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THE INTELLECTUAL JOURNEYS OF IMĀM BUKHĀRĪ: A METHODOLOGICAL REVOLUTION IN HADĪTH STUDIES

Abdul Halīm¹⁰²

Abstract:

The preservation and authentication of the prophetic traditions represent one of the most remarkable material undertakings in Islamic scholarship. At the heart of this great endeavor and a turning point for the methodology of ḥadīth authenticity and collection were Muḥammad bin Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī’s four decades of academic expeditions in the Islamic world. Imām Bukhārī’s travels spanned almost 75,000 kilometers through the main centers of Islamic learning, and far from being mere physical adventures, they were an intellectual and scholarly expedition that molded the foundation of Islamic scholarship. This research study outlines the three stages of Bukhārī’s scholarly journey: the formative stage, the extensivemobilization period, and the reformation stage, with each stage representing Bukhārī’s methodological innovations. This research comparatively investigates his travel routes and scholarly engagements with differing communities, it demonstrates how Bukhārī’s mobility provided cross-regional scrutiny over teachings and ensured some degree of integrity in the transmission of ḥadīth. It also explores his challengers and his work—especially the magnum opus, Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī—delving deeper into the mechanics that made Hadīth scholarship possible.

Keywords: *Hadīth Authentication, Imām Bukhārī, Scholarly Expeditions, Cross-Regional Verification, Methodological Innovations, Knowledge Transmission, Intellectual Geographic Mobility.*

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INTRODUCTION

The 9th century CE is marked as an essential period of intellectual flourishing in Islamic civilization, during which the science of ḥadīth authentication started to take root and became a core field of study. Imām Muḥammad bin Ismā‘īl al-Bukhārī was a pioneer in the methodology of ḥadīth collection and verification. *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* set standards in Islamic scholarship, as his enormous travels and hybridization with diverse scholarly traditions paved the way for this innovations.

From his teenage years right up to the time he died, Bukhārī’s intellectual journey proceeded through the major centers of Islamic learning across a vast expanse of land from Central Asia to the Arabian Peninsula. According to Christopher Melchert, “The geographic distribution of ḥadīth in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* suggests the amount of time he spent in various regions: Iraq (about 54 percent), Khurāsān and Transoxania (20 percent), Egypt (10 percent), Syria (8 percent), and Mecca and Medina (7 percent).” This supports the argument that al-Bukhārī’s intellectual outlook is more a product of Iraq than Khurasan/Transoxiana.¹⁰³ He strategically traveled, collating various scholarly traditions and establishing a universal framework for the authentication of ḥadīth.

This study seeks to explore the many phases that made up Bukhārī’s scholarly development: his youngest days, ending with years of intense ḥadīth gathering, and ultimately the final consolidation. This study underlines Bukhārī’s lasting impact on the history of Islamic knowledge by providing a peek into his approaches and the hurdles he faced by the way.

SCHOLARLY EXPEDITIONS

The extensive journeys of Imām Bukhārī represent an important period in the development of ḥadīth scholarship during the 3rd century AH. Imām Bukhārī began his excursions for knowledge in 210 AH when he was only sixteen years old. His pursuits followed a

¹⁰³ Christopher Melchert, “Bukhārī and Early Hadith Criticism,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 121, no. 1 (2001): 18.

systematic geographical pathway through major intellectual centers of the Islamic world.

These extensive journeys were marked by intense scholarly engagement and meticulous documentation, spanning regions from Transoxiana to Egypt. They fostered a comprehensive network of academic dialogue that enriched Islamic scholarship. The arrangement of his travels and scholarly interactions offers an organized view of the methodical approach he employed to gather and authenticate ḥadīth reports.

Early Life and Formative Years

Muhammad bin Ismā‘īl was born on 13th Shawwāl 194 AH / 810 CE in Bukhāra to a scholarly family. His father, Ismā‘īl bin Ibrāhīm, was a descendant of a Persian family. One of his ancestors, Bardizbah, was a Persian Zoroastrian, whose son Al-Mughīrah accepted Islam at the hands of the governor of Bukhāra, Al-Yamān al-Ju‘fī. Later, Al-Mughīrah’s family came to be associated with the Arab affiliation of Al-Ju‘fī.¹⁰⁴

Imām Bukhārī’s father, Ismā‘īl bin Ibrāhīm, was a notable scholar of his time and had interactions with prominent figures such as Imām Mālik and Ibn al-Mubārak. Ismā‘īl passed away when Al-Bukhārī was a child, leaving him under the care of his mother. In his childhood, Bukhārī temporarily lost his eyesight but reportedly regained it through the fervent supplications of his devout mother. Displaying exceptional intellectual abilities from an early age, he began his formal education at the age of six (200 AH). By the age of 10, he had completed his preliminary studies and began memorizing *aḥādīth* under the guidance of renowned local scholars, including Ḥanafī Abū Ḥaṣṣ al-Kabīr (also known as Al-Dākhilī), Al-Bikandī, and ‘Abdullāh bin Muḥammad al-Musnadī.¹⁰⁵ Once, he corrected an

¹⁰⁴ Muntasir Zaman, Bukhārī Project.

¹⁰⁵ Tāj al- dīn al-Subkī, al-Tabaqāt al-Shāfi‘yya al-kubrā, 2:213 (Giza: Dār Hajr, 1413 AH).

error in ḥadīth narration by Abū Ḥafṣ, earning his teacher's praise and respect.¹⁰⁶

In 250 AH, Imām Bukhārī stepped outside his native city and traveled to Merv and Balkh. There, he studied with one of his prominent teachers, Makkī bin Ibrāhīm, from whom he cited the largest number of three-link *aḥādīth* (*Thulāthiyyāt*) in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*. From there, he moved to Naysābūr in 209 AH¹⁰⁷ after completing his studies in nearby regions like Balkh, Herāt, and Jibāl.¹⁰⁸ He had already studied under local scholars in Bukhāra and developed his initial methodology in ḥadīth authentication. These formative years established the intellectual and methodological groundwork for his future contributions to ḥadīth authentication.

COMMENCEMENT OF SCHOLARLY EXPEDITION

Imām Bukhārī's scholarly expedition commenced from his native city of Bukhāra in 210 AH. Accompanied by his mother and brother, he left Bukhāra to perform Hajj, marking the beginning of what would become an extensive academic journey.

Historical evidence suggests that his journey was via Tehran. Imām Bukhārī visited Baghdād and Baṣra during this journey, which lasted about 6–8 months. In Baghdād, he met Mu'allā bin Manẓūr al-Rāzī, one of his key teachers, though his most notable teacher in Baghdād was Imām Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal, with whom he maintained a deep relationship until Imām Aḥmad's demise. Al-Bukhārī also studied under Yaḥyā bin Ma'īn, a leading authority in the field of narrator criticism (*'ilm al-jarḥ wa al-ta'dīl*). Additionally, he engaged with the philologist Abū 'Ubayd al-Qāsim bin Sallām, whose linguistic views he later cited in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*. Records indicate that Imām Bukhārī visited Baghdād at least eight times during his lifetime.

¹⁰⁶ Al-Baghdādī, Al-Khaṭīb. *Tārīkh Baghdād aw madīna al-Salam*. Vol. 2:330, Lebanon: Dār al-kutub al-'ilmiyya.

¹⁰⁷ Muḥammad bin Aḥmad al-Dhahabī, *Siyar A'lām al-Nubalā'*, 12th ed., 404. "Abū 'Abd al-Ḥakīm says: 'The first time al-Bukhārī entered Naysābūr was in 209 AH. And finally came there in 250 AH and lived there for years.'"

¹⁰⁸ Jibāl was the name given by the Arabs to a region and province located in western Iran, under the Umayyad and Abbasid Caliphates.

Imām Bukhārī's travels also took him through Yemen (Başra) in pursuit of learning aḥādīth from 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Şan'ānī, but he was deterred after being falsely informed that al-Şan'ānī had passed away. Subsequently, Al-Bukhārī arrived in Makkah for Hajj. After fulfilling the pilgrimage, he stayed in the city to study, while his family returned to Bukhāra. Imām Bukhārī was unfamiliar with the area, so he took help from a Kūfan guide named Shamkhadā,¹⁰⁹ who introduced him to the local ḥadīth scholars, including al-Ḥumaydī. In 211 AH, Imām Bukhārī continued his journey to Palestine, where he visited Muḥammad al-Faryābī. As Ḥānī' bin al-Naḍr said, Imām Bukhārī was among them in Shām studying with al-Faryābī, and despite being only a 17-year-old boy at the time, he demonstrated remarkable maturity, avoiding the sportive behavior typical of youth (*shabāb*).¹¹⁰

Imām Bukhārī's visit to Irāq in 211 AH was particularly noteworthy. In Kūfa, he engaged with Talq bin Ghannām, the vice judge of Kūfa, and other prominent ḥadīth scholars such as Abū Bakr bin AbīShaybah and AbūNu'aym bin A'wn in Wāsiṭ. In Başra, al-Bukhārī studied under one of his most influential teachers, 'Alī bin al-Madīnī, an expert in identifying hidden defects (*'ilal*) in aḥādīth. Imām Bukhārī once remarked, "I didn't consider myself insignificant to anyone except 'Alī bin al-Madīnī." Başra became one of his most frequented destinations after Baghdād and Kūfa, where he also received praise from the esteemed Basran teacher 'Amr bin al-Fallās.

The journey continued as he reached Madīnah, where he began compiling two significant works: *Qalāya al-Şahābahwa al-Tābi'in wa Aqāwīlihīm* (Legal Verdicts of the Companions and Successors) and *Tārīkh al-Kabīr* (The Great History). He worked on these projects during moonlit nights by the Prophet's grave (*Rawḍah al-Sharīfah*).

¹⁰⁹ Abū Aḥmad 'Abd Allāh al-Jurjānī, *Asāmī man Rawā 'Anhum al-Bukhārī fī Şaḥīḥihī* (Dār al-Bukhārī), 66–77.

Shamkhada al-Kūfī: His original name was "Ishāq bin Sulaymān," and it is also said to be "Ibn al-Husayn." Ibn 'Adī said, "He resided in Makkah and was a companion of al-Karābīsī."

¹¹⁰ Muḥammad bin Aḥmad al-Dhahabī, *Siyar A'lām al-Nubalā'*, vol. 12 (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, n.d.), 405.

Evidence suggests that between 212 and 217 AH, he visited Madīnah, Makkah, and Ḥimṣ (Homs) in Syria, engaging with the two works he started in Madīnah. During this time, he rejoined the lectures of Imām al-Ḥumaydī, from whom he narrated the famous ḥadīth of intention: *Innamā al-a‘māl bi al-niyyāt*, which became the first ḥadīth in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*. Although this ḥadīth was narrated by others, Imām Bukhārī prioritized al-Ḥumaydī’s version due to his Qurashī lineage, aligning with the prophetic instruction: *Qaddimū Quraysh* (Advance the Quraysh).

In 217 AH, al-Bukhārī traveled to Askalān (Palestine), where he studied with ‘Alī bin Ḥaḥṣ, a student of Ibn al-Mubārak. It is likely that he visited Baṣra before Askalān and then moved to Egypt. In Egypt, he studied with Aḥmad bin Ishkāb, from whom he transmitted the last ḥadīth of his *Ṣaḥīḥ*: *Kalimatan ḥabībatān*. Another of his Egyptian teachers was Nu‘aym bin Ḥammād.

Between 218 and 220 AH, evidence suggests that al-Bukhārī traveled to Damascus,¹¹¹ where he studied with ‘Abd al-A‘lā bin Mushir, a scholar from Damascus. Ibn ‘Asākir also mentions him in his book *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*. However, it is unclear if he actually visited. There is also speculation that he traveled to Upper Mesopotamia in the same period.

Eager to learn from the renowned scholars of Baṣra, he decided to travel there again. However, this time, he witnessed the persecution of Imām Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal during the Qur’ānic inquisition (*Miḥnah*). During his time in Baṣra, he also narrated a ḥadīth from Bishr bin Marḥūm.

Finally, in Naysābūr, Imām Bukhārī met Ishāq bin Rāḥawayh, who admired *Tārīkh al-Kabīr* and presented it to the Tahiridamīr ‘Abdullāh al-Ṭāhir. These extensive travels, spanning decades and vast regions from Central Asia to the Arabian Peninsula, represented the zenith of his scholarly journey. These trips, fueled by a deep commitment to verifying and compiling the prophetic aḥādīth, allowed him to engage with the foremost scholars of that era. His

¹¹¹ Jonathan A.C. Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and Muslim: The Formation and Function of the Sunnī Ḥadīth Canon* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 66.

travels were not just physical journeys but intellectual and spiritual quests that solidified his reputation as a transformative scholar. Upon completing his travels at Naysābūr (he spent about three years there from 222 AH to 225 AH), al-Bukhārī returned to his homeland, Samarqand, where he reunited with his old teacher al-Bikandī (d. 225 AH) and began compiling his significant work, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*.

THE REFORMATIVE JOURNEY OF IMĀM AL-BUKHĀRĪ

Al-Bukhārī entered a new phase of teaching, compiling, and critiquing using the rigorous methodologies he honed during his travels. This era culminated in the compilation of his seminal work *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, which not only set a new standard for ḥadīth authenticity but also addressed the intellectual and theological challenges of his time. As a reformer, Al-Bukhārī aimed to bring clarity and discipline to Islamic sciences, ensuring that future generations would inherit a tradition free from fabrication and error. This stage of his life stands as a testament to his unwavering commitment to the Ummah and the prophetic legacy.

By 234 AH, the reformation period of Bukhārī's scholarly journey began with his return to Naysābūr, where he attended the funeral of Aḥmad bin Ḥarb, a prominent scholar of Naysābūr. The idea of compiling the *Ṣaḥīḥ* was seeded in Bukhārī's heart in 237 AH during a gathering with Ishāq bin Rāḥawayh. It took 16 years to complete the compilation, and the first audition of the *Ṣaḥīḥ* was held in 253 AH. Thus, the work began in 237 AH.¹¹²

During the same period (234–240 AH), Al-Bukhārī may have travelled to Baghlā. An incident is recorded where Qutaybah bin Sa'īd deferred a legal question to Al-Bukhārī, saying, "Al-Bukhārī is an amalgam of Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal, Ishāq bin Rāḥawayh, and 'Alī bin al-Madīnī."¹¹³ Around this time, Abū Ja'far al-Warrāq joined him as a scribe and assistant, and it was during this period that Abū 'Īsā al-

¹¹² Aḥmad al-Aqṭash, *Qisṣat Ḥayāt al-Bukhārī* (Riyadh: Maktabat Markaz al-Imām al-Albānī, 2024), 180–220.

¹¹³ Muḥammad bin Aḥmad al-Dhahabī, *Siyar A'lām al-Nubalā'*, vol. 12 (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, n.d.), 418.

Tirmidhī began studying under him, recording valuable ḥadīth-related insights.¹¹⁴ Al-Tirmidhī also relayed an incident he observed between Al-Bukhārī and ‘Abd Allāh al-Munīr.

After an eastern sojourn, Al-Bukhārī returned to the heartland of the Muslim world, Baṣra, where he spent approximately five years working on his *Ṣaḥīḥ*. During this period (244–248 AH), he performed Ḥajj every year. He also dictated the work of *Tārīkh al-Kabīr* (The Great History) in Baṣra in 246 AH.¹¹⁵ The precise dates of his movements between 240–244 AH remain unclear.

After spending considerable time in Baṣra, Al-Bukhārī made his final visit to Baghdād, where a large group of students copied the Aḥādīth from him, including Al-Qāḍī Abū ‘Abdullāh al-Mahāmīlī.¹¹⁶ On his journey back east, he stopped in Rayy, where he was welcomed by the renowned Rāzī family, including Abū Ḥātim Muḥammad bin Idrīs al-Rāzī and Abū Zur‘ah al-Rāzī, who benefited from Al-Bukhārī’s expertise in narrator criticism.

After his time in Rayy, Imām Al-Bukhārī returned to Naysābūr, the city that had long awaited his return. By 250 AH, he was warmly welcomed by local scholars, including the famous ḥadīth master Imām Muḥammad bin Yaḥyā al-Dhuhlī. Al-Dhuhlī seemed to signal fruitful collaboration with Al-Bukhārī, acknowledging his ḥadīth scholarship. However, their friendship took a bitter turn shortly after the funeral of Sa‘īd bin Marwān, which was led by Al-Dhuhlī. Yaḥyā al-Dhuhlī wrote letters to other scholars, criticizing Al-Bukhārī, resulting in a shift in scholarly perception. Nevertheless, Imām Muslim continued to attend Al-Bukhārī’s lectures, openly supporting him in scholarly debates.

Eventually, Al-Bukhārī was forced to leave Naysābūr due to a controversial exchange over the creation of the Qur’ān. Passing through Marw, he shared his grievances with Aḥmad bin Sayyār, but he avoided public support due to the likelihood of public conflict.

¹¹⁴ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh Baghdād*, vol. 2 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah), 248.

¹¹⁵ Abū Ya‘lā al-Khilālī, *Kitāb al-Irshād fī Ma‘rifah ‘Ulamā’ al-Ḥadīth*, vol. 3 (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah), 959.

¹¹⁶ Al-Mahāmīlī became Qāḍī of Baghdād at age 20, significantly influencing the city’s jurisprudence during his tenure.

During this time, Al-Bukhārī completed the compilation of the *Ṣaḥīḥ* and moved to the city of Farabr. It was here that he began his relationship with Muḥammad bin Yūsuf al-Farabrī, who studied with him for three years (253–255 AH). In Farabr, Al-Bukhārī was actively involved in local and political issues and expanded the section of Tafsīr in his *Ṣaḥīḥ*.

In 255 AH, Al-Bukhārī received news that his teacher, ‘Abd Allāh al-Dārimī, the ḥadīth master of Samarqand, had passed away. Reflecting on the loss, he remarked, “If you survive, you will suffer the loss of your loved ones; your own death is far worse.”

Al-Bukhārī returned to his homeland, Bukhāra, but faced opposition from the Tahrīdī Amīr Khālīd bin ‘AbdAllāh and some legal disagreements with local Ḥanafī scholars, forcing him to leave. During this period, he authored theological tracts, including *Khalq Af‘āl al-‘Ibād*, responding to debates on the creation of the Qur’ān, as well as works on *Raf‘ al-Yadayn* (raising hands in prayer) and *Qirā’a Khalfā al-Imām* (reciting behind the imām).

In 256 AH, the year of his demise, Al-Bukhārī relocated briefly to Bikand before moving to Bāyān in Nasaf. Here, he continued teaching the *Ṣaḥīḥ* to scholars such as Ibrāhīm Ma‘qil al-Nasafī and Ḥammād bin Shākir. He was accompanied by Abū Muḥammad al-Afānī, who served as his scribe.

Amid ongoing controversies, Al-Bukhārī retreated to Khārtank¹¹⁷ during the last days of Ramaḍān, where he stayed with his relative Ghālīb bin Jibrīl. During this time, he received an invitation to Samarqand but fell ill. He tried to travel but could no longer manage. On the eve of Eid al-Fiṭr, after ‘Ishā prayers on Saturday, 256 AH, Al-Bukhārī passed away peacefully.

The night marked the end of a life dedicated to the pursuit and preservation of Islamic knowledge. He travelled through numerous cities, faced various challenges, and made significant contributions to the sciences of ḥadīth, making his passing a great loss

¹¹⁷ Khārtank is a village 25 kilometers away from Samarqand. The word khār means donkey and tang means tight, referring to the traffic on the roads there. It was originally called Jarmābādh. (Muntasir Zaman, Bukhārī Project).

for the Muslim community. Nevertheless, his legacy endures through his monumental works, especially *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, which continues to guide and inspire generations of scholars and believers.

CONCLUSION

The scholarly journeys of Imam Bukhari indicate a great commendation to the pursuit of Islamic knowledge and preservation of the traditions of Prophethood: from travelling across the vast expanses of the Islamic world to his commitment to authenticity, rigor, and discipline in the collection and study of hadith. Each phase of his journey—the years spent in his hometown of Bukhara to trips to faraway cities like Mecca, Baghdad, and Nishapur—was punctuated with meetings with eminent scholars, engaging in scholarly debates, and the writing of his magnum opus, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*.

Although he had difficulties in his life, such as disagreements with a number of prominent contemporary scholars, his credibility and legacy was established because of his unwavering, unquestionable honesty and knowledge. History recounts numerous occurrences that demonstrate Imam Bukhari's commitment and honesty. One of the most significant of these is the story of how he threw a thousand dinars into the sea at once to keep the allegiance he had earned by recording hadith.¹¹⁸ And it is important to note here that once on behalf of Imam Bukhari, another incident is given about how he went far to find a hadīth from a shaykh. When al-Bukhārī arrives, the shaykh is gesturing an animal as though it was some food. Upon observing this, Imam Bukhari concluded that the individual is unfit to receive the hadīth and refused to take it from him. There is nothing about this occurrence in the significant documents. However, this is how the story has been told. Furthermore, adding this portion to Imām Bukhārī does not seem to be a prudent move. Likewise, it's unclear if this occurrence has been added to those of many other Extremists (Al-muthashaddidūn) in accepting the Prophetic hadiths.

¹¹⁸ Al-Mubārakfūrī cited this story from Imām al-'Ajlūnī, who mentioned it in his book *Al-Fawā'id al-Darārī fī Tarjamat al-Imām al-Bukhārī*.

In conclusion, Imām Bukhārī's travels were more than just travels; they were an extraordinary spiritual and intellectual pilgrimage that undoubtedly influenced the field of hadith studies. His life remains a monumental lesson on devotion to knowledge and truth that inspires generations of scholars down to the present day.

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