
In his landmark manual of hadith science entitled Ma'rifat Anwā' Ullām (or Ṭlm) al-Ḥadīth, also known as the Musqadīma, the great Syrian master Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ (577-634) brought under one roof the collected wisdom of his three great precursors – al-Rāmahurmuzī's al-Muhaddith al-Fāṣil, al-Hākim’s Ma'rifat Ullām al-Ḥadīth, and al-Khaṭīb’s Kīṭāya fi Ṭlm al-Riwāya – assessing, selecting, and organizing their material into a final canon for the greater benefit and to the unanimous approval of teachers and students of hadith from East to West down to our times.

Michigan and Yale graduate Eerik Dickinson, author of the 2001 Development of Early Sunnite Ḥadīth Criticism, based his rendering of Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ on the definitive Syrian edition of our teacher Nūr al-Dīn ʿItr, enhancing it – and its size – out of the footnotes of the 1,000-page Egyptian edition by the late ʿĀʾisha, Bint al-Ṣalāḥī. Its English and erudition rank with the works of Muḥammad Mustafā al-A zamī and the late Muḥammad Ḥāmidullah in hadith culture, and redeem the genre from the spot where Muḥammad Ḥāshim Kamāl’s disappointing Ḥadīth Methodology had left it. The result is a classic in its own right and, although printed at low cost in Lebanon and subsidized by Qatari patrons, its high-end pricing by Reading’s Garnet Publishing will insure it is pirated for many years to come.

For all the footnotes, the translator overly relied on the Bint al-Ṣalāḥī edition and therefore overlooked flagging some famously problematic notions which ʿItr rectified in his otherwise sparse marginalia. In Category 30, for example, the statement attributed to Imām ʿĀḥmad ibn Ḥanbal incorrectly puts in his mouth the condemnation of the mass-transmitted hadith: “On the Day of Resurrection I will be the [prosecutor] of whoever harms a [covenanted].” In Category 62, several of Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ’s examples for the Reliable Transmitters Who Confused Their Ḥadīth at the End of Their Life are disputed. In Category 41, it should have been pointed out that the claim that al-Zuhrī narrated from his student Mālik was rejected by Ibn Ḥād ibn al-Barr.

A technical field such as the categories of hadith (ullām al-ḥadīth) requires a translator to invent terminology. Dickinson’s felicitous choices – e.g. “parallelisms” for muṭābaʿāt, “impairing defect” for ʿilla qāḍīha, “paidonymics” for kunā, “gentilics” for ansāb, “bone-setter” for ḡābir – show the intelligence of the topic one prays for. A few basic terms, however, are obscured:

- The muŋqatī is not “interrupted ḥadīth” but “broken-chained” in one or more places of the chain.
- The mursal is not “loose ḥadīth” but rather “expedited,” “dispatched” over one or more missing links.
- “Misrepresentation” is a commentary for tadlīs but not a translation. “Concealment” and “camouflage” are both more accurate and precise since the most common type of tadlīṣ consists in occulting a name completely, and not just misrepresent it.
- “Unfamiliar” is too mild for munker which is better rendered as “disclaimed” if not “rejected.”
- Even more than “analysis,” iṭibār conveys the sense of “evaluation.”
- The afrād are not exactly “isolated ḥadīths” but literally “unique” ḥadīths from one or more of the perspectives Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ himself outlines in the chapter to that effect.
- Rather than the vague term “disrupted,” muddārib is best translated as “inconsistent” or “discrepant.”
- Similarly, “contradictory ḥadīth” is not what the scholars meant by mukhtalif al-ḥadīth but rather “reconcilable ḥadīths.” Reconcilability is indeed the driving force of the entire category in the classics of the genre such as the works of Ibn Qutayba and others.
- Rather than “mixed-up” I believe “topsy-turvy” is perfect for the maqlūbīn.
- “Licensing” is as inelegant for ijāza as “positive law” for fiqḥ, but “global license” for ijāza ʿāmma? Use “general.”
- “Transference” for munāwalā is strange and uncommitted. More literal and precise is “handover” even if it is a neologism, especially since a munāwala does not necessarily amount to the narrational permission “transference” suggests.
- Mudābbaj is not “symmetrical transmission” but “reciprocal transmission.”
- To translate “raʾy” as “arbitrary opinions” makes short thrift of the firmly established division of raʾy into sound and unsound types. Sound raʾy is the same as madhhab – what fiqḥ and ʾiḥtīḥād are all about. Capricious raʾy is the archway of bidʿa and heresy. From the earliest generation many examples of sound raʾy – by the Second Caliph and other major Companions – were validated by the Prophet himself, upon him and them blessings and peace. Such approval pre-empts any velleity of subsequent generations to stem the dynamism of qualified scholarly striving which the word raʾy, at its best, denotes, and which its translation ought to allow: please stick to “opinion(s)” or “juridical opinion(s)” or the like.
- “Source” for makhraj is murky and the footnote does nothing to help: “The word makhraj is not a technical term in the study of ḥadīth and on its own yielded very little meaning to later commentators. They tended
to interpret the clause ‘the source of which is known’ as a reference to the necessity of cohesion in the isnād of the fair hadith.” In fact, the makhraj of the hadith is literally “the place/way it emerges,” its “outset,” and refers to the top links of its chain. If these links are recognized, it is a sign the chain exists in reality, but not that it is necessarily fair since the h.adīth and/or chain could be sound, weak, or even forged. A makhraj needs to be known to any pre-sixth-century authority, otherwise it is dismissed out of hand.

- Not zujjāja and dajjāja but zujāja and dajāja.

Contrary to the translator’s footnote at the end of Category 2, “the finest classical biographical dictionary” is not al-Khatīb al-Baghdādi’s Tārīkh Baghdādī but either al-Dhahabi’s Tārīkh al-Islām or Siyar A’lām al-Nubalāʾ or his student Tāj al-Dīn Ibn al-Subki’s Tabaqāt al-Shāfi’iyya al-Kubrā. All four are mentioned in the bibliography (on a par with G.H.A. Juynboll, somewhat like citing a Daltonian in a textbook on Monet) but, in any case, the translator’s prefatory presentation of Ibn al-Salāḥ does not reflect knowledge of any of those masterpieces.

The translator warns us that “Ibn al-Salāḥ did not have at his disposal that great scholarly convenience, the footnote. He therefore had to incorporate his digressions in the body of the text. In the instances where these are relatively lengthy or interrupt the flow of the argument, I have distinguished them by presenting them as an indented text block.” But his criterion for what qualifies as a digression on the part of Ibn al-Salāḥ is arbitrary, and other readers past and present consider those passages to be integral parts of the author’s argument. Stranger yet is his idea that “[t]he Muqaddimah amply exemplifies what Professor Franz Rosenthal [his teacher] has called the philnomynous (sic) character of Islamic scholarship.” He also asks, “[h]ow can we explain the astonishing success of this work, since it clearly broke little new ground in terms of its basic format?” These two remarks – especially the first – exemplify the paradox of the graduates of Orientalism being such skilled technicians who lack a sense of the ethos of Ilm and the very disciplines they chair, teach, and write about.

Indeed, the translator’s entire introduction is disquieting and seems to have been dashed off on a bad day. What to say of the disparagement of the great Hanbali hadith Master ‘Abd al-Ghanī al-Maqdisī, known as Ibn Sūrūr (to whom such luminaries of ḥadīth and its fiqh such as Ibn Daqīq al-Ḥd and al-Mizzī became indebted), as “a pathological troublemaker and career martyr”? Or the assessment that “Ibn al-Salāḥ’s networking finally paid off” with his professorship at the Rawāḥiyya school? Or the sarcasm that “the acquisition of the sandal of the Prophet was his [the ruler of Syria al-Malik al-Ashraf’s] major cultural achievement”? I suggest Mr. Dickinson look up the Siyar for the exchange that took place between Ibn Sīrīn and ‘Abīdat al-Salmānī, followed by al-Dhahabi’s comments, to learn the place a Prophetic relic holds in the hearts of Muslims.

The volume sorely lacks an index of Arabic terms. See the mustalah index appended to Mūsā Furber’s translation of Ibn Hajar’s Nukhbat al-Fikar in the first volume of our Sunna Notes series published at the Al-Qur‘ān wal-Sunna Association of Birmingham.

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