The Textual Integrity of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*

A Study on the Primary Recensions, Textual Variants, and Transmission of the *Ṣaḥīḥ*

Muntasir Zaman

Qaḷam

Contents

Appendices

Introduction

Described as "the most authentic book after the Quran,"[1] *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* is an embodiment of critical scholarship and a paragon of the hadith tradition. The unrivaled standards of verification utilized to authenticate its contents require little introduction.[2] What is less known, to an anglophone readership at least, is its transmission after Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl al-Bukhārī's (d. 256 AH) demise. Thousands of people are said to have attended readings of the *Ṣaḥīḥ* under al-Bukhārī, but only a handful of them played an active role in transmitting the book to posterity. What further complicates the issue is that its extant oral and manuscript transmission effectively bottlenecks at one student, Muḥammad b. Yūsuf al-Farabrī (d. 320 AH).[3] While a single individual conveying information may not be an issue in many circumstances, in this case, a serious question is often raised: Why is it that a book so consequential to the faith—second only to its divine scripture—reached posterity via such a narrow route? To add insult to injury, the single narrator purportedly lacks explicit accreditation and praise from his contemporaries.

In his 1993 study on Islamic law, the British historian Norman Calder dismissed the ascription of several early works to their purported compilers. These collections, Calder argued, were the result of systematic pseudepigraphy, redaction, and organic growth. The written corpora of scholars like Mālik b. Anas (d. 179 AH), Muḥammad al-Shaybānī (d. 189 AH),

---

1   Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ, *Maʿrifat anwāʿ ʿilm al-ḥadīth* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1986), 18; al-Nawawī, *al-Adhkār* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2004), 32.

2   On al-Bukhārī's methods of authentication and hadith criticism in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*, see Abū Bakr Kāfī, *Manhaj al-Imām al-Bukhārī fī taṣḥīḥ al-aḥādīth wa-taʿlīlihā* (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 2002). On his legal principles, see Scott C. Lucas, "The Legal Principles of Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl al-Bukhārī and their Relationship to Classical Salafi Islam," *Islamic Law and Society* 13, no. 3 (2006): 289–324.

3   The name of al-Farabrī is so closely tied with al-Bukhārī that a seventh century critic made the demonstrably inaccurate claim that al-Bukhārī had no other students. See al-Dhahabī, *Siyar aʿlām al-nubalāʾ* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 1985), 1:103.

al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204 AH), and al-Bukhārī reached their final form much later than their alleged dates of compilation.[4] At the heart of Calder's contentions are the absence of the autographs of these works and supposed discrepancies in their composition. His revisionist claims were challenged and discredited by subsequent studies.[5] There is much to unpack in Calder's contentions, but this study hopes to put these concerns regarding the Ṣaḥīḥ to rest.[6]

In the face of thousands of manuscripts,[7] commentaries, contemporaneous and secondary citations,[8] and supplementary works (e.g., *mustakhraj*s) from different epochs and regions, to deny the overall ascription

---

4   Norman Calder, *Studies in Early Muslim Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 36, 39, 84, 194–95, 229. In a 2001 paper on *al-Tārīkh al-kabīr*, Christopher Melchert states that "the attribution of our present Ṣaḥīḥ to al-Bukhārī's lifetime remains questionable." In a 2010 paper, Melchert denies that the Ṣaḥīḥ was posthumously projected back to al-Bukhārī but maintains that "he left it in a somewhat unfinished state" and that "the Ṣaḥīḥ is a little less securely attributed." See Christopher Melchert, "Bukhārī and Early Hadith Criticism," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121, no. 1 (2001): 19; Christopher Melchert, "Bukhārī and His Ṣaḥīḥ," *MUSEON* 123, nos. 3–4 (2010): 444, 446.

5   On the authorship of Mālik's *Muwaṭṭaʾ*, see ʿUmar F. ʿAbd-Allāh, *Mālik and Medina: Islamic Legal Reasoning in the Formative Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 52–57, which incorporates Miklós Murányi's research on the subject. On al-Shaybānī's works, see Behnam Sadeghi, *The Logic of Law Making in Islam* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 177–199. On al-Shāfiʿī's works, see Ahmed El Shamsy, "Al-Shāfiʿī's Written Corpus: A Source-Critical Study," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 132, no. 2 (2012): 199–220. On ʿAbd al-Razzāq's *Muṣannaf*, see Harald Motzki, "The Author and His Works in the Islamic Literature of the First Centuries," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 28 (2003): 171–93.

6   Twentieth-century scholars like the Moroccan ʿAbd al-Ḥayy al-Kattānī (d. 1962) and the Egyptian Maḥmūd Shākir (d. 1997) tackled the rising skepticism toward classical literary and oral sources by noting the inconsistent methods of critics and the disastrous ramification of such a revisionist attitude. See Ahmed El Shamsy, *Rediscovering the Islamic Classics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2020), 199–208.

7   The Muʾassasat Āl al-Bayt catalog of hadith manuscripts lists 2,327 manuscripts of the Ṣaḥīḥ that were written in various periods of history and located in libraries throughout the world. See *al-Fihris al-shāmil li-l-turāth al-ʿArabī al-Islāmī al-makhṭūṭ*, 7:493–565. The catalog was published over three decades ago, and many manuscripts have been discovered since, so the current number is much higher.

8   Secondary references include al-Bayhaqī (d. 458 AH) citing hadith from the Ṣaḥīḥ with his own chain to al-Bukhārī, and contemporaneous citations refer to al-Tirmidhī (d. 279 AH) mentioning hadith that al-Bukhārī included in the Ṣaḥīḥ. Examples of both will be provided in the following chapters.

of the *Ṣaḥīḥ* to Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl al-Bukhārī requires a level of revisionist skepticism that lacks academic credibility—yet provocative titles arguing exactly that abound.[9] As astutely noted by al-ʿIzz b. ʿAbd al-Salām, wholescale skepticism toward the provenance of ancient texts would render functioning in society unmanageable.[10] Considering the efforts that scholars exerted to edit and preserve hadith collections, particularly *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī,* a fortiori there should be no question about the provenance of these collections.[11] Moving past the basic premise of ascribing the *Ṣaḥīḥ* to al-Bukhārī, this study will examine the textual integrity of the *Ṣaḥīḥ* on a granular level. Although the *Ṣaḥīḥ* was compiled by al-Bukhārī, how much of the current text resembles the compiler's autograph, and if they differ, then what are the causes and extent of the divergences?

For argument's sake, even if the veracity of the *Ṣaḥīḥ* were put into question, the ramifications on the hadith corpus would not be ruinous. The thoughts of the Ḥanbalī polymath Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728 AH) on this matter are instructive for our purposes:

> The hadith of al-Bukhārī and Muslim are narrated by countless other scholars and hadith experts. Neither of them is unique in their narrations; before and after them, many have narrated those very hadith. If al-Bukhārī and Muslim were not born, the faith would not be lacking, for those hadith would exist through other routes in a manner that would meet, or even exceed, the objective.[12]

At first blush, these comments may come across as dismissive of the vaunted place of the *Ṣaḥīḥayn* in Muslim intellectual history. However, considering the assumption that the foundations of Islam hinge on the veracity

---

9   See, for instance, Rashīd Aylāl, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: Nihāyat usṭura* (Rabat: Dār al-Waṭan, 2017), 163–164, 279–280. An early example of such skepticism comes from the Zaydī scholar of Yemen Jamāl al-Dīn ʿAlī b. Muḥammad b. Abī al-Qāsim (d. 837 AH). His student Ibn al-Wazīr (d. 840 AH) wrote a multivolume book to respond to these and other contentions of Jamal al-Dīn. See Ibn al-Wazīr, *al-ʿAwāṣim wa-l-qawāṣim fī al-dhabb ʿan sunnat Abī al-Qāsim* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 1992), 302ff.

10   Al-Burzulī, *Fatāwā al-Burzulī,* 1:79.

11   Al-Suyūṭī, *Tadrīb al-rāwī,* 1:574; see also Ibn al-Wazīr, *al-ʿAwāṣim wa-l-qawāṣim,* 1:302.

12   Ibn Taymiyya, *Minhāj al-sunna fī naqḍ kalam al-Shīʿa al-qadariyya* (Riyadh: Jāmiʿat al-Imām Muḥammad b. Saʿūd al-Islāmiyya, 1986), 7:215. The research of Aḥmad Snober on the number of hadith that are unique to the *Ṣaḥīḥ* will be mentioned in the conclusion.

Geographic and Chronological Spread

Everything discussed thus far relates to the immediate transmission of the *Ṣaḥīḥ*. When the students of al-Nasafī, Ḥammād, and al-Farabrī began transmitting the *Ṣaḥīḥ* themselves, there now emerged a second generation of recensions of the text, each with its textual idiosyncrasies and variations. The subrecensions of al-Nasafī and Ḥammād will be addressed in their respective sections. In the case of al-Farabrī, there are at least twenty-four subrecensions.[67] Apart from Ibn al-Sakan (d. 353 AH) and al-Naqqāsh (d. 351 AH), his students were predominantly from the neighboring towns of Khurasan and Transoxiana. His prominent students include Abū Zayd al-Marwazī (d. 371 AH), Ibn ʿAdī (d. 365), and "the Three Shaykhs:" al-Mustamlī (d. 376), al-Sarakhsī (d. 381 AH), and al-Kushmīhanī (d. 381). One of his most influential students in terms of spreading the text was Ibn al-Sakan, who was born in Baghdad but later settled in Egypt, a geographically convenient location for students traveling from the Maghreb. Thus, Ibn al-Sakan became the linchpin for al-Farabrī's recension to travel to the other end of the Muslim world.[68]

By the third and fourth generation of transmitters, al-Farabrī's recension not only reached every important center of learning, but it also became the de facto route of transmission for the *Ṣaḥīḥ*. Figure 2 illustrates the transmission and spread of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* from its three primary recensions until the end of the fifth century AH.[69] To be clear, scholarly activity surrounding the *Ṣaḥīḥ* involved more than its transmission. During the "long fourth century AH," *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (and *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*) witnessed a period of "intense canonization" in the regions of Jurjān, Isfahan, Nishapur, and Baghdad. By virtue of groundbreaking books like al-Ismāʿīlī's (d. 370 AH) *al-Mustakhraj*, Abū al-Ḥasan al-Dāraquṭnī's (d. 385 AH) *al-Ilzāmāt,* and al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī's (d. 405 AH) *al-Mustadrak*, the *Ṣaḥīḥ* was foregrounded as a masterpiece of hadith literature.[70]

---

67 On al-Farabrī's students, see ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm, *Riwāyāt*, 1:173; "Introduction," in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (ed. Bayt al-Sunna), 1:226–420.

68 Muḥammad al-Manūfī, "*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* fī al-dirāsāt al-Maghribiyya min khilāl ruwātihi al-awwalīn wa-uṣūlihi," in *Qabas min ʿaṭāʾ al-makhṭūṭ al-Maghribī* (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1999), 79ff. As stated by al-Manūfī, al-Farabrī's other students like Abū Zayd al-Marwazī also had many notable Maghrebi students.

69 The biographies and information for these transmitters can be found in "Introduction," in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (ed. Bayt al-Sunna), 1:226–420.

70 Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim*, 100–153.

No.	HN	Nasafī	Farabrī	VT	CR	SRC	Ref	Comment
593	6,886	"kitāb Allāh al-qiṣāṣ"	"al-qiṣāṣ"	MT	N	FB	12:214	
594	6,891	"qatil"	"qatl"	MT	F	FB	12:219	Also mentioned by al-Mustamlī. This variant was preferred by Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ and others.
595	6,911	"istaʿāra"	"istaʿāna"	CH	N	FB	12:253	
596	6,911	"kuttāb"	"al-kuttāb"	CH	N	FB	12:253	
597	6,918	Placement of bas-mala between kitāb and bāb		CH	N	FB	12:264	
598	6,918	Rewording of the bāb		CH	N	FB	12:264	
599	6,918	Rewording of the kitāb		CH	N	FB	12:264	
600	6,918	"ml-muʿāhadīn"	"al-muʿānidīn"	CH	F	IQ	5:12	Also mentioned by al-Jurjānī. The latter is more accurate.
601	6,922	Truncation of the verse		CH	N	FB	12:268	The truncation results in a confusion between the verses.

No.	HN	Nasafī	Farabrī	VT	CR	SRC	Ref	Comment
602	6,922	Truncation of the verse		CH	N	FB	12:269	
603	6,940	Truncation of the verses		CH	N	FB	12:313	Some recensions incorrectly alter the verse.
604	6,946	"al-āya"	"ilā ākhirihi"	CH	N	FB	12:319	
605	6,948		"karhan wa-kurhan"	CH	N	FB	12:321	
606	6,967		Chapter heading	CH	O	FB	12:339	Also omitted by al-Ismāʿīlī.
607	6,972	"unādiyahu"	"ubādiyahu"	MT	F	QI	1:81	Also mentioned by al-Kushmīhanī.
608	6,982	Suspended report from Ibn ʿAbbās after hadith		MT	F	FB	12:361	Also mentioned by al-Mustamlī and al-Kushmīhanī via Abū Dharr.
609	6,982	"bāb awwal mā budiʾa"		CH	N	FB	12:352	
610	6,986		Chapter heading	CH	N	FB	12:373	Resolves an objection.