

CRITICISM OF THE SUSPICIONS OF THE ORIENTALIST ALPHONSE MINGANA ABOUT SAHIH AL-BUKHARI

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Abstract:

This research presents a critical study of the doubts raised by the orientalist Alphonse Mingana regarding Sahih al-Bukhari. Mingana published a copy of Sahih al-Bukhari in 1936 at the University of Cambridge, accompanied by a brief study in which he cast doubt on the attribution of Al-Jami' al-Sahih to Imam al-Bukhari. This study examines the suspicions he raised about Sahih al-Bukhari, refutes them, and explains the methodology of Hadith scholars in verifying and transmitting prophetic texts. It also provides an introduction to the orientalist Mingana and a list of his works. The significance of this research lies in the stature of Imam al-Bukhari as one of the leading scholars of Islam, and in the status of his Sahih, which is regarded as the most authentic book among Muslims after the Holy Qur'an. Casting doubt on it constitutes an attack on one of the greatest sources of Islamic legislation throughout history.

In conclusion, the study presents the key findings and recommendations aimed at advancing Hadith studies in relation to Orientalist research and highlighting the methodological flaws within such studies.

Keywords: Sahih al-Bukhari, Alphonse Mingana, Doubts, Methodology

1- INTRODUCTION:

The Prophetic Sunnah is considered one of the primary sources of Islamic legislation. Allah Almighty says: "Nor does he speak from [his own] inclination. It is not but a revelation revealed."

(Surat al-Najm: 3-4)

For this reason, Muslim scholars have paid great attention to the study of Hadith—both its transmission (riwāyah) and comprehension (dirāyah)—from the time of the Companions until today. The Companions exerted tremendous effort in memorizing, verifying, and transmitting the Prophet's sayings exactly as they heard them from him ﷺ. The Successors then transmitted them to the following generations, until hundreds of thousands of Hadiths reached us.

Muslims are unanimously agreed that the most authentic book ever transmitted is Sahih al-Bukhari. This consensus is the result of the tireless efforts of Hadith scholars throughout the ages, who meticulously examined and scrutinized the Hadiths of Sahih al-Bukhari, subjecting them to the rigorous rules of narration and criticism, and thus arrived at this conclusion.

However, some Orientalists have cast doubt upon Sahih al-Bukhari, neglecting the great scholarly tradition of Hadith criticism. Among these Orientalists was Alphonse Mingana, who raised certain suspicions about Sahih al-Bukhari. Mingana was not among the most prominent Orientalists—perhaps because he lived during the same period as major figures such as Ignaz Goldziher (d. 1921), Carl Brockelmann (d. 1956), and Joseph Schacht (d. 1969), whose fame overshadowed him. Moreover, most of his work focused on collecting Oriental manuscripts—many of which he published—making him one of the leading collectors of Arabic and Syriac manuscripts, as will be discussed later. He also wrote several studies on Islamic heritage, one of which concerned Sahih al-Bukhari.

2- Who is Mingana?

In compiling information about his background, I relied—besides the limited Arabic references—on several foreign websites, providing a closer and more accurate portrayal of this little-known Orientalist. The main sources include:

- Encyclopedia of Orientalists by Dr. 'Abd al-Rahman Badawi (p. 568)
- Al-Mustashriqūn (The Orientalists) by Dr. Najeeb 'Aqīqī (pp. 515-516)
- Wikipedia – Alphonse Mingana (1878-1937)
- Alphonse Mingana (1878-1937) and His Contribution to Early Christian-Muslim Studies by Samir Khalil Samir, S.J.
- The Mingana Collection – University of Birmingham

Alphonse Mingana was born in the village of Sharanish in the province of Duhok, near Zakho, in the Kurdish region of northern Iraq, in 1881 (though some sources state 1878). He was the son of a priest of the Chaldean Catholic Church united with Rome, and his original name was Hormizd. Thus, he was of Iraqi origin.

At the age of thirteen, his family sent him to the Chaldean Syriac Seminary for Missionary Training run by the Dominican Fathers in Mosul, where he studied from 1893 to 1902. In addition to theology, he learned Syriac, Arabic, Turkish, Persian, Kurdish, and other languages. After his graduation, he was ordained a priest in 1902 and began teaching at the same seminary. However, he soon entered into conflict with the Jesuits over his views expressed in his journal *Narses* (1907) and his book *Syriac Sources*. This dispute led him to leave the Roman Catholic Church in 1910.

Afterward, in 1913, Mingana moved to England through the assistance of a Protestant missionary society. He first worked at Woodbrooke College near Birmingham, teaching languages and theology. In 1915, he met a Norwegian student named Emma Sophie Floer, whom he later married. They had two children—John and Mary. Mingana later became the Director of Oriental Languages at the John Rylands Library in Manchester, a renowned repository of Arabic and Syriac manuscripts. There, he lectured on manuscripts and published several of them, while also teaching at other institutions such as Cambridge University and the University of Manchester.

The library commissioned him to acquire manuscripts, prompting him to travel to the Middle East three times between 1924 and 1929. He visited Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, and Saint Catherine's Monastery in Sinai, collecting numerous manuscripts that formed his famous Mingana Collection—over 3,000 documents and manuscripts—now preserved at the University of Birmingham, UK, and exhibited as The Mingana Collection at the Birmingham Museum.

These expeditions were financed by Edward Cadbury, a wealthy philanthropist from the well-known Cadbury chocolate family. Alphonse Mingana passed away in Birmingham on December 5, 1937, at the age of 59.

The Mingana Collection is one of the most renowned manuscript collections in the world. It enjoys a distinguished reputation in Western libraries and is currently housed at the University of Birmingham in the United Kingdom. The collection comprises over 3,000 Middle Eastern manuscripts in more than 20 languages, spanning 4,000 years of history. Mingana collected them during his three expeditions to the Middle East between 1924 and 1929—visiting Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Egypt—in addition to what he had gathered earlier in Iraq during his years of study and teaching there, as he was Iraqi by birth and upbringing.

3- The methodology of scholars of Prophetic Hadith in proving and preserving the Prophetic text:

The scholars of Hadith exerted tremendous efforts to preserve the Prophetic text. They stipulated that for a narration (*ḥadīth*) to be accepted and judged authentic, its transmitter must have memorized it—whether by heart or through written records. It was customary among the early Hadith scholars to combine both methods: they would write down the Hadiths and then memorize them. When narrating, they transmitted only what they had fully memorized.

This methodology relied upon precision in both oral transmission and written documentation. The scholars authored numerous works dedicated to establishing the principles, rules, and standards that distinguish sound narrations from irregular ones. Neglecting this well-established methodology—refined by generations of eminent scholars—has led to significant methodological flaws in many Orientalist studies on the Prophetic Sunnah.

Hadith scholars formulated rigorous and highly detailed criteria to distinguish between authentic and weak narrations. Anyone who delves deeply into these principles realizes the immense intellectual and methodological effort they represent. In this regard, the German orientalist Harald Motzki stated:

“It has now become difficult for Orientalists to maintain that Muslims fabricated the chains of transmission (*isnāds*) in the early or mid-second century [AH], as earlier Orientalists such as Schacht and Goldziher had claimed.”

(Interview with Dr. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Abū al-Majd, published on alukah.net, November 3, 2013).

Among the various forms of Hadith compilation, the most distinguished and challenging was composing works that included only authentic narrations. This required the author to verify the fulfillment of the five essential conditions of authenticity: (1) continuous chain of transmission (*ittiṣāl al-isnād*), (2) narrators possessing integrity (*‘adālah*), (3) precision (*ḍabt*), (4) absence of irregularity (*shudhūdh*), and (5) absence of hidden defects (*‘illah*).

Even after meeting these five criteria and declaring a Hadith authentic, a later scholar might identify an overlooked issue. For instance, one scholar may consider a narration connected, while another discovers a gap in the chain; or one may believe a Hadith free from defects, only for a hidden flaw to later be revealed. This explains why compiling a collection of entirely authentic Hadiths is among the most demanding scholarly endeavors.

Imam al-Bukhārī used to narrate from his original manuscripts, from which students would transcribe, verify, and read back to him—following the scholarly conventions of Hadith transmission. From this practice emerged the various recensions (*riwāyāt*) of *Sahih al-Bukhari*.

The transmission of *Sahih al-Bukhari* was established through numerous lines of transmission—seven of which are particularly well-known and traceable back to al-Bukhari himself, generally agreeing in content. These variant transmissions represent a standard practice among Hadith scholars of that era. Those unfamiliar with this method might mistakenly think that these versions represent multiple independent works or composites of different authors, whereas, in reality, they are authentic transmissions stemming from one source—each copy reflecting the transmission of a trustworthy student.

We now turn to the two main objections raised by Mingana and the scholarly responses to them.

4- The absence of a copy of Sahih al-Bukhari in his own handwriting:

“Every Hadith, whether long or short, begins with the words: ‘Akhbaranā al-Bukhārī qāla ḥaddathanā fulān’ (Al-Bukhari informed us, saying: So-and-so narrated to us). In any other book, the reader would immediately infer from this phrasing that the author himself did not write the work, but rather one of his students did. This assumption is reinforced by the fact that, at the beginning of the Book of Fasting (folio 26b), the manuscript lists the names of the transmitters—such as Abū Zayd Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Marwazī and Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf al-Farbari—who transmitted to the scribe of this manuscript. This assumption, however, cannot be defended by anyone who examines the manuscript carefully, for the scribe nowhere says: ‘My teacher al-Marwazī, who was authorized by al-Farbari, permitted me to copy al-Bukhārī’s text in such and such a way.’ Rather, he simply presents the complete text beginning with: ‘Al-Marwazī narrated to us, who was told by al-Farbari that al-Bukhārī narrated from so-and-so...’ Thus, the orally transmitted information only indicates the historical fact that al-Bukhārī uttered this wording as recorded in the manuscript.”

Response:

From Mingana’s statement, it is evident that he questioned the attribution of al-Jāmi’ al-Ṣaḥīḥ to al-Bukhārī, suggesting instead that the book was compiled by one of his students because al-Bukhārī’s name appears within the chains of transmission. This claim can be refuted on several grounds:

1. Consensus of Attribution:

The authorship of Sahih al-Bukhari by Imam al-Bukhārī is a universally established fact, transmitted through uninterrupted scholarly consensus—generation after generation—known to both the learned and the lay. Denying this is a rejection of self-evident reality. Orientalists like Mingana, however, were influenced by modern skeptical approaches that cast doubt even on well-established truths.

2. Misunderstanding the Method of Transmission:

It was a well-known practice among Hadith transmitters to record their chains of narration at the beginning of the books they transmitted or copied. Applying Mingana’s reasoning would lead to absurd conclusions—for example, claiming that Sunan Abī Dāwūd was not authored by Abū Dāwūd himself because transmitters such as al-Khaṭṭābī and Abū Nu’aym would say: “I was informed by Ibn Dāsah, who was informed by Abū Dāwūd, of the entire book.” Clearly, this does not make them the authors.

3. Multiple Independent Transmissions:

Sahih al-Bukhari reached us through several independently corroborating routes. If the book had truly been authored by al-Farbari, as Mingana implied, other contemporaneous transmitters—such as Ḥammād ibn Shākir and al-Nasafī—would not have transmitted versions consistent with al-Farbari’s. The consistency among these versions proves that the work originated from al-Bukhārī himself.

4. Multiplicity of Chains:

The numerous chains of transmission leading to al-Bukhārī—some through al-Farbari, others through different students across various regions—further attest to its authenticity. This isn’t something found in other traditions, as the isnād system is a unique hallmark of Islamic scholarship.

5. Distinction between Author and Narrator:

Muslim scholars differentiate between the author (mu’allif) and the transmitter (rāwī) through the isnād structure. The author is the originator from whom the chains diverge, while the transmitters merely convey the text via a single isnād. In Mingana’s manuscript, for instance, the narration proceeds:

“Akhbaranā Abū Zayd Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad, ḥaddathanā Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf, akhbaranā al-Bukhārī...” Clearly, this indicates that Abū Zayd transmitted from al-Farbari, who transmitted from al-Bukhārī—the actual compiler and author.

5- Differences in the hadiths, chapters, and books of Al-Bukhari:

“This manuscript differs from others in its text and order. Comparing the wording of its chapters with printed editions—such as the Cairo edition of 1345 AH—reveals numerous textual discrepancies. Additionally, the sequence of books in this manuscript diverges from that of other manuscripts and printed versions...”

Response:

Indeed, there are minor differences among the various transmissions and manuscripts of Sahih al-Bukhari. This is because al-Bukhārī narrated his work in multiple locations, at different times, and under various circumstances. His students did not all hear it in a single sitting, hence the natural variations between copies.

For example, both al-Uṣaylī and al-Qābisī studied the Sahih together under Abū Zayd al-Marwazī in Mecca in 353 AH. Al-Qābisī, being blind, relied on al-Uṣaylī for verification. Later, al-Uṣaylī heard the Sahih again from Abū Zayd in Baghdad in 359 AH—some portions read by Abū Zayd himself, others by al-Uṣaylī. Understandably, slight variations appeared among these recitations.

Such discrepancies are natural and well-known among Hadith scholars, often involving minor differences in wording or spelling due to human error in hearing or transcription. Scholars meticulously documented and reconciled these differences in specialized works.

Mingana, however, exaggerated these discrepancies, implying that they were substantial and fundamental—an inaccurate assumption contradicted by the evidence. In fact, Muslim scholars had already discussed and catalogued such textual variations centuries before Mingana’s time, addressing differences in chapters, arrangement, and even numbering of Hadiths.

6-CONCLUSION:

- The Sahih al-Bukhari fragment preserved within the Mingana Collection is indeed one of the early copies of the Sahih, transmitted through Abū Zayd al-Marwazī from al-Farbari.
- Mingana's doubts primarily stem from his unfamiliarity with the science of Hadith transmission. Had he studied the discipline of 'Ulūm al-Ḥadīth (Hadith methodology), he would have realized that Muslim scholars had addressed all his concerns centuries earlier.
- Many Orientalists project their own methods of studying biblical texts onto the Qur'an and Hadith, resulting in serious misunderstandings and methodological errors.

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