



Deconstruction of the Common Link Theory: Harald Motzki's Methodological Critique of G.H.A. Juynboll's Skepticism in Hadith Dating

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Abstract: The dating of hadith remains a contested frontier in the academic study of early Islam. G.H.A. Juynboll, refining Joseph Schacht's legacy, advanced the common link theory, which treats the convergence point of transmission chains as the historical originator and probable fabricator of a tradition, while dismissing single strands as fictitious. This article reconstructs Harald Motzki's methodological critique of that theory as articulated in *Whither Hadith-Studies?* and *Dating Muslim Traditions*, and subjects both positions to a dialectical reading. Using a qualitative library-research design with content, comparative, and interpretive analysis of primary sources, the study maps the scholarly factions involved and isolates the first principles on which each argument rests. The findings show that Juynboll's identification of the common link with a forger relies on an *argumentum e silentio* and on a statistically unrealistic model of branching transmission, whereas Motzki reframes the common link as the first systematic collector and professional teacher, and grounds dating in the correlation of *isnad* and *matn*. The article further argues that the *isnad-cum- matn* method does not escape critique, since it confronts a structural circularity that recent scholarship has termed a principle of uncertainty. The contribution lies in offering Indonesian hadith studies a non-apologetic synthesis that neither absolutizes skepticism nor treats Motzki's rebuttal as a closed verdict.

Keywords: common link; Harald Motzki; G.H.A. Juynboll; *isnad-cum- matn*; hadith dating; orientalist skepticism.

Abstrak: Penanggalan hadis tetap menjadi medan perdebatan paling tajam dalam kajian Islam awal di dunia akademik. G.H.A. Juynboll, yang menyempurnakan warisan Joseph Schacht, mengajukan teori common link, yakni teori yang memperlakukan titik pertemuan jalur periwayatan sebagai pencipta historis sekaligus pemalsu sebuah hadis, sembari menafikan single strand sebagai jalur fiktif.

Artikel ini merekonstruksi kritik metodologis Harald Motzki terhadap teori tersebut sebagaimana tertuang dalam *Whither Hadith-Studies?* dan *Dating Muslim Traditions*, lalu membaca kedua posisi itu secara dialektis. Dengan desain kualitatif berbasis library research yang memadukan analisis isi, komparatif, dan interpretatif atas sumber primer, kajian ini memetakan faksi-faksi keilmuan yang terlibat dan membongkar prinsip dasar yang menopang masing-masing argumen. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa identifikasi Juynboll atas common link sebagai pemalsu bertumpu pada argumentum e silentio dan model percabangan transmisi yang secara statistik mustahil, sementara Motzki memosisikan ulang common link sebagai kolektor sistematis pertama dan guru profesional, serta menambatkan penanggalan pada korelasi isناد dan matan. Artikel ini menegaskan bahwa metode isناد-cum-matn sendiri tidak kebal kritik, sebab ia berhadapan dengan sirkularitas struktural yang oleh sarjana mutakhir disebut sebagai prinsip ketidakpastian. Kontribusinya terletak pada tawaran sintesis non-apologetik bagi studi hadis Indonesia yang tidak mengabsolutkan skeptisisme maupun memperlakukan bantahan Motzki sebagai vonis final.

Kata Kunci: common link; Harald Motzki; G.H.A. Juynboll; isناد-cum-matn; penanggalan hadis; skeptisisme orientalis

1. Introduction

The study of hadith in Western academic circles arose from a question that has never been fully resolved: Can texts codified more than two centuries after the Prophet's death be treated as valid evidence of events in the first century of the Hijri calendar? This question touches on the epistemological foundations of how a religious community acquires knowledge about its past. The answers provided by scholars over the past century and a half have divided the field into camps whose arguments clash at a fundamental level. This clash extends far beneath the surface of the data and touches upon the axioms that determine how that data is interpreted.

Ignaz Goldziher pioneered this skeptical approach. In *Muhammedanische Studien*, he concluded that the hadith corpus primarily documents the theological, legal, and political struggles of the Muslim community during the second and third centuries rather than recording the Prophet's authentic sayings (Goldziher, 1971). Goldziher read the hadith as a philologist would read the Pseudo-Isidorian Decretals documents whose internal anachronisms reveal their date of origin. Joseph Schacht extended this skepticism to the realm of law. Through his analysis of al-Shāfi's works, particularly *Kitāb al-Umm* and *al-Risālah*, Schacht formulated three tools that would later become

the standard arsenal of revisionism: *backward projection*, *argumentum e silentio*, and the *common link* phenomenon (Schacht, 1950). His thesis was unequivocal: isnād developed backward in a gradual process, such that the chains with the most perfect format were, in fact, the youngest in age.

G.H.A. Juynboll developed the phenomenon of the *common link* originally mentioned in a footnote by Schacht into a comprehensive dating method. He introduced technical terms that continue to dominate the discussion to this day, namely *isnad bundle*, *single strand*, *partial common link*, *spider*, *dive*, and *knot* (Juynboll, 1989, 1993, 2001). For Juynboll, the point where multiple chains of transmission converge is the only historically verifiable node, and the figure at that node is the person who first circulated in other words, fabricated a hadith (Juynboll, 1983). This paradigm spread throughout Islamic studies departments in Europe and, through translation, also found its way into Indonesian classrooms (Masrur, 2007).

This skeptical consensus faced its most formidable challenger in Harald Motzki. Motzki's career did not begin with hadith. His 1978 dissertation at the University of Bonn dealt with Egypt's non-Muslim minority in the second half of the eighteenth century and Bonaparte's expedition a topic far removed from isnad. His intervention in hadith studies truly made its mark in 1991, when he published an analysis of ʿAbd al-Razzāq's *al-Muṣannaf* and concluded that some of the material within it could be traced back to the first century of the Hijri calendar (Motzki, 1991). Five years later, Motzki launched a frontal attack on Juynboll through the article *Quo vadis, Ḥadīth-Forschung?* in the journal *Der Islam*, the English version of which was widely circulated under the title *Whither Hadith-Studies?* (Motzki, 1996; 2010). This chronological clarification corrects a misconception circulating in some Indonesian literature, which places Motzki's challenge in 1978.

Mapping out the factions is a prerequisite for an honest assessment of this debate. The revisionist-skeptical camp stretches from Goldziher and Schacht to Juynboll, and becomes more pronounced with Michael Cook, Patricia Crone, and John Wansbrough, who cast doubt on nearly all early Islamic sources (Cook, 1981). The second camp, often referred to as the Nijmegen and Saarbrücken schools, is led by Motzki alongside Gregor Schoeler and Andreas Görke, and offers measured optimism regarding the sources through the *isnad-cum- matn* method (Görke & Schoeler, 2008). A third camp

emerged later as an internal critique of the reconciliatory method itself, with Stephen Shoemaker as its most vocal proponent (Shoemaker, 2011). Muslim scholars such as Wael Hallaq contribute a fourth perspective by characterizing the entire issue of authenticity as a pseudo-problem arising from a false premise (Hallaq, 1999).

The Indonesian literature on hadith studies exhibits a tendency that undermines its scientific value. Most studies treat Motzki's rebuttal as a decisive victory that settles the matter, as if criticism of Juynboll automatically restores the hadith's full authenticity (see Ulummudin, 2020; Ramdhani, 2021). This interpretation skips over a crucial step. Motzki's rebuttal undermines Juynboll's claim of forgery without necessarily proving the hadith's attribution to the Prophet, and his alternative method contains structural weaknesses acknowledged even by his own supporters (Motzki, 2005). This article fills that gap by analyzing the debate between Juynboll and Motzki dialectically, unpacking the foundational principles of each position, and then subjecting the *isnad-cum- matn* method to the same rigorous critical scrutiny.

Three objectives guide the following discussion. First, to reconstruct the structure of Juynboll's *common link* theory at the level of first principles, that is, the assumptions that must first be accepted for the theory to function. Second, reorganize the five pillars of Motzki's critique into a coherent argumentative framework, complete with its evidential basis. Third, to subject the *isnad-cum- matn* method to a counter-critique so that readers can obtain a comprehensive map of the limits of historical knowledge that can be derived from *isnad* and *matn*.

This study is qualitative in nature, employing a *library research* design and a historical-critical approach. The object of study is text; therefore, all data consists of written arguments found in academic works, rather than field data. Primary sources are divided into two groups. The first group includes Juynboll's works that develop the *common link* theory, encompassing *Muslim Tradition* (1983), a methodological article in *al-Qanṭara* (1989), a study on Nāfi^c in *Der Islam* (1993), and a reexamination of technical terminology in *Islamic Law and Society* (2001). The second group includes Motzki's responses, notably *Whither Hadith-Studies?* (1996/2010), *Dating Muslim Traditions* (2005), a study of *al-Muṣannaf* (1991), and *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence* (2002).

Secondary sources were drawn from reputable international journals and university presses to assess the two positions within the broader discourse. This category includes A. Kevin Reinhart's review in the *Journal of the American Oriental Society* (2010), Halit Özkan's critique of the relationship between the *common link* and the term *madār* (Özkan, 2004), as well as recent debates regarding the limits of the *isnad-cum-matn* method (Pavlovitch, 2016; Shoemaker, 2011). The inclusion of these conflicting sources is intentional, as the aim of this study is dialectical reconstruction, not the defense of any single side.

The analysis proceeds through four mutually reinforcing stages. Content analysis is used to extract and interpret the core claims of each source. Comparative analysis maps the points of convergence and divergence between Juynboll and Motzki on each point of contention. Interpretive analysis explores the epistemological implications of each position, particularly the hidden assumptions that determine the validity of the arguments. The synthesis combines these three layers into a conclusion that maps the boundaries of historical knowledge while pointing the way toward further research. The first-principles approach is applied consistently, so that every claim is tested against the soundness of its supporting premises, regardless of how widely the claim is accepted.

2. Results and Discussion

The Genealogy of Skepticism: From Goldziher to Juynboll

The *common link* theory did not come out of thin air. It is the third offshoot of an intellectual lineage in which each generation has deepened the sense of suspicion. Goldziher laid down its foundational premise at the end of the nineteenth century. The hadith, he argued, is a mirror reflecting the face of the community that shaped it; thus, it records the doctrinal debates and political factions of the second century far more faithfully than it records the Prophet's sayings (Goldziher, 1971). This premise shifts the burden of proof. Since Goldziher, authenticity has ceased to be given and has become a claim requiring proof. That burden falls on the shoulders of those who assert that a hadith originates from the Propheti.

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Juynboll's position lies at the extreme end of the spectrum. A reviewer of *Muslim Tradition* noted that Juynboll's skepticism requires readers to believe in such a complex and coordinated web of lies that it makes more sense to assume the Prophet did, in fact, occasionally utter some of the hadiths attributed to him. This irony reveals a structural weakness at the heart of the paradigm. A theory that requires a massive conspiracy to explain the uniformity of the data bears a heavier burden of improbability than the hypothesis it seeks to replace.

The most radical wing of the skeptical camp goes even further than Juynboll. John Wansbrough treats all early Islamic sources as later-composed salvation literature, thereby stripping both the Qur'an and the hadith of their historical grounding. Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, in *Hagarism*, reconstruct early Islam almost entirely from non-Muslim sources because they consider internal sources to be unreliable (Crone & Cook, 1977). These extreme positions underscore a common logic that binds the entire skeptical camp: the methodological presumption that the burden of proof rests entirely with those claiming authenticity, while falsity is assumed as the default state that requires no proof.

The opposition to this line of argument did not begin with Motzki. Fuat Sezgin and Nabia Abbott were the first to challenge Schacht's thesis by presenting evidence of written documentation of hadiths dating back much earlier than what the skeptical camp acknowledges, while Muhammad Mustafa al-A'zami launched a detailed attack on the foundations of *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*. This optimistic camp, which relies heavily on evidence of early writing, is often labeled "apologetic" by its opponents. Motzki's contribution takes a different methodological approach, as he uses

the skeptics' own tools to dismantle their conclusions from within, rather than attacking them from the outside with traditional premises.

This line of debate reached Indonesia through a relatively narrow channel. Ali Masrur introduced the theory of the *common link* to Indonesian-speaking readers through a monograph that traced the historical roots of hadith using Juynboll's framework, and that work long served as the primary gateway for graduate students in Indonesia (Masrur, 2007). The consequences were twofold. On the one hand, terms such as *isnad bundle*, *single strand*, and *common link* became familiar in Indonesian hadith studies classrooms. On the other hand, because the introduction began with Juynboll's framework, Motzki's critique often came later and was read as an afterthought, even though that critique challenged the very foundations of the framework that had already been assimilated. This sequence of assimilation helped shape the way the local academic community weighed the entire debate.

The Anatomy of the Common Link Theory and Its Hidden Assumptions

The concept of the *common link* is built upon a series of terms that must be precisely understood before they can be critically evaluated. A *single strand* is a single, unbranched chain, typically extending from the Prophet to the *common link*. The *common link* is the narrator from whom many chains first branch out. *Partial common link* is a narrator in the next layer who also serves as a secondary branching point. *Spider* describes a pattern that resembles many chains but is composed of a deceptive series of *single strands*. *Dive* refers to a lineage that dives directly from a later collector to an older authority by bypassing the *common link*. *Knot* is a small junction where several lineages intersect (Juynboll, 1989; 2007).

Juynboll's ideal *isnad* structure can be visualized as an inverted funnel. It has a single source the Prophet, who transmitted the hadith to one companion, who passed it on to one *tābi^cī*, who in turn passed it on to one *tābi^c al-tābi^cīn*, and so on until it reaches the *common link*. From the *common link* upward, the chain branches out widely toward the *partial common links*, and then toward third-century collectors such as al-Bukhārī and Muslim. Juynboll identifies the *common link* as the creator of the *matn* as well as the compiler of the names of the Companions and *tābi^cīn* in the *single strand* below it. In many cases, this figure lived in the late first or early second century AH,

that is, among the *tābi^cīn* or their students, not in the fourth century as is sometimes mistakenly believed.

Three hidden assumptions underpin this entire framework, and all three are worth examining one by one. The first assumption states that authentic transmission patterns must branch out from the very beginning, so a single chain is automatically suspected. The second assumption states that the appearance of a *common link* in the data is equivalent to the appearance of the text itself in history, so the date of the *common link* is the date of the hadith's origin. The third assumption states that a source's silence regarding a particular chain proves that the chain never existed. These three assumptions are axiomatic for Juynboll. He uses them as starting points that he does not test beforehand and then builds his entire line of reasoning upon them.

This is precisely where the vulnerability of the paradigm lies. A theory whose conclusion is already contained within its assumptions operates in a circular manner. If the single path is defined as false from the outset, then the discovery of a single path anywhere will always result in a verdict of falsification. That verdict stems from a definition set in advance, while evidence serves merely to fill in a form whose outcome is already known. Juynboll, in other words, built a machine whose output is predetermined by the design of its input. Motzki's critique strikes precisely at this joint.

An illustration clarifies this mechanism. Imagine a hadith collected by al-Bukhārī and Muslim through various chains of transmission. When all the chains are stacked, the lines at the bottom converge on a narrator from the generation of *tābi^c al-tābi^cīn*, for example, a figure from Basra or Kufa, and from that figure the chains branch out to a dozen or so students. Juynboll interprets that figure as a *common link* and treats the chain of names below him which extends in a single, unbroken line all the way to the Prophet as a fictional construct. This interpretation assigns historical weight to the branches above the *common link* while stripping that weight from the single chain below it, even though both parts originate from the same body of data. It is this allocation of historical value based on graphical form rather than on a case-by-case examination of each account that Motzki would later challenge.

Juynboll refines this schema with additional categories that reveal both its rigor and its vulnerabilities. An *apparent common link* is a narrator who appears to be a point of convergence but is in fact merely an artifact of

compilation, whereas an *inverted common link* reverses the direction of intertextual dependence. The proliferation of these corrective categories reveals a deeper problem. A method that requires so many exceptions to salvage its main rule indicates that the main rule itself is unstable. Juynboll's divergence from Schacht is more a refinement than a reversal. Schacht treats the *common link* as a dating indicator, while Juynboll makes it the centerpiece of his entire methodology, complete with the claim that the *common link* is a forger who can be named.

One of Juynboll's technical criteria deserves special attention because it determines almost everything. A new point is recognized as a valid *partial common link* if at least three paths radiate from it independently. This threshold of three paths appears conservative and scientific, but this is precisely where the problem lies. This threshold filters out many actual transmission data, since historical transmissions rarely leave three written traces that survive into the era of compilation. By setting a threshold that is difficult to meet, Juynboll ensures that most isnads fail the test and are automatically categorized as suspects. Criteria designed to be this strict function as a machine that produces skepticism as an output guaranteed by its very design.

The *spider* and *dive* categories vividly illustrate this tension. *Spider* is a pattern that at first glance appears to have many branches, but upon closer inspection turns out to be composed of a single chain of paths that tricks the eye. *Dive* is a path that dives directly from a later collector to an older authority by bypassing the *common link*. Juynboll treats both patterns as signs of forgery, since they deviate from the ideal branching pattern he has established. Interpreting deviations in form as evidence of forgery assumes that historical transmission should be neat and symmetrical an assumption that has never been proven. The history of the dissemination of knowledge is, in fact, full of uneven, interrupted, and divergent paths just like the dissemination of classical manuscripts, some copies of which have been lost while others have survived by chance. Making neatness a condition of authenticity is tantamount to condemning history for not behaving like a diagram.

Motzki and the Nijmegen Paradigm Shift

Harald Motzki was born in Berlin in 1948 and studied comparative religion, Semitic languages, biblical studies, Islamic studies, and European history in

Bonn, Paris, and Cologne. His strong background in *classical studies* shaped his approach to interpreting sources, characterized by philological rigor that rejects hasty generalizations. He earned his doctorate in 1978 under the supervision of Albrecht Noth, obtained his habilitation in 1991 with *Die Anfänge der islamischen Jurisprudenz*, and served as a professor of methodology in Islamic studies at the University of Nijmegen until his death in 2019 (Motzki, 2002).

Motzki's contributions marked a shift in Western scholarship, from skeptical classical Orientalism toward a more cautious source-critical approach. He neither rejected Western methods nor uncritically accepted Islamic tradition. Instead, he combined the two. From the West, he adopted the discipline of source analysis, and from Islamic tradition, he drew upon the wealth of *rijāl* and *takhrīj* data that had long been neglected by revisionists. The result is the *isnad-cum- matn* method, which treats *isnad* and *matn* as two sets of data that must be correlated, not separated (Motzki, 2005).

Motzki outlined four approaches to dating among Western scholars, then criticized all four. The first approach relies solely on the *matn*. The second approach dates hadiths based on the date of compilation of the book in which they are found. The third approach relies entirely on the *isnad*, and this is the path taken by Schacht and Juynboll. The fourth approach combines the *matn* and the *isnad*, and this is the direction Motzki takes. His main thesis is concise. Schacht and Juynboll's conclusions are problematic because they rely on limited and selectively chosen sources, as well as on skeptical assumptions which, when taken together, require the reader to believe in a series of coincidences far more improbable than the possibility that a hadith originated in the early period (Motzki, 2005).

Motzki's critique of these four approaches is specific and does not make sweeping generalizations. He considers the purely textual approach which dates hadiths based on their linguistic features or doctrinal content to be flawed, since stylistic features can be imitated and content can be inserted later without leaving any formal traces. He rejects the approach based on compilation dates because the date of a book merely marks a final boundary, and the material within it may be much older than the container that holds it. He considers the purely *isnad*-based approach of Schacht and Juynboll to suffer from the most serious flaw, as it derives history from graphic patterns

while ignoring the transmitted content. He chose the fourth approach, which combines *isnad* and *matn*, precisely because the weaknesses of each individual approach can be mutually corrected when these two sets of data are brought together and forced to cross-examine one another.

Motzki's Five Main Points of Criticism Against Common Link

Motzki's claim is not just a theoretical notion. In his study of *al-Muṣannaf* by 'Abd al-Razzāq, he traced the material transmitted from Ma'amar ibn Rāsyid and from Ibn Jurayj, then demonstrated that most of that material can be reliably traced back to the second half of the first century AH (Motzki, 1991). In *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence*, he reconstructs pre-school Mecca fiqh and demonstrates that al-Zuhrī and his predecessors had already been grappling with legal issues that Schacht considered to have emerged much later (Motzki, 2002). This textual evidence shifts the debate from a clash of intuitions to a clash of data, and it is in the realm of data that skeptical claims regarding the "void" of the first century begin to crumble.

Motzki's critique in *Whither Hadith-Studies?* can be organized into five interlocking themes. Reading them as a separate list would diminish their impact, since all five function as a cumulative body of evidence that undermines the assumptions made in the preceding section.

This dispute has a concrete battleground, and naming it prevents the debate from remaining stuck in abstraction. Juynboll takes the figure of Nāfi', the mawlā of Ibn 'Umar, as a case study to prove his thesis, concluding that Nāfi's status as a major narrator is partly a later construction used to anchor legal material to the authority of Medina (Juynboll, 1993). Motzki responded by reexamining the same material and demonstrating that the correlation between the structure of the *isnad* and the variations in the *matn* within the Nāfi' corpus actually supports his historical existence as a teacher who imparted specific material to his circle of students (Motzki, 1996). The battle over this single name serves as a microcosm of the entire methodological war, for it is here that two ways of interpreting the same data produce two conflicting histories.

The lessons from the case of Nāfi' are methodological and can be generalized. Juynboll interprets the dominance of Nāfi's chain of transmission as a sign of centralized fabrication, while Motzki interprets the same dominance as a sign of the pedagogical centrality of a teacher who indeed

serves as a node of transmission. A single set of data accommodates two interpretations, and what decides between them is the initial assumption regarding who bears the burden of proof. Once that assumption is revealed and tested, the strength of Motzki's interpretation lies in its economy, as it explains the data pattern without having to assume a coordinated forgery operation that left not a single trace of opposition from contemporary hadith critics.

The first issue concerns a statistical anomaly among the *tābi^cīn*. If *isnad* began to be used in the last quarter of the first century and the phenomenon of the *common link* arose from that use, then logically the number of *common links* among the *tābi^cīn* should be abundant. Juynboll's own data, however, shows the opposite namely, very few *common links* in that layer. Motzki interprets this scarcity as an artifact of Juynboll's method, not a historical fact. Juynboll's style of *isnad* analysis, which demands extremely strict criteria for recognizing a *common link*, automatically reduces their number, so that his conclusions stem from the procedure rather than from the reality he is measuring (Motzki, 1996).

The second line of argument challenges the inference that the emergence of *isnad* implies forgery. Juynboll argues that the practice of citing authorities, which became widespread at the end of the first century, serves as evidence that *isnad* is fictitious. Motzki reverses this logic. A new practice of citing sources does not prove that the cited sources are fictitious, just as the introduction of formal citations in a scholarly tradition does not negate the existence of the teachers being cited. He proposes that the *common link* be interpreted as the first major collector and professional teacher who compiled and systematized material that was already in circulation, rather than as the first forger (Motzki, 1996). An apt analogy is to equate the *common link* with Justinian, who compiled Roman law. Compiling is not the same as creating, and attributing the entirety of Roman law to the compiler would erase centuries of legal practice that preceded it.

The third point debunks the misconception of equating a single chain with an actual single chain. The presence of a *single strand* in the data merely means that the *common link* transmits through the single chain he mentions and does not imply that only the individuals in that *isnad* knew the hadith. Other chains through which the same *matn* passed may have disappeared

because they were not transmitted by the early collectors. In several cases, later collectors or students of the early collectors succeeded in rediscovering other chains that had survived in oral transmission or were preserved by minor collectors (Motzki, 1996). The absence of traces of a chain in the sources that have reached us is not proof of the chain's nonexistence in history, and at this point Schacht's *argumentum e silentio* collapses.

The fourth school rejects blanket judgments regarding the names of the Companions and *tābiʿīn* at the bottom of the isnad. Juynboll suggests that those names were falsely attributed by the *common link*. Motzki emphasizes that not all single chains between the Prophet and the *common link* are fabricated, and not every *matn* is the creation of the *common link*. Even chains that branch off from the *common link* should not be deemed fictitious without a case-by-case examination. This blanket approach violates a fundamental principle of historical criticism, namely that each tradition is evaluated on its own merits, not according to categories established prior to examination.

The fifth axis undermines Juynboll's ideal branching model by calculating its consequences. Juynboll assumes that authentic transmission always spreads, so that each narrator passes it on to several students, each of whom in turn passes it on to several students. If this assumption were true, the branching structure would explode exponentially. With a branching factor of five, the first generation would contain 5 narrators, the second generation 25, the third generation 125, and the fourth generation 625 narrators (Motzki, 1996). Not single hadith in the corpus features 125 narrators in its third generation. Juynboll's ideal model, therefore, demands a reality that never occurred, and this demand resembles Procrustes' bed, which forces the body of history to stretch or shrink to fit predetermined geometric dimensions.

The scarcity of variant chains is to be expected when real-world factors are considered. Collectors such as al-Bukhārī and Muslim often recorded only one chain of transmission that reached them or one chain they considered the most authentic, so many other chains were not recorded due to editorial selection, not because they did not exist. Geographical distance, teachers who had only a few serious students, and students who did not become teachers thereby breaking the chain of transmission all contributed to the dominance of a single chain. Juynboll's principle of mandatory branching would reveal its absurdity even more if applied to other fields of knowledge, for by that logic,

nearly the entire transmission of classical knowledge would have to be declared invalid simply because it did not branch out extensively in every generation.

These five pillars derive their strength from their cumulative nature. Each, when considered in isolation, only weakens one aspect of Juynboll's theory. Taken together, the five of them uproot the entire foundation of assumptions underpinning the verdict of forgery. The scarcity of *common links* among the *tābi^ʿīn* refutes the claim that this phenomenon marks the birth of hadith. Reversing the inference regarding the emergence of isnad transforms the *common link* from a suspect into a collector. Distinguishing single chains in the data from single chains in history neutralizes the *argumentum e silentio*. Rejecting blanket verdicts restores the presumption of innocence for each narrator. The dismantling of the branching model exposes the unrealistic nature of the standards set by Juynboll. The remaining evidence ceases to demand a conspiracy of forgery and gives way to a more parsimonious hypothesis, namely that many hadiths were indeed already in circulation in the early period through chains whose traces were largely unrecorded.

Isnad-cum- matn as a Methodological Response

Motzki's critique does not stop deconstruction. He offers a constructive alternative procedure. The *isnad-cum- matn* method works in two sequential steps. The first step involves graphically mapping out the entire isnad of a hadith, exactly as Juynboll did, to identify *common links* and *partial common links*. The second step which is absent in Juynboll's approach compares the *matn* variants transmitted by each chain (Motzki, 2005). The logic behind this correlation is simple and robust. If a particular variant of the *matn* consistently appears in chains radiating from a *partial common link*, then that variant most likely does indeed originate from that figure, since independent agreement across chains is difficult to explain without assuming a real common source.

The strength of this method lies in the use of the *matn* as a check on the isnad. While a coordinated forgery of the isnad is conceivable, a simultaneous forgery that produces patterns of variation in the *matn* corresponding to the branching structure of the isnad would require a conspiracy far beyond the organizational capabilities of the first-century community. Schoeler and Görke applied similar logic to *sīrah* material and successfully reconstructed layers of the narrative of ʿUrwah ibn al-Zubayr that can be traced back to the second half of the first century (Görke & Schoeler, 2008). Pavlovitch extends this

approach to legal traditions with an even higher level of detail (Pavlovitch, 2016). This corpus of case studies provides the *isnad-cum- matn* with something Juynboll's method lacks: a verifiable chronological trail.

This achievement shifted the focus of the debate. The issue shifted from the question of whether hadiths can be dated to the question of how old the earliest layer is that can be convincingly reconstructed. For the Nijmegen school, much of the legal material and *sīrah* can be traced back to around the turn of the first and second centuries of the Hijri calendar, a finding that undermines Schacht's thesis that legal hadiths were almost entirely produced after the middle of the second century. Reinhart describes this shift as a move from the "big bang" theory toward gradualism that is, from the notion that hadith emerged all at once at a single point in time to a picture of gradual growth whose roots extend much further back (Reinhart, 2010).

Concrete results lend substance to these methodological claims. Andreas Görke and Gregor Schoeler applied the correlation of *isnad* and *matn* to the corpus of ʿUrwah ibn al-Zubayr's narrations regarding the Prophet's life story, thereby revealing a core layer that can be consistently traced back to around the second half of the first century of the Hijri calendar (Görke & Schoeler, 2008). Pavlovitch took a similar approach to the legal traditions concerning the confessing adulterer and *kalāla*, then mapped out, step by step, the formation of that material with a chronological precision that is difficult to refute without contradicting his own data (Pavlovitch, 2010; Pavlovitch, 2016). These case studies are not rhetorical victories. They are reconstructions that include diagrams, textual variants, and lines of reasoning open to reexamination; thus, any criticism of them is bound by the same obligation namely, to refute through an examination of the data rather than through a principled rejection from a distance.

The power of *matn* control can be further elaborated. When two chains of transmission that are far apart in *isnad* turn out to carry variants of the *matn* that share the same editorial characteristics, that similarity demands an explanation. The most economical explanation is the existence of a common source at the point where the two chains still converge, namely at a *partial common link* or *common link*. Gregor Schoeler adds an important dimension by pointing out that early transmission took place through a combination of personal written notes and oral instruction, so the sharp dichotomy between

oral and written traditions assumed by skeptics is in fact mistaken. The *kitāb* notes used as teaching aids explain why text variants could remain stable across several generations without requiring either perfect memorization or mass forgery.

The repositioning of the *common link* as a professional teacher carries sociological consequences that are often overlooked. By the end of the first century, the transmission of knowledge shifted from an informal activity to a scholarly profession involving numerous students and a reputation at stake. A figure such as al-Zuhrī became central because he compiled, selected, and taught material to a wide circle of students a role of compilation that is fundamentally different from authorship. His emergence as a *common link* in isnad charts captures this moment of scholarly professionalization, not a moment of forgery. Interpreting a hub of compilation as a hub of forgery is just as erroneous as accusing a critical editor of a classical text of being the author of the text he or she edited.

The figure of al-Zuhrī lends historical significance to this repositioning. He worked under the auspices of the Umayyad court and gained access to a wide circle of tradition-bearers; thus, his emergence as a node of transmission reflects the social position of a scholar who gathered material from many teachers and then passed it on to many students. Interpreting this position as evidence of forgery would ignore the entire institutional context that shaped early transmission. Court patronage, scholarly journeys, and the formation of teaching circles are social factors that explain why certain names became central in the isnad network without necessitating the assumption of fabrication. The social history of scholarship, therefore, provides a richer explanation than the forgery hypothesis, and this richer explanation is also more economical because it relies on documented mechanisms rather than on a conspiracy that must be assumed.

Epistemological Roots: The Burden of Proof and the Limits of Evidence

The debate between Juynboll and Motzki, when traced to its roots, is a debate over who bears the burden of proof. The skeptics posit the axiom that falsity is the default state, so authenticity must be proven through positive evidence, a standard that is nearly impossible to meet for first-century events. This axiom functions as a methodological choice that predetermines the outcome before any examination begins, and its status as a choice rather than an

empirical finding is often overlooked. The German tradition of *Quellenkritik* which gave rise to both Schacht and Motzki itself contains two conflicting legacies. The legacy of Barthold Niebuhr and Leopold von Ranke demands rigorous yet constructive source criticism, whereas the legacy of Pyrrhonian skepticism demands a far more radical suspension of judgment. Juynboll inherited the latter, Motzki the former.

This choice of burden of proof has asymmetrical consequences. The standard set by Juynboll, if consistently applied to other sources of civilization, would erase much of our knowledge of antiquity, since almost no ancient text would pass the tests of chain of transmission and simultaneous documentation that he demands of the hadith. Hallaq cuts straight to the heart of this issue when he refers to the question of authenticity as a pseudo-problem born of double standards (Hallaq, 1999). A fairer burden of proof evaluates each tradition according to the weight of its own evidence without presupposing either authenticity or falsity from the outset. This is what *isnad-cum-matn* promises, and this is where the real test lies, for this method must prove that it can ground its assessment on evidence outside the circle of its own assumptions.

The issue of the burden of proof boils down to a dilemma that predates the study of hadith. Every attempt to verify a narration ultimately faces the classic trilemma regarding the foundations of knowledge, in which a claim must be supported by another claim, which in turn requires further support. The skeptical camp halts this regression by deciding that the default foundation is falsity, so that the chain of proof ends in a negative presumption. The source-critical camp halts it by anchoring judgment to independent data correlations, in the hope that these correlations are robust enough to replace a foundation that is never absolute. Neither approach fully escapes the trilemma, and methodological integrity demands the acknowledgment that any hadith dating operates on a probabilistic, not an apodictic, foundation. The best historical claims in this field hold the status of the strongest available hypotheses, and their status will remain if new evidence may still emerge.

Systemic Limitations: A Counter-Critique of Motzki and the ICMA

To declare Motzki the winner of the final round would be to repeat the very same mistake he accuses Juynboll of namely, to close the case before the evidence has been fully examined. The *isnad-cum-matn* method has serious

structural limitations, and scientific integrity demands that these limitations be laid bare just as sharply as the criticism of the *common link*.

The first objection concerns the repetition of results. The *isnad-cum-matn* method requires several judgment calls from the researcher, ranging from determining the similarity between two *matn* variants to deciding whether a transmission chain is independent or the result of borrowing. These decisions are not fully algorithmic, so two meticulous researchers may arrive at different dating conclusions for the same corpus. A method whose results depend on the evaluator's judgment inherits a vulnerability like the one Motzki criticized in Juynboll, namely that conclusions may reflect the researcher's analytical style rather than the structure of the data being measured. The Nijmegen camp responded by emphasizing the transparency of their procedures and the openness of their diagrams to scrutiny a response that shifts the guarantee of objectivity from the certainty of results to the possibility of public scrutiny. That guarantee is real, but it remains weaker than the full reproducibility that is the ideal of empirical methods.

The most fundamental objection concerns circularity. Early dating through *isnad* requires that variants of the *matn* be sufficiently similar to be considered derived from a single source, whereas a successful reconstruction of the *matn* requires sufficient variation to distinguish between transmission chains. These two requirements are mutually exclusive. A few contemporary scholars have termed this dilemma the "principle of uncertainty" a condition in which the success of dating through *isnad* hinders the reconstruction of the *matn*, and vice versa. Without a historical anchor outside of the *isnad* and the *matn* themselves, the correlation between the two risks becoming a self-supporting argument, resembling Baron Münchhausen attempting to pull himself out of a swamp by pulling on his own hair.

Stephen Shoemaker raised a second objection from a perspective opposite to Motzki's. He argued that Schoeler and Görke's reconstruction of 'Urwah was overly optimistic, since the agreement across traditions could be explained by later standardization rather than by authentic ancient sources (Shoemaker, 2011). This argument partially restores the force of skepticism. If the standardization of material can create the illusion of convergence, then convergence in the text does not automatically prove authenticity, and the burden of proof shifts once again. Shoemaker's polemic with the Nijmegen

school in the journal *Der Islam* demonstrates that this field is far from reaching a consensus, and that any claim of early dating must still withstand methodological challenges.

Michael Cook raises an objection that challenges the foundation of dating via *common link* from yet another angle. He points out that isnads can spread and multiply through a practice he calls “isnad diffusion,” in which a narrator borrows or expands a chain to strengthen a tradition he already believes to be true (Cook, 1981). If this practice is common, then the density of chains around a *common link* can develop later without reflecting actual historical transmission, and it is precisely at this point that the optimism regarding early dating becomes vulnerable. Cook’s objection is particularly incisive precisely because it focuses on a natural social mechanism within a community that values isnad. He does not need to assume malicious intent to undermine dating, and this is what makes his argument difficult to refute. Motzki and his successors respond that the correlation of the *matn* remains a filter, since the purely mechanical dissemination of isnads does not in itself produce patterns of textual variation that align with the branching of transmission chains. This exchange demonstrates that every defense gives rise to a new attack, and the field remains open.

The third objection is empirical in nature and stems from the reapplication of the method itself. Recent studies of the *faḍā’il* hadiths show that the *isnad -cum-matn* often fails to distinguish between *diver* and *single strand* chains convincingly, precisely in the most contested cases, so that this method is strongest precisely for hadiths with clear branching and weakest for those whose historical status is most obscure. Özkan adds a conceptual objection by challenging Juynboll’s claim that the term *madār* in the Islamic tradition is equivalent to *common link*, a claim that has also been adopted in Western discourse in general (Özkan, 2004). If the equivalence of the terms themselves is shaky, then the bridge between Western and classical categories which underpins the entire debate is also shaken.

Wael Hallaq offers the most radical perspective by labeling the entire issue of authentication a pseudo-problem (Hallaq, 1999). His argument cuts to the heart of the first principle. According to Hallaq, Western scholars demand a level of historical certainty that has never been demanded of any other source of civilization and then declare that the hadith fails to meet standards that

have been deliberately set to be impossible to meet. Such demands reflect the epistemological anxieties of Western modernity more than they do any intrinsic issues within the hadith corpus. Jonathan Brown mediates this debate by distinguishing between the literal, historical, and effective truths of a hadith, and demonstrates that the classical Sunni tradition itself has operated with categories that are more nuanced than the “authentic versus spurious” dichotomy employed by revisionists (Brown, 2009).

This counter-critique leads to one important conclusion. Motzki’s victory over Juynboll is partial and methodological, not total and substantive. He succeeded in showing that the *common link* need not be interpreted as a forgery, and that a single chain of transmission is not automatically fictitious. He did not, nor did he claim to, prove attribution to the Prophet in every case. The limits of historical knowledge attainable through *isnad* and *matn* stop at the reconstruction of the oldest verifiable layer, and that layer, even in the best-case scenario, rarely touches the Prophet directly without a shred of doubt.

3. Conclusion

The *common link* theory developed by Juynboll, building on Schacht’s legacy, rests on three unproven assumptions: the necessity of early branching, the identification of the date of the *common link* with the date of the hadith’s origin, and the equating of the silence of sources with historical non-existence. Motzki’s critique in *Whither Hadith-Studies?* dismantles all three through five interlocking lines of argument, ranging from statistical anomalies among the *tābi‘īn*, the reversal of inferences regarding the emergence of *isnads*, the distinction between single pathways in the data and single pathways in history, the rejection of blanket judgments regarding early narrators, to the debunking of a branching model that is mathematically impossible. Motzki repositioned the *common link* as a professional collector and teacher, not a forger, and proposed the *isnad-cum- matn* as a procedure that anchors dating to the correlation between *isnad* and *matn*.

A dialectical reading refuses to end the story with Motzki’s victory. The *isnad-cum- matn* method grapples with circularity which contemporary scholars refer to as the principle of uncertainty with Shoemaker’s renewed skepticism, which explains the convergence of *matn* through later standardization, and with the empirical limitations of the *diver* and *single*

strand cases, which are, in fact, the most hotly debated. Motzki's victory, therefore, is partial and methodological. He restores the possibility of dating early without proving a final attribution to the Prophet. Indonesian hadith studies benefit most by maintaining a productive tension between skepticism and source optimism. The stance of choosing one side as the ultimate winner impoverishes the study, whereas the tradition of classical hadith criticism can stand as an equal dialogue partner for Western methodology.

Further research could take three directions. The first direction involves examining *isnad-cum- matn* in a corpus of Malay-Nusantara hadith to determine whether local transmission patterns reinforce or challenge the model constructed based on Middle Eastern data. The second direction formalizes the classical categories of *'ilal* and *madār* into the language of network analysis so that they can be directly compared with Juynboll's categories. The third approach explores the principle of uncertainty from a philosophical perspective to formulate explicit criteria regarding the historical anchor points required for any dating claim, thereby shifting the debate from an exchange of intuitions toward replicable testing.

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