

Qisṣat ḥayāt al-Bukhārī: Sīra tārikhiyya jadīda

JEDDAH: MARKAZ IḤSĀN, 2024, 1ST ED. 536 PAGES.

AḤMAD AL-AQTASH

Few works in Islamic intellectual history have received as much attention as *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. With hundreds of premodern and modern studies dedicated to its name, one might assume that little room remains for groundbreaking insights. Khaldūn al-Aḥḍab's recently revised study and the introduction to the Bayt al-Sunna edition of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* have made significant contributions to our understanding of Imam al-Bukhārī's life and works. Yet, Aḥmad al-Aqtash's highly anticipated monograph manages to push the boundaries of an extensively studied subject even further. If al-Aqtash's gloss on Abū Mas'ūd al-Dimashqī's *Ḥawāshī* is any indication, he possesses an exceptional mastery of the hadith sciences and is thus well-equipped to engage with the subject at hand.

Qisṣat ḥayāt al-Bukhārī: Sīra tārikhiyya jadīda represents a significant contribution to the field, offering a meticulously researched and critically engaging biographical account of Imam al-Bukhārī. The impetus for writing this book stemmed from conversations with other scholars, particularly regarding when al-Bukhārī compiled the *Ṣaḥīḥ*

and when al-Tirmidhī met al-Bukhārī. While these may seem like minor points, they carry significant academic implications for understanding other aspects of al-Bukhārī's life and evolving views. Spanning over 500 pages and structured into twenty-nine chapters, this volume systematically reconstructs al-Bukhārī's life, travels, and intellectual oeuvre. The detailed twenty-two page table of contents offers an accessible reference and a helpful summary of both significant and peripheral discussions. Excerpts of the book were previously published in *Majmū'at al-Makhṭūṭāt al-Islāmiyya* (pp. 35-36: 2022).

As its subtitle suggests, the book provides a revised historical account of al-Bukhārī's life, which serves as its greatest strength. Al-Aqṭash endeavors to establish a coherent, linear narrative of al-Bukhārī's movements. This is a particularly challenging task given the fragmentary nature of early biographical sources. The complexity of this undertaking is heightened by al-Bukhārī's extensive travels, the animated nature of his scholarly life, and the proliferation of certain misconceptions. To address these challenges, al-Aqṭash categorizes the sources on al-Bukhārī's life in chronological order and employs a rigorous analytical approach to seemingly minor reports to elucidate al-Bukhārī's precise whereabouts at different junctures. An important approach used in the book is citing lost early sources through secondary works, such as al-Warrāq's *Shamā'il al-Bukhārī* and al-Ḥākim's *Tārīkh Nisābūr* via Ibn 'Asākir's *Tārīkh* and al-Dhahabī's *Siyar*. While experts may readily recognize early authors in the chains of transmission of later works, this method might not be as apparent to others, let alone utilized. As the author notes, the advantage of this approach is that it helps identify the earliest available source, providing the most likely unadulterated account of a given event. The author's consultation of Persian and Sogdian dictionaries adds a distinctive dimension to the book's scholarship (pp. 38, 373).

We can consider two examples to get a sense of how the author employs unintuitive sources and tactics to "fill in the blanks." He argues that al-Tirmidhī met al-Bukhārī before 241 AH in Firabr by meticulously examining reports related to the movements of one 'Abd Allāh b. Munīr, a mutual associate (pp. 196-201). This argument has broader implications, as it helps determine whether al-Tirmidhī's transmission of al-Bukhārī's

opinions reflect his earlier or later views (p. 204). Second, al-Aqṭash cites the contemporaneous Ibn Faḍlān's travelogue to estimate the most plausible route al-Bukhārī took from his hometown to Baghdad enroute to the Hajj (pp. 64, 270). These and other examples help spatially and chronologically animate al-Bukhārī's travels for readers, which is an aspect that other biographers seem to have overlooked. To be sure, some Western academic treatments of al-Bukhārī's travels have employed a similar approach.¹

A particularly complicated aspect of al-Bukhārī's biography is the composition, recension, and correct ascription of his books. Perhaps the most innovative argument in the book is al-Aqṭash's assertion that *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* was completed in 253 AH, shortly before al-Bukhārī's death (pp. 377–86). He also spends considerable effort in chronologically plotting the different recensions of al-Bukhārī's *Tārīkh* works (p. 216, 235). The final chapter, dedicated to al-Bukhārī's extant and lost books (twenty-three proven titles and four of dubious ascription), provides valuable insights into the chronology of their compilation and various recensions.

A key limitation when attempting to detail an uninterrupted linear narrative is the inevitable degree of conjecture involved in positioning certain events. To his credit, al-Aqṭash frequently acknowledges this challenge, making clear that his interpretations are well-founded but not necessarily conclusive (p. 8). For example, he argues that al-Bukhārī's temporary blindness occurred when he set out for the Hajj rather than during his childhood, but he notes that this is merely a more plausible reading of the extant data (p. 67). He also corrects widely held misconceptions, such as the claims that al-Bukhārī presented his *Ṣaḥīḥ* to his teachers (p. 152), obtained 'Alī b. al-Madīnī's *Kitāb al-'ilal* without permission (p. 116), and saw *Musnad Aḥmad* (p. 126). In the process, he occasionally consults multiple manuscripts of a text to determine the most accurate rendition of a passage (pp. 23, 106, 189).

Al-Aqṭash also provides insightful historical context, such as his discussion of how Ibn Rāḥawayh described *Tārīkh al-kabīr* as sorcery to the local emir. He explains that this reaction stemmed from the groundbreaking nature of the work: it was the first attempt to systematically

gather narrators from various chains into an independent, alphabetically ordered biographical dictionary—a method that later became standard (p. 258). Readers will appreciate the stage setting for the final years of al-Bukhārī's life and the controversy surrounding the *lafẓ* debate in Transoxiana (p. 342). Based on my reading of the subject, the author offers the most vivid retelling of these pivotal events.

An area of unease for some readers may be al-Aqṭash's critique of earlier historians, such as al-Ḥākim (p. 70), and contemporary scholars, like al-Mu'allimī (p. 223) and Nūr al-Dīn 'Itr (p. 200). His critique also extends to al-Bukhārī himself. Al-Aqṭash argues in one instance that al-Bukhārī misidentified the name of his teacher's father due to an error by his student Muslim (p. 106). While some may view these critiques as contentious, al-Aqṭash presents well-argued cases with a tone that remains professional and respectful. These points of critique, along with the author's often speculative conclusions, have drawn responses from the hadith expert Sharīf Ḥātim al-ʿAwnī, who recently shared some critical reflections on the book.

The conclusion feels somewhat rushed and would benefit from a more detailed synopsis, along with proposals for further research. While numerous topics are addressed, some would have been enriched by additional details such as the precise identity of al-Dākhilī, a more comprehensive discussion of al-Bukhārī's children (including an analysis of claims that he had no offspring), and greater specificity regarding the recensions of the *Ṣaḥīḥ*. Regarding the reasons why al-Nasafī's recension did not gain lasting traction (p. 459), it would be beneficial to include a discussion on how, prior to its decline, al-Nasafī's recension was favored by many commentators. This topic is explored by Fuat Sezgin. The appended maps intended to illustrate al-Bukhārī's travels (pp. 32, 62, 101) would have been more effective had they been clearer and less visually cluttered.

Qiṣṣat ḥayāt al-Bukhārī is a commendable work that offers fresh insights into al-Bukhārī's life and numerous related topics. Given its depth of research, critical engagement with sources, and revisionist approach to common scholarly assumptions, this book is likely to spark considerable academic debate. Any serious student of hadith studies

would greatly benefit from reading this work, not only for its subject matter but also as an exemplary model of meticulous research, critical reassessment of established views, and illumination of the scholarly milieu of the third-century AH through the life of its most iconic figure.

MUNTASIR ZAMAN
INSTRUCTOR
QALAM SEMINARY
CARROLLTON, TX

doi: 10.35632/ajis.v42i1-2.3737

Endnotes

- 1 Jonathan A.C. Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim: The Formation and Function of the Sunnī Ḥadīth Canon* (Leiden: Brill, 2007) p. 47.