

## Imām al-Bukhārī's contribution to the development of hadīth literature, and the importance of his al-Jāmi' al-Sahīh

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بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

*"O People, no prophet or messenger will come after me and no new faith will be born. Reason well, therefore, O People, and understand words which I convey to you. I am leaving you with the Book of God (the Qur'ān) and my Sunnah (the life style and the behavioral mode of the Prophet – peace be upon him), if you follow them you will never go astray."*

These words, addressed by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to the Muslims during the Farewell Pilgrimage, were the final confirmation for the believers of the importance of preserving a record of the words and actions of their beloved Prophet (peace be upon him), themselves regarded as a secondary revelation, inspired by the Creator himself. Whether or not permission was granted by the Prophet (peace be upon him) to his companions for an official record remains a topic of debate in scholarly circles, fuelled by the existence of contradictory hadīth on this topic.[1] Evidence suggests, however, that there were some Companions who made such notes, in collections which later came to be known as *Sahīfahs* (scripts), for their own guidance.[2]

By the end of the first century, corruption began to taint the realm of hadīth. Political and theological divisions within the ever-expanding Islamic Empire led to the quotation, misquotation, and fabrication of hadīth by rivaling factions in support of their cause, a practice which instigated the comment of 'Āsim al-Nabīl (d.212), "In nothing do we see pious men more given to falsehood than in Tradition." [3] The legal jurists themselves were now ever-increasingly in need of legitimizing traditions to use in their jurisprudence. Effectively, the urgency arose firstly, to collect and record the hadīth, and secondly, to devise a method through which to differentiate the authentic from the unauthentic.

The first official decree to begin the compilation of hadīth was not until the Umayyad reign, set by the Caliph 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz. The resultant works, however, are no longer extant, thus little can be said concerning their plan, method, or contents.[4] These primary works, arranged according to a structured subdivision of chapters according to their subject-matter, were known as *musannafs*, the earliest and best known available example of which is the *Muwatta'* of Mālik b. Anas, founder of the Māliki school of jurisprudence. Mālik's *Muwatta'* was not a traditional collection of hadīth, for "it's intention is not to sift and collect the 'healthy' elements of traditions circulating in the Islamic world but to illustrate the law, ritual and religious practice, by the *ijma'* recognized in Medinan Islām, by the *sunnah* current in Madīna, and to create a theoretical corrective, from the point of view of *ijma'* and *sunnah*, for things still in a state of flux." [5] Another type of hadīth collection which appeared was that of the *musnad* arrangement, which was arranged by the name of the companion under whose name the hadīths were reported. The famous *musnads* of Ahmad b. Hanbal, Ishāq b. Rāhawayh and

'Uthmān b. Abī Shaybah are all remnants of this era. Although there is some confusion concerning the chronological appearance of the two, we may assume that both appeared at the end of the first and the beginning of the second century.[6]

By the third century, however, neither type of collection seemed to be entirely sufficient. Although the *musannafs* aimed to "provide the lawyer with a handbook of tradition in which he could readily look up the *ipsissima verba* of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and thus silence an objector"[7], they "diluted by legal additions the literature of the hadīth proper and made its study subservient to legal discussions." [8] The *musnads*, on the other hand, were difficult to use, for the hadīth on common topics were in different sections, nor did they "discriminate between authentic and *da'if* material." These factors were probably what influenced Ishāq b. Rāhawayh (d.238/852) to remark that he wished someone would compile a book which comprehensively gathered only the authentic hadīth. [9] Although delivered casually, the remark was received in a more inspiratory light by one of his students, Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870). Following this incident, al-Bukhārī sifted, over sixteen years, through some 600,000 hadīths known to him in search of only those which were authentic, from which he chose to include only 7,397 [10] in his compilation *al-Jāmi' al-Sahīh*. The title of the work itself is interesting, and indicates one aspect of al-Bukhārī's contribution to the development of the science of the hadīth; the first word which appears, *al-Jāmi'*, means that the collection contains hadīths relating to all of the following eight topics: i-Belief, ii-Laws and Rulings, iii-*Riqāq* (piety and ascetism), iv-*ādāb* (manners) of eating, drinking, travel etc, v-*Tafsīr* (Qur'ānic exegesis), vi-*Tarīkh* and *Siyar* (historical and biographical matter), vii-*Fitan* (crises expected towards the end of time), and viii-*Manāqib* (virtues) and *Mathālib* (defects) of various people, places etc. [11] Although there were other *jāmi'* collections prior to that of al-Bukhārī's, such as that of Sufyan al-Thawri, what is important here is that al-Bukhārī compiled the first *Jāmi'* which contained only authentic (*sahīh*) hadīth. As for what al-Bukhārī considered made a hadīth authentic, he did not state the exact canons of criticism which he applied, and thus later scholars made personal attempts at inferring them from the text. [12]

It would seem pertinent to examine, at this point, what features made the *Jāmi'* such an important work in its field, such that it was worthy of later coming to be known as the most authentic book after the Qur'ān. Principally, al-Bukhārī's hadīth were composed of three aspects, the *matn* (the actual text itself), the *isnād* (chain of transmission) and the *tarjamatul bāb* (the chapter heading). The *matn* was the most important of the three, and the science of hadīth was developed as a way of authenticating what information the *matn* carried. Having said this, it is understandable that the *matn* demands less attention than the *isnād* and the *tarjamah*. This provoked some criticism, Siddiqi commented that al-Bukhārī "pays little attention to the probability or possibility of the truth of the actual material reported by them." [13] Guillaume attributes the occurrence of contradictory hadīth within the same chapter to this, for "if the *matn* contained an obvious absurdity or an anachronism there was no ground for rejecting the hadīth if the *isnād* was sound." [14] However, traditional Islamic scholars of hadīth have derived criteria which they propose define the acceptability of a text. [15] For example, the narration should not contradict the basic laws of nature. Also, it should not doubt the notion of Allāh's perfection, such as we find in the forged narration, "Allāh created the horse and caused it to run until when he perspired, Allāh created himself with his perspiration." Nor should it state that which contrasts what is stated in the Qur'ān, for

example the alleged hadīth "An illegitimate child will not enter Paradise and nor will his progeny until seven generations." This narration contradicts the code of the Qur'ān: "And no carrier will carry the burden of others." These are a few of the conditions of acceptance of a hadīth by virtue of its *matn*. In direct contrast to this, however, Ibn 'Abd al-Barr (d.463) and al-Nawawi (d.676) apparently "do not hesitate to assail traditions which seem to them to be contrary to reason or derogatory to the dignity of the Prophet (peace be upon him)."[16] As no supporting reference has been supplied, it is hard to do anything other than take this statement lightly. If we accept the view that al-Bukhārī adhered to these conditions, however, and did not overlook the content in favour of the *isnād*, this would have been a valuable contribution to ridding the hadīth literature of icated and weak narrations.

The second aspect of al-Bukhārī's hadīth was that of the *isnād*. As was previously mentioned, al-Bukhārī did not himself state how he examined the authenticity of the *isnāds*. Thus, although later scholars like Al-Hazmī and Al-Muqaddasī produced treatises on the subject, these sanctions were effectively determined through personal analysis, therefore, betokening small-scaled differences of opinion. Siddiqi, for example, offers a synopsis of al-Bukhārī's understanding of what made a hadīth authentic; he says, "...such traditions as were handed down to him from the Prophet (peace be upon him) on the authority of a well-known Companion, via a continuous chain of narrators who, according to his records, research and knowledge, had been unanimously accepted by honest and trustworthy traditionists as men and women of integrity, possessed of a retentive memory and firm faith, accepted on condition that their narrations were not contrary to what was related by the other reliable authorities, and were free from defects. al-Bukhārī includes in his work the narrations of those narrators when they explicitly state that they had received the traditions from their own authorities. If their statement in this regard was ambiguous, he took care that they had demonstrably met their teachers, and were not given to careless statements."[17] Others outlined more detailed and intricate criteria, expanding on Siddiqi's description that the *isnād*, for example, had to be *muttasil* ('uninterrupted' – if it stops short of the Prophet - peace be upon him - it is known as *mawqūf*), and that there had to be clear evidence that any two consecutive narrators in a chain had met in person. This critical study of authenticating the hadīth by virtue of its *isnād* developed into a science which came to be known as '*ilm al-jarh wat-ta'dīl*' ('the science of impugning or confirming [the credibility of the *muhaddiths*].'[18] Numerous works were composed on this topic, including four by al-Bukhārī himself, the most famous of which goes by the name of *Kitāb al-Rijāl al-Kabīr*. In this work, al-Bukhārī treats some 40,000 men, demonstrating his vast knowledge on this topic.

It may seem surprising therefore, that despite his seemingly stringent, thorough, practice in this field, there should remain room for criticism. Surprisingly, the first criticism came from al-Bukhārī's contemporary and compiler of the second most authentic hadīth collection entitled *al-Sahīh*: Muslim b. Al-Hajjāj (d.261). Muslim, unlike al-Bukhārī, did not insist on proof that two consecutive narrators had met, but rather sufficed with the possibility of this – meaning, he accepted hadīth *mu'an'an* ('so-and-so reported *on the authority of* so-and-so) in the same category as those reported with worse like 'I heard from', or 'I saw', and the like. Indeed, in the introduction to the *Sahīh*, Muslim attacks an anonymous contemporary on this issue, saying that 'the expression '*an* implies personal contact unless there is direct evidence to the contrary...He accuses his opponent of inconsistency on the ground that there are several hadīth *mu'an'an* which are accepted as

genuine, e.g. Hisham *'an abīhi*....it would be ridiculous to suppose that there was no personal contact between the two men and to refuse to regard the tradition as genuine.'[19] The anonymous opponent seems to be al-Bukhārī himself.[20]

Al-Bukhārī was also criticized for inconsistency on the grounds that he uses less exacting criteria for the hadīth which form the basis of some of his chapter headings, and those which corroborated the main ones. In some of these cases, the *isnāds* are partially or fully omitted, and sometimes even relies on weak authorities. In fact, there are approximately 1,725 'suspended' (*mu'allaq*) traditions in his *Jāmi'*. [21] This led some scholars to conclude that al-Bukhārī, although regarding these hadīths as genuine, was unable to find a genuine *isnād* for them [22], and thus cast doubt over our scholar's fundamental premise of compiling only those undoubtedly authentic hadīths. If we examine, in particular, the issue of omitting the *isnāds*, however, we will find that the criticism is a weak one. According to Ibn Salāh and al-Nawawī [23] the total number of hadīth excluding repetitions amounts to 4,000 [24]. This means that there were 3,275-3,397 hadīths in the *Jāmi'* which were repetitions, either because they are indicating a difference of opinion, or because they are being used under various chapters. It is extremely likely, for the sake of comprehensiveness, that while al-Bukhārī repeated the hadīth, he did not see the same need to repeat the *isnād*. The issue of weak traditions, however, still remains, and provoked figures such as al-Dāraqutnī (d. 385) to compose an entire book (*al-Istidrākāt wa'l-Tatabbu'*) in demonstration of the weakness of many canonical hadīths, including al-Bukhārī's. [25] 'Aynī too, in his celebrated commentary has shown the defects of some of its contents. [26] According to Siddiqi though, al-Bukhārī's inclusion of such hadīth was intentional, with specific academic purposes in mind, explained further by commentators on his *Sahīh*. [27]

More criticism – this time towards the issue of authentication by *isnād* rather than al-Bukhārī in particular - came from the direction of Joseph Schacht, who studied certain *isnāds* and led him to conclude that 'the *isnād* itself had consciously been seen and exploited as a weapon of debate in its own right' [28], and therefore was not a reliable source of authentication. This accusation formed an attempt to invalidate the hadīth literature in its totality, implying that there was no method to test for its authenticity. However, a silencing counter-criticism was made of Schacht's position by Professor John Esposito of Georgetown University, who said, "Accepting Schacht's conclusion regarding the many traditions he did examine does not warrant its automatic extension to all the traditions. To consider all Prophetic traditions apocryphal until proven otherwise is to reverse the burden of proof. Moreover, even where differences of opinion exist regarding the authenticity of the chain of narrators, they need not detract from the authenticity of a tradition's content and common acceptance of the importance of tradition literature as a record of the early history and development of Islamic belief and practice." [29]

The final aspect of al-Bukhārī's hadīth which deserves some examination is that of his *tarājim*. This aspect contributes greatly to the peculiarity of al-Bukhārī's work, and vastly exposes the visionary genius of al-Bukhārī. From his chapter headings, the reader gains insight into al-Bukhārī's attitudes in the realms of law, theology and Qur'ānic exegesis, and as al-Qastallānī has said, "Al-Bukhārī's fiqh is contained in the headings of his chapters." [30] There is some debate amongst scholars as to when al-Bukhārī actually wrote his chapter headings, the strongest opinion of which is that he authored the chapters prior to embarking on his task. Evidence for this view lies in instances where

one finds headings followed by no hadīths at all, from which we can infer that there was no authentic hadīth known to al-Bukhārī on this topic, although he wished to have addressed it. The implications of al-Bukhārī 's *tarājim* have also been debated, for while at times his headings would tackle a legal issue, at others he was found to be forwarding a moral judgement. Likewise, in some instances they agree fully with their respective hadīths, while in others the significance is seemingly broader. However, it must be remembered that "in every chapter heading, al-Bukhārī kept a certain object in view." [31] And in dividing his work in such a manner, al-Bukhārī made the work of the jurists, when attempting to find hadīths on certain topics, all the less tasking.

If credibility of a work is to be judged through the attendance of committed scholars of the field towards it, then there is no shortage of scholars who have studied and composed works on al-Bukhārī's *Jāmi'*. It even provoked the emergence of whole genres of literature related to it [32], such as the *Mustadrakāt*, (where the compiler gathers together all the hadīth which fulfil al-Bukhārī's and Muslim's conditions, but were missed by the two scholars), and the *Mustakhrajāt*, (where the compiler collects additional *isnāds* to add to those cited earlier, thereby strengthening the hadīths further), among others.

As we have seen, al-Bukhārī compiled his work in a time when there was a great need for the authenticity of hadīths to be established. He aimed to gather together only the most authentic hadīths available to him at the time, under various chapters which would be of interest to the jurist, whilst at the same time not confining his work to the legal realm. What makes his work peculiar to that of his contemporary Muslim's is the *tarājim*, his stricter attitude towards *isnāds*, and the repetition of hadīths, through his "determination to distil as many rulings as the different clauses, even individual words, of a hadīth can be made to yield." [33] Although faced with criticism from Muslim and Orientalist scholars alike, much tribute has been made to the accuracy, scrupulous care, and exactitude employed by al-Bukhārī. Brockelmann commented, 'He has shown the greatest critical ability, and in editing the text has sought to obtain the most scrupulous accuracy.' [34] And although al-Bukhārī was not the first to compose works in the field of hadīth, and who made major contributions to their critical study, al-Bukhārī "absorbed, sifted, organized and developed earlier writings, and cleared the path for further achievements by succeeding scholars." [35]

Although there is much to be gained from free study, the essence of Islām is undoubtedly ingrained in the lives and heritage of the pious ancestors, who lived closer to the time of the Prophet (peace be upon him) and who had seen Islām in the form of practical application rather than mere theoretical arguments and explanations. As well as the valuable works bequeathed to later generations, al-Bukhārī also left an irreplaceable example of piety and God-consciousness. He himself, on many occasions, acknowledged that he had not documented a single narration until he had purified his body by taking a bath and offered two units of prayer asking for Allaah's guidance on the matter. Such extraordinary care is not reported to have been taken by any other scholar throughout history. We shall conclude with the words of al-Bukhārī's contemporary, Qutayba b. Sa'īd, "If Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl was among the Companions, indeed he would have been exemplar (to them)." [36]

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**Footnotes:**

[1] Abū Dāwūd, for example, cites two subsequent hadiths, the first stating the Prophet's (peace be upon him) command, and the second his forbiddance, (lest it should hinder the integrity of the Qur'ān) regarding this issue. (Robson, J. Hadīth, Encyclopaedia of Islam)

[2] Robson, J. Hadīth, Encyclopaedia of Islam, also Siddiqi, pg 9

[3] Guillaume, pg 78

[4] Siddiqi, pg 7

[5] Goldziher, Muslim Studies

[6] According to Guillaume and Siddiqi, the musnad appeared first on the scene, whereas Abdul Rauf and

others claimed that the musannafs were compiled slightly earlier than the musnads

[7] Guillaume, pg 25

[8] Abdul Rauf, pg 273

[9] Siddiqi, pg 56

[10]ö Abdul Rauf, pg 275 (According to Siddiqi (pg 56) however, this figure is 7,275, which was also the opinion of Imam Nawawi)

[11] Siddiqi, pg 10

[12] For example, Al-Hāzimī in his *Shurūt al-A'imma*, al-Iraqi in his *Alfiyya*, and al-'Aynī and al-Qastallānī in their introductions to their commentaries on the *Sahīh*, among others.

[13] Siddiqi, pg 58

[14] Guillaume, pg 89

[15] al-Jāmi' al-Sahīh: A Review

[16] Guillaume, pg 94

[17] Siddiqi, pg 56

[18] Abdul Rauf, pg 278

[19] Guillaume, pg 86

[20] *ibid.*

[21] Siddiqi, pg 57

[22] Guillaume, pg 27

[23] Al-Jāmi' al-Sahīh: A Review

[24] There is some difference of opinion regarding this number. Abdul Rauf puts the number of repetitions at 4,000 (pg 275), while Guillaume states that the number of hadīth excluding repetitions is 2,762 (pg 28)

[25] Guillaume, pg 94

[26] Siddiqi pg 58

[27] Siddiqi, pg 57

[28] Burton, pg 148

[29] Esposito, pg 81

[30] Guillaume, pg 26

[31] Siddiqi, pg 57

[32] cf: Farid, pgs 130-134

[33] Burton, pg 125

[34] Siddiqi, pg 58

[35] Abdul Rauf, pg 279

[36] Farid, pg 53