

Review Essay

Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World, 2nd ed.

Jonathan A.C. Brown

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The true measure of success for any written work is the attention it receives from its readers; the publication of subsequent editions is one such marker. The first publication of Jonathan Brown's critically acclaimed textbook on ḥadīth placed the complex domain and vast tradition of Prophetic ḥadīth works, perhaps for the very first time, at the center of lay English readership. At long last, a work existed that bridged the deep gulf between contemporary academic studies and traditional Islamic scholarship, especially considering that nowhere is this rift deeper than in the field of ḥadīth studies. His work was appreciated across a variety of circles across faith and sectarian lines, and now the publication of the second edition bears testimony to the success it truly deserves.

Ironically, in the rich Islamic tradition no books—apart from the Qurʾān of course—received more continual and sustained attention, generation to generation, than the numerous works that documented and chronicled ḥadīth reports about the Prophet of Islam. In particular, the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Bukhārī and the *Muwattaʿa*ʾ of Mālik of Madīnah are the only two works that have documented complete recitals in each generation going back in an uninterrupted chain to their compilers. It is then fitting that Brown's research on the ḥadīth tradition yielded no less than three major books, all of which have been well received and continue to be discussed and read: in addition to the subject of the present review, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim: The Formation and Function of the Sunni Ḥadīth Canon* (Brill, 2007) and *Misquoting Muḥammad: The Challenge and Choices of Interpreting the Prophet's Legacy* (Oneworld Publications, 2014).

The immediate aim of this book is to help the reader make sense of the complexity and breadth of the Sunni ḥadīth tradition, with hopes of answering a more distant and more fundamental question: whether the tradition accurately represents the actual teachings of the Prophet Muḥammad. Of course, for Brown the answer is obvious, but his hope is to take you on a journey of three hundred-odd pages to show you why.

Chapter 1 introduces the reader to the lexicon of ḥadīth (termed *muṣṭalah al-ḥadīth*), which is the mainstay and starting point for all ḥadīth studies. The discussion immediately reveals what makes Brown's work so widely appealing: a striking ability to translate some of the most complex concepts into modern everyday vernacular. For instance, he compares the mutations that can creep into ḥadīth wordings to a game of telephone; Muʿjam/Thabt works to the effective CVs of ḥadīth scholars; and the *isnād*-seeking culture to collectors of rare coins who are not concerned with the coins' original value or authenticity but how rare they were. Teachers of ḥadīth and Islamic studies would do well to look at how Brown breaks down many of these concepts, as traditional ḥadīth teaching has long been known to have developed a culture of unnecessary complexities and technicalities. Responding to the charge of why ḥadīth were not all written down from the beginning, he points out that the Prophet was a guide and fatherly figure to the Companions and lived on in their collective memory so there wasn't a need felt to write everything down. Even today, how many of us write down all the memories of our parents and grandparents? In addition, his discussion of the tensions between oral and written traditions, and its bearing on the differences in the Western versus Islamic contexts, is both illuminating and readily understandable.

To illustrate his points, Brown quotes various ḥadīth texts with their full chains of transmission and what they teach us, adding to the practical utility of the work. That is, the reader doesn't leave only with theoretical-historical discussion but feels that he or she has actually learned some ḥadīth. Brown also touches on much deliberated issues in the ḥadīth tradition such as the exact scope of the Prophet's authority, distinguishing what is authoritative of his ḥadīth from what was customary, and what distinguishes ḥadīth literature from other works which contain aspects of the Prophet's life and statements.

Chapter 2 is one of the lengthiest chapters and represents the real weight of the book for those who are interested in making sense of the sheer volume of ḥadīth books in circulation. A broad survey of the stages of development of ḥadīth literature is presented here, extending into present

times. What makes this presentation unique is his insightful breakdown of these stages, which I have not seen elsewhere. The description of the early eighth century *Muṣannaḥ* stage—which includes the very first major ḥadīth book, the *Muwaṭṭaʿ* of Mālik—as “transcripts of legal debates” helps one to understand the qualitative difference in their contents from other more standard works—for instance, in their abundant inclusion of non-Prophetic material like statements and views of Companions and early Muslim authorities. Indeed, a study of the *Muwaṭṭaʿ*, especially the version transmitted by Muḥammad al-Shaybānī (d. 805), clearly reveals that Madīnan–Kūfan dialectical argumentation forms a consistent backdrop behind the text.

This is followed by the early ninth-century Musnad stage, aptly described as the emergence of “Ḥadīth Literature Proper,” as books now mature to become exclusively organized around *isnāds*. The *Musnad* of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal is one of the few surviving works of this era and remains one of our tradition’s largest ḥadīth compilations to date. Next comes the *Ṣaḥīḥ/Sunan* era (ninth to tenth century) which is appropriately described as a movement spearheaded by Bukhārī and Muslim to compile works, for the very first time, with only the most rigorous content possible. The inclusion of the Sunan works here (Tirmidhī, Abū Dāwūd, al-Nasāʿī, and Ibn Mājah) is entirely appropriate since their authors were contemporaries who were also inevitably influenced by this regard for authenticity, even as they compiled their own works with slightly different objectives in mind. While Bukhārī and Muslim had sought to produce for the community a compendium of only the most authentic and undisputed evidences for all matters related to our faith, Tirmidhī, on the other hand, compiled his *Sunan* to catalogue the full range of ḥadīth utilized and accepted by Muslim jurists while at the same time providing his own comments on ḥadīth gradings (which exhibit the unmistakable influences of the *ṣaḥīḥ* movement). A student of Bukhārī, he provided extensive comments on the authenticity—or lack thereof—of these narrations, often quoting his own teacher’s views on them (these quotes are prefaced by *Qāla Abū ʿAbdullāh*: “Abū ʿAbdullāh [i.e. Bukhārī] said...”). By the dawn of the eleventh century, a proper ḥadīth canon had emerged in the form of Six Books, which became a permanent anchor in the Sunni ḥadīth tradition. This is followed by other less important stages, each of which was characterized by its own historical contingencies and communal requirements that led to particular structures emerging in each time.

A recurrent theme of Brown's is an ingenious use of the *isnād-matn* structure of ḥadīth to highlight the two functions fulfilled by the broader Sunni ḥadīth tradition: to authoritatively establish Islamic law and dogma (through the *matn*) and to establish a medium of connection to the charisma of the Prophet (through the *isnād*). Keeping this scheme in mind allows one to make sense of many issues that have perplexed many a student.

Chapter 3 goes on to discuss the methods of ḥadīth criticism, beginning of course with Brown's customary and keen insights. He compares traditional ḥadīth critics to modern investigative reporters and dips into the world of journalism to elucidate the pillars of ḥadīth investigation: determining the veracity of the source and seeking corroboration. "Corroboration is what turns a tip into a story," he reminds us. Incidentally, the echoes between journalism and ḥadīth criticism could not be more on point. On October 23, 2018, veteran radio personality Dave Ross lamented the problem of widespread forgery in media in the wake of the Russian election-meddling fiasco, especially fake videos which could now impersonate not only voice but even facial expressions through advanced algorithms. Though this was indeed alarming, he commented that we also have the resources to deal with these forgeries: in a word, reporters. If they are known to be reputable and honest (*dabṭ* and *'adālah*), the expectation is that they would be corroborating these videos to determine their authenticity. All we have to do is to put our trust in reputable reporters and news agencies. Specifically, Brown refers to the 3-tier process of ḥadīth verification: demanding first an *isnād* for the report, then investigating all its individual links (to determine accuracy, uprightness, and contiguity), and finally seeking corroboration in other reports (known as *i'tibār*). While not universal (some scholars did not consider corroboration essential, on which more below), this is still a useful paradigm to understand the whole process. Brown has great discussions on the phenomenon of ḥadīth forgery and the notion of content criticism, both of which feature prominently in modernist charges against the tradition. Openly criticizing ḥadīth contents based upon one's own reasoning (an approach advocated by the early Mu'tazilite school) is not without its pitfalls, as reason can often be subjective and end up marring the whole enterprise as whimsical. Thus, early scholars of ḥadīth vehemently opposed this approach while at the same time engaging in it to a limited extent, as Brown admits. This tension between relying exclusively on texts via their *isnāds* and examining their contents endures to our times.

Perhaps a more appropriate alternate representation of this discussion, in my humble view, is to point out that the traditional schemata did in

fact have adequate safeguards to detect fatal content flaws: the notion of anomaly and hidden weakness. In the 5-part criteria for the highest-tier *ṣaḥīḥ ḥadīth* utilized by Bukhārī and Muslim and taught in all later standard textbooks, it was not enough for a ḥadīth to have a strong *isnād* (the first three conditions) but it had to pass two additional safeguards in order to be deemed sound: not contradicting stronger reports (in which case the ḥadīth would be termed *shādh*, meaning anomalous) and not possess hidden, more subtle weaknesses (*ʿillah*). Brown does indeed mention *ʿillah* in the context of corroboration, but it should be noted that a large portion of *ʿillah* works were devoted to narrations that contained red flags in their content that prompted critics to examine them more closely. This discipline has been described as fine craftsmanship, much like expert jewelry or goldsmithing, where trained eyes can spot a fake. In other words, all the ingredients like the *isnād* may be in order, but scholars still sense something is wrong—quite often from problems in the content of the ḥadīth and not only in the *isnād*—prompting further query that ultimately uncovers the defect. Examples abound in *ʿilal* works. The essential point is that ḥadīth critics never divorced texts from their *isnāds* but analyzed them together in a delicate balance. Potential red flags in the text prompted more diligent scholars to pursue further scrutiny of the *isnād*. It must also be pointed out, as Mohammed Akram Nadwi of Oxford does in his monograph *The Difference between Ḥadīth and Philosophy* (UK: Al-Salām Institute, 2018), that these instances of a report containing a strong *isnād* while containing an obvious error in wording are exceedingly rare in the overall ḥadīth corpus and represent simple mistakes on the part of narrators. When they did occur, ḥadīth scholars were well equipped to deal with them and they readily did so in practical ways, all of which reinforces our confidence in the overall craft.

The remaining chapter includes important observations on the laxity in critiquing reports that was applied to lesser-priority topics for Muslim scholars: predictions and prophecies, history and battles, morals and manners. In contrast, matters of law and creed were deemed more urgent and required more scrutiny for their reports. Ultimately, this opened the door to an acceptance and sacred reverence for all ḥadīth reports across the board. Brown aptly describes this scenario as a “Big Tent” of the late Sunni tradition that admitted a massive amount of ḥadīth into Islamic discourse which were previously deemed unreliable. Nadwi in his monograph *The Right Pathway to Studying Ḥadīth* (UK: Al-Salām Institute, 2018) also acknowledges the widespread laxity in ḥadīth that spread in the Muslim

world by unsuspecting scholars who approached ḥadīth as sacred text and philosophical truth rather than historical reports that required verification. The chapter then ends with two valuable case studies critically analyzing ḥadīth reports, one of which does not appear in the previous edition.

The rest of the book includes valuable chapters on the ḥadīth tradition in the minority Shīʿī tradition (which most readers of the Sunni tradition have little exposure to), the scope and function of ḥadīth among jurists who set the boundaries and parameters of jurisprudence and law, ḥadīth among theologians who debated creedal aspects of the faith, and among mystics and Sufis, many of whom had interesting and quite unique perspectives on ḥadīth. In this running list, chapter 8 appears as a brand new chapter on the role of ḥadīth in issues of politics and Islamic governance, which is highly valuable though regrettably too brief. Therein he expounds on the various ways scholars dealt with the idea of the Caliphate, the requirements for the Muslim ruler to be from the Quraysh tribe as indicated by many ḥadīth reports, and the fact that Sunni consensus ultimately settled on a quietist approach towards politics that discouraged rebellion in the interest of pragmatic peace. However, he points out that “Sunni quietism...was at odds with the Quran’s powerful imperative for ordaining justice in the public sphere.” This led to drastically different approaches to these debates outside the Sunni fold, and even fostered more nuanced intra-Sunni approaches as are being played out in the current Muslim world. The discussion ends abruptly, unfortunately, and leaves the reader still seeking. Brown provides further reading options after each chapter, among which here is highly recommended Ovamir Anjum’s *Politics, Law and Community in Islamic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012); I would also add Khaled Abou El Fadl’s *Rebellion & Violence in Islamic Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), a sophisticated and expanded discussion on how the Muslim tradition approached the rules of rebellion and political resistance (*bughāh*) in Islamic law.

By far the most valuable chapter for many readers will undoubtedly be Chapter 9, which summarizes and evaluates centuries of Western scholarly criticisms of the ḥadīth tradition. It is in this chapter that Brown brings all hands on deck, combining his training and acumen as a meticulously trained Western academic with his solid grounding in traditional Islamic scholarship and immersion within the Sunni tradition. He starts by pointing out that Orientalist studies of the East grew out of mostly European colonial or diplomatic interests, and that “Western criticism of the ḥadīth tradition can

be viewed as an act of domination in which one world-view asserts its power over another by dictating the terms by which ‘knowledge’ and ‘truth’ are established.” This led to a long and contentious engagement with the ḥadīth enterprise by Western scholars who operated under the parameters of the Historical Critical Method, which Brown goes on at length to explain and contextualize in its European setting. In essence, this approach consisted of a presumption of doubt towards all historical reports, a questioning of all orthodox narratives, and a deep skepticism towards—even mockery of—religious traditions and metaphysical notions of the universe. For Brown, this framework produced four basic approaches to ḥadīth criticism: the classical Orientalists (Muir, Goldziher, Schacht, Juynboll), who challenged key features of the Islamic narrative and laid down the first premises, such as assumptions of widespread forgery in ḥadīth as the norm; the Apologists (Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khan, Abbott, Mustafa al-Azami), who defensively responded to them while accepting some of their premises; the Revisionists (Crone, Cook), who went even farther than the Orientalists to challenge anything and everything, including Islām’s origins; and finally, the Western Reevaluation (Powers, Motzki, and we might add Brown himself), which began in the 1980s with a stronger appreciation of the ḥadīth tradition and a pushback against these original assumptions. In the end, Brown posits that early Western criticism of ḥadīth was limited by its inability to appreciate the vastness and complexity of the ḥadīth tradition as well as its reliance on such small sample sizes and limited studies that its conclusions were invariably based more on its own preconceived worldviews than empirical fact. He points out that extreme a priori doubts of the Muslim ḥadīth tradition are groundless and “obliges us to believe things more fantastical than simply accepting that the sources might be authentic.”

Ḥadīth forgery was undeniably a very real problem in the Muslim community, one recognized by Muslim scholars themselves, who developed their own sophisticated enterprise to deal with it. Specifically, the three-tiered system as described by Brown was an effective way to determine the authenticity of reports, even as many Muslim scholars inconsistently applied it. The problem of fabrication, however, remains an enduring one in the Sunni tradition precisely because of this very inconsistency. Specifically, a fateful decision was made by Sunni scholars to lower their guard by not applying their own critical method in matters they deemed less urgent: all reports that didn’t concern *fiqh* or theology, even if they be as important as *tafsīr*, history or *Sīra*. Brown poignantly observes:

It is unfortunate that many of the areas that Western scholars consider the most important subjects of study—political history, apocalyptic visions, and Quranic exegesis—were simply not the priorities of Sunni hadith scholars. It is possible that it was prioritization of law over other areas that led to the inclusion of large numbers of unreliable hadiths in Sunni collections, not the failings of Sunni hadith-critical methods. (271)

The final chapter discusses the destructive effects of modernity on the Islamic world along with the pushback of Islamic revivalism which brought ḥadīth back to the forefront of the Islamic tradition. The chapter also proves to be the most interesting, as it entails a discussion of modern personalities, some of whom are still alive. It outlines four specific responses from Muslim scholars: the “Qur’ān Only” movement (Chirāgh ‘Alī, Ghulām Aḥmad Parvez, Sidqī, Haykal, Abū Rayya, Fazlur Rahman, Javed Aḥmad Ghāmīdī), modernist Salafis (Sir Sayyid Aḥmad Khan, ‘Abduh, Ridā, Shaltūt, Muḥammad al-Ghazālī), traditionalist Salafis (‘Abd al-Wahhāb, Sanani, Shawkānī, Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khan; and in the modern period, al-Albānī, Muqbil al-Wādī‘ī, al-Ghumārī brothers), and Late Sunni Traditionalists (al-Kawtharī, al-Būtī, ‘Alī Jumu‘ah). Brown places the contemporary Muḥammad al-Ghazālī among the last category (in addition to the second), which I would consider highly questionable. In this new edition, there are also new figures added (including Ghāmīdī, who has been creating quite the controversies across American Muslim circles in recent months), as well as a reshuffling of some of the old ones (al-Qarḍāwī is now left out), all of this a reflection of the fluidity of the discussion.

Glowing praises of this book aside, there are a number of problems which can potentially be raised. First, the notion of corroboration in ḥadīth criticism is perhaps overplayed in the book. Corroboration was likely not a universal step for ḥadīth criticism as Brown proposes, but more closely related to the game of numbers that characterized later ḥadīth scholarship. The concept of ‘*azīz* (hadiths narrated by at least two at each level) versus *gharīb/fard* (narrated by only one at one link) features prominently in these discussions. There was such a widespread presumption—apparently espoused by the Mu‘tazilite Abū ‘Alī al-Jubbā‘ī and even by prominent Sunni figures like Ibn al-‘Arabī and Kirmānī—that a *ṣaḥīḥ ḥadīth* had to be at least ‘*azīz* (i.e. having support at each level) that Ibn Ḥajar was forced to add the famous retraction in his *Nukhbat al-Fikr* that ‘*azīz* is not a precondition for *ṣaḥīḥ*. In the end, Ibn Ḥajar being a latter-era ḥadīth scholar still ends up lending support to the obsession with numbers, especially the

notion of *tawātur* which Brown rightly observes was entirely “unsuitable for the ḥadīth tradition.” But researchers like Akram Nadwī point out that Bukhārī and Muslim generally did not look for corroboration for each single report. To prove that, one need only look at the first and last ḥadīths of *Bukhārī*, which are solitary narrations without any further supporting *isnāds* but nevertheless sound. The concern of early scholars was simply to establish strong evidences based on sound sources, even by a solitary chain. They simply did not share the same obsession with numbers that characterized later Sunni scholarship. Corroboration was surely a resort in certain cases, as for narrations that might have been dubious or suffered from certain minor flaws that required remediation in the form of supporting narrations. As a glaring example, in a well-known tradition in one of the chapters of the Book of Ghusl, Bukhārī relates from Muḥammad b. Bashshār from Mu‘ādh b. Hishām from his father from Qatādah from Anas b. Mālik that the Prophet would visit all of his wives in a single night, and that they were eleven in number. Bukhārī is well aware that despite possessing a sound *isnād*, this text is clearly problematic as the Prophet did not have eleven wives at one time (what Brown would call open content criticism). So Bukhārī immediately after this ḥadīth relates a supporting report through another *isnād* (Sa‘īd from Qatādah from Anas) that there were nine wives. In this case, a report with a minor error is immediately corrected by a corroboratory report. The original report was not deemed damaged enough to warrant exclusion, but a minor flaw was remediated through corroboration. Corroboration was also used, as alluded to by Brown on several occasions, by ḥadīth critics/biographers to determine the accuracy (*dabṭ*) of a narrator, by comparing his narrations to those of his peers to determine inconsistencies. Brown makes an argument for more widespread use of corroboration in the early period as opposed to its laxity among later scholars, which may be subject to dispute depending on what one precisely means by the term.

Finally, and perhaps more pressingly, is an unsettling idea that recurs—albeit indirectly—throughout the book: the suggestion to divorce what the Prophet actually may have said from the content of ḥadīth reports and the whole authentication process. Brown states on page 17: “Authentic’ or ‘forged’ here [in the Sunni tradition] thus has no necessary correlation to whether or not the Prophet Muhammad really said that statement or not.” Those familiar with Brown’s work know that he means, as he states on page 4, that “the *isnād* was an effort to document that a hadith had actually come from Muhammad...” But the resurfacing of this theme in various forms

throughout the book—for instance, in his proposed dual-function motif, that a *matn* conveyed authority while *isnād* served as a sacred connection irrespective of ḥadīth authenticity; or in his closing quotation from Plato: “I have heard a report of the ancients, whether it is true or not only they know”—leads readers to a certain broad impression of the ḥadīth tradition that the substance of his book does not support. Also problematic for many may be his description of the Prophetic style of speech as consistently hyperbolic, that is, that the Prophet frequently made use of hyperbole (read: *exaggerations* or *embellishments*) in his ḥadīth, which could not be taken literally or at face-value but needed scholars to develop filters to determine how to actually apply them to our circumstances. While this could be read charitably by more grounded students who are well aware of the point Brown is intending to make, this contentious term is ill-suited for the Prophetic message and has further implications and dubious connotations.

All of this rhetoric unwittingly serves to diminish the forcefulness and clarity of the Sunni ḥadīth enterprise. The end game of ḥadīth science has always been clear to its practitioners, even if some ignored it on occasion: to determine what the Prophet actually said. In their minds, a sound ḥadīth for scholars has always been one that they believed the Prophet *actually* said. You would be hard pressed to find scholarly discourse referring to the Prophet’s ḥadīth as historically probabilistic. The epistemological certainty of theologians influenced by the game of numbers, while affirmed by many ḥadīth scholars, had little practical bearing on their craft. In a recent lecture at the Fairfax Institute, Ovamir Anjum acknowledged that “Islam is the only tradition that pays fundamental attention to facts (did the Prophet really say it; i.e. ḥadīth sciences) and not just truth (the fact that the ḥadīth exists).” This is also precisely the starting point for Ibn Khaldūn’s brilliant *Muqaddimah* to world history, where the author calls for history to move beyond mere information to truths, and beyond superficial reports—often baseless—to uncovering the meanings behind these reports. What the Prophet actually said, what really happened in history, the truth, have always been the concern for Muslims. In the end, truth matters.

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