

Book Review

Joel Blecher, *Said the Prophet of God: Hadith Commentary across a Millennium* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2018), 288 pp., 13 b/w images, 3 maps, 2 tables. ISBN 978-0-52029-594-0. Price: \$34.95 (cloth).

L. W. Cornelis van Lit, O.P.
Utrecht University

(cornelisvanlit@gmail.com)

This is not a book about a prophet called Saïd. Instead, it is an eloquently written, skillfully researched study of the mechanics of writing commentaries on hadith collections. The title and blurb are eye-poppingly ambitious, speaking of such breadth and depth that, in fact, we may conclude that it would be unfair to take them at face value. I would suggest we even ignore Blecher's own characterization of his book as a "survey [...] to track change and continuity in the slow-moving, cumulative tradition of commentary on *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*" (p. 182) and instead take the book to describe the craft of commenting on hadiths, specifically in the case of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. The all-encompassing approach, both historically and geographically, is part of the argument: there is a fundamental stability in this craft. This fact becomes all the more clear in the epilogue, where Blecher discusses the use of hadiths by members of ISIS.

If you read the epilogue after having read everything before it (that is, the actual book), then this discussion does not read as a section that merely describes what people from ISIS do with hadiths. Rather, it is as though Blecher is saying that *even people from ISIS* use hadiths in a way that is customary, with due regard for the unwritten rules of this craft. As such, Blecher makes a very compelling case for the craft's stability.

Blecher does a superb job of describing the craft itself, though again not without boldly arguing for two main theses. One is that commentary writing in the field of hadith studies is "a social practice, in which the competition for everyday social and material rewards was entangled with the achievement of certain interpretive excellences" (p. 28). In chapter 1, Blecher provides anecdotal evidence of this by presenting the case of the Andalusian scholar al-Bājī (d. 474/1081). Al-Bājī interpreted a hadith that speaks of Muḥammad signing a document as



evidence that Muḥammad was literate. This claim had theological implications about the status of the Qurʾān, and al-Bājī thus had to defend himself against accusations of heresy. The other thesis is that commentators also had to negotiate a “connection to a transtemporal and transregional community” (p. 171), namely that of “tradition” as understood by, for example, Talal Asad. Consequently, commenting on a hadith did not entail simply reading it and giving your opinion. In fact, the first step was recognizing that “simply reading” was not always possible. In chapter 2, Blecher discusses the example of a hadith that restricts the number of lashes for non-*ḥudūd* offenses to ten. The problems with the hadith were manifold: (1) there are different versions of basically the same hadith, (2) they have inconsistencies in their transmission chains, and (3) they seem to contradict Mālikī jurisprudence. In dealing with these problems, scholars were expected to use and discuss previous interpretations of these aspects or of this hadith in general. As Blecher says, “hadith commentaries sometimes had as much or more to say about the exegetical history of the hadith than about the hadith upon which it claimed to comment” (p. 44). At the same time, it should be noted that as the history of this commentary tradition grew, the craft of commenting increasingly relied on “strategic omissions” (p. 133). In this way, out of the materials supplied by the source text and its tradition, endless varieties of new and original positions could be maintained.

In the subsequent chapters, Blecher gives evidence that “the site of commentarial authority was not relegated

to the quiet surfaces of the written commentary but was performed by living people in the limits of space and time” (p. 96). In chapter 3, he describes how commentators negotiated their intellectual work with their patrons and their students. He does this by focusing on two great commentators in ninth/fifteenth-century Cairo: the rivals Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 852/1449) and Badr al-Dīn al-ʿAynī (d. 855/1451), who competed over shared patrons as well as mutual students. Chapter 4 digs into what their rivalry meant in terms of commentary writing: through a draft copy and other copies, we can reconstruct how Ibn Ḥajar went back to the same hadith and rewrote or added materials to the commentary that he was steadily producing. This continuous rewriting was also fueled by the structure of hadith studies, which owed much to the reading of the entire *Ṣaḥīḥ* each year in the month of Ramadan. Chapter 5 focuses on what went on in that month—namely, live commentary and debates at the court of the sultan. One incident, in which Ibn Ḥajar bested another scholar in a debate about the number of people who get to enjoy shade in Paradise, is discussed at length. By comparing the accounts of this incident in Ibn Ḥajar’s historical work *Inbāʾ al-ghumr* and in his commentary *Fatḥ al-bārī*, we learn more about what was typical of the craft of writing a commentary on a hadith collection. Chapter 6 continues to draw on the case study of Ibn Ḥajar and al-ʿAynī to give an impression of how authority was established. Here we get acquainted with the importance of the “genealogical connection to a canonical collection” (p. 108), which one can imagine as an *isnād* from the commentator back to al-Bukhārī.

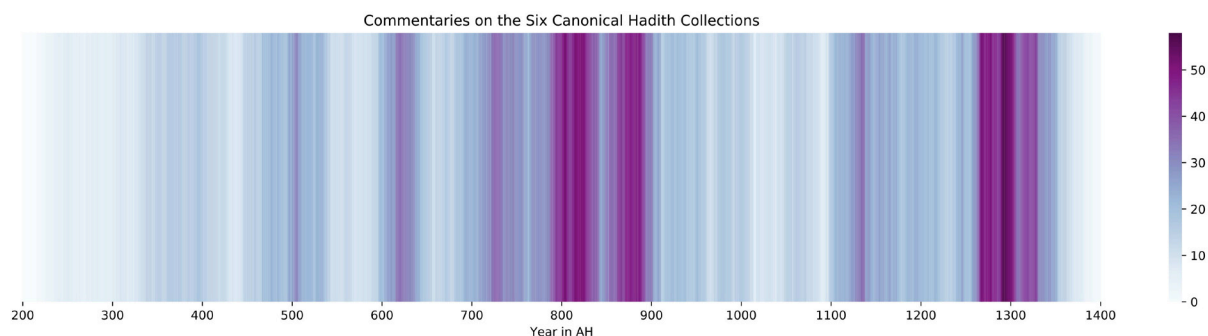
The interplay between hadith studies (*ʿulūm al-ḥadīth*) and jurisprudence (*fiqh*) is once more highlighted.

The next two chapters examine subgenres of hadith commentary. Chapter 7 shifts the focus back to the unique challenges posed by *al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī. Its chapter headings can be mystifying; sometimes there are even headings but no actual chapter, that is, no hadiths. Knowledge of these problems and their solutions became part of becoming a skilled, authoritative commentator. In fact, this issue had such a strong pull that it gave rise to a subgenre of commentaries on the chapter headings alone. In Chapter 8 we meet another subgenre, that of ever more concise commentaries in summary form. For this chapter, Blecher moves on to another great scholar, al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505). In general, such commentaries address the bare essentials of reading correctly and understanding the meanings of rare words. The skill involved seems haphazard; at times important pieces of the commentary tradition are left out, while at times seemingly unimportant parts are discussed at length.

The final two chapters discuss the impact on commentary writing of a situation in which the commentator is removed from the majority of previous commentaries by hundreds of years and thousands of miles. Notably, Blecher shows the influence of print technology, modernity, and a local language other than Arabic by focusing on Deobandi and Urdu-speaking commentators.

As I am not an expert in hadith studies, I leave it to others to double-check the book's factual correctness. I do, however, wish to raise some issues regarding Blecher's discussion of the phenomenon

of commentary writing. Take, for example, chapter 4. Blecher goes into great detail in reconstructing the work process of Ibn Ḥajar, and in this sense the chapter is convincing. At the same time, however, he left me craving more—such as recourse to more manuscripts to triangulate more of the intermediate steps Ibn Ḥajar took to write the commentary, or the use of *samāʿ* notes to establish a clearer picture of who was there and why, and what role they played in the formation of the commentary. Indeed, a whole book on just the writing, revision, and early reception history of Ibn Ḥajar's *Fath al-bārī* would have made for a thrilling read on its own. The same goes for the phenomenon of commenting on the chapter headings of the *Ṣaḥīḥ* or the problems pertaining to the very first hadith of that collection; Blecher's passion for these subjects is contagious and left me wanting more. Thus, when Blecher claims he writes "thick history" (p. 195), I would love to see it a whole lot thicker. Where this succinctness actually hurts the argumentation is in chapter 8, in which Blecher is able to show that al-Suyūṭī preferred short commentaries but comes up short in explaining exactly why and what impact this preference had. These questions are raised but not satisfactorily settled. The same problem arises sometimes at the sentence level. For example, Blecher starts a quantitative argument about the difference in word count between the draft and final versions of Ibn Ḥajar's commentary, but then cuts it short and concludes that "more research needs to be done" (p. 69). He promises that the numbers he gives are consistent with some other numbers that he has found, but he does not actually provide those numbers or a description of how he



arrived at them. In another place, Blecher says that “the first three hadith [. . .] sparked wide disagreement [. . .] despite or perhaps because of the clarity of their apparent meaning” (p. 31). As a reader I am left bewildered: which one is it, despite or because? Nevertheless, I would advise reading past these minor blemishes and focusing on the core topic—the craft of hadith commentary—which Blecher demonstrates that he understands inside and out.

A cursory comparison between this book and the dissertation on which it is based reveals that a lot of thought and care went into the production of the former. So, if something in the dissertation is not in the book, the omission must have been strategic. Nevertheless, given the thought-provoking analysis and conclusions Blecher provides, I would like to provide some counterpoints in the hope that these will foster a continued interest in hadith-commentary writing. I would like to introduce my thinking with the graphic above.

This is a heat map showing the lifespans of hadith commentators. I created this graphic using *Jāmi‘ al-shurūḥ wa-l-ḥawāshī* by ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad al-Ḥibshī as my source, looking up the entries for the six canonical hadith collections and noting

the death dates for all the commentators in a spreadsheet. I thus discarded some entries that had no (or an uncertain) death date. Using only this resource meant that I almost certainly did not catch all commentaries, and given that some entries do not show manuscript evidence I may also have included some that never existed. For our purposes, however, such minor noise does not detract from a generally sound picture of historical reality.

From the death dates I extrapolated the commentators’ lifespans by assuming an average life of forty years. The average is certainly not true of everyone: al-Suyūṭī was 60 when he passed away, Ibn Ḥajar 76, al-‘Aynī 93, and Zakariyyā’ al-Anṣārī an astonishing 101 years old. We may assume, however, that out of the hundreds of commentators, the majority did not grow this old. Further, we may think of the forty-year span as a floruit, presuming that it was, on average, the last forty years of a scholar’s life in which the scholar was active. I would argue that it is important to use a range like this rather than just the death date because if there is one thing we know, it is that commentators did not write their commentaries when they were dead. Thus, plotting death dates would significantly shift the shape of the graphic to the right. As Blecher convincingly

argues, hadith-commentary writing was a process that took many years, sometimes decades, so plotting a range is a more precise way to visualize when the writing of commentaries itself was popular.

On the basis of this data, I plotted a heat map for all commentaries combined. Below I also provide a heat map comparing commentaries on al-Bukhārī with those on Muslim, but I did not produce individual heat maps for the other four collections since they had comparatively few commentaries. The index on the right shows that in the combined heat map, dark purple marks a time at which more than fifty hadith scholars were alive and busy writing a commentary.

From these maps, some results are readily available. First, to plot all commentators, a millennium was not enough; I had to use a span of 1,200 years. Further, we see that hadith commentary in general really took off in the mid-fourth/tenth century. We observe six notable concentrations; apparently, commentary writing had its ebbs and flows. Perhaps there were certain circumstances that promoted the writing of hadith commentaries. The first peak is right around AH 500 (ca. 1100 CE), the second in the early seventh/thirteenth century, and the third in the early eighth/fourteenth century, and then the indisputable explosion of commentary writing took place throughout the ninth/fifteenth century. A discernible bump is visible in the mid-twelfth/eighteenth century, but finally we see an extraordinary concentration around AH 1300 (ca. 1900 CE).

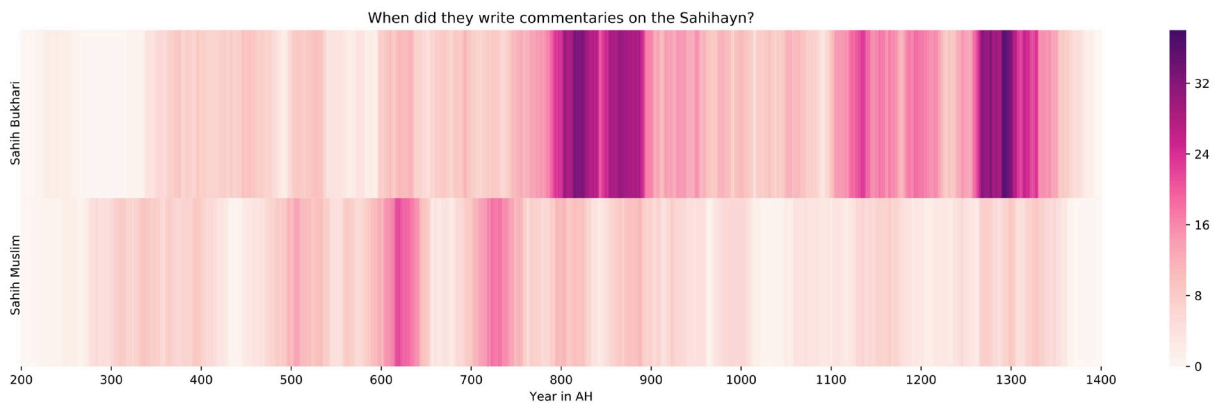
Blecher's book nails both high points of commentary production: his part on the Mamluks is about the ninth/fifteenth

century, and his part on early modern India is about the thirteenth. In this sense, Blecher has chosen well. But because of his focus on case studies and anecdotal evidence, the aptness of his choices would not have been clear from the book itself. Blecher emphasizes the importance of live commentary sessions organized by the ruler. These may indeed have been a decisive factor in the remarkable surge in the popularity of commentaries in both time frames, and I hope we will see further studies about the relationship between staged debates at the court and literary production.

Comparing Blecher's case studies with the enormous number of 634 dated commentators (see table below) prompts the question how representative his conclusions are for commentary writing in general. I do not have an answer, other than to say that Blecher has strategically chosen a variety of commentaries and commentators and that his conclusions are in line with what we are finding out about commentary writing in other genres.

I alluded earlier to a great variety in the number of commentaries each hadith collection received. They are listed in the table below.

Collection	Number of Dated Commentators
al-Nasā'ī	14
Ibn Māja	19
Abū Dāwūd	32
al-Tirmidhī	36
Muslim	189
al-Bukhārī	344
<i>Total</i>	<i>634</i>



From the preceding table, it is clear why Blecher uses only *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* in his book; it already seems to define the genre by itself. Yet it is instructive to look at the heat map above, showing the distribution of commentators on Muslim and al-Bukhārī. Note that dark red-purple means that more than thirty commentators lived at the same time.

Two notable results emerge. First, the writing of commentaries on Muslim started quickly after the collection was created. By comparison, al-Bukhārī's collection received commentaries only after a century or so had passed. Further, we see that Muslim's collection was generally popular in the first few centuries after its compilation, with spikes in the early seventh/thirteenth and early eighth/fourteenth centuries. At that point, attention to Muslim's collection peters out and al-Bukhārī's collection begins to predominate. I do not know whether this trajectory is well known among scholars of hadith studies, but it surprised me, as it is not discussed by Blecher. A significant shift such as this begs for explanation. Further analysis of this issue would also shed more light on how representative commentaries on al-Bukhārī are of hadith commentaries in general.

I would like to make some final comments regarding commentaries on al-Bukhārī specifically. First, I suspect that more can be said about the phenomenon of hadith commentary stacked upon commentary, sometimes several layers deep. The clearest example of such stacking is al-Sanūsī's (d. 895/1490) *Mukammal Ikmāl al-Ikmāl*, a commentary on al-Ubbī's (d. 827/1424) *Ikmāl al-Ikmāl*, which is a commentary on al-Qāḍī 'Iyāḍ's (d. 544/1149) *Ikmāl al-Mu'lim*, which is a commentary on al-Māzarī's (d. 536/1141) *al-Mu'lim bi-fawā'id Muslim*, a commentary on *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*. Examples abound in the *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* commentary tradition, too. Second, given the importance of the summary of Ibn Abī Jamra (d. 695/1296) and the extensive commentary of al-Qaṣṭallānī (d. 923/1517), both of which spawned supercommentaries, it is a shame they do not receive attention in Blecher's book. And third, al-Ḥibshī lists the commentaries on al-Bukhārī in groups that function as subgenres. Without drawing too much attention to it, Blecher touches on most of these but notably does not mention three: (1) the so-called *thulāthiyyāt* subgenre, which collects and comments on only those hadiths that have an *isnād*

of three transmitters; (2) what al-Ḥibshi calls *ruwāt al-Bukhārī wa-tarājimuhum*, that is, studies of the reception and transmission of the text after al-Bukhārī; and (3) commentaries whose main task is to rearrange al-Bukhārī's collection, for example according to each hadith's first letter.

Whether this last subgenre is to be accepted as commentary will be a crucial question for future studies of hadith commentary. I am thinking, in particular, of an entirely different phenomenon: the so-called *arbaʿiniyyāt* collections, in which hadith scholars worked with a self-imposed limit of forty hadiths, no more. These could be on the same topic, or come from the same narrator, or have another commonality. The point is that a great degree of creativity in this operation should be acknowledged. It was "strategic inclusion and exclusion as commentary" in a radical form. To this end, I suspect Blecher's book will be provocative enough to foster a discussion on methodology and the theoretical framework appropriate for the study of hadith commentary. Blecher engages with modern literary theory, and from this starting point I imagine that scholars in hadith studies could engage with recent theoretical reflections on postclassical Islam (e.g., those of Shahab Ahmed and Thomas Bauer) or theoretical and methodological treatments of commentary writing (e.g., recent special

issues of *Oriens*, *MIDEO*, and *Philological Encounters*) to yield interesting new approaches or analyses. Likewise, this book left me wondering how similar or different the genres of hadith commentary and Qurʾān commentary are. Lastly, I think that quantitative analysis could bolster our understanding of what went on in such large bodies of literature. Hadith literature is ripe for such analysis, since many books in the genre are available in plain-text format.

I suspect this book will attract a wide readership, including outside of academia. Not only will the subject be of interest to many, but Blecher's clear and accessible writing style will on its own attract readers. In that regard, however, I think it is fair to warn that a certain level of knowledge is expected. I could imagine that the book might be just a little too much for an undergraduate student left to his or her own devices. Including this book in a graduate seminar on hadith should work out well, however, especially if students are asked to compare Blecher's ideas with their own experience reading bits and pieces of hadith commentaries. Scholars working on a variety of topics will benefit from this book, including those working in hadith studies, book history, and postclassical Islamic intellectual history and postclassical Islamic intellectual history, in particular those focusing on commentary writing.