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Research Article

## Scholarly Responses To Allegations Against Imam Abū Ḥanīfa

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**Abstract.** Imam Abū Ḥanīfa was well profound scholar who was recognized as a founder of a flexible school of thought. It was prevailed so as to cover a wider area of Islamic civilization overtaking all other school of thought. His legal rulings always remained within the boundaries set by the Qur'an and the sunnah from. Unfortunately, his legacy was not free from criticism. he confronted some accusations even from great Islamic scholars. Throughout history, criticism against him erupted of two major factors: first, possessing insufficient knowledge of ḥadīth, and second, giving preference to qiyās (analogical reasoning) over prophetic traditions. This article aims to uncover causes of these accusations against him, evaluate historical contexts and authenticity of such statements attributed to prominent Islamic scholars and their late absolute acknowledgement, and to analyze the responses provided by classical and modern scholars in defense of Imam.

**Keywords:** Imam Abū Ḥanīfa, Ḥadīth, Qiyās, Islamic jurisprudence, Criticism of scholars.

## INTRODUCTION

Imam Abū Ḥanīfa was a profoundly influential scholar, recognized as the founder of a flexible school of thought during a period when such an approach had not previously been established by any other scholar. His school of thought spread widely, covering vast areas of Islamic civilization and surpassing other schools in influence. However, he has not been free from criticism, particularly concerning some of his principles. In this discussion, we will examine the main allegations raised against him by prominent figures and analyze the responses provided by other scholars in his defense. These criticisms first arose during his lifetime and continued after his death, leading to misconceptions among followers of his school. Broadly, these criticisms can be categorized into two types:

**He had limited knowledge of the Ḥadīth tradition.**

**He prioritized Qiyās (reasoning or analogy) over Ḥadīth.**

It is essential to analyze the causes and historical backgrounds of these allegations, examine the true basis of his school's foundations, and evaluate the statements of prominent scholars against him and their contexts. Ultimately, this discussion aims to present clear responses to these allegations. A.C. Jonathan Brown states in his work: "When presented with a situation for which the Qur'an and the well-known teachings of the Prophet and his companions provide no clear answer, scholars like Abū Ḥanīfa relied on their own interpretations of these sources to respond. Such scholars were known as the *ahl al-ra'y*, or the partisans of legal reasoning."<sup>1</sup> Brown's observation is especially relevant, offering valuable insight into the nature of these criticisms.

### Causes for Accusations

Imam Abū Ḥanīfa was the first to delve deeply into jurisprudence. During his time, he was especially cautious in formulating answers for potential issues that had not yet arisen, seeking clear solutions in advance. However, many scholars of his era criticized this approach, viewing it as unnecessary, unhelpful, and a waste of valuable time. Despite this, Imam Abū Ḥanīfa remained steadfast in his principle, believing it was the responsibility of a jurist to address the religious needs of Muslim society before such issues emerged. Historical reports support this perspective. For

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan A.C. Brown, *Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2009), 103

instance, when Imam Qatāda visited Kūfa, Abū Ḥanīfa reportedly asked, "O Abū Khattāba, what is your opinion about a person who has been absent from his wife for years, and she assumes him to be dead and remarries? What is your view regarding her dowry (ṣadaq)?" Qatāda replied, "Has such an incident occurred?" Abū Ḥanīfa answered, "No." Qatāda then said, "Why do you ask about matters that have not yet happened?" To which Abū Ḥanīfa responded, "We prepare ourselves to confront an issue before it arises, so that when it occurs, we will know how to address it."<sup>2</sup>

As a result, some scholars referred to him and his students as Arā'aytiyyūn—those who would ask hypothetically, "What if such-and-such occurred?"<sup>3</sup> The scholar Shu'ba ibn al-Ḥajjāj, for example, disliked this tendency and stated, "Nothing was more detestable to me than hearing someone say, 'What if?'"<sup>4</sup>

This extensive engagement with jurisprudence led to the compilation of Islamic legal rulings on over ten million issues, as reported in the work *al-Ināya fī Sharḥ al-Hidāya*.<sup>5</sup> Critics argued that this abundance of hypothetical questions suggested he was more knowledgeable about what had not happened than what had actually occurred.

Another factor was that Abū Ḥanīfa adopted strict conditions for accepting ḥadīth reports, as fabricated ḥadīths were widespread during his era especially in Iraq, which had become a center for new intellectual movements. This environment compelled him to be cautious in accepting ḥadīth, aiming to protect Islamic tradition from unreliable narrations. Consequently, some ḥadīths that he rejected were later accepted by other prominent scholars. Due to this strict methodology, Abū Ḥanīfa often relied on Qiyās (analogy). His exceptional intelligence allowed him to apply reason to issues where reliable ḥadīth were lacking.

## Foundations of Islamic Thought

Imam Abū Ḥanīfa's school of thought is firmly rooted in the Qur'an and ḥadīth. He based his legal reasoning on the Qur'an, the Sunnah (prophetic tradition), the consensus (ijmā') of scholars, and analogical reasoning (qiyās). If he did not find guidance in the Qur'an or authentic prophetic ḥadīth, he turned to the sayings of the Prophet's companions. When these three sources were unavailable, he would then apply qiyās (analogy).

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<sup>2</sup> *Al-Khatīb al-Baghdādī, Tārīkh Baghdād, vol. 13 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2001), 343.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, Jāmi' Bayān al-'Ilm wa Faḍlihi, vol. 2 (Cairo: Dār al-Fikr, 1981), 120.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Al-Marghīnānī, Al-Hidāya fī Sharḥ Bidāyat al-Mubtadī, commentary by al-'Ināya (Cairo: al-Maṭba'a al-Kubrā al-Amīriyya, 1892), vol. 1, 14.*

Abū Ḥanīfa's reliance on *ra'y* (reasoned opinion) was not a rejection of revelation; rather, it was an effort to interpret divine law in situations where explicit texts were ambiguous or silent. Ibn Khaldūn states, "The method of reasoning by analogy was developed by the Iraqis, with Abū Ḥanīfa being its great pioneer; yet his analogies always remained within the boundaries set by the Qur'an and the Sunnah."<sup>6</sup> Wael Hallaq further notes, "The Ḥanafī school's early formation reflects a deliberate process of codification, a unique synthesis of rational analysis and fidelity to the prophetic model."<sup>7</sup>

Abū Ḥanīfa was known for his strict conditions regarding the acceptance of ḥadīths. He accepted only those narrations that were both authentic and consistent with the Qur'an and established principles of Islam. He would not accept ḥadīths from transmitters whose actions contradicted their narrations, such as the report from Abu Huraira regarding cleansing a vessel seven times if a dog's head entered it. Similarly, he would not accept ḥadīths that were criticized by earlier scholars or when conflicting reports existed.<sup>8</sup> In such cases, he compared the jurisprudence of the transmitters to determine which narration was more reliable. He also avoided accepting ḥadīths that emerged during times of crisis or widespread uncertainty, recognizing the increased possibility of widespread but unreliable reports.

### **Criticisms by Scholars and Their Contexts**

When analyzing the statements of some Islamic scholars against Imam Abū Ḥanīfa during his time such as Shu'ba ibn al-Ḥajjāj, Sufyān al-Thawrī, and Mālik ibn Anas. It becomes clear that much of the criticism was rooted in misunderstanding or was later proven to be unfounded. Shu'ba, for example, once remarked, "The people of Kūfa are known for their *ra'y* (opinion), and no one is more opinionated than Abū Ḥanīfa."<sup>9</sup>

Upon closer investigation, many of the statements attributed to these prominent scholars appear to be fabrications intended to undermine Imam Abū Ḥanīfa's reputation. However, some reliable reports indicate that disagreements were based on the methodological issues previously discussed. Eventually, these scholars' perspectives changed after they interacted with Imam Abū Ḥanīfa during his journeys to Mecca, Medina, Basra, and Baghdad. Through scholarly exchanges,

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<sup>6</sup> Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, trans. Franz Rosenthal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958), 451.

<sup>7</sup> Wael B. Hallaq, *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 63.

<sup>8</sup> Mustafa al-Sibā'ī, *Al-Sunnah wa-Makānatuhā fī al-Tashrī' al-Islāmī* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1978), 214

<sup>9</sup> Al-Khatīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh Baghdād*, vol. 13 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2001), 350.

they came to appreciate his knowledge, commitment to the Qur'an and Sunnah, and intellectual rigor. Those who had criticized him ended up praising him, recognizing the depth of his scholarship.

Abd Allāh ibn al-Mubārak, who initially opposed him, later stated, "Whoever speaks ill of Abū Ḥanīfa is an ignoramus."<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Yaḥyā ibn Ma'īn, a leading authority in ḥadīth criticism, said, "Abū Ḥanīfa was trustworthy (thiqa), and his opinions were grounded in reason and evidence."<sup>11</sup> It is reported that when Imam Mālik was told that Abū Ḥanīfa relied excessively on opinion, he replied, "It is a great statement to make. By Allah, he is a man of deep intellect, and had he been in our midst, we would have benefited from him." Imam Mālik is also said to have read the works of Abū Ḥanīfa and reportedly gathered sixty thousand ḥadīths from him.<sup>12</sup>

The statements attributed to Imam Shāfi'ī against Abū Ḥanīfa are likewise unfounded. Shāfi'ī studied Abū Ḥanīfa's jurisprudence closely and engaged in dialogue with his companions, such as Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan. He acknowledged the influence of Abū Ḥanīfa's legal reasoning. Similarly, Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal, though he did not meet Abū Ḥanīfa directly, studied the works of Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan and was influenced by Abū Ḥanīfa's methodology. These testimonies contribute to the later scholarly consensus that Abū Ḥanīfa was a distinguished figure who combined knowledge and reason in his approach to Islamic law.

### Responses to Allegations

Some critics claim that Imam Abū Ḥanīfa was not well versed in the ḥadīth corpus. Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī reports several narrations attributed to notable scholars, such as Ibn al-Mubārak and Ahmad ibn Hanbal, suggesting that Abū Ḥanīfa was deficient in ḥadīth or lacked both ḥadīth and reasoning. However, these narrations reported in Tārīkh Baghdād have been proven unreliable through the research of Muḥammad al-Kawtharī in his work "Ta'nīb al-Khaṭīb."<sup>13</sup> Even prominent historians such as Ibn Khaldūn mistakenly cited that Abū Ḥanīfa's narrations only amounted to seventeen. Dr. Muṣṭafā al-Sibā'ī raises a powerful question: How could a scholar recognized by consensus as a mujtahid a status that requires mastery of ḥadīth be ignorant of ḥadīth?<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> bn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *Tahdhīb al-Tahdhīb*, vol. 10 (Hyderabad: Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif, 1325 AH), 451.

<sup>11</sup> bn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *Tahdhīb al-Tahdhīb*, vol. 10 (Hyderabad: Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif, 1325 AH), 451.

<sup>12</sup> Al-Mizzī, *Tahdhīb al-Kamāl fī Asmā' al-Rijāl*, vol. 19 (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 1980), 147.

<sup>13</sup> Muḥammad al-Kawtharī, *Ta'nīb al-Khaṭīb 'alā Mā Sāqahu fī Tarjamat Abī Ḥanīfa mina al-Akādīb* (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Azhariyyah, 1949), 12–14.

<sup>14</sup> Muṣṭafā al-Sibā'ī, *Al-Sunnah wa-Makānatuhā fī al-Tashrī' al-Islāmī* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1966), 229.

Anyone who studies the Ḥanafī school can see that its legal rulings are supported by hundreds of ḥadīths. Ibn Abī Shayba, in his work “Al-Muṣannaf al-Kabīr,” dedicates a chapter to ḥadīths that apparently contradict Abū Ḥanīfa’s rulings, identifying 125 such cases.<sup>15</sup> If all contradicting ḥadīths were brought forward, the remainder of his rulings would be in agreement with sound prophetic traditions. It is also reported that his legal opinions number over 200,000 a testament to the breadth of his school. It is inconceivable that these rulings would lack any connection to ḥadīth, especially when only a small number are said to contradict them.

The root of these criticisms may lie in the fact that Abū Ḥanīfa did not publicly teach ḥadīth as some other scholars did. However, as al-Dhahabī notes, Abū Ḥanīfa narrated ḥadīths from four thousand scholars<sup>16</sup>. His students compiled works on ḥadīth, such as “Kitāb al-Āthār” by Abū Yūsuf and “Kitāb al-Āthār al-Marfu‘a” by Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan. Abul Muayyad Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥasan gathered these musnads in his work “Jāmi‘ al-Masānīd,” highlighting that Abū Ḥanīfa’s ḥadīth legacy was maintained through his students, even if he did not author a dedicated collection himself.

A principal accusation was that Abū Ḥanīfa gave precedence to qiyās (analogy) over ḥadīth. This, however, contradicts both his own statements and the methodology of his school. In “Al-Mizān al-Kubrā,” al-Sha‘rānī quotes Abū Ḥanīfa as saying, “Whoever claims that we prefer reason over the ḥadīth of the Prophet has lied against us. Do we use qiyās when there is a clear text? No, we act upon the ḥadīth and leave qiyās aside.”<sup>17</sup>

Notably, Abū Ḥanīfa accepted mursal ḥadīth (narrations with a missing link) while Imam Shāfi‘ī did not, refuting the allegation that he disregarded ḥadīth. Some scholars, like Hammad ibn Salama and Wakī‘, claimed that Abū Ḥanīfa prioritized reason, with Wakī‘ stating that he found Abū Ḥanīfa contradicted about 200 ḥadīths. However, it is important to ask: How could Abū Ḥanīfa oppose ḥadīth when he himself said, “Whatever comes from the Messenger of Allah, it is to be followed with utmost respect”? Disagreement over the reliability of narrations is common among scholars; what Abū Ḥanīfa deemed reliable, others might see as weak, and vice versa. Being closer to his own teachers, he was better able to judge their reliability.

Furthermore, a mujtahid may set aside a reliable ḥadīth due to factors such as abrogation (naskh) or specification (takhṣīṣ). It is neither surprising nor blameworthy if an Imam did not have access to certain ḥadīths, as the Companions themselves traveled to different regions and did not claim universal knowledge of all traditions.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibn Abī Shayba, *Al-Muṣannaf*, vol. 5 (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1989), 315.

<sup>16</sup> Al-Dhahabī, *Siyar A‘lām al-Nubalā’*, vol. 6, 398.

<sup>17</sup> Al-Sha‘rānī, *Al-Mizān al-Kubrā*, vol. 1 (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Tijāriyya al-Kubrā, 1952), 75.

The famous example of ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb’s unfamiliarity with the ḥadīth about seeking permission before entering a house clearly illustrates this point.<sup>18</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Imam Abū Ḥanīfa was a distinguished Islamic scholar who established a comprehensive school of thought grounded in the Qur’an, the Sunnah, and the principles of ijtihād. The accusations against his methodology in formulating legal rulings largely stemmed from misunderstandings many of which were ultimately dispelled by the very prominent scholars who initially criticized him. His reliance on qiyās (analogical reasoning) attracted criticism, yet a careful examination reveals that his prudent approach to ḥadīth was not due to ignorance, but rather a principled response to the widespread presence of unreliable narrations in Kūfa and Iraq during his era.

The criticisms that Abū Ḥanīfa was deficient in ḥadīth knowledge or that he prioritized qiyās over transmitted reports have been systematically refuted by scholars throughout history. Historians such as al-Dhahabī, Ibn Ḥajar, and al-Kawtharī have confirmed that these allegations were either misunderstandings or fabrications. Ultimately, Abū Ḥanīfa’s methodology represents a profound synthesis of reason and revelation, a testament to his exceptional intelligence and enduring legacy in Islamic jurisprudence.

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<sup>18</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī, Book of Seeking Permission, Ḥadīth no. 6245.*

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