



Blind Spots: The Origins of the Western Method of Critiquing Hadith

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Author's Introduction:

A few years ago I was involved in a debate on the radio with a prominent British historian who had recently written a sensationalist book on the origins of Islam. He claimed, in a distinctly haughty tone not uncommon among academics, that praying five times a day was not originally part of the Prophet's message but was, in fact, imported into early Islam by Zoroastrian converts as an imitation of their own Zoroastrian five-times daily prayer.¹ Along with many other Western scholars, he argued that, since Muslim sources like the Sira and Hadith collections consisted of material compiled at earliest a few decades after the events they described, they could not be relied on as reliable historical sources for the life of the Prophet ﷺ or Islam's beginning. Moreover, they were compiled by Muslims who had every interest in shoring up the claims of their religion.

But the evidence that this scholar relied on when making his claim about the 'true' origins of Muslim prayer came from a book written by a rabbi in France in the twelfth century, and it did not even mention prayer; it mentioned how Zoroastrian converts to Islam often continued drinking after becoming Muslim. Meanwhile, a Hadith describing the duty of praying five times a day appears in the earliest surviving book of Hadith, the Muwatta' of the Medinan scholar Imam Malik (d. 796).²

*Why did this British scholar disparage Muslim reliance on evidence from a few decades after the life of the Prophet ﷺ, collected by a scholar in the Prophet's own city, while arguing that speculation about a statement made by a Jewish rabbi centuries later in Europe was better testimony about the origins of Islam?³ Why, not long after this interview, did [this and several other Western scholars](#) argue that the Qur'an could have come from much later than Muslims alleged or much earlier than they alleged **but not from the actual time of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in the seventh century?***

¹ Tom Holland, *In the Shadow of the Sword*, 405.

² Muwatta': kitab salat al-layl, bab al-amr bi'l-witr.

³ For more on this, see [here](#).

The answer is that the way in which Western scholars generally view reports about the past, and reports about the history of religions and scriptures, in particular, is not neutral. It is the product of a specific cultural and political tradition. Though this method prides itself on shedding light on the dark recesses of all human pasts, it has its own blind spots.

What follows is an excerpt from my book Hadith: Muhammad's Legacy in the Medieval and Modern World, 2nd edition, (Oneworld, 2017). Specifically, it is the introduction of the chapter on the Western study of the Hadith tradition. We have decided to publish this section here on Yaqeen because it provides an important resource for those who read Western historical writings about early Islamic history and, more broadly, about the formation and development of religious traditions. In short, these pages provide a manageable summary of how and why 'modern' people came to a uniquely skeptical and cynical attitude towards scripture and orthodoxy across religious traditions. - J. A. C. Brown

Introduction

Thus far we have discussed hadiths and their functions in Islamic civilization as a tradition developed by a people who affirmed that Muhammad ﷺ was a prophet, the last in a series sent to humanity by a God who created the universe and is its sole font of truth. So far, the hadith tradition has unfolded among Muslims. Though they might have disagreed on the proper use or interpretation of hadiths, Muslims have controlled the boundaries of the discussion. This book, however, does not assume that the reader believes that God influences the course of history or that Muhammad ﷺ was a prophet. Instead, you may have noticed (assuming I've done my job) that this book discusses hadiths in a 'neutral' or 'objective' tone according to the methods of modern historians of a religious tradition.

Like Muslim hadith critics, however, our methods of historical criticism in the West have their own tradition with its own assumptions. What we must admit before any further discussion is that, because a book does not assume that God

directly intervenes in human events, that Muhammad ﷺ was a prophet, or that hadiths are in general authentic, then what it really assumes is that God does *not* directly interfere in historical events, that Muhammad ﷺ was *just a man*, and that there are *real doubts* about the historical reliability of the entire hadith corpus. Few Western readers of this book, for example, would accept the explanation that we know the Muslim hadith tradition is an accurate record of Muhammad's words because God would never let his chosen religion go unpreserved (a standard Muslim explanation). As you can imagine, discussion of hadiths in the West differs dramatically from its indigenous Muslim counterpart.

This chapter explores the Western academic investigation of early Islamic history and its radical critiques of the Sunni hadith tradition. 'The Authenticity Question,' as we will term it, has two implications that we must bear in mind. First, Western scholars' critical examination of hadiths and the methods that Muslims used to authenticate them can be seen as laudably advancing our understanding of Islamic origins and as part of a larger human endeavor to expand all areas of knowledge. Second, however, Western criticism of the hadith tradition can be viewed as an act of domination in which one worldview asserts its power over another by dictating the terms by which 'knowledge' and 'truth' are established. From this perspective, one could ask why the 'light' that Western scholars shed on hadiths is necessarily more valuable to 'the advancement of human understanding' than what the Muslim hadith tradition has already offered. As the likes of Edward Said have shown, knowledge is power, and studying an object is an act of establishing control over it.

It is thus no coincidence that four of the five main avenues through which the Western study of the Islamic world progressed grew out of European colonial or diplomatic interests (the French study of Islamic law and culture in colonial North Africa, similar Dutch studies in Southeast Asia, British studies of Persianate Islam in India, and European diplomatic interest in the Ottoman Empire). The fifth avenue, which proved most important for our subject, was that of Semitic studies, and stemmed from Biblical studies (as we shall discuss below).⁴

⁴ Expanding on Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 1, p. 40.

European diplomats in the late nineteenth century plotted how to promote a ‘progressive’ Islam among their colonial populations, much as their American successors have in the twenty-first. Western discussions about the reliability of the hadith tradition are thus not neutral, and their influence extends beyond the lofty halls of academia. When reports surfaced in 2008 that the Turkish government was preparing a ‘radical revision’ of the Sunni hadith canon, mainstream Western media applauded this move towards reformation (the rumor proved false).⁵ The Authenticity Question is part of a broader debate over the power dynamic between ‘Religion’ and ‘Modernity,’ and between ‘Islam’ and ‘the West.’ Instead of approaching the Authenticity Question from a teleological perspective, where we assume that the native ‘Muslim’ vision of the hadith tradition is wrong and that Western scholars have awakened it from its millennial slumber and are guiding it gradually forwards, we will assume what I think is a more accurate approach: the hadith tradition is so vast and our attempts to evaluate its authenticity so inevitably limited to small samples, that any attitudes towards its authenticity are necessarily based more on our critical worldview than on empirical fact. Because we ultimately cannot know empirically whether Muhammad ﷺ was a prophet or a character formed by history, or whether or not God played any role in preserving his words for posterity, we will not look at the Authenticity Question as one to which there is a right and wrong answer. Instead, we will identify what the various schools of thought on this question have taken as their basic assumptions and how they have built on them. We will examine how some schools of thought reacted to others and how their assumptions cast doubt on those of others.

The Origins and Assumptions of the Western Study of the Hadith vs. the Islamic Tradition

The Muslim hadith tradition and the Western academic study of Islamic origins represent diametrically opposed approaches to evaluating the authenticity of reports about the past. Both are critical, in that they concern themselves with questions of the reliability of historical sources, but they proceed from two sets of

⁵ Joseph Massad, *Islam in Liberalism*, pp. 65–73. See <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7264903.stm>.; <http://blogs.reuters.com/faithworld/2008/03/07/turkeyexplains-revision-of-hadith-project/> (last cited July 2016).

assumptions that are at loggerheads. The following section is a digression from the subject of hadiths, but it is an essential one if we are to understand why Western and Muslim scholars view the study of hadiths so differently.

As we have seen, the Sunni tradition of hadith criticism was founded on a commitment to sifting reliable from unreliable hadiths based on criteria that examined both the sources of a report and its contents. In the absence of conflicting evidence or some strong objection, however, Muslim hadith scholars and jurists treated a report attributed to the Prophet ﷺ *prima facie* as something he really said. Ibn Hanbal thus famously stated that even a hadith whose authenticity was not established was a better source for law than ruling by one's reason alone. A critical examination of a hadith was required only when a scholar had some compelling reason to doubt its authenticity. Even then, the charismatic authority of the Prophet ﷺ could overwhelm any critical concerns. The famous Egyptian scholar Ibn al-Hājj (d. 737/1336) ignored the legal ruling of a hadith and was subsequently afflicted by leprosy. When the Prophet ﷺ appeared to him in a dream, the scholar asked him why he was being punished, since he had analyzed the hadith and concluded that it was not reliable. The Prophet ﷺ replied, 'It suffices you to have heard it.' Ibn al-Hājj repented and was cured by the Prophet ﷺ in his dream.⁶ Furthermore, Muslim belief that the Prophet ﷺ had been granted knowledge of the unseen and intended his legacy to form the basis for the civilization of Islam has meant that Muslims venerate statements attributed to the Prophet ﷺ before they doubt them. Skepticism towards hadiths was not the default setting of Muslim hadith critics.

The approach of Western scholars has been the converse. According to the famous Lord Acton (d. 1902), the modern historian cannot believe in the presumption of innocence. His first reaction to any historical report must be suspicion.⁷ The modern Western study of history, commonly referred to (despite its internal diversity) as the **Historical Critical Method (HCM)**, is an approach to the past that emerged from Renaissance humanism and the critical approach to the sources

⁶ Al-ʿAjlūnī, *Kashf al-khafā*, vol. 1, p. 12 al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb*, vol. 1, p. 177.

⁷ Lord Acton, *A Lecture on the Study of History*, pp. 40–42.

of history and religion that subsequently developed in Germany in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Maintaining a ‘historical critical’ perspective towards the past means that we do not accept what historical sources tell us without question. Instead, we interrogate them and attempt to establish their reliability according to a set of assumptions about how human society functions. As the great German historian Leopold von Ranke (d. 1886) declared, history is about looking behind the sources to find out ‘What really happened.’⁸

Numerous books have been written on the origins of the modern, historical critical worldview. In brief, its roots lie in 1) The Renaissance rediscovery of the Classical heritage of Greece and Rome; 2) The Age of Discovery, particularly the discovery of the New World; and 3) The Protestant Reformation. The rediscovery of the Classical heritage gave European scholars a sense of historical distance from the past and revealed the historical changes undergone by long revered texts like the Bible. At the same time, it affirmed a constant, unchanging human nature—an essential tool for how Western scholars authenticate stories from the past. Greek and Roman historians exuded a cosmopolitan skepticism that European minds found irresistible and introduced the model of the historian as detached analyst, as opposed to Christian chronicler. Ironically, reengaging with Classical philosophy did not energize rumination on metaphysics and theology as much as it led to a new focus on studying the rules governing the material world. Meanwhile, the discovery of the Americas exploded the established map of the world, which had been drawn from the genealogies and geographies of the Bible. The Protestant Reformation dismantled the Church’s monopoly on interpreting scripture, ultimately resulting in a view of the Bible as a historical product bound in its own context rather than an inerrant and timeless spring of literal truth.

The roots of the HCM emerged from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries, when Italian and French humanist scholars were reintroduced to the range of the Classical Greco-Roman heritage through manuscripts brought from the Muslim world and Byzantium. This led Western European scholars to a new perspective towards their cultural heritage. Western Europe had always considered itself a

⁸ Leopold von Ranke, *Sämtliche Werke* (1868–90), vol. 33, pp. v–viii.

continuation of the Roman tradition, looking to Roman law and literature as exempla. But this relationship lacked any notion of historical distance; pre-Renaissance medieval artists painted Biblical heroes in the armor of English knights and portrayed French kings in Roman regalia.⁹ History was conceived according to the scheme articulated by St. Augustine (d. 430) and drawn from Biblical themes and markers. Since the time of Adam, history had been punctuated by one great cosmic event, the life of Christ, and since his crucifixion mankind had been in unrelenting decline, awaiting his second coming.

One effect of the Renaissance ‘rebirth’ of interest in Roman figures like Cicero (d. 43 BCE) was that Italian scholars like the poet Petrarch (d. 1374) developed a sense of historical depth. Far from Augustine’s medieval synthesis of the Classics and Christianity, what Petrarch found as he fell in love with the prose of Cicero’s Latin letters was a pagan outlook on religion. Cicero’s writings revealed a culture of supercilious skepticism alongside public piety. The famous Roman Senator readily admitted how ridiculous Roman religious practices were but still demanded they be respected in public.¹⁰

Nowhere was historical distance more obvious than in the Latin language itself. Renaissance humanism was first and foremost a realization of how different (or, according to the humanists, how decadent) medieval Church Latin was from the language of Cicero. This fascination with recovering the pure Latin of the ancient Romans led the Italian scholar of language, or **philologist**, Lorenzo Valla (d. 1457) to realize how many Latin words had come to mean something other than their original meaning. Examining a document called *The Donation of Constantine*, which the Roman emperor Constantine supposedly had written in the early fourth century granting the pope control over lands in the West, Valla pointed out that the presence of linguistic **anachronisms** (things that appear out of place in time—like a letter supposedly written by Jesus but mentioning mobile phones) meant that this document must have been a later forgery. The document mentions ‘fiefs,’ or land

⁹ For example, twelfth-century paintings of Gospel scenes in the Swiss church of Zillis show characters dressed in medieval clothes; Rosalind and Christopher Brooke, *Popular Religion in the Middle Ages*, p. 137; Myron P. Gilmore, *Humanists and Jurists*, pp. 1–10.

¹⁰ Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, pp. 1:60–62, 71–73; Petrarch, *The Secret*, pp. 68–69.

grants, but Valla points out that this word did not appear until much later.¹¹ Noticing how language changed over time had led Valla to unmask a historical forgery that had long served as a pillar of the papacy's claim to the right to act as a temporal power. Identifying anachronisms would serve as a pillar of the HCM.

The Renaissance fascination with language as a tool for rediscovering origins had even more stunning implications for the study of the Bible. One of Valla's successors in philology, the famous Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam (d. 1536), duplicated Valla's obsession with Classical Latin in the field of Greek. Erasmus devoted his career to producing the most reliable and accurate versions of ancient Greek texts by comparing the oldest possible manuscripts of the books and then purging them of mistakes made in copying and the linguistic misunderstandings or even insertions of later scholars. When producing a new edition of the original Greek text of the New Testament, Erasmus discovered that a verse that had long been part of the Latin Bible and used as a definitive proof of the Trinity was a later addition totally absent in the original Greek.¹²

Erasmus' life straddled stunning discovery and religious upheaval. In the span of his adult life, two new continents were added to the map. Not only had the great minds of the past never guessed their existence, but their inhabitants had no place in the Biblical genealogy based on Adam's children. With the globe as conceived by Church fathers shattered, a path was opened for novel scholarship. The French Protestant Isaac de la Peyrère (d. 1676) made the controversial argument that the Bible must have been more local than global. Adam was not the first man but merely the patriarch of one of many tribes (since Cain was able to flee and marry elsewhere, see Genesis 4:16). Similarly, Noah's flood was not global, just a local punishment for the land of Canaan.¹³

¹¹ Eugene F. Rice, Jr. and Anthony Grafton, *The Foundations of Early Modern Europe*, p. 82.

¹² This verse reads: 'And there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one...' King James Bible 1 John 5:7–8. Only four Greek manuscripts mentioned this famous 'Johannan comma,' and all were historically late; Jerry Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ*, pp. 45, 152–153.

¹³ Klaus Scholder, *The Birth of Modern Critical Theology*, p. 67; Travis Frampton, *Spinoza and the Rise of Historical Criticism of the Bible*, pp. 208–216.

By Peyrère's time, the Protestant Reformation had opened new space for theological speculation in Protestant realms like England and the Netherlands. The revival of philosophy, or the notion that metaphysical truth can be attained by reason alone, led to the blossoming in seventeenth-century England of Deism, or the belief in a rational God knowable and bound by reason. In line with contempt for the papacy and the discovery of the human hand in shaping scripture, Deists like John Toland (d. 1722) argued that Christianity had originally been a purely rational religion but that the early Church had corrupted it with Roman superstitions.¹⁴

The great Protestant reformers had called for Christianity to be based on scripture alone, with the Holy Spirit, not Church tradition, guiding the believer to the proper understanding of the Bible. In contrast to Church fathers, who had long read Biblical passages in accord with Church doctrine or with select tenets of Aristotelian philosophy, Protestant founders like John Calvin (d. 1564) insisted on a reading of the Bible that adhered more closely to its literal sense.¹⁵ Ironically, this approach produced an influential Protestant outgrowth whose perspectives on the Bible proved hugely consequential. The Quakers soon came to see the inspiration of the Holy Spirit as a more important guide to truth than scripture, so critiques of the Bible's historical integrity began losing their sting.¹⁶

By the late seventeenth century, such developments had raised a key question at the fringes of Protestant thought. If truth could be known from outside scripture, either through reason or inspiration, and if that scripture itself seemed more and more like a historical product of a flawed Church tradition, then was the Bible really a timeless vessel of universal truth? Benedict Spinoza (d. 1677) of Amsterdam gave the most influential answer. In his landmark *Theological-Political Treatise*, he argued that the Bible must be treated as the product of a particular time and place, phrased in the language and idiom of its original audience. The Old Testament's description of God walking with man

¹⁴ Peter Gay, ed., *Deism*, pp. 72–77.

¹⁵ Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 25–26.

¹⁶ Scholder, *Birth of Modern Critical Theology*, pp. 37–40.

(Genesis 5:24) or the miracles of Jesus in the New Testament were not universal theological claims or historical facts. They were expressions of how religion was understood by the Bible's original audiences. This did not mean that the Bible was pointless, but it no longer held the paramount place in the hierarchy of truth. The 'universal foundation' of all religion, wrote Spinoza, was to love God and love one's neighbor, to 'defend justice, assist the poor, not to kill, not to covet other men's property, etc.'¹⁷ But the historically bound Bible only *shared in* this truth, it did not monopolize it. Contrast Spinoza's approach with the Muslim position that the Qur'an is, as Muslim scholars have held, 'the most truthful of speech, suitable for all times and all places.'¹⁸

The critical methods of Erasmus and the philosophical outlook of Spinoza and the Deists took root and blossomed in the university cities of Germany, where the HCM emerged as a clear scholarly methodology in the late 1700s. The philological study of ancient texts led to a myriad of critical revelations about Greco-Roman history and the Bible. Examining the style of Greek in Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, F. A. Wolf concluded in 1795 that the two works could not have been the product of one author.¹⁹ Studies of the New Testament Gospels led German scholars to conclude that, far from being themselves eyewitnesses to the events of Jesus' life, the gospel writers Luke and Matthew had both constructed their versions of Christ's life based on material from the book of Mark. As Voltaire (d. 1778) reported, scholars now knew that the many non-canonical gospels that had been discovered actually predated the four gospels of the New Testament.²⁰ One German scholar, Hermann Reimarus (d. 1768), made the controversial but ultimately influential contention that the first generations of Christians had invented much of the life of Jesus. Leading German scholars of theology adopted the position that the truth of religion was knowable first and foremost by reason, with both scripture and Church teachings constructed by human hands. The truth of biblical narrative was no longer assumed. It had to correspond to reason and fact.

¹⁷ Benedict Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise*, pp. 170–171.

¹⁸ See for a version of this, al-Khatīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh Baghdād*, vol. 6, p. 115.

¹⁹ F. A. Wolf, *Prolegomena to Homer*, p. 233.

²⁰ Voltaire, *Essai sur les Moeurs*, p. 1:288.

Of course, some German scholars still maintained the inerrant and literal truth of the Bible. Others tried to rationalize its miracles (Jesus did not walk on water, for example, this was merely what the Apostles *perceived*). But what emerged as the conventional approach, exemplified by the theology professor Johann Semler (d. 1791), was that the true function of the Bible was to convey *spiritual* truth, not historical or scientific fact. The Biblical canon was a historical development, and its particular meanings were tied to the worldviews of its original audiences. The Bible was no longer the sole storehouse of truth for mankind. Rather, it was just a stage in man's journey towards a greater philosophical truth working its way through history.²¹ The development of the HCM among German scholars culminated in David Friedrich Strauss' (d. 1874) controversial 1835 book *The Life of Jesus*. The work called for a total rejection of the historicity of the gospels (Jesus' miracles were just 'culturally conditioned myths') and a recognition that Christianity must be based on the Christ of faith, not of history.²²

By the mid-nineteenth century, what had been controversial seventy years earlier had become mainstream scholarship. The primary focus of university scholarship in Germany had shifted from Christian theology to history (though controversy still raged in more conservative colleges in Scotland and America). Historians no longer served the Bible and theology, now these subjects were merely objects of historical study.²³ A crucial principle of the HCM was that the original founders of all religions were not actually responsible for the later, formalized teachings of those religions. This idea was already present in Voltaire's observation that the early Church fathers relied on non-canonical gospels.²⁴ But it was ultimately formalized by the German sociologist Max Weber (d. 1920), who argued that a religion's orthodoxy was organized by later generations in order to institutionalize the founder's charismatic religious authority. Contrast this with the Sunni belief

²¹ Frei, *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*, pp. 56–57, 162; Robert Morgan and John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation*, p. 48. See also Pico's (d. 1494) *Oration on the Dignity of Man*.

²² Robert Morgan and John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation*, p. 47; Thomas Howard, *Religion and the Rise of Historicism*, p. 34.

²³ Howard, *Religion and the Rise of Historicism*, pp. 2, 12–13.

²⁴ Voltaire, *Essai sur les mœurs*, p. 1:288.

that hadith scholars were merely *preserving* their Prophet's original teachings by 'fending off lies from the Sunna of God's Messenger.'

This new German school of history assumed that the first step of studying any text was to question its reliability and determine its authenticity. In other words, the default setting for scholars was to doubt the reliability of material transmitted about the past. Certainly, this principle of doubt did not mean that European historians doubted *everything* about the past. But as their criticisms of the textual integrity of Homer's epics or the historical veracity of the Bible illustrate, they were willing to indulge fundamental doubts about the cornerstones of Western history and religion based upon what they considered anachronisms or stylistic inconsistencies within a text. Contrast this with the statement of Sunni hadith critics like Mullā 'Alī al-Qārī (d. 1014/1606), who asserted that 'it is manifestly obvious that if something has been established by transmission [from the Prophet], then one should not heed any contradiction with sense perception or reason.'²⁵

In contrast to the mission of Muslim chroniclers—to preserve God's message and recount the history of God's chosen community—from the eighteenth century onward European historians envisioned themselves as detached observers. They were inspired by the Classical historians whose works Petrarch and others had recovered in the Renaissance. In writing his monumental *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon (d. 1794) channeled the Roman historians Tacitus (d. *circa* 117 CE) (whom he called the first historian who 'applied the science of philosophy to the study of facts')²⁶ and Polybius (d. 118 BCE), who insisted it was the historian's duty to criticize friend and foe impartially.²⁷ Far from defending some religious truth, historians like Gibbon saw themselves like Cicero, standing above and outside religion's benighted confessional traditions while remarking on the deeper, underlying constancies of human history.

²⁵ Mullā 'Alī al-Qārī, *al-Asrār al-marfū'a*, p. 407.

²⁶ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 1, p. 186.

²⁷ Polybius, *The Histories*, p. I:14.

Along with an *a priori* doubt about textual reliability and the human construction of religious orthodoxy, the HCM rested on other revolutionary methodological foundations. The Renaissance had reacquainted European scholars with the Classical skepticism of Sextus Empiricus (d. *circa* 210 CE), who dismissed inherent truth and universal morality as unknowable and who urged people to focus on their immediate moral and physical surroundings. In the sixteenth century, the Italian city of Padua emerged as a center for ‘natural philosophy’ (i.e., science) where Aristotle’s empirical observations, not his metaphysics, were front and center. Based on this Classical foundation, scholars in Padua developed the procedure of hypothesis and demonstration that became the foundation of empirical investigation.²⁸

The writings of the Roman philosopher Lucretius (d. *circa* 55 BCE), a materialist who believed that only the material world existed and that natural causes, not the gods, govern our affairs, became wildly popular in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. His poetic stanza ‘Happy is he who understands the causes of things’ became a mantra often quoted by Enlightenment scholars. It embraced a materialist understanding of the world in which events proceeded according to natural laws and not according to divine intervention. The most influential scientists of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, such as Blaise Pascal (d. 1662), were still committed Christians. But for them, in order to protect Christian belief from critics, faith had to be placed beyond the realm of reason and scientific study. The physical world, on the other hand, was created by God according to fixed laws that could be measured and relied on. In the late 1700s, a certain crass materialism emerged that did not just set the metaphysical respectfully aside. It mocked any belief in the supernatural (reminiscent of Lucretius himself). Particularly evident in the writings of the French encyclopedist Diderot (d. 1784), this crass materialism would become a dominant cultural theme in Europe by the late 1800s. Contrast this with the position of Muslim scholars (and, indeed, medieval Christians) that scripture and empirical observation had to be read in accord with one another, since both revelation and nature were ‘signs’ of God.

²⁸ John Herman Randall, *The School of Padua and the Emergence of Modern Science*, pp. 18, 46–47.

The scientific revolution sealed the assumption that miracles or God's direct involvement could not be called on to explain history and scripture. European historians embraced the Roman poet Horace's command 'Let no god intervene (*nec deus intersit*)'; it was the immutable laws of nature and human society that shaped human history. They followed their Greco-Roman exemplars, who adhered to the ancient position that human nature was an unchanging constant.²⁹ Herodotus (d. *circa* 420 BCE), the 'Father of History,' concluded that Helen could not actually have been at Troy because people would never choose fighting a ten-year war over surrendering a woman they had wrongly abducted in the first place.³⁰ Just as Newton discovered the laws of motion, Voltaire described human society as governed by its own, constant laws.³¹

One of the central principles of the HCM was thus the Principle of Analogy (sometimes called, clumsily, uniformitarianism), which dictates that, although cultures can differ dramatically from place to place and era to era, human societies always function in essentially the same way. As a result, we can reconstruct how and why events transpired in Greece thousands of years ago based on our understanding of how individuals and groups function in our own societies today. If people generally tend to pursue their own interests and advance their own agendas today, then they did so in Greek times or at the time of Christ, and no one can be realistically exempted from such motivations.³² Contrast this with the Sunni Muslim view of history in which, as the Prophet ﷺ supposedly said, '**The best generation is the one in which I was sent, then the next, then the next**' (or, indeed, contrast it with the pre-Renaissance Christian view of history). For Sunni hadith critics, the Prophet's time was 'free of evil.'³³ His Companions were incapable of lying about him and certainly not analogous to anyone else.

²⁹ Livy, *The Early History of Rome*, p. 3:1.

³⁰ Herodotus, *The Histories*, p. II:120.

³¹ J. H. Brumfitt, *Voltaire, Historian*, p. 103.

³² Ernst Troeltsch, 'Historical and Dogmatic Method in Theology,' pp. 13–14; W. Von Leyden, 'Antiquity and Authority: A Paradox in the Renaissance Theory of History,' p. 488.

³³ The scholar al-Kirmānī (d. 786/1384) said that it is an essential belief in Islam that there was no 'evil (*sharr*)' in the time of the Prophet ﷺ; Ibn Hajar, *Fath*, vol. 13, p. 26.

Along with the Principle of Analogy and the detection of anachronisms to identify unreliable reports, the HCM has also relied on a tool often referred to as the Principle of Dissimilarity. Articulated by the Dutch classicist Jakob Perizonius (d. 1715), this states that a report that seems to contradict or challenge orthodoxy is probably originally true, since no one trying to construct or defend that orthodoxy would have made it up.³⁴

In the study of the Bible, these trains of thought led to the development of what was termed **Form criticism** in Germany in the first decades of the twentieth century. This method of criticism combined the presumed doubt in the integrity of texts with the modern critic's confidence that the construction of these texts was affected by very profane, worldly interests. Form critics identified smaller sections within Biblical books from which their larger narratives were composed. Each of these smaller components, termed forms, 'served a definite function in a concrete situation in the life of the early church.' 'The main purpose for the creation, the circulation, and the use of these forms was not to preserve the history of Jesus, but to strengthen the life of the church.'³⁵

From the mid-nineteenth century to the early twentieth, the various strands of European thought on science, history, and religion came together to form a worldview immediately familiar to us today. Often called Positivism, it held that through their newly developed methods of science and rigorous scholarship, humans were able to cast aside ignorance and superstition and uncover the truth about their surroundings and their past. Equally important, only truth so discovered was worth following. Although glimpses of it had appeared in the Renaissance and around the time of the French Revolution, one crucial pillar of Positivism was the notion of progress—that human civilization was *improving*. Unlike almost everything else mentioned so far, this belief was unprecedented. It was alien to the Greeks, the Romans, and St. Augustine alike. Despite two world wars, Positivism remains alive today. It is immediately exemplified by the popular character

³⁴ Bart D. Ehrman, *The New Testament*, pp. 204–205; Arnaldo Momigliano, *Studies in Historiography*, p. 21.

³⁵ Norman Perrin, *What Is Redaction Criticism?*, p. 16.

Sherlock Holmes, whose detailed scientific method allows him to reconstruct past events and determine the exact character of any person.

As summarized neatly by Voltaire, historians applying the HCM believed reports coming from people in the past if ‘what they say of themselves is to their disadvantage, when their stories have some resemblance of truth, and they do not contradict the normal order of nature.’³⁶ The important basic assumptions and methods that together made up the Historical Critical Method of scholars in Europe and later America are:

- 1) A presumption of doubt about the authenticity or reliability of a historical text or historical reports;
- 2) A general suspiciousness towards orthodox narratives presented in such texts or reports;
- 3) The conviction that by analyzing historical sources using the methods noted above a scholar can sift the reliable from unreliable by identifying which parts of the text served which historical agendas.

The development of the Historical Critical Method would have immediate consequences for the questions of authenticity in the Islamic tradition. The nineteenth century in particular saw French and British scholars begin investigating the life of Muhammad ﷺ and Islam’s origins as part of their efforts to dominate colonized Muslim populations. For German scholars of the ancient Near East, studying Islam was a byproduct of Biblical studies. In his efforts to better understand the historical development of the Old Testament, the German Biblical scholar Julius Wellhausen (d. 1918) saw studying Islam as the best way to approximate the Bible’s Semitic context. But, in seeking to ‘uncover’ the origins of Islam and its scripture, these German scholars were engaging in a conscious, if well-intentioned, act of domination. As it was announced proudly in 1902 at a German Orientalist conference, ‘the darkness of antiquity has been illuminated’ and ‘light has been carried into the dusky forests’ of India, Africa, and the Middle East by Europeans uncovering the origins and developments of these peoples’

³⁶ Voltaire, *La Philosophie de l’Histoire*, p. 121.

religions. As one scholar has put it, Theodor Nöldeke's (d. 1930) influential 1860 book on the origins of the Qur'an typified 'Europe's newfound confidence in its superior knowledge of oriental texts and traditions.'³⁷ More important for our purposes, these Orientalists were making an imposing assumption: that what had proven true of Christianity and the Bible must be true of all other religions and all other sacred texts as well. Soon the methods of Biblical scholars would be brought to bear on the Arab-Islamic tradition.

...

Western historians are of course totally right to point out the suspicious anachronism in a hadith in which the Prophet ﷺ allegedly says, 'If you see Mu'āwiya on my pulpit, kill him,' or the even more outrageous alleged hadith of 'There will be in my community a man named Muhammad b. Idrīs [al-Shāfi'ī], and the strife he brings will be worse than Satan.' But prominent Muslim hadith critics like Ibn 'Adī (d. 975), al-Jawzaqānī (d. 1148-9), and al-Dhahabī (d. 1348) also considered the hadith about Mu'āwiya to be unreliable or fabricated outright, and the hadith condemning al-Shāfi'ī was used by Muslim scholars as a textbook example of forgery.³⁸

Even though many Muslim scholars considered them unreliable, hadiths condemning the Qadarites (*qadariyya*, that early Muslim sect that upheld a belief in total human free will) appear in collections like the respected Four *Sunan*. Certainly, it seems that the proper name Qadarite did not develop for over a century after the death of the Prophet ﷺ.³⁹ But jumping to dismiss these hadiths as forgeries due to the anachronism of the Prophet ﷺ 'foretelling' this sect's emergence is hasty. Western scholars might not accept that the Prophet ﷺ could know the future, but the Qur'an clearly engages the questions of free will and

³⁷ Suzanne Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire*, pp. 157, 174, 183–184, 187; Nöldeke's *Geschichte des Qurans* has been translated as *The History of the Qur'an*, trans. Wolfgang Behn (Leiden, Brill, 2013).

³⁸ Al-Jawzaqānī, *Al-Abātīl*, pp. 114–115; al-Dhahabī, *Mīzān*, p. 3:277; Ibn 'Adī, *Al-Kāmil*, vol. 5, pp. 1744, 1751, 1756.

³⁹ See the Caliph 'Umar b. 'Abd al-Azīz's (d. 720) letter on the subject, where he refers to them as those who hold 'al-qawl bi'l-qadar'; Abū Nu'aym, *Hilyat al-awliyā'*, vol. 5, p. 351. Compare with Mālik b. Anas referring to them as the *qadariyya* in his *Muwatta'*: *kitāb al-qadar, bāb al-nahy 'an al-qawl bi'l-qadar*.

predestination. Some Muslims in Muhammad's time could well have angered him by advocating the idea that God did not control human actions, so it is not unreasonable that he might have warned them against this. Crucially, for every hadith in which the Prophet ﷺ condemns the Qadarites by this proper name there is a corresponding, non-anachronistic narration in which he refers to them as 'the people of *qadar*' or 'those who disbelieve in *qadar*.' In fact, these non-anachronistic narrations are the most reliable ones according to Muslim scholars. What seems like a clear case of anachronism to Western scholars might actually be a case in which the Prophet ﷺ condemned an existing heresy, then some later transmitters of those hadiths lazily replaced 'the people of *qadar*/those who disbelieve in *qadar*' with the conventional label Qadarite as it had emerged in their time.⁴⁰ Western critics from Ignaz Goldziher (d. 1921) onwards rebuked Muslim hadith scholars for not taking the contents of a hadith into consideration when analyzing its authenticity. But as we have seen, Muslim critics like al-Bukhārī (d. 870) did, in fact, use the contents of hadiths to prove that they were unreliable, although their degree of skepticism never approached that of the HCM.

Certainly, Muslim hadith critics differ from modern Western criticism in that they believe that the Prophet ﷺ could know the future, but perhaps Western scholars could benefit from their cautious approach. Western reasoning for why the hadith about visiting the three mosques must be forged rested on the fact that it seemed to promote an Umayyad agenda and that al-Zuhrī (d. 742), who was associated with the Umayyad court, is in the *isnād*.⁴¹ But there are other early *isnāds* for this hadith that do not have al-Zuhrī in them.⁴² Should we reconsider our conclusion or assume, quite without reason, that these other *isnāds* were forged as well? The Al-Aqsa Mosque is mentioned in the Qur'an, so is it so inconceivable that the Prophet ﷺ would order his followers to pay special attention to it along with the Haram Mosque in Mecca and his mosque in Medina?

⁴⁰ For the corresponding versions of these hadiths, see *Sunan Ibn Mājah*: introduction, *bāb fī al-qadar*; *Musnad Ibn Hanbal*, vol. 2, p. 125, etc.

⁴¹ Michael Lecker, 'Biographical Notes on al-Zuhri,' p. 38.

⁴² Al-Humaydī, *Al-Musnad*, vol. 2, p. 330.

There is a certain ‘chicken and the egg’ logic to the Western approach to the reliability of hadiths. Goldziher and others have regularly criticized the hadith, considered *sahīh* by Muslims, ‘When you see the black banners approaching from Khurasan, go to them, for indeed the Messiah (*Mahdī*) is among them,’ which they consider to be a product of Abbasid revolutionary propaganda (the Abbasids both had black banners and emerged from Khurasan).⁴³ But we must accept the fact that Muhammad ﷺ, prophet or not, might actually have acted like a prophet and prophesied occasionally. Did the Abbasids forge this hadith about the black banners and the *Mahdī*, or did they take advantage of an existing hadith and simply tailor their banners to fit the messianic image that the Prophet ﷺ had actually described?

Looking outside the Islamic tradition, the Old Testament Book of Zechariah reads, ‘Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey’ (Zechariah 9:9). Does the fact that the Gospels describe Jesus entering Jerusalem on a colt or donkey (Mark 11:1–11; Matthew 21:1–4) mean that Christians made up this part of the Book of Zechariah to bolster the case for Jesus being a messianic figure (we know this is not true since the Book of Zechariah predates Christianity)? Or did Jesus really enter Jerusalem (not unlikely) riding the transport of his day—a donkey (not unlikely)—an event that the Gospel writers then described in the language of Old Testament scripture to show how Jesus’ life was part of Old Testament prophecy being fulfilled? Taken further, the entry of the Quaker James Nayler (d. 1660) into the English town of Bristol in 1656, riding on a donkey with women strewing fronds before him and singing ‘Holy, Holy, Holy,’ obviously does not mean that Quakers concocted the Gospel story. Nayler was simply casting himself in the image of Christ as portrayed in scripture.⁴⁴ Similarly, some of the apparent anachronisms found in hadiths may simply be Muslims scripturalizing their own actions and history to dovetail with statements made by Muhammad ﷺ.

⁴³ Al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Jāmi‘ al-sagħīr*, # 648.

⁴⁴ *A True Narrative of the Examination, Tryall, and Sufferings of James Nayler* [London], n.p. 1657, pp. 4–5.

Both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars of hadiths have agreed that there are many forged hadiths. In my opinion, explaining how this came about involves understanding the choices made by the Sunni scholarly tradition more than it does doubting the systematic effectiveness of their method of hadith criticism. In theory as well as practice, the Sunni system of hadith transmission criticism, which demanded a source, investigated its reliability and sought out corroborating evidence, is an effective way of determining the authenticity of a report. Modern reporters, after all, employ a similar method. The Western scholars G.H.A. Juynboll (d. 2010) and Michael Cook cited the practice of *tadlīs* (when a transmitter cites a source in a way that seems like they heard it directly from them when they did not) as the loophole by which hadiths were attributed to major transmitters or equipped with additional *isnāds*. Juynboll states that *tadlīs* ‘was hardly ever detected.’⁴⁵ But Muslim hadith scholars from the mid-eighth century onward were obsessive about identifying which transmitters lapsed into *tadlīs* and when. Shu‘ba (d. 776) said that ‘*tadlīs* is the brother of lying’ and studied the transmissions of his teacher Qatāda b. Di‘āma (d. 735) closely to know when he had heard a hadith directly from the person he was citing and when it was unclear if there was an unspecified intermediary. Yahyā b. Sa‘īd al-Qattān (d. 813) made sure to identify *tadlīs* even when it was done by as revered a figure as Sufyān al-Thawrī (d. 778). Later, master critics like ‘Alī b. al-Madīnī (d. 849), al-Husayn al-Karābīsī (d. 859), and others wrote multi-volume books identifying the names of those who committed *tadlīs* and the degree of their laxity.⁴⁶

Juynboll states that the critical method of Muslim hadith scholars did not take into account the possibility that *isnāds* were fabricated wholesale. But the intensive focus on finding corroboration in order to evaluate a transmitter was aimed at isolating those individuals who cited *isnāds* not backed up by other students of the same teacher. If a transmitter was making up *isnāds* wholesale, he would be identified as someone who ‘is not corroborated (*lā yutāba‘u ‘alayhi*)’ or narrates ‘unacceptable (*munkar*)’ hadiths. The number of hadiths transmitted by Ibn ‘Abbās appears to increase incredulously over the centuries only when we forget to

⁴⁵ G. H. A. Juynboll, *Muslim Tradition*, pp. 52, 73, 75.

⁴⁶ Khatīb, *Al-Kifāya*, p. 2:371–378; idem, *Al-Jāmi‘*, vol. 2, p. 312.

distinguish between the relatively small number that Ibn ‘Abbās actually heard from the Prophet ﷺ and those in which he said ‘the Prophet said ...’ leaving out the older Companion who had actually told him the hadith.

Clearly, Muslim scholars’ rulings on the reliability of individual hadiths cannot be accepted without careful examination. But, as the German scholar Harald Motzki and others have shown, the classical Islamic method of filtering out forged hadiths was much more effective than earlier scholars like Goldziher and Juynboll have believed. However, Sunni scholars only chose to apply their critical methods *some of the time*. Masters of early Sunni hadith criticism such as Sufyān al-Thawrī, Ibn al-Mubārak (d. 797), Ibn Hanbal (d. 855), Ibn Ma‘īn (d. 848), and Ibn Abī Hātim al-Rāzī (d. 938) all stressed that they dealt stringently with the *isnāds* of hadiths dealing with law and dogma but were lax with material concerning history (*maghāzī*), the virtues of people or acts (*fadā’il*), pious preaching (*wa‘z*), the end of days (*malāhim*), good manners, and the meaning of Qur’anic terms (*tafsīr*). As Nabia Abbott (d. 1981) stated, this material easily passed through the hadith scholars’ critical filters. These were the doors that Sunni scholars left open for forged material.

Al-Tirmidhī’s (d. 892) collection offers a useful example since he alone provided his own ratings for each hadith in his book. In chapters dealing with core legal topics, only a relatively small percentage of hadiths suffer from some lack of corroboration (*gharīb*): for the chapters on tithing (*zakāt*) and fasting (*sawm*), it is 17%. His chapter on inheritance (*farā’id*) has only 7%. Al-Tirmidhī’s chapters on non-legal matters, however, have a much larger percentage of hadiths that the author himself acknowledges as problematic: apocalyptic strife (*fītan*)—35%; the virtues of various early Muslims (*manāqib*)—52%; pious invocations (*da‘awāt*)—50%; and manners (*ādāb*)—27%. If corroboration was the keystone of Muslim hadith criticism, then al-Tirmidhī certainly dropped his critical guard in the non-legal chapters in comparison with legal ones. It is unfortunate that many of the areas that Western scholars consider the most important subjects of study—political history, apocalyptic visions, and Qur’anic exegesis—were simply not the priorities of Sunni hadith scholars. It is possible that it was prioritization of

law over other areas that led to the inclusion of large numbers of unreliable hadiths in Sunni collections, not the failings of Sunni hadith-critical methods.

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