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A Critical Study of the Evolutionary Theories of Western Scholars in the Criticism of Ḥadīth

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Abstract

The Aḥadīth of the Prophet are second only to the Qur'ān in the source of Islam. The Qur'ān and Sunnah are considered by most scholars the two most basic sources of Islamic jurisprudence. When the Orientalists started their research on Islamic sciences, they also paid special attention to these two main branches. Since the Qur'ān is the word of Allah Almighty, he has taken direct responsibility for its protection. In contrast to this whole miracle book, the Arabs who were so proud to have their language that they called themselves Arabs and those who spoke all other languages Ajam, ie dumb, could not stand it. When Western scholars started re-examining Islamic Sciences, they also raised objections to the Qur'ān from different angles. But they could not achieve their goal because of its miraculous structure. So, a group chose the field of Aḥadīth of the Prophet. Most Western scholars seem to agree on the principles by which Muslim scholars working on the science of Ḥadīth have judged the authenticity and weakness of Aḥadīth that these principles are not logical and scientific. Therefore, traditions based on them cannot be checked. Then they began to examine these traditions based on some self-made principles. The different positions they took in researching Ḥadīth are discussed in this research article on their gradual evolution.

KEYWORDS

Ḥadīth; Authenticity;
Orientalists;
Muḥaddithīn;
Goldziher; Joseph
Schacht; Isnād;
Transmitters;
Principles; Theories.



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Introduction

By the end of the 17th century, Western scholars had been aware of the basis of ḩadīth, its transmission, and important collections in this field. However, its critical studies started in the 19th century A.D. Among those who initially researched the sciences of ḩadīth were those who were mainly working the Holy Prophet's biography (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). During their research, they realized that the second most important status in Islam is that of the Prophetic ḩadīth. So they turned their attention to the ḩadīth. Initially, those who worked on it felt that it was natural. Muslims must have made practical arrangements to preserve the words of their prophet along with the Qur'ān,¹ because the ḩadīth of the Prophet has the status of interpretation of the Qur'ān. As Islam spread to other parts of the world, people in different parts of the world began to face new problems. The Qur'ān could not offer a solution to these new problems. For this, along with the Qur'ān, ḩadīth was also needed. To meet this need, Muslim scholars began to search for Aḩadīth.

Because of their strong memory, the Arabs relied more on oral memorization than on writing. At that time, there were not many educated people. Besides, reading and writing materials were not easily available to everyone. During this period, most of the ḩadīth's material of the Prophet was preserved and transmitted through oral traditions. In the early days of revelation, for some reason, the Holy Prophet himself prevented people from writing Aḩadīth. However, permission was later granted. On the contrary, the Prophet himself ordered to write many Aḩadīth and rulings. Many companions and followers had also written Aḩadīth personally.

However, the earliest written sources which Western scholars first had access to be in the second/eighth century. It makes Western scholars seem hesitant about ḩadīth. On the one hand, some people considered a large part of the Aḩadīth, which were oral narrations and to some extent also present in the form of notices to the students of ḩadīth, to be reliable.² On the other hand, some scholars have rejected it as a product of later times.³

There were two main reasons for this skepticism and denial.

1. Most collections of ḩadīth have been transmitted in the form of oral traditions for almost a century. It depended entirely on the personal memory of ḩadīth narrators and their likes and dislikes. Therefore, it cannot be trusted.⁴

2. The various political, personal, and religious interests found in Islamic society could have led to a change in the Aḩadīth of the Prophet and the fabrication of new Aḩadīth.⁵

1. **Checking The Authenticity of ḩadīth and Western Scholars**

Initially, Western scholars studied the books of Muslim ḩadīth scholars to determine the status of Aḩadīth, who had long ago developed the principles of distinguishing authentic Aḩadīth from weak Aḩadīth. According to them there were no traces of this fitnah until the Prophet's time and the time of the Shaykhayn (Abū Bakr and 'Umar may Allah be pleased with them).⁶ It was started by Abdullah ibn Sabā and his followers at the end of the caliphate of ḩaḩrat 'Uḩmān ibn Affān. During the reign of ḩaḩrat 'Alī (RA), when he had wars with Amīr Mu'āwiyah (may Allah be pleased with him), the Ummah was divided, and various false groups began to seek the help of ḩadīth to prove their point of view.⁷

The Muḩaddithīn did not limit their efforts in the service of ḩadīth to the compilation and research of the Prophet's Aḩadīth. On the contrary, established various rules and regulations for the false identification and fabricated traditions published in the Aḩadīth and disciplined them in books. In the opinion of Allāmah Jalāl-uddīn Suyūḩī, these sciences reach one hundred, and he writes quoting Imām ḩāzmī that each of these one hundred sciences also has its permanent status.⁸ In the presence of these sciences, whenever fitnah arises till the Day of Judgment, it can be properly prevented.

As a practical defense of the ḩadīth, the Muḩaddithīn warned the people against the names of liars and fabricators, and at the same time compiled the authentic, weak, and fabricated traditions separately. That is undoubtedly a great deed and an unforgettable favor to the Muslim Ummah. Therefore, the fabricated and weak Aḩadīth are no longer suspicious from any scholar of ḩadīth. Muḩaddithīn felt the need timely and take extreme measures to separate the fabricated traditions from the authentic traditions and gave it real importance to the science of ḩadīth. Some of these experts have created such perfection and expertise in this field that in their presence, liars could not succeed in their plan. Whoever and where any liar tried to fabricate ḩadīth, these Imāms exposed him and separated such traditions one by one. Many scholars have paid tribute to the services of these Imāms, as Sufyān al-Thawrī said:

”الملائكة حراس السماء واصحاب الحديث حراس الارض”⁹

“The angels are the protectors of the heavens and the companions of the Ḥadīth are the protectors of the earth.”

Abdullah bin Mubāarak said:

”لوهم رجل في السحر أن يكذب في الحديث لأصبح الناس يقولون فلان كذاب”¹⁰

“If a person intends to lie in the Ḥadīth at dawn, people will start saying in the morning that he is a liar.”

When someone asked Abdullah ibn Mubāarak about the weak Aḥadīth, he said:

”تعيش لها الجهادة”¹¹، إنا نحن نزلنا الذكر وإنا له لحافظون”¹²

”The expert Imāms are alive for this.”

Then he recited this verse of the Qur’ān.

“Behold, it is We Ourselves who have bestowed from on high, step by step, this reminder: and behold, it is We who shall truly guard it [from all corruption]”.

It is clear from the above statements and arguments that one of the most capable groups of narrators was always ready in this field. Being engaged in the science of Ḥadīth, Allah Almighty had given them such expertise that they could immediately recognize the weak Ḥadīth. Besides, based on the principles they have formulated for the critique of Ḥadīth, Muslims can express their pride to all other nations of the world.

These principles of critique of Aḥadīth had to be praised and the example of which is not found in the heritage of the past but also of the present nations. Western scholars were astonished when they saw this Science of Ḥadīth. Initially, some people praised Muslim scholars for writing down the Biography of 500,000 narrators.¹³ But it concluded soon that the critique of Muslim scholars of Ḥadīth is limited to a mere analysis of the sand and the persons in it. While the fabrication in Ḥadīth had started from the very beginning, so it is impossible to draw correct conclusions based on this analysis. The number of authentic Aḥadīth may be much less than what has been stated by Muslim Ḥadīth scholars.

William Muir¹⁴ and Dozy¹⁵ have estimated that about half of this, and Von Kremer¹⁶ has acknowledged that only a few hundred Aḥadīth are authentic. Professor Ignas Goldziher reinforced this skepticism. He differed from his predecessors in that most of the earlier scholars believed that the Ḥadīth could to some extent be helpful and authoritative in determining historical events. Goldziher started looking for the weak instead of the authentic Aḥadīth. In his research, he concluded almost all

the collection of Aḩadīth weak. He considered the Aḩadīth to be the result of the political, social, and religious evolution of the second century AH and the conflict between different political and religious classes. Ignas Goldziher, on the one hand, refused to accept the historical status of the ḩadīth as a product of later times. On the other hand, he used the sayings of the Companions and their followers as historical references.¹⁷

His research impressed Western scholars, and many scholars, recognizing its findings, expanded their studies in their light. As a result, they began to view the Prophetic ḩadīth with skepticism. But at the same time, some scholars have refused to accept Goldziher's harsh criticism, which has largely rejected the content of the ḩadīth. Some of these scholars also explicitly denied Professor Goldziher's skepticism. One of these scholars is Johnn Fuck, although he did not mention Professor Goldziher's name. However, his investigation results give the reader and the researcher a picture of Goldziher's opposition to the investigation. For example, Professor Goldziher has presented a picture of Imām Muḩammad ibn Shahāb al-Zuhrī in such a way that he used to fabricate Aḩadīth for the Umayyads. Therefore, he is not a reliable narrator. He played a significant role in the fabrication of ḩadīth. He has admitted that because of these Umayyads we had to get involved in the fabrication of ḩadīth.¹⁸ While John Fuck has praised ibn Shahāb al-Zuhrī and called him one of the greatest narrators of the ḩadīth.¹⁹ He praised the principles of critical ḩadīth formulated and used by the narrators. According to him, since the Aḩadīth were mostly narrated orally, the same method used by the narrators could have been better for researching the Aḩadīth. In which they study the living conditions of the narrators in the Aḩadīth to know the status of the ḩadīth. He also cites the absence of anti-mutazilite Aḩadīth in canonical books as evidence that the Muḩaddithīn has put the Aḩadīth in their compiled collections of Aḩadīth, without any prejudice or interest. Based on the above and some other similar arguments, he has refuted the view of all the Orientalists who considered the Aḩadīth as a product of first two centuries of early Islam.²⁰

Towards the end of the twentieth century, almost 60 years after Professor Ignas Goldziher's research, Professor Joseph Schacht, one of the most important scholars among Western scholars, presented his research on the ḩadīth sciences. He left all his predecessors behind in casting doubt on the ḩadīth authenticity. He investigated the status of jurisprudential Aḩadīth and went beyond Ignas Goldziher and declared all the collections

of jurisprudential Aḩadīth to be unreliable. In his most famous book of this field named “The Origins of Muḩammadan Jurisprudence”, he presented some modern theories. The result of all this is that there is not as much possibility of believing in the material that has reached us in the name of ḩadīth as can be believed in general historical material. He declared all the work of the ḩadīth scholars as unreliable saying that their decisions are based on the criticism of chain and all the chains are artificial and fabricated to support the texts of prophetic Traditions. Therefore, these cannot be trusted at all. These were all fictitious and figurative names that were added randomly from bottom to top. He introduced his principles of determining the time of fabrication of any ḩadīth. In it, he bases his analysis on three things.²¹

1. Common narrator in the chain of Tradition. (He introduced this formal theory, which he called the Common Link Theory). This is the person from whom many series of chains are created.
2. In which book did the ḩadīth first appear? It is based on another of his theories, e Silentio.²² According to which he decides whether the ḩadīth is ancient or modern.
3. Determining the date of the ḩadīth on the basis of text analysis. (The most important thing is the analysis of the text. If there is a difference between the chain and the text, he prefers the text and determines the time of the fabrication based on it.)
4. The work of Professor Joseph Schacht has influenced Western scholars to such an extent that we can divide the subsequent work into three major categories based on it.
 - Scholars who completely refute this view.

The number of such Western scholars is small. However, some of these scholars have observed that the results of their research have raised serious questions about the theories put forward by Professor Joseph Schacht.²³

F. E. Peters composed his biography of Muḩammad according to the accounts of the traditional sources:²⁴ J Fuek's findings also refute the vital theories of Professor Joseph Schacht. He believes that the findings of Professor Joseph Schacht are inconsistent with the evidence found in the biography of Ibn-e-Ishāq.²⁵ However, the biography of Ibn-e-Ishāq is older than the source used by Professor Joseph Schacht. He also found it wrong to know the history of traditions based on the best theory of Professor Joseph Schacht e Silentio in the light of Sīrah Ibn Ishāq.

Nabia Abbot wrote a book in 1967 entitled "Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri II Qur'ānic Commentary and Tradition". Although the direct target of this book is not known to refute the theories and views of

Professor Joseph Schacht. But the results of her research are in stark contrast to those presented by Professor Joseph Schacht. The result of which is that the ḩadīth has been passed down from generation to generation through safe and reliable sources, both orally and in writing, from the beginning of Islam. It has also been examined honestly. Therefore, we are right in acknowledging it as an authentic source of knowledge of the history of Islam. One of the best theories of Prof. Joseph Schacht regarding family Isnād is his position that the main reason for this was that some well-educated companions and followers had the Aḩadīth of the Prophet in written form, which would be passed on to their future generations. In this way, family Isnāds came into being. On the contrary, those companions and followers who could not read or write, or who did not have the written scripts of Aḩadīth, do not have family Isnāds in their traditions.²⁶

Theories put forward by Professor Joseph Schacht are very popular. Therefore, many Muslim scholars have also acted in response to them. According to them, the narration and compilation of Aḩadīth started from the very beginning, that is, from the time of the Prophet. Those were later transmitted orally and in writing to his disciples and later to the Jamaʿīn ḩadīth. Which have been frozen in book form and have reached us?²⁷

- Scholars who endorsed the views of Goldziher and Joseph Schacht and rejected the views of the first group.

They took the position of Muslim ḩadīth scholars who have not been able to prove the authenticity of Aḩadīth on scientific and rational grounds. Therefore, all the material should be considered fabricated and unreliable until its authenticity is proved by logical and scientific Rules.²⁸

- A third group partly accepted Professor Joseph Schacht's views on ḩadīth. But he refused to accept the assumption that all the material in Islamic history in the name of the sayings and deeds of the Prophet, his Companions, and his followers is fabricated.

They said that although there are some weaknesses and flaws in the research of Goldziher and Joseph Schacht, it can be used with some reforms and amendments. Andreas Corke and Gregor Schoeler supported this theory. G.H.A. Juynboll concludes that there is evidence of the existence of Prophet's Aḩadīth in the last two decades of the first century AH, but in this skepticism. He agrees with Goldziher that it is impossible to distinguish between authentic and unauthentic except for a few exceptions.²⁹ Juynboll has also introduced some refinements to this method of Joseph Schacht such as importance of multiple “partial common links” with the main “common link”. According to Juynboll, if we want to use Isnāds for dating a tradition with accuracy we must also

identify “Partial common links” with “Common Links” because that directly depends on the early transmitters. Each of them has several students who narrate traditions from them.

One of the major objections of many Orientalists to the investigation of the Muḩaddithīn has been that they have judged the authenticity and weakness of the traditions only on the examination of Traditions' Chain. Goldziher says that no matter how many contradictions have been narrated with authentic Isnāds, which cannot be proved logically or historically. Even then, no one can object to its authenticity.³⁰ Alfred Guillaume³¹ and Juynboll³² have also stated that the entire investigation of the Muḩaddithīn depends entirely on the analysis of the Isnād and the narrators of the ḩadīth while the authenticity of the ḩadīth cannot be checked properly on the base of this evidence.

There are different degrees of the authenticity of the traditions found in different books of ḩadīth; which are explained in the books of ḩadīth by the terms Marfū', Mawqūf and Maqṩū'. Joseph Schacht has concluded from the analysis of such certified traditions that the chains have been improved later. He named it “Backward Growth of Isnād” and described it as a tool of fabrication.³³ Juynboll³⁴ Alfred Guillaume³⁵ and Gregor Schoeler³⁶ also accepted this theory and declared the Aḩadīth unreliable. Western scholars' research took a new turn in 1970 when R. Marston Speight used a method used to check the authenticity of the Bible on ḩadīth. He used this method to determine the position of a famous ḩadīth. In which ḩaḩrat Saa'd bin Abī Waqās fell ill, and the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) went to his house to inquire about his illness. He prayed for ḩaḩrat Saa'd (may Allah be pleased with him). The same ḩadīth mentions migration in some ways, and in some books where this ḩadīth is described in detail, it is added that ḩaḩrat Saa'd bin Abī Waqās asked permission to bequeath his inheritance. So he (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) allowed him to bequeath a maximum of one-third of the wealth. Marston Speight compiled 19 different Isnāds of this ḩadīth (about which he assumes that these have been altered).

- Then these different texts are arranged to keep in mind their complexity and growth.
- The text of each ḩadīth has been examined from three different angles.
- The degree of its growth has been determined.
- He also checked the sticking of the various texts altogether.
- Thirdly, he has checked the style of the ḩadīth and its words in terms of vocabulary. In his opinion it shows the ancient or modern version of this ḩadīth.

- The last step is to categorize the texts and identify the changes and additions that take place in them.³⁷

After this, some other scholars also tried to determine the date of Aḥādīth based on text and also made some changes and additions in its method. Lawrence I Conrad also examined the traditions based on the same principle and called the relatively better texts a product of later periods.³⁸

Arriving here marked another turning point in the Orientalist style of investigation. When some modern Western scholars called the method of critique of Ḥadīth by Goldziher, Joseph Schacht, Speight, and their fellow scholars (in which the time of Aḥādīth is determined based on comparing and analyzing texts in different ways) as flawed and incomplete. They disagreed with their predecessors, claiming that a very vague and rough dating of Aḥādīth could be possible based on mere text criticism. Moreover, in this way, it is not possible to know the dating of all traditions.

In one of his articles, J.H. Kremers has tried to determine the date of a tradition³⁹, narrated from Ḥaḍrat Abū Sa'īd Al-Khudrī (may Allah be pleased with him), which is found in Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim, and Musnad Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal, etc. Gregor Schoeler has examined the traditions based on comparing Isnāds and texts.⁴⁰ Another scholar, Uri Rubin, has adopted a similar approach to the study of Ḥadīth.⁴¹ Pavel Pavlovitch worked on a Ḥadīth of self-Confessed Adultery punishment by the method of Isnād-cum-Matn Analysis.⁴² He has also reviewed traditions based on chains and texts in another article. Harald Motzki is one of the most important scholars of modern times who dated the traditions based on Isnād and texts. He names it Isnād-cum-Matn analysis. According to him, for any authentic tradition, there must be a correlation between the patterns of its chains and the variations of different texts.

Conclusion:

When Western scholars began their research in the field of the Prophetic Ḥadīth, they expressed distrust on the principles of Ḥadīth research that had been formulated and used by the Muḥaddithīn centuries before. Western Scholars declared them fail in achieving their goal. Then they started trying to determine the date and origin of the Aḥādīth according to their principles. But in it, they presented some different and contradictory theories.

William Muir, one of the pioneers and important scholars of this field, acknowledged some Aḥādīth as authentic. However, he also set his criteria for determining the status of Ḥadīth. The famous Western scholar Ignas Goldziher was the first scholar who refused to accept the Aḥādīth on

a large scale. Many Western scholars have been concerned about the consequences of Goldziher.

Later, some scholars disagreed with him and wrote a rebuttal. They termed the study of Aḩadīth as incomplete and flawed based on text analysis, alone as was done by Goldziher. In their opinion, by this method vague and rough dating is possible. On this basis, some scholars said that the credentials should be reviewed along with the texts. In this way, it may help to determine the dating of the Aḩadīth in a better way. But according to them, the text must have basic status than the sanad in the verification of traditions. Some time ago, some researchers started using the method of Isnād cum Matn in the dating of ḩadīth. However, there are still many flaws in using this method. Due to which the Orientalist investigation is not yielding correct results.

This is the method used by the Muḩaddithīn centuries ago to differentiate the authentic Aḩadīth from the fabricated in a much better way. However, the analysis of chain has the primary and decisive position in their principles, rather than the text. Furthermore, due to their proximity of time and location, they are more entitled to rely on their investigations and to recognize their decisions regarding the status of the Aḩadīth and lay new investigations on their foundations. In this case, we can know the true picture of the Aḩadīth. On the other hand, most of the research of Western scholars is based on possibilities. That is why they have taken so many turns in this field. While ḩadīth is the base of our religion (Islam), we can never afford the possibilities and the probabilities in this matter. Even Western scholars should stop presenting such new theories in which there are constant flaws, and they need to be changed which are being continuously proved by the investigation of their successors. Therefore, they should conduct their research based on the principles of the Muḩaddithīn.

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