

Book Reviews

Said the Prophet of God: Hadith Commentary Across a Millennium

Joel Blecher

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Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī is often described as the most vital text in the Islamic Sunni tradition, second only to the Qur'an. In examining the commentarial legacy of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Joel Blecher's *Said the Prophet of God* provides a panoramic view of exegetical actors across space and time who participated in commentarial production through recitals, written texts, and video recording. Exploring this tradition, Blecher looks at the periods of classical Andalusia, late medieval Egypt, and modern India, using these contexts to inform readers of the political, intellectual, and social stakes involved in commentary (3). Commentators are described as having produced their works in accordance with the circumstances of their time; Blecher also presents the sincere devotion commentators had in achieving excellency, an effort that was a dynamic internal to the tradition and not fully reducible to social-historical context. By this, Blecher refers to the production of knowledge which deals less with worldly ambitions and more with staying true to the tradition, namely pursuits of achieving spiritual merit (15).

Blecher's book is comprised of three parts (devoted respectively to Andalusia, Mamluk Egypt, and modern India) with an epilogue pertaining to the engagement of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* by fundamentalist groups. Creatively, Blecher unpacks his discussion by presenting a predicament at each juncture to show how commentators used methodologies indicative of their time to respond to contemporary challenges. The first part involves Andalusian scholar Abū al-Walid al-Bājī, in a fiasco during a live commentarial session. Interpreting the hadith related to the treaty of Ḥudaybiyya, Bājī suggested that the Prophet had written down his name on the document—implying that the Prophet was not in fact unlettered—causing Bājī to be the subject of visceral castigations. For Blecher, this occasion demonstrates the material

stakes involved when producing commentary. These stakes related not only to Bājī's academic career but also put his life in jeopardy, as the penalty for such an offense extended to capital punishment. Blecher presents the reconciliatory approach—a “double movement”—which commentators typically employed in order to assert their position while complying with an established tradition. Bājī is described as having used double movement by maintaining that the Prophet could write while agreeing that the Prophet was unlettered, reconciling this apparent contradiction by positing that the Prophet learned to write after verses were revealed to him (27). For Blecher, this hermeneutic strategy signifies an age in which hadith commentary demanded a certain expectation, emphasizing the material stakes involved for commentators participating in this craft while also exemplifying Bājī's fidelity to the tradition (29).

Though the conflict surrounding the application of discretionary punishment (*ta'zīr*) is largely dealt with in his chapters on Andalusia, Blecher returns to this issue throughout his work. In doing so, he provides a spectrum of how this issue was treated by commentators across space and time. Illustrated as a graph in the text are three hadiths from *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, all relaying the same message of eschewing lashing beyond ten whips except in matters related to offenses forbidden by God in the Qur'an (35). Explicating how commentary on this hadith was subjected to the circumstances at play, Blecher describes how the Zāhirī school interpreted this hadith based on its apparent meaning, which contradicted the prevalent Mālikī opinion (42)—namely that the number of lashes was left to judicial discretion. The debate invited a plethora of different opinions, all working within a framework convincing to the intelligentsia. Jurists such as Ibn Baṭṭāl, Muhallab, and Ibn Ḥazm are seen as having utilized the hadith sources in order to justify their positions in a realm which anchored hadith sciences. The Mālikī opinion is described as having been left by its critics with no option other than to utilize hadith for justification of its position, demonstrating a move towards internal change as well as the preservation of its jurisprudential commitment (45). This is the same compromise or double movement Bājī had made. These social, political, and intellectual stakes include both the challenge against orthodoxy as well as the terms by which scholars justified their opinions. This created a standard of how competency would be achieved. Blecher sees the achievement of excellence, meanwhile, as having manifested through positions based on hadith linkages to the Prophet's example (46).

The second part of this book largely deals with the production and reception of Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī's *Fatḥ al-bārī* in the context of Mamluk Egypt. This environment saw academic prowess to lie in one's ability to produce a dense body of work. Absorbed into this tradition, Ibn Ḥajar is shown to have constantly revised his commentary of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, such that it was only completed with his passing (77). The predicament or case Blecher focuses on here involves the accusation of plagiarism charged by Ibn Ḥajar against his rival, ʿAynī. Both experts are presented as having competed for the patronage of Sultan al-Muʿayyad Shaykh (60). Suyūṭī too had been charged with plagiarism, which Blecher takes as indicative of the Mamluk era, when the many live commentarial sessions meant that commentary could be copied and published without attribution by students or rivals. Such live performances also served as an arena for debate in which commentators would be scrutinized by their audience (63). The case of Harawī speaks to this dynamic, for his incompetence was exposed by a former chief judge of the Shāfiʿī school of law, Bulqīnī. This showdown took place at the citadel, a space well attended by many from the top echelons of society, including the sultan (87). In addition, Harawī, who claimed to have memorized *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, was humiliated by Ibn Ḥajar in front of Sultan al-Muʿayyad Shaykh (90). As such, social capital and patronage are seen as interconnected to one's memory and how it ought to be used (96). The constant revisions to *Fatḥ al-bārī* are also described as a social commitment to compete with rivals; but the layers of additions made to *Fatḥ al-bārī* also speaks to preserving the context of the Prophet's legacy, thus contributing to excellency beyond the material and social world (77).

Chapter six of this text serves an appropriate prelude to the era of concision. Written works would be condensed in order to reach a wider readership which (though still highly educated) was less concerned with depth of expertise. In contrast, this chapter discusses the manner of rarefaction which, in the context presented by Blecher, relates to scholarship hermetically licensed to a few elitists (98). In the example of discretionary punishment, Ibn Ḥajar as well as ʿAynī are discussed as having used *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* as a source of verification in light of the hadiths dealing with discretionary punishment (108), instead of dismissing any reported hadith in the corpus. For these Mamluk-era commentators, reconciliation of hadiths to circumstantial situations needs both rarefied intelligence and proficiency in performing a double movement (109). The varying extent to which chapter headings of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* are considered valuable to the tradition of exegetical commentary is given detailed analysis, as coupled with

how commentaries were arranged (such as Ibn ‘Urwa al-Zaknūn’s *Musnad* of Ibn Ḥanbali, 120). Zarkashī’s *al-Tanqīh* is described as having departed from the norm of elaborate commentary. Though not received as benevolently as other more expansive works, the *Tanqīh* became a model for future commentaries to follow, such as Suyūṭī’s *Tawshīh* (131).

Turning to modern India, Blecher looks at how British colonialism informed the commentarial output produced by both the Deobandi and the Ahl-i-Hadith movements. From the observations of this milieu, Blecher suggests that hadith commentary developed on transregional and transcendent terms, with the Arabic language and Arab ancestry yielding the standard for social and academic credibility (151). Focusing on how double movement was performed in this context, Blecher describes the Deobandi scholar Kashmīrī as having venerated yet critiqued Ibn Ḥajar’s *Fatḥ al-bārī* in justification of the Ḥanafī school of law (153). As explained by Blecher, the colonial era questioned the validity or necessity of Islamic jurisprudence. It was in this context that *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* was interpreted. Addressing the issue of discretionary punishment, Kashmīrī is viewed as aiming to vindicate the practice of lashing despite British opposition to it, rather than providing an opinion on the matter for its regulatory practice (155). Ṣiddīq Ḥasan Khān of the Ahl-i-Hadith scholars is noted as having been unsupportive of relying on an Islamic school of law (157). His commentary on *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* is described as being accessible in the sense that it abridged *Fatḥ al-bārī* and existed on the margins of another text, providing two commentaries in one (158). For Kashmīrī and Ṣiddīq Khān to have referenced in their works medieval Egyptian and Arabian scholars is indicative of the priority given to what Blecher describes as an idealized “Arab” past (162).

Many decades later, after British colonial rule, commentary would go through the labor of translation and distribution, acts which are seen to be sacred by Abd Raḥmān (169). As a political activist working against the pervasiveness of secular thought in the modern Indian context, Abd Raḥmān had translated into both English and Urdu (168) the work of ‘Uthmānī, who referenced scientific discoveries in his commentary (176). Such modern vehicles as television broadcasting and YouTube came to dominate the landscape of how commentary is distributed, for instance by Muḥammad Sharīf of the Niẓāmiyya College in Hyderabad (181). Beyond these media forms, most interesting to Blecher in these contexts is the interplay between

commitment to a past exegetical tradition and persistent engagement with the social and political contexts of one's time.

By analyzing the social and political stakes of hadith commentary, the standards of commentarial excellence, spiritual aims, and the media of commentarial production, Blecher provides a retelling of hadith commentary in light of social practice. In telling this history, Blecher includes the most important commentators and commentaries representative of the Islamic Sunni tradition, focusing on figures like Ibn Ḥajar, Ibn Ḥazm, Suyūṭī, ʿAynī, Zarkashī, plus more. *Said the Prophet of God* presents illustrations of hadith chains and manuscripts in order to succinctly guide readers through convoluted technical issues when it comes to hadith construction as well as to display how and where writing was done on commentarial manuscripts. This work serves as a template for how social scientists could approach hadith commentary using a variety of methodological approaches.

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