

# INTRODUCTION

## An Epistemological Framework for Assessing Joshua Little's Objections



PROJECT IHYA RESEARCH TEAM

HEADED BY: SHEIKH ASADULLAH KHAN

ŞAFAR 1448 AH

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# Introduction

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

After nearly 3 years following Joshua Little's video critiquing the reliability of Hadith, particularly as expressed through his 21 objections, this project finally serves to provide a scholarly response that not only addresses his claims, but also examines the broader methodological and epistemological assumptions upon which his critique presupposes. The concern of this paper, then, is to address what Little's objections assume, what they imply, and what kind of answer they require. For this reason, this paper will begin with a number of preliminary points before turning to the 21 objections, all of which shall lay the groundwork necessary for understanding what a proper defence of the hadith tradition might look like. Many skeptical arguments against hadith rely on assumptions which are rarely defended with the same expectations demanded of the Muslim tradition. These assumptions include, among other things, that religious communities are generally inclined toward fabrication, that miracle claims are historically unreliable, that legal and theological development implies back projections, and that testimony from early Muslims must be doubted unless externally verified by some other kind of evidence. The problem, however, is that none of these assumptions are truly self evident, since they too require justification.

With this in mind, it is useful to begin our study with a reflection that this broader discussion is not simply a debate over whether hadith have any historical value at all. Even many skeptical academics today would concede that hadith literature can preserve meaningful historical data, especially when speaking about broad patterns of transmission and the usefulness of isnad networks in tracing material back to early Muslim figures. The real issue, then, is not whether hadith have any value, but how far back that value can be pushed, and whether one is justified in assuming that radical doctrinal change occurred in the first century of Islam. It should also be mentioned, however, that since Little's actual position is more nuanced than saying that all hadith are fabricated, it would be intellectually lazy to respond to him as though that is his argument. Rather, the stronger response is to steelman Little's position, identify the deepest assumptions behind it, and then show why those assumptions do not carry the evidential weight needed for his conclusion. Hence, when responding to Little, the question here would be whether the hadith tradition, when assessed as a total historical and epistemic system, is more justified than the skeptical alternatives being proposed by him.

Given this, as a roadmap for what's to come, an account of what entails justification will be given. Many of Little's objections seem to depend on a deeper epistemological concern, namely, what exactly makes a hadith, or the hadith corpus more broadly, justified as historically reliable? If our response does not explain what justification entails, then although it may answer Little's particular objection, it leaves open the deeper assumption beneath his critique. Hence, the paper will discuss knowledge as justified true belief,

historical justification, the role of testimony, and why social epistemology is especially relevant to hadith.

The dispute, then, is not a choice between mere acceptance of the tradition vs pure skepticism. The relevant comparison is between competing historical explanations. The traditional Muslim thesis maintains that the hadith tradition meaningfully preserves Prophetic teachings and approvals through early transmission, including isnad and matn criticism. The skeptical thesis, on the other hand, maintains that much of the same material is better explained by later fabrication, back projection, or legal, political, and theological development. This paper, then, will attempt to frame little's objections in a way that answers which of these competing hypothesis better explains the available evidence.

What's to be noted, however, is that this comparison is epistemological before it is historical. It requires an account of what makes a historical belief justified, how testimony can transmit knowledge, how uncertainty should be represented, how prior commitments affect judgment, and what kind of evidence is sufficient to defeat a *prima facie* testimonial claim. Without such an account, both the defense and the critique of hadith risk assuming the very standards that remain in dispute.

What shall be shown here, then, is that Little's 21 objections fail to acknowledge this methodological problem. Most of his objections stem from establishing a low prior probability for certain events, and given that background assumption, make the move towards being skeptical about the transmission accuracy of the reports. However, these objections don't do enough, since, as we will show, they must also ask whether the skeptical interpretation of them is more probable than the traditional explanation, rather than allowing the language of "possibility" to do all the heavy lifting for him.

Given that, this paper, as a start to the series of papers to come, will touch on the relevance of what is known as Bayesian probability. The overall point is to show how probability functions when comparing competing explanations, since in the case of hadith, one must ask which hypothesis makes the data more expected. As a general outline, then, the competing hypotheses are roughly as follows. The first is the traditional Muslim thesis, which states that the hadith tradition meaningfully preserves Prophetic material through isnad, matn criticism, early transmission, and scholarly scrutiny. The second is the skeptical thesis, which states that much of the hadith corpus is better explained by later fabrication, back projection, or doctrinal development.

This will be especially important when dealing with Little's appeal to historical parallels. It is possible that a narrator lied, just as it is possible that a report was back projected, or that political, legal, or sectarian concerns shaped a narration. It is also possible that some Muslims, like members of any other community, had incentives to fabricate material. But possibility, by itself, is not evidence for its probability. In order for Little's skeptical argument to be justified, he must show not only that fabrication or corruption could have happened, but that this explanation better accounts for the evidence than the traditional model of preservation. Likewise, the Muslim response must show not only that hadith preservation is possible, but that it is more probable given the totality of the data.

Bayesian epistemology is especially relevant because it represents rational confidence in degrees and compares hypotheses through the evidence they predict. It asks how confident one should be in the traditional and skeptical theses before a particular item of evidence is considered, how expected that evidence would be under each thesis, and how confidence should change after the evidence is incorporated. In this way, claims about fabrication, corroboration, contradiction, oral transmission, or institutional criticism become claims about comparative likelihood rather mere “objections” as little puts it.

To be clear, then, this paper does not answer Little’s objections one by one. To do that would require a separate historical treatment of the individual examples, dates, corpora, isnad families, manuscripts, and scholarly statements, all of which will be done in subsequent papers in this series of papers responding to little. This paper only serves to establish the preliminaries upon which the later responses will rest on, namely, an account of justification, testimony, social epistemology, competing hypotheses, burden of evidence, and Bayesian probability. Once these preliminary matters have been established, the following papers will then turn to Little’s 21 objections directly. To recognize this point early on will make the rest of the task far simpler, since the issue will no longer be whether Little can point to a possible defeater, but whether that defeater actually carries the evidential weight needed to undermine the hadith tradition in the way he wants them to.

What, then, is the thesis of this paper? It is simply that Little’s objections do not succeed merely by showing that fabrication or doctrinal development are possible. To undermine the hadith tradition in the way he intends, he must show that these skeptical explanations are more probable than the traditional model of preservation. To remind the reader, Little does not merely maintain that the hadith corpus is unreliable, but rather, that it is unusually unreliable, meaning that it does not even come close to many of the other historical sources at our disposal. Once these claims and objections are assessed through justification, testimony, social epistemology, and Bayesian probability, it shall be argued that the skeptical model does not explain the evidence better. Hence, the task of this paper is to show that belief in the meaningful preservation of hadith is not based on mere speculation, but rather, on a historically and epistemically justified position.

One last point here is, for those concerned less about the actual structure of the Bayesian framework when assessing probability, and would instead like to read a mere summary detailing the border and more relevant picture with regards to little’s overall critique of hadith, they may find, at the end of this paper, a finer outline of what has been discussed throughout the paper, in a manner more digestible for the reader, God willing.

# The Epistemological Question Prior to the Historical Question

## What is justification?

Any attempt at understanding justification must first begin at understanding knowledge. Classically, knowledge is said to be “justified true belief.” Put this way, 3 things become apparent:

The proposition in question is true

One believes in it

One is justified in believing it

The literature on the philosophy of epistemology presents famous Gettier problems that attempt to question this definition, but regardless of how persuasive one finds them, for the purposes of this paper, this view shall not be contested. The question, therefore, is, what transforms a belief into a rational and justified one? This is especially important for our purposes, since the question at hand is not merely whether Muslims believe hadith to be preserved, nor even whether a particular hadith happens to be true, but whether Muslims are justified in believing that the hadith tradition, as a whole, reliably preserves the teachings, actions, and approvals of the Prophet ﷺ.

Here too, one finds an enormous amount of differences in the literature on epistemology and justification. Ignoring much of the debate, the least that can be said here is that any form of argumentation stems from what is known as conceptual analysis, whereby one provides a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for a concept. Thus, it can be said that a condition is:

Necessary if something must possess it in order to qualify as the thing in question.

Sufficient if possessing it guarantees that the thing qualifies.

An adequate conceptual analysis therefore identifies conditions that are:

Individually necessary: each condition must be present.

Jointly sufficient: together, the conditions fully define the concept.

In modern analytical parlance, this is denoted using the phrase “if and only if.” Such as the statement:

“A report is historically justified if and only if it satisfies conditions A, B, and C.”

This means:

If the conditions are met, the report counts as historically justified.

Only reports meeting those conditions count as historically justified.

This understanding will be especially important when one analyzes Little's objections to hadith, since the question at hand would be, do hadith reports, or at least the hadith tradition broadly, possess the necessary and sufficient kinds of things that make them historically justified? The point here being highlighted, then, is that when we speak about justification, we are not merely searching for a causal explanation for why Muslims accept hadith, nor are we merely looking for some pragmatic justification, but rather, the kind of justification we ought to search for is an epistemic and historical justification. To highlight this distinction, consider that one is asked:

"Why do you believe the hadith tradition is reliable?"

One might respond to the question above by saying "because I was raised that way," or "because the scholars stated it that way," or "because Imam al-Bukhari accepted it." This certainly explains how the belief developed, as it gives a causal history for its existence, but clearly, by itself, it does not provide epistemic justification. It does not show that the belief, even if true, is likely to be true. Hence, while appeals to scholarly authority may have a real place within an Islamic epistemology, especially for non-specialists, the matter at hand in a response to Little is different. The task is not merely to show that Muslims have inherited hadith through a scholarly tradition, but to show that this inherited tradition gives us actual reasons to believe that the reports are connected, in some meaningful and justifiable way, to the Prophet ﷺ and the earliest Muslim community.

When one looks at the apologetical literature on hadith, one finds that this concept is often overlooked in these debates. Often, Muslims will respond to skeptical objections by appealing to the sophistication of isnad criticism. However, even if that may be so, and even if doing so would resolve some of Little's objections, the deeper question still remains: what exactly makes a hadith, or a hadith corpus, justified as historically reliable? If the answer is "isnad," then one must ask what about the isnad makes it evidentially strong. If the answer is "multiple chains," then one must ask how many chains are sufficient, and under what conditions they count as independent. If the answer is "communal practice," then one must ask how amal relates to hadith, and whether the practice confirms the report, or whether the report is being used to explain the practice.

The classical analysis of knowledge supplies the broad epistemic aim of the inquiry, where a belief should not count as knowledge merely because it happens to be true, but because the believer possesses adequate justification. Historical inquiry, however, also requires a similar attitude. One may be nearly certain that a figure existed, strongly confident that an event occurred, moderately confident regarding its date, and doubtful about the exact wording of a reported speech. These differences matter when asking whether belief in the meaningful preservation of the report is justified.

Bayesian epistemology represents these differences as degrees of belief, or credences. A credence of 0 represents complete disbelief, a credence of 1 complete certainty, and intermediate values represent intermediate confidence. The numerical language is an idealization, not the claim that historians must attach exact decimals to every report. Its purpose is to discipline comparative judgments already present in historical reasoning,

such that one explanation is better supported than another, or that one pattern is more surprising under the skeptical thesis than under the traditional thesis.

Moreover, this distinction between knowledge and credence prevents a common mistake regarding assessing one's justification for a belief. The fact that a report may be, say, mistaken, corrupted, or fabricated can prevent certainty, but it does not by itself make belief in the report irrational. A possible defeater becomes epistemically effective only when there is reason to think it actually applies, and its force must be weighed against the positive evidence supporting the report or the transmission system.

Bayesian epistemology therefore restricts the transition of going from a mistake in a particular transmission, to overall skepticism of the entire process of said transmission. Seen this way, even if memory can be distorted, communities fabricated, and transmitters mistaken, the relevant question that still needs to be asked is whether the observed chain, variant pattern, or the source of the testimony, is more expected if meaningful preservation occurred or if the material was produced later. The existence of an error in the mechanism is part of the analysis, it is not the conclusion of the analysis.

Yet still, there is more to be said on this notion of justification. Typically, when one claims they are justified in a particular belief, not only are they stating that they have sufficient reasons to hold said belief, but also, that their view is equally, or more, plausible than any competing null hypothesis. Hence, it shall do us some good to give a brief account on hypothesis testing, at least to the extent to which it is relevant in historical discussions. In this case, the traditional Muslim hypothesis is not merely that "hadith exist," nor merely that "Muslims believed hadith," but that the hadith tradition, through isnad, matn criticism, transmission, early practice, and scholarly scrutiny, preserves a meaningful amount of Prophetic material. The skeptical hypothesis, on the other hand, is often that many hadith were projected backwards from later legal, political, sectarian, or theological debates. Thus, the question becomes: which hypothesis better explains the evidence?

The strength of a particular historical hypothesis is judged based on at least the following criteria:

- It is consistent and not ad hoc.
- It has explanatory scope and power.
- It is parsimonious.
- It accounts for the available evidence.
- It explains contrary data without collapsing into speculation.

Hence, for any given person to be justified in believing a proposition (P) on the basis of some hypothesis (H), one must not only be:

Justified in believing H, meaning that H passes the criteria of hypothesis testing above.

Justified in believing that H makes probable P.

Put this way, with regards to the hadith debate, for Little's skeptical model to be justified, it must not only show that fabrication, back projection, and doctrinal development are



possible, but also that these explanations are more probable than the traditional model of preservation. Likewise, for the Muslim response to be justified, it must not only show that hadith preservation is possible, but also that the traditional model better explains the totality of the data.

# Credence, Probabilism, and Epistemic Coherence

Once historical justification is treated as a matter of graded confidence, the first core Bayesian norm is probabilism: rational credences should conform to the probability calculus. In a finite setting, credences must be non negative, meaning, that mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive possibilities must sum to one, and the credence assigned to a proposition must equal the sum of the possibilities in which it is true. These requirements impose coherence on both the traditional and skeptical models.

Probabilism generalizes the familiar requirement that beliefs should be logically consistent. Suppose a researcher assigns a credence of 0.8 to the claim that a report is authentic and a credence of 0.5 to the claim that it is not authentic. These attitudes cannot be jointly coherent because the proposition and its negation exhaust the possibilities. More subtle incoherences arise when a person assigns high confidence to several claims whose conjunction is impossible or low confidence to components whose disjunction is certain. Probability theory identifies these tensions and requires their correction.

An alternative justification appeals to accuracy. A credence can be understood as an estimate of truth. Here, propositions that are true have truth value 1, propositions that are false have truth value 0, and a credence is more accurate when it lies closer to the truth value. Under suitable measures of inaccuracy, a non probabilistic credence assignment is dominated by a probabilistic one, meaning that there is another assignment that is at least as accurate in every possible world and more accurate in some. This provides a distinctly epistemic reason for coherence.

For the present inquiry, probabilism imposes several forms of discipline. A broad claim that the hadith corpus is ‘unusually unreliable’, as little claims, must be consistent with judgments about the different reports, genres, transmission networks, and critical selections that compose it. Conversely, a defense of meaningful preservation cannot infer the authenticity of every individual narration from the reliability of the tradition in general

Second, probabilism requires attention to the logical relations among hypotheses. “The wording is exact,” “the semantic core is authentic,” “the attribution to the Prophet is correct,” and “the report was transmitted through the stated chain” are not equivalent claims. A report may preserve a genuine event in paraphrased language. It may, for example, preserve a Companion’s judgment that was later expressed in prophetic form, or it may contain an authentic core alongside later elaboration. Treating all of these possibilities as a single binary choice between total authenticity and total fabrication obscures the actual evidential problem.

Third, coherence restrains rhetorical asymmetry. Little’s strong conclusion cannot be supported simply by assigning generous probabilities to every conceivable skeptical auxiliary hypothesis while demanding a high level of proof from the traditional model.

Back projection, coordinated fabrication, undetected common sources, etc, are themselves historical claims. They require priors, likelihoods, and evidence just as the preservation model does. To have a standard of justification for oneself, and yet not expect said standard for others, is nothing short of fallacious.

Moreover, another meaningful insight here is with respect to the requirement of regularity. A regular probability function assigns probability 0 only to contradictions and probability 1 only to logical truths. The rationale here is epistemic humility, meaning that assigning zero to a contingent hypothesis makes it impossible for any finite evidence to revive that hypothesis through ordinary conditionalization. In historical inquiry, dogmatic priors are therefore also fallacious. If a naturalist assigns literal probability 0 to every miracle report, no amount of testimony can matter. Likewise, if a traditionalist assigns probability 1 to the authenticity of every canonized report, no historical evidence can matter. Both positions misrepresent the strength of their evidence by treating substantive conclusions as logical certainties.

# Conditional Probability, Bayes's Theorem, and Confirmation

The central mathematical relation in Bayesian reasoning is conditional probability. The probability of a hypothesis  $H$  given evidence  $E$  and background knowledge  $K$  is written  $P(H/E, K)$ . Bayes's theorem expresses this posterior probability as a function of three components: the prior probability of  $H$  given  $K$ , the probability of observing  $E$  if  $H$  is true, and the overall probability of  $E$ .

$$P(H/E, K) = \frac{P(E/H, K)P(H/K)}{P(E/K)}.$$

For a binary comparison between  $H$  and its negation, the denominator can be expanded:

$$P(H/E, K) = \frac{P(E/H, K)P(H/K)}{P(E/H, K)P(H/K) + P(E/\neg H, K)P(\neg H/K)}.$$

The odds form is often more used however:

$$\frac{P(H/E, K)}{P(\neg H/E, K)} = \frac{P(H/K)}{P(\neg H/K)} \times \frac{P(E/H, K)}{P(E/\neg H, K)}.$$

The first ratio is the prior odds. The second is the likelihood ratio, or Bayes factor. The posterior odds are their product. Applied to hadith, this decomposition separates one's confidence in the traditional and skeptical theses from the evidential contribution made by a particular isnad pattern, textual variant, contradiction, etc. Evidence favors the traditional thesis when it is more expected under meaningful preservation than under the specified skeptical alternative, and favors the skeptical thesis when the reverse is true.

This point will be foundational to how we shall respond to Little, especially for his first objection. A skeptical explanation is not confirmed merely because it can accommodate the evidence. Nearly any sufficiently flexible story of fabrication or development can be made compatible with a surviving report. The skeptical thesis is confirmed only to the extent that the evidence is more probable under it than under meaningful early transmission. The same requirement applies to the traditional thesis. Mere compatibility is weaker than explanation, and explanation is weaker than comparative confirmation.

Bayesian confirmation is often defined in terms of an increase in credence, where  $E$  confirms  $H$  relative to a probability model when  $P(H/E) > P(H)$ . This can occur even when the posterior remains low. Suppose an initially improbable hypothesis rises from 1 percent to 10 percent after new evidence. It remains unlikely, but it has been strongly confirmed relative to its prior. Conversely, a hypothesis may retain a high posterior while being disconfirmed by a particular piece of evidence if it began even higher.

This is useful because an individual objection may genuinely lower the probability of a report without making the skeptical thesis more probable overall. Hence, as we will state later in future papers, a contradiction, chronological gap, or legal motive can be a real defeater to some degree. Its actual force, however, depends on the prior odds, the strength

of the relevant likelihood ratio, the level of the hypothesis being assessed, and the positive evidence that remains after the objection has been made. Therefore, a mere difficulty in explanation does not automatically weaken the overall null hypothesis being tested (the traditional model of hadith transmission).

This likelihood ratio also exposes a common skeptical talking point.  $P(E/H)$  is not the same as  $P(H/E)$ . The fact that fabrication would produce a certain feature does not establish that a report with that feature was fabricated. To infer the latter, one must also know how frequently the feature would occur under authentic transmission and how plausible the competing hypotheses were beforehand. The error is analogous to confusing the probability of a positive test result given disease with the probability of disease given a positive result.

To explain this point better, consider the following. Let  $H$  be the hypothesis that the historical core of a report is authentic. Suppose its prior probability is only 0.01, giving prior odds of 1:99. Now suppose one piece of evidence has a likelihood ratio of 20 in favor of  $H$ . The posterior probability rises to about 0.168. A second conditionally independent piece with the same Bayes factor raises it to about 0.802. A third piece with a Bayes factor of 5 raises it to about 0.953. The numbers are hypothetical and prove nothing about any hadith. Their purpose is strictly logical, that even a very low prior can be overcome by sufficiently discriminating evidence, while weak evidence may fail to overcome a low prior no matter how rhetorically impressive it sounds.

Sequential updating can be represented as follows:

$$\text{Posterior odds} = \text{Prior odds} \times BF_1 \times BF_2 \times \dots \times BF_n,$$

provided the evidence items are conditionally independent in the relevant way. When they are not independent, the correct decomposition is conditional:

$$\frac{P(E_1, \dots, E_n / H)}{P(E_1, \dots, E_n / \neg H)} = \prod_{i=1}^n \frac{P(E_i / E_1, \dots, E_{i-1}, H)}{P(E_i / E_1, \dots, E_{i-1}, \neg H)}.$$

Although we plan not to expand more on this later, this formulation of Bayes is actually quite useful in transmission studies. Ten isnads that all descend from one common source do not ordinarily provide ten independent pieces of evidence. Ten reports that arise from separate regions may still be dependent if they derive from a shared text or coordinated teaching network. Likewise, a partial dependence does not reduce all corroboration to zero. The task is to model the actual structure rather than count reports naively or dismiss them as a whole.

Bayesian reasoning therefore clarifies the burden placed on Little's thesis. The Muslim tradition already concedes that fabrication, error, weak transmission, sectarian influence, and back projection can occur. Little must establish more than their possibility or even their occasional actuality. Because his claim is that hadith is unusually unreliable, he must show that the observed features of the tradition are appreciably more probable under widespread late construction than under meaningful preservation combined with human error, since the null does not maintain infallibility in the transmission process.

# The Problem of Priors: Subjective, Objective, and Imprecise Bayesianism

The most controversial element in Bayesian analysis is prior probability. The prior  $P(H | K)$  represents rational confidence in a hypothesis before the focal evidence is incorporated, although it may already reflect substantial background knowledge. Little's appeal to a skeptical prior seen in objection 1 is, then, not irrelevant, but neither is it doing what he thinks it is. Anyone who describes religious testimony as automatically suspicious, miracle reports as simply improbable, or Muslim preservation as analogous to other traditions, is making a prior judgment that must itself be defended.

Seen this way, the existence of priors does not simply give a free pass for bias. It raises the question of which priors are rationally permissible. Bayesian theories, therefore, divide sharply on this issue.

Subjective Bayesianism holds, in its most permissive form, that any prior is rationally allowed so long as it is coherent, often with additional requirements such as regularity. Here, "subjective" means that different agents may rationally begin with different probability distributions because they possess different background beliefs, experiences, and information. The principal discipline lies in coherence and in updating correctly as shared evidence accumulates. Here, subjective Bayesianism has an important role to play in this debate because it makes background commitments easier to notice. Hence, a Muslim theist, a non muslim theist, an agnostic, and a metaphysical naturalist may rationally begin with different priors regarding prophecy and miracles.

Objective Bayesianism, on the other hand, adds substantive norms for priors. It seeks freedom from bias, avoidance of unwarranted precision, and an appropriate representation of evidential symmetry. The Principle of Indifference, in one form, states that possibilities should receive equal probability when the total evidence supports them equally. Maximum entropy methods generalize this idea by selecting the least informative distribution consistent with known constraints.

Objective Bayesianism is attractive, and more relevant, where the debate becomes distorted by unfair suspicion for one thesis over another. Unless a relevant difference is established, the ordinary fallibility of testimony, authorial interest, and institutional bias cannot be used to make hadith uniquely suspicious (in an unusually unreliable way) while comparable historical materials remain usable. Little's claim of unusual unreliability therefore requires a principled system breaker where some feature makes the hadith tradition epistemically inferior, not merely subject to the normal limitations of ancient testimony, of which he deems justified to believe in.

Nevertheless, the Principle of Indifference is difficult to apply. Equal probabilities depend on how possibilities are partitioned and described, such as when a report may be divided into two options, authentic or inauthentic. Equal division produces different priors in each

case. Moreover, historical possibilities also lack the clean physical symmetries of something like a die, which is what it was originally intended to be used for.

The better approach, for the purposes of this paper, then, is to take a moderate position here. Priors should be coherent, regular, transparent, and constrained by genuine background evidence.

This form is imprecise Bayesianism, we would argue, is especially useful in historical studies. Instead of assigning  $H$  a precise probability such as 0.37, an investigator may represent rational confidence by an interval, for example  $[0.2, 0.5]$ , or by a set of permissible probability functions. Two propositions may both receive a midpoint of 0.5 while differing radically in evidential basis, where one may be supported by balanced frequencies, while the other is surrounded by deep uncertainty. Hence, these sharp numbers can hide this difference.

For hadith studies, imprecise priors can represent uncertainty about a range of mechanisms, such as background rates of fabrication, the probability of semantic drift, or the expected survival of early documents. Sensitivity analysis can then ask whether the conclusion remains stable across the permissible range. If a report achieves a high posterior under every reasonable prior in the range, one could then be confident in its results. If the result changes dramatically with small adjustments, the appropriate conclusion is to be epistemically cautious. This kind of Bayesian analysis will be used when responding to Little's 2 and 3rd objection.

The rational role of a prior is therefore neither to decide the hadith question in advance nor to pretend that inquiry begins from nowhere. Priors summarize relevant background knowledge before the focal evidence is introduced. They remain open to revision and must be proportionate to what is actually known. A skeptical prior may lower initial confidence, but it cannot substitute for the comparative evidence needed to establish Little's conclusion.

# The Principle of Conditionalization and Historical Learning

The second core norm of Bayesian epistemology is diachronic. It concerns how credences should change through time. Suppose an agent begins with a probability function  $P_{\text{old}}$  and then learns evidence  $E$  with certainty. The Principle of Conditionalization requires the new credence in any proposition  $X$  to equal the old conditional credence in  $X$  given  $E$ :

$$P_{\text{new}}(X) = P_{\text{old}}(X / E), P_{\text{old}}(E) > 0.$$

Conditionalization can be understood as a three stage procedure. Possibilities incompatible with  $E$  are assigned probability zero, with the remaining possibilities rescaled so that their probabilities sum to one; and the probabilities of broader propositions are recalculated from the revised distribution. The essential feature here is ratio preservation where If  $E$  does not discriminate between two possibilities because both entail  $E$ , then their relative odds should remain unchanged after  $E$  is learned.

Conditionalization captures an important norm of historical justification, namely, that confidence should change because of evidence, and only to the extent warranted by that evidence. A newly dated manuscript or an independent early citation, as in the case of archaeological discoveries for example, should only alter the assessment. By contrast, repeating the general possibility of fabrication without supplying new discriminating evidence should not continually lower the probability of the traditional thesis, as Little does multiple times when he repeats certain objections in differing wordings, and from that, makes anew more objections.

What makes matters more complicated, however, is that historical learning is rarely certain. A paleographic date is always probabilistic, just as the identity of a transmitter may be disputed. Strict conditionalization is too rigid when the historical investigator does not become certain of  $E$  but instead raises confidence in  $E$  from one intermediate value to another.

Jeffrey conditionalization addresses this problem. Suppose the possible evidential states form a partition  $E_1, E_2, \dots, E_n$ , and new experience changes the agent's confidence in those states without making any one certain. The revised credence in  $X$  is:

$$P_{\text{new}}(X) = \sum_i P_{\text{old}}(X / E_i) P_{\text{new}}(E_i).$$

This method then allows for “soft” updating of the probabilities. Through this, we can revise the probabilities of the evidential possibilities and allows that revision to propagate to the hypotheses. For example, little may revise the probability that a manuscript belongs to the early eighth century from 0.4 to 0.7 without becoming certain of the date. The probability of hypotheses that depend on early attestation should then rise in proportion to how strongly they were connected to that dating possibility.



Jeffrey conditionalization is highly useful to hadith research because nearly every evidential judgment is graded, and yet conditional on a range of possibilities. As an example, narrator reliability is not simply present or absent, just as the interpretation of a textual variant may be contested. A rational analysis should not force these uncertain inputs into binary categories.

Conditionalization also clarifies why some evidence carries far greater weight than other evidence. A feature predicted by both the traditional and skeptical models does little to discriminate between them. By contrast, a more risky, geographically dispersed or structurally complex transmission pattern may strongly favor meaningful preservation if it would be difficult to produce under late fabrication. The same is true in the opposite direction when a feature is substantially more expected under backprojection or doctrinal construction.

Hence, Little's objections must somehow alter the balance between the traditional and skeptical models in proportion to their actual discriminatory force, not merely because they describe something that could have happened.

# Testimony, Transmission, and Social Evidence

At this point, however, one more category of epistemic justification must be introduced, namely, the role of testimony. This is especially important in the case of hadith, since the hadith tradition, by its very nature, is a testimonial tradition. It is not merely a set of disconnected propositions but rather, a massive network of claims transmitted by persons, through persons, to other persons. Hence, if one is going to assess the epistemic status of hadith, one cannot do so while ignoring what philosophers today call social epistemology, that is, the study of how knowledge is acquired through social means, such as testimony, trust, authority, expertise, communal memory, and institutional transmission. Put simply, much of what we know, or claim to know, is not known by direct observation, but by testimony. We know the names of our ancestors, the facts of ancient history, the findings of science, the existence of cities we have never visited, and even many facts of our own birth through the testimony of others. If testimony is dismissed as epistemically weak merely because it is testimony, then most of human knowledge collapses with it.

This point is extremely relevant when assessing the HCM as it is applied to hadith. If the historical critical method begins with the assumption that testimony is not to be trusted unless independently verified by non testimonial evidence, then this assumption itself requires justification. It cannot simply be taken for granted. For in ordinary epistemic life, testimony is not treated as guilty until proven innocent. Rather, testimony is *prima facie* justified unless one has a defeater. Here, by a defeater, we mean to say, some reason to think that the testimony in question is false, unreliable, fabricated, or otherwise unworthy of belief. Thus, the burden is not merely on the traditionalist to explain why hadith testimony should be accepted, but also on the skeptic to explain why the testimony of early Muslims should be rejected. The matter may be expressed as follows:

Testimony is a valid source of epistemic justification unless there exists a sufficient defeater against it.

The hadith tradition is a structured testimonial tradition

Therefore, the hadith tradition provides *prima facie* epistemic justification unless sufficient defeaters are given against it.

Seen this way, one cannot reject hadith merely by pointing out that it is transmitted through testimony. That would not be an objection, since testimony is precisely one of the normal ways human beings acquire knowledge. Rather, the skeptic must show that the testimony is defeated, for example, by showing contradictions, anachronisms, etc. But unless such defeaters are actually established, and not merely speculated, then the rejection of hadith testimony is itself epistemically unjustified. The hadith tradition is not merely one person claiming something in isolation. Rather, it is a socially embedded system of transmission and criticism. The muhaddithun did not simply accept testimony naively. They investigated transmitters and compared routes, all while analyzing memories and other cofactors. Hence, even if one does not accept every conclusion of the hadith critics, it would be unjustified to treat their tradition as though it was epistemically blind. If

anything, hadith criticism is itself a sophisticated form of social epistemology, since it attempts to answer the very question philosophers ask: under what conditions are we justified in accepting the testimony of another person?

For this reason, the fallacious use of the HCM, when it rejects the epistemology of testimony, must be asked to justify its own alternative standard. If someone like Little says that hadith cannot be trusted because it comes through testimony, as he does in one of his objections talking about supernatural miracles, then he must explain why other forms of historical knowledge, which also come through human transmitters, are not rejected on the same basis. If it's due to philosophical commitments based on prior probabilities, then the skeptic must explain why those commitments automatically function as a defeater, especially when court writers and modern academics also have commitments, biases, and interests of their own. If the skeptic says that a report must be externally corroborated before it can be believed, then the skeptic must explain why testimony itself is not allowed to function as evidence. Otherwise, the critique becomes selective. This will be discussed in more detail when those objections are raised, respectively.

The issue may therefore be put in another syllogism:

A rejection of testimony is justified only if one has sufficient defeaters against that testimony.

Many skeptical approaches to hadith reject early Muslim testimony without establishing sufficient defeaters against the testimonial system as a whole.

Therefore, many skeptical approaches to hadith are not justified in rejecting early Muslim testimony as a whole.

Of course, this does not mean every hadith must be accepted. Nor does it mean testimony is infallible. Testimony can be mistaken and exaggerated, but this only proves that testimony must be critically assessed, not that testimony should be dismissed in principle.

The hadith tradition is therefore not merely a collection of propositions but a structured testimonial network. Even when material is preserved in writing, its content ordinarily concerns what one person heard, saw, remembered, taught, or copied from another. The epistemic question is not whether testimony is involved (nearly all ancient history depends upon it), but whether the particular testimonial system possesses sufficient positive indicators of reliability or sufficient defeaters to warrant rejection.

Bayesianism models a testimony by distinguishing the truth of a proposition from the production of a report. Let  $H$  be the proposition that an event occurred or that a statement was uttered, and let  $R$  be the event that a witness reports  $H$ . The evidential force of  $R$  depends on two probabilities:

$P(R/H)$ : the probability that the witness reports  $H$  if  $H$  is true;

$P(R/\neg H)$ : the probability that the witness reports  $H$  if  $H$  is false.

The ratio  $P(R/H)/P(R/\neg H)$  is the Bayes factor supplied by the testimony. A witness confirms  $H$  when the report is more likely if  $H$  is true than if  $H$  is false. This requires more

than sincerity. A sincere but confused witness may have a high false report rate. A competent witness with poor access may fail to report true events. Testimonial reliability is therefore multidimensional.

Moreover, this model explains why the existence of ulterior motives, as little tries to establish, does not automatically nullify testimony. Motives matter to the extent that they change the probability of the report under truth and falsity. The model also distinguishes a witness's general reliability from the reliability of a particular report. A transmitter may be accurate in normal matters but likely to err in, say, old age, in a specific region, from a particular teacher, or when narrating by meaning.

Multiple testimony, then, is a double edged sword. If two reports are conditionally independent given H and also conditionally independent given not-H, their likelihood ratios multiply. Two modestly reliable witnesses can provide strong combined support. However, two reports may be socially independent yet both caused by the same rumor. Hence, once the truth or falsity of H is fixed, learning one report should not substantially change the probability of the other. Where this condition holds, corroboration is genuinely cumulative. This is why, in fact, one of the conditions for justification is parsimony. If there were 10 independently attested transmitters all converging on the same lie, one would be less justified in accepting said scenario over true and genuine transmission.

Additionally, testimonial evidence is also affected by selection. A compiler does not sample randomly from all reports in circulation. Reports are filtered according to judgments about chains, transmitters, content, and relevance. The existence of a large pool of fabrications concerns the base rate before selection. The reliability of a selected corpus depends additionally on the performance of the filter.

Let A be the hypothesis that a report is authentic and Pass the event that it passes a critical procedure. Then:

$$P(A / Pass) = \frac{P(Pass / A)P(A)}{P(Pass / A)P(A) + P(Pass / \neg A)P(\neg A)}.$$

Even if authentic reports are initially rare, a filter can produce a reliable selected set if it accepts a high proportion of authentic reports and a very low proportion of inauthentic ones. Conversely, a prestigious filter can perform poorly if its false positive rate is high. The historical question is not answered by noting either that fabrication was abundant or that criticism existed. One must estimate the sensitivity and specificity of the actual critical practices, something which little attempts at doing when he argues the methods of Sunni hadith criticism were adopted far too late in time.

This reveals to us, then, a dual evidential role in reports of fabrication. Evidence that early scholars encountered forged reports lowers confidence in unfiltered material. Yet evidence that they identified forgers, compared routes, rejected transmitters, traveled for corroboration, and preserved reasons for criticism may raise confidence in the capacity of the tradition. The same fact can support multiple hypotheses

The hadith tradition should accordingly be analyzed as a complex epistemic and historical system. It contained competing schools with overlapping lineages, local biases, formal and informal filters, and varying standards. This complexity does not guarantee reliability inofitself, but it makes the skeptical claim of unusual unreliability harder than the observation that some Muslims possessed incentives to fabricate. The skeptical model must explain why these mechanisms failed so comprehensively that they preserved no meaningful Prophetic material or left the corpus epistemically inferior to comparable historical traditions.

# Total Evidence and the Logic of Historical Objections

As discussed in the previous section, a justified historical conclusion must rest on the total relevant evidence rather than the feature that is most rhetorically useful to one side. Something like a late manuscript, for example, may count against early composition, while an early citation may count in its favor. Likewise, a motive for fabrication may lower confidence, whereas detection of weak routes or convergence across hostile groups may raise it. The question is which model best explains the cumulative pattern.

The Bayesian framework therefore prevents a possible defeater from being treated as a conclusive system breaker, that is, when a further argument to substantiate the system breaker is not given. Unless an objection entails the falsity of the traditional hypothesis, it normally changes the odds by a finite amount. The objection may be strong, weak, or neutral depending on its likelihood ratio. Little must show that the cumulative force of his objections makes the skeptical model more probable, he cannot obtain that conclusion by presenting 21 separate possibilities and allowing their number alone to stand in for evidential weight. Several recurring forms of historical objection can be clarified without adjudicating their specific applications.

The last thing to be said on this matter, in anticipation of what Little or other skeptical academics might argue, is that not all objections ought to be judged the same way. All arguments, one way or another, attempt to pick out weaknesses in our worldview. However, it is relevant to point out that there are different kinds of objections. Some objections show that a belief is impossible, incoherent, or contradictory. Other objections merely show that a belief requires further explanation or nuance. As an example, if one were to show that the hadith tradition necessarily contradicts itself in such a way that no reconciliation is possible, then this would be a much more damaging objection. But if one merely shows that some reports may have been transmitted through single chains in the first century, or that some legal discussions developed over time, then this does not by itself show that hadith as a tradition is unjustified. It only shows that the model of preservation must be explained with more precision.

As an example, consider the following weak skeptical syllogism:

If some hadith reports were transmitted through single chains, then those reports are not justified.

Some hadith reports were transmitted through single chains.

Therefore, those reports are not justified.

The problem here is not necessarily in the form of the argument, but in the hidden assumption found in the first premise. Why should single chain transmission, by itself, entail lack of justification? This is precisely the point that must be argued for, not merely assumed. For in many areas of historical reasoning, mechanisms such as testimony, memory, and contextual evidence can raise the probability of a report, even where the

evidence is not mathematically certain. Hence, unless Little shows that single chain transmission is necessarily unreliable, or that the early Muslim community had no reliable mechanisms of preservation, the conclusion does not follow with the force he wants it to. Remember, the burden of proof on little is high, since he maintains not only that the hadith are unreliable, but rather, unusually unreliable, breaking parsimony and requiring a high amount of explanatory power.

First, evidence of general human dishonesty affects a base rate. If religious communities often fabricate authoritative material, the prior probability of authenticity may be lower than it would be in a context with no incentives to invent. But the generalization does not determine the posterior of a critically selected report. The relevant analysis must include the report's specific transmission history, content, corroboration, and the probability that it would survive the relevant filters if false.

Second, chronological lateness is evidential only relative to expected preservation. This is to say, evidence of absence is not the same as absence of evidence. The absence of an early written witness supports later origin of a given tradition when an early witness would have probably existed, survived, been discovered, and been relevant enough to cite if the report were authentic. Hence, "No surviving early source", as little puts it, is not a self interpreting fact. Its Bayes factor depends on a model of documentation and loss. This will be looked at in objection 2.

Third, contradiction is not a single evidential category. Two reports may conflict because one is false, both are false, one concerns a different event, one paraphrases, or a later transmitter introduced a variant. Contradiction strongly disconfirms its accuracy in transmission, but it may only weakly disconfirm the authenticity of a shared core teaching.

Fourth, legal or political usefulness establishes a motive or selective advantage, but not fabrication by itself. A report that conveniently supports a later controversy may be more probable under invention than under authentic transmission, but authentic teachings can also become useful in later controversies. The evidential question is whether the observed fit is unusually precise or suspicious, or otherwise much more expected under post hoc construction.

Fifth, oral variation is evidence against a model of verbatim, perfectly stable transmission. It is not, however, automatically evidence against transmission through meaning. A realistic authentic transmission hypothesis should predict some paraphrase, omission, and mnemonic restructuring. Hence, a corpus with no variation across extended oral transmission might itself be surprising. The relevant comparison concerns the observed pattern, not the abstract fact that memory is fallible.

Sixth, supernatural content illustrates the role of background knowledge. The prior probability of a miracle differs sharply depending on whether K includes metaphysical naturalism, generic theism, or confidence in prophetic revelation. As shown in previous sections, bayesianism prevents both sides from substituting a worldview commitment for an evidential analysis. A low but nonzero prior may be overcome by sufficiently strong testimony, just as a high theological prior does not make every miracle report authentic.

Seventh, lexical and conceptual change must be linked to a dating model. A term's later technical meaning can be evidence of later formulation if that meaning was unavailable in the alleged period. But semantic ranges overlap, technical senses can emerge gradually, and later transmitters may paraphrase earlier content in contemporary vocabulary. The evidential force depends on the probability of the observed wording under models that depict either exact preservation, paraphrase, and later invention.

These points above, then, illustrate the main thesis of this paper, namely, that an objection becomes probative only when it identifies evidence that discriminates among clearly stated hypotheses. The objection must be shown to be substantially more expected under fabrication, retrojection, or doctrinal development than under meaningful transmission. This symmetry, however, does not erase the unequal burden created by unequal claims. Little's thesis that hadith is unusually unreliable is stronger than the traditional admission that the corpus contains both sound and unsound material, and it therefore requires correspondingly stronger comparative evidence, given parsimony.



# From Corpus Level Claims to Report Level Hypotheses

One of the most consequential methodological errors little seems to make is excessive extrapolation. Knowledge claims such as “all hadith are preserved” or “the hadith corpus is unreliable” are both insufficiently precise for an actual historical study of this kind. The traditional thesis defended here is that the hadith system meaningfully preserves Prophetic material, not that every wording, chain, or report is equally sound. Little’s stronger corpus level claim must therefore be disaggregated by genre, transmission density, regional history, and transmitter status.

A Bayesian analysis should begin by defining the unit of evaluation. For a particular report, at least five hypotheses may be distinguished:

H1: the Prophet uttered substantially the reported wording and the stated chain accurately represents transmission;

H2: the Prophet conveyed the semantic core, but wording and some details changed during transmission;

H3: the report originated with a Companion or early authority and was later attributed to the Prophet without deliberate fraud;

H4: the report was deliberately fabricated to serve a legal, political, theological, or devotional purpose;

H5: the report developed through storytelling, harmonization, or communal memory without a single deliberate fabricator.

Of course, these hypotheses are not meant to be exhaustive, but rather, they serve to prevent a false binary. A piece of evidence may strongly disconfirm H1 while supporting H2 over H4. Variants may undermine verbatim preservation yet support a common early core. A late technical term may count against exact wording while remaining compatible with early content expressed in later language, etc.

The point here is that when it comes to corpus level conclusions, they ought to be built hierarchically from lower level analyses. Individual reports possess report specific evidence, while families of reports share transmitters and critical histories. Evidence of fabrication in one genre may properly lower priors for similar material, but it cannot mechanically determine the status of unrelated reports. Likewise, evidence that classical criticism performs well in a controlled domain may raise confidence without proving every later judgment correct. Here, it seems Little agrees with us, since he does accept reports from the Uthmanic recension of the Quran, presumably due to this very notion.

Regardless, reports are not epistemically identical, rather, they are embedded in networks that generate cumulative evidence. Hence, it is at this level that the traditional and skeptical models must ultimately be compared.

# Disagreement, Robustness, and the Burden of Argument

Bayesian analysis helps diagnose disagreement by separating three questions.

Do the parties possess the same evidence?

Do they assign the same comparative likelihoods to that evidence under the traditional and skeptical hypotheses?

Do they begin from different background commitments and priors?

This separation is especially valuable in responding to Little because it reveals whether an objection rests on a disputed fact, a disputed historical model, or an particular philosophical commitment.

An evidence dispute concerns whether a manuscript is early, whether two texts are independent, whether a narrator met a teacher, or whether a quotation is accurately attributed. A likelihood dispute concerns what those facts would be expected to look like under authenticity or fabrication. A prior dispute concerns background assumptions about religious testimony, miracles, institutional reliability, or the prevalence of invention. These series of papers, then, attempt to identify which question Little's objection is raising, in an attempt to assess their robustness.

This point regarding competing hypotheses is especially important when assessing the burden of evidence placed upon Little. As stated in the intro, Little is not merely arguing that some hadith are weak, or that some reports may have been fabricated or mistaken. Were that his only claim, then the burden would be much lower, since the Muslim tradition itself already concedes that weak reports, including fabricated reports, mistaken narrators, sectarian influence, and legal back projection can exist. Rather, Little's maintains not only that the hadith corpus is unreliable, but that it is unusually unreliable, meaning that it does not even come close to many of the other historical sources at our disposal. This kind of claim carries a much heavier burden, since it is not enough to point toward ordinary historical limitations, or the mere human possibility of error and fabrication. He must show that the hadith tradition is uniquely deficient in a way that makes it worse than the normal kinds of ancient testimony historians are otherwise willing to use.

Seen this way, Little's argument must do more than establish that fabrication was possible in early Islam. It must establish that fabrication was so widespread, so successful, and so undetected, that the hadith corpus became epistemically inferior to other historical traditions. This is a far more difficult claim to justify. If the hadith tradition contains isnad criticism, narrator evaluation, matn analysis, comparison of routes, identification of liars, awareness of fabrication, early scholarly scrutiny, and mechanisms for distinguishing sound reports from weak reports, then one cannot simply say that hadith is unusually unreliable without explaining why all of these mechanisms fail to raise its evidential status. If anything, the existence of these mechanisms creates an evidential problem for Little,

since they are precisely the sort of things one would expect from a community that was concerned with preservation and verification.

This is where the issue of parsimony becomes relevant. A theory that says some reports were fabricated is not difficult to maintain, since, again, the Muslim tradition itself already says this. But a theory that says the hadith corpus is unusually unreliable must explain why a civilization that developed such a detailed apparatus for testimony, transmission, and narrator criticism should be treated as less reliable than many other ancient sources which often lack comparable mechanisms. If the skeptical thesis requires us to believe that large scale back projection occurred, that the community failed to detect it in any meaningful way, and that the very sciences designed to detect error were themselves unable to preserve a meaningful amount of Prophetic material, then this thesis is not automatically more parsimonious than the traditional model. In fact, it may become less parsimonious, since it multiplies assumptions in order to explain away the very evidence of preservation.

Put another way, Little cannot simply argue for his case by lowering the standard of reliability for hadith alone while leaving other historical materials acceptable. If human testimony and authorial bias are enough to make hadith unusually unreliable, then the same critique would seem to threaten much of ancient history. But if these factors do not automatically downplay the usefulness of other historical sources, then Little must explain why they downplay the usefulness of hadith in particular. To be clear here, we are not arguing that a proper defence of the hadith tradition ought to bind us to a *tu quoque* fallacy, but rather, that for little's conclusion to follow, he would need to present a valid system breaker between the two. The issue, then, is not whether hadith has the normal limitations that come with historical testimony. The issue is whether Little can establish a special defeater against the hadith corpus that is strong enough to justify treating it as unusually unreliable.

Hence, the burden of evidence on Little is higher than he seems to acknowledge. It is not enough for him to point toward possibility, or the existence of incentives. Rather, he must show that his skeptical hypothesis has greater explanatory scope, greater explanatory power, and greater parsimony than the traditional model. Unless this is done, the claim that hadith is unusually unreliable remains under argued. At most, Little would have shown that hadith, like all historical testimony, requires critical assessment. But this is not a conclusion the Muslim tradition rejects. The real question is whether, after critical assessment, the hadith tradition is less justified than the skeptical alternatives being proposed, and that is precisely what Little must prove.

# Limits of Bayesian Method

Bayesianism is not a complete historical method and is not presented as one. It cannot select the correct hypotheses by itself, identify the relevant evidence, determine linguistic meaning, or guarantee that a coherent prior is justified. Its role in this paper is to guide us through the inferential movement from historical data to claims about reliability, especially where Little's objections risk moving from a possible mechanism of error to a corpus level conclusion of the data.

First, probabilistic coherence is not sufficient for truth. A person may update impeccably from a prejudicial prior and remain far from reality. Historical studies therefore requires independent assessments on things like accurate source description, linguistic competence, being methodologically fair, and having reliable background knowledge.

Second, the use of exact numerical values may be inaccurate and exceed the evidence. To be clear, for the purposes of this paper, values are used to ranges based on assumptions. They are used to summarize the reasons, not replace them.

Third, Bayesian models idealize agents as logically coherent and capable of tracking complex conditional relations. Real transmitters have limited memory and limited access to evidence. The norms should be treated as standards toward which inquiry aims, not as a claim that every rational historian performs explicit calculations.

Fourth, confirmation is model relative. By this, we mean that a report can be better explained by authentic transmission than deliberate fabrication but less well explained than unconscious retrojection. Conclusions are only as strong as the competing hypotheses.

Finally, Bayesianism does not replace a full account of knowledge, epistemic virtue, or testimony. Its role is merely to supply the grammar by which competing historical explanations are compared under uncertainty. Joined to an account of justification and social epistemology, it shows why the meaningful preservation of hadith can be rationally affirmed without claiming certainty for every report.

## Conclusion

The central epistemic error exposed by these preliminaries is the collapse of possibility into probability. As little will attempt to show, fabrications occurred, oral transmission was fallible, political and legal incentives existed, and reports were selected, edited, and compiled over time. Even if granted, which much of our papers will argue against, none of these facts, alone, establish that the hadith tradition is probably unreliable, still less that it is unusually unreliable when compared with other bodies of ancient testimony.

Once the debate is formulated in these terms, Little's objections lose the force they derive from mere possibility. They remain serious evidential claims to be tested in the later paper, but they do not possess the evidential status to overturn ones epistemic justification. The relevant question is whether the actual evidence is more expected if hadith preserves a meaningful body of Prophetic material or if that material is principally the product of later construction. The argument of these preliminaries, then, is that belief in meaningful preservation is historically and epistemically justified unless the skeptical model can discharge that comparative burden.

## Summary

A proper discussion of justification must begin with the concept of knowledge. Knowledge is traditionally defined as justified true belief. On this account, three conditions must be satisfied:

The proposition is true.

The person believes the proposition.

The person is justified in believing it.

Applied to hadith, the question becomes: what conditions must a report, or the hadith tradition more broadly, satisfy in order to be historically justified? If isnād is offered as evidence, one must ask:

What features of an isnād make it evidentially strong?

How does narrator reliability affect the probability of a report?

How many transmission routes are needed before corroboration becomes significant?

Under what conditions are multiple routes genuinely independent?

How does communal practice relate to the report?

Does the practice confirm the report, or is the report merely being used to explain the practice?

Historical justification also requires the comparison of competing explanations. The traditional Muslim hypothesis is not merely that hadith exist or that Muslims believed in them. It is that the hadith tradition, through transmission, isnād criticism, matn analysis, early communal practice, and scholarly scrutiny, preserves a meaningful amount of Prophetic material. The skeptical hypothesis maintains that much of the corpus is better explained as later legal, political, sectarian, or theological material projected backward onto the Prophet ﷺ. The central question is therefore:

Which hypothesis explains the evidence better?

A strong historical hypothesis should possess several qualities:

It should be internally consistent rather than ad hoc.

It should have broad explanatory scope.

It should explain the evidence with sufficient power.

It should be parsimonious.

It should account for contrary evidence without relying on excessive speculation.

For Little's skeptical model to be justified, it is not enough to show that fabrication, back projection, or doctrinal development were possible. He must show that these explanations are more probable than the traditional model of preservation.

Little's claim is not simply that some hadith are weak, mistaken, or fabricated. The Muslim scholarly tradition already recognizes the existence of weak narrators, false reports, sectarian influence, legal back-projection, and human error. Little's claim is considerably stronger. He argues that the hadith corpus is not merely imperfect but unusually unreliable, to the point that it compares poorly with many other historical sources. One cannot simply declare the corpus unusually unreliable without explaining why these mechanisms fail to raise its evidential status. Their existence is itself evidence of a community concerned with preservation, authentication, and error detection.

Hadith is, by its nature, a testimonial tradition. It consists of a vast network of claims transmitted by people, through people, to later people. A great deal of human knowledge depends on testimony. If testimony were rejected simply because it is testimony, much of human knowledge would collapse. In ordinary epistemic life, testimony is not generally treated as false until independently proven true. It normally provides *prima facie* justification unless there is a sufficient defeater.

Bayesian probability provides a useful framework for comparing the traditional and skeptical explanations of hadith. It asks a relatively simple question:

Given our background knowledge and the available evidence, which hypothesis makes the evidence more expected?

The Bayesian Odds Form is as follows:

$$\frac{P(H_p / E)}{P(H_d / E)} = \frac{P(H_p)}{P(H_d)} \times \frac{P(E / H_p)}{P(E / H_d)}$$

The first fraction gives the posterior odds after the evidence is considered. The second fraction gives the prior odds before the specific evidence is considered. The final fraction is the likelihood ratio: it compares how expected the evidence is if one hypothesis is true with how expected it is if the competing hypothesis is true.

$$Posterior\ odds = Prior\ odds \times Likelihood\ ratio$$

For the purposes of this paper, the hypotheses may be defined as follows:

HT: The traditional preservation thesis, that the hadith tradition, through *isnad*, *matn* criticism, communal practice, early transmission, and scholarly scrutiny, preserves a sufficiently reliable body of Prophetic material to function as a source of historical knowledge.

HS: The skeptical thesis, that much of the hadith corpus is better explained as later legal, sectarian, political, or theological material projected backward onto the Prophet ﷺ.

E: The historical evidence concerning transmission, narrator criticism, *matn* comparison, geographical spread, communal practice, corroboration, and the detection of fabrication.

k: The relevant background knowledge concerning early Islam, testimony, literacy, Qur'anic preservation, anti-fabrication norms, scholarly networks, and historical context.

$$\frac{P(H_S/E, k)}{P(H_T/E, k)} = \frac{P(H_S/k)}{P(H_T/k)} \times \frac{P(E/H_S, k)}{P(E/H_T, k)}$$

This formula does not require either Islam or skepticism to be assumed from the outset. It requires the evidence to be compared under both models. If the evidence is more expected under the preservation thesis, it raises the probability of that thesis. If it is more expected under the skeptical thesis, it raises the probability of skepticism.

The mere possibility of fabrication is not sufficient to defeat a report. The same is true of possible political influence, possible memory failure, possible back-projection, or possible doctrinal development. A possible alternative explanation becomes evidentially significant only when it explains the actual evidence better than the competing explanation.

The final issue is therefore comparative rather than merely skeptical. Little cannot undermine the hadith tradition simply by showing that error, fabrication, political influence, or doctrinal development were possible. Because Little claims that the corpus is unusually unreliable, he must show that the skeptical model possesses greater explanatory scope, explanatory power, and parsimony than the traditional preservation model