

Tracing the Authenticity of the Early Islamic Law: A Critical Review of the Isnad Cum Matn Methodology in The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence By Harald Motzki

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ABSTRACT

A critical examination of the authenticity of hadith is one of the central themes in classical Islamic studies, as hadith serves as the primary source of law after the Qur'an. This review is based on Harald Motzki's seminal work *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence: Meccan Fiqh before the Classical Schools*, which represents a significant milestone in developing a scientific approach to the early history of Islamic law. Through his *isnād-cum-matn* analysis, Motzki seeks to reconstruct the formative history of Meccan fiqh by examining the transmission of hadith through the interrelation between chain of narrators (*isnād*) and textual content (*matn*). This approach not only challenges the skeptical assumptions of earlier Orientalist scholars such as Ignaz Goldziher and Joseph Schacht, but also demonstrates that sources like *Musannaf 'Abd al-Razzāq* can serve as authentic evidence for the existence of Islamic legal thought in the first Islamic century. This review highlights Motzki's methodological strength in combining historical tradition with rigorous textual criticism and underscores the relevance of his work to contemporary hadith research. Moreover, it discusses the strengths and limitations of Motzki's study, particularly its focus on the legal developments of Mecca alone, which opens further opportunities for comparative research among other early centers of Islamic jurisprudence.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Qur'an and Hadith are two fundamental sources of Islamic teachings. While the Qur'an serves as the primary source of divine law, the Hadith serve as an explanation, interpreter, and reinforcement of the Qur'an's meanings. Therefore, the authenticity of the Hadith is a central issue in Islamic studies, as its validity directly impacts the validity of Islamic law and theology (Kamaruddin

Amin, 2009). Efforts to maintain the authenticity of the Hadith began during the time of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), when his companions could directly confirm and clarify a narration with the Prophet (Suryadi, 2011). This tradition of critical narration became the initial foundation for the development of the science of muhaddithin, which emphasizes the honesty of narrators and the accuracy of transmission.

Over time, various problems arose in the transmission of Hadith, particularly after the Prophet's death and the expansion of Islamic territory. At that time, fabricated Hadith emerged, motivated by political, ideological, and even fanatical interests of certain groups (M. Azami, 1978). This event demanded a more systematic critical methodology to distinguish between authentic and correct Hadith. On the one hand, in the West, the study of Hadith also developed intensively through the Orientalist tradition, which placed great emphasis on the historical aspects and originality of Islamic legal sources (Abdurrahman Badawi, 1980).

Western scholars view that orientalist interest in Hadith is driven more by historical interest, while for Muslim scholars, Hadith becomes an object of study because of its central role as a source of law and theological doctrine (Kamaruddin Amin, 2009). Since the 19th century, a debate has emerged between skeptical and non-skeptical views pioneered by Ignaz Goldziher and Joseph Schacht who considered that sanad was merely a construction of scholars of the second century Hijri and had no historical roots in the time of the Prophet (Ignaz Goldziher, 1890). It is in this context that Harald Motzki proposed a new methodological approach called Isnad-cum-Matn analysis. Through this approach, Motzki not only examined the chain of sanad but also analyzed the correlation between sanad and matn to trace the origins and validity of the narration (Joseph Schacht, 1950). In his landmark work, *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence: Meccan Fiqh Before the Classical Schools*, he refuted Joseph Schacht's assumption by presenting evidence that early Islamic legal texts, including *Al-Musannaf* by 'Abd al-Razzaq al-Shan'ani, were authentic sources from the first century of the Hijri era (Harald Motzki, 1991).

Motzki successfully demonstrated that the Islamic legal tradition and Hadith were already established long before the emergence of the classical schools of jurisprudence (Harald Motzki, 2002). Therefore, the Isnad-cum-Matn approach introduced by Motzki made an important contribution to updating the method of Hadith research in the West while strengthening the historical position of Hadith as an authentic source of Islamic law (G. H. A. Juynboll, 1968). This article aims to critically explore the Isnad-cum-Matn methodology in Motzki's work and outline how this approach serves as an epistemological argument against classical Orientalist skepticism. Furthermore, it seeks to examine the relevance of Motzki's method in supporting the authenticity of early Islamic law and opening up a space for methodological dialogue between Muslim and Western scholars.

2. METHODS

This research uses a qualitative method with a library research design. This literature review was chosen because the research object is the methodological ideas in Harald Motzki's scientific work, not empirical field phenomena. The approach used is historical-critical and textual analysis of primary and secondary literature related to isnād-cum-matn methodology.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study of the early emergence of Islamic law (fiqh) has always attracted the attention of researchers, both Muslims and Orientalists. The fundamental question is: how was Islamic law formed and when did it begin to become systematic? (Amin, K, 2003). Many Western scholars, such as Ignaz Goldziher and Joseph Schacht, argue that Islamic law emerged long after the time of the Prophet Muhammad, namely in the second or third century of the Hijriah (Goldziher, I, 1971). However, this view was criticized by Harald Motzki, a German orientalist who offered a new approach through isnad-cum-matn analysis, a method that combines criticism of the sanad and matan of the hadith simultaneously (Motzki, H, 2002).

In the introduction to his book **The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence: Meccan Fiqh before the Classical Schools**, Motzki reexamines classical Orientalist theory, which he considers overly skeptical of early Islamic sources. He argues that Schacht's view, which holds that most hadith are fabricated by later generations, fails to consider the historical value of proven sanad transmission. According to Motzki, a historical approach should not rely solely on suspicion (hermeneutic of suspicion), but also requires exploring empirical data through document analysis, such as Abd al-Razzaq al-San'ani's *Musannaf*. This approach allows him to map the process of legal transmission from generation to generation in a more measurable and objective manner. Motzki used Abd al-Razzaq's *Musannaf* as the primary object of his research because it is considered to date back to the early period of Islam and captures various legal practices during the period of the successors. He analyzed approximately 3,800 hadith, including narrations from early figures such as Ibn Jurayj, Ma'mar b. Rashid, and Sufyan al-Thawri. His research found that many of the narrations in the *Musannaf* have a verifiable chain of transmission and are not necessarily fabrications, as assumed by Schacht (Rais, M & Nurdin, R, 2025).

The *isnad-cum-matn* method allows Motzki to assess the authenticity of a hadith by combining two aspects: the sanad structure and the matan content (Sumbulah, U, 2022). He rejects the view that a "common link" (connecting narrator) is always an indication of hadith forgery. Instead, this phenomenon can be evidence that a particular narrator played a significant role in transmitting the tradition from an older source. In the third part of Motzki's book, he traces the development of Islamic law in Mecca by examining figures such as 'Ata ibn Abi Rabah, 'Amr ibn Dinar, and Ibn 'Uyaynah. He finds that the practice of legal reasoning (*istinbat*) emerged even before the formation of the school of thought (*mazhab*). The activities of scholars in Mecca demonstrate that *fiqh* (jurisprudence) was already a vibrant social and religious practice since the early second century of the Hijri era. Therefore, the claim that Islamic law only developed during the codification of the schools of thought needs to be reexamined.

Motzki introduced the *isnad-cum-matn* method as a methodological innovation in modern hadith criticism. This approach focuses not only on the authenticity of the sanad but also on the appropriateness of the meaning and historical context of the matn (Motzki, H, 2010). According to him, combining these two approaches can reveal deeper layers of hadith history and bring it closer to its origin. Several Indonesian researchers, such as U. Hadi Rais and R. Nurdin, consider this method highly relevant for contemporary hadith studies. Through the dating method, Motzki demonstrates that the authenticity of a hadith can be assessed by tracing when and in what context it appeared, not just by who narrated it. This method was also explored in Umi Sumbulah's thesis, which concluded that Motzki's approach could revitalize classical hadith criticism with more modern scientific standards. Motzki's work is significant because it seeks to bridge the gap between Orientalist skepticism and Muslim apologetics. He does not reject criticism of early Islamic sources, but he also does not rule out the possibility of historical authenticity in legal histories. His approach provides a new model for Islamic legal research that is empirical, critical, and methodological. For Islamic studies in Indonesia, Motzki's thinking inspires the development of a more contextual methodology for hadith and *fiqh* research, namely by assessing narration data through simultaneous historical, social, and textual analysis.

Harald Motzki's work, *"The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence: Meccan Fiqh before the Classical Schools,"* marks a significant milestone in the study of the history of modern Islamic law. This book attempts to retrace the roots of Islamic law formation using the *isnad-cum-matn* method, an integrated analysis of the sanad and matan of the hadith (Motzki, H, 2002). This approach not only refutes the skeptical views of previous Orientalists such as Joseph Schacht, but also offers a new methodological framework for assessing the authenticity of Islamic legal sources (Schacht, J, 1950)

Strengths of Harald Motzki's Work

1. **Methodological Innovation in Hadith Criticism** The main strength of this book lies in its methodological innovation. Motzki introduces the *isnad-cum-matn* analysis method, a simultaneous integration of the sanad and matan studies (Sumbulah, U, 2022). This approach

rejects the classical dichotomy between sanad and matan, which has previously only been examined separately. In this way, he can trace the relationship between the transmission of narration and the legal content of a hadith, thus producing a more comprehensive historical understanding (Amin. K, 2003). According to Sumbulah, this method helps open up new opportunities for hadith researchers to assess the authenticity of narrations using more empirical and logical data. This approach also revives the spirit of classical sanad criticism previously applied by hadith scholars such as al-Bukhari and Muslim, but with more systematic modern analytical tools.

2. **Utilization of Authentic Historical Data** Harald Motzki used the work of 'Abd al-Razzaq al-San'ani as the primary source for his research because it is considered an early document reflecting the practice of fiqh in Mecca. This approach demonstrates methodological rigor, as he selected texts closer to the period of the Prophet and his successors, rather than later secondary sources. Through an analysis of approximately 3,800 narrations, Motzki systematically traces the pattern of legal transmission from generation to generation. As a result, he proved that many of the legal traditions in Musannaf have a valid and verifiable chain of transmission, thus undermining Schacht's view that legal hadiths were merely fabrications of scholars after the 2nd century AH. This study demonstrates that fiqh did not emerge suddenly, but rather is the result of the continuity of legal practice since the early generations of Islam.
3. **Balance between Skepticism and Apologeticism** In contrast to classical Orientalists who were overly skeptical of Islamic sources, Motzki adopted a more balanced approach. He acknowledged the possibility of fabricated hadiths, but also opened up the possibility that some hadiths have a valid historical basis. This methodological stance demonstrates intellectual maturity and a preference for data, not ideology. According to Kamaruddin Amin, Motzki's position bridges the gap between two extreme camps: skeptical Orientalists and apologetic Muslim scholars. This approach has made his research more acceptable to both Western and Muslim academics.
4. **Contribution to the Study of Early Islamic Law** Motzki also successfully uncovered the dynamics of Islamic law in Mecca before the formation of the classical schools of thought. He demonstrated that the process of *istinbat* (legal reasoning) was already present during the period of the successors, thus Islamic law has older practical roots than previously assumed by Orientalists. This enriches the discourse on the history of the formation of Islamic law and confirms that legal authority emerged not only through codification, but also through social practices and religious communities.

Weaknesses of Harald Motzki's Work

1. **Too Limited Geographical Focus of the Study** The main criticism of this work is its overly narrow focus on the Mecca context. While Motzki does analyze Musannaf' Abd al-Razzaq in detail, the text only reflects a specific local legal tradition. In fact, early Islamic law also developed in Kufa, Medina, and Basrah with different dynamics. As explained in Rahman and Nasution's research, this narrow geographic focus makes it difficult to generalize Motzki's conclusions to the entire early Islamic legal tradition.
2. **Reliance on Single Document Analysis** Another weakness is the over-reliance on a single source, namely the Musannaf' of Abd al-Razzaq. Relying solely on a single text increases the potential for interpretive bias, especially if the manuscripts used have variant readings or differing wordings. Several hadith researchers in Indonesia, such as Hadith, Rais, and Nurdin, have stated that selecting a single source has the potential to obscure variations in the sanad (chain of transmission) that appear in other hadith works, such as the Musannaf of Ibn Abi Shaybah or the Muwatta' of Malik.
3. **Lack of Integration with the Socio-Political Context** Although Motzki successfully explored the historical dimensions of the hadith, he failed to fully integrate these findings with the social and political context of early Islamic society. His analysis emphasized textual validity rather than

external factors that may have influenced the formation of law. Yet, many legal hadith emerged within the context of specific social, political, and economic struggles.

Methodological Complexity That Makes It Difficult to Apply The *isnad-cum-matn* approach is indeed sophisticated, but its application requires philological skills and extensive data. In the Indonesian academic context, this method remains difficult to implement due to limited access to manuscripts and hadith digitization tools. Several local researchers have stated that Motzki's method is ideal, but difficult to implement for field research based in Islamic boarding schools or in classical hadith collections that have not yet been digitized.

4. CONCLUSION

A study of Harald Motzki's work, *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence: Meccan Fiqh before the Classical Schools*, demonstrates that the study of the origins of Islamic law (*fiqh*) cannot be understood solely through the lens of classical Orientalist skepticism, such as that of Joseph Schacht. Through the *isnad-cum-matn* method, Motzki successfully offers a new paradigm for understanding the authenticity of hadith and the development of early Islamic law. This approach proves that Islamic law was not born during the codification of the schools of thought, but rather developed gradually during the generation of the successors, as reflected in the work of Musannaf' Abd al-Razzaq al-San'ani. The main strength of Motzki's work lies in his methodological innovation, which integrates criticism of the *sanad* and *matn*, thoroughness in the use of historical sources, and an epistemological stance that balances skepticism and acceptance of the historical value of hadith. He successfully positions himself as a bridge between the Orientalist critical tradition and the scientific methodology recognized by Muslim scholars. With his empirical and systematic approach, Motzki makes a significant contribution to the renewal of hadith criticism and the study of early Islamic law.

However, this work also has several limitations. The overly narrow focus on the Mecca context limits the generalizability of the research results, while the reliance on a single primary source (Musannaf' Abd al-Razzaq) creates potential interpretive bias. Furthermore, Motzki's predominantly textual analysis fails to fully connect the legal dimension to the social, political, and cultural context of early Islamic society. The complexity of his methodology also demands a high level of academic expertise and data sources that are not yet fully accessible to researchers in the Islamic world, particularly in Indonesia.

Considering its strengths and weaknesses, Motzki's work can still be categorized as a monumental contribution to the study of modern Islamic law. He not only corrects classical Orientalist views but also enriches the method of hadith research with a more empirical, critical, and scientific approach. For Islamic studies in Indonesia, Motzki's ideas can serve as methodological inspiration for developing hadith and *fiqh* research that is not solely textual but also contextual, considering historical, social, and epistemological aspects comprehensively. Therefore, a critical review of Harald Motzki's work emphasizes that an understanding of early Islamic law must be built on a balance between historical criticism and respect for the tradition of narration. The *isnad-cum-matn* method is not merely a tool for hadith criticism, but rather an intellectual bridge connecting the classical scholarly heritage with modern scientific approaches in an effort to understand the authenticity of Islamic law.

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