

Source: [Explanaton of Sahih Bukhari](#)

The most important of all hadeeth collections, is of course al-Jaami' as-Saheeh of Imaam al-Bukhari. Al-Bukhari is said to have questioned more than a thousand scholars of hadeeth, who lived in places as far apart as Neesaaboor, Hijaaz, Egypt and Iraq. Al-Bukhari used to seek aid in prayer before recording any hadeeth, and weighed every word he wrote with scrupulous accuracy. He devoted more than a quarter of his life to the compilation of his Saheeh, which is generally considered by the Muslims as an authority second only to the Quran.

Abu 'Abdullaah Muhammad Ibn Ismaa'eel Al-Bukhari, who was born at Bukhaaraa in the year 194A.H. / 810C.E. was of Persian origin. His ancestor, Bardizbah, was a farmer in the vicinity of Bukhaaraa, who was taken captive during the Muslim conquest of the region. Bardizbah's son, who took the name al-Mugheerah, accepted Islaam at the hand of al-Yamaan al-Ju'fee, the Muslim governor of Bukhaaraa and gained from him the ascription al-Ju'fee, al-Mugheerah's son Ibraaheem, the grandfather of our author, had a son called Ismaa'eel, who became a scholar of hadeeth of great piety and sound reputation. Scrupulous in his habits, he is said to have mentioned on his deathbed that in all he possessed there was not a penny which had not been earned by his own honest labour.

Ismaa'eel died leaving a considerable fortune to his widow and two sons, Ahmad and Muhammad, the latter being only an infant at the time. The child who was destined to play such a central role in the development of hadeeth literature was endowed by Allah with great intellectual powers, although he was physically frail. He possessed a sharp and photographic memory, and a great tenacity of purpose, which served him well in his academic life.

Like many scholars of his time, al-Bukhari began his educational career under the guidance of his mother in his native city. Finishing his elementary studies at the young age of eleven, he immersed himself in the study of hadeeth. Within six years he had mastered the knowledge of all the scholars of hadeeth of Bukhaaraa, as well as everything contained in the books which were available to him. He thus travelled to Makkah with his mother and brother in order to perform Hajj. From Makkah, he started a series of journeys in quest of hadeeth, passing through all the important centres of Islaamic learning, staying in each place as long as he needed, meeting the scholars of hadeeth, learning all the hadeeth they knew, and communicating his own knowledge to them. It is recorded that he stayed at Basrah for four or five years, and in the Hijaaz for six; while he travelled to Egypt twice and to Koofah and Baghdad many times.

Imaam al-Bukhari's travels continued for some four decades. In the year 250A.H. / 864C.E., he came to the great Central Asian city of Neesaaboor, where he was given a grand reception suitable to a scholar of hadeeth of his rank. Here he devoted himself to the teaching of hadeeth, and wished to settle down. But he was obliged to leave the town when he declined to accept a request to deliver lectures on hadeeth at the palace of Khaalid Ibn Ahmad ad-Dhuhalee. From Neesaaboor he travelled on to Khartank, a village near Bukhaaraa, at the request of its inhabitants. Here he settled down, and died in the year 256A.H. / 870C.E.

Throughout his life, al-Bukhari displayed the character of a devout and pious Muslim scholar. He was rigorous in the observance of his religious duties, ensuring that rather than relying on charity he always lived by means of trade, in which he was scrupulously honest. Once he lost ten thousand dirhams on account of a minute scruple. A good deal of his income, in fact, was spent on helping the students and the poor. It is said that he never showed an ill-temper to anyone, even when there was more than sufficient cause; nor did he bear ill-will against anybody. Even towards those who had caused his exile from Neesaaboor, he harboured no grudge.

Hadeeth was almost an obsession with al-Bukhari. He spared no pains for it, sacrificing almost everything for its sake. On one of his voyages he was so short of money that he lived on wild herbs for three days. But he enjoyed one form of public recreation: archery, in which he had acquired great skill. His amanuensis, who lived with him for a considerable time, writes that Bukhari often went out to practice his aim, and only twice during his sojourn with him did he see him miss the mark.

Since the very outset of his career, al-Bukhari showed the signs of greatness. It is said that at the age of eleven he pointed out a mistake of one of his teachers. The teacher laughed at the audacity of the young student; but al-Bukhari persisted in his correction, and challenged his teacher to refer to his book, which justified the pupil's contention. When still a boy, too, he was entreated by a large group of hadeeth students to give a lecture on the subject. He accepted their request, and a large crowd of students duly gathered at a masjid, and accepted the ahaadeeth which he related. Once, when he visited Basrah, the authorities were notified of his arrival and a day was fixed for him to lecture. At the lecture, he was able to confine himself only to such ahaadeeth as he had received on the authority of the early hadeeth scholars of Basrah, and had none the less been unknown to the audience.

On many occasions al-Bukhari's learning was put to severe tests, of a kind often favoured by rigorous scholars of the time, and he seems always to have emerged with credit. At Baghdad, ten hadeeth scholars changed the chains of narration and contents of a hundred ahaadeeth, recited them to al-Bukhari at a public meeting, and asked him questions about them. Al-Bukhari confessed his ignorance of the ahaadeeth that they had recited. But then he recited the correct versions of all the ahaadeeth concerned, and said that probably his questioners had inadvertently recited them wrongly.

At Samarqand, four hundred students tested al-Bukhari's knowledge in the same way, and he succeeded in exposing their interpolations. At Neesaaboor, Muslim, the author of another famous Saheeh, together with others, asked al-

Bukhari questions about certain ahaadeeth, and found his answers completely satisfactory. In many scholarly gatherings he successfully identified some of the obscurer early hadeeth narrators in a way which had eluded the other scholars present. These repeated trials and triumphs won him recognition as the greatest hadeeth scholar of his time by all the major authorities with whom he came in contact, including Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, 'Alee Ibn al-Madeeneh, Abu Bakar Ibn Abee Shaybah, Ishaq Ibn Raahawayh, and others.

Al-Bukhari's writings began during his stay in Madeenah at the age of 18, when he compiled his two earliest books. One of these contained the decrees and judgements of the Companions and their Followers, while the other was made up of short biographies of the important narrators of hadeeth during his own lifetime. A large number of other collections followed.

The Saheeh, known commonly as Sahih Al-Bukhari, is the most important of his books. It is said to have been heard by 90,000 of the author's students, and is considered by almost all hadeeth scholars to be the most reliable collection of hadeeth. The Saheeh may be seen as al-Bukhari's life-work: his earlier treatises served him as a preparation for this magnum opus, while his later books were little more than offshoots of it. It was to the Saheeh that he devoted his most intense care and attention, expending about a quarter of his life on it.

Al-Bukhari's notion to compile the Saheeh owed its origin to a casual remark from Ishaq Ibn Raahawayh (166-238A.H. / 782-852C.E.), who said that he wished that a hadeeth scholar would compile a short but comprehensive book containing the genuine ahaadeeth only. These words seem to have fired al-Bukhari's imagination, and he set to work with indefatigable energy and care. He sifted through all the ahaadeeth known to him, tested their genuineness according to canons of criticism he himself developed, selected 7,275 out of some 600,000 ahaadeeth, and arranged them according to their subject matter under separate headings, most of which are taken from the Quran, and in some cases from the ahaadeeth themselves.

Because al-Bukhari nowhere mentions what canons of criticism he applied to the traditions to test their genuineness, or tells us why he compiled the book, many later scholars have tried to infer these things from the text itself. Al-Haazimee, in his Shuroot al-A.immah, al-Iraaqee in his Alfiyyah, al-'Aynnee and al-Qastalaanee in their introductions to their commentaries on the Saheeh, and many other writers on the hadeeth sciences, including Ibn as-Salaah, have tried to deduce al-Bukhari's principles from the material he presents.

As we have seen, al-Bukhari's main object was to collect together the sound ahaadeeth only. By these, he meant such ahaadeeth as were handed down to him from the Prophet on the authority of a well-known Companion, via a continuous chain of narrators who, according to his records, research and knowledge, had been unanimously accepted by honest and trustworthy hadeeth scholars as men and women of integrity, possessed of a retentive memory and firm faith, accepted on condition that their narrations were not contrary to what was related by the other reliable authorities, and were free from defects. Al-Bukhari includes in his work the narrations of these narrators when they explicitly state that they had received the ahaadeeth from their own authorities. If their statement in this regard was ambiguous, he took care that they had demonstrably met their teachers, and were not given to careless statements.

From the above principles, which Imaam al-Bukhari took as his guide in choosing his materials, his caution is evident. Al-Bukhari's purpose was not only to collect what he considered to be sound ahaadeeth, but also to impress their contents on the minds of his readers, and to show them what doctrinal and legal inferences could be drawn from them. He therefore divided the whole work into more than a hundred books, which he subdivided in 3,450 chapters. Every chapter has a heading that serves as a key to the contents of the various traditions, which it includes.

It has been aptly remarked that the headings of the various chapters of the Saheeh constitute the fiqh of Imaam al-Bukhari. These headings consist of verses from the Quran or passages from ahaadeeth. In some cases they are in full agreement with the ahaadeeth listed underneath them, while in some others, they are of a wider or narrower significance than the ahaadeeth that follow; in which case they serve as an additional object of interpretation and explanation of the ahaadeeth. In some cases, they are in the interrogative form, which denotes that the Imaam regarded the problem as still undecided. In other cases, he wanted to warn against something that might outwardly appear to be wrong and impermissible. But in every chapter heading, al-Bukhari kept a certain object in view. There are even cases where the headings are not followed by any ahaadeeth at all; here al-Bukhari is intending to show that no genuine, tradition on the subject was known to him.

Al-Bukhari is also being original when he repeats the various versions of a single hadeeth in different chapters. By doing this rather than putting them together in one place, he wanted to bring to light further evidence of the authenticity of the ahaadeeth in question, and at the same time to draw more than one practical conclusion from them. Similarly, in including one part of a hadeeth in one chapter and inserting another part in another chapter, and in introducing the 'suspended' ahaadeeth as marfoo' and mawqoof, al-Bukhari has certain specific academic purposes in view, which are explained by the commentators of his Saheeh.

It was thus that the Saheeh, the work of a great hadeeth scholar who combined a vast knowledge of ahaadeeth and allied subjects with scrupulous piety, strict exactitude, the painstaking accuracy of an expert editor, and the legal acumen of an astute jurist, rapidly attracted the attention of the whole Muslim community, and became accepted as an authority next only to the Qur.aan. Many Muslim doctors wrote enormous commentaries on it, in which they thoroughly

discuss every aspect of the book, and every word of its contents, from the legal, linguistic, contextual and historical aspects. Twelve such commentaries have been printed, while at least another fifty nine remain in manuscript form.

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