – and we have not come across any other work by him – is the famous book which is known as al-Maghaazi. It has not yet appeared in full; rather part of it has been published, annotated by Dr. Muhammad Hameedullah. The same portion has also been published with annotation by Dr. Suhayl Zakkaar. We hope that it will be published in full shortly, by Allah’s leave. But the book has been preserved for us through Ibn Hishaam’s abridgement, in what is known as as-Seerah an-Nabawiyyah li Ibn Hishaam (the Seerah or Prophetic Biography of Ibn Hishaam), who narrated the Maghaazi of Ibn Ishaaq from the student of Ibn Ishaaq, Ziyaad al-Bakaa’i (d. 183 AH).

6. Scholarly praise for his hadith

Shu‘bah ibn al-Hajjaaj said concerning him: He was the ameer al-mu’mineen in hadith.

Abu Mu‘aawiyah ad-Dareer said: Ibn Ishaaq was one of the people with the best memory. If a man had fifty hadiths or more, and he left them with Ibn Ishaaq, he would say: Memorise them for me, then if I forget them, you will have preserved them for me.

Sufyaan ath-Thawri said: I sat with Ibn Ishaaq seventy-odd years ago, and none of the people of Madinah made any accusations against him or said anything bad about him.

‘Ali ibn ‘Abdullah said: I looked in the books of Ibn Ishaaq and I did not find anything about which I had any reservations, apart from two hadiths, but they may still have been sound and saheeh.

7. Response to those who criticisedhim

The criticisms that were made against Ibn Ishaaq may be summed up in eight points:

(i) He was accused of being a Qadari, and it was even said that he was flogged for this reason.

(ii) He was accused of being a Shi‘i.

These two issues – if they are proven to be true – do not have any impact on his hadith, because the scholars continued to accept hadith from Qadaris and Shi‘ah if it was proven that they were truthful and honest and had good memories.

(iii) He was accused of tadlees (deliberately using ambiguous words in order to mislead)

He was mentioned by Ibn Hajar in the fourth level of those who used tadlees, in Maraatib al-Mudalliseen (p. 51). He said: He was known for using tadlees (deliberately using ambiguous words in order to mislead) in reports from da‘eef (weak) and majhool (unknown) narrators, and from narrators who were worse than them, and he was described in such terms by Ahmad, ad-Daaraqutni and others.

This is not to be regarded as casting aspersions on his hadith in general terms either. Hadith may be accepted from one who engaged in tadlees a great deal if he clearly states that he heard the hadith directly; rather what is to be rejected is the reports he narrated by saying ‘an (from, i.e., stating that a report was narrated from So and so without stating that he heard it, and so on).

(iv) He was accused of lying

This is a false accusation which has not been proven, even though he was accused of this by Hishaam ibn ‘Urwah (d. 146 AH), Maalik ibn Anas (d. 179 AH) and Yahya al-Qattaan (d. 198 AH).

With regard to the accusation of Hishaam ibn ‘Urwah that he lied – which Yahya al-Qattaan took from him – the reason for that is that he said: Ibn Ishaaq narrates from my wife Faatimah bint al-Mundhir, but by Allah he never saw her.

This reason is not sufficient to accuse a great scholar such as Ibn Ishaaq of lying. It may be that he heard from her from behind a screen, without seeing her, or it may be that he heard from her before she married Hishaam ibn ‘Urwah. In fact adh-Dhahabi said: It may be that she was one of the maternal aunts through breastfeeding of Ibn Ishaaq, so he could enter upon her, and Hishaam was not aware that she was his maternal aunt or paternal aunt.

Sufyaan ath-Thawri said: Ibn Ishaaq told me that she had narrated hadith to him and that he had entered upon her.

Adh-Dhahabi said: He was telling the truth about that, without a doubt, and Hishaam was telling the truth in his oath. So he did not see her, and the man did not claim that he saw her; rather he stated that she narrated hadith to him. We have heard (hadith) from a number of women, and we did not see them, and by the same token, a number of the Taabi‘een narrated from ‘Aa’ishah, and they never saw her at all.

‘Abdullah ibn Ahmad said: I told my father the hadith of Ibn Ishaaq and he said: Why did Hishaam deny it? Perhaps he came and asked permission to enter upon her and she gave him permission – i.e., and he (Hishaam) was not aware of that.

With regard to Imam Maalik regarding him as having lied and describing him as a charlatan, the scholars did not accept that from him, because he did not mention any evidence for regarding him as having lied. A number of the scholars, such as Ibn Ishaaq, Ibn Abi Dhi’b and Ibn al-Maajishon, had a dispute with Imam Maalik and there was some animosity between them, so some of the later scholars did not accept what some of them said about some others, because of what was known about the animosity between them. By the same token, they did not accept what Ibn Ishaaq said about Imam Maalik: Give me some of his books so that I can highlight some of their faults; I know about his books.

Ya‘qoob ibn Shaybah said: I asked ‘Ali – i.e., ibn al-Madeeni –: How is the hadith of Ibn Ishaaq in your view –is it saheeh?

He said: Yes, his hadith is saheeh in my view.

I said: What about Maalik's comments concerning him?

He said: Maalik did not sit with him and he did not know him. What hadith did Ibn Ishaaq narrate in Madinah?

I said: And Hishaam ibn 'Urwah spoke against him.

'Ali said: What Hishaam said does not count as proof. Perhaps he entered upon his wife when he was still a boy and heard from her. His hadith appears to be truthful. On one occasion he narrated: Abu'z-Zinnaad told me, and on one occasion he said: Abu'z-Zinnaad stated, and he narrated from a man, from someone who heard him say: Sufyaan ibn Sa'eed told me, from Saalim Abu'n-Nadr, from 'Umayr: "Fasting on the Day of 'Arafah." He was one of those who narrated the most from Abu'n-Nadr. And he said: al-Hasan ibn Dinar told me, from Ayyoob, from 'Amr ibn Shu'ayb: "With regard to loans connected to transactions", and he was one of those who narrated the most from 'Amr.

Imam adh-Dhahabi (may Allah have mercy on him) said: We do not claim that the leading scholars of al-jarh wa't-ta'deel (evaluation of hadith narrators) were infallible and did not occasionally make mistakes or speak harshly about those with whom there was some ill feeling or animosity. It is known that much of what peers say about one another is to be ignored and does not count for anything, especially if the man is regarded as trustworthy by a group of scholars who sound fair-minded in what they say. These two men – i.e., Maalik and Ibn Ishaaq – each criticised the other, but what Maalik said about Muhammad being somewhat imprecise in narration had an impact of Ibn Ishaaq's reputation, whereas what Muhammad said concerning Maalik did not have any impact. Maalik rose to high status and became like a star, and the other one – i.e., Ibn Ishaaq – also attained relatively high status, especially in the field of biography.

(v) He was accused of differing with trustworthy narrators.

(vi) He was accused of being the sole narrator of some munkar (odd) reports.

Adh-Dhahabi (may Allah have mercy on him) said: al-Qaadi Abu Ayyoob spoke the truth when he

said: Whoever seeks out strange hadiths, his hadiths will be rejected. This is one of the gravest faults of Ibn Ishaaq. He wrote down hadiths from everyone without any restraint.

Therefore Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal (may Allah be pleased with him) did not approve of the hadiths of Ibn Ishaaq.

Ya'qoob ibn Shaybah said: I heard Ibn Numayr say, when he mentioned Ibn Ishaaq:

When he narrates from well-known narrators from whom he heard directly, then he is hasan al-hadith and sadooq (trustworthy). But his problem is that he narrates invalid hadiths from unknown narrators.

Ishaaq ibn Ahmad ibn Khalaf al-Bukhaari al-Haafiz said: I heard Muhammad ibn Ismaa'eel say:

Muhammad ibn Ishaaq has a thousand hadiths narrated by him alone, that he does not have in common with anyone else.

Ahmad said: Ibn Ishaaq came to Baghdad, and he did not care from whom he narrated, from al-Kalbi or anyone else.

And he said: He cannot be quoted as evidence. 'Abu'l-'Abbaas ibn 'Uqdah said: I heard 'Abdullah ibn Ahmad ibn Hanbal say: My father used to seek out the hadith of Ibn Ishaaq and write it down and narrate it in the Musnad. It was said to him: Did he quote it as evidence? He said: He did not quote it as evidence with regard to issues having to do with the Sunnah of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him).

Al-'Aqeeli said: al-Khidr ibn Dawood told me: Ahmad ibn Muhammad told me: I said to Abu 'Abdullah: What do you say about Ibn Ishaaq? He said: He engaged in tadlees a great deal. I said: If he says, [So and so] informed me, [So and so] told me, is he trustworthy? He said: He says, [So and so] told me, but he may still engage in tadlees.

There are differing reports from Ibn Ma'een concerning his verdict on the hadith of Ibn Ishaaq. An-Nasaa'i said: He is not qawiy (strong). Abu Haatim said: His hadith may be written down. Ad-

Daaraqutni said: His hadith may not be quoted as evidence.

However the words of those who criticised him do not undermine his narration: rather that brings his hadith down to the level of hasan, and his hadith is to be deemed da‘eef only in the event of tadlees or if he is the only one to narrate a ghareeb hadith, not in all instances.

Ibn ‘Adiyy said: I examined his hadith a great deal, and I did not find any of his hadith that would lead one to state categorically that he is da‘eef. But he may make mistakes, or be confused sometimes, as others also made mistakes, but trustworthy narrators and leading scholars did not refrain from narrating from him, and there is nothing wrong with him.

(vii) His narration of Israa’eeliyyaat [reports from Jewish sources]

Imam adh-Dhahabi (may Allah have mercy on him) responded to this issue by saying:

What is wrong with narrating Israa’eeliyyaat from the People of the Book, because the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “Narrate from the Children of Israel, and there is nothing wrong with that” and he said: “If the People of the Book tell you something, do not believe them and do not disbelieve them”? This is Prophetic permission allowing us to listen to what they narrate in general, as some scholars listened to what they narrated concerning medicine. But none of that can be quoted as evidence; rather evidence is to be found in the Qur’an and Sunnah. End quote.

Mizaan al-I‘tidaal (6/58).

(viii) Combining the words of the shaykhs

Ayyoob ibn Ishaaq ibn Saafiri said: I asked Ahmad ibn Hanbal: If a hadith is narrated only by Ibn Ishaaq, do you accept it? He said: No, by Allah, for I see him narrate a single hadith from a number of people, but he does not differentiate between the words of this one or that one.

This issue does not mean that all of his hadiths are da‘eef. Rather it means that caution is required with regard to cases where it is not certain whether Ibn Ishaaq combined the wordings of different

shaykhs and mixed them together. That is because it is important to differentiate between the words of trustworthy narrators and those of others.

8. His death

He (may Allah have mercy on him) died in the city of Baghdad in 151 AH, according to the more correct view, which was favoured by adh-Dhahabi.

The ruling on the hadith of Ibn Ishaaq may be summed up in the words of Imam adh-Dhahabi (may Allah have mercy on him):

With regard to hadith on fiqhi rulings, his hadith concerning them go down from the level of saheeh to the level of hasan, except in the case of reports narrated only by him, which are to be regarded as munkar [odd]. This is my view concerning him, and Allah knows best.

Al-Haafiz Ibn Hajar (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The reports which are narrated by him alone, even if they do not reach the level of saheeh, they are of the level of hasan, if he clearly states that the narrator told him directly. End quote.

Fath al-Baari (11/153)

Note: all the quotations for which the source is not mentioned in this article are taken from the book Siyar A'laam an-Nubala' by adh-Dhahabi (7/33-55)

And Allah knows best.