

Imam Malik's Hadith Methodology in Al-Muwatta': An Integrative Analysis of the Tradition of Ahl al-Madinah and the Construction of Early Fiqh

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze Imam Malik's hadith methodology in al-Muwatta' and its contribution to the development of hadith studies and Islamic jurisprudence. Al-Muwatta' is one of the earliest works in the history of hadith compilation, integrating prophetic traditions with the practices of the people of Madinah (ahl al-Madinah). This research employs a qualitative approach using library research methods based on classical and contemporary sources. The findings reveal that Imam Malik applied a rigorous method of hadith selection, combining chains of transmission, the collective practice of the Madinan community, and the principle of public interest (maslahah). Furthermore, the book functions as both a hadith collection and a legal manual. Imam Malik's contribution lies not only in hadith codification but also in the formulation of a contextual and applicable methodology of Islamic law.

Keywords: *Imam Malik, al-Muwatta', hadith, Islamic jurisprudence, ahl al-Madinah*

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1. Introduction

Hadith studies, as one of the principal disciplines within Islamic studies, occupy a strategic position in the formation and development of Islamic law. Hadith serves as the second source of law after the Qur'an, providing explanation (bayan), elaboration (tafsil), and reinforcement (ta'kid) of the Qur'an's more general teachings. Hadith is therefore understood not merely as a normative tradition but also as an epistemological foundation for the construction of Islamic law (Siddiqi, 2006).

Since the earliest period of Islam, the transmission of hadith was carried out orally through the memorization of the Companions and the Successors (tabi'in). This tradition reflects the strength of oral culture within Arab society at the time. However, as the territory of Islamic rule expanded into regions such as Persia, Syria, and North Africa, the need for hadith codification became increasingly urgent, owing to the emergence of new issues not explicitly addressed in the Qur'an and the growing risk of distortion resulting from uncontrolled transmission (Azami, 2002).

In addition, the political dynamics of the period following the rightly guided caliphs (khulafa' al-rashidin) also influenced the development of hadith. The emergence of political and sectarian conflict led certain groups to produce hadith carrying ideological content in support of particular interests. It was in this context that hadith scholars began to develop methods for criticizing chains of transmission (sanad) and text (matn) in order to ensure the authenticity of hadith (Brown, 2009). This process became the seed of the systematic discipline of hadith sciences.

In subsequent developments, the need for hadith codification reached its peak in the second century of the Hijra. During this period, scholars began compiling hadith into structured works. One of the central figures in this process was Imam Malik ibn Anas (93–179 AH), a great scholar from Madinah known both as a hadith expert and a jurist (faqih). His monumental work, *al-Muwatta'*, is regarded as one of the oldest hadith compilations arranged systematically by theme (Malik ibn Anas, 2005).

Imam Malik possessed methodological strengths that distinguished him from other hadith scholars. He did not merely focus on collecting hadith but also applied an extremely rigorous process of selection to the reports he received. In this respect, Imam Malik prioritized quality over quantity: of the thousands of hadith he knew, only a small portion were included in *al-Muwatta'*, namely those judged to be the most authentic (sahih) and most relevant to the legal needs of society (Dutton, 2002).

The distinction of *al-Muwatta'* lies not only in its selectivity but also in its integrative character. The book contains not only the hadith of the Prophet but also the legal opinions (fatwas) of the Companions, the views of the Successors, and the practice of the people of Madinah ('amal ahl al-Madinah). This approach reflects Imam Malik's view that the collective practice of the Madinan community carries normative authority, since its people are considered direct heirs of the Prophet's tradition (Bewley, 1997). *Al-Muwatta'* is thus not merely a hadith compilation but also an early representation of an Islamic legal system grounded in social reality.

Imam Malik's integrative approach demonstrates that Islamic law cannot be separated from the social context in which it develops. This differs from a purely textual approach that focuses solely on hadith transmission without regard for social practice. From this perspective, Imam Malik may be regarded as a pioneer of the contextual approach in the study of hadith and fiqh (Hallaq, 2005).

Nevertheless, the unique character of *al-Muwatta'* has also generated scholarly debate. Some scholars classify the book as a hadith work because it contains reports from the Prophet with clear chains of transmission, while others regard it as closer to a fiqh work because its structure follows the chapters of Islamic law and contains substantial ijtihad, or independent legal reasoning (Kamali, 2003). This debate shows that *al-Muwatta'* occupies a position between the two disciplines of hadith and fiqh.

In addition, the use of the practice of ahl al-Madinah as legal evidence (hujjah) is one of the most widely debated aspects of Imam Malik's methodology. Imam Malik held that the practice of the Madinan community carried legal authority because its people lived in the same

environment as the Prophet and inherited his tradition directly. However, some scholars, particularly from other schools of law, criticized this approach as insufficiently universal and difficult to apply outside the Madinan context (Al-Kattani, 1982).

Even so, Imam Malik's approach retains its relevance for contemporary Islamic law. In circumstances where Muslims face a range of complex new problems, an approach that integrates text and context becomes especially important. A study of Imam Malik's methodology in *al-Muwatta'* therefore carries not only historical value but also offers a theoretical contribution to the development of an adaptive and contextual Islamic law.

Based on the foregoing, this study is important for gaining a deeper understanding of *al-Muwatta'*'s position within the treasury of Islamic scholarship, and for analyzing Imam Malik's methodological contribution to the development of hadith studies and fiqh. It is hoped that this research offers a fresh perspective on the relationship between hadith, social practice, and the construction of Islamic law

2. Method

This study employs a qualitative approach, a research method aimed at achieving an in-depth understanding of phenomena through the analysis of meaning, concepts, and interpretation of non-numerical data (Creswell, 2014). This approach was chosen because the object of study is the thought of a particular figure, Imam Malik, which cannot be measured quantitatively but must instead be understood through an exploration of ideas, methods, and the historical context surrounding them. A qualitative approach allows the researchers to more comprehensively examine how Imam Malik's intellectual construction was formed and how it remains relevant within the Islamic scholarly tradition.

The type of research used is library research, which relies on written sources as its primary data (Zed, 2008). In this study, the researchers did not collect field data but instead examined literature relevant to the topic under investigation. This approach is highly relevant because the study of classical scholars' thought is fundamentally derived from written works passed down through generations. Accordingly, the accuracy and depth of the analysis depend heavily on the researchers' ability to trace, understand, and critically evaluate the literature used.

The data sources in this study consist of two main categories: primary and secondary sources. Primary sources include classical works directly related to Imam Malik's thought, such as *al-Muwatta'* and *Tanwir al-Hawalik* (Malik ibn Anas, n.d.; Al-Suyuti, n.d.). *Al-Muwatta'* is Imam Malik's principal work, containing a collection of hadith, the opinions of the Companions, and his own *ijtihad* on various legal matters, while *Tanwir al-Hawalik* serves as a commentary (*sharh*) that helps clarify the content and methodology used in *al-Muwatta'*. This study also draws on the works of other hadith scholars addressing the criticism of *sanad* and *matn*, in order to strengthen the analysis of Imam Malik's method of hadith selection.

Secondary sources in this study consist of contemporary literature, such as academic books and scholarly journals relevant to the topic (Azami, 1978). These sources provide a modern perspective on Imam Malik's thought and serve as a point of comparison in analyzing scholars' interpretations of his methodology. By combining classical and contemporary sources, this study seeks to present an analysis that is both textual and contextual.

In the data-analysis process, this study employs a descriptive-analytical method, systematically presenting the data before analyzing it to identify patterns, relationships, and underlying meanings (Moleong, 2017). Through this method, the researchers first describe the key concepts within Imam Malik's thought, such as his method of hadith transmission and his use of the practice of the people of Madinah, before critically analyzing them to understand the underlying logic.

In addition, this study employs a historical-critical approach, a method that situates thought within its historical context while critically examining the validity and relevance of sources (Gottschalk, 1986). This approach is essential for understanding how the social, political, and intellectual conditions of Imam Malik's era shaped the formation of his thought.

Imam Malik's thinking is thus understood not in isolation from its context but as the outcome of an interaction between text, tradition, and social reality.

Through the combination of the descriptive-analytical and historical-critical methods, this study seeks to produce a comprehensive understanding of the construction of Imam Malik's thought explaining not only what he thought, but also why and how that thought was formed and developed within the Islamic scholarly tradition.

3. Results and Discussion

. Biography of Imam Malik

Imam Malik ibn Anas was one of the towering figures in the history of Islamic thought, particularly in the fields of fiqh and hadith. His full name was Abu Abdillah Malik ibn Anas ibn Malik ibn Abi Amir ibn 'Amr ibn al-Harith ibn Ghaiman ibn Khuthail ibn 'Amr ibn al-Harith. He was born in Madinah in 93 AH (711 CE) and died at the age of 89, on a Sunday — the 10th according to some accounts, the 14th according to others — of Rabi' al-Awwal, 179 AH/795 CE, after 22 days of illness, and was buried in al-Baqi', not far from the Prophet's Mosque, in a city that was then a center of Islamic learning and home to many Companions and Successors of the Prophet (Abu Zahrah, 1997, p. 15; Aisyah, 2011, p. 14).

The scholarly environment of Madinah exerted a profound influence on the formation of Imam Malik's intellectual character from an early age. His family was known for its devotion to religious learning, and he grew up in an atmosphere that encouraged a serious and profound pursuit of knowledge (Amin, 2003, p. 221).

From childhood, Imam Malik displayed a great love of knowledge, particularly of hadith. He devoted much of his time to studying and memorizing the reports of the Prophet Muhammad. In pursuing knowledge, he studied under many prominent scholars of Madinah, among the most influential of whom was Nafi', the freedman (mawla) of Ibn 'Umar, a Successor renowned as a trustworthy transmitter with a strong chain of narration reaching the Companion 'Abdullah ibn 'Umar (Ibn Sa'd, n.d., vol. 5, p. 317). Through Nafi', Imam Malik acquired numerous hadith that later became an important foundation of his legal thought.

Imam Malik also studied under Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri, a great scholar known as a pioneer of hadith codification. From al-Zuhri he learned not only hadith but also a systematic method of thought for understanding and compiling reports (Azami, 1978, p. 45). Interaction with these great scholars formed the solid intellectual foundation of Imam Malik, particularly in terms of precision, caution, and depth of analysis regarding the sources of Islamic law.

One of Imam Malik's most distinctive characteristics was his highly selective attitude toward accepting hadith. He paid attention not only to the chain of transmission (sanad) but also rigorously assessed the credibility and integrity of narrators. Imam Malik refused to transmit hadith from narrators whose honesty was in doubt, even when such narrators were widely known within society (Al-Dzahabi, n.d., vol. 8, p. 48). For him, the authenticity of hadith was non-negotiable, since hadith constitutes one of the primary sources for establishing Islamic law.

Furthermore, Imam Malik gave priority to the practice of the people of Madinah ('amal ahl al-Madinah) as a source of law. He believed that the living tradition of Madinah reflected the direct practice of the Prophet Muhammad and therefore carried substantial normative value (Al-Zuhaili, 1986, p. 321). This approach shows that Imam Malik relied not only on texts but also took into account the social reality inherited across generations.

Imam Malik's monumental work, *al-Muwatta'*, stands as concrete evidence of his intellectual excellence. The book contains not only a collection of hadith but also the opinions of the Companions and Successors, as well as Imam Malik's own *ijtihad* on various legal matters (Malik ibn Anas, n.d., p. 5). The compilation of *al-Muwatta'* was carried out with great care, through a rigorous selection process applied to thousands of hadith, leaving only those judged truly authentic and relevant. This further affirms his reputation as a scholar of great precision and responsibility in preserving the purity of Islamic teachings.

In daily life, Imam Malik was also known as a dignified figure who consistently upheld his principles. He held knowledge and hadith in the highest respect; it is reported that he was

always in a state of ritual purity and dressed neatly whenever he transmitted hadith to his students (Al-Qadi Iyad, n.d., vol. 1, p. 112). This attitude reflects a profound respect for knowledge and an awareness of the moral responsibility inherent in transmitting religious teaching.

Imam Malik's influence on the Islamic world was immense, particularly through the Maliki school of law, which subsequently spread widely across regions such as North Africa, Andalusia, and parts of the Middle East (Coulson, 1964, p. 56). The methodology he developed remains one of the principal references in the study of fiqh to this day. Through the combination of meticulousness in hadith, respect for tradition, and a strong capacity for ijtihad, Imam Malik succeeded in constructing a comprehensive legal system of thought that has remained relevant across the ages.

Imam Malik's intellectual biography therefore shows that he was not merely a hadith scholar but also a legal thinker with a unique and profound approach. The environment of Madinah, the quality of his teachers, and his commitment to the authenticity of knowledge were the principal factors shaping his character and his contribution to the treasury of Islamic scholarship.

2. The Social and Political Context of the Writing of *al-Muwatta'*

The writing of *al-Muwatta'* by Imam Malik cannot be separated from the social and political dynamics surrounding the Islamic world in the second century of the Hijra. That period marked an important transition in Islamic history, as power shifted from the Umayyad to the Abbasid dynasty — a transfer that affected not only the political administration but also brought change to law, scholarship, and the broader social life of the Muslim community (Nasution, 1986, p. 45).

Toward the end of Umayyad rule, the political situation tended toward instability. Various internal conflicts, dissatisfaction among certain groups, and demands for social justice weakened the dynasty's hold on power (Hitti, 2002, p. 281). When the Abbasids succeeded in seizing power, they sought to build political legitimacy by drawing closer to religious scholars and figures, in order to secure moral support while strengthening the foundations of the new government (Lapidus, 2002, p. 78).

It was in this context that Imam Malik emerged as one of the leading scholars of Madinah. He was recognized as an expert in hadith and fiqh with high scholarly authority and was respected by society at large. Madinah itself was, at the time, still regarded as a center of authentic Islamic scholarship, being the city where the Prophet Muhammad had lived and where many Companions had settled (Abu Zahrah, 1997, p. 23). The scholarly tradition of Madinah placed strong emphasis on direct practice (*amal ahl al-Madinah*), regarded as a concrete reflection of the Prophet's teachings.

The Abbasid caliph Abu Ja'far al-Mansur, recognizing the importance of unifying the Islamic legal system across his increasingly extensive territory, requested that Imam Malik compile a book of law that could serve as an official reference for the entire Muslim community (Hasan, 1970, p. 102). This request reflects the government's effort to standardize law in order to achieve uniformity in judicial practice and state administration.

In response, Imam Malik compiled *al-Muwatta'*, a work containing a collection of hadith, the opinions of the Companions, and the views of the Successors, arranged systematically according to legal themes. The book not only contains normative texts but also reflects the legal practice that had developed in Madinah at the time (Dutton, 2002, p. 56). *Al-Muwatta'* thus became one of the earliest works in the field of fiqh to combine hadith with ijtihad.

Nevertheless, despite receiving the caliph's support, Imam Malik demonstrated an independent attitude regarding scholarly authority. He refused to have *al-Muwatta'* established as the sole legal standard binding upon the entire Islamic world (Hallaq, 1997, p. 34), a refusal grounded in his awareness that legal practice across different regions varied according to differing social, cultural, and scholarly conditions.

Imam Malik held that diversity of ijtihad was an unavoidable feature of Islam; the Companions themselves had shown differences of opinion in understanding and applying religious teaching. Imposing a single book as the sole standard, he believed, would only

diminish the intellectual richness and flexibility of Islamic law (Coulson, 1964, p. 41). This attitude reflects the principle of tolerance and openness within the classical Islamic scholarly tradition.

Furthermore, Imam Malik's refusal can also be understood as a form of separation between political authority and scholarly authority. Although he respected the caliph as a political leader, he nevertheless maintained his independence as a scholar (Rahman, 1979, p. 67), demonstrating that, within the Islamic tradition, scholars play a critical role in safeguarding the purity of religious teaching from the intervention of political power.

The writing of al-Muwatta' was thus not merely the result of scholarly necessity but was also shaped by a complex socio-political context. The work reflects the interaction between power and scholarship and demonstrates how scholars responded to the challenges of their time while remaining anchored to the fundamental principles of Islam. Imam Malik's refusal to accept an absolute standardization of law stands as evidence that diversity of *ijtihad* is an integral part of the Islamic legal tradition that must be preserved to this day (Kamali, 2003, p. 89).

3. The Methodology of Compiling al-Muwatta'

The methodology Imam Malik used in compiling al-Muwatta' represents one of the most important contributions to the development of classical Islamic law. The book functions not merely as a hadith compilation but also as a representation of a method of *ijtihad* that balances transmitted knowledge (*naql*) with rational reasoning (*ra'yu*). In compiling the work, Imam Malik applied rigorous principles of selection, a structured system of organization, and the use of distinctive legal sources, such as the practice of the Madinan community (Hallaq, 1997, p. 28).

a. Hadith Selection

One of the central aspects of Imam Malik's methodology was his rigor in selecting hadith. He was known as a scholar extremely careful in accepting and transmitting hadith. Various reports indicate that Imam Malik had access to tens of thousands of hadith, yet only around 1,900 were ultimately included in al-Muwatta' (Abu Zahrah, 1997, p. 45), demonstrating that his selection process placed far greater emphasis on the quality and validity of reports than on their quantity.

The selection criteria Imam Malik applied encompassed several important dimensions, including continuity of the chain of transmission (*ittisal al-sanad*), the integrity and precision of narrators (*'adalah* and *dabt*), and the consistency of a hadith's content with the practice that had developed in Madinah (Hasan, 1970, p. 110). He also tended to avoid hadith deemed weak or potentially controversial, particularly when unsupported by well-established practice within the community.

In addition, Imam Malik did not confine himself to transmitting *marfu'* hadith (those traced directly to the Prophet) but also included *mawquf* reports (statements of the Companions) and *maqtu'* reports (statements of the Successors) within al-Muwatta' (Dutton, 2002, p. 72). This shows that he regarded the scholarly authority of the earliest generations of Islam as an integral part of the sources of law, so that al-Muwatta' became a work reflecting the continuity of the scholarly tradition from the Prophet through subsequent generations.

b. Fiqh-Based Systematics

Another prominent feature of the methodology of al-Muwatta' is its organization according to the chapters of *fiqh*. Imam Malik arranged the book thematically, beginning with discussions of worship (*'ibadah*), such as prayer and almsgiving (*zakat*), followed by transactions (*mu'amalah*) such as trade, and extending to matters of criminal law (*hudud*) (Coulson, 1964, p. 39). This system makes it easier for readers to understand and access material according to practical needs in daily life.

This thematic structure also reflects a practical approach within Islamic law. Imam Malik did not compose al-Muwatta' as a purely theoretical work but rather as a guide that could be directly applied within community life. Each chapter typically begins with relevant hadith, followed by the opinions of Imam Malik or other relevant scholars (Rahman, 1979, p. 70).

The strength of this systematic arrangement lies in its capacity to integrate legal evidence with legal practice. Readers gain not only the text of the hadith but also an understanding of how it was applied in real contexts, making al-Muwatta' one of the earliest works to unite hadith and fiqh within a single coherent whole (Motzki, 2002, p. 91).

c. The Use of 'Amal Ahl al-Madinah

The most prominent feature of Imam Malik's methodology is his use of the practice of the people of Madinah ('amal ahl al-Madinah) as a source of law. According to Imam Malik, the practice that developed in Madinah carried substantial authority, since the city was the home of the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions (Abu Zahrah, 1997, p. 52). Tradition passed down through generations in Madinah was regarded as reflecting authentic Islamic teaching.

Imam Malik held that the collective practice of the Madinan community carried greater weight than an individual hadith report, particularly if that hadith lacked support from widespread practice. This position rested on the assumption that the people of Madinah inherited their tradition directly from the Prophet and the Companions, giving their practice significant normative value (Hallaq, 1997, p. 32). 'Amal ahl al-Madinah thus became one of the distinctive sources of law within the Maliki school.

The use of this principle also reflects an empirical dimension in Imam Malik's methodology. He relied not solely on texts but also took into account the living social reality within the community, providing flexibility in the application of law while preserving the relevance of Islamic teaching across a variety of life contexts (Kamali, 2003, p. 95).

Even so, the use of 'amal ahl al-Madinah' also distinguishes Imam Malik from other scholars, such as Imam al-Shafi'i, who placed greater emphasis on the authority of hadith as the primary source of law. This difference reflects the diversity of methodology within the Islamic fiqh tradition, which ultimately enriches the broader treasury of Islamic scholarship (Brown, 2009, p. 83).

The Construction of Imam Malik's Hadith Thought

Imam Malik's hadith thought constitutes one of the essential foundations in the development of classical Islamic law. He is known not only as a hadith scholar but also as a jurist capable of integrating hadith texts with social reality. The construction of his thought reflects a moderate, contextual approach oriented toward the welfare of the community, reflected in several core principles: the integration of hadith with social reality, the use of the concept of *maslahah* (public interest), and the application of the method of *sadd al-dhari'ah* (Hallaq, 1997, p. 30).

Integration of Hadith and Social Reality

One of the distinctive features of Imam Malik's thought is his approach, which is not purely textual in understanding hadith. He recognized that hadith, as a source of Islamic teaching, must be understood within the social context in which it is applied (Brown, 2009, p. 76). Imam Malik therefore relied not only on the literal text of hadith but also took into account prevailing social conditions, developing traditions, and practices that had persisted across generations.

This approach is clearly evident in his use of 'amal ahl al-Madinah' as a source of law. For Imam Malik, the practice of the Madinan community represented a concrete form of hadith implementation in real life (Dutton, 2002, p. 85). Accordingly, when a hadith text appeared to differ from an established Madinan practice, he tended to regard that practice as reflecting a more authentic interpretation.

This contextual approach demonstrates Imam Malik's awareness of the importance of legal relevance within community life. Islamic law was not viewed as rigid but rather as a dynamic system capable of adapting to social change (Rahman, 1979, p. 72). His thought thus creates room for flexibility in the application of law without disregarding the authority of the text.

The Concept of Maslahah

In addition to his contextual approach, Imam Malik is also known for employing the concept of *maslahah* (public interest) as a basis for *ijtihad*. This principle holds that the primary purpose of Islamic law is to secure benefit and prevent harm in human life (Kamali, 2003, p. 101). Accordingly, in situations lacking a clear textual ruling, Imam Malik considered the aspect of public interest as a basis for establishing law.

The concept of *maslahah* employed by Imam Malik is often referred to as *maslahah mursalah* — benefit not explicitly mentioned in the text of the Qur'an or *hadith*, yet consistent with the general objectives of the *sharia* (Abu Zahrah, 1997, p. 60). Examples include administrative or social policies aimed at preserving order and community welfare.

The use of the principle of *maslahah* demonstrates that Imam Malik possessed a broad vision in understanding the objectives of Islamic law (*maqasid al-shari'ah*). He focused not merely on the formal aspects of law but also on its impact on community life (Auda, 2008, p. 45). Islamic law can thus function as an instrument for achieving justice and social welfare.

Sadd al-Dhari'ah

Another important method within the construction of Imam Malik's thought is *sadd al-dhari'ah* — closing off any path that may lead to harm or legal violation. This principle is grounded in the idea that an act which is inherently permissible (*mubah*) may nonetheless be prohibited if it carries the potential for negative consequences (Hallaq, 1997, p. 35).

For instance, a transaction that is formally valid may be prohibited if it contains elements that could lead to usury (*riba*) or fraud. *Sadd al-dhari'ah* thus functions as a preventive measure in safeguarding the objectives of Islamic law. This approach shows that Imam Malik was concerned not only with formal legality but also with the consequences of an action.

This method also reflects a spirit of caution in establishing law. Imam Malik sought to prevent violations before they occurred, allowing Islamic law to function as an instrument of protection for the community (Coulson, 1964, p. 42). This principle later became one of the distinguishing features of the Maliki school and was widely adopted across various contexts of Islamic law.

Overall, the construction of Imam Malik's *hadith* thought reflects a balance between text and context, between norm and reality, and between legality and public interest. His integrative and contextual approach ensures that his thought remains relevant across a range of circumstances and conditions. By combining the principles of *hadith*, *maslahah*, and *sadd al-dhari'ah*, Imam Malik succeeded in building a legal methodology that is both theoretically robust and practically applicable (Hasan, 1970, p. 120).

4. Characteristics of al-Muwatta'

Imam Malik's *al-Muwatta'* is one of the monumental works in the intellectual history of Islam, possessing distinctive characteristics compared with other *hadith* or *fiqh* works. Its distinction lies in its integrative approach, combining *hadith* as a normative source with *fiqh* as the outcome of understanding that text. In addition, *al-Muwatta'* contains the reports (*athar*) of the Companions and possesses a practical character that renders it relevant to the daily life of Muslims (Hallaq, 1997, p. 33).

Combination of Hadith and Fiqh

One of the key characteristics of *al-Muwatta'* is its fusion of *hadith* and *fiqh* within a single systematic work. Unlike purely *hadith*-based works that focus solely on collecting reports, *al-Muwatta'* also contains legal interpretation derived from those *hadith* (Brown, 2009, p. 79). Imam Malik presents not only the text of *hadith* but also explanations or legal opinions based on his understanding of them.

This approach demonstrates that *al-Muwatta'* functions not merely as a documentation of *hadith* but also as an applicable legal guide. In each chapter, Imam Malik typically arranges

hadith relevant to a given theme, followed by his own opinion or the practice prevailing in Madinah (Dutton, 2002, p. 90). Readers can therefore understand not only the legal evidence itself but also how it is applied in real life.

This combination of hadith and fiqh makes al-Muwatta' one of the earliest works to integrate two major disciplines within Islam. It also reflects Imam Malik's scholarly method, which does not rigidly separate text from interpretation but instead views the two as a unified, mutually complementary whole (Motzki, 2002, p. 95).

Containing the Reports (Athar) of the Companions

Another characteristic of al-Muwatta' is the presence of the reports (athar) of the Companions within it. In addition to transmitting the hadith of the Prophet Muhammad, Imam Malik also included the statements and practices of the Companions and Successors as part of the sources of law (Abu Zahrah, 1997, p. 63). These reports hold particular significance, as the Companions are regarded as the generation that best understood Islamic teaching after the Prophet.

In many cases, Imam Malik used the reports of the Companions to strengthen or clarify the meaning of a hadith. In certain situations, he even gave priority to an established practice of the Companions over a hadith with a weak chain of transmission or one unsupported by widespread practice (Hasan, 1970, p. 118), demonstrating that Imam Malik viewed the Islamic scholarly tradition as an unbroken continuity across generations.

The presence of the Companions' reports within al-Muwatta' also reflects a historical approach to understanding Islamic law. Imam Malik did not treat texts in isolation but also considered how they were understood and applied by the earliest generations of Islam (Coulson, 1964, p. 44). The book thus offers a more comprehensive picture of the development of Islamic law in its formative period.

Practical in Nature

Another important characteristic of al-Muwatta' is its practical and applicable nature. The book was compiled not solely for academic purposes but also as a guide for the community in conducting daily life in accordance with Islamic teaching (Rahman, 1979, p. 75). Accordingly, its discussion spans a wide range of areas of life, from worship and transactions to criminal law.

This practical character is evident in the way Imam Malik organized the material systematically and accessibly. Each chapter addresses a specific topic in a logical sequence, making it easier for readers to locate and understand relevant law. In addition, the use of concrete examples drawn from the practice of the Madinan community helps illustrate the real-world application of law (Kamali, 2003, p. 104).

The practicality of al-Muwatta' has made it one of the principal references within the Maliki school and a work widely used by judges (qadis) in adjudicating cases. The book provides not only a legal basis but also guidance for applying that law across various situations (Hallaq, 1997, p. 36), showing that al-Muwatta' serves a dual function as both a scholarly work and a practical guide.

Overall, the characteristics of al-Muwatta' reflect Imam Malik's scholarly approach, which is integrative, historical, and practical. By combining hadith and fiqh, incorporating the reports of the Companions, and organizing the material in an applicable manner, the book has become one of the most influential works in the history of Islamic law. These strengths ensure that al-Muwatta' remains a relevant point of reference to this day (Auda, 2008, p. 49).

Contribution to the Science of Hadith

Imam Malik's al-Muwatta' has made a highly significant contribution to the development of the science of hadith. As one of the earliest works to combine hadith and fiqh, al-Muwatta' was not only an important reference in its own time but also exerted considerable influence on the compilation of later hadith works. One of its principal contributions was serving as an early

model for the systematic organization of hadith, later adopted and further developed by prominent scholars such as Imam al-Bukhari and Imam Muslim (Hallaq, 1997, p. 38).

Prior to the compilation of al-Muwatta', the hadith of the Prophet were generally scattered across memorized traditions and notes that had not yet been systematically organized. Although earlier efforts at collecting hadith had been made, such as those undertaken by scholars of the Successors' generation, no prior work possessed a neat and comprehensive thematic structure comparable to al-Muwatta' (Brown, 2009, p. 82). In this context, Imam Malik introduced an important innovation by organizing hadith according to the chapters of fiqh, such as prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and trade, among others.

The thematic system used in al-Muwatta' subsequently inspired the compilation of major later hadith works, including Sahih al-Bukhari and Sahih Muslim, both of which were likewise organized according to specific chapters, making it easier for readers to understand and access hadith according to the topic they required (Azami, 1977, p. 45). It can thus be said that al-Muwatta' laid the methodological groundwork for the development of hadith science in terms of the organization and presentation of material.

Beyond its systematic organization, the contribution of al-Muwatta' is also evident in its method of hadith selection. Imam Malik was known to be extremely strict in choosing which hadith to include in his book, transmitting only hadith deemed authentic and supported by well-established practice within the Madinan community (Dutton, 2002, p. 94). This approach provided an early standard for hadith criticism (naqd al-hadith), later further developed by subsequent generations of hadith scholars.

Imam al-Bukhari and Imam Muslim, for instance, developed more detailed and systematic criteria for hadith selection, including rigorous examination of both sanad and matn. Nevertheless, the principle of caution in accepting hadith that Imam Malik had applied remained one of the essential foundations of hadith science (Motzki, 2002, p. 102), indicating a methodological continuity between al-Muwatta' and the later canonical hadith collections.

Another contribution of al-Muwatta' lies in its integration of hadith and legal practice. Unlike hadith works that focus more narrowly on transmission, al-Muwatta' also contains legal opinions and the practice that developed in Madinah, adding a further dimension to the understanding of hadith — namely, how it was applied in real life (Rahman, 1979, p. 78). This approach subsequently influenced how scholars understood the relationship between hadith and fiqh.

Furthermore, al-Muwatta' also played a role in strengthening the authority of hadith as a source of Islamic law. During Imam Malik's time, considerable debate surrounded the use of hadith in establishing law, particularly between those who prioritized reason and those who emphasized the text (Hasan, 1970, p. 125). Through the compilation of al-Muwatta', Imam Malik demonstrated that hadith could serve as a robust legal foundation when understood and applied through the proper method.

The influence of al-Muwatta' is also visible in the development of the tradition of hadith writing across various regions of the Islamic world. The book became a reference for scholars in compiling their own works, whether in the form of commentaries (sharh) or other hadith compilations (Coulson, 1964, p. 47); indeed, al-Muwatta' exists in numerous transmitted versions, reflecting the extent of its dissemination and influence throughout the Islamic world.

The contribution of al-Muwatta' to hadith science is therefore not limited to its systematic organization but also encompasses its method of selection, its integration with fiqh, and its role in strengthening the authority of hadith as a source of law. The work forms a bridge between the oral and written traditions of hadith scholarship and serves as a foundation for the development of the great hadith works that followed (Kamali, 2003, p. 110).

Critical Analysis

Imam Malik's legal thought — particularly his use of 'amal ahl al-Madinah' as a source of law — has not been immune to criticism from scholars. Although this method became a distinctive feature of the Maliki school, some scholars regarded it as problematic, particularly

with respect to the universality of Islamic law. This criticism emerged as part of the intellectual dynamism within the rich and diverse Islamic scholarly tradition (Hallaq, 1997, p. 40).

One of the principal criticisms of the use of 'amal ahl al-Madinah' is the view that the practice of the Madinan community cannot serve as universally binding legal evidence. Critics such as Imam al-Shafi'i argued that the primary source of Islamic law must remain the Qur'an and authentic hadith, rather than the local practice of a particular community (Brown, 2009, p. 88). According to this view, treating the tradition of the Madinan community as a source of law risks disregarding authentic hadith transmitted from other regions.

Imam al-Shafi'i specifically rejected treating 'amal ahl al-Madinah' as binding legal evidence, arguing that there was no guarantee that the practice of the entire Madinan community fully reflected the teaching of the Prophet Muhammad (Abu Zahrah, n.d., p. 71). He contended that, following the Prophet's death, the Companions had dispersed across various regions of the Islamic world, meaning that knowledge of hadith and religious practice was not confined to Madinah alone. Restricting authority to a single region was therefore seen as failing to reflect the actual spread of knowledge within Islam.

Criticism has also come from a methodological perspective. Some scholars argue that reliance on 'amal ahl al-Madinah' opens the door to subjectivity in establishing law, since not every community practice can be definitively verified as a direct inheritance from the Prophet or the Companions (Hasan, 1970, p. 130). There is thus a possibility that such practices were shaped by local cultural habits not wholly derived from Islamic teaching.

Despite these criticisms, however, Imam Malik's approach also carries significant merits. His use of 'amal ahl al-Madinah' reflects an awareness of the importance of social context in understanding and applying Islamic law. In this respect, Imam Malik relied not solely on the literal text but also considered how that teaching was practiced in real life (Dutton, 2002, p. 98).

This approach can be understood as a form of flexibility within Islamic law. By taking community practice into account, Islamic law becomes more adaptive to differing social conditions — an important consideration given the vast expanse of the Islamic world and the diversity of its cultures (Rahman, 1979, p. 80). Imam Malik's method thus allows room for legal adjustment without abandoning the fundamental principles of the sharia.

Furthermore, the use of 'amal ahl al-Madinah' can also be seen as an effort to preserve the continuity of a living Islamic tradition. The practice of the Madinan community was regarded as representing Islamic teaching that had been internalized in daily life since the time of the Prophet. Treating it as a source of law therefore helped preserve the authenticity of Islamic teaching in a practical and applicable form (Coulson, 1964, p. 50).

From a broader perspective, the disagreement between Imam Malik and his critics reflects the richness of methodology within Islamic law. The absence of methodological uniformity is, in fact, a strength that allows Islamic law to develop according to the needs of different times and places (Kamali, 2003, p. 115). This disagreement also demonstrates that *ijtihad* is a dynamic process, open to a variety of interpretations.

Accordingly, although the use of 'amal ahl al-Madinah' as legal evidence has drawn criticism, this approach retains significant value in the development of Islamic law. Such criticism should not be understood as total rejection but rather as part of an intellectual dialogue that enriches the treasury of Islamic scholarship. Ultimately, Imam Malik's method demonstrates that flexibility and contextuality are essential elements in preserving the relevance of Islamic law across a variety of situations and conditions (Auda, 2008, p. 52).

4. Conclusions and Suggestions

Based on the discussion presented in the preceding sections, it can be concluded that Imam Malik, through his monumental work *al-Muwatta'*, succeeded in constructing an integrative hadith methodology that combines hadith texts with the social practices of the community. This approach demonstrates that understanding hadith cannot rest solely on its textual dimension but must also take into account the historical and social context in which such teachings were applied.

The principal strength of Imam Malik's methodology lies in his ability to connect normative sources with empirical reality. By making hadith the primary foundation while also giving due consideration to 'amal ahl al-Madinah', he presented a model of legal thought that is not rigid but flexible and adaptive to community conditions, reflecting a profound understanding of the objectives of Islamic law: to secure benefit (maslahah) and prevent harm in human life.

In addition, al-Muwatta' also demonstrates a major contribution to the development of hadith and fiqh scholarship. Its fiqh-based system of organization became a model for later hadith works, while its rigorous method of hadith selection provided an early standard for hadith criticism. The book thus functions not merely as a compilation of reports but also as a practical guide for the application of Islamic law.

Nevertheless, Imam Malik's thought has not been free of criticism, particularly regarding his use of 'amal ahl al-Madinah' as legal evidence. Some scholars have argued that this approach lacks sufficient universality. Viewed more broadly, however, this method in fact demonstrates the flexibility inherent in Islamic law. Such differences of opinion form part of the dynamics of ijtihad, enriching the treasury of Islamic scholarship and showing that no single approach can encompass the full complexity of Muslim life.

In the contemporary context, Imam Malik's methodology retains considerable relevance. His approach, which integrates text and context, offers inspiration for the development of an Islamic law responsive to changing times. Amid various modern challenges — globalization, social change, and technological development — a method of ijtihad capable of bridging the fundamental principles of sharia with the realities of modern life is very much needed.

It can therefore be affirmed that Imam Malik's thought, as expressed through al-Muwatta', carries not only historical value but also enduring, actual value that can continue to be developed. The methodology he built remains one of the important foundations for understanding and applying Islamic law contextually, ensuring its continued relevance and capacity to address the needs of the Muslim community across different times and places.

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