

Joel Blecher, *Said the Prophet of God: Hadith Commentary across a Millennium* (Oakland: California University Press, 2018). Pp. 272.

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The field of hadith studies in European languages has long been dominated by efforts to determine whether and how the extensive material about the deeds and sayings attributed to the Prophet Muḥammad preserved by Islamic sources can be used to learn about the early history of Islam. This strong focus on the source value of hadiths for the study of early Islamic history has all but completely sidelined other important questions about this material, such as how Muslims across the centuries have approached it, studied it, and made sense of it in their religious and intellectual lives. This situation is slowly changing thanks to the work of scholars such as Jonathan A. C. Brown, Garrett Davidson, and others. We have now begun to understand the importance of the hadith corpus for Muslims who lived centuries after the Prophet. Joel Blecher's *Said the Prophet of God* is a highly welcome and truly groundbreaking contribution to this ongoing trend, as it puts hadith commentary—a previously almost completely unstudied practice and genre of Islamic intellectual and religious history—on the scholarly agenda.

Blecher's main goal in his book is to illuminate how Muslims have interpreted and reinterpreted the meaning of hadiths across time, space, and media. In particular, he zooms in on the history of interpretation of *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* as the most authoritative Sunni hadith collection and traces continuities and ruptures in the tradition of commentary on this work, whereby “commentary” denotes both a specific social practice and a genre of scholarly literature. He “argues that the meanings of hadith were shaped as much by commentators’ political, cultural, and regional contexts as by the fine-grained interpretative debates that developed over long periods of time” (p. 3). Combining methods from social history, intellectual history, and social theory, Blecher seeks to map not only a central area of Islamic intellectual activity but also “to synthesize new avenues for scholars of history, anthropology, religion, and law who study cultures of reading and textual interpretation” (p. 4).

The subtitle of the book, *Hadith Commentary across a Millennium*, gives an adequate impression of the breadth of its content. The book begins with an introduction, including an account of the author's observation of a live commentary session in 21st-century Damascus as well as a general overview of the history of hadith commentary and the significance of its study (pp. 1–18). It continues with a first part on “Andalusia in the Last Days of the Umayyads,” comprising two chapters that deal with live hadith commentary and commentary litera-



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ture on *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* in al-Andalus during the tenth and eleventh centuries (pp. 19–46). This is followed by a second, longer part on “Egypt and Syria under the Mamluks” in six chapters (pp. 47–139, discussed in more detail below) and a third part in two chapters about “Early Modern India and Beyond,” which studies the multilingual commentary tradition on *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* in the Arabian Peninsula and South Asia from the fifteenth to the twenty-first century (pp. 141–83). The book closes with an epilogue focusing on, among other things, hadith commentary among supporters of ISIS (pp. 184–96) and a back matter section containing acknowledgments, notes, works cited, an index of names and titles, and a subject index (pp. 197–272).

The second part, which is of primary interest to scholars of the Mamluk period, begins in the third chapter with a thorough analysis of the intellectual, social, and political context in which Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 1449) wrote his monumental *Fatḥ al-bārī fī sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Blecher focuses here in particular on the interconnections between the written commentary and Ibn Ḥajar’s teaching activities, his patronage relations with members of the political elite, and his professional rivalries. The fourth chapter offers a detailed study of the textual history of *Fatḥ al-bārī* and its revisions against the background of the academic rivalries Ibn Ḥajar was involved in. This chapter builds on a truly remarkable basis of manuscript evidence and provides deep insights into Ibn Ḥajar’s working techniques while editing and revising his text. The fifth chapter examines how highly competitive and politically charged live commentary sessions in the presence of the Mamluk ruler and academic rivals at the Cairo Citadel played a central role in the world of Mamluk scholarly patronage and left their imprint on both the content of *Fatḥ al-bārī* and its author’s career. The sixth chapter examines intersections between hadith commentary, *isnād* scrutiny, and jurisprudence, with a focus on the position of the Shafiʿi school within the Mamluk multi-*madhhab* system. The seventh chapter discusses at considerable length commentarial practices and texts related to the chapter headings in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and shows how thorough engagement with these sometimes rather enigmatic headings could serve as a marker of commentarial excellence and theological commitment. The part on hadith commentary in the Mamluk period closes in the short eighth chapter with an analysis of Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī’s (d. 1505) concise commentarial work on *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* known as *al-Tawshīḥ*. Here, Blecher demonstrates that, in addition to encyclopedic and monumental commentaries such as *Fatḥ al-bārī*, Mamluk scholars also produced wieldier works that later enjoyed considerable popularity.

Blecher’s book delivers what its title promises: a history of hadith commentary over more than 1000 years, focusing on three key areas of the Islamic world. Clearly structured and in conversation with neighboring disciplines such



as literary studies and philosophy, Blecher's analysis of the practice and genre of hadith commentary offers both discussions of fascinating historical case studies and engaging theoretical reflections about what it means to comment on a canonized text.

The richness of Blecher's study and the breadth of his work notwithstanding, some specialist readers might have wished for more thorough presentations of the historical and philological details connected to several questions the book touches upon, such as how exactly one could use hadiths to argue that Muḥammad was not illiterate (Chap. 1), exactly what different types of additions Ibn Ḥajar made when he revised his *Fatḥ al-bārī* (Chap. 4), in what specific way Deobandi commentaries were different from others (Chap. 9), or the exact importance of hadiths in debates about the definition of faith (Chap. 10). That these topics are not explored in further depth is clearly not because of a lack of erudition and expertise on the author's part, but rather seems to have to do with the length limits university presses in the Anglo-Saxon world dictate to their authors. In the case of *Said the Prophet of God*, this has resulted in a book that is short and accessible enough to make it onto the reading lists of upper-undergraduate and graduate courses. I would hope the author examines some of the more specialized topics elsewhere.

The limited level of philological and historical detail of some of the discussions aside, from the perspective of scholarship on the Mamluk period one could hardly have wished for a more accessible yet pioneering work on the practice and genre of hadith commentary. This type of engagement with reports about the deeds and sayings attributed to the Prophet played a key role in Mamluk religious and intellectual history, but before the publication of Blecher's important monograph, we knew painfully little about it. Groundbreaking and well-written, *Said the Prophet of God* will be essential reading for anyone interested in Mamluk religious and intellectual history for decades to come.



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