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Araştırma Notu / Research Note

The Predicament of the Middle-Ground Orientalist*

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Introduction

In Western hadith studies, the term "middle-ground orientalists" refers to those scholars who apply *isnād-cum-matn* analysis (ICMA), the Western method closest to the *muʿāraḍa* procedure of the hadith critics, and who, on the basis of this method, arrive at earlier dates for hadiths than those proposed by the line of Joseph Schacht (d. 1969) and G. H. A. Juynboll (d. 2010).[1] Given the methodological affinity between them and Muslim hadith scholars, and given their early datings, the question inevitably arises whether the work of the middle-ground orientalists might ultimately open the way to a method, or even a paradigm, shared with Muslims. The point of departure of this research note is the objection that Harald Motzki (d. 2019) himself raised, in his comments on the draft of my article, to my negative answer to this question.

* *This research note is based on my presentations "A Case for a Common Paradigm? Middle-Ground Orientalists and Isnad-cum-Matn Analysis" (Oberseminar Theological Hadith Studies, Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen, Zentrum für Islamische Theologie, 6 June 2023) and "Mutavassıt Oryantalistlerin Hadis Savunusu ve Paradigma Değişiminin İmkânı" (International Symposium on Rethinking Orientalism on the Twentieth Anniversary of Edward W. Said's Death, Yalova, 31 October-2 November 2023).*

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1 For the classification of Western scholars and the criteria on which it rests, see Kızıl, *Müşterek Râvi Teorisi*, 25-57; Brown, *Hadith*, 204 ff.

I had sent him the article "In Pursuit of a Common Paradigm", written on the basis of the first chapter of my doctoral dissertation, in order to obtain his comments before publication, since he had supervised me for six months during my stay in Nijmegen as an exchange student in the course of my doctorate.[2] In the article I had stated that, in the final analysis, both the revisionist and the middle-ground orientalists carried out their work within the orientalist paradigm, and that the different groups within this paradigm differed from one another in degree rather than in kind.[3] In the margin of this sentence Motzki had noted: "What my own approach is concerned, I think this statement is wrong."[4] I had concluded the article with the observation that a reconciliation between the two paradigms was improbable, that the search for a common paradigm was a futile effort, and that a new synthesis or, in the terminology of Thomas Kuhn (d. 1996), a full paradigm shift should therefore not be expected.[5] Earlier in the article, I had described the three groups of Western scholars as consecutive points on a single line and attributed this continuity to their having been trained in the same scholarly tradition, which they accepted as authoritative.[6] Commenting on this passage, Motzki expressed his conviction that his own work represented precisely such a break with the prevailing tradition:

> To my mind, this blanket judgment is biased. There were in the Western sciences regularly "revolutions" in which the prevailing scholarly tradition was critically revised and even completely rejected in favour of new theories and practices (see T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*). This happened also in Islamic studies. My criticism (and that of other like-minded colleagues) of the dominant Western views in *ḥadīth* studies can be seen as such a revolutionary change. If it gains broader acceptance in Western *ḥadīth* studies in the future, it would be a "paradigm change".[7]

It is the fact that, despite the time that has passed and the studies that have been published since then, I still hold the same view today that has led me to

2 Motzki's comments, inserted as Word comments, on the pre-publication draft of "In Pursuit of a Common Paradigm" (December 2014, author's archive). Hereafter cited as Motzki, Comments on the Draft.

3 Kızıl, "In Pursuit of a Common Paradigm", 31.

4 Motzki, Comments on the Draft.

5 Kızıl, "In Pursuit of a Common Paradigm", 32.

6 Kızıl, "In Pursuit of a Common Paradigm", 29.

7 Motzki, Comments on the Draft.

write this research note.

The central claim of this paper consists of three interrelated observations. First, the middle-ground orientalists do not step outside the boundaries of the orientalist paradigm. Second, as a natural consequence of this, they do not accept *ṣaḥīḥ* hadith in the sense in which Muslims accept it, and the "historical kernel" or "core" at which they arrive does not correspond to the *ṣaḥīḥ* of the hadith sciences. Third, and in fact most importantly for the purposes of this paper, the middle-ground orientalists, despite dating hadiths to early periods, display a tendency to limit their conclusions, particularly when responding to the criticisms directed at them. The word "predicament" in the title refers to the picture formed by these three circumstances taken together.

Only these predicaments will be dealt with below; the technical differences in the way *isnād-cum-matn* analysis is applied by Muslim scholars and by Western scholars will be left to a separate study.[8] The examples below have been chosen from the work of Motzki on account of his representative standing, his application of the method to various types of tradition, and the fact that, by responding to the criticisms directed at it, he all but took personal ownership of *isnād-cum-matn* analysis.[9]

I. The Middle Ground: A Position within the Paradigm

Although they belong to different countries and religions, orientalists have formed an epistemic community by virtue of their own classics, written in the nineteenth century and still taught today, their teacher-student relationships, their web of mutual citation, the premises they share, and their common terminology. Dale F. Eickelman's recollection of the first seminar on Islamic history he attended at McGill University in 1964 is a concise expression of this situation. The professor conducting the seminar said that the fundamental texts had been established by the "greats" of the previous generation, such as Theodor Nöldeke (d. 1930) and Ignaz Goldziher (d. 1921), and that what fell to the new generation was to weed out typographical errors and other minor flaws.[10] One of the most obvious examples from the field of hadith of the continuity of this tradition is the acceptance, in its broad outlines and by Western scholars in general, including Motzki, who objected to some of its elements, of Schacht's

8 For the outlines of these differences, see for now Kızıl, "Batı'da Hadis Çalışmaları", 270-271; Kızıl, *Müşterek Râvi Teorisi*, 191-193, 225-230.

9 Cf. Kızıl, "Batı'da Hadis Çalışmaları", 268.

10 Eickelman, "The Underneath of Academic Life", xxvi-xxvii.

fundamental thesis that a transition took place from the living tradition of the ancient schools of law to the Prophetic *sunna* and that the binding force of the *sunna* increased over time. Another example is their approach to the Constitution of Medina. From Julius Wellhausen (d. 1918) onwards, the document has been accepted as authentic by almost all Western scholars, and on almost the same grounds.[11]

Although the most important distinguishing feature of the middle-ground orientalists is their application of *isnād-cum-matn* analysis, the distinctiveness of a method depends on its premises, and applying *isnād-cum-matn* analysis does not by itself make a scholar a middle-ground orientalist. For the outcome of the analysis is determined by whether single-strand lines of transmission are included in the analysis from the outset, whether the differences between versions are taken to be deliberate alterations or the natural outcome of the process of transmission, the views held on the chronology of the *isnād* and on whether the part of the *isnād* preceding the time when the *isnād* came into use was correctly remembered, and whether, in deciding all these questions, use is made of the *rijāl* and *jarḥ wa-taʿdīl* literature.[12] Behind these technical premises, in turn, lie theological or ideological premises such as one's understanding of history, the position of the Prophet in religion, and whether there was a transmission of hadith from the very beginning. Motzki himself acknowledges this in the final sentence of his article on dating methods.

> Therefore, whether the dating of a tradition is considered reliable or not, depends not only on the dating methods applied, but also on our preconceptions of early Islam which we have formed.[13]

Herbert Berg has made the same observation in sharper terms. In his view, the results of the work of scholars on both sides of the debate, the sceptics as well as the sanguine, are dictated by their presuppositions. The attitude of each scholar determines the conclusions he reaches, the arguments are frequently circular, and it is therefore unlikely that the impasse will be resolved.[14] Two objections may be raised to Berg's characterisation of one side of the debate as "sanguine". First, neither the middle-ground orientalists nor Muslims are any

11 See Kızıl, "'Sunna' of Western Scholars", 48-66.
12 Kızıl, "Batı'da Hadis Çalışmaları", 269.
13 Motzki, "Dating Muslim Traditions", 253.
14 Berg, *The Development of Exegesis*, 3-4; Berg, "Competing Paradigms", 261.

less critical than the sceptics. Whether or not their conclusions are accepted, the extremely meticulous *isnād-cum-matn* analyses of the middle-ground orientalists and the attention to detail displayed by Muslim hadith scholars in their works on *ʿilal* show that calling them "sanguine" is unfair. Second, Muslim hadith scholars and middle-ground orientalists differ too much from one another to be gathered into a single group under the heading "sanguine". In this respect, Berg's depiction of the dispute as a dichotomy between Goldziher and Fuat Sezgin (d. 2018), with Motzki placed on the second side together with Nabia Abbott (d. 1981), Muḥammad Muṣṭafā al-Aʿẓamī (d. 2017), Josef Horovitz (d. 1931) and Johann Fück (d. 1974), is misguided.[15] As the following words from one of Motzki's posthumously published essays also show, this depiction does not accurately reflect the position of the middle-ground orientalists in the person of Motzki:

> ... there is indeed a middle ground between Scylla and Charybdis, between extreme source skepticism and the more or less uncritical acceptance of Islamic traditions.[16]

The middle-ground orientalists differ from the sceptics and the revisionists just as they differ from Muslims. These differences can be seen most clearly in the criticisms they direct at one another.[17] As an example of these differences one may cite the fact that, in contrast to the interpretations of Schacht and Juynboll, who regard the common link as the fabricator of the hadith, Motzki, while not denying that there were cases in which common links fabricated hadiths, considers it better "to look upon the common links as the first great collectors and professional teachers of knowledge in general and of traditions about persons living in the first century of Islam in particular".[18] Because the definition of the common link as a collector and teacher does not rule out the possibility that the hadith was really received from his teacher, it carries the potential of pushing the dating back by one generation and makes it possible to cross what

15 Berg, *The Development of Exegesis*, 49-50.

16 Motzki, "Historical-Critical Research", 86.

17 Among the principal debates to which the middle-ground orientalists have been party are those between Motzki and Juynboll, Berg and Schoeler, Berg and Motzki, Motzki and Schneider, and Shoemaker and Motzki, Schoeler and Görke.

18 Motzki, "Whither Ḥadīth Studies?", 51. This interpretation of the common links is close to that of al-Aʿẓamī (see Kızıl, "Mustafa el-Azamî'nin Oryantalistlerin Hadislerle İlgili Temel İddialarına Yönelttiği Tenkitlerin Değerlendirmesi", 445, n. 40).

Motzki calls "Schacht's magical limit of the year 100".[19] Whereas Juynboll makes the historicity of a point of transmission dependent on the number of lines of transmission fanning out from that point (the knot principle), Motzki did not proceed from the mere number of transmitters; rather than rejecting single-strand lines out of hand, he compared the texts carried by these lines with the others in order to determine whether they derived from a common teacher.

Despite the differences indicated, the middle-ground orientalists nevertheless do not step outside the framework of the orientalist paradigm, and they stand closer to the sceptical-revisionist line than to Muslims. For this reason, as will be seen below, it is not possible to place al-Aʿẓamī and Motzki in the same camp. Consequently, following Berg's observation in a later study, this time an accurate one, the sceptical, revisionist and middle-ground orientalists should be thought of as three points on a single line, and the continuity between the groups should not be overlooked.[20] The predicament of the middle-ground orientalists lies precisely at this point, in the fact that they are located on this line.

II. The Limiting Effect of the Orientalist Paradigm and Its Influence on the Middle-Ground Orientalists' Responses to Criticism

The first predicament of the middle-ground orientalists is that, despite all the points on which they differ from the sceptics, they share the founding premises of the orientalist paradigm and are unable to cross the boundary drawn by these premises. Motzki states this openly in an interview. In this interview he said that Islamic studies (*Islamwissenschaft*) is secular, that it does not accept the dogmas of Muslims as the fundamental basis of its investigation and may therefore reach conclusions that diverge from those of Muslim scholars; he also stated that religious empathy is not required for the reconstruction of historical events.[21] Moreover, in his posthumously published essay he described his method

19 Motzki, "Al-Radd ʿalā l-Radd", 228.

20 Berg, "Competing Paradigms", 261.

21 Motzki, "Harald Motzki ile Hayatı, İlmî Kariyeri ve Fikirleri Üzerine", 308, 337. Yet whether or not Muḥammad (PBUH) is accepted as a prophet has a bearing, in particular, on the assessment of the *fitan* traditions. Religious empathy also determines whether we interpret texts that lend themselves to misunderstanding with charity. According to Halbertal, the degree of a text's canonicity corresponds to the amount of charity it receives in interpretation. In the words quoted by Brown, in sacred and legal texts "there is an a priori interpretive commitment to show the text in the best possible light. Conversely, the loss of this sense of obligation to the text is an undeniable sign that it is no longer perceived as holy" (see Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhārī and*

as "historical-critical" and explained the qualifier "historical" as meaning that the text under investigation is regarded not as a text that descended from heaven or was revealed by God, but as one that developed over centuries and therefore has a history.[22] When hadith is viewed from this definition, the question to be asked is not whether it belongs to the Prophet, but in which period it emerged and how it changed over time.

One of the clearest indications of the ground shared by orientalists is the view of the middle-ground orientalists concerning the sources. The article jointly written by Andreas Görke, Motzki and Gregor Schoeler in response to Stephen J. Shoemaker opens with the following sentence.

> It is well known that the extant Muslim narrative sources relating to the life of Muḥammad date from at least 150 to 200 years after Muḥammad's death in the year 11/632 and that these sources are highly problematic when used as sources for the life of Muḥammad.[23]

The sentence goes on to list the problems. Since no archaeological research has been carried out in Mecca and Medina, there is no external evidence to support the Muslim sources; the non-Muslim sources frequently contradict the Muslim account; some of the traditions appear to have been derived from the interpretation of the text of the Qurʾān; some reflect later theological, legal or political debates; and some are of the nature of salvation history.[24] This picture, which amounts to an inventory of the claims of the sceptical and revisionist line running from Henri Lammens (d. 1937) to John Wansbrough (d. 2002) and Patricia Crone (d. 2015), is presented by the three most prominent names among the middle-ground orientalists[25] as the "well known" starting point of the debate. In the same article, after reporting Shoemaker's admission that some of the material attributed to ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr (d. 94/713) may be authentic, the authors describe the distance between themselves and Shoemaker in the following sentence: "Basically, this is not very different from what Schoeler,

Muslim, 44).

22 Motzki, "Historical-Critical Research", 76. For the premises of the historical-critical method, cf. Brown, *Hadith*, 201-204.

23 Görke - Motzki - Schoeler, "First Century Sources", 2-3.

24 Görke - Motzki - Schoeler, "First Century Sources", 3.

25 For an objection to counting Görke as a middle-ground orientalist, see Özdemir, "An Isnād-cum-matn Adherent Andreas Görke".

Görke and Motzki say – but it is assessed in a different way."[26] That the difference from a sceptical Western scholar is characterised by the middle-ground orientalists themselves as a difference of assessment confirms the observation that the divergence between the positions is one of degree rather than of kind. The preservation of the general framework drawn by Schacht is part of the same picture. As indicated above, Motzki, although one of the most important critics of Schacht, found Schacht to be right in his thesis that Islamic law was initially based largely on *raʾy* and that, until two generations before al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204/820), recourse to *mawqūf* and *maqṭūʿ* reports was the rule and recourse to *marfūʿ* hadiths the exception.[27] The difference, in his view, is that Schacht's claim was a conjecture, whereas his own is a conclusion drawn from the evidence:

> I showed, for instance, in *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence* that ʿAṭāʾ b. Abī Rabāḥ, a student of Ibn ʿAbbās, often quotes juridical opinions of his teacher, but not a single *ḥadīṯ* from the Prophet. This result was only based on two large chapters (*kutub*) of ʿAbd al-Razzāq's *Muṣannaf* so that there was a slight chance to find a few traditions of the Prophet in the rest of the work. Recent research by a student of mine has revealed that in the whole *Muṣannaf* ʿAṭāʾ transmitted actually only four *aḥādīṯ* of the Prophet from Ibn ʿAbbās. This is in line with the biographical traditions about the age of Ibn ʿAbbās during the lifetime of the Prophet and the views of early Muslim scholars (2nd century) how much *aḥādīṯ* Ibn ʿAbbās heard and transmitted from him. This stands in marked contrast to the 1660 Prophetic *aḥādīṯ* from Ibn ʿAbbās that are found in the *ḥadīṯ* collections of the 3rd century. This example suggests that the growth of the Prophetic *aḥādīṯ* only started in the 2nd century H. This is not a conjecture as it was the case with Schacht, but a conclusion based on the study of the sources.[28]

Another feature of the middle-ground orientalists that requires them to be regarded as belonging within the orientalist paradigm is that they do not accept an uninterrupted transmission of hadith continuing from the time of the Prophet. Motzki has specifically pointed out that his having chosen examples which make it possible to go beyond the common link should not be interpreted to mean that he alleges from the start that there was always a process of transmission

26 Görke - Motzki - Schoeler, "First Century Sources", 4.

27 Motzki, *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence*, 127, 295-296.

28 Motzki, Comments on the Draft. Motzki concluded this assessment with the sentence: "I will continue working on this issue in the near future."

stretching from the Prophet to the common link.[29] The most striking consequence of this attitude is his silence in the face of *isnād*s in which the Prophet appears as the common link. Acknowledging that the collector-teacher interpretation does not explain the cases in which the Prophet is the common link, Motzki says the following.

> How traditions developed in which the Prophet appears as a common link, I do not know. I assume that there is no general solution of this problem; different possibilities must be accounted for. In any case, the issue deserves further study.[30]

For the Prophet's being the common link would require accepting an uninterrupted transmission of hadith beginning from his own time; yet this is a premise of the classical Islamic paradigm, not of the orientalist one. It is therefore no coincidence that a scholar who can regard common links from the generations of the Companions and the Successors as the residue of a real process of transmission refrains from passing judgement when the same *isnād* structure converges on the Prophet. All these examples show that Motzki, while occupying a distinct position in the post-Schacht period, was careful not to step outside the orientalist paradigm.[31]

The natural consequence of remaining within the boundaries of the orientalist paradigm, and the second predicament of the middle-ground orientalists, is that they do not accept *ṣaḥīḥ* hadith in the sense in which Muslims accept it. The terminological aspect of the matter is frequently overlooked. The very concept of "dating" has become a product of looking at hadith from within the orientalist paradigm. For although it is in theory possible to date hadiths to the time of the Prophet, in practice Western scholars, while occasionally conceding the existence of an authentic kernel, have not dated a single hadith in its wording to the time of the Prophet, at least since 1996,[32] when they began to apply *isnād-cum-matn* analysis. In practice, therefore, dating has turned into a search for an answer to the question "When did the hadith emerge *after the*

29 Motzki, "Al-Radd ʿalā l-Radd", 213.

30 Motzki, "Dating Muslim Traditions", 241-242.

31 This caution stems not from loyalty to Schacht but from the preference, and perhaps the habit, of thinking within a scholarly tradition made up of such elements as long-standing teacher-student relationships, the fundamental texts studied, and Enlightenment scepticism (Kızıl, *Müşterek Râvi Teorisi*, 185, n. 412).

32 The year in which, as Motzki notes, he and Schoeler began to apply ICMA.

Prophet?" The word "authentic", too, must be understood in this context.

The work in which Motzki brings the word "authentic" closest to the Prophet is *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence*. In the introduction to the book he says that, among the traditions belonging to the period before the generation of the Successors, it is occasionally even possible to identify reports about the Prophet which are quite probably authentic.[33] In the body of the book, too, he reaches conclusions about some *marfūʿ* hadiths that come quite close to the Prophet. For instance, after establishing that the hadith "al-walad li-l-firāsh"[34] was brought into circulation at the latest in the second half of the first century AH, and possibly as early as its first half, he says that the possibility cannot be ruled out that the story has a historical kernel and that the Prophet actually made the arbitration in question.[35] The expression he uses for the hadith concerning ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿUmar's (d. 73/693) divorcing his wife during her menstruation is that "we are apparently dealing with a very old tradition of the Prophet, perhaps even with a genuine *fatwā* of the Prophet".[36] In the article on the jurisprudence of al-Zuhrī, written in the same period, he likewise characterised the hadith of ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr concerning the suckling of adults as an authentic hadith.

None of these statements, however, is a judgement of soundness (*ṣiḥḥa*) in the sense understood by Muslims, and Motzki has stated as much in these very works. In the introduction to *Origins* he defines authentic reports as reports that were really transmitted by one of the Prophet's contemporaries. He also explicitly notes that the word "authenticity", which he uses for the Ibn Jurayj (d. 150/767) traditions in the *Muṣannaf* of ʿAbd al-Razzāq (d. 211/826-27), must not be misunderstood, and that by it he means not that the content of the traditions is reliable, but only that ʿAbd al-Razzāq's ascription of these traditions to Ibn Jurayj can be trusted.[37] Likewise, what he means in characterising the ʿUrwa hadith as authentic is that the hadith reports an event that really took place in the lifetime of the Prophet, albeit decades later.

Despite these clarifications by Motzki, it has been supposed that by "authentic" he meant *ṣaḥīḥ* traditions, and in the Muslim world his early datings and the examples in which he speaks of an authentic kernel have been understood

33 Motzki, *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence*, xiv.

34 *al-Muwaṭṭaʾ Riwāyat Abī Muṣʿab*, "Aqḍiya", 2879; *Muwaṭṭaʾ Mālik bi-Riwāyat al-Shaybānī*, "Daʿwā wa-l-Shahādāt wa-Iddiʿāʾ al-Nasab", 845; *al-Muwaṭṭaʾ*, ed. al-Aʿẓamī, 4:1069-1070 (no. 2736); al-Ṭayālisī, *al-Musnad*, 3:59.

35 Motzki, *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence*, 129.

36 Motzki, *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence*, 136.

37 Motzki, *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence*, 72, n. 105.

as his acceptance of the existence of *ṣaḥīḥ* hadiths.[38] An important reason for this misunderstanding is the wording of *Origins* itself. For in *Origins* the conclusions stand out in the main text, while the definitions that qualify them remain in the introduction and the footnotes. Yet when one does not confine oneself to *Origins* and examines Motzki's *isnād-cum-matn* analyses and, in particular, his responses to the criticisms of other Western scholars, it becomes clear that he never characterised any hadith as *ṣaḥīḥ*. Indeed, Sean W. Anthony, one of the scholars who apply ICMA, also emphasises that the dating of a tradition to an early period does not mean that the tradition is necessarily a historically accurate one.[39]

Muslims are not the only ones who have read Motzki's conclusions in this way. In the West, Herbert Berg fell into a similar error: in summarising Motzki's work, he attributed to him the conclusions that ʿAbd al-Razzāq did not forge hadiths and that, at least in the case of the *Muṣannaf*, both the *matn*s and the *isnād*s could largely be trusted.[40] Motzki's reply shows how the seemingly most ambitious conclusions of *Origins* were qualified by their own author:

> My conclusion is not general. It applies only to the isnāds, not to the matns, and only to ʿAbd al-Razzāq's main informants, not to the other informants…
>
> The diversity on which I primarily base my conclusions about the authenticity of the informants (not the ḥadīths!) is the diversity of the isnāds… Authenticity does not refer to authenticity of the matns, but to authenticity of the ascription of the texts to Ibn Jurayj's informant ʿAṭāʾ, i.e. authenticity of the isnād.[41]

When Berg later asserted that the scholars who apply *isnād-cum-matn* analysis believe they have shown hadiths to be largely authentic, Motzki responded this time as follows.

> I do not believe that. I only assume that many traditions found in the extant compilations were not invented by the compilers but have a history (including forgeries) which can be retraced to a certain point in time. The main aim of my approach is dating traditions. The fact that, for example, a ḥadīth of the

38 Kızıl, "Batı'da Hadis Çalışmaları", 257, n. 3.

39 Anthony, *Muhammad and the Empires of Faith*, 7.

40 Berg, *The Development of Exegesis*, 36, 38; for Motzki's account, see Motzki, "The Question of the Authenticity", 219, 221.

41 Motzki, "The Question of the Authenticity", 219, 229.

> Prophet can be dated to the second half of the first/seventh century does not mean that it is authentic in the sense that it really goes back to him in the form preserved or that it reflects accurately what really happened. By dating traditions, conclusions about this type of authenticity will be possible in very rare cases, if ever.[42]

According to Motzki, a similar misunderstanding came from Uri Rubin (d. 2021). When, in his article "The Prophet and the Cat", Motzki called the hadith of Abū Qatāda (d. 54/674) that he had examined there "an authentic ḥadīth of the first/seventh century", he noted that this did not mean that such a tradition could always be proved to go back to the Prophet or to a Companion, and stated that Rubin had misunderstood him:

> I call this an authentic ḥadīth of the first/seventh century. That does not necessarily imply that such a tradition can always be proved to go back to the Prophet or a Companion, as U. Rubin misinterpreted my intentions in *The Eye of the Beholder*, 237.[43]

An important reason for so much misunderstanding is the ambiguity of the terminology. Motzki himself concedes this in his reply to Paul Gledhill:

> Motzki's understanding of authentic transmission is not limited to verbatim transmission from teacher to pupil, and his understanding of forged transmission is not limited to pure falsification. These are only the extreme ends of a range of possibilities. Only extremely gullible or extremely skeptical scholars use the terms 'authentic' and 'forged' in this sense. As for scholars who are less gullible and less skeptical, the problem is that there are no convenient terms for the broad spectrum that lies between authenticity and forgery. As a consequence, scholarly terminology is often undifferentiated, and the reader frequently must attempt to extrapolate the intended meaning of a term from the context in which it is used. This is not always easy.[44]

42 Motzki, "The Origins of Muslim Exegesis", 234-235.
43 Motzki, "The Prophet and the Cat", 74, n. 159.
44 Motzki, "Motzki's Reliable Transmitter", 196.

Another factor that widens the distance between authenticity and *ṣiḥḥa* is the distinction drawn between form and content. What Western scholars express by the words "kernel" and "core" is that the hadith, even if it is not *ṣaḥīḥ* in the form in which it has reached us, reflects an event or a debate that took place in the earliest period. What is authentic, therefore, is not the wording of the hadith but its content, or the event to which it refers.[45] At the very beginning of his study of the traditions of ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr, Schoeler states that by "authentic" he does not wish to imply that the events depicted in these hadiths took place exactly as described, and that the chronological distance of thirty to sixty years between the earliest reports and the events they relate, as well as the distortions arising from the perspectives of the transmitters, must be taken into account.[46] Görke, in enumerating the limits of *isnād-cum-matn* analysis, states that the wording of the variants usually differs considerably, that it is therefore impossible to reconstruct the original wording of the common link's tradition, and that the results are for the most part confined to the content of the original tradition.[47]

The extremely cautious statements of the middle-ground orientalists concerning the authentic kernel have inevitably brought with them the question whether the laborious and time-consuming *isnād-cum-matn* analyses are really worth the effort expended on them.[48] Indeed, Motzki himself, at the end of his article on Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq, after stating that a real historical biography could not be written unless hundreds of source-critical studies were carried out on all the details of the Prophet's life, questioned the outcome of such an enterprise.

> We may wonder whether the outcome will justify the time and energy needed for such an enterprise. As we have shown, the historical facts that can be extracted from the sources relating a certain event of the Prophet's life are few. In the case of the murder of Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq, not even the date of the event can be established with some certainty. The historical biography which will be the outcome of all these source-critical efforts will probably be only a very small one.[49]

45 Kızıl, "Oryantalistlerin Akademik Hadis Araştırmaları", 190-193. On this subject, see also Akgün, "Hadislerin Otantikliği Hususunda Bazı Oryantalistlerin Görüşleri", 75-97.

46 Schoeler, *The Biography of Muḥammad*, 1.

47 Görke, "Prospects and Limits", 143.

48 Melchert, "The Early History of Islamic Law", 303; Robinson, "Reconstructing Early Islam", 122, n. 100.

49 Motzki, "The Murder of Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq", 233-234.

The following words, at the end of the section in his posthumously published essay in which he examines a *sīra* tradition attributed by Ibn Isḥāq (d. 151/768) to Ibn ʿAbbās (d. 68/687-88) through Muḥammad b. Abī Muḥammad, likewise sum up the conclusion he had reached at the end of his career.

> Yet, it remains impossible to substantiate through the source-critical method that the story goes back to a contemporary of the Prophet—let alone an eyewitness of the events—and reflects historical facts. The value of the story for a historical reconstruction of the life of the Prophet is therefore limited. The story only reflects the image, or one of the images, that Muslims formed during the first century after the Prophet's death about the difficult phase of his activity in Mecca.[50]

Western scholars, too, have stated that the datings of the middle-ground orientalists do not reach soundness in the sense understood by Muslims. Jonathan Brown, while describing Motzki as the first Western scholar to show hadith the kind of respect shown to it by Muslim hadith scholars,[51] expresses in his review of *Analysing Muslim Traditions* the need not to read too much into Motzki's method, in the following words.

> It is also very important, however, not to read too much into Motzki's method. Many of his readers, especially those espousing a fideistic approach to the ḥadīth corpus, have assumed that he believes that ḥadīth are generally authentic.[52]

Joshua J. Little's verdict is sharper still:

> Yet Motzki was extremely pessimistic in his results, and his approach cannot be used to defend the conventional Islamic origins-narrative beyond the most rudimentary of outlines.[53]

50 Motzki, "Historical-Critical Research", 86.
51 Brown, *Hadith*, 226.
52 Brown, "Analysing Muslim Traditions", 473-474.
53 Little, "The New Historiography of Islamic Origins".

As the examples above also show, the places where the positions of the middle-ground orientalists can be seen most clearly are, in particular, their responses to the criticisms directed at them. The mistaken conclusions drawn from their work, owing to the ambiguous nature of academic language, which shies away from certainty, and to the complex structure of *isnād-cum-matn* analyses, can be corrected thanks to the positions they state clearly in their responses to criticism. Almost every new criticism has prompted the middle-ground orientalists to clarify what they do not claim. Although one might think that a step backwards is being taken here, the absence of any explicit statement to this effect on their part allows their responses to be characterised only as stating the matter more clearly and correcting misunderstandings. Indeed, in his responses to criticism Motzki generally states that he has been misunderstood and sets out his position more clearly. Moreover, most of the qualifying statements, as can be seen in the introduction and footnotes of *Origins*, were already present in the original studies; what happens in the face of criticism is that these qualifications move from the footnotes into the main text and become the principal claim of the study. Yet it does not escape notice that this almost always results in a narrowing of the scope of the claim. Melchert's remark, as early as 2003, that Motzki's caution regarding the period before the generation of the Successors reduced his work to a footnote to Schacht's shows how this narrowing looks from the sceptical camp.[54] In the end, the "Motzki's paradigm" which Berg said might replace Schacht's[55] has been limited by its own author.

What Remains: The Value of the Middle-Ground Approach

One of Motzki's own assessments of his work amounts to a summary of the predicaments discussed so far. In the interview he conducted with Motzki on the occasion of his retirement, Joas Wagemakers reminded him that at the end of years of extremely detailed research he had concluded only that the traditions could in all probability be traced back to a certain time, while still nothing could be said about their content, and asked whether this was satisfying. Motzki answered "actually, yes", and said that, thanks to the large number of individual examples examined, it had become possible to pass judgement on more general matters such as the life of the Prophet and early Islam, and that this was a great advance. What mattered to him, he stated, was being able to come close to the time of the Prophet.[56] This answer makes plain what a middle-ground orientalist does and

54 Melchert, "The Early History of Islamic Law", 302.

55 Berg, "The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence", 289.

56 Wagemakers, "De diepte in", 71-72. For the idea of arriving at a general picture from

does not obtain. What is obtained is the dating of traditions to a period close to the time of the Prophet. What is not obtained is the formation of a preponderant probability (*ẓann ghālib*) as to what the Prophet said or did, and for the Muslim hadith scholar that is the real issue.

Nevertheless, the fact that the middle-ground orientalists do not accept *ṣaḥīḥ* hadith in the sense in which Muslims accept it, and that they do not step outside the boundaries of the orientalist paradigm, does not mean that their work is worthless for Muslim scholars. Among Western scholars, they remain the group from which Muslims can benefit most, particularly on account of the similarity of method. It must also be acknowledged that Motzki, with his judicious approach and his scholarly refusal to generalise about single strands, has provided the strongest tool that can be used against Juynboll's and Michael Cook's claims of diving and spreading. In benefiting from these studies, however, their aims must be kept in mind. As stated above, the aim of the middle-ground orientalists' *isnād-cum-matn* analyses is not to establish the soundness of a hadith but to date the tradition and to reconstruct its transmission history, that is, the stages it passed through in the course of transmission.[57] The contribution of these studies to Muslim hadith scholars, accordingly, concerns transmission history for the most part. To work on *isnād-cum-matn* analysis means to take up and discuss such questions as the necessity of reading *isnād*s in conjunction with one's views on the chronology of the *isnād* and on the systematisation of hadith transmission, the concentration of single-strand lines in particular parts of the *isnād*, the interventions to which hadith texts may have been subjected by transmitters in the course of transmission and their effect on the meaning of the text, the reflection of the assessments in the *rijāl* literature in *isnād*s and texts, the growth in the number of hadiths, and the backward growth of *isnād*s. These discussions have accelerated the effort of Muslims to ground their views on the history of hadith transmission in concrete evidence. In this process, what Muslim hadith scholars need to do is to follow these studies while remaining aware of how much of the findings and conclusions reached in the research of Western scholars rests on concrete evidence and how much consists of interpretations made within their own paradigm. Thereafter, the question whether these findings admit of a different interpretation can be pursued.

individual examples, cf. the mosaic simile in Görke - Motzki - Schoeler, "First Century Sources", 55.

57 Görke - Motzki - Schoeler, "First Century Sources", 56.

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