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Fitan Traditions and Apocalyptic Narratives: Comparative Examination of Contemporary Western Approaches

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the nature of fitan traditions through a comparative analysis of evaluations within the Islamic scholarly tradition and approaches developed in modern Western academic literature. It begins by exploring how fitan traditions are treated in classical hadith literature, followed by an analysis of their interpretation in modern Western scholarship within the frameworks of historical context, textual formation, and political function. The findings indicate that fitan traditions are closely linked to the political and social crises of early Islamic history. Classical hadith scholars approached these traditions with caution, assessing their reliability primarily through isnad analysis and the evaluation of transmitters. In contrast, modern Western scholarship has tended to interpret these traditions largely in terms of their historical context and political function, revealing significant methodological differences between the two approaches. Another key conclusion is that no single methodological framework is sufficient for analysing fitan traditions. While the methods of isnad and textual criticism developed within the classical science of hadith provide essential tools for understanding the transmission structures of these reports, modern historical and sociological approaches contribute to a deeper understanding of the political and social contexts in which these traditions emerged. A more comprehensive understanding of fitan literature therefore requires the integration of multiple methodological perspectives.

Keywords: Apocalyptic narratives; fitan; hadith; prophecy

INTRODUCTION

Hadith studies in the second and third centuries of the Hijra, during the process of collecting and classifying narrations, generated a critical field of discussion both methodologically and in terms of content. During this period, scholars debated whether the narrations concerning the signs of the Hour, internal turmoil, and the legitimacy of political authority were reflections of the historical experiences of Islamic societies, and questions on how these narrations should be interpreted were deliberated. The first systematic Western academic criticism of hadith became prominent with the works of Ignaz Goldziher. Goldziher argued that a large portion of hadiths were produced after the Prophet's death as responses to sectarian and political tensions in early Islamic society (Goldziher 1889). The critical path he opened was placed on a more systematic foundation by the studies of Joseph Schacht. Schacht asserted that, in the first two centuries of the Hijra, legal tradition primarily took shape through living practices (living tradition) and evaluations based on personal opinion, and that the majority of hadiths were products of later juristic and political debates rather than the Prophet's own era. He also stated that the backward extension of the isnad system, which was used to determine the period in which narrations were produced, functioned to grant legitimacy to the text by establishing a link to the Prophet (Schacht 1950). Harald Motzki, offering a critical yet methodologically advanced response to Schacht's approach, argued that isnad and matn analysis should be conducted together to understand the historical value of hadiths, maintaining that judging based on only one of these criteria would be insufficient, and he proposed the synthesis method known as "isnad-cum-matn analysis" for hadith dating (Motzki 2005).

In the 14th century, a similar critical skepticism emerged among Muslim scholars, specifically regarding fitan narrations. The historian Ibn Khaldun (d. 808AH) explicitly voiced his distrust toward fitan reports and questioned the hadiths circulating the expectation of the Mahdi in terms of both historical and methodological coherence (Ibn Khaldun 1900). This intellectual background shows that there was a

need to develop both historical and critical reading models to understand the nature of fitan narrations within the broader hadith literature.

One of the most significant sample studies in this field is Wilferd Madelung's 1981 analysis on Mahdi-centered hadith variants. Madelung examined a Mahdi report in Abu Dawud's *Sunan* as a propaganda text supporting the political struggle of Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr, claiming that original historical figures in the narration were gradually removed or obscured over time, transforming the story into a Mahdi-focused account (Madelung 1981).

This study is important for demonstrating how political contexts can be mapped and matched with historical timelines (cf. Ramle & Huda 2022 ; Sattar et al. 2026). Another major contribution that questioned both the historical consistency of isnad patterns and the content of reports came from Hendrik Albert Juynboll. Juynboll argued that recurring transmitter clusters can carry meaningful chronological data about the period of a report, but that the recurrence of narrators does not always indicate the original or primary generative source of the text (Juynboll 1983 ; 1989). This approach enabled a methodological discussion of the dating of fitan reports and the logic underlying their entry into wider circulation.

Michael Cook's 1992 article titled "Eschatology and the Dating of Traditions" (Cook 1992) provides a critical discussion that aims to show the limitations of Schacht's "common link" theory when applied to the dating and provenance analysis of the narrations in Nuʿaym ibn Hammad's (d. 228AH) *Kitab al-Fitan*. Cook reminds us that Schacht originally developed this method for legal hadiths, yet worked with the assumption that isnads and the common-link model could be applied across all types of narrations. He demonstrates that, in the case of fitan traditions, this assumption yields problematic results and unreliable chronological conclusions isnads and the common-link model could be applied across all types of narrations; and he demonstrates that, in the case of fitan traditions, this assumption yields problematic results and unreliable chronological conclusions (Cook 1992). These theoretical and methodological debates demonstrate that analyses of fitan reports must evaluate both generative context and functional purpose together. The shared aim of these studies is to interrogate the origin contexts of fitan traditions by using structured tools, including historical matching, testing isnad formulae against external timelines (external dating), and composition analysis; and further, to identify the logic of legitimacy production by which these reports entered circulation, the social and political crises they responded to, and how they were reinterpreted and reframed in later periods.

The present research has been structured by taking as its basis the historical and isnad-based critical approaches developed by Goldziher, Schacht, and Juynboll, and the method proposed by Motzki, which evaluates the relationship between the isnad and the matn together.

The design of the study relies on assessing both the capacities and methodological limitations encountered by these models. In this regard, the present study aims to critically examine the compatibility between Western-centered critical models and classical hadith methodology in the analysis of fitan reports. To achieve this aim, the study evaluates the formative context of early apocalyptic fitan literature by examining the historical correspondence of isnad strands and the internal coherence of report compositions. Accordingly, the article begins with a concise overview of the apocalyptic character of fitan traditions and then analyzes the textual emphases and temporal imaginaries embedded in these reports within the framework of hadith methodological principles. The functional utilization of these traditions in political contexts and their relation to sectarian tensions were evaluated by accounting for historical agents, social divisions, and the discursive shaping of such conflicts. In parallel, the social functions fulfilled by fitan hadiths were analyzed in the context of coping with uncertainty, directing collective memory, consolidating norms, and regulating group behavior in times of crisis. Subsequently, Western approaches toward the historical dating and methodological analysis of Islamic apocalyptic narrations were discussed. In this framework, the dating methods applied by Jorge Aguadé to fitan literature and his strategies for constructing chronological data were analyzed. The approach of Wilferd Madelung, which examines fitan hadiths in terms of their political functions, historical contexts, and positioning within sectarian struggles, was discussed through the capacity of these narratives to shape political memory.

The contextual methodology of Michael Cook and his debates on the limitations he directed toward Schacht's "common link" transmitter theory were evaluated by considering the methodological gaps created by approaches that proceed mainly

through analogies derived from legal hadiths. Finally, the perspective of David Cook, which identifies the sources of apocalyptic literature in the Sunni tradition, its position within written and oral transmission networks, and the place of fitan literature within religious sciences, was examined.

In this study, I use terms such as collective memory, identity, and consciousness independently of Jan Assmann's technical definition (Assmann 1988) and entirely as sociological descriptive concepts.

THE NATURE AND THEOLOGICAL BACKGROUND OF FITAN TRADITIONS

TO WHAT EXTENT ARE FITAN TRADITIONS APOCALYPTIC?

John Collins defines apocalyptic literature as "a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality that is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another, supernatural world" (Collins 1998). Among the core features of this genre is a dualistic conception of time (the present age versus the age to come) (Beyerle 2014). In fitan traditions, as in Jewish-Christian apocalyptic texts, dominant themes include cosmic conflict at the end of time, a messianic savior figure (the Mahdi), large-scale societal collapse, and moral degeneration (Cook 1992 ; Paçacı 1998).

The apocalyptic narrative structures outlined by Collins (Collins 1998) find clear resonance in the fitan traditions of Islam. The dualistic conception of time, the expectation of divine deliverance, and scenarios of societal collapse allow these traditions to be interpreted as the Islamic expression of the Jewish-Christian apocalyptic tradition. In this context, fitan traditions can be classified as apocalyptic both theologically and historically. David Cook's observation that Daniel-type apocalyptic texts find a strong counterpart in Islamic culture is likewise noteworthy, as it demonstrates how this shared structural and thematic framework takes shape within Muslim traditions (Cook 2002).

Although Daniel does not occupy a central position within prophetic narratives (Cook 2002), reports circulating since the time of the conquests regarding his tomb in Susa indicate that he came to be perceived within the Muslim community as an apocalyptic figure endowed with authority. The notion of a "book" attributed to Daniel appears as a literary element that contributed to this process (Cook 2002). David Cook notes that Islamic apocalypticism does not fully conform to a classical definition of apocalypse as outlined above, since these texts lack a divine mediator, an otherworldly journey, or systematic cosmic schemes. Nevertheless, David Cook acknowledges that there are certain thematic and structural similarities with Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions. Motifs such as the concept of fitna, moral testing, and the purification of believers are linked to this tradition (Cook 2021).

As observed in modern academic literature, the traditions concerning fitan and malahim have often been associated with Jewish-Christian apocalyptic literature. It has been argued that some fitan traditions in Islam were influenced by Jewish-Christian cultural elements. According to this view, certain fitan narratives that emerged in the Islamic world display similarities with motifs found in Jewish apocalyptic texts. It has also been suggested that some narratives appearing in works of Jewish apocalyptic literature such as Secrets of Shimon bar Yochai, Pirke Rabbi Eliezer, and Sefer Hekhalot show resemblances to the malahim reports found in Islamic literature. However, Hıdır emphasizes that such similarities do not necessarily indicate a direct interaction. In his view, stylistic and thematic parallels observed in certain texts cannot be generalized or extended to the entirety of the Islamic hadith literature. Applying the similarities between certain reports found in Nuʿaym ibn Hammad's *Kitab al-Fitan* and narratives in apocalyptic literature to all fitan traditions included in the canonical hadith collections is methodologically problematic. Each of these reports, he argues, must be evaluated within its own isnad and historical context.

According to Hıdır, claims that fitan traditions were influenced by Jewish-Christian culture are often the product of a reductionist approach. Such a perspective tends to overlook the Prophet Muhammad's relationship with revelation and instead portrays him merely as a thinker or social reformer shaped by his sociocultural environment. From this viewpoint, the Quran and the Sunnah are seen not as products of revelation but largely as ideas inherited from Jewish-Christian traditions. Hıdır stresses that this approach is incompatible both with the Islamic understanding of revelation and with the available historical evidence. (Hıdır 2018).

In this context, it can be argued that fitan traditions exhibit an apocalyptic character; however, it would not be accurate to classify them as fully apocalyptic in the classical sense. As defined by Collins, key elements such as a dualistic conception of time, expectations of eschatological salvation, and widespread social and moral decline are clearly present in these traditions, indicating that they align thematically with an apocalyptic framework. Nevertheless, as David Cook emphasizes, the absence of features such as a divine mediator, otherworldly journeys, and systematic cosmic schemata makes it difficult to equate them fully with classical apocalyptic literature; moreover, as Hıdır notes, reducing these similarities to direct external influence is methodologically problematic. Therefore, fitan traditions are best understood as a partial and contextually shaped form of apocalyptic discourse within the Islamic tradition.

THE THEME OF FITAN IN ISLAMIC TRADITION

In the history of Islamic thought, the traditions of fitan and malahim have been widely discussed both in the classical hadith literature and in modern academic studies because they deal with political and social events said to occur in the future. The nature, origin, and reliability of these reports attracted the attention of Muslim scholars from an early period, and they were regarded as a field requiring careful evaluation particularly in terms of isnad and textual analysis.

A significant number of classical hadith scholars adopted a cautious approach toward the traditions of fitan and malahim. The main reason for this approach was that a considerable portion of such reports were transmitted through weak isnad and that some narratives may have been influenced by the storytelling traditions circulating in early Islamic society. The assessments of Khatib al-Baghdadi (d. 463AH) are particularly noteworthy in this regard. Khatib does not consider a large portion of the malahim reports reliable and notes that some of them resemble texts attributed to the Israelites (Khatib 1983). According to him, because some transmitters were unreliable and storytellers occasionally added material to such reports, works dealing with malahim should be approached with caution. At the same time, however, Khatib acknowledges that certain reports with sound chains of transmission reaching the Prophet also exist. This indicates that in the classical hadith tradition the fitan reports were not entirely rejected but were instead subjected to critical scrutiny.

One of the notable remarks on this subject in the classical period is the well-known statement attributed to Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 241AH) and transmitted by Ibn Hajar (d. 852AH): “Three types of books have no reliable basis: maghazi, malahim, and tafsir (Ibn Hajar 1986).” This statement points to the fact that many reports in these fields do not possess strong chains of transmission. In particular, the possibility that malahim traditions might contain elements of Israiliyyat led scholars to develop a cautious stance toward such narratives. Indeed, some Muslim scholars suggested that certain reports related to fitan and malahim may have entered Islamic literature through converts of Jewish-Christian background such as Kaʿb al-Ahbar, Wahb ibn Munabbih, or Tamim al-Dari. This possibility raised the question of whether such narratives originated from prophetic sources. Nevertheless, it is also evident that the Islamic tradition did not completely reject the fitan and malahim reports. According to Islamic belief, absolute knowledge of the unseen belongs solely to God; however, God may reveal certain aspects of the unseen to the prophets through revelation. The Quranic verse, “He is the Knower of the unseen, and He does not disclose His unseen to anyone except a messenger whom He has chosen” (Quran 72:26-27), constitutes the basis of this understanding. Within this framework, the Prophet’s foretelling of certain future events has been interpreted in Islamic thought as being connected with revelation (Hıdır 2018).

One of the earliest examples of the fitan literature is Nuʿaym ibn Hammad’s *Kitab al-Fitan*. Originally from Khurasan, Nuʿaym ibn Hammad travelled to several major centers of learning of his time including Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Egypt in pursuit of hadith scholarship and transmitted reports from many scholars. Nevertheless, the literature of jarh and taʿdil indicates that Nuʿaym ibn Hammad was not widely regarded as a reliable transmitter of hadith. In this context, his work *Kitab al-Fitan* also occupies a controversial position within the hadith corpus. The work essentially represents a compilation in which reports related to fitan and malahim were brought together largely without being subjected to a systematic evaluation of authenticity (Hıdır 2018). According to Hıdır, the fact that a large proportion of the reports in *Kitab al-Fitan* are mawquf or maqtuʿ in nature makes it problematic to treat the work as equivalent to the canonical collections of authentic hadith (Hıdır 2018).

The hadith literature constitutes a fundamental source for understanding Islamic eschatology and apocalyptic thought and has remained central to theological and intellectual debates since the emergence of the Muslim community. In this context, eschatological hadiths consist of reports in which the Prophet Muhammad comments on specific events, responds to questions, or refers to future occurrences (Yusoff & Ismail 2023). Fitan traditions constitute one of the most striking and intensively treated themes in hadith literature. The fact that they are addressed in separate chapters in foundational hadith collections such as *Musnad Ahmad ibn Hanbal*, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, *Sahih Muslim*, *Sunan Abu Dawud*, *Sunan al-Tirmidhi*, *Sunan Ibn Maja*, and *Sunan al-Nasaʾi* demonstrates the particular attention these reports received from the early periods onward (Cf. Ertürk 2017). These chapters appear under distinct titles such as "*Kitab al-Fitan*" in Bukhari (Bukhari 1993), "*Kitab al-Fitan wa ashrat al-saʿa*" in Muslim (Muslim 1955), and "*Kitab al-Fitan*" in Tirmidhi (Tirmidhi 2009). They contain reports concerning both the signs of the end times and anticipated episodes of social disintegration.

Prominent figures in the fitan literature include symbolic characters such as the Dajjal, the Mahdi, Gog and Magog, and the Sufyani. While most of these figures are present in both Sunni and Shiʿi traditions, each sect interprets them through its own historical and theological lens. The emergence of Mahdi expectations in early Islamic thought should be understood within a broader framework of messianic expectation. As several scholars have noted, the concept of a divinely guided deliverer who will establish justice and end oppression is not unique to Islam but appears in various religious traditions. In the Islamic context, however, this idea gradually developed around the expectation that a descendant of the Prophet would restore justice and renew the purity of the faith. Although the Quran does not explicitly present the Mahdi as a central element of salvation doctrine, the strong devotion to the Prophet and the belief in the special status of his family contributed to the emergence of hopes for a divinely guided leader from the ahl al-bayt. Over time, especially within Shiʿi circles, this expectation evolved into a fully developed messianic doctrine centered on the appearance of the Mahdi who would restore justice and establish a righteous order (Sachedina 1981:1-3).

Within the Islamic tradition, this belief was shaped by historical circumstances. While the Quran refers to Jesus as al-Masih, it does not present him as a future messianic redeemer in the same sense as Jewish or Christian traditions. Instead, later Islamic literature particularly hadith and apocalyptic reports developed detailed narratives concerning the appearance of a just ruler known as the Mahdi. These reports describe a figure who will emerge at a time of widespread injustice, establish justice on earth, and restore the true order of the Muslim community. The belief became closely intertwined with discussions of the end times and with traditions describing the descent of Jesus and the defeat of the Dajjal. Over time, different theological interpretations emerged regarding these themes, and the expectation of the Mahdi became especially prominent in Shiʿi thought, where it was integrated into a systematic doctrine of the awaited Imam (Fığlalı 1981). For instance, in Shiʿi thought, the Mahdi is regarded as the embodiment of divine truth and the ultimate representative of divine justice on earth. He is the final figure in the doctrine of the Twelve Imams and, although physically concealed during the period of occultation (*ghaybah*), he is continuously acknowledged as a source of presence and authority. In this respect, the Mahdi in Shiʿism is a figure who unites both religious and political leadership, is infallible (*maʿsum*), and is guided by divine inspiration. With his reappearance, a moral and metaphysical order will be reestablished. In Shiʿi understanding, the Mahdi marks the beginning of a new era in which Islamic law will be reinterpreted, absolute justice will be established, and all forms of corruption incompatible with the essence of faith will be eradicated. This places him at the center of both messianic expectation and the Shiʿi concept of authority. Thus, in Shiʿi doctrine, the Mahdi is far more than an eschatological savior; he is the final manifestation of divine wisdom and the historical guarantor of divine justice (Momen 1985) and represents a strong messianic orientation at the heart of apocalyptic expectations, expressed most elaborately in the Ismaili tradition (Filiu 2011). By contrast, in Sunni belief, the Mahdi is generally portrayed as a savior figure who will appear before the Day of Judgment, lead the Muslim community, and join Jesus in the struggle against the Dajjal a concept that has gained wide acceptance and is supported by major hadith sources (Öz 1995).

The Sunni canonical hadith sources primarily focused on the careful definition and elaboration of the Islamic legal tradition, while apocalyptic subjects particularly those containing messianic elements held only secondary or even tertiary importance. Chapters on fitan are typically located at the end or near the end of these classical hadith compilations. Nevertheless, from the early periods onward, rationalist Muslim critics expressed deep skepticism regarding the validity of apocalyptic hadiths, even when such reports were included in the canonical collections.

Another notable example of this critical tendency in the 9th/14th century is the renowned historian and jurist Ibn Khaldun. While writing on the figure of the Mahdi, he questioned the interrelationship between the apocalyptic tradition, the esoteric interpretation of *Surat al-Kahf*, and especially the historical-political claims of Twelver Shiʿism, thus openly articulating his personal mistrust of apocalyptic texts (Ibn Khaldun 1900).

In the 19th and 20th centuries, Sunni modernist thought subjected these apocalyptic hadiths to much more systematic scrutiny, characterizing them at best as symbolically meaningful reports, and, in older terminology, as *Israiliyyat* (traditions of Judeo-Christian origin). Statements to this effect by Egyptian modernist theologian Muhammad Abduh (1849-1905) and his Syrian disciple Rashid Rida (1865-1935) (cf. Rashid Rida 2011) have provoked anger among more literalist, traditionalist contemporary hadith scholars, who believe in the absolute authenticity of every detail preserved in the classical hadith corpus (see al-Wabil 1990).

As seen above, the textual structure of fitan reports found in the hadith corpus is highly contested (Stowasser 2002). While some of these hadiths are considered textually sound, their isnads have been deemed weak; others have been criticized due to textual inconsistencies. This indicates that, from the perspective of hadith methodology, fitan traditions represent a problematic domain that demands careful evaluation, particularly in terms of the relationship between isnad and matn.

Moreover, fitan reports have played a functional role in interpreting the past. In several instances, historical events such as the assassination of Uthman, the Battle of Harra, and the tragedy of *Karbala* are discussed within the framework of fitan. This suggests that such reports have served as a religious lens through which historical traumas were interpreted and given meaning. In this context, fitan reports function as narratives that shape collective memory. These traditions have enabled the framing of historical crises through religious meaning, thereby influencing how Muslim communities relate to their past. Particularly in periods marked by political fragmentation, civil strife, and debates over religious authority, the fitan literature has served as a tool both for legitimizing the present and for framing hopes or fears about the future. In this respect, fitan reports represent a corpus of religious texts that warrant multilayered analysis from historical and sociological perspectives.

POLITICAL UTILIZATION AND SECTARIAN STRUGGLES

From the early periods of Islamic history, fitan traditions have occupied a central place in both political and theological debates. They have served as texts containing prophecies about the apocalypse and the end times, as well as instruments of social influence. It is well established that these reports have been used by various actors across different periods to construct political legitimacy and reinforce sectarian identities. Initially included under chapters on fitan in sources such as *Sahih al-Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim*, these traditions have over time become the subject of political and ideological readings. In addition to their prophetic content, fitan traditions have functioned as tools for political propaganda and the construction of sectarian ideologies since the early periods of Islamic history. Notably, during the Abbasid revolution, reports predicting the emergence of a Mahdi from the lineage of the Prophet were employed effectively. Narrations conveying meanings such as: "(…) someone from the Ahl al-Bayt will rise and fill the world with justice." (Daylami 1986) and "al-Mahdi from Muhammad ibn Abdillah fill the world with justice." (Isfahani 1868) were exploited to legitimize the Abbasid cause (al-Duri 2009).

During the Umayyad-Abbasid transition, fitan reports provided a framework of ideological discourse aimed at criticizing Umayyad rule and promoting the anticipated Abbasid leadership. Abbasid propagandists operating in Khurasan mobilized people around the call for the Mahdi, demonstrating the compelling mobilizing power these traditions held in the popular imagination (Crone and Hinds 1986 & al-Duri 2009). This illustrates that fitan traditions possessed the potential to direct political movements. Furthermore, how these reports were interpreted by various sects is also noteworthy. In

the Shiʿi tradition, fitan narrations form the doctrinal foundation of the belief in the Mahdi. In Twelver Shiʿism, the concept of the occultation of the Twelfth Imam and his expected return near the end of time is nourished by numerous traditions (Momen 1985). In contrast, within the Sunni tradition, fitan narrations have generally been interpreted as cautionary texts emphasizing moral and social decay. Moreover, fitan reports constructed around figures like the Sufyani became a medium in which Umayyad hostility and sectarian polemics intersected. Reports that depict the Sufyani as a tyrannical, deviant, and destructive leader for example, the report sent to the Prophet's clan, the Banu Hashim, stating that "this is the Sufyani, whom they would find in the reports of the learned elders, that he would appear and kill everyone he could of its descendants and their *mawali*," (Cook 2002) clearly criticizes the lineage of the Umayyads and supports Shiʿi thought. Thus, it can be confidently stated that fitan traditions have functioned as texts that fuel apocalyptic anxieties in Muslim societies, and as discursive instruments in struggles over political power. These reports have been employed particularly during moments like the Abbasid revolution to challenge the legitimacy of the existing authority or to mobilize public support around an alternative, redemptive figure. While in the Shiʿi tradition they acquired doctrinal significance and became the cornerstone of belief in the Mahdi, in the Sunni tradition they have largely remained confined to moral admonitions. Nevertheless, each sectarian and political formation has reinterpreted these traditions according to its own ideological priorities. As a result, the fitan corpus constitutes a multidimensional field of inquiry that must be examined within its broader social, political, and sectarian contexts.

THE SOCIAL FUNCTION OF FITAN TRADITIONS

Beyond their nature as apocalyptic texts conveying prophetic messages about the future, fitan traditions have also played a significant role in Islamic culture as tools for interpreting historical crises, shaping individual attitudes, and constructing mechanisms of social balance. These narrations have served as a kind of historical consciousness and moral compass for Muslim individuals and communities, forging a link between religious knowledge and political reality, and guiding both personal and collective behavior (cf. Toure & Mamat 2018).

Many fitan reports found in the hadith literature offer normative recommendations regarding proper conduct during times of turmoil. Particularly prominent are those that counsel individuals to maintain composure and avoid conflict. One well-known report states: "During times of tribulation, the one who sits is better than the one who stands; the one who stands is better than the one who walks; and the one who walks is better than the one who runs" (Bukhari 1993). This hadith exemplifies the recommendation of passive resistance aimed at preventing individuals from being drawn into chaos. Especially during the early centuries, when tribal conflicts and internal unrest were widespread, such narrations offered a calming discourse and contributed to the restoration of social order.

On a broader social level, another function of fitan traditions is their contribution to the cultivation of individual and collective morality. These reports frequently emphasize the moral collapse of end-time societies, portraying a world where truth is denied, liars are esteemed, trust is lost, and religious sensitivity is severely weakened. They describe an environment in which trustworthy individuals are labeled traitors, traitors are deemed trustworthy, liars gain influence, and unqualified people are entrusted with leadership roles (Abu Dawud 2009; Ahmad b. Hanbal 2001; Bayhaqi 2011; Bukhari 1993; Haythami 1994; Ibn Maja 2009; Tabarani 2012). Such statements function as moral guidance, encouraging vigilance and social self-reflection (cf. Shuhari et al. 2018). Additionally, the report states, "Islam will become strange again as it began. Glad tidings to the strangers!" (Muslim 1955), idealizes those few who struggle to preserve their faith in times of religious decay, emphasizing the virtue of steadfastness in periods of moral corruption. In this sense, fitan traditions reinforce individual responsibility amidst widespread societal mistrust and portray the devout personality as a stabilizing moral force. This function serves especially during turbulent periods to preserve religious identity and strengthen personal accountability.

Fitan traditions have also held a strong place in popular culture. Figures mentioned in the narrations – such as the Mahdi/Messiah (Tirmidhi 2009), the Dajjal (Bukhari 1993; Ibn Maja 2009; Muslim 1955) and the Beast (Dabba) (Bayhaqi 2011; Muslim 1955) have become subjects of public storytelling, legendary tales, and eschatological sermons, and have been widely transmitted and reinterpreted in both oral and written forms (Filiu 2011).

Since the earliest periods, they have helped cultivate historical consciousness in Muslim societies, guided individuals on how to behave in times of tribulation and have been variously reinterpreted across different sectarian and cultural contexts. Whether through active discourses that lay the groundwork for political mobilization or through exhortations calling individuals to composure and restraint, fitan reports have become functional texts that shape both personal resolve and collective identity during moments of rupture in Islamic societies. In this sense, fitan traditions remain a living legacy that continues to influence the formation of religious discourse, the development of social consciousness, and the search for moral-based societal balance just as they did in the past.

FOUNDATIONS OF WESTERN APPROACHES TO ISLAMIC TRADITIONS

Ignaz Goldziher (1850-1921) clearly demonstrated that, when assessed by rigorous scholarly criteria, only a very small portion if any of the material preserved in the canonical hadith compilations can be confidently traced back to the early period from which they profess to originate. His detailed analysis demonstrates the presence of later theological and legal tendencies, as well as the aspirations of subsequent generations, showing how the hadith record was shaped to support one or another of the competing theses in various disputed questions (Goldziher 1904). As presented by him, the hadith literature developed gradually after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, shaped by the religious, political, and social developments that emerged in the post-Prophetic period. In his view, many hadith were not transmitted from the Prophet himself but were instead created in later generations as responses to ongoing sectarian and political conflicts, aiming to provide religious legitimacy to ideologies, authorities, or practices. Goldziher argues that the majority of hadiths were not produced during the Prophet's lifetime but rather fabricated afterward to address emerging issues within the Muslim community. These sayings, although attributed to the Prophet, were often constructed to lend divine authority to theological doctrines, legal norms, political claims, or factional disputes that developed during the Umayyad (Goldziher 1889) and the Abbasid periods (Goldziher 1889). One of the central claims of Goldziher is that hadith fabrication served political purposes. Both Umayyad and Abbasid rulers used religious discourse to legitimize their rule, often commissioning scholars or religious figures to circulate hadiths that emphasized obedience to rulers, the prohibition of rebellion, or the divine sanction of the caliphate (Goldziher 1889).

Joseph Schacht (1902) builds upon Goldziher's critical approach while also surpassing it in certain respects, especially in his analysis of the historical nature of legal hadiths attributed to the Prophet. Schacht traces the earliest sources of Islamic law to the administrative and social practices of the Umayyad period. Around the 1st century AH, the foundational shaping of Islamic jurisprudence took place based on these practical implementations, and traces of such practices can be observed in later transmissions. According to Schacht, many of the reports found in classical and other hadith collections entered circulation particularly after the Shafiʿi period. In other words, a significant portion of these reports did not reflect the Prophet's lifetime but instead emerged as products of later juristic debates. Confirming Goldziher's findings that the majority of hadiths are doctrinal rather than historical in nature, Schacht further argues that a critical analysis of the isnad can be used to determine the chronological positioning of hadiths. Indeed, the commonly observed tendency in isnads to extend "backward" was intended to enhance the authority of the reports by ultimately linking them to the Prophet (Schacht 1950). According to Schacht, legal authorities initially relied on the "living tradition" based on individual opinion (*raʾy*), then grounded this tradition in the authority of the Companions. However, by the mid-second century AH, this tradition was shaken when hadith scholars began circulating reports attributed directly to the Prophet. Within this shift, only Shafiʿi recognized the supreme authority of Prophetic reports and placed hadiths at the center of the legal system (Schacht 1950). In Schacht's approach, any report attributed to the Prophet should not be regarded -unless proven otherwise- as his actual or partially altered statement, but rather as a fictional expression of a legal doctrine formulated later (Schacht 1950). The historical position of such reports can be identified through the period in which they began to be used as evidence in legal discussions, their place in the historical development of the topic, and indicators within their isnad-matn structure (Schacht 1950). According to Schacht, these reports were produced as tools to legitimize doctrines upheld by jurists of

their time and must be understood in the historical context in which they were first used. In this regard, if a common link is repeatedly mentioned in the isnad chains, this strongly implies that the report originated in the period during which that transmitter lived. Even hadith scholars like al-Tirmidhi (d. 279AH) recognized this phenomenon, referring to reports based on common transmitters in their isnads as "the hadiths of so-and-so (N.N.)" and classifying such reports as gharib (Schacht 1950). According to Schacht's "common link" theory, if there is a central transmitter who repeatedly appears in the isnad chains of a given report, that individual represents the historical moment in which the report first emerged. The convergence of isnads around this transmitter is considered strong evidence that the report was produced during their lifetime. This approach supports the notion that isnads were extended upward to reach the Prophet and provides an important method for determining the historical origins of a report.

Hendrik Albert Juynboll (1935-2010) supported Schacht's common link theory and described it as a "brilliant" idea (Juynboll 1983). According to this theory, if the same transmitter repeatedly appears in different transmission chains of a hadith, that person may be the source of the hadith. In other words, the hadith may have been fabricated by that transmitter or disseminated through them. According to Juynboll, when isnad chains are traced backward, they often lead not to a Companion but to this "common link" transmitter. This suggests that the isnads were later attributed to this person, and the Companion names were added afterward to make the hadith appear older and more authoritative. To support this view, Juynboll provides several examples. One of them is anti-Baghdad tradition. Juynboll argues that anti-Baghdad tradition, which portrays the early stages of the city's construction, is supported by sixteen isnads, most of which converge on Sufyan al-Thawri (d. 161AH), while the remainder are transmitted by individuals plausibly connected to him. The notion that a dozen traditionists, independently and without knowledge of one another, fabricated the same statement and then all happened, by sheer coincidence, to attribute it to the same master is, he maintains, entirely untenable. The inescapable conclusion, therefore, is that Sufyan himself must be held responsible for putting this tradition into circulation. The motive for doing so, Juynboll suggests, is to be sought in Sufyan's anti-Abbasid disposition; and the most likely period in which he could have produced the tradition coincides, in striking ways, with various phases of Baghdad's building history "predicted" by Sufyan, as it were, yet more plausibly interpreted as a simple *vaticinatio post eventum*, or, perhaps more accurately, *per eventum* (Juynboll 1983). According to Juynboll, all of these indicate that Sufyan al-Thawri was the common link of the report (Juynboll 1983). Juynboll, in his 1989 article "Some isnad-analytical methods illustrated on the basis of several woman-demeaning sayings from hadith literature," states that in another tradition he examined, he again applied the common link theory and once more succeeded in uncovering the true origin of the report. According to him, when the isnad chains of these woman-demeaning traditions are traced backwards, one observes that the segment extending to the Prophet proceeds through a single or at most two channels, whereas the real multiplicity of transmission begins only at the point he calls the common link. In the case of the tradition describing women as "the greatest fitna," he notes that this nodal point clusters around Sulaiman al-Taymi, which indicates that the historical origin of the report is not the Prophet but rather this second/third-generation ascetic from Basra. For Juynboll, the fact that the isnad expands only at the common-link level demonstrates that the tradition cannot be reliably projected further back than this transmitter, and this structure reveals that the attribution to the Prophet is essentially a later strategy of legitimization (Juynboll 1989).

Harald Motzki's (1948-2019) understanding of hadith diverges from traditional Western approaches and is grounded in methodological critique and a multilayered historical analysis. Rather than treating hadiths merely as data points for reconstructing historical events, Motzki regards them as dynamic sources that reflect the mindset and development of early Islamic society. He critically interrogates the generalizing tendencies of earlier Western scholars such as Goldziher and Schacht, who often regarded isnads as entirely fictitious constructs (Motzki 2005). Motzki argues that relying on isolated criteria such as either matn or isnad alone is insufficient to assess the historical reliability and dating of hadiths. Instead, he proposes a comprehensive source-critical method that involves the combined analysis of matn, isnad, and the structural and textual features of the collections in which the traditions appear (Motzki 2005). This methodological synthesis is known as "isnad-cum-matn" analysis (Motzki 2005). Motzki pays close attention to their transmission patterns

and variant forms. In Motzki's view, hadiths should not be subjected to a binary classification of either authentic or forged. Rather, each tradition must be studied within its historical context. He rejects Schacht's assumption that all isnads are fabricated and instead demonstrates that structural features such as the "common link" can serve as valuable indicators for understanding the historical transmission of hadiths.

However, he emphasizes that the presence of a common link does not necessarily prove that a tradition originated with that transmitter, nor does it indicate fabrication; instead, such figures may have functioned as conduits for earlier transmission traditions (Motzki 2005). Motzki's approach enables scholars to trace the development of hadiths during the pre-literary oral phase and to examine how variant versions evolved. In this sense, he adopts a more affirmative stance regarding the origins of hadith, arguing that many traditions were committed to writing at an earlier stage than previously assumed and could have been reliably transmitted. Thus, he challenges the notion that hadith literature is merely a late literary construct, proposing instead a historically traceable tradition of transmission. Motzki's theory of hadith represents a critical engagement with Western scholarship while simultaneously incorporating its methodological insights. He develops a context-sensitive, structurally informed, and philologically grounded methodology that integrates multiple dating techniques. In doing so, he contributes significantly to the reconstruction of historical criticism in modern-day hadith studies, emphasizing both reliability and methodological rigor.

JORGE AGUADÉ: FITAN TRADITIONS AND DATING METHODOLOGIES

Jorge Aguadé's research on the dating of fitan traditions focuses on the work *Kitab al-Fitan* by Nuʿaym ibn Hammad. Rather than emphasizing isnad analysis, Aguadé seeks to determine when these traditions were likely produced, based on their historical context. Employing the "post quem" (earliest possible date) and "ante quem" (latest possible date) methods, Aguadé attempts to show that certain fitan reports began circulating in the 3rd century AH (Aguadé 1976). In this framework, he focuses on nine distinct reports and argues that not all of them originated with Nuʿaym. Some, he suggests, may have been fabricated by figures frequently cited in fitan isnads, such as Abu Qabil, Ibn Lahia (d. 174AH), and Layth ibn Saʿd (d. 175AH). The recurring presence of these transmitters particularly in eschatological reports indicates, in Aguadé's view, a tendency to attribute this type of report to them (Aguadé 1976). Aguadé also contends that the content of some reports in *Kitab al-Fitan* is directly related to the political and social circumstances of the historical figures presumed to have fabricated them. For instance, according to Aguadé, some reports mention a battle said to have taken place between the Egyptians and the Andalusians at Ausim formerly known as Wasim located fifteen kilometers northwest of Cairo. Other traditions predict that, after the Andalusians are defeated, the Ethiopians will attack Egypt; indeed, one report even states that the Ethiopians will reach Menf, ancient Memphis, near Cairo. Aguadé emphasizes that although these traditions speak of battles involving Andalusians, Egyptians, and Ethiopians, none of the events they describe has any historical basis. In his view, the reports were shaped by an attempt to generate an eschatological meaning and sought to create an impression of reliability by invoking the authority of Companions associated with Egypt in their isnads.

According to Aguadé's assessment, these accounts that the accounts of these battles do not correspond to historical reality; in particular, the claim that the Andalusians were not Muslims and the prediction that the Ethiopians would attack Egypt lack historical support. Thus, it becomes clear that most of these reports reflect political and social anxieties especially those stemming from the Coptic uprising and tensions in Egyptian-Ethiopian relations rather than actual events and are products of eschatological expectations and subsequently constructed narratives (Aguadé 1976).

In the *Apocalyptic Imagination* (Collins 1998), Collins highlights vaticinium ex eventu the technique of presenting past events as prophecy as one of the core structures of Jewish and Babylonian apocalyptic texts. Collins notes that Akkadian texts such as the Marduk and Shulgi prophetic speeches, the Uruk Prophecy, and the Dynastic Prophecy depict historical events through symbolic and cryptic language, presenting them as if they were future predictions. Phrases like "A prince will arise… another man who is unknown will arise" closely resemble the symbolic expressions found in Daniel 11, or Daniel 8:23-5. This technique allows the author to present history under the guise of prophecy, lending divine authority to the narrative

while simultaneously legitimizing contemporary political or ideological positions (Collins 1998). Additionally, in texts like the Apocalypse of Weeks, the division of history into a fixed number of periods and the positioning of the author's own time within that scheme reinforces the idea of a divinely ordered universe (Collins 1998). In this context, Aguadé's argument that Nuʿaym's fitan traditions were retrospectively constructed based on events that had already occurred aligns closely with Collins's approach. This technique demonstrates that such traditions are narrative tools used to reinterpret historical events and construct political legitimacy. Aguadé's approach to fitan traditions shows significant parallels with the hadith theories of prominent Western scholars such as Goldziher and Schacht. These connections are especially evident in the shared assumption that many hadiths were produced within specific historical contexts, and that the isnads were added later to lend authority to these fabricated reports.

Goldziher argued that most hadiths emerged after the Prophet's death and were responses to sectarian, political, and theological controversies in early Islamic society. He viewed hadiths as texts that intervened in historical processes and served to legitimize religious and political authority. In particular, he emphasized how Umayyad and Abbasid rulers used fabricated hadiths to justify their regimes.

Similarly, Aguadé points out that several reports found in *Kitab al-Fitan* were likely produced to support the Abbasids. According to Aguadé, these reports are presented as prophecies but are retrospective reinterpretations of past events, written in religious language. This reading closely aligns with Goldziher's core argument that hadiths were constructed as tools of religious legitimation in response to historical developments.

Schacht, building upon Goldziher, asserted that many hadiths were created to support evolving legal doctrines and that their isnads were extended backwards to fabricate a link to the Prophet. He particularly emphasized that post-Shafiʿi (d. 204AH) scholars retroactively inserted hadiths into legal debates to establish authority. Aguadé makes a similar observation regarding fitan traditions: Many of these reports cluster around specific transmitters and reflect the political and social circumstances of their time. Schacht's "common link" theory, which posits that a recurring transmitter in isnads likely represents the period when the report first emerged, directly resonates with Aguadé's identification of figures like Abu Qabil, Ibn Lahia, and Layth ibn Saʿd as central nodes in the transmission of fitan reports (Aguadé 1976). Aguadé's suggestion that these individuals may have been the originators of certain traditions parallels Schacht's view that such hadiths were not genuinely Prophetic, but later constructions.

WILFERD MADELUNG: THE POLITICAL FUNCTIONS AND HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF FITAN TRADITIONS

Wilferd Madelung's 1981 article titled "Abdullah b. al-Zubayr and the Mahdi" is a groundbreaking study in terms of examining the historical and political background of the fitan traditions in early Islamic history (Madelung 1981). Madelung demonstrates that most of these traditions primarily functioned to provide political legitimacy and to serve as propaganda (Madelung 1981). This approach offers a profound historical critique of the Mahdi narratives and apocalyptic signs found in the hadith literature. To prove his main argument, Madelung analyzes a well-known and detailed Mahdi hadith found in Abu Dawud's *Sunan*. This report describes how, after the death of a caliph, a man flees from Medina to Mecca and is forcibly nominated by the people for the caliphate. An army sent against him from Syria is swallowed by the earth between Mecca and Medina (the *khasf* incident). Then, supporters arrive from Iraq and Syria, and an army sent by a man from the Kalb tribe is defeated. The report states that this person will establish an ideal rule of justice lasting seven years before passing away (Madelung 1981). Madelung shows that all the key elements contained in this narrative correspond precisely to the life of Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr (d. 73AH), who rebelled against Umayyad rule during the Second Fitna. According to Madelung, the "death of the caliph" in the tradition refers to the death of Muawiya or Yazid, and the "man fleeing to Mecca" clearly points to Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr himself (Madelung 1981).

The interruption of the Syrian army's campaign toward the Hijaz and the political tensions involving the Kalb tribe, one of the key supporters of the Umayyads (Madelung 1981), provide strong evidence that the hadith is actually a depiction of historical events. Madelung argues that this report was not originally produced with a Mahdi expectation but as a political text intended to support Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr's claim to the caliphate

(Madelung 1981). In various versions of the report, it is stated that the person who first circulated it was Abdullah ibn al-Harith; this individual received allegiance on behalf of Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr during the temporary power vacuum in Basra and promoted propaganda in his favor (Madelung 1981).

However, Madelung explains that this political narrative gradually underwent a process of "Mahdisations". The failure of Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr's rebellion caused the predictions in the narrative to contradict historical reality (Madelung 1981). As a result, the report eventually transformed from a description of a past political event into a prophetic account of the future appearance of the Mahdi (Madelung 1981). In this transformation, the role of Basran transmitters, especially figures like Qatada ibn Diama (d. 117AH) was significant. Madelung identifies that these transmitters concealed or altered certain names in the isnad in an effort to universalize the report, thereby obscuring its historical context (Madelung 1981). Even names such as Abdullah ibn Safwan, which appear in the chain of transmission and are known to have been close supporters of Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr illustrates how historical actors were used to grant legitimacy to the hadiths (Madelung 1981). Through the example of Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr, Madelung demonstrates that many apocalyptic elements in early hadith literature were originally political texts produced to legitimize specific historical figures, and that these texts later became sacralized, gradually detached from their historical origins (Madelung 1981). Madelung's analysis provides a solid methodological foundation for the critical examination of Mahdi traditions found in the works of early authors such as Nuʿaym ibn Hammad.

Madelung's approach closely aligns with the hadith theories of earlier Western scholars such as Goldziher and Schacht. This alignment becomes particularly evident in their shared assumption that fitan traditions were produced within specific historical contexts to legitimize certain political actors, and that isnad chains were later constructed to mask this production or to grant these reports religious authority.

Madelung argues that the Mahdi tradition he analyzes was originally crafted as a piece of political propaganda in support of Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr. The report narrates the story of a man fleeing from Medina to Mecca after the death of a caliph, being reluctantly appointed as caliph, the destruction of a Syrian army en route to Medina, and the defeat of another army from the Kalb tribe. Madelung demonstrates that these elements directly correspond to the historical events of Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr's struggle, asserting that the narrative although presented as a hadith was composed to confer religious legitimacy upon his political claim. This perspective closely parallels Goldziher's view that hadiths are not historical records of the Prophet's sayings, but doctrinal documents created posthumously to support emerging sectarian and political ideologies. Schacht's theory further reinforces this connection. Schacht held that most hadiths were developed during later legal and political debates, with isnads retroactively added to connect the content to earlier authorities or the Prophet himself. According to Schacht, hadiths originated at a specific moment in history, and the isnads were extended upward to lend authenticity. Madelung's observation that this report was transformed into a Mahdi tradition through the influence of Basran transmitters such as Qatada ibn Diama serves as a concrete example of this process. While the report initially functioned as a tool to politically support Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr, its isnad was later altered certain names were removed or replaced with more generalized expressions so that the tradition evolved into a messianic prophecy. This transformation reflects Schacht's claim that hadiths were universalized and stripped of their historical context to serve as sources of legal or political authority. In this regard, Madelung's analysis provides a clear, case-based illustration of the broader theories advanced by Goldziher and Schacht. It demonstrates how hadiths could originate as historically rooted narratives serving immediate political functions, only to be reconfigured through isnad modification and reinterpretation into apocalyptic or doctrinal texts. Thus, Madelung's work stands as a significant contribution to the historical-critical understanding of apocalyptic elements in hadith literature, reinforcing key assumptions of classical Western scholarship.

MICHAEL COOK: A CONTEXT-CENTERED APPROACH AND THE LIMITS OF THE SCHACHTIAN METHOD

The fundamental problem addressed in Michael Cook's article "Eschatology and the Dating of Tradition" is determining when hadiths from the early Islamic period originated. Instead of written books from this era, what we possess are short texts

transmitted through isnad chains. Identifying the origin of these reports is critically important for understanding early Islamic history (Cook 1992). Cook decides to test the method of Schacht, who had held the dominant view in the field up to that time (Cook 1992). In his studies on legal traditions, Schacht adopted a skeptical approach, arguing that most isnad chains were fabricated later and that the majority of reports appeared much later than claimed beginning roughly from the mid-second Islamic century. The instrument that substantiated Schacht's skepticism was the common link theory. According to this theory, if a report is transmitted by multiple individuals, tracing the isnad chains backwards leads to a single transmitter where the lines converge. This person, the Common Link, is according to Schacht the real origin of the report. Everyone mentioned before him in the chain (such as a Companion or the Prophet) was added later to lend credibility to the report (Cook 1992). Therefore, the earliest possible date for the emergence of a report is the period in which this Common Link lived. Cook chooses fitan reports to test the reliability of Schacht's theory, which is based on internal isnad analysis, by comparing it with external historical evidence (Cook 1992). If a fitan report was fabricated after a particular event occurred, it predicts that event as if it were a prophecy. This provides an external, solid terminus a quo for when the tradition must have arisen, and this date can then be compared with the common link date produced by isnad analysis (Cook 1992). Cook's critique of Schacht arises from this comparison. Through three striking examples, he demonstrates that the date of the Common Link does not always reflect the actual date when the report originated:

The first report foretold that the Andalusians would attack Egypt. Historical records show that this attack took place in 199AH/815CE. This proves that the report must have been fabricated sometime after the year 815 CE. However, when we examine the isnads, Ibn Lahia (d. 174AH) appears as the common link (Cook 1992). According to common link theory, the earliest date of the report should be around the year 790 CE. Cook notes that 790 is earlier than the event in the year 815 CE. In other words, the report would have had to exist before the common link died. This suggests that the common link may not be the inventor of the text but rather the first person to gather and record it among the people (Cook 1992).

The second report refers to Tiberius, the son of the Byzantine emperor Justinian II. The end of Tiberius's life corresponds to 93AH/711CE. This indicates that the report was fabricated very early, likely before the year 737 CE, during the Umayyad period. Yet when we examine the isnads, two different common links emerge in two different regions (Egypt and Syria): Ibn Lahia and Artah ibn al-Mundhir (d. 163AH). Not only does this violate the assumption that a report has a single common link, but the death dates of these individuals (779 and 790 CE) are much later than the 730s CE, the period in which the report is historically estimated to have been fabricated (Cook 1992). Thus, the isnad chains fail to identify the true origin of the text.

As Madelung also notes, the details of the third report were clearly constructed to support the rebellion of Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr between the years 684-692 CE (Cook 1992). This is an extraordinarily early dating, one that even challenges Schacht's thesis that traditions generally begin to appear after the year 718 CE. When we look at the isnad scheme, the Successor Qatada ibn Diama (d. 117) appears as the common link (Cook 1992). Cook's interpretation is as follows: While the historical evidence places the report in the 680s CE, the common link points to the year 718 CE. This shows that although the report was fabricated very early, it entered the common literary tradition only later, through a more reliable authority such as Qatada (Cook 1992). Therefore, although Schacht's general idea that isnads grow backwards (that is, earlier names are added to enhance credibility) is correct, the lifespan of the common link is not the absolute birth date of the text (Cook 1992). Cook acknowledges that Schacht is generally correct that isnad chains were largely constructed retrospectively (Cook 1992). However, he demonstrates that common link theory is not a flawless mechanism for determining the exact emergence date of a report. The common link may not be the inventor of the text but rather the first person to compile or standardize it; therefore, his lifetime may differ from the true birth date of the text. Cook's study shows that Schacht's methodological skepticism should continue, but it must be supplemented and corrected through external historical evidence (Cook 1992).

In his textual study of *Kitab al-Fitan*, especially in his detailed analysis of a unique apocalyptic narrative within Nuʿaym ibn Hammad's compilation, Michael Cook pushes this perspective further. He

argues that the narrative in question diverges from typical Muslim eschatological reports by employing structural features and chronological schemes borrowed from Jewish and Christian apocalyptic traditions such as the division of history into symbolic "week" and "epoch," and references to figures like the Christ. Michael Cook meticulously analyzes the isnad of the report, which starts with recognizable transmitters from *Hims*, but then shifts to a vague and ahistorical attribution: "It has reached us (balaghana) that Nath was a prophet." This statement indicates legendary or pseudepigraphal origins. According to Michael Cook, this ambiguity, along with the awkward Arabic and unidiomatic expressions, further indicates a non-Muslim provenance (Cook 1993). Particularly striking is his observation that the chronicle references figures such as Yazid II in highly symbolic terms describing him as "the braggart," "the demolisher of the building," and "the destroyer of the images" and makes explicit mention of his iconoclastic actions. Michael Cook points out that such motifs reflect Christian rather than Muslim concerns, suggesting that the text was either directly translated from, or heavily influenced by, a Christian-Syrian apocalypse. Moreover, the chronicle employs an alternative calendrical system based on the conquest of Syria (rather than the Hijra), further distancing it from standard Islamic historiographical models. Based on the cumulative internal evidence, Michael Cook proposes that this portion of *Kitab al-Fitan* is likely a reworked Arabic version of a non-Muslim apocalypse dating to the early Abbasid period a conclusion that places the text at the intersection of Muslim literary tradition and interreligious cultural exchange (Cook 1993). Michael Cook's approach also aligns in part with that of scholars like Harald Motzki, who emphasize the integration of isnad and matn analysis. However, the key difference lies in their treatment of isnad while Motzki places methodological trust in isnad analysis, Michael Cook generally treats it as a supplementary element. Motzki's interpretation based on his isnad-cum-matn method regards isnad as a structural carrier of the text (Motzki 2005), whereas for Cook, this role is replaced by contextual functionality. Thus, Michael Cook does not view isnad in isolation from the text, but as a component that can only be meaningfully understood within the historical context of the report.

DAVID COOK: ISLAMIC APOCALYPTICISM, ITS SOURCES AND POSITION IN SUNNI TRADITION

David Cook, in his evaluation of fitan traditions early examples of Islamic apocalyptic literature argues that the structural framework of these reports, early examples of Islamic apocalyptic literature, strongly aligns with classical apocalyptic narratives. According to him, the temporal trajectory in these texts indicates a continual decline and corruption; events unfold along a sharp axis of moral, political, and social deterioration. Ultimately, these narratives reach a fitna, "crisis point" so narrow that only a purified and righteous minority can pass through it. In David Cook's analysis, the central feature of this period of fitna is that it constitutes a divine process of testing and purification (Cook 2021).

The classical Muslim apocalyptic tradition is shaped by the eschatological sensibilities of early Islamic society, yet it has evolved in both form and function. Muslim apocalyptic texts trace the origins of this tradition directly to the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, that is, to the socio-political context of 7th century CE Arabia. However, due to the anonymous nature of the groups that likely produced the earliest fitan narratives, it is not possible to date these texts with precision. This observation supports David Cook's claim that early apocalyptic traditions were not grounded in fixed authority but were rather shaped by anonymous agents during periods of social or political crisis. According to David Cook, this anonymity allowed the texts to remain open to interpretation and to be refunctionalized according to the needs of different historical moments. David Cook argues that the primary form of apocalyptic traditions typically involves a statement by the Prophet or one of his close companions regarding the end of the world. These statements range from short warnings to long and complex eschatological scenarios. According to his analysis, this variation indicates that classical apocalyptic texts are less concerned with literary cohesion than with didactic function. For example, some reports that are not found in the Quran though not necessarily in contradiction with it eventually became foundational elements of an evolving apocalyptic doctrine. Another significant point emphasized in the literature is that so-called

"lengthy traditions" are largely compilations of shorter reports. This editorial practice reveals the composite and constructed nature of apocalyptic discourse. Such textual assemblage is central to David Cook's reading of works like *Kitab al-Fitan*, where he identifies a sequential narrative logic and a tendency toward scenario-building. For David Cook, these compilations function as mechanisms for managing crises of religious and political authority. Another core issue highlighted by David Cook is the marginal status of apocalyptic traditions within normative Islamic sciences. These traditions are generally excluded from sound hadith collections and remain peripheral to the mainstream legal-theological canon. Yet, as Cook points out, despite their exclusion from authoritative corpora, apocalyptic narratives have gained widespread popularity among the broader Muslim public. This disparity underscores the complex position of apocalyptic texts: they operate at the intersection of belief and popular religiosity, without enjoying full institutional legitimacy. Perhaps the most striking structural feature of the apocalyptic tradition is its emphasis not on the end itself, but on the preceding stages of chaos, disorder, and disintegration. While the Quran states that the timing of the final hour is known only to God, fitan traditions render this unknowability tangible through elaborate narratives of catastrophe and moral collapse. According to Cook, this shift reveals the central role of disaster in Islamic eschatological imagination as a narrative instrument for articulating meaning and contesting the legitimacy of the prevailing world order. In this sense, fitan literature does more than announce an imminent end; it exposes the cracks in the present and functions as a critique of political and moral failure (Cook 2005).

David Cook compares the concept of the chosen minority, central to fitan reports, with archetypes found in Jewish and Christian scriptures, such as Gideon's test. This comparative approach reflects David Cook's effort to analyze apocalyptic texts within the broader framework of universal religious discourse. Ultimately, David Cook interprets the concept of fitna as the eschatological spiritual filter a mechanism of divine separation and purification that determines who is truly worthy of the truth (Cook 2021). The background of these traditions is marked by social uncertainty, crises of legitimacy within the caliphate, and external threats. Within this framework, many reports concern pre-apocalyptic events and feature figures such as the Mahdi, the Dajjal, the Dabba, (Cook 2021) the Messiah, and Gog and Magog (Cook 2021).

When evaluating Islamic apocalyptic literature, David Cook argues that fitan traditions largely emerged as a product of the political and theological debates that took place between the 1st and 4th centuries AH. According to him, these reports are not inherently less authentic than other Islamic traditions; rather, they all arose within the same contentious historical context (Cook 2021). For this reason, the general Sunni distrust toward apocalyptic texts stems from the widespread belief that such traditions serve political functions more than they reflect prophetic authenticity. David Cook emphasizes that the fitan and malahim literature was particularly compiled by early transmitters such as Nuʿaym ibn Hammad but was later excluded from the canonical Sunni hadith collections. This exclusion reflects a natural distance the Sunni tradition maintained from apocalyptic narratives. For instance, traditionalist scholars like Ibn Kathir only incorporated apocalyptic reports found in sources deemed authentic, while rejecting those considered weak, fabricated, or disputed. Consequently, many of these reports came to be classified within the category of *mawdu* (fabricated) traditions (Cook 2021). Although Mahdi narratives occupy a significant place in both Sunni and Shiʿi traditions, David Cook argues that they developed more coherently within Shiʿism, which is more attuned to doctrines of occultation and the concept of a salvific figure. In modern Sunni apocalyptic texts, however, figures such as the Dajjal and Gog and Magog tend to take precedence over the Mahdi. Overall, David Cook attributes the marginalization of apocalyptic texts in the Sunni tradition to their political usage and the traditional authorities' decision to exclude them from the core hadith corpus. According to David Cook, while Islamic apocalyptic literature possesses some unique features, it should not be viewed as a wholly independent and original tradition. In fact, early Muslim apocalyptic texts display clear parallels with Jewish and Christian apocalypticism. These similarities include the concept of fitna as a process of purification and trial, the idea of a small, elect group attaining salvation,

narrative depictions of final battles, and overarching themes of moral decay. David Cook notes that these narratives often align with the content and structure of Jewish-Christian apocalyptic traditions. However, Islamic apocalypticism adapted these elements in accordance with its own theological framework and distinctively developed them. Thus, in David Cook's view, Islamic apocalypticism features both resemblance and divergence. In this context, one of the figures to whom David Cook frequently refers is Kaʿb al-Ahbar, a former Jewish scholar who converted to Islam and became a significant transmitter in early Islamic tradition. His contributions are especially evident in apocalyptic reports concerning the Day of Judgment, the end times, and the Mahdi. David Cook points out that much of the information attributed to Kaʿb stems from *Israiliyyat* sources, and that he played a role in transmitting Jewish apocalyptic expectations into Islamic tradition. However, this interaction did not result in a direct transmission but rather took the form of a reconstruction process shaped within the Islamic theological framework (Cook 2021).

Given all these considerations, it becomes clear that David Cook prioritizes the function of fitan reports within collective consciousness rather than focusing on the authenticity of their isnad structures. In this respect, David Cook's approach closely aligns with that of Michael Cook, who criticized the application of Schacht's method to fitan traditions. Michael Cook argued that while isnad-based critiques may be effective in the analysis of legal texts, they fall short in capturing the nature of fitan reports, which require examination through their textual form and historical context. David Cook similarly relegates isnad analysis to the background and foregrounds the functional and historical dimensions of the text. Although this approach may initially seem different from Motzki's isnad-cum-matn methodology, both ultimately converge in their emphasis on historical context. Both scholars argue that a report cannot be properly understood solely through its isnad; it must also be analyzed through its textual variants, historical function, and ideological usage.

EVALUATION AND DISCUSSION

The findings examined in this study demonstrate that fitan traditions constitute a body of literature in Islamic intellectual history with theological, historical, and sociological dimensions. In Western academic literature, the approaches developed toward apocalyptic traditions generally evaluate these reports through their historical context, political functions, and processes of textual formation. When the Islamic tradition and modern Western academic literature are considered together, it becomes evident that, alongside certain points of convergence, there are also significant methodological divergences regarding the nature and function of fitan traditions.

One of the most notable common points between the two approaches is the recognition that fitan traditions are closely related to the political and social crises of early Islamic history. Classical hadith scholars also recognized that fitan and malahim traditions became widespread particularly during periods of intense political turbulence and therefore approached these reports with caution. Indeed, scholars such as Khatib al-Baghdadi and Ibn Khaldun noted that some of these traditions may rely on weak isnads or may have taken shape through the interpretation of historical events. Similarly, Western scholars such as Aguadé and Madelung examine fitan traditions in terms of their emergence within the context of early political struggles and debates over legitimacy. In this respect, both approaches acknowledge that these reports function as narratives that enable the interpretation of historical crises.

A second point of convergence concerns the social function of apocalyptic narratives. In the Islamic tradition, fitan traditions have often been interpreted as texts that warn believers about how they should behave during periods of tribulation. These traditions emphasize values such as patience, moderation, and the preservation of social order, thereby serving as moral guidance in times of crisis. Western scholarship likewise recognizes that apocalyptic texts perform a similar function. David Cook emphasizes that apocalyptic narratives serve to make sense of social anxieties and to strengthen collective identity. From this perspective, both the Islamic tradition and modern academic studies acknowledge that apocalyptic traditions play an important role in shaping how societies interpret experiences of crisis.

Nevertheless, significant methodological differences exist between the two approaches. The most fundamental point of divergence concerns the epistemological status of the hadith corpus. Classical hadith methodology evaluates the reliability of reports through criteria such as the strength of the isnads, the reliability of transmitters, and textual

coherence. Within this framework, the authenticity of a report is determined largely based on the reliability of its chain of transmission. By contrast, in Western academic literature hadiths are often examined through historical criticism and textual formation processes, and some scholars have argued that a substantial portion of these reports may have been produced in later periods. In this context, Goldziher and Schacht maintained that the hadith corpus emerged as a product of political and legal debates that developed within early Islamic society.

This methodological divergence becomes particularly evident in debates concerning the dating of traditions. Schacht's "common link" theory suggests that a transmitter who repeatedly appears in isnads may represent the period in which the report first emerged. However, Michael Cook has shown that this approach is limited when applied to fitan traditions. According to Cook, since such traditions often emerge as narratives following specific historical events, dating them solely through isnad analysis is insufficient. For this reason, more comprehensive approaches such as Motzki's isnad-cum-matn method aim to produce more balanced results by analyzing both the chains of transmission and the textual content together.

Another important area of discussion concerns the similarities between Islamic apocalyptic literature and Jewish-Christian apocalyptic traditions. In Western scholarship, some researchers interpret these similarities as the result of cultural interaction or transmission. However, within the Islamic tradition, it is emphasized that such parallels do not necessarily indicate direct textual borrowing. Since Islamic thought recognizes that prophets may convey certain future events through revelation, explaining such narratives solely through cultural influence is considered a reductionist approach. Therefore, interpreting these similarities within the framework of shared religious themes, moral concerns, and eschatological expectations appears to offer a more balanced perspective.

This study suggests that the most productive approach to studying fitan traditions is to employ fitan different methodological traditions in a complementary manner. Classical hadith methodology provides powerful tools for analyzing the structure of transmission chains and the internal coherence of texts. Modern historical and sociological methods, on the other hand, help to illuminate the political and social context in which these traditions emerged. The combined use of these approaches may allow for a more comprehensive understanding of both the historical development and the religious functions of the fitan literature.

Several important areas for future research also emerge from this discussion. First, the more systematic application of isnad-cum-matn analysis to fitan traditions could clarify the processes through which these reports were transmitted. Second, interdisciplinary approaches such as historical sociology could provide valuable insights into how apocalyptic narratives shape forms of consciousness and identity within Muslim societies. Third, comparative studies between Islamic apocalyptic literature and apocalyptic traditions in other religious contexts may enable these reports to be examined through their functional and structural characteristics.

Finally, it is important to examine how these traditions were interpreted in later periods. Although these reports occupy a relatively limited place within the classical hadith corpus, they continue to play a significant role in popular religious discourse, political rhetoric, and contemporary interpretations of crises. For this reason, the literature of fitan may also be regarded as an important field of research for understanding how eschatological thought is shaped in contemporary Muslim societies.

Fitan traditions represent a dynamic field of literature shaped within the framework of theological thought, historical experience, and social consciousness. Establishing a methodological dialogue between the Islamic tradition and modern Western academic approaches may contribute to a more balanced understanding of this literature. Bringing together the textual criticism tools of classical hadith methodology with modern historical and sociological analyses holds the potential to reveal more comprehensively both the historical origins and the religious and social functions of apocalyptic traditions.

CONCLUSIONS

This study demonstrates that it is insufficient to regard fitan traditions in Islamic intellectual history merely as narratives describing the Day of Judgment or as prophecies about the future. Rather, these traditions constitute a body of literature closely connected with the political struggles, social crises, and debates over legitimacy that characterized early Islamic society. In this sense, fitan traditions may be understood as narratives that reflect theological

interpretations, historical experiences, and social anxieties simultaneously.

In the present study, the evaluations found within the Islamic scholarly tradition and the approaches developed in Western academic literature have been examined comparatively. This comparison reveals that there are certain points of convergence between the two approaches. The observation that fitan traditions are related to the political and social crises experienced in early Islamic society is acknowledged both by classical hadith scholars and by modern researchers. At the same time, however, significant differences can be observed in the methods and epistemological assumptions employed in evaluating these traditions. While classical hadith methodology assesses the reliability of reports primarily through the analysis of isnad chains and the evaluation of transmitters, Western academic scholarship tends to focus more on historical context, processes of textual formation, and the political functions of these narratives.

The study further shows that a single methodological approach is insufficient for the analysis of fitan traditions. The methods of isnad and textual criticism developed within the classical science of hadith provide important tools for understanding the transmission structure of these reports. At the same time, modern historical and sociological analyses offer valuable insights into the political and social contexts in which these traditions emerged. For this reason, the combined use of different methodological approaches allows for a more balanced and comprehensive evaluation of the fitan literature.

Several important areas for future research also emerge from this discussion. First, the transmission processes of fitan traditions should be examined in greater detail through the joint analysis of their isnad structures and textual variants. In addition, interdisciplinary approaches such as historical sociology and the sociology of religion may contribute significantly to understanding the forms of meaning and interpretation that these narratives have produced within Muslim societies. Furthermore, comparative studies between Islamic apocalyptic literature and apocalyptic traditions found in other religious contexts may enable these narratives to be analyzed regarding their functional roles and historical contexts.

AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization, A.T.Ş. methodology, A.T.Ş.; investigation, A.T.Ş.; resources, A.T.Ş.; writing – original draft preparation, A.T.Ş.; writing – review and editing, A.T.Ş. Author have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI) GENERATED TEXT DECLARATION

During the preparation of this work, the author used [ChatGPT / GPT-5] to provide alternative phrasing suggestions for the abstract and conclusion sections, and to improve the grammar and fluency of the English writing, as the author is not a native speaker of English. The accuracy of the information contained in the AI-generated content was verified by the author. All core elements of the research, including the formulation of the research aim and the final revisions, were performed manually by the author. After using this tool, the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares no conflict of interest.

ETHICS STATEMENT

This study has been prepared in accordance with the principles of research and publication ethics. During the preparation of the study, the principles of academic integrity and research honesty were observed, and the study was conducted in compliance with national and international ethical standards. All sources used in the article have been properly cited, and no plagiarism, data fabrication, falsification, or other forms of scientific misconduct are involved. Ethics committee approval is not required for this study.

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