

**The Development of Early Sunnite Hadith
Criticism: The *Taqdima* of
Ibn Abi Hatim al-Razi (240/854-327/938)**

Eerik Dickinson
Leiden, Brill, 2001. 146 pages.

Hadith is a uniquely Islamic discipline and of the utmost importance not only to Islamic thought, but also to Islamic culture and civilization. It is in this vein that `Abdullah ibn al-Mubarak said that *isnad* (chain of transmission) is a part of the religion. While most studies on Hadith literature in western scholarship focus on the issue of authenticity, the hadith scholars' method of determining what is a basis for belief and practice, as well as that method's historical development, have been regrettably overlooked. The author's *The Development of Early Sunnite Hadith Criticism: The Taqdima of Ibn Abi Hatim al-Razi (240/854-327/938)* proposes to fill in some of those gaps.

Chapter 1, "Hadith in the Time of Ibn Abi Hatim," provides the setting for Ibn Abi Hatim's career. The two main factions of Islamic thought in the third Islamic century were the adherents of hadith (*ahl al-hadith*) and their rivals (*ahl al-ra'y*). Dickinson introduces two approaches to hadith: the commentator (*ahl al-ra'y*) and the critic (*ahl al-hadith*). The commentator accepted the canon as it was and treated it as though it were closed. Any contradictions were dealt with through interpretation. The critic, however, manipulated the canon's boundaries and removed any objectionable material (p. 7) by using the "objective criteria of hadith criticism" (p. 1).

Chapter 2, “Ibn Abi Hatim al-Razi: Life and Works,” introduces us to this scholar and his *sitz im leben*, his three *rihlas* to gather hadiths, and his later life and passing away. Ibn Abi Hatim’s interest in hadith is reflected in his *oeuvre*, which Dickinson classifies into three categories: hadith criticism (six works), theology and religious subjects (ten works), and, lastly, biography and history (three works). Chapter 3, “The Taqdimat,” focuses on his *Taqdimat al-Ma`rifah li Kitab al-Jarh wa al-Ta`dil* (Introduction to *Kitab al-Jarh wa al-Ta`dil*), in which he seeks, as Dickinson tells us, to refute the positions of *ahl al-ra`y* by showing that the early generations employed *jarh* (impugning a narrator) and *ta`dil* (verifying a narrator’s reliability). Ibn Abi Hatim uses the *tabaqat* (biography) genre to show that hadith criticism was practiced by the early Hijazis. In analyzing the *Taqdimat*’s style, Dickinson notes Ibn Abi Hatim’s use of testimonial, biographical, and documentary evidence. Each of these form the subject of the remaining chapters.

Chapter 4, “The Testimonial Evidence,” a mere four pages, illustrates how Ibn Abi Hatim used testimonial evidence from the earliest Muslims to prove that hadith criticism was practiced by the early generations of Muslims. Ibn Abi Hatim uses not only Hijazi scholars (which would be preaching to the choir) but also Kufan *ahl al-ra`y* scholars, thereby emphasizing that hadith criticism was practiced across the board. Chapter 5, “Biographical Evidence,” looks at how Ibn Abi Hatim used biographical entries to reveal that his critics were indeed critics. To this end, he cites stories of dreams involving his critics, their study and mastery of hadith, their moral insouciance (*zuhd*) and scrupulousness (*wara`*), and, lastly, their relationship to political authorities of their times.

The last chapter, chapter 6, “The Documentary Evidence,” is the longest and most substantial one. Documentary evidence shows that critics judged the narrators, thereby proving that *jarh* existed among the earliest Muslims. Going outside of the *Taqdimat*, Dickinson also draws on Muslim’s *Kitab al-Tamyiz*, Ibn Hibban’s *Marjuhin* and *Sahih*, and other books of the period to show how the hadith critics formed their opinions about the narrators.

Dickinson seems baffled as to why Ibn Abi Hatim would mention his critics’ *zuhd* and *wara`* (pp. 59, 71), seemingly implying that the early critics were concerned purely with the science of hadith criticism. Reliability, however, was not simply a matter of scholarly precision but, more importantly, one of piety through devotion to the Prophet’s (Allah bless him and give him peace) Sunnah. On page 81, the technical term *dajjal* is translated as “antichrist.” While this is an appropriate translation in theological discussions, in the nomenclature of hadith it would be more appropriate to translate it as “imposter.” More significantly, Dickinson’s formulation of why Ibn

Abi Hatim penned the *Taqdima* requires further substantiation. The whole study revolves around his claim that Ibn Abi Hatim was writing to refute the Kufans. But who are these Kufans that he is addressing?

The author is to be commended for getting past the authenticity issue (which western scholars and Muslim apologists cannot seem to do) and focusing on hadith methodology. This methodology, however, was given more extensive treatment in his other contribution to hadith studies: his exceptional translation of Ibn Salah's *Muqaddima* (An Introduction to the Science of Hadith: *Kitab Ma`rifat Anwa` al-Hadith* [UK: Garnet Publishing, 2005]).

While some interesting (if not contentious) information is provided, the promised "development of early Sunnite hadith criticism" is not delivered. Perhaps it should have been subtitled *A Development in Sunnite Hadith Criticism*, because Dickinson provides only one chapter of that story and, unfortunately, an incomplete one at that. For instance, we are not told how the *Taqdima* was received (in a book of 130 pages, space could not have been the issue), the development of the ideas in the *Taqdima* among hadith critics, or how the various disciplines of hadith criticism culminated in Ibn Salah's *Muqaddima*. What Dickinson does provide us with is a brief introduction to Ibn Abi Hatim, a study of his *Taqdima*, and the methods that he employed therein. The book, fascinating and welcome as it is, unfortunately promises more than it actually delivers.

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