

*Carrying on the Tradition: A Social and Intellectual History of Hadith Transmission across a Thousand Years.* By GARRETT DAVIDSON. Islamic History and Civilization, vol. 160. Leiden: BRILL, 2020. Pp. xii + 333. €121.

Anybody who works on Maliki scholars in the early modern Maghreb will be familiar with ‘Abd al-Ḥayy al-Kattānī’s *Fahras al-fahāris wa-l-athbāt*, the celebrated biographical dictionary of scholars and their networks up to the early twentieth century (al-Kattānī died in 1962). Garrett Davidson, who discusses al-Kattānī’s work in the last chapter of his study of hadith transmission in the postcanonical age, can now tell us what kind of work this really is. It is, he contends, only incidentally an encyclopedia of scholars—primarily, it is a work that aims to cement al-Kattānī’s links to the Prophet through a catalogue of the chains of transmission (sg. *isnād*) that end in himself. And in this, it is the modern incarnation of a tradition that goes back to the earliest centuries of Islam.

Davidson’s starting point is the moment of the creation of the great hadith collections in the ninth century. Although now in written form, the process of copying and recopying still introduced the danger of error and the creeping in of variations. Thus, there was still need for a system of authorized transmission, as in the precollection period—only now it was the written text that was transmitted through an *isnād* going back either to al-Bukhārī and the other collectors, or to their sources. However, after two or three centuries so many trustworthy copies of the great collections had been made that these had achieved canonical form, that is, the written text itself was said to be *mutawātir*: the high number of identical copies ensured that none could be false. From that point on, there was not really any need for an oral or aural transmission of the text—a mere comparison of a copy with a trusted written original would be sufficient.

Yet the transmission of hadith continued, in various forms. Davidson’s claim is that from this point, the transmission, “I read al-Bukhārī with [name]” was no longer a certificate of

authenticity of the text, but a pious exercise to show the reader's link with the great hadith collector, and through his *isnād*, back to the Prophet. And, freed from the shackles of actually having to authenticate the text, the process of transmission turned into a competition among scholars to have the most elevated status in this respect. That is, to be able to show the closest possible connection to the Prophet by having an *isnād* with the fewest possible intermediaries to the collector or his predecessors.

This set in motion a chase for “elevated chains,” which Davidson with great delight describes to the reader. Because, given that a fixed period of time had passed, a short chain must contain long links: each transmitter must have received the text as early as possible in his career, and passed it on as late as possible in his life. Since authenticating the text was no longer relevant, you could lengthen this lifespan by removing the element of having to actually read or understand the content of the hadith. Thus, it became commonplace for aspiring parents to bring their young children to attend a hadith audience with an elderly shaykh, long before they could understand it, and have this duly documented in registers provided, just in case the child would later turn to a scholarly career.

A case in point was the story of Abū al-ʿAbbās al-Ḥajjār, who lived in thirteenth-century Damascus and whose father had brought him to such a session on al-Bukhārī. He did not become a scholar, however, but a stonemason, and remained illiterate his whole life. When he was seventy-five years old, some scholars came to ask if he remembered having been to a session with the aged Ibn al-Zabīdī (d. 1223), a possessor of a very short chain. Al-Ḥajjār had only a vague memory of this, but it was confirmed that his audition with Ibn al-Zabīdī had been documented, so the young scholars asked if they could read al-Bukhārī in the elderly stonemason's presence—he would be paid, evidently. He agreed, and they did, and as al-Ḥajjār lived to the age of almost one hundred, he heard more than seventy of these sessions, and accumulated considerable wealth from it. But he himself never learned either to read or

comprehend the text he was transmitting. It was only his age that provided the desired pious connection. Even today, Davidson states, most chains of transmission for al-Bukhārī pass through al-Ḥajjār. The same process, he notes, applies for women, as they could similarly transmit pious connections as the illiterate al-Ḥajjār; thus, we find many elderly women, who likewise had been exposed to a hadith audition as children, becoming venerated transmitters if they lived long enough. There were also many scholarly women who seriously entered into the study of the hadith they transmitted, but the main avenue to fame was to live a long life.

These and many more anecdotes of how the pious transmission could be carried to extremes (the teacher who transmitted hadith while in a coma; the student who had to be pried away from an elderly transmitter who had died during the interview) make this a very lively and readable volume, in spite of its seemingly somewhat dry subject matter. Its main focus, however, is to distinguish between the various stages that this process of pious transmission went through over the centuries. From the early aural/oral stage in which portions of the transmitted text were read out—either by the teacher so the student could verify his copy, or by the student so that the teacher could identify errors—it became, as we have seen, sufficient that only one of the parties tackled the text; the other party only needed to be present and have his or her presence recorded.

However, reading aloud the complete text of al-Bukhārī, Muslim, or other hadith compilers was tedious and, as we have seen, strictly speaking unnecessary to provide the desired connection to the “lineage.” Thus, shorter collections of hadith that had been received through such elevated transmission came to be produced, in particular the very popular “forty hadith” genre. The purpose was, of course, to demonstrate that the compiler was in possession of very “high,” that is to say, short chains; collections of hadith of the highest quality (i.e., fewest links) thus became known as *‘awālī* (sg. *‘ālī* “high”) collections. A further development was the study of persons in the chains and their links to one another, the *fihrist*, *mu‘jam*, or *thabat* genres. The

modern dictionary of al-Kattānī falls into this category, a catalogue of catalogues of the elevated transmitters al-Kattānī had taken from, and their teachers and their works, backward in time.

Davidson claims here that our understanding of the term *ijāza* is flawed. Most scholars of “networks” have focused on the *ijāza* as a teacher’s authorization that a student could teach a particular work. Davidson concedes that such *ijāza* authorizations exist, but claims that they are in fact a small minority; most found in the literature are in fact of the pious type, for which there is no assumption that the recipient has mastered anything. In fact, an *ijāza* could be given to “everyone in this generation” and similar categories, and is thus useless as a basis for network analysis. But it has been well known that an *ijāza* was often given mainly as a polite gesture—for example, after an afternoon visit to a master—or indeed sent by mail, so network studies must be, and largely have been, based on more contextual evidence of the nature of the contacts studied.

Another category of transmission is one that contains a common element passed down the generations—for example, the transmitter touches the student with his hand or says “I love you” during the session, as his teacher did to him; these are known as *musalsalāt*. This type of transmission emphasizes that what is transmitted is pious contact, and brings to mind another and parallel type of chains of transmission, the Sufi *silsilāt*, from Sufi teacher to student, containing both an intellectual element (e.g., the prayer formula) and a pious connection, sensory or otherwise. There are also other points of similarity, such as the Sufi search for the *ṭarīqa Muḥammadiyya* in the meaning of the shortest possible chain ending with a first link meeting with the Prophet in a vision, which compare to the hadith acceptance of transmitters living supernaturally long life spans and thus providing the shortest possible chain.

This Sufi comparison is not developed in this book, but the emphasis on the hadith *isnād* as pious rather than (or in addition to) intellectual transmission can certainly be seen as a further breaking down of the barrier between the “exoteric” fields of Shari‘a and hadith and the

“esoteric” field of Sufism. This may also be relevant to Davidson’s very interesting last chapter, when he brings the story to the twentieth century and describes the renewed interest in this traditional way of pious transmission, probably as a reaction to the “exoteric” literalism of the Salafis and Islamists. Many of the “traditionalists” he mentions there, like al-Kattānī and ‘Alī Jum‘a, are also Sufis, and fully familiar with—and as Sufis dependent on—such a type of pious transmission. It would have been interesting to pursue this parallel and to see to what extent one has influenced the other.

On the other hand, Davidson passes very briefly over the resurgence of hadith scholarship that we find at the other end of the spectrum, such as that of Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī. Easily dismissed as a Salafi, his renewed focus on hadith criticism is certainly an important element in hadith studies today, and these two aspects of pious and literalist hadith scholarship in relation to each other in the contemporary period would have made for an interesting analysis.

This may be asking for too much, however, in a work of already substantial length and complexity. Davidson’s work as we have it is thoroughly researched and well presented, and it should quickly become essential reading for any further research both on hadith in the postcanonical period and on the question “how did transmission of knowledge actually take place” in the real world of premodern Islamic scholarship.

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