

**An Introduction to the Science of the Hadith:  
*Kitab Ma`rifat Anwa` 'Ilm al-Hadith***

*Ibn al-Salah al-Shahrazuri (Eerik Dickinson, tr.)  
Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing, 2005. 356 pages.*

Contemporary western scholarship on the hadith literature largely ignores most of the relevant secondary scholarship, namely, that produced by pre-modern hadith specialists, including the discussions and assessments found in the *rijal* literature, the *ilal* genre, and other works. Perhaps this neglect is born of the conviction that as religious persons, pre-modern scholars were incapable of “doing” real history. Or perhaps it reflects the suspicion that their assessments were designed *exclusively* to vindicate doctrinally correct hadiths. Neither assumption does justice to the traditional field of hadith studies. It is thus fitting to understand this discipline, not only because attention to the secondary literature is a requirement of responsible scholarship in any field, but also because doing so can benefit the modern reevaluation of the hadith literature.

The first step toward understanding traditional hadith scholarship is to know its terminology. In English, there may be no better introduction to this terminology than Eerik Dickinson’s translation of Ibn al-Salah’s (d. 643/1245) classic work. In addition, the book briefly addresses some of the defects that could appear in the hadiths, contradictions in their *isnads* (chains of transmission) or *matns* (texts), such as when one transmitter relates a tradition with an incomplete *isnad* and another transmitter provides a complete one, various subdisciplines of hadith studies and other matters.

Ibn al-Salah’s book can help correct certain modern misunderstandings about the nature of traditional hadith scholarship and the technical meanings of such basic terms as *sahih*, *da`if*, *munkar*, and *tadlis*. To give an example, the traditional discipline is often faulted for rating as sound (*sahih*) hadiths that can be recognized as ahistorical. This presupposes, incorrectly, that *sahih* means authentic. Yet Ibn al-Salah indicates that classifying a hadith as *sahih* means no more than saying that its *isnad* and its variants satisfy certain formal criteria. He asserts that, therefore, such a classification does not

necessarily mean that the hadith is authentic. Likewise, if a hadith is not considered *sahih*, this does not mean that it is necessarily apocryphal. (To be sure, it was held that a judgment of soundness creates a presumption of authenticity that should be acted upon in the absence of other evidence. However, this probabilistic approach acknowledged that many sound hadiths could be ahistorical.)

The book also touches upon the methods of hadith critics. Redaction criticism was their bread and butter. Comparing different versions of a hadith often made it possible to learn what its prototype looked like and, hence, judge the qualities of its various transmitters. For example, it was often possible to discern if a transmitter had changed the hadith's sense. In the case of contradictory variants of the same hadith related through person X, if all transmitters from X except one related the hadith in a certain way, that one could be considered the original version and the anomalous version could be written off as erroneous. But such matters were not necessarily settled through a mere counting of the transmitters on the two sides of a disagreement. Rather, transmitters known as reliable were given greater weight.

While Dickinson's translation is definitely valuable, there is room for improvement. It is neither free from error nor always in accordance with idiomatic English. For example, there is a problem in the section on *sahih* reports. The translation states: "The standard of the sound hadith does not require that the hadith is sound in reality..." (p. 5). It is not clear what this sentence means. At this point, Ibn al-Salah has already given the criteria that define a sound hadith. This sentence, then, appears to say that a hadith that satisfies these criteria need not, in reality, satisfy these criteria: a contradiction. In fact, however, Ibn al-Salah does not say that a *sahih* hadith is not necessarily *sahih* in reality; rather, what he says is that it need not be "definitely true" (*maqtu`an bih*), i.e., certainly authentic.

Another error appears in the section on *munkar* reports. The translation states: "In the remarks of many scholars of hadith we find a blanket condemnation of the hadith isolated as rejected, unfamiliar or anomalous" (p. 59). The original text is *wa-itlaq al-hukm `ala al-tafarrud bi al-radd aw al-nakarah aw al-shudhudh mawjud fi kalam kathir min ahl al-hadith*. Dickinson understands *hukm `ala* to mean "condemnation of." Although in some contexts *hukm* can mean that, here it refers to the judgment (on an isolated transmission [*tafarrud*]) that the hadith is *munkar*. The preposition *`ala* goes with *itlaq*, not *hukm*. What Ibn al-Salah is saying is that, in the remarks of many hadith scholars, the term *munkar* is applied without distinction to isolated hadiths characterized by rejection, unfamiliarity, or anomalousness.

The point is that some scholars used *munkar* simply as a synonym of “isolated” and did not take into account factors other than isolation, such as the transmitter’s reliability.

As an example of non-idiomatic and confusing renderings, one may mention this sentence: “Abu `Abd Allah al-Hakim made a type of problematic hadith the instances when ...” (p. 45). A better translation would be: “Abu `Abd Allah al-Hakim considered as a type of problematic hadith the instances where ...” (See Lane’s *Lexicon* for this sense of *ja`ala*.)

In sum, this translation is a valuable contribution to the western study of Islam. It is to be hoped that it inspires more rigorous research in the fundamental field of hadith studies.

Behnam Sadeki  
Assistant Professor, Department of Religious Studies  
Stanford University, Stanford, California