

AUTHENTICITY OF HADITH AND ORIENTALISTS: A CASE STUDY OF JOSEPH SCHACHT'S THOUGHTS

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Abstract

The study about the authenticity of Hadith has been a central subject in both Islamic and Western schools of thought. Throughout the history of orientalism, Joseph Schacht presented influential theories relevant to the origin, development and compilation of Hadith, particularly challenging the historical reliability of Sunnah. This work critically overviews major hypothesis of Schacht's about the Common Link Theory in the light of primary Islamic sources. The aim of the study is to analyze the validity of Schacht's theories and to evaluate their influence on Hadith literature. To achieve these purposes, an analytical and comparative research approach has been adopted. The study focuses the methods practiced by Muslim scholars for the protection and validation of Hadith text and chain of narrators. Schacht's conclusions are mainly based on fabricated material and insufficient knowledge about of the criterion set by Muhaddithin. Evidence from early Hadith works, the science of jarah wa tadil and the continuity of isnad transmission challenges many of his views regarding authenticity of Hadith works. It concludes that in spite of having influence on Western academic thought; Schacht's theories remain critically weak when observed through the lens of Turath.

Keywords

Schacht, Hadith Literature, Authenticity, Orientalists, Muhaddithin.

1. Introduction

Orientalism can be defined as the study of Eastern civilizations through western lens. Word Orient is basically used by Europeans to describe the East, while Occident referred to the West. With the passage of time, Orientalism developed into a broad sense that effected religious studies, history and colonialism.

Edward Said articulates that Orientalism is not just the academic study of East .It is a western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the orient¹.

In general, Orientalism was commonly used as the study of the East, while contemporary scholars have argued that Orientalism does not refer only to the geographical "East." Rather, it covers all the regions where Islamic civilization, culture and authority had flourshed. Therefore, restricting Orientalism just to the East is not right.²

¹ Said , W, Edward, *Orientalism*, 1st Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) 03

² Touseef, Muhammad, Majid Moazzam, Raja, "The Evolutionary Stages of the Orientalist Movement, Orientalists' Access to and Use of Arabic Publications: A Research Study", *Rahat-ul-Quloob* 7(1), 29-38.
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1.1 Orientalism in 7th century

In seventh century when Islam was at its peak, orientalists took interest in Islam. During this phase, Christian tried to understand Islam just for the sake of defending Christianity and challenging Islam.¹ The early studies in Europe about Arabic language and Islamic literature were limited. It was based on misconception.

1.2 Orientalism in 11th to 13th century

During the Crusades war western became more familiar with Islamic civilization through political interactions. European scholars translated many Arabic books into Latin.²

1.3 Orientalism in 14th to 17th century

This era is entitled as Renaissance period in Europe. European institutions began introducing different field of studies like Arabic, Persian, and Hebrew while scholars collected Eastern manuscripts. This intellectual revival encouraged systematic study of Eastern languages. Orientalism gradually evolved from religious debates to an organized academic discipline.³

1.4 Orientalism in 18th to 19th Century

The colonial period is knownend as the most influential time in the history of Orientalism. European overcomes the Muslim lands. Western scholars became closely connected with colonial administration. Napoleon's conquest of Egypt in 1798 is considered a turning point in European orientalism. As Orientalism became highly institutionalized through research academies and specialized societies about Islam.⁴

2. Early life history of Joseph Schacht (1902 to 1969)

Joseph Franz Schacht was an eminent German Orientalist. He was a renowned professor of Arabic, Islamic law and Hadith literature. Schacht was born on March 15 in 1902 in Poland. He achieved a memorable success in PhD at the age of mere 21 and appointed as the youngest professor in Germany at that time at the University of Freiburg.⁵

3. Major Works

Joseph Franz Schacht academic contributions are centered on the evolution of Islamic law and the authenticity of Hadith. His most remarkable works, often considered as his life achievements, include:

3.1. The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence (1950)

This work is widely considered as his most important and controversial. In this book, Schacht analyzed the early evolution of Islamic law. He has offered a common link theory regarding the transmission of Hadith. He argued that many legal traditions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad

¹Said , W, Edward,*Orientalism*, 1st Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) 59

² Springer Nature, *Western Views of Islam in the Middle Ages*, Retrieved May 29, 2026, from <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1057/9780312299675>

³ Stolzenberg, Dora, *What Was Oriental Studies in Early Modern Europe?*, In *The Allure of the Ancient* , Brill,343-374

1. Edward W. Said, *Orientalism*, 1st Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).pg 42
2. Wakin, Jeanette, "Remembering Joseph Schacht", *Islamic Legal Studies Program Harvard Law School*, Occasional Publications 4,(January 2003)

were projections back to him by later generations. This book significantly affected Western thought on early Islam.

3.2. An Introduction to Islamic Law (1964)

This work has served as a standard textbook for decades. It provides a detailed and comprehensive picture of the history, development, and structure of Islamic law. It addresses all the subjects from pre-Islam customs to the modern legal codes. It is a foundational resource for students and scholars of Islamic Law.

3.3 Encyclopaedia of Islam

Schacht was a great contributor to the first and second editions of the Encyclopedia of Islam. He wrote immensely entries on basic legal, theological, and historical concepts. His efforts in these editions played a vital role in shaping how Western scholars understood Islamic terms throughout much of the 20th century.

3.4 Early Research on Hiyal

At the beginning of his career, Schacht gained fame for his detailed philological work on hiyal. He has translated book al-Khassāf's Kitāb al-hiyal and explored the gap between legal theory and actual practice in early Islamic society. This theme dominated his research for the rest of his life. With the help of these contributions; he introduced methods of historical criticism into Islamic studies, leaving a legacy that remains a central point of discussion.

4. Goldziher and Joseph Schacht

Ignaz Goldziher is commonly attributed as the pioneer who introduced skepticism regarding Hadith however; history provides us another name Gustav Weil (1808-1889), who first argued that all the reports in Sahih Al Bukhari must be rejected. As a result, Goldziher expanded this skepticism building a new thought around these early doubts.¹

No doubt, Ignaz's views introduced a sense of skepticism into the study of Hadith and Islam but Schacht was the first who shaped and formalized this skepticism by providing his research regarding the Hadith isnad.

Joseph Schacht accepted the ideas of Goldziher in his book *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (1950) and clearly said that the primary goal to attempt this work was to strengthen the ideas of Goldziher regarding Hadith literature.²

5. Joseph Schacht Objections

Joseph Schacht raised many objections about the evolution of Islamic law and Hadith literature. He claimed that the Hadiths were fabricated after long time of Muhammad ﷺ. Schacht also challenged the reliability of Isnad. Muslim scholars rejected all these claims by providing evidence from history.

¹ Muhammad Zubair, Hafiz, *Islam aur Mustashriqeen*, Maktaba Rahmatulil Alamin, (Oct, 2014), 92

² Schacht, Joseph, *The Origins Of Muhamadan Jurisprudence*, Oxford At The Clarendon Press, (1967), 05

Below is a brief overview of Schacht objections regarding authenticity of Hadith and Islamic law:

5.1 Authenticity of Hadith

Holy Quran and Hadith are the basic sources for the guidance of the Muslims. Hazrat Muhammad ﷺ said that

تَرَكْتُ فِيكُمْ أَمْرَيْنِ، لَنْ تَضِلُّوا مَا تَمَسَّكْتُمْ بِهِمَا: كِتَابَ اللَّهِ وَسُنَّةَ نَبِيِّهِ¹

I am leaving among you two things. As long as you hold them firmly, you will never go astray, the Book of Allah and the Sunnah of His Prophet ﷺ.

Literature possessed by Muslims is not compiled during the time of Rasool ﷺ. It was compiled in second century Hijri or after that.²

Dr. Muhammad Hamidullah has provided the evidence regarding existence of Islamic law during life time of Prophet (PBUH). He discussed the last sermon of Rasool ﷺ as a complete charter of human rights and Islamic law. This sermon covers the topic like social justice, protection of human rights and morality. It's not merely a sermon but it is a complete social code of conduct. Here Prophet (PBUH) recited these verses³

الْيَوْمَ أَكْمَلْتُ لَكُمْ دِينَكُمْ وَأَتِمَمْتُ عَلَيْكُمْ نِعْمَتِي وَرَضِيْتُ لَكُمُ الْإِسْلَامَ دِينًا⁴

Today, I have completed your religion for you, completed My blessing upon you, and have liked for you Islam as religion.

It provides a proof of the presence of Islamic law at that time. Furthermore; Dr. Hamidullah not only compiled these documents but also collected a large pile of records from companions of Rasool ﷺ. It shows that Islamic law was present and implemented also at that time. Holy Quran contains several verses regarding judicial and community matters.⁵

Orientalists asserted that a substantial portion of the Hadith chain of transmission was organized during the second and third centuries. However, this hypothesis has been challenged by modern Muslim scholars like Dr. Mustafa al Azmi and Dr. Muhammad Fuat Sezgin. The compilation and documentation of Hadith started during the presence of the Prophet ﷺ and the companions of Prophet ﷺ maintained this tradition. Several companions of Prophet ﷺ maintained personal collections regarding rasool's dogmas, which later became primary sources for the compilation of Hadith literature. This literature worked as fundamental guideline for afterward generations. The evidence of personal collection of sahaba's is given below:

- Hazrat Abu Bakar siddique possessed 500 Ahadith collection which he burnt himself.
- Hazrat Saad bin ubada Ansari who was entitled as Al-kamil due to his perfection in different fields like writing, politics, horse riding, swimming and archery.
- Hazrat Samra bin Jundab's collection of Hadith was preserved by his son Salman.
- Hazrat Abdullah bin Amar bin al Aas's collection named as Sahifa Assadiqa.
- Hazrat Abu Hurarira compiled 5374 Ahadith.

¹ Mālik ibn Anas, *Al-Muwaṭṭaʿ*, Kitāb al-Qadar, Bāb Mā Jā'a fī al-Qadar, hadith no. 1594

² Schacht, Joseph, *The Origins Of Muhamadan Jurisprudence*, Oxford At The Clarendon Press, (1967), 140

³ Hamidullah, Muhammad, *Majmuah AL Wasaiq Al Siyasiyah li Ahde Nabi wa Khilafah Al Rashidah*, trans. Abu Yahya Imam Khan Noshehrawi, Majlis e Taraqi Adab Lahore, (2005), 25-26

⁴ Al-Quran 5:3

⁵ Al Azmi, Muhammad Mustafa, *On Schacht's Origins of Muhamadan Jurisprudence*, Sohail Academy Lahore, (2004), 19-21

- Hazrat Abdullah bin Abbas possessed a collection of 2660 Ahadith .
- Hazrat Abdullah bin jabir's hadith collection named Risala e Hajj.
- Hazrat Urva bin Zubair compiled Hazrat Ayesha's 2210 rivayah. ¹

Schacht rejected and ignored all these historical evidence which proves that the compilation of Hadith was already taking place during the time of the Companions and the Successors also.

5.2 Common Link Theory

This is an academic term used in the historical context and study of early Islamic Hadith Isnad. It analyses the historical origins and authenticity of religious text looking at the names of people who transmitted it. This term initially introduced by Western renowned personality Joseph Schacht and expanded by Juynboll. Common link is a single person or teacher who invented, fabricated or popularized a specific Hadith.

Joseph Schacht argues that comparatively observing the various chains of transmitters, mostly a particular figure appears as the point from which multiple Isnad expand. Furthermore, he says that this transmitter is likely the actual originator of the tradition, while the names appearing before him in the chain may have been added later to give the report authenticity and authority. Expanding of Isnad across different scholarly circles, it resulted in the emergence of additional transmission strands, converging upon a single common link. Based upon this theory he asserts that this tradition originated in the period of later scholars rather than in earlier generations. As a result, he questions the authenticity of Hadith and claims that these Isnad are fabricated by later researchers.²

Joseph Schacht debates that the early literature of Isnads, particularly those linking back to the Companions should not be considered reliable without critical analysis.³ These arguments are deeply rooted in his Common Link Theory, which has been later challenged by Muslim scholars such as Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami and Fuat Sezgin.

While discussing only third generation of narrators who narrated from Abu Huraira (R.A) mostly belonged to the second century Hijri, several features become evident.

This third generation comprised of 22 narrators:

Out of these 22 narrators 9 belonged to Madinah, 5 from Basrah, 4 from Kufah, and one each from Hijaz and Khurasan. This chain is traced back to 11 students of Abu Hurairah (R.A), who were trained from Madinah, Basrah, and Kufah.

Another point is that not all the narrators were students of the same teacher. Although three personalities of the Basrah were trained by a single teacher, the remaining was trained by different sources. However, not all Hadiths were transmitted by a large number of narrators. Some were transmitted through a single narrator or two, three, or even more generations. For instance

عَنْ أَبِي هُرَيْرَةَ رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ قَالَ: قَالَ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ ﷺ
إِذَا صَلَّى أَحَدُكُمْ الْجُمُعَةَ فَلْيَصِلْ بَعْدَهَا أَرْبَعًا⁴

Whenever you perform the Jumu'ah prayer, offer four rak'ahs after it.

This Hadith was initially narrated only by Abu Hurairah (R.A). From him, it was reported by Abu Salih, and then by his son Suhail. Thereafter, at least eight scholars transmitted it through Suhail.

¹ Fuat Sezgin , Dr. , *Tareekh al Turath al arabi* , Idara tul saqafah wa al Nashar bil jamia, vol.1 ,(1991), 153-164; Al Azmi , Muhammad Mustafa , *Studies in Early Hadith Literature* , American Trust Publications , (1978), 25,26

² Schacht, Joseph, *The Origins Of Muhamadan Jurisprudence*, Oxford At The Clarendon Press,(1967),171,172

³ Schacht, Joseph, *The Origins Of Muhamadan Jurisprudence*, Oxford At The Clarendon Press,(1967),175

⁴ Muslim ,Alhajaj Alqusheri,*Al Sahih Al Muslim*,Kitabul juma',Babuslah Bad Al Juma',Hadith no, 881

This example shows that Hadith transfer operated through a structured and geographically heterogeneous network of reporters. While some traditions were propagated through numerous narrators across different regions, others remained stuck to a single line of transmission for several generations. Though, both methods disclose the traceable nature of the isnād system, showing that the preservation of Hadith was carried out through broad networks rather than being restricted to a single narrator or locality.¹

5.3 Formation of Islamic Law

Joseph Schacht advanced the view that Islamic law developed after the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. He says that although the Quran provided certain legal principles but during the first and second centuries of Islam the detailed structure of Islamic jurisprudence emerged. He claimed that during the later part of Umayyad khilafah many legal doctrines originated from the practices of administrators according to need of time, rather than directly from the Prophet ﷺ. Further he contended that these legal practices were later referred or associated to the Prophet through the development of Isnad in Hadith. He named it as projection back.²

Nabia Abbott was an American Orientalist. She was a pioneer female professor of Oriental Studies at the University of Chicago. She was born in Christian family of Turkey in 1897. She got her early education from Lucknow. Her father was a merchant. She spent some time with her father in Iraq and India. She offered research on the history of Muslim women. One of her masterpiece regarding female is *Aishah, the Beloved of Muhammad* ﷺ. Another famous work is *Studies in Arabic Literary Papyri*; scholarly work consisted upon three volumes.

Goldziher and Joseph Schacht argued that many Hadith Isnads were fabricated later to support legal matters of Umayyad, Abbott rebuked all these arguments by providing manuscripts. She dug up early Hadith manuscripts and proved that Hadiths were transmitted both orally and in writing from the time of Muhammad ﷺ. So, she rejected this theory that Hadiths were designed during the third Islamic century. She made it clear that this misunderstanding arose due to some scholars who failed to understand how the Isnad system worked. According to her, Hadith text was transmitted from generation to generation since the Prophet's life. Multiple chains of transmission developed as the number of transmitters increased over the years. It resulted in a network of transmitters across different generations.³

5.4 Role of Imam Shafi

Joseph Schacht posited that Imam Shafi was the master architect of the theory of Islamic law. Shafi established the initial framework of Islamic Law based on the Quran, Sunnah, Ijmah and Qiyas. Further, he proposed that Shafi associated the term Sunnah specifically with the life of Rasool ﷺ. Before him it was commonly used for every social conduct and custom in Madinah and Iraq.⁴

Waeel Halaq is a prominent scholar who completed his important research, *Was al Shafi The Master Architect of Islamic Jurisprudence?* He examines the claim that Imam Shafi was the sole architect of Islamic jurisprudence. He argues that Schacht exaggerated the role of Imam Shafi. His al-Risalah does not represent the beginning of Islamic Law rather; it is a legal tradition before

¹Al Azmi, Muhammad Mustafa, *On Schacht's Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*, Sohail Academy Lahore, (2004), 164

²Schacht, Joseph, *The Origins Of Muhamadan Jurisprudence*, Oxford At The Clarendon Press, (1967), 98

³Muhammad Zubair, Hafiz, *Islam aur Mustashriqeen*, Maktaba Rahmatulil Alamin, (Oct, 2014), 104, 105

⁴Schacht, Joseph, *The Origins Of Muhamadan Jurisprudence*, Oxford At The Clarendon Press, (1967), 6, 11

Shafi. Risalah was not the first work on Islamic jurisprudence but merely the earliest text on Islamic Law. Muslim scholars had already been formulating legal principles before Imam Shafi. Evidences can be traced out from the first and second centuries of Islam. Some principles and concepts discussed in al-Risalah are found in earlier works regarding Islamic jurisprudence such as Al Awzai. In short, Imam Shafi is not the founder of Islamic jurisprudence.¹

Dr. Al. Azami refuses these claims and proves that the term Sunnah was in practice during the time of the Prophet ﷺ himself for him. The Holy Quran has commanded again and again the Itbai of Rasool ﷺ.² He made it clear that although early scholars employed Sunnah in a broader sense, they always considered the Sunnah of the Prophet ﷺ as the ultimate source.

Mustafa Al. Azami explains that the living tradition is basically rooted in the Sunnah of the Prophet (PBUH). Imam Shafi did not invent a new legal system but he systematically addressed the doubts that were emerging regarding the authenticity of the Hadith.

6. Conclusion

Doubtlessly, Joseph Schacht paved the way for and established the bases for modern Western skepticism associated with Islamic Fiqh and Hadith. He made important contributions to the study of Hadith. Although he conducted an extensive research, his methodology has been criticized by scholars due to his biasedness. Usually, a question stuck in a scholar's mind and derives results may be according to his expectations or may not be but Joseph research contrary to it his conclusions are for the support of Ignaz Goldzehir doubts. The scholarly works of Dr. Mustafa Azami, Nabia Abbott and other researchers proved that the Muslim Isnad system and the text of the Hadith are authentic by every historical standard. All these objections by orientalist are superficial and based on their prejudice. They are completely against reality.

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¹ Sideque Mughal, Zahid, "Imam Shafi: Mustashriqeen wa Naqideen Mustashriqeen ki Nazar mein", *Al-Shariah*, 32(5), (December 2021): 22

² Al Azmi, Muhammad Mustafa, *On Schacht's Origins of Muhamadan Jurisprudence*, Sohail Academy Lahore, (2004), 61, 62

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