

Explosive Increase Of Isnâd & Its Implications

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Assalamu-alaikum wa rahamatullahi wa barakatuhu:

Introduction

This document can be considered as an appendix to [On The Nature Of Hadîth Collections Of Imâm Bukhârî & Muslim](#).

Our main concern here is with the statements made by Nabia Abbott in her book [Studies In Arabic Literary Papyri](#) on the issue of isnâd (i.e., chain of transmitters of the hadîth) and the implications of her statements on the authenticity of hadîth literature and scientific nature of hadîth sciences.

It has already been [observed](#) that Imâm al-Bukhârî and Imâm Muslim selected only a few authentic hadîth from their vast collection and left out many traditions, despite their authenticity, simply to avoid excessive length and repetition. This repetition arose due to explosive increase of isnâds during their lifetime.

Nabia Abbott On Isnâd

Nabia Abbott, a prominent orientalist who conducted an extensive study on hadîth literature and papyri, observed that the phenomenal growth of the corpus of this literature is not due to growth in content but due to progressive increase in the parallel and multiple chains of transmission, i.e., isnâds:

... the traditions of Muḥammad as transmitted by his Companions and their Successors were, as a rule, scrupulously scrutinised at each step of the transmission, and that the so called phenomenal growth of Tradition in the second and third centuries of Islam was not primarily growth of content, so far as the hadîth of Muḥammad and the hadîth of the Companions are concerned, but represents largely the progressive increase in parallel and multiple chains of transmission.^[1]

Take a highly simplified example of one Companion narrating a single hadîth from the Prophet to two students: these students themselves teaching that narration again to two pupils each and so on until we reach the time of al-Bukhârî and his contemporaries. We will find that in al-Bukhârî's generation at least 16 individuals will be hearing the hadîth from their respective teachers. Because each individual

chain of transmission counts as a separate ḥadīth, what started out as a single narration transmitted by one Companion only, has evolved within a short period of time to 16 ḥadīth; an increase of 1600%. The true nature of affairs, however, being far greater, with a far greater number of Companions transmitting a far greater number of narrations to a far greater number of students. This then is the form in which proliferation took place, the dispersion of narrators and chains of transmission. Using the mathematical application of geometric progression, Nabia Abbott concludes:

... using geometric progression, we find that one to two thousand Companions and senior Successors transmitting two to five traditions each would bring us well within the range of the total number of traditions credited to the exhaustive collections of the third century. **Once it is realised that the isnad did, indeed, initiate a chain reaction that resulted in an explosive increase in the number of traditions, the huge numbers that are credited to Ibn Ḥanbal, Muslim and Bukhārī seem not so fantastic after all.**^[2]

An Example

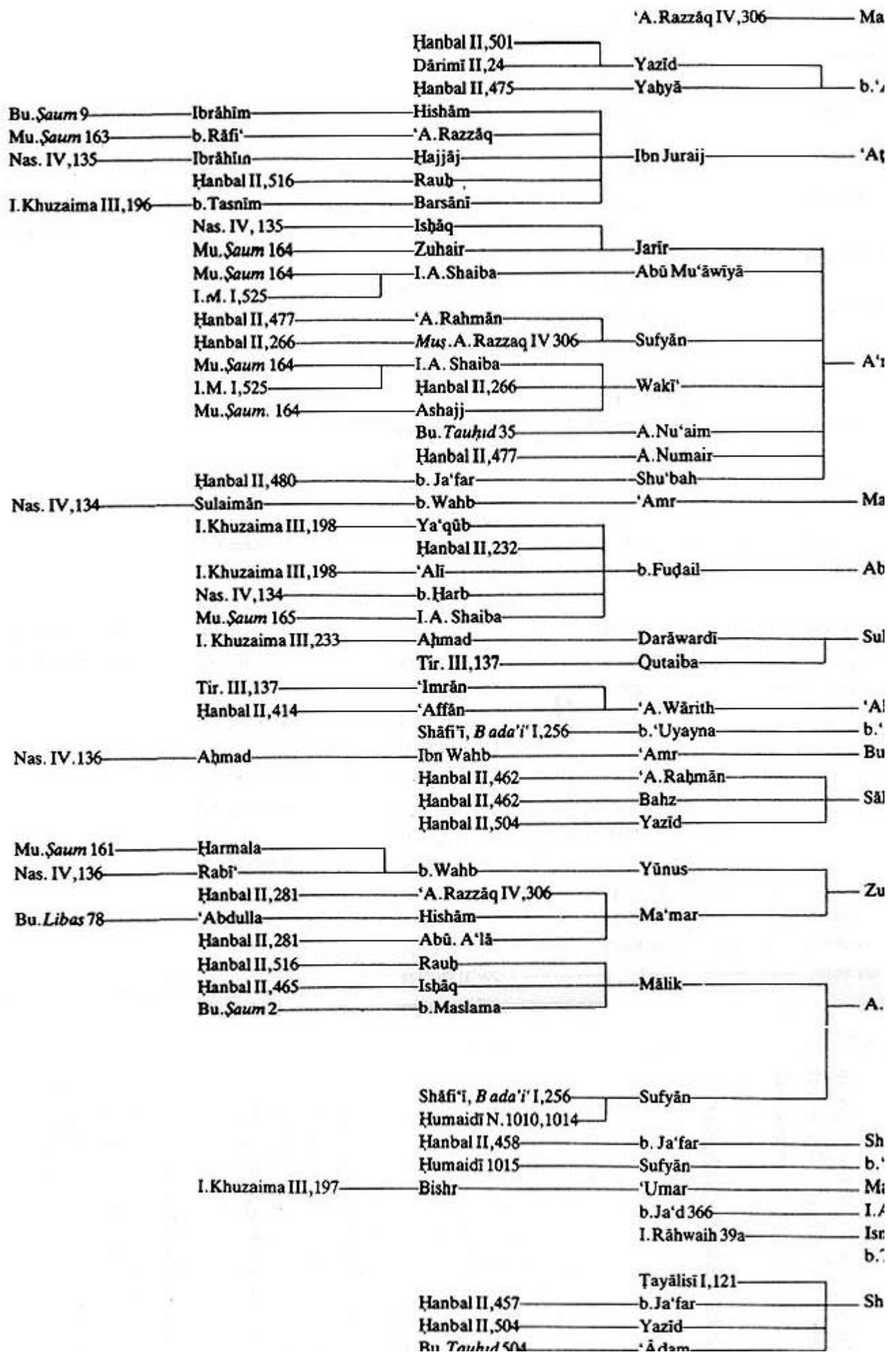
Before we begin with the implication of explosive increase of isnād, a review of fundamentals of ḥadīth is necessary. Every ḥadīth consists of a matn (text) and an isnād (the chain of narrators). The ḥadīth is [evaluated](#) on the basis of the matn and isnād. Isnād, as it is well known, is unique to Islam. The purpose of isnād is the disclosure of the source of information. In the final stage, the source must lead to the person who had direct contact to the highest authority to whom the statement belonged. In other words, the principle of evaluation of the ḥadīth is similar to what is known as the law of witnesses. This is a well-recognised principle in the courts of law all around the world to evaluate/cross-examine a person who said or saw or heard something from someone or somewhere and verify the authenticity of the person's statement. In the science of ḥadīth, this verification takes a new dimension. The transmitters of the ḥadīth are carefully scrutinised to make sure that the persons named could in fact have met one another, that they could be trusted to repeat the story accurately, and that they did not hold any heretical views. This implied extensive biographical studies; and many biographical dictionaries have been preserved giving the basic information about a man's teachers and pupils, the views of later scholars (on his reliability as a transmitter) and the date of his death.

In order to show what Nabia Abbott really meant by explosive increase in isnād, let us take an example of the ḥadīth on fasting. This ḥadīth has been transmitted fully as well as in parts.^[3]

Abû Huraira reported the Prophet saying: (that Almighty Allah has said) Every act of the son of Adam is for him; every good deed will receive tenfold except fasting. It is [exclusively] meant for me, and I [alone] will reward it. He abandons his food for My sake and abandons drinking for My sake and abandons his pleasure for My

sake. When any one of you is fasting he should neither indulge in sex nor use obscene language. If anyone reviles him he should say, "I am fasting." The one who fasts has two [occasions] of joy: one when he breaks the fast and one on the day when he will meet his Lord. And the breath [of a fasting person] is sweeter to Allâh than the fragrance of musk.

The chart below shows the transmission of the isnâd of this hadîth to the classical collections [to be read from right to left]:



This lengthy ḥadīth has been transmitted by many scholars in parts. Ibn Ḥanbal has endorsed it at least 24 times. It is preserved in the collections of A'mash (d. 148 A.H.), Ibn Juraij (d. 150 A.H.), and Ibrāhīm b. Tahmān (d. 168), transmitters from the students of Abū Huraira. It is also found in Shi'ite, Zaidī, and Ibadī sources.

Confining the discussion only to the third generation of narrators from Abū Huraira, who mostly belong to the first half of the second century of the Hijra, the following features appear: There are 22 third-generation transmitters-nine from Medina, five from Baṣra, four from Kūfa, and one each from Mecca, Wasit, Hijāz, and Khurasan. These variously trace their source to 11 students of Abū Huraira, whose homes were in Medina, Baṣra, and Kūfa. A second interesting point is that not all the Medinese, Basrites, or Kufans are the students of one man. Three of the Basrites trace the source of their knowledge to one Basrite, but the other two cite two different Medinese as their source.

This ḥadīth is not an isolated case of such an extensive transmission. Professor al-Azamī adds that:

I have demonstrated this position in three aḥādīth only. By going through Studies, Arabic section, 30 charts can be produced, and by going through al-A'zamī, Ziyaur Rahmān's work on Abū Huraira, 1000 charts can be drawn on this grand scale for the aḥādīth transmitted by Abū Huraira alone.^[4]

It is clear from our discussion that the isnād did result in an explosive increase in the multiple and parallel chains of transmission of the aḥādīth that trace back to the Prophet^(p) and the companions. The content, however, did not increase. Now what are the implications of the explosive increase in isnād?

The Implications

Here, we are primarily concerned about various hypotheses put forward by Joseph Schacht in his book Origins Of Muhammadan Jurisprudence concerning isnād. Most of the issue are already refuted by Professor M Mustāfa al-Azamī in his book On Schacht's Origins Of Muhammadan Jurisprudence. We will only summarize some of the refutations here, insha'allah.

"Projecting-back" hypothesis: For a careful reader of the above chart of chain of transmission, it is clear that forgery of a ḥadīth on such a grand scale is impossible as the number of scholars and transmitters of the ḥadīth were spread throughout the Muslim empire from Spain to India. One interesting feature of this is that it refutes Schacht's 'projecting-back' the ḥadīth to the Prophet^(p) or his companions hypothesis, i.e., someone invented the ḥadīth and then projected it back to the time of Prophet^(p). The second and third generation transmitters of the ḥadīth are considered by Schacht to have involved in this conspiracy. As the above chart shows that if a ḥadīth is fabricated and projected back to the earlier authorities, it would mean that the person who invented the ḥadīth has to ask his teachers and students as well as other Muslim scholars in various parts of the Muslim world to graft the isnād which would take the ḥadīth back to the Prophet^(p) or his companions. As anyone can see, this would also

require that the same ḥadīth present in the books of earlier scholars be impugned and new isnād grafted. This means a conspiracy of monumental proportions that would involve people from different parts of the Muslim world to come together and hatch such a plot.

Here we might as well accuse Schacht of projecting his doctrines forward.

Creation of supporting traditions : In this hypothesis of Schacht, a ḥadīth was fabricated, the isnād of constructed and was projected forward in time. Let us assume that some person from second or third generation of transmitters fabricated a ḥadīth and perhaps made an arrangement for the duplication of isnād, entrusting his students with the secret and instructing them to ask the scholars of a hundred years later or even more to fabricate new isnāds to support his false ḥadīth, and that the request was accepted by Ibn Hanbal and Bukhārī and others. Would Schacht have us believe that the originator of this fabricated ḥadīth was able to contact scholars scattering from Khurasan to Egypt and from Syria to Yemen informing them of the need to project the doctrine back to early scholars? Collusion and forgery on so wide a scale is hard to credit.

Suppression of undesirable material: In a further attempt to discredit the scholars of the time, Schacht claims that since the ḥadīth as narrated by Hisham (d. 146 AH) shows the Prophet and ʿAʿiṣha in a disconcerting light, the crucial point was formally mitigated in a version with the new isnād Mālik - Yaḥyā b. Saʿīd - ʿAmra - ʿAʿiṣha, and a shortened one with the isnād Mālik - Nāfiʿ - Ibn ʿUmar - ʿAʿiṣha... Oddly enough, Bukhārī, Muslim, ʿAbdur Razzaq, and Ibn Hanbal all record Hishām's version without noting or suppressing this 'disconcerting' aspect of the Prophet's behaviour. Moreover, Nāfiʿ died 30 years earlier than Hishām, and according to Schacht, Hishām's version most probably did not exist in the life of Nāfiʿ. Schacht thus asks us to believe that Nāfiʿ had the foresight to see that after 30 years Hishām would present the Prophet and ʿAʿiṣha in a disconcerting light, and thus mitigated the crucial point before its existence.^[5]

Family isnāds: According to one of the lesser theories of Schacht, **all** family isnāds are spurious. This has lead him to reject many well-authenticated ḥadīth and isnāds. Muslim scholars on the other hand did not claim that all family isnāds are genuine, as is quite obvious from their biographical works. Some of family isnāds which were denounced are:

Maʿmar b. Muḥammad and his transmission from his father.

ʿIsā b. ʿAbdallāh from his father.

Kaṭhīr b. ʿAbd Allāh from his father.

Mūsā b. Maṭīr from his father.

Yaḥyā b. ʿAbd Allāh from his father.

But one should not go too far in the dismissal of family isnāds. If a statement of a father about his son or vice versa, or a wife about her husband, or a friend about a

friend, or a colleague about a colleague is always unacceptable, then on what basis could biography possibly written? Professor Schacht would want us to believe that all the biographies written till now are forgeries.^[6]

And Allah knows best!

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References

[1] Nabia Abbott, [Studies In Arabic Literary Papyri](#), Volume II (Qur'ânic Commentary & Tradition), 1967, The University Of Chicago Press, p. 2.

[2] *Ibid.*, p. 72.

[3] M Mustāfa al-Azamî, [On Schacht's Origins Of Muhammadan Jurisprudence](#), 1996, The Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies & Islamic Text Society. The discussion starts from p. 157.

[4] *Ibid.*, p. 165.

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 205.

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 197.