CHAPTER TEN

CONCLUSION

Instead of summarizing the results of this study in abstract form (see the Thesis section in the Introduction), we conclude in a manner more useful to students of Islamic civilization and its magnificent tradition of hadith scholarship. As the present study proceeded, teachers, scholars and students consistently posed the same questions about the Sahihayn canon and its historical development. I have thus attempted to use these questions as a framework for summarizing the conclusion of this study.

I. Why the Sahihayn and Not Other Books?

Asking why one text achieves membership in the canon and another does not poses trenchant questions about the forces that drive intellectual history and about the possibility of objective scholarly evaluation. Can historians always explain choices made in the past through a materialist lens, or can historical actors establish and act on sets of aesthetics independent of material surroundings? One might contend that there is nothing in the writings of Shakespeare that makes them intrinsically better than the works of other playwrights or poets. The canonical status of Romeo and Juliet might ultimately hinge on the number of copies of the text that were produced at some crucial point in time, the nature of the network that distributed and performed the play, the charisma of those scholars who promoted its study or its resonance with some great social issue of the day. Another, better play written by a now-unknown litterateur may have disappeared into history for similar reasons. Canonicity, from this perspective, is the product of material forces and the accidents of history. It is not a matter of objective quality.

This perspective robs the critic or the scholar of his right to aesthetic evaluation; eminently a creature of the material world around him, he is no more able to escape these constraints than the texts he purports to judge. Is this perspective accurate, or must we allow for the serendipitous variable of scholarly preference? Should we acknowledge that
a well-respected critic or sincere scholar could rise above the material constraints of his day and pronounce an influential verdict on a book based on purely aesthetic grounds? It seems that the Sahihayn canon was the product of both the material accidents of history and the explicit judgments of influential Muslim scholars as to which hadith collections provided the best understanding of the Prophet’s charismatic legacy.

To isolate the factors that shaped the Sahihayn canon, let us review the fate of four hadith collections written by prominent transmission-based Sunni scholars of the sahih movement between 250/865 and 350/960 in the Khurásân region: the Sahihayn, the Sahih of Ibn Khuzayma (d. 311/923) and the Sahih of Ibn Hibbân (d. 354/965). All four of these hadith scholars were Sunnis who compiled comprehensive legal and doctrinal references on hadith restricted to only what they considered authentic reports. All four had comparable visions of what Islam and the sunna of the Prophet ‘should’ be. By the eighth/fourteenth century, all four collections had won approval from the Sunni scholarly community. As our judge of canonicity, let us turn to al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī, whose seminal study of the Sahihayn in fact sparked their canonization. While al-Ḥākim viewed al-Bukhārī’s and Muslim’s collections as the pinnacle of critical stringency and excellence in hadith evaluation, he dismissed both the Sahih of his teacher Ibn Hibbân and that of his exemplar Ibn Khuzayma.

Ibn Hibbân’s work seems to have been the victim of the accidents of history. Al-Ḥākim condemned the work of his teacher, a belated participant in the sahih movement, due to the presence of unknown transmitters in its isnâds. As we know, however, early members of the Sahihayn Network had also been unable to identify some of al-Bukhârî’s transmitters. Only after several generations of study were these ‘unknown’ narrators identified. For al-Ḥākim, the absence of unknown transmitters in the Sahihayn proved central to his claims on the books’ authority. Had Ibn Ḥibbân lived a century earlier and produced his Sahih at the same time as al-Bukhârî, perhaps scholars could have identified his unknown transmitters as well.

In the case of Ibn Khuzayma’s Sahih, however, we cannot explain its exclusion from the canon as the result of material forces or ideological pressures. Influential scholars who evaluated Ibn Khuzayma’s Sahih simply did not approve of his quality selections. Ibn Khuzayma was the axis of transmission-based jurisprudence, theology and hadith study in Khurásân during the late third/ninth and early fourth/tenth centuries. Our earliest sources on the period accord him accolades that dwarf