Book Reviews


Whether the Traditions from the Prophet Muhammad (peace be on him) or Hadith are really his legacy or not is a question that many in the modern day have answered over a spectrum of views, ranging from rejection to recognition. A lot has been written on Hadith in modern times, starting from Schacht’s rejectionist take on it in his book, Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence and his paper, “A Revaluation of Muslim Traditions.” While onwards, the scholarship on the subject of Hadith grew considerably and examined the question of its authenticity, polarised views on it appeared widely. Some like Crone and Cook with their Hagarism and G.H.A. Juynboll with his Muslim Tradition, largely agreed with Schacht in rejecting Hadith as Muḥammad’s (peace be upon him) legacy and came with their theories of the way this genre of texts originated, while others like Abbott with her Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri, Azmi with his Studies in Early Hadith Literature, and Sezgin with his first volume of Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums, showed that the formers’ rejectionist theories were without sound bases and affirmed that Hadith is Muḥammad’s legacy, forgeries notwithstanding. A third group of scholars has

appeared more recently, which tries to find a ‘middle ground’ on the issue of 
Hadith, authenticity. It is heralded by Harald Motzki with his Analyzing Muslim Traditions and Biography of Muhammad: The Issue of the Sources. Andreas Görke, Gregor Schoeler and Herbert Berg are some of the other important contemporary writers from this group.

While these are some of the most important scholars in the current discourse on Hadith and their writings form its corner stones, Jonathan Brown is another contemporary scholar of Hadith who also tries to address the issue of its authenticity in his book Hadith: Muhammad’s Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World, through an exposition of how Hadith, Muhammad’s legacy began and developed over the early Islamic centuries and perceived today among the Muslims and in the Western academia. Later he addresses some of the questions raised in the modern day discourse on the subject including how Hadith it relates to the Muslim sense of Islamic authenticity. The author also looks at some of the problems related to the Muslims dealing with the vast collections of traditions, especially the large number of forgeries therein and how well they were able to deal with them, adding another very important dimension to the issue of Hadith authenticity.

Brown’s Hadith may be loosely divided into three parts: genesis and classical Muslim approaches to Hadith, its traditional usages among the Muslims and the modern debate on its authenticity and historical worth, the latter parts naturally dependent on the first. The first chapter serves as an introduction to the book and defines some basic terms in Hadith studies like itself. The second chapter discusses how this legacy of the Prophet started in his time and developed in the early years. Hadith transmission and its collection among the Sunni Muslims constitute the important topics in this discussion. The variety of genres of Hadith literature which appeared in classical times also forms an important part of this discussion. The genesis of methods of Hadith criticism among the Sunni Muslims constitute the third chapter of Brown’s exposé on Hadith, where he highlights some of the important features of the sciences of Hadith, primarily their method in isnād classification and analysis. The fourth chapter of Brown’s Hadith discusses the genesis and development of traditions


in Shi′i Islam as well as their criticism therein. There he also briefly describes how these traditions related to the Sunni ones and the way they survived in predominantly Sunni states.

In the three chapters that follow, Brown describes the function of Hadith in Islamic law, theology and tasawwuf. The issue of legal authority of Sunnah forms a central theme in this discussion, followed by the positions of the four major Sunni legal schools, the Ḥanafi, the Mālikī, the Šafī′ī and the Ḥanbali on its legal usage and authority. The way Hadith as a source of law relates to its other sources like consensus or Ijmāʿ is also discussed in this chapter. The last two chapters bring the book to its conclusion. They offer brief discussions on the modern discourses on the authenticity of Hadith, in the west and in the Muslim world. The former discourse is categorised by Brown into four approaches, the orientalist, the philo-Islamic apologetic, the revisionist and the revaluative ones. He briefly explains the point of view of some of the proponents of these approaches, Goldziher for the first, Abbott, Azami and Sezgin, for the second, Schacht for the third and Donner and Motzki as the most prominent representatives of the last of these approaches, and elaborates on the way they relate to each other. The last two chapters carry the largest share of critique in Brown′s discussion on Hadith, which is generally descriptive. The penultimate one reviews some of the modern day Muslim views on Hadith and its authenticity, like those of the modern day Quranians who reject the authenticity of Hadith and its legal worth, either partly or fully. The last chapter of the book which is titled 'Conclusion' is followed by a glossary of important Hadith terms, and the bibliography.

Brown deserves praise for offering a simple introduction to Hadith or Traditions in this book and tries to cover its fourteen hundred odd years long history without being overly debative. Although he does offer a glimpse into the debates on Hadith in its formative periods as well as in modern times, his Hadith remains generally descriptive.

There are a few minor issues found in Brown′s Hadith though do not affect the simplistic beauty of this book, yet they need to be pointed out here since they do mar his rendition of such an important subject as Hadith. For example, at the outset of his discussion on early development of Hadith, Brown comments on the approaches of some early second (eighth) century traditionist-jurists like Malik in his traditional cum juristic musnad collection—the Muwatta′—that even when quoting the Prophet directly, he was not obsessed with complete, unbroken chains of transmission that would characterise the classical period of Hadith collection... Malik was trying to answer questions with the sources he felt were reliable and was not concerned with proving their authenticity...(see, p. 27). Here, the word ‘concern’ instead of ‘obsession’ would
have been more appropriate. Brown also discusses an example in which a student of Mālik asked him whether or not one should wash in between one's toes when performing ritual ablutions. To this Mālik replied that it was not required. Brown tells us that another student ‘Abdallāh b. Wahb objected to this, saying that they had a Hadīth in Egypt which revealed how the Prophet did wash between his toes. Mālik accepted the Hadīth as good and acted upon it from then onwards. Brown then comments that Mālik did not know of the Hadīth since he had not left Madīnah except for pilgrimage. Generalising this, Brown concludes that if Mālik did not mention a Hadīth on an issue, it was because he did not know it (see pp. 27–28). If a jurist like Mālik did not mention a Hadīth on an issue, there were reasons besides the one mentioned by Brown which renders his statement here as too simplistic an explanation for the instances where a Hadīth is not mentioned. Here, an in-depth inquiry into the jurists’ approaches to Hadīth would have added the much needed accuracy to this discussion. Another example where Brown’s comments about some genres of traditions like the Mu’jam and ‘local histories’ are partly correct but his sweeping statements about them need review. For example, he says in one place that seeking elevated chains of transmission or isnāds had become a goal in its own right in the mid-nine hundreds (or third century A.H.) and gives the example of Ṭabarānī’s Mu’jam (see, pp. 47–48). While what he says about Ṭabarānī may be true, it should not be generalised as Brown has done. At another place, one finds him claiming that Ijāza or permission of transmission was sometimes obtained even for one’s unborn child (see, p. 44) without any further explanation or evidence for the claim, which, without proper explanation, creates a confusion in the readers’ minds.

An issue which has also been discussed by Brown is that of the existence of some traditions which encourage the writing of traditions and others that prohibit it. He calls it ‘contradictory evidence’ and considers it to be ‘very problematic’ for Muslims and just after that he aptly presents the reconciliatory solution to the problem as presented by Nawawī (see, p. 21–22). The


‘evidence’ mentioned by Brown is not itself contradictory but appears to be so, else it would not have been resolvable, which renders ‘contradictory’ as redundant.

Coming to Brown’s review of the western Hadith scholarship, he introduces the subject well and covers the four major trends therein, including the currently popular western revaluation of the earlier revisionist trend. Brown presents the views of revaluators like Donner and others well. However, Motzki is not well-represented here as when Brown praises him for showing the same ‘respect’ for Hadith as Muslims have, and says that Motzki considers Zuhri’s and Ibn Jurayj’s transmissions to have been generally reliable (see, p. 226). In Motzki’s older writings like “Der Fiqh” he held the view mentioned by Brown but his more recent point of view about Zuhri is different where he holds Zuhri to be responsible for inaccuracy in transmission of some traditions. Regarding Brown’s comment on Motzki’s ‘respect’ mentioned above, it is evident from Motzki’s works like Biography that he does not consider Muslim traditions with similar respect as Muslims do. This becomes even clearer from his comments in some of his more recent writings. However, since the latter sources were published in 2010, the same year as Brown’s Hadith, he may not/did not know of it. The same cannot be said about Motzki’s Biography though, which was published in 2000.

In spite of the observations mentioned above, the value of Brown’s Hadith lies in its simple and concise description of the Hadith discourse in a short volume. On such a vast and much debated topic as Hadith, Brown’s Hadith is one which tries to afford its readers a glimpse into the genesis and development of the primary text of Islam, which is second only to the Qur’an in its importance. It also introduces the readers to some of the important academic classical and current debates on the subject. Last but not least is Brown’s suggested ‘further readings’ at the end of every chapter of his Hadith, which provide the readers with a way to further enrich their experience with Hadith or Islamic traditions. This book may also be described as an introduction to Hadith, a purpose that it serves quite well.

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115. He points out that written record of Hadith did exist, but were avoided for public use, which probably resolves the evidence considered by Brown as contradictory.  
14 Ibid. 170–239.  