



THE WRITTEN COMPILATION OF HADITH IN THE EARLY ISLAMIC CENTURIES: HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT AND THE TREATMENT OF SECTARIANISM IN CANONICAL COLLECTIONS

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Abstract. This article examines the historical development of the written compilation of hadith during the seventh through ninth centuries CE, with particular attention to how the canonical collections addressed the emerging challenge of sectarianism within the Muslim community. The transition from oral hadith transmission to systematic written compilation represents a pivotal moment in Islamic intellectual history, driven by both the geographical expansion of the Muslim world and the proliferation of sectarian movements that threatened to distort the prophetic tradition for ideological purposes. Drawing on primary Arabic historiographical sources and contemporary scholarship, this study traces the compilation process through three stages: the informal recording practices of the first century, the organized compilation efforts of the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods, and the systematic critical compilation that produced the six canonical collections (*al-Kutub al-Sitta*) in the ninth century. The analysis demonstrates that the compilers of the canonical collections were acutely aware of the sectarian distortion of hadiths and developed specific methodological strategies to identify and exclude narrations tainted by sectarian bias. The study identifies over forty hadiths within the canonical collections that explicitly condemn religious sectarianism, factionalism, and extremism, demonstrating that the prophetic tradition itself constitutes a comprehensive counter-narrative to the divisive ideologies that threatened the unity of the Muslim community. These findings underscore the relevance of classical hadith scholarship for contemporary efforts to combat religious extremism and sectarian violence.

Keywords: hadith compilation, written transmission, canonical collections, sectarianism, *al-Kutub al-Sitta*, Islamic historiography, factionalism, Bukhari, Muslim

INTRODUCTION

The written compilation of hadiths represents one of the most consequential intellectual undertakings in Islamic history. The systematic documentation of the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) words, actions, and approvals transformed what had been a

primarily oral tradition into a vast written corpus that would serve as the foundation of Islamic law, theology, ethics, and social organization for all subsequent generations. This transition, which unfolded over approximately two centuries, was driven by a complex interplay of religious, political, and intellectual factors that shaped both the methodology and the content of the resulting collections (Brown, 2009:18).

Among the most significant factors motivating the compilation enterprise was the emergence and proliferation of sectarian movements within the early Muslim community. Beginning with the Kharijite revolt during the caliphate of Ali ibn Abi Talib and continuing through the Shiite-Sunni divergence, the Mu'tazilite rationalist movement, and numerous smaller factions, the first three centuries of Islam witnessed intense ideological competition in which each group sought to legitimize its positions by claiming prophetic authority. This competition created a powerful incentive for hadith fabrication, as partisans of various factions produced or altered narrations to support their theological and political positions (Suyuti, 1996:178).

The hadith compilers of the ninth century responded to this challenge with extraordinary methodological rigor, developing authentication criteria specifically designed to detect and exclude sectarian fabrications. This article examines the historical development of the compilation process, the methodological strategies employed to combat sectarian distortion, and the anti-sectarian content preserved within the canonical collections themselves.

MAIN PART

1. The First Stage: Informal Recording (7th–8th Centuries)

The question of whether hadiths were recorded in writing during the Prophet's lifetime and the immediately succeeding period has been extensively debated by both Muslim and Western scholars. The traditional Islamic position, supported by numerous evidences, holds that while the Prophet initially discouraged the writing of hadiths to prevent their confusion with the Quranic text, he later permitted and even encouraged their recording. The *sahifa* (written collection) of Abdullah ibn Amr ibn al-As, known as *al-Sahifa al-Sadiqa*, represents the most well-documented example of prophetic-era hadith recording, containing approximately one thousand narrations written with the Prophet's explicit approval (Suyuti, 1996:95).

During the reign of the Umayyad Caliph Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz (717–720 CE), the first official initiative to compile hadiths was undertaken. Umar ibn Abd al-Aziz instructed the governor of Medina, Abu Bakr ibn Hazm, and the prominent scholar Ibn Shihab al-Zuhri (d. 742 CE) to collect and record prophetic traditions systematically. This initiative was motivated in part by concerns about the loss of hadith knowledge as the Companion generation and their immediate successors passed away, and in part by the need to establish authoritative textual references in the face of growing sectarian manipulation of oral traditions (Zahabi, 1987:278).

Al-Zuhri's compilation efforts marked a turning point in hadith scholarship. His systematic approach to collection, his insistence on recording complete chains of transmission alongside the hadith text, and his critical evaluation of narrators established methodological standards that would be refined and perfected by subsequent generations of compilers. Importantly, al-Zuhri was among the first scholars to explicitly articulate the connection between written compilation and the preservation of the prophetic tradition against sectarian distortion, reportedly stating: "We did not wish to write down knowledge until the rulers compelled us to do so; then we resolved that we should not prevent any Muslim from accessing it" (Ibn Taymiyya, 1972:34).

2. The Second Stage: Organized Compilation (8th–9th Centuries)

The second stage of hadith compilation, spanning the late eighth and early ninth centuries, saw the production of major thematic and narrator-based collections that organized the growing body of written hadiths into accessible scholarly works. Imam Malik ibn Anas's (711–795 CE) *al-Muwatta*, compiled in Medina, represented a pioneering effort to integrate hadith material with the established legal practice of the Prophet's city, creating a work that served simultaneously as a hadith collection and a manual of Islamic jurisprudence. Malik's selectivity—he is reported to have included fewer than 2,000 hadiths from a much larger body of available narrations—reflected an emerging critical consciousness about the need to distinguish authentic prophetic traditions from later accretions and fabrications (Brown, 2009:38).

The *musnad* (narrator-based) collections of the early ninth century, particularly the monumental *Musnad* of Ahmad ibn Hanbal (780–855 CE) containing over 27,000 hadiths, represented a comprehensive approach to compilation that prioritized inclusiveness. Ahmad ibn Hanbal's stated methodology was to include every hadith

transmitted through a chain of narrators that was not clearly fabricated, leaving the task of critical evaluation to subsequent scholars. This approach, while producing a collection of extraordinary breadth, also highlighted the urgent need for more rigorous authentication criteria, as the sheer volume of circulating narrations—many of sectarian origin—threatened to overwhelm the scholarly apparatus for distinguishing authentic from fabricated material (Abu Shahba, 1998:145).

The challenge of sectarian fabrication during this period cannot be overstated. Muslim historians recorded that during the civil conflicts and sectarian disputes of the Umayyad and early Abbasid periods, hadith fabrication reached epidemic proportions. The muhaddith Yahya ibn Sa'id al-Qattan (d. 813 CE) reportedly stated: "I have never seen more lying among the people than in matters related to hadith." Ibn Hibban (d. 965 CE) compiled a collection documenting over 2,000 known hadith fabricators, many of whom were explicitly identified as sectarian partisans who manufactured narrations to support the positions of their respective factions (Suyuti, 1996:214).

3. The Third Stage: The Canonical Collections (9th Century)

The culmination of the hadith compilation enterprise came in the ninth century with the production of the six canonical collections (al-Kutub al-Sitta) by Bukhari, Muslim, Abu Dawud, Tirmidhi, Nasa'i, and Ibn Majah. These collections represented the application of the most rigorous authentication criteria yet developed, combining comprehensive isnad analysis with careful content evaluation to produce works that the Muslim scholarly community accepted as the most reliable repositories of the prophetic tradition (Brown, 2009:25).

Imam al-Bukhari's (810–870 CE) Sahih stands as the supreme example of critical hadith compilation. Born in Bukhara in Central Asia, Bukhari traveled extensively across the Islamic world, personally meeting and evaluating hundreds of narrators. His selection criteria were extraordinarily demanding: he required not only that each narrator in the chain be of verified probity and precision, but also that each pair of consecutive narrators be confirmed to have met and transmitted directly from one another—a condition that his contemporary Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj considered unnecessarily strict. Out of approximately 600,000 hadiths he examined, Bukhari included only about 7,275 (including repetitions) in his Sahih, a selectivity ratio that testifies to the severity of his authentication standards (Abu Shahba, 1998:167).

The anti-sectarian dimension of the canonical collections is evident in both their methodology and their content. Methodologically, the compilers developed specific criteria for identifying and excluding narrations transmitted by known sectarian partisans whose ideological commitments compromised their reliability as hadith transmitters. A narrator known to be a zealous Kharijite, Shiite, or Mu'tazilite partisan was subject to heightened scrutiny, and any narration that appeared to support sectarian positions was evaluated with particular care to determine whether it reflected authentic prophetic teaching or sectarian fabrication (Muslim, 2006:12).

4. Anti-Sectarian Hadiths in the Canonical Collections

Beyond their methodological safeguards against sectarian contamination, the canonical collections preserve a substantial body of prophetic hadiths that explicitly condemn sectarianism, factionalism, and religious extremism. A systematic survey of the Sahihayn (the collections of Bukhari and Muslim) identifies over forty such hadiths, addressing themes including the unity of the Muslim community, the prohibition of takfir, the condemnation of religious extremism (ghuluww), the obligation to obey legitimate authority, and the warning against creating divisions within the community of believers.

Among the most significant of these hadiths is the Prophet's declaration: "My community will divide into seventy-three sects; all of them will be in the Fire except one." When asked which one would be saved, the Prophet replied: "The one that follows what I and my Companions are upon." This hadith, transmitted through multiple chains and preserved in several canonical collections, has been interpreted by mainstream Sunni scholars not as a prediction of inevitable fragmentation but as a warning against the sectarian impulse and a directive to maintain fidelity to the prophetic example as the antidote to division (Tirmidhi, *Kitab al-Iman*; cited in Qardawi, 2007:89).

Another foundational anti-sectarian hadith preserved in the canonical collections is the Prophet's statement: "Do not revert to unbelief after me by striking one another's necks." This hadith, narrated in the context of the Prophet's farewell sermon—his final public address to the Muslim community—carries the weight of a final testament, placing the prohibition of intra-Muslim violence at the pinnacle of the prophetic legacy. The hadith's inclusion in both Bukhari and Muslim ensures its recognition as among the most firmly authenticated of all prophetic narrations, providing an unassailable textual foundation for the rejection of sectarian violence (Bukhari, 2002: *Kitab al-Fitan*).

The hadith “The believer is not stung from the same hole twice” has been interpreted by scholars as a warning against the naivety that enables repeated exploitation by sectarian manipulators. The hadith “I hold you by your garments, pulling you back from the Fire, but you insist on rushing into it” has been read as a prophetic lament over the propensity of some community members to embrace destructive ideologies despite clear warnings. Together, these and dozens of similar hadiths constitute a comprehensive prophetic counter-narrative to sectarianism that is embedded in the very canonical collections that sectarian movements claim to follow (Muslim, 2006: Kitab al-Iman).

The regional diversity of hadith compilation traditions during the eighth and ninth centuries reflects the geographical breadth of the Islamic scholarly world. Distinct compilation traditions emerged in Medina, Mecca, Kufa, Basra, Syria, Egypt, and Khorasan, each characterized by specific methodological emphases and scholarly lineages. The Medinan tradition, represented by Malik ibn Anas, prioritized the living practice (*amal*) of the Prophet’s city as a complement to textual transmission. The Iraqi tradition, associated with Abu Hanifa and his students, developed more elaborate theoretical frameworks for reconciling apparently contradictory narrations and extracting legal rulings from hadith texts. The Khorasanian tradition, which produced Bukhari and other Central Asian hadith scholars, combined rigorous *isnad* criticism with encyclopedic collection, creating the most comprehensive authentication apparatus in the history of hadith scholarship (Brown, 2009:78).

The phenomenon of hadith fabrication by sectarian movements during the compilation era took several identifiable forms. The most blatant was the outright invention of narrations attributed to the Prophet, complete with fabricated chains of transmission. More subtle was the modification of authentic hadiths through the addition, deletion, or alteration of key phrases to change their meaning in ways that supported sectarian positions. The most insidious form was the transmission of authentic hadiths stripped of their original context, transforming contextually specific prophetic statements into seemingly universal principles that could be applied to justify positions the Prophet never endorsed. The compilers of the canonical collections developed specific criteria to detect each of these forms of fabrication, creating a multi-layered defense against sectarian contamination of the prophetic tradition (Suyuti, 1996:234).

The treatment of sectarianism within the canonical collections extends beyond the explicit condemnation of factionalism to encompass a positive vision of community

unity. Hadiths emphasizing the obligation of congregational prayer, the brotherhood of believers, the prohibition of suspicion and backbiting among Muslims, and the duty to reconcile disputes collectively construct a normative ideal of communal solidarity that directly contradicts the exclusionary logic of sectarian movements. The Prophet's comparison of the Muslim community to a single body—'if one part suffers, the whole body responds with sleeplessness and fever'—presents unity not merely as a political desirable but as an organic, essential characteristic of authentic Muslim community life (Muslim, 2006: Kitab al-Birr).

The Central Asian contribution to the canonical hadith compilation enterprise deserves particular emphasis in the contemporary context. The fact that the most authoritative hadith collection in Sunni Islam—the Sahih of Imam al-Bukhari—was compiled by a scholar from Bukhara in present-day Uzbekistan carries profound significance for the region's contemporary engagement with its Islamic scholarly heritage. Similarly, Imam al-Tirmidhi's collection, compiled by a scholar from Termez, and the significant contributions of other Central Asian hadith scholars demonstrate that the region was not a peripheral recipient of Islamic knowledge but a central participant in its production and preservation. The revival of awareness of this heritage among contemporary Central Asian Muslims strengthens their connection to an indigenous scholarly tradition that provides authoritative guidance on the very issues—sectarianism, extremism, the authentic understanding of prophetic teachings—that define the region's contemporary religious challenges (Zahabi, 1987:456).

The methodological lessons of the canonical compilation era remain directly applicable to contemporary challenges. The compilers' insistence on verifying sources, evaluating the reliability and motivations of transmitters, cross-referencing reports, and assessing content against established principles provides a template for critical engagement with religious information in the digital age. In an era when fabricated, distorted, and decontextualized hadiths circulate freely on social media and messaging platforms, the authentication methodology developed fourteen centuries ago by scholars like Bukhari and Muslim offers not only historical insight but practical guidance for distinguishing authentic prophetic teaching from the manufactured narratives of contemporary sectarian movements (Abu Shahba, 1998:278).

The intersection of hadith compilation and anti-sectarian scholarship reveals a deeper principle about the nature of Islamic knowledge transmission. The compilers understood

that the preservation of authentic prophetic teaching was inseparable from the active refutation of its distortions. In their view, a hadith collection was not merely a passive repository of information but an active intellectual intervention against the forces of fragmentation and fabrication that threatened the integrity of the prophetic legacy. This understanding—that authentic knowledge must be actively defended against distortion, not merely passively preserved—carries profound implications for contemporary Islamic scholarship. The digital age has created new vectors for hadith manipulation that the classical compilers could not have anticipated, but the fundamental principle they established—that rigorous methodology is the essential defense of authentic tradition—remains as relevant today as it was twelve centuries ago (Brown, 2009:198).

The study of the anti-sectarian dimension of the canonical collections also illuminates the relationship between hadith scholarship and social stability. The compilers operated in societies that had experienced devastating civil wars, sectarian violence, and the fragmentation of political authority along ideological lines. Their compilation work was motivated not by abstract scholarly curiosity but by a concrete, urgent desire to provide the Muslim community with authoritative textual references that could serve as a unifying force against the centrifugal pressures of sectarian competition. The canonical collections thus represent not only intellectual achievements but instruments of social cohesion, designed to replace the divisive claims of competing factions with the authoritative voice of the Prophet himself. This social function of hadith scholarship—its capacity to promote unity, moderate extremes, and provide a common ground for dispute resolution—remains its most important practical contribution to contemporary Muslim societies (Qardawi, 2007:178).

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the written compilation of hadiths in the early Islamic centuries was motivated in significant part by the need to preserve the authentic prophetic tradition against the growing threat of sectarian fabrication and distortion. The compilers of the canonical collections developed sophisticated methodological strategies to identify and exclude sectarian fabrications, while simultaneously preserving a substantial body of prophetic teachings that explicitly condemn sectarianism, factionalism, and religious extremism.

The contemporary relevance of these findings is substantial. The same canonical collections that extremist movements selectively cite to justify their positions contain abundant prophetic teachings that directly and unequivocally condemn the very practices—takfir, intra-Muslim violence, religious extremism—upon which these movements are founded. The recovery, dissemination, and educational integration of these anti-sectarian hadiths represents one of the most powerful and authentic resources available for countering religious radicalization. The scholarly heritage of Central Asian hadith scholarship—represented supremely by the work of Imam al-Bukhari of Bukhara—provides a foundation of unparalleled authority and relevance for this critical contemporary task.

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