

Carrying on the Tradition: A Social and Intellectual History of Hadith Transmission across a Thousand Years

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Garrett Davidson's new book, *Carrying on the Tradition*, is a significant contribution to the Western study of Sunni hadith. Through detailed analysis of a breath-taking range of hadith books and documentary sources, it identifies key features of hadith transmission that emerged during approximately the fourth/tenth century and were sustained in the Middle East and North Africa until the tenth/sixteenth century. During this period, which Davidson calls "post-canonical," the purpose of chains of transmission (*asānīd, isnād*) was radically different from what it was during the first three centuries of Islam, when the canonical hadith books were compiled by scholars such as al-Bukhārī (d. 256/870) and al-Tirmidhī (d. 279/892). This transformation of the role of the chain of transmission had profound consequences on hadith transmission and, as Davidson demonstrates, has led many Western Islamicists to draw erroneous conclusions about hadith scholarship during this period.

The original purpose of the chain of transmission was to document the oral sources for a hadith or report ascribed to early Muslim

authorities. Thousands of these chains can be found in the canonical “six books” of Sunni hadith literature, as well as in other contemporaneous books in multiple genres, such as the *Muṣannaf* of Ibn Abī Shayba (d. 235/849); al-Shāfi‘ī’s (d. 204/820) *Kitāb al-Umm*; Ibn Qutayba’s (d. 276/889) *adab* work, *‘Uyūn al-akhbār*; Ibn Sa‘d’s (d. 230/845) *Kitāb al-Ṭabaqāt al-kabīr*; and both the Qur’ān commentary and history of al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923). While a few Western Islamicists have claimed that third/ninth century hadith compilers merely attached chains of transmission to hadith texts (*mutūn*), the fact that *isnād*-based hadith criticism emerged during the early third/ninth century and blossomed in the fourth/tenth century severely undermines this claim. The chain of transmission was the primary (but not exclusive) locus of hadith criticism, and the chains found in the canonical books were carefully studied for centuries and considered the primary source for evaluating the authenticity of hadiths.

However, Davidson has found that the chain of transmission underwent a radical change in the century or so following the compilation of the canonical Sunni hadith books. What was initially a scholarly apparatus transformed into a ritual act of devotion and “a conduit for the spiritual charisma (*baraka*) of the Prophet” (17). Hadith scholars and transmitters promoted an “ideology” that “the chain of transmission was the tie that bound the [Muslim] community to the Prophet and through him to God Himself” (2). No less an authority than the famous scholar Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ (d. 643/1245) declared that in his age “the aim of hadith transmission is the preservation of the chain of transmission” (24). As Davidson astutely notes, Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ’s observation was “essentially a declaration of the end of rigorous transmitter criticism.” Furthermore, an important objective of this new ideology that emerged in the post-canonical period was to reduce the number of links in the chains of transmission between the transmitter and the Prophet. The technical term for hadiths with few links is “elevated” (*al-‘ālī*), and most of *Carrying on the Tradition* describes the historical consequences that the quest for elevated chains of transmission had on centuries of Sunni hadith transmission.

The first major change was the rise of the composition of audition notices for hadiths and hadith books. An audition notice (*samā‘* or *ṭabaqa*) is different from an *ijāza*, to which Davidson devotes a separate

chapter, because an *ijāza* is a “mode of non-oral hadith transmission” (50). By contrast, an audition notice serves “simply to document that [named individuals] heard a manuscript [of hadith] read aloud” (51). This manuscript could have been read aloud by the transmitter himself or, more likely, by someone in the presence of the transmitter. Audition notices became very important for the cultivation of elevated chains of transmission because scholars and lay people would often bring their young children to the hadith sessions of an old transmitter so that if the child lived to an old age, they would be able to transmit what they had heard as a child with fewer links in the chain of transmission than their contemporaries. Davidson argues persuasively that this practice of bringing children to hadith audition sessions had little to do with education and served primarily to preserve the chain of transmission and to reduce the number of links in the chains of transmission of hadith books. In other words, transmission of hadith became largely divorced from education and scholarship.

The divorce between transmission and education was further enhanced by the *ijāza*, a term that many Western scholars have misunderstood (109-111). According to Davidson, when the term *ijāza* is used by itself, it refers to *ijāzat al-riwāya*, which is “a permission granted by a transmitter allowing the recipient to cite and further transmit a text or groups of texts through the granting transmitter’s personal chain of transmission” (108). It did not authorize the recipient to teach the hadiths or indicate that they had mastery of them; rather it merely allowed a student to add his or her own name to the chain of transmission that this transmitter had for the book. (The *ijāzat al-tadrīs* authorized teaching and, according to Davidson’s citation of Devin Stewart, was very rare [110].) The third chapter of *Carrying on the Tradition* is dedicated to elucidating the history of the *ijāza* and its variations, such as the “unspecified *ijāza*,” the “global *ijāza*,” the permissibility of granting *ijāzas* to young children (under the age of five), and even the question of whether an *ijāza* can be granted to a child that has not yet been born. From the perspective of hadith transmission, Davidson notes that “the issuance of *ijāzas* to children was an important means of creating elevated chains of transmission” (138), and he concludes with the important observation

that “the *ijāza* played a central role in the preservation of the model of the oral chain of transmission after the ideal of actual oral/aural transmission became untenable” (151).

Having identified and analyzed the two most important components of post-canonical hadith transmission, namely the audition notice and the *ijāza*, Davidson applies his findings to the social prestige that elevated chains of transmission conferred upon both lay Muslims and scholars. Due to the divorce between transmission and scholarship, lay men and women could become “hadith rock stars” (163) and even make a small fortune. Among male lay transmitters, the case of al-Ḥajjār (d. 730/1329), stands out (163-165). Abū l-‘Abbās al-Ḥajjār was an illiterate mason in Damascus who was recorded as attending an audition session when he was very young, such that in his old age, hadith scholars in his neighborhood realized he was the last living link in the chain of an important recension of al-Bukhārī’s *Ṣaḥīḥ*. According to the norms of Sunni hadith culture, al-Ḥajjār merely had to sit in the presence of someone reading al-Bukhārī’s *al-Ṣaḥīḥ* to an audience of Muslims in order to confer his short chain of transmission for this book upon all who were present. During the final years of his life, political figures and scholars, along with hundreds of laypeople, sat in the presence of the illiterate al-Ḥajjār and listened to a local scholar read his recension of al-Bukhārī’s *al-Ṣaḥīḥ* in order to acquire al-Ḥajjār’s elevated chain of transmission for this esteemed Sunni book. Like contemporary rock stars, al-Ḥajjār also made large sums of money by attending his own audition sessions, which is further evidence of the cultural prestige of elevated chains of transmission.

Davidson was wise to give the example of the male lay-transmitter al-Ḥajjār before addressing the sensitive issue of female hadith transmitters. Due to the paucity of female authors in Islamic history, there has been a temptation to assume that any Muslim woman who was involved in hadith transmission was a scholar. Davidson thoroughly demolishes this assumption on the basis of his careful analysis of al-Sakhāwī’s (d. 902/1497) famous biographical dictionary, *al-Ḍaw’ al-lāmi’*, and audition notices preserved in Damascus. He shows that a very small number of female transmitters were in fact scholars, such as Karīma al-Marwaziyya (d. 463/1070) and Zaynab bt. al-Kamāl (d. 740/1339), while the vast

majority of them were lay women. Part of his evidence for this argument is that these female transmitters were only sought out and audited when they were in their seventies and eighties, once their chains of transmission had become shorter than those of their contemporaries. Given that women who survive childbearing generally live longer than men, the Sunni quest for elevated chains of transmission presented long-lived women with an opportunity to become valued hadith transmitters. However, this same culture that valued elevation also did not demand that the transmitter be literate or a scholar, and this fact is reflected by Davidson's finding that female transmitters were always passive participants in their audition sessions and rarely described as having scholarly credentials. In other words, a man read the hadith book out loud to the audience in the presence of the elderly female transmitter, like what we saw above in the case of al-Ḥajjār. This finding is especially devastating for a book such as Mohamad al-Nadawi's *al-Muḥaddithāt: The Women Scholars of Islam* (Oxford 2007), because it means that the vast majority of women mentioned in it almost certainly were lay transmitters who lacked the basic credentials associated with Muslim scholarship.

In chapters five and six, Davidson discusses six genres of post-canonical hadith scholarship that arose during this period of the Sunni cultivation of elevated chains of transmission, each of which contributed to its growth and expansion. These genres are the forty-hadith collection, the *ʿawālī* genre, *mashyakha* and *muʿjam* works, and *fihrist* and *thabat* catalogs. Hundreds of works in these genres were composed, and very few of them have received Western scholarly attention. For example, the *fihrist* catalog appears to have originated in Muslim Spain and the earliest surviving works of this genre, by the exegete and judge Ibn ʿAṭīyya (d. 541/1149) and polymath al-Qāḍī ʿIyāḍ (d. 544/1149), both have been published (256-262). One especially valuable observation Davidson makes in the sixth chapter is that the *thabat* genre initially served to document oral/aural transmission of books before it became synonymous with the *fihrist* catalogue, which overwhelmingly consists of *ijāzas* for books, by the eleventh/seventeenth century.

The final chapter of *Carrying on the Tradition* serves as an epilogue to the book and briefly discusses the decline and modest recovery of the

ijāza in the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Davidson ascribes the contemporary renewed practice of documenting hadith transmission among some Muslims to a broad revival of interest in the late Sunni scholarly tradition as well as what he calls “neo-*ahl al-hadith*,” which many of us would call *salafīs*, especially in the GCC countries. I cannot help but wonder if the vast network of Deoband seminaries has also played a role in this modest revival too, although this institution is not mentioned in the book under review, which focuses almost exclusively on the Arabic-speaking countries of the pre-modern period.

This book is essential reading for anyone researching Sunni scholarship during the post-canonical hadith period, especially prior to the Ottoman period. It argues convincingly that academics and historians must be careful about making a distinction between hadith transmitters and hadith scholars, given how popular hadith transmission was in public settings during this time and how many participants were laypeople. It also clarifies the core institution of the *ijāza*, which was used primarily to allow the transmission of texts without investing the impractically long time it would take to hear them in their entirety from a transmitter, and it normally did not imply any degree of mastery or comprehension of the texts in question. Finally, it introduces a variety of genres of hadith literature that contributed to the Sunni quest for elevated chains of transmission, several of which, such as the forty-hadith collection and *fihrist* catalog, continued to be produced into the twentieth century.

Perhaps the most important lesson I took away from this social and intellectual history is just how *anti-intellectual* Sunni hadith transmission became from approximately the fourth/tenth century until the eleventh/seventeenth century. Unlike disciplines such as legal theory or *kalām* theology, which engaged with rigorous hermeneutical and metaphysical questions, hadith transmission transformed into a ritual practice involving young children “listening” to men reading hadith books in the presence of old men and women. It involved, even in the twentieth century, hadith scholars defending the presence of jinn or alleged three-hundred-year-old men in chains of transmission. To his credit, Davidson is remarkably non-judgmental about the irrational

aspects of hadith transmission, which often became more of a spectacle than a scholarly practice. Of course, hadith *scholars*, such as al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348) and Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī (d. 852/1449), produced rigorous scholarship during this time, but this is not the subject of *Carrying on the Tradition*, which focuses on the long-term Sunni venture of preserving elevated chains of transmission, along with scholarly works that supported this endeavor. But, as Davidson notes (74), even though al-Dhahabī the scholar did not approve of children receiving *ijāzas*, he nonetheless took his own three-year old son to get *ijāzas*, because that is what a good father did.

In conclusion, *Carrying on the Tradition* provides a valuable foundation and guide for future research in the history of hadith scholarship and transmission during the post-canonical period. It also indicates the challenges researchers will face examining hadith transmission during the Ottoman period, when audition notices become very rare, although this may be compensated for by the large number of manuscripts that survive from this period. It will also be valuable for a future comparative study of Twelver Shī‘ī hadith transmission during its post-canonical period, another vast field of Islamic Studies that remains largely untouched. Finally, Davidson’s careful distinction between hadith transmitters and scholars, as well as his clarification of the purpose of the omnipresent *ijāza*, will benefit future studies of Sunni hadith transmission in West Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia, regions of the Muslim world which, understandably, lay outside the scope of *Carrying on the Tradition*.

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