

On The Nature Of Hadīth Collections Of Imām Al-Bukhārī & Muslim

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Assalamu-alaikum wa rahamatullahi wa barakatuhu:

Introduction

Over the years, Christian missionaries have solidified their reputation for embracing zealous new recruits. One fresh addition to this delegation of holy servicemen is the neophyte, Andrew Vargo. More often than not, the missionaries have overlooked the academic backgrounds of these fresh recruits, apparently intoxicated by their impassioned hatred for Islam. Mr. Vargo has recently tried his hand as a student of comparative religion, introducing some of the most fantastic ideas yet to the discourse. Among these ideas is a rather [boastful claim](#) concerning the collection of ahadīth by the great Muslim scholar, Imām al-Bukhārī (d. 256 A.H). The highlight of Vargo's claim lies in the following:

In fact, it is difficult, in spite of the Muslim "science" of Hadith to know which traditions are strong or weak! For example, Bukhari collected over 600,000 reports, but kept only 7,397 as true!

As we shall see, feisty statements such as the above only prove to be self-defeating in the end. This article intends to examine Mr. Vargo's thesis in light of the scholarship of Imām al-Bukhārī, and thereby ascertain the actual worth of the neophyte's claim.

To appreciate the broader perspective, we will also include a discussion of Imām Muslim's ahadīth collection, insha'allah.

Imām Bukhārī & The Nature Of His Collection

Andrew Vargo has practically begged the question for us already - where exactly does Imām al-Bukhārī mention that among the 600,000 ahadīth in his collection, only 7,397 are to be accepted as 'true'? The neophyte maintains the missionary tradition of conveniently omitting any references that would support his thesis; the mark of a true academician, indeed! Once again, it is left to the Muslims to enlighten the ill-informed missionary on this matter.

Imām al-Bukhārī's actual words have been reproduced below:

تشاجر قوم في البخاري ومسلم لدي وقالوا: أي ذين تقدمت فقلت: لقد فاق البخاري صحة كما فاق في حسن الصناعة مسلم * لم يستوعب «الصحيحان» كل الأحاديث الصحيحة، بدليل قول البخاري: «ما أدخلت في كتابي «الجامع» إلا ما صح، وتركت من الصحاح مخافة الطول»^(١). وقول مسلم: «ليس كل شيء عندي صحيح وضعته ها

(١) «مجموع فتاوى شيخ الإسلام» ص ٧٤ ج ١٨.

(٢) غرضه لم يذكر جميع طرق الحديث الواحد.

* The two sahîh collections did not gather the totality of the authentic ahâdîth as proved by al-Bukhârî's testimony: "I have not included in my book al-Jâmi° but what is authentic, and I left out among the authentic for fear of [excessive] length. (Footnote 2)"

Footnote 2 says:

He [al-Bukhârî] meant that he did not mention all the turuq [parallel chains of transmission] for each and every hadîth.⁽¹⁾

To reiterate this in elementary English for the neophyte, Imâm al-Bukhârî selected only a few authentic ahâdîth from his vast collection. However, he left out certain traditions, despite their authenticity, simply to avoid excessive length and repetition in his al-Jâmi° (a discussion about which is given below). If anything, the privilege to make such a gesture is highly complimentary to the authenticity of the Islamic traditions. In another tradition, Imâm al-Bukhârî is also reported to have said:

قال سمعت السعداني يقول سمعت بعض أصحابنا يقول قال محمد بن اسماعيل :
أخرجت هذا الكتاب - يعني الصحيح - من زهاء ستمائة ألف حديث . أخبرنا
أبو سعد الماليني قال أنبأنا عبد الله بن عدي قال سمعت الحسن بن الحسين
البخاري يقول سمعت إبراهيم بن معقل يقول سمعت محمد بن اسماعيل البخاري يقول:
ما أدخلت في كتابي الجامع إلا ما صح وتركت من الصحاح لحال الطوال . حدثني

He said, I heard as-Sa'dânî say, I heard some of our companions say, Muḥammad Ibn Ismâ'îl said: I selected/published [the content of] this book - meaning the Sahîh book - from about 600,000 hadîths/reports. Abû Sa'd al-Mâlînî informed us that 'Abdullâh Ibn 'Udayy informed us: I heard al-Ḥasan Ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Bukhârî say: "I have not included in my book al-Jâmi° but what is

authentic, and I left out among the authentic what I could not get hold of." ^[2]

The above quotation reflects Imâm al-Bukhârî's gallant honesty to admit that he was not able to collect each and every authentic tradition that existed in his day. Rather, his *al-Jâmi'* is only a partial collection of authentic traditions, despite its massive volume. Furthermore, it should be clarified for the neophyte that the notion of a **partial collection of authentic material** is quite different from the notion of a **partially authentic collection of material**. However, it is not our aim to offer a course on propositional reasoning. Thus, we leave the point with the hope that the neophyte will eventually comprehend this piece of preschool logic.

Professor Mustāfa al-Azami, who offered a devastating critique of Joseph Schacht's work, again clarifies the misunderstanding of many Orientalists on this issue:

Al-Bukhârî did not claim that what he left out were the spurious, nor that there were no authentic traditions outside his collection. On the contrary he said, "I only included in my book *al-Jâmi'* those that were authentic, and I left out many more authentic traditions than this to avoid unnecessary length." He had no intention of collecting all the authentic traditions. He only wanted to compile a manual of *ḥadīth*, according to the wishes of his Shaikh Ishâq b. Râhwaih, and his function is quite clear from the title of his book *al-Jâmi' al-Musnad al-Sahîh al-Mukhtasar min umûr Rasûl Allâh wa Sunanhi wa ayyamih*. The word *al-Mukhtasar*, 'epitome', itself explains that al-Bukhârî did not make any attempt at a comprehensive collection. ^[3]

Yet, the neophyte, Andrew Vargo seems to be living under the delusion that the 600,000 *ḥadīth* of Imâm al-Bukhârî's collection somehow means 600,000 separate narrations or bodies of text. His sloppy study of this issue becomes clear when one learns that a *ḥadīth* is comprised of both a text (*matn*) and a chain of transmission (*isnâd*). In the [science of ḥadīth](#), the same text with ten chains of transmission is regarded not as one *ḥadīth* but rather as ten *ḥadīths*, despite the fact that the text attached to each chain is the same in every case.

Professor Mustāfa al-Azami adds:

Now it is clear that when traditionalists give enormous numbers for the traditions, they mean channels and sources of their transmission, and do not mean real numbers of *ḥadīth*. ^[4]

Nabia Abbott, a prominent orientalist who conducted an extensive study on *ḥadīth* literature, 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 Muhammad 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 hadith of Muhammad and the hadith of the Companions are concerned, but represents largely the progressive increase in parallel and multiple chains of transmission.^[5]

Take a highly simplified example of one Companion narrating a single hadith 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 hadith from their respective teachers. Because each individual chain of transmission counts as a separate hadith, what started out as a single narration transmitted by one Companion only, has evolved within a short period of time to 16 hadith; 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 isnâd 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 Hanbal, Muslim and Bukhârî seem not so fantastic after all.**^[6]

The implications of explosive increase in of the isnâd is dealt with [here](#).

Imâm Muslim & The Nature Of His Collection

Imâm Muslim along the similar lines to that of Imâm al-Bukhârî , is reported to have said:

الصحيحين المعول عليهما عند أهل السنة في الحديث ، قال الإمام مسلم : «ما وضعت شيئاً في كتابي هذا إلا بحجة ، وما أسقطت منه شيئاً إلا بحجة» وقال أيضاً : ليس كل شيء عندي صحيح وضعته ههنا ، إنما وضعت ما أجمعوا عليه أي ما استوفى شرائط الصحة المجمع عليها .
وقد عرض مسلم على علماء عصره ، كالإمام أبي زرعة ، فأقر كل ما ليس فيه علة ، وترك ما له علة .

The translation of which is:

[...]. Imâm Muslim said: "I have not included in my present book any thing but with proof [regarding authenticity] , and I have not left out anything but with proof". He also said: **I did not include everything that I judge authentic/Sahih, I only included what received a unanimous agreement, i.e., what fulfilled all the criteria of authenticity agreed upon** [by the scholars].

And Muslim has presented [his collection] to the scholars of his time, like Imâm Abû Zar'ah, and retained what was void of defect, and left out what had some defect.^[7]

From the above quotation, it is clear that Imâm Muslim's collection is also **a partial collection of authentic material and not a partially authentic collection of material**. He followed a certain set of criteria that demanded a proof for the inclusion of each and every hadîth in his collection.

Conclusions

Imâm al-Bukhârî's collection of ahadîth was maintained to be authentic on account of his authority, and it has been maintained as authentic ever since. The neophyte's assertion, that Imâm al-Bukhârî regarded almost 99% of his own collection as spurious, is among the most rash and foolhardy statements ever dared by a Christian missionary. On the contrary, the 7,397 refers to the number of hadîths that Imâm al-Bukhârî chose to include in his al-Jâmi' and left out many authentic narrations from his vast collection for the fear of excessive length.

Again, according to the neophyte:

In fact, it is difficult, in spite of the Muslim "science" of Hadith to know which traditions are strong or weak!

We should wonder whether the neophyte is as quick to demonstrate the same puerile enthusiasm over the question of his own religious texts. Regardless, we will quote the famous trail of Imâm al-Bukhârî to show how Maqlub^[8] (changed, reversed) ahadîth can be identified with ease by a scholar of hadîth:

The famous trial of al-Bukhârî by the scholars of Baghdad provides a good example of a **Maqlûb** isnâd. The traditionists, in order to test their visitor, al-Bukhârî, appointed ten men, each with ten ahâdîth. Now, each hadîth (text) of these ten people was prefixed with the isnâd of another. Imâm al-Bukhârî listened to each of the ten men as they narrated their ahâdîth and denied the correctness of every hadîth. When they had finished narrating these ahâdîth, he addressed each person in turn and recounted to him each of his ahâdîth with its correct isnâd. This trial earned him great honour among the scholars of Baghdad.^[9]

Finally, it is worth citing a significant trend in modern Western scholarship of the Prophetic traditions of Islam. For the past several decades, criticism of these traditions has been the Orientalist's whipping post, an opportunity to invalidate the traditions of Islam, which culminated in the work of Joseph Schacht, mentioned earlier. However, this position has practically been reversed in recent times, with the advent of academic honesty on the part of Western scholars. Professor John Esposito of Georgetown University has made the following counter-criticism of Schacht's traditional position:

Accepting Schacht's conclusion regarding the many traditions he did examine does not warrant its automatic extension to all the traditions. To consider all Prophetic traditions apocryphal until proven otherwise is to reverse the burden of proof. Moreover, even where differences of opinion exist regarding the authenticity of the chain of narrators, they need not detract from the authenticity of a tradition's content and common acceptance of the importance of tradition literature as a record of the early history and development of Islamic belief and practice.^[10]

The position of Esposito perhaps reflects the predominant attitude among Western educational institutions that entertain any study of Islam and its traditions. This is simply evidenced by the fact that Professor Esposito has become one of the reigning authorities on Islam in the West, whose textbooks are considered university standards for courses on Islam.

Considering the missionaries' abuse of hadîths to denigrate the Prophet of Islam^(P), it would be too generous to assume that Andrew Vargo "misunderstood" the nature of the collection of Imâm al-Bukhârî. An honest misunderstanding entails at least some understanding of the issue, which doesn't even seem to be his case. Perhaps the neophyte might consider beginning a genuine study of the [science of hadîth](#) before he embarrasses himself further.

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And Allah knows best!

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- [3] M Mustafa al-Azami, [Studies In Early Ḥadîth Literature](#), 1992, American Trust Publications (Indianapolis, USA), pp. 305-306.
- [4] *Ibid.*, p. 306.
- [5] Nabia Abbott, [Studies In Arabic Literary Papyri](#), Volume II (Qur'ânic Commentary & Tradition), 1967, The University Of Chicago Press, p. 2.
- [6] *Ibid.*, p. 72.
- [7] Al-Imâm Muhyee ad-Dîn Abî Zakariyya Yahyâ bin Sharaf al-Nawâwî, [Sahîh Muslim Bi Sharh al-Imâm al-Nawâwî](#), Volume I, 1994/1414, Dâr al-Khair, p. 1.
- [8] A ḥadîth is known as **Maqlûb** (changed, reversed) when its isnâd is grafted to a different text or vice versa, or if a reporter happens to reverse the order of a sentence in the text.
- [9] Suhaib Ḥasan, [An Introduction To The Science Of Ḥadîth](#), 1995, Darussalam Publishers, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, available [online](#), quote taken from [here](#).
- [10] John Esposito, [Islam: The Straight Path](#), 1998, Oxford University Press, p. 81.