Book Reviews


This is an unusual book in many ways, all of them good. Its scope is strikingly broad, it is in conversation with the latest scholarship both in the field of specialization and also in the wider world of theory, and it is well-written. While one may disagree with some of Brown’s specific and general conclusions, this book deserves be read for many years to come.

In nine detailed chapters (plus a concluding chapter and appendices) Brown takes on a commonplace in the field of Islamic Studies—the fact that al-Bukhārī’s and Muslim’s collections of ḥadīth have an elevated position—and he explains both how this happened and what it means. As a result, he makes a significant contribution to the study of Islamic law and the study of Ḥadīth, and, more generally, provides important insights for the understanding of Muslim scholarly culture. In addition, Brown has important things to say about the ways that canons are formed and how they function within societies.

This broader perspective is Brown’s starting point, as he devotes the first two chapters to defining precisely what a canon is, the different ways it can be identified, and how we might go about considering the Ṣaḥīḥ of al-Bukhārī and Muslim to be canon. This very informative excursion into theories of canon, developed largely in the fields of biblical and literary studies, does not result in one single definition but rather in several distinctive perspectives. Brown dutifully covers taxonomic definitions, such as Gerald Sheppard’s distinction in the Encyclopedia of Religion between Canon 1 (“rule, standard, ideal, or norm”) and Canon 2 (“a list, chronology, catalog, fixed collection, and/or standardized text”), but by his own admission Brown is “irretrievably Weberian” (18) in his preference for the social “needs” that produce canon. For Brown, canonization is “the transformation of texts, through use, study, and appreciation, from nondescript tomes into powerful symbols of divine, legal or artistic authority” (5).

In other words, Brown approaches the Ṣaḥīḥayn with the questions of how they came to be considered canon and in what ways this canonicity manifests itself in Islamic society. He does not address the question of whether they are authentic representations of what Muḥammad actually said and did (this, Brown argues, is “beyond the ken of historians” [preface, xxi]), nor does he enter much into questions of textual history (he devotes the second of two appendices to this subject, [384-86]).
not, in my view, wholly satisfactory). Rather, the majority of his book (chapters four through nine) is a study of these texts after they had already emerged in the community. First, however, Brown’s Chapter Three (47-98) is very informative on the “genesis” of al-Bukhārī and Muslim. While this chapter falls short of the full critical biography of these figures that we very much need, it demonstrates an exemplary engagement with primary and secondary sources (including recent scholarship in Arabic). Brown is not shy about taking on the likes of Wilfred Madelung and Christopher Melchert, judiciously weighing their views and offering alternatives. For example, Brown convincingly argues that al-Bukhārī was no semi-rationalist (contra Melchert) but rather a traditionalist attacked by the radical wing of his own party (78).

In Chapter Four, Brown outlines the “canonical process,” the period during which the Ṣaḥīḥayn were intensively studied and prepared for eventual canonization, discussed in Chapter Five. In a sense, the first five chapters focus on the Ṣaḥīḥayn as Canon 2, that scholarly work required to fix the text and standardize it as an authentic representation of the Prophet’s sunna. Brown groups the remaining chapters into “part two” which seem to focus on the Ṣaḥīḥayn as Canon 1. Here we find discussion of these texts as a “measure of authenticity” (Chapter Six), as the basis of a “canonical culture” (Chapter Seven), as an icon of the tradition to be rejected (Chapter Eight) and as the focus of ritual and narrative (Chapter Nine). Brown himself states (335) that only Chapter Nine focuses on Canon 2, but throughout, he keeps in mind the broader Muslim community, not merely the elite world of the ḥadīth scholars.

This is an enormous sweep, the benefit of which is to offer a thorough assessment of the meaning of these texts for Muslim society. The obvious risk of over-extension is mitigated by Brown’s patient scholarship; he keeps his focus through a pattern of first examining the relevant secondary literature, and then analyzing selected primary sources. For example, in Chapter Five, “Canon and Community,” he includes a reasonably thorough cataloguing of the role of ḥadīth in the epistemology of all the major legal schools (183-94), but this chapter ultimately focuses on the work of one scholar, al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī (d. 405/1014). Typically, Brown treats al-Naysābūrī not only as an individual scholar, but as a member of a vibrant scholarly community, tracing the influence of his teachers, correspondence with colleagues and effect on his students. This examination furthers Brown’s observation that the study of the Ṣaḥīḥayn “seems to have been an exclusively Shāfiʿī endeavor” (135), at least in this earliest phase.

Indeed, a surprising result of Brown’s study is the vastly differing attitudes toward al-Bukhārī’s and Muslim’s collections in past and present. From their very creation, they were subject to withering criticism and rejection: Muslim was forced to argue that his book was merely meant as a “private collection” (94) and al-Bukhārī was accused of plagiarism (95). The 4th/10th and 5th/11th centuries were no kinder, for while the Shāfiʿīs championed the Ṣaḥīḥayn, Mālikīs were initially enamored of their own texts and “tangential to the Ṣaḥīḥayn network” (137), while the Ḥanbalis were openly critical. Not until the mid-5th/11th century did these schools come to a tacit agreement on the status of “the Ṣaḥīḥayn canon as a measure of authenticity in polemics and expositions of their schools’ doctrines” (222); it would be three more centuries before