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*Said the Prophet of God: Hadith Commentary across a Millennium.* Joel Blecher. Oakland: University of California Press, 2018. Pp. 272. Reviewed by Scott Bursey, *Florida State University*.

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*Hādīth* commentaries are a trans-historical tool of exegetical actors, a tool which has allowed them to commentate on, nuance – and therefore influence – the reading of *Sahīh al-Bukhārī* across a millennia of Islamic history. Each iterative commentary is influenced by the era in which it was created, and therefore carries the marks of its diverse contextual time period. The express goal of Joel Blecher’s work *Said the Prophet of God, Hādīth Commentary*, is to offer a high-level view of centuries of successive interpretation, iteration, and commentary on *Bukhārī’s* *hādīth* collection. Blecher’s project is guided by a range of questions, specifically: “How did Muslims interpret and reinterpret the meanings of *hādīth* and *hādīth* collections,” and “what were the complex social forces, technologies, times, spaces, and audiences that shaped and were shaped by the practice of commentary on *hādīth*?” (2–3). The expressed argument of the text can be summarized as follows: “the meanings of *hādīth* were shaped as much by commentators’ political, cultural, and regional contexts as by the fine-grained interpretive debates that developed over long periods of time” (3). From the perspective of the believer this is a contentious assertion, as the goal of *hādīth* commentaries is to provide clarity to the challenging and often unclear prose of the Prophet as collected by *Bukhārī*. However, from the perspective of a literary scholar, charting the progressive change of interpretive texts over the *longue durée* of history is important, as it highlights the impact of social influence, contextual pressure, and the bias of the commentator. Blecher is thus careful to note that, although “[a] written commentary [...] is supposed to be a timeless encounter with a *hādīth*, insulated from mundane local events, [...]

commentaries are structured by those events in fundamental ways” (92). The production of these *ḥādīth* commentaries, which often took a lifetime to complete, is not directly reducible to fully trans-historical influences, as the desire remains to honour tradition at the expense of worldly gain with the promise of spiritual merit (15).

The structure of Blecher’s work is broken into “three key historical periods and locales in which [the] commentary on *sahīh al-Bukhārī* flourished: classical Andalusia, late medieval Egypt, and modern India.” The work also closes with an “epilogue on contemporary appropriations of *ḥādīth* commentary by Islamist groups,” specifically ISIS (3). Borrowing heavily from the discursive literary method of analysis, Blecher positions each jurist within the contextual frame in which their work was created, and elucidates the challenges and competing influences they were forced to reconcile while creating their commentaries. It can be a perilous exercise for a jurist to fashion a commentary which is out of step with a canonically foundational assertion, something Blecher demonstrates by charting the blowback from a ruling by the Andalusian scholar Abū al-Walīd al-Bājī (d. 474/1081) (24). Commenting on a *ḥādīth* pertaining to Muhammad’s return to Mecca in 628, where he is negotiating a contract with the Quraish, al-Bājī pointed out clear terminological evidence that Muhammad could write, which is a contentious assertion (25).<sup>1</sup> Given that all scholars were funded by patronages from the state, al-Bājī was jeopardizing his position and his livelihood, and even his life by making an assertion like this. The result from al-Bājī’s assertion is what Blecher refers to as a double movement, in that both interpretations were preserved in successive

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1. The specific *hadīth* version identified by Blecher can be found in the *Mishkat al-Masabih* collection, specifically: Khaṭīb al-Tibrīzī, Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh, active 1337, fl. 1704 Salih bin Ömer bin Selman bin Mehmet Efendi, صالح خطيب التبريزي، محمد بن عبد الله. *Mishkāt Al-Maṣābīh*: Book 19, Hadith 259 (4049), <https://sunnah.com/mishkat:4049>.

commentaries and it fell to the commentator or the reader (if the commentator elected to include al-Bāji's assertion), to determine the viability of the claim (27).

A reoccurring case study that Blecher leverages as a means of illustrating interpretive change in regard to *ḥādīth* interpretation is demonstrated in the conflict surrounding the application of discretionary punishment (*ta'zir*). Following three *ḥādīth* collected in *sahīh al-Bukhārī* pertaining to the number of lashings a criminal would be forced to endure, questions were raised as to what degree a judge could change the punishment via their own discretion (except in situations of *hudūd* [boundary, limits], where the punishment for the crime is clearly outlined in the Qur'an, such as for murder, adultery and so on) (34). Blecher outlines a range of classical stances on this *ḥādīth*. Baṭṭāl of Córdoba (d. 449/1057) provided a clear ruling to adhere to the rule of not exceeding ten lashes (36). Representing the *Hanaḥī* opinion, Abū Hanīfa (d. 150/767) suggested a limit of forty, while two other scholars suggested seventy-five (36). The variance only continues with Abū Ja'far al-Tahāwī (d. 321/935), who, on the basis of his personal *ijtihād* (reasoning), asserted that 100 lashes was the limit (39). British colonial officials in India were not keen on how such variances in punishment were left to a magistrate's discretion (156). These variances thus resulted in a hybrid legal code being created, largely due to the influence of Deobandi religious authorities, specifically Kashmīrī (d. 1933), who ruled on the side of taking the *Hanaḥī* line of ten lashes, maximum (154–155).<sup>2</sup> The

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2. It is interesting that Blecher focuses so much on the hybridized legal code in India and does not mention the separate *shari'a* court system in Egypt, which would have better illustrated his point. There is a wealth of material that shows defendants frequently choose not to have their case heard in the secular system because the *shari'a* court system offered a degree of situational variance. See Judith Tucker, *Women in Nineteenth-Century Egypt* (Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 163.

progressive change and iteration in how this *ḥādīth* has been interpreted across space and time is just one example Blecher employs as a means of charting the shifting landscape of commentary and the jurists who engage in its study.

He also explores how commentaries were delivered, tracing the shift from spoken performances in Andalusian and Mamluk settings to private settings for the elite in Ottoman times, to a preference for the written word in our contemporary moment (82). Further discussed is the changing taste of commentators and their readers as the cost of reproducing works decreased drastically over time. Moreover, a greater increase in literacy rates among the general civil society resulted in a call for slimmer and more concise commentaries, and for commentaries in a range of languages other than Arabic (132,168).

It is the epilogue which offers what I feel is the most interesting aspect of the work. Here, Blecher reviews some deeply problematic interpretations offered by a number of ISIS *ḥādīth* scholars, all of whom attempt to justify the revival of slavery by engaging in “novel” (186) interpretations of various hadith commentaries on slavery. While acknowledging that “there is an understandable resistance in the academy to understanding ISIS’s propagandists as participating in the rich tradition of hadith commentary in any way other than to bring about its ruin,” he ultimately asserts that “if scholarly inquiry is to differ from the work of counter-propagandists, we must seek to analyze the strategies of ISIS’s interpretive approach in the context of the cumulative tradition rather than to caricature them” (193).

Blecher’s book reveals the study of *ḥādīth* and its commentary to be as relevant today as it was a millennia ago. Whether the reader be well-versed in Islam and the history of *ḥādīth*, or a novice interested in the vicissitudes of Islam, this work offers a

compelling breadth and summary which both audiences will find deeply rewarding – a must read for scholars interested in the history of *ḥādīth* studies.