





DRAFTED DIVINITY

A MARKED-UP, EARLY VERSION OF A CANONICAL ISLAMIC TEXT GLIMPSES THE EVOLUTIONARY HISTORY OF A RELIGIOUS TRACT KNOWN ONLY IN ITS COMPLETED STATE, BUILT TO WITHSTAND THE CENTURIES.

BY MENACHEM WECKER

Scholars who wish to pore over the medieval manuscript collection at Istanbul's lavish and sprawling Süleymaniye Mosque have to visit its library in person, if they can find it.

Joel Blecher could not.

"You can't blame me for missing it," says Blecher, a historian of medieval Islam.

The 16th-century mosque itself sticks out like an impeccably manicured thumb from the warrens and bustle of the city. It's "one of the greatest architectural achievements of its time," Blecher says, designed

"to look like a domed Byzantine church squared into a perfect cube in the hopes of offering mosque-goers a glimpse of divine symmetry on Earth."

The library, on the other hand, is tucked away in what seems like the back alley of another back alley. Repositories like this one, he says, often are priced out of locations "that would do real justice to the treasures their shelves hold."

When he did find it, Blecher flashed his passport and soon was in a roughly 450-square-foot room with a dozen tired-looking computers, which had a habit of displaying partially darkened

screens at inopportune times.

Still, the arrangement worked in his favor during that summertime visit in 2014. Blecher, now an assistant professor of history at GW, had come to dread the looks on the faces of rare-book librarians after they'd spend half an hour retrieving a manuscript only

for him to open it, check the date and the copyist's name, and hand it back. At the Suleymaniye Mosque library, where the entire collection had been scanned but not pored over by a curator, he could click through dozens of manuscripts in a single sitting.

He'd already worked through some 150 or 200 medieval Arabic manuscripts over two days there when he opened a file that would change the course of his career.

Two things immediately leapt off the scanned page amid some messy handwriting: the year 822 in the Islamic calendar (1419 in the Gregorian count) and the phrase "*min imlā' ... Ibn Hajar*"—"from the dictation of ... Ibn Hajar."

Blecher could not believe his eyes.

A COMMENTATOR OF BIBLICAL PROPORTIONS

Though he died in 1449, Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani remains something of a household name, someone that most Sunni Muslims with a religious education beyond childhood would know of and revere, Blecher says.

More than 500 years after his death, his name and work still are touchstones for Islamic scholars and clerics big and small, ISIS propagandists and the mainstream media, including what Blecher calls a "soap opera" in Egypt based on Ibn Hajar's life and times.

His renown stems from a 13-volume commentary on the



hadith: the collected sayings attributed to the prophet Muhammad and other stories about the way in which Muhammad lived. The thousands of *hadith* he studied are not part of the Quran, but they carry the weight of law for many in Islam's global Sunni majority.

Ibn Hajar's encyclopedic analysis, called *Fath al-Bari*—literally "Victory of the Creator," although Blecher prefers the more poetic "Unlocking the Divine Wisdom"—was, in the 1400s, an unprecedented undertaking in Islam. The work was "a monumental intellectual feat that helped reshape the way a religious community viewed its own tradition ... an instant classic," as Blecher described it last year in *The Atlantic*.

Ibn Hajar worked for at least 30 years on *Fath al-Bari*. Officially it was pronounced as complete in 1438 but, like similar works, tinkering continued and the effort only truly ended when the commentator died a decade later, Blecher says. Anything less might be seen as disrespecting the holy text upon which they worked.

Authors of commentaries are "willing to sacrifice their lives for the text and give themselves over completely to that practice," he says.

Aware of Ibn Hajar's notoriously poor handwriting, given his penchant for writing by candlelight, Blecher thought he was looking at a scan of a draft that Ibn Hajar had penned himself decades before his magnum opus was published.

"I thought, 'This is it,'" Blecher says. He saved the file immediately but couldn't yet make heads or tails of it, as it seemed to have been written so quickly that it was hard to decipher.

"I'm thinking that I can't believe what I'm seeing. Part of me is skeptical, because it was too good to be true," he says. "And in a sense it was too good to be true."

When Blecher got home to Virginia, where he was teaching at Washington and Lee University at the time, he studied the PDF more thoroughly. It turned out not to be a personal draft of Ibn Hajar's, but an early version all the same—one that the commentator had dictated to a student.

"It actually documents what the narrative sources had been saying," Blecher says, which is that students would gather around the master and transcribe his oral dictation. "I could see that there were things crossed out and added in the margin."

Most everything that was known about *Fath al-Bari* up to then came from the text itself and narrative sources surrounding it, Blecher wrote in reporting the discovery in 2017, a year after he arrived at GW. Here was an opportunity to study its DNA.

A DIAMOND IN THE ROUGH DRAFT

The unlikely planetary alignment that led to the unearthing of this manuscript, hidden in a repository that had to be sifted through in person, was eclipsed only by the fact that most scholars wouldn't have cared to search for it. Most are interested in completed manuscripts or commentators' own copies, not rough drafts which were meant for private rather than public consumption, Blecher says.

But a final product offers only part of a story.

Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, he says, wasn't created in a single stroke.

"There's no way he could have painted it in a day, and yet the way in which we interpret it and analyze it is as if that was his plan all along," Blecher says. "Over the course of making it, Michelangelo must have made decisions here and there about what the work meant and

what its composition would be.”

The chapel is a masterpiece, but it wasn’t static. It was alive with variables, dead ends, improvisations and false starts.

The same, Blecher says, goes for *hadith* commentaries. He’d known that in theory, but here finally was proof: The commentaries weren’t one-offs, but texts that evolved over time.

In reporting the discovery last year in the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Blecher even points out that a close look at just one part of that early text finds 25 percent fewer words than in the same section in the final published *Fath al-Bari*. And this is a text in which even a single word change might wield profound significance.

“These drafts are meaningful, useful and valuable, and give us insight into when these texts are written and the ways that *hadith* are interpreted over time,” Blecher says.

One major difference between the draft found by Blecher and Ibn Hajar’s final version relates to an additional call to prayer issued in marketplaces on Fridays. Many Sunnis approved of it, while Shiites saw it as the product of a corrupted text, which had either been transmitted improperly or outright fabricated. At first, Blecher says, Ibn Hajar said the call to prayer was acceptable, without addressing its origins. But in revisions added to the margins decades later, Ibn Hajar laid down “withering criticism of the trustworthiness and plausibility of each [underlying] *hadith*’s chain of transmission” and scolded those who had circulated them, Blecher wrote in the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*.

While Ibn Hajar had left out those *hadith* in the earlier dictation, Blecher surmises that after he’d later read works in which they were taken at face value, he “decided it was part of his charge” to include them, “if only to unequivocally reject them.”

Blecher’s discovery and analysis of the manuscript informed not only the understanding of the *Fath*

al-Bari, but also the much broader pursuit of a book he published last year, *Said the Prophet of God: Hadith Commentary across a Millennium* (University of California Press).

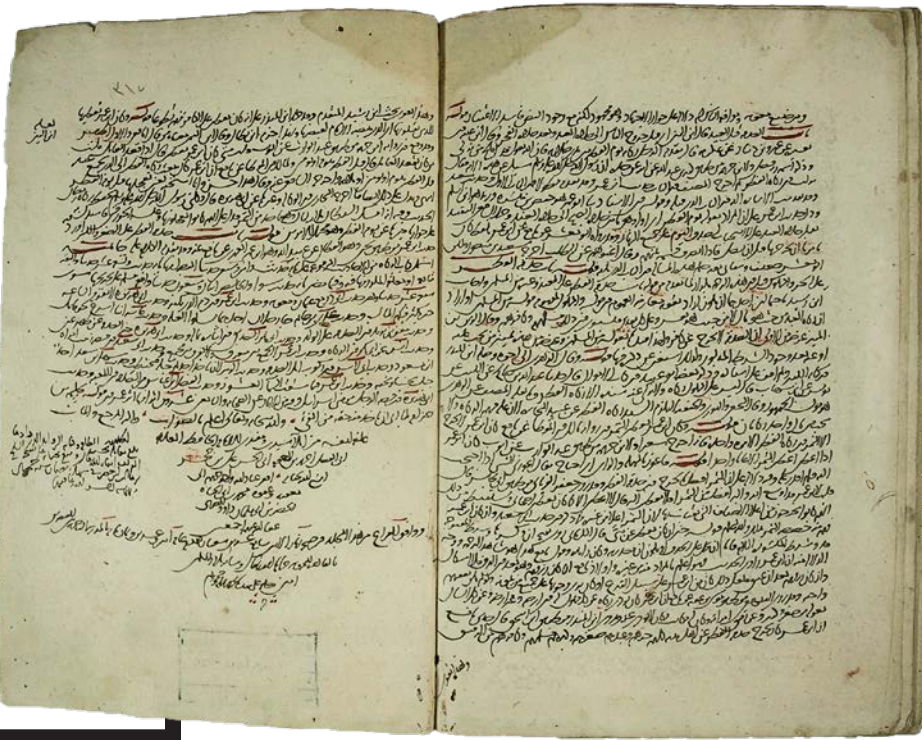
The cumulative work shows the Islamic intellectual tradition didn’t become stagnant around the year 1000, as many assume, says Jonathan Brown, the Alwaleed bin Talal Chair of Islamic Civilization at Georgetown University and director of Georgetown’s Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim Christian Understanding. Brown is familiar with Blecher’s work and

has studied *hadith* extensively.

“Muslim engagement with the foundations of their tradition, and how to bring it to bear on contemporary issues, never stopped,” Brown says.

“*Hadiths* are perhaps the most important source for Islamic law and dogma, eclipsing even the Quran, which is a relatively short text,” Brown says, noting that Blecher’s reading of the *hadiths* is novel, but not as controversial as it may seem: When looking for rationale to innovate, Islamic commentators have tended to locate new approaches within earlier

In reporting the discovery last year in the *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, Blecher even points out that a close look at just one part of that early text finds 25 percent fewer words than in the same section in the final, published *Fath al-Bari*. And this is a text in which even a single word change might wield profound significance.



Folios from the 1419 manuscript showing marginal notes that are described as being added in 1446, updating it to reflect a later pre-final version

discussions. Commentaries are great sites to chart that change.

Deep dives into the commentaries, their iterations and their authors can offer context to help understand those shifts, digging into things like the weight of social and intellectual pressures (even Ibn Hajar sought to shield himself—by recording meticulous notes on dates of dictations, among other measures—from a cross-Cairo rival he suspected of spying in an attempt to scoop him on the project) and the impact of economic factors and patronage on these religious texts.

The last two are consistent threads in Blecher's work, and ones he'll carry into his next book, about the intersection of the spice trade and sacred commentators—a project that's already garnered grants from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the American Council of Learned Societies.

In *Said the Prophet of God*, Blecher tracks the evolution of commentary surrounding one economically oriented *hadith* in

particular, which states that slave owners must clothe and feed their slaves as they clothe and feed themselves.

The *hadith* stems from a close companion of the prophet's, named Abu Dharr al-Ghifari, who was seen walking with his slave, and the two were dressed in nearly identical garb.

"When asked to explain this unusual practice," Blecher writes, "Abu Dharr confessed that he used to abuse his slave until Muhammad scolded him, stating, 'Those whom God has placed under your authority are your brothers. He who possesses his brother feeds him what he feeds himself and dresses him in what he dresses himself.'"

Over the centuries, commentators have vacillated on how to interpret it. In the 11th century in Andalusia, one commentator ridiculed the idea of dressing and feeding slaves as if they were above their stations.

"Slave masters, in his opinion, were required only to meet their slaves' basic necessities: cover their nakedness and feed them when

they are hungry," Blecher writes. "It would be absurd, he contended, for any legal scholar to require a slaveholder who ate rare fowl and Persian bread made from the finest flour, who dressed himself in elegant garments from far-away Nishapur, to feed and dress his slave in the same fashion."

Ibn Hajar, on the other hand, landed on the side of absolute equity on this point, while other's interpretations across time have advocated for a middle road. Much more recently, in 1999, a Pakistani commentator explained the *hadith*, in the absence of slaves, in terms of equality between capitalists and "labourers who work in factories, shops, and homes," Blecher writes. And ISIS has embraced it, along with other texts, as a justification of slavery.

ARGUMENT IS A 'MERCY'

The system of *hadith* and its interpretation that Blecher charts—a jungle of branches and vines coalescing and intertwining—gains even more complexity by aiming to codify and preserve



contradictory interpretations of the same text.

But all that has led Blecher to see *hadith* commentaries as a “kind of time travel,” he says. “They’re bundling these commentaries together. They themselves know that 600 or 700 years separate them and the compilation of the text, and they imagine that their commentary may have to endure for another 200, 300, 400 or 500 years.”

To explain the benefits of debate and multiple interpretive traditions, Blecher quotes a *hadith*: “The differences of my community are a mercy.”

He interprets that to mean that the doubt, skepticism, change and evolution inherent in the interpretations over centuries are part of the divine plan, as the devout see it. The arguments themselves are wrapped up irrevocably in the tradition itself.

“It’s not that you are treating the religious text as a toy or device to play around with the meaning, to make it say what you want it to,” Blecher says. “You are interested in making fine distinctions precisely

because you don’t want to claim to speak for the text and to get it wrong. In a sense, the more seriously you take a text, the more serious you are to make sure you understand the range of possible opinions and meanings.”

By quoting and preserving mainstream positions alongside the outliers, *hadith* commentators essentially delineate the contours and the distribution of the entire breadth of the tradition. The cumulative tradition acts as a check and balance.

“It vets out extreme opinions,” he says.

“Part of what I’m doing in the book [*Said the Prophet of God*] is giving a window into how initiates, or insiders, understand the tradition,” Blecher adds. “It’s often the case that when insiders present their tradition to outsiders, they like to present a unified consensus and a stable, foundational text that’s uncorrupted and an opinion that can’t be challenged. Part of what this book is about is giving scholars some insight into the internal dynamics.”

That includes, he noted in his *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* article, a lingering sense of “the artifice of completion.” He argues, instead, that seeing “a commentary and its revision as a serial performance” can offer a “stereoscopic” view that adds dimensions of time and social and intellectual processes to a text that otherwise might seem to have been hatched whole.

“With each word dictated,” Blecher writes in the case of Ibn Hajar, “and each explanation inked on paper, new riddles, new debates and new ambiguities emerged both for him and his readership.”

Blecher is finding some of the same for himself, even as he operates a few steps removed—digging, as he is, into the *process* of digging into the religious tenets.

After his piece in *The Atlantic* published last year offering insights into the discovery, Blecher noticed an unauthorized, verbatim Arabic translation of his story in an online publication. Then a television anchor in the Middle East posted it on his Facebook page and a bit of a debate ensued as the article spread through 8,300 shares and more than 22,000 views.

“For modernist Muslims and secularized Muslim and Christian audiences, the article seemed to suggest that Islam has the capacity to change as the modern world changes,” he says. “For learned Muslims, who were familiar with the textual tradition, it reinforced something they knew already: that the *ulama*”—or Muslim religious authorities—“have always opened Islamic texts to a wide range of interpretations across time, and that they were always in the process of refining their interpretations.”

Others seemed threatened, and they jumped headlong “into the flame war.” Blecher was called names, he says, and was accused alternately of a plot to distort Islam and of being too generous to the religion.

And the story of history’s interpreters marches on. **WR**