The Divine Sources

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The primary sources for Sharia are the Quran and the Sunna. The Quran is believed to be the speech of God revealed to Muhammad, so to obey God, as the Quran itself commands, is to follow the precepts provided in the Quran. Its status as a “divine source” for the Sharia seems obvious. The Quran also repeatedly commands Muslims to obey God’s Messenger. As God’s chosen messenger, Muhammad understood the Quran the best and most perfectly exemplified its teachings through his activities and words. Thus, his example, Sunna, is also an obvious source for Sharia, and a divine one in that it is prescribed by God in the Quran. It also seems natural that Muhammad’s followers would have preserved reports of his activities in what would eventually become known as hadith. What may seem so “obvious” and “natural,” however, turns out to be far more complex and contentious.

The Quran scholar Angelika Neuwirth has pointed out that one must distinguish between the redaction of the text culminating with an authoritative, ne varietur Quran, and the canonization of the text, that is, the endorsement of the Quranic legal and societal ordinances (2003: 2). The traditional account of the origin of Islam and Sharia would suggest that the process of canonization began with Muhammad’s first revelation and culminated with his death, when the Quran was complete and recognized by the generation of Muslims who had known him personally, the Companions. The redaction was more or less complete some 15 years later when the third caliph, Uthman, published an official version of the text. The process of the canonization of the Sunna of the Prophet, particularly as hadith in the six Sunni collections (al-kutub al-sitta) of al-Bukhari, Muslim, al-Nasai, Abu Dawud, al-Tirmidhi, and Ibn Majah, were far more protracted and contested. Modern scholarship has called into question the dates and order of the redaction and canonization of the Quran and the authenticity of the hadith in these collections. This modern scholarship strikes at the heart of the Sharia for it undercuts the “divine” aspect of its two main sources, and it is therefore occasionally viewed as motivated by confessionalism or orientalism. Muslim scholars, however, have a long history of asking surprisingly similar questions about the Quran and the Sunna.

Synopsis of Divine Sources in Islamic Scholarship

Traditionally the Quran is believed to be of divine origin—a claim that the Quran itself advances. It was brought from a heavenly archetype (Q 43:3) to Muhammad via the angel Gabriel (Q 2:91), and

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the Prophet recited only that which God willed (Q 8:76–7) in the clear language of Arabic so that all might understand it. In Islamic theology it came to be seen as the eternal Speech of God. Even the order of the suras was divinely determined. Muhammad is reported to have said that Gabriel came to review the Quran with him once a year, but in the last year of his life Gabriel did so twice. As such, its contents and authority in religious and legal matters are beyond question. The accounts by Muslims are, of course, more complicated, for the Quran was revealed serially over two decades, certain parts abrogate earlier revelations, and even a brief survey of the exegetical literature (tafsîr) makes it clear that it was not universally understood even by the earliest Muslims.

Be that as it may, the Quran was, therefore, a canon in Muhammad’s lifetime, and his Muslim followers preserved it and committed it to writing after his death. Again, on closer inspection, the process is much more complicated. Various traditional accounts claim that the succeeding caliphs, Abū Bakr and later Ṭūlhān, initiated the process of its collation and canonization. Abū Bakr (r. 632–34) commissioned one of Muhammad’s scribes, Zayd b. Thābit, to collect the Quran from all available sources, which included the memories of the Companions and written sources on papyrus, leather, bones, and palm leaves. This collection passed to the second caliph, Ḥūmaṭān, and at the latter’s death, to his daughter Ḥafṣa. Later, when Muslims from Syria and Iraq quarreled over the correct reading of the Quran, the third caliph Ṭūlhān (r. 644–56) commissioned Zayd b. Thābit and others to collect an official copy, opting for the Qurashī dialect when differences were found. At this point, the number and order of the suras were fixed as was the consonantal text. Ṭūlhān then sent copies of his recension of the Quran to other major Muslim centers with instructions to burn other versions. Thus, with Ṭūlhān the ne varietur consonantal text is established. By no later than 656 the Quran as we have it today, more or less, had its definitive form and authority. Vowel markings would take a little longer. Al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf al-Thaqafī (d. 95/714), the governor of Iraq under the Umayyads and credited by some as having introduced diacritics into the Arabic script, is also recorded as destroying any collections that deviated from the official one.

A modern Muslim scholar, Muḥammad al-Azami names approximately 65 scribes who at one time or another recorded Muḥammad’s dictation of the revelations. “Based on the total number of scribes, and the Prophet’s custom of summoning them to record all new verses, we can safely assume that in his own lifetime the entire Quran was available in written form” (2003: 69). Al-Azami is of the opinion that Muhammad himself even fixed the arrangement of the suras. He recapitulates the traditional accounts of the Quran’s compilation under Abū Bakr and then again under Ṭūlhān. Thus, the Quran, the textus receptus, embodies the will of God—His instructions for His creatures. Ritual, civil, commercial, penal, or social regulations within the Quran are held to be universal and eternal, and the extant legal schools (sg. madhhab) of both Sunni and Shi’i Islam view the Quran as the primary source of law.

Embodied in the form of hadith, the Sunna stands second only to the Quran. The hadith of the Sunna in the six collections are generally considered authentic, particularly if they are found in both al-Bukhārī’s and Muslim’s collections. Shi’i Islam has different collections of hadith and a somewhat broader concept of the Sunna which includes the Imams. This literature began with the death of Muḥammad, as an attempt to maintain his guidance. The Companions were a natural source for these reports, which soon branched out into written collections such as the ad hoc sahīfa, the more topic-specific muṣannaf, and the source-based muṣnad. Finally, the topically arranged collections of hadith with a full chain of transmitters (isnād), called ṣaḥīfa or sahīḥ books, appeared. But with the early rivalries within the Muslim community and the incorporation of a multitude of peoples within the rapidly expanding Arab-Islamic empire, reports attributed to Muḥammad—some fabricated, some tendentially altered—had been circulating widely in the earliest decades of Islam. This led to the insistence that the report (matn, the body of the hadith) be provided with a list of people who had transmitted it. Since these, too, could be invented or adapted, biographical literature (rijāl) developed

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1 The dialect of the Quraysh, the Prophet’s tribe.
to evaluate the reliability of transmitters and to determine whether a transmitter had met the person from whom it was claimed he had received the report. Traditionists, or ahl al-ḥadīth, also sought out corroborating reports. The collectors of the sunan or sāḥīḥ books, such as the compilers of the six collections, painstakingly amassed and selected hadith to ensure their authenticity. It would take much heated debate and several centuries before a handful of books from this vast collection of hadith literature emerged as authoritative, that is, were canonized. Al-Bukhārī’s Ṣaḥīḥ and Muslim’s Ṣaḥīḥ in particular were deemed to be the most authoritative and authentic representation of Muḥammad’s legacy by Sunni Muslims (Brown 2007). The four major Shiʿi collections of hadith are unique in that the isnād traces the origin of the reports to Muḥammad via the Imams, to Imams via later Imams, and to Muḥammad or Imams via followers of the Imams (that is, Shiʿi). The Sunna may be the second divine source for the Sharia, but the contents of the Sunna have always been contested.

Modern Scholarship on the Sunna

Most modern scholarship on the Sunna has focused less on the content of the Sunna and more on its authenticity. The resulting debate is complex, and even the classification of the participants is in dispute; in an earlier work (Berg 2000: 6–64) I classified these scholars based on their conclusions about the authenticity of hadith: early Western skepticism (Ignaz Goldziher and Joseph Schacht), the more sanguine reaction against this skepticism (Nabia Abbott, Fuat Sezgin, and Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami), those who search for a middle ground (G.H.A. Juynboll, Fazlur Rahman, Gregor Schoeler, Harald Motzki, and others), and renewed skepticism (Michael Cook and Norman Calder). Jonathan Brown (2009: 197–236) classifies Western scholarship on the authenticity question into four categories that are based instead on scholarly outlook: the orientalists (Goldziher, Schacht, and Juynboll), the philo-Islamic apologetic (Abbott and al-Azami), the revisionists (Patricia Crone and Cook), and the Western re-evaluation (primarily Motzki). Motzki himself (2005: 204–53) classifies scholars based on their methodologies even if they reach opposite conclusions: dating on the basis of the matn alone (Goldziher, Schacht, and R. Marston Speight), dating on the basis of occurrence in collections (Schacht, but primarily Juynboll), dating or reconstruction on the basis of the isnād alone (Schacht, Juynboll, and Sezgin), and dating using both isnād and matn (Motzki).

Ignaz Goldziher was not the first modern scholar to express doubts about the authenticity of the hadith in the Sunna. The Dutch scholar Reinhart Dozy (d. 1883) had remarked that he was surprised not by all of the false materials, but that so much of it, including at least half of al-Bukhārī’s collection, was authentic (1879: 124–5); the Scot William Muir (d. 1905) also felt that as much as half of the material was spurious and doubted the value of the information in the isnād, although unflattering depictions of Muḥammad suggested that much was genuine (1894). In contrast, Goldziher felt hadith could “not serve as a document for the history of the infancy of Islam, but rather as a reflection of the tendencies which appear in the community during the mature stages of its development” (1971, 2: 19). He urged skeptical caution over optimistic trust. His conclusion was based on the apparent oral transmission of hadith and their proliferation in later collections but absence in earlier collections. He accepted that early Muslims had sought to preserve the Prophet’s words, but the tendential interpolations and inventions also began early. It was no surprise, therefore, that the isnād of contradictory hadith was equally impressive. Later, he opined, as the hadith scholars began to oppose other sources for Sharia, such as personal view (raʾy), the legal schools found it expedient to fabricate hadith to support their particular positions. The widespread fabrication led to efforts to evaluate the authenticity of hadith—based solely on the isnād. This effort, however, simply encouraged isnād emendation, by repairing gaps or extending Companion and Successor2

2 The generation after the Companions, known as al-tābiʿūn.
hadith back to Muḥammad. Thus, every opinion, practice, and innovation found expression in the form of a hadith (1971, 2: 126). Only a very small part, if any, of the contents of the collections of al-Bukhārī and Muslim could be confidently assumed to be early. Goldziher’s early twentieth-century contemporaries—Leone Caetani, D.S. Margoliouth, and Henri Lammens—expressed similar doubts (Caetani 1905; Margoliouth 1912, 1914; Lammens 1943).

Joseph Schacht refined Goldziher’s conclusions by focusing primarily on Sharia and the role of al-Shāfiʿī in its development. Schacht argues that hadith were not originally a source for Islamic law as traditionally assumed. Rather, “The ancient schools of law shared the old concept of sunna or ‘living tradition’ as the ideal practice of the community, expressed in the accepted doctrine of the school” (Schacht 1959: 80). It was al-Shāfiʿī who struggled to narrow the understanding of sunna so that it referred exclusively to the example of the Prophet in the form of hadith; the result, according to Schacht, was that the “living tradition” was attributed to Successors and Companions and toward the middle of the second century extended to Muhammad, the authority of whose hadith becoming supreme only with al-Shāfiʿī. Although he suggested that the isnād was irrelevant for historical analysis, Schacht had two methods for dating of hadith—one focused on the matn, one on the isnād. By placing the matn in its relative position within the debate of a particular legal issue, one could determine when the hadith was likely to have emerged. For example, if a hadith seems to react or respond to another, the former is likely to be a later invention. Schacht also argued that a matn consisting of short legal maxims was earlier than a more elaborate one, particularly if it was anonymous. Some information, however, could still be gleaned from the isnād because of its backward growth from Successors to Companions to Muhammad: “The more perfect the isnād, the later the tradition” (Schacht 1949: 147). A widely attested (mutawātīr) hadith had no better claim to authenticity, for the isnād was fabricated specifically to counter the charge of being isolated. In addition to this “spread of isnāds,” Schacht also observed that many hadith with the same or a similar matn often had a common transmitter (“common link”) in the middle of the isnād. This indicated to him that the common-link transmitter—or someone using his name—put the matn into circulation; common links, therefore, should allow one to determine the terminus a quo for the appearance of the hadith. The more recent names in the isnād might reflect the actual transmission history, but the earlier names, those below the common link, were fabricated. Based on this argument and methods, Schacht concluded that there was no regular use of the isnād prior to AH 100.

Reaction to Goldziher’s general skepticism and to Schacht’s more specific claims provoked significant counter-reactions. Nabia Abbott argued for an early and continuous transmission of hadith in written form. Initially, she claimed (1967: 29), there had been a fear of a development of a body of literature that could compete with the Quran, but with the death of the second caliph in 644, these hadith were promulgated in the major centers of Islam. The use of terminology that reflects oral transmission (for example, ḥaddatha “to relate,” and akhbara “to tell”) belied the use of written transmission. The apparent explosion in the number of hadith a century later resulted from early manuscripts (with a single isnād) being broken up into their constituent parts and each given the same isnād—thus giving the impression of a sudden huge increase in the number of hadith. Fuat Sezgin is even more adamant than Abbott that oral transmission was supplemented with written materials and is willing to posit the existence of books on the basis of the isnād: “In order to establish the first sources of Islamic literature, one must first of all discard the old presupposition that the isnād was first introduced in the second and third centuries A.H. and that the transmitters’ names were invented” (1967: 83). Al-Azami also argues for a continuous early written tradition, using the evidence supplied in the isnād and rijāl literature, and he lists hundreds of Companions, Successors, and other early scholars who must have had written sources (1992: 1–211). After systematically critiquing Schacht’s claims of the isnād being late, arbitrary, and gradually improved over time and of “so-called” common links being used to date hadith, al-Azami concludes that while there may have been mistakes, there is

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3 A similar assumption is made by R. Marston Speight as part of his form analysis, though he argues that reported speech is earlier than direct speech (1973).
no reason to question the isnād system or the authenticity of hadith literature (1992: 247; 1985: 182). Hence, for Abbott, Sezgin, and al-Azami, there is an implicit or explicit assumption that written sources suggest authenticity.

The Authenticity Debate

Several scholars delved into that assumption in greater detail. Gregor Schoeler argues that, despite protests to the contrary, though early scholars of hadith may not have employed written materials during their public lectures, privately they and their students did rely on written materials as mnemonic aids even in the first century. The variation in hadith as preserved is not surprising—a teacher may have presented materials differently over the years and students may have recorded them differently (1985: 201–30; 1992: 1–43). Not only does Schoeler blur the distinction between written and oral transmission, but also between variation and authenticity. Although different, he avers, all the recensions can be considered authentic. Norman Calder also emphasized the use of private notebooks by students, whose contents in the process of copying and transmission were changeable. But to Calder this did not imply authenticity; the materials therein were not transmitted as books, but as segments, and not verbatim, but acquired, selected, and preserved based on the needs of the “author” (1993: 162–3).

A creative contribution to the authenticity debate came from Fazlur Rahman, who accepted the skepticism of Goldziher and Schacht, proffering only a few critiques, but claimed (1979) that it was irrelevant for the normativity of the Sunna. Rahman argued for the early attempt to preserve the words and deeds of Muḥammad—but without the use of the isnād, which was for him a late first-century development. Some hadith may have existed in some form from the time of Muḥammad, but, more importantly, early Muslims organized their lives according to Muḥammad’s words and deeds without recourse to hadith. This he called the “silent living Sunna” of Muḥammad. Later, when the need to justify certain practices or beliefs via hadith arose, they naturally referred back to the Companions who embodied this silent Sunna. Reacting to Schacht, Rahman believed al-Shāfiʿī’s demand for hadith with a proper isnād led not to fabrication but to a reformulation of this Sunna and to the backward growth of the newly formalized isnād. The net result, however, was to transform the living Sunna into the structure of Prophetic Sunna. The Sunna as incorporated in hadith may not be literally authentic, but it remains largely normative for Muslims since it authentically reflects the silent living Sunna that is rooted in the words and deeds of Muḥammad.

Rahman’s compromise, however, did not put the authenticity issue to rest. Schacht’s two approaches were taken up by John Wansbrough and G.H.A. Juynboll. Wansbrough represented the continuation of Schacht’s claim that the isnād is of no historical value. “The supplying of isnāds, whether traced to the prophet, to his companions, or their successors, can be understood as an exclusively formal innovation and cannot be dated much before 200/815” (1977: 179). Wansbrough merely extended Schacht’s general principle to all hadith: legal, historical, and exegetical. Juynboll, on the other hand, represented the continuation of Schacht’s claim that the isnād has at least some historical value. He greatly refined many of Schacht’s views about both the vast scale of isnād and matn fabrication, thus opposing Sezgin, al-Azami, and Abbott (1983: 4), though he did accept that Muḥammad’s followers likely preserved his teaching during his lifetime. But Juynboll put himself in neither the Wansbroughian nor the Schachtian camp. “I think that a generous lacing of open-mindedness, which our skeptics might describe as naïvité, is an asset in the historian of early Islamic society rather than a shortcoming to be overcome and suppressed at all costs” (1983: 6–7). He argued that the systematic use of hadith (that is, with isnād) began in the 70s or 80s of the first century, but only fully emerged half a century later, while the narrowly focused Sunna of the Prophet emerged out of the more general sunna of the Companions and Muḥammad only toward the end of the first century. In this he agreed with Schacht, but he dated its emergence significantly earlier. Within this framework, it was likely
that Successors, or the Successors to the Successors (that is, the third generation of Muslims), were the first to circulate hadith, with later Muslims responsible for the backward growth of the isnād. In a view reminiscent of that of Rahman, Juynboll nevertheless concluded,

[I]t seems likely that at least part of the prophetic tradition listed in one or more canonical—or even non-canonical—collections deserves to be considered as a fair representation of what the prophet of Islam did or said, or might have done or said, but surely it is unlikely that we will ever find even a moderately successful method of proving with incontrovertible certainty the historicity of the ascription of such to the prophet but in a few isolated instances (1983: 71).

Juynboll was, however, far more optimistic about dating a tradition based on its isnād, especially when it displayed the common link. He described the common link as the oldest “transmitter who hears something from (seldom more than) one authority and passes it on to a number of pupils, most of whom pass it on in their turn to two or more of their pupils” (1989: 351–2). The older authorities are usually fictitious, whereas the fanning-out links often authentically represent the transmission. Unfortunately, most legal hadith have what Juynboll termed the “spider pattern,” not the common-link pattern, that is, most hadith display a multitude of partial common links and single strands that fan out from various locations. Juynboll believed these represented later transmitters inventing the entire isnād to bridge the gap between themselves and a suitably early—fictitious or historical—person. This pattern matters because “in the entire canonical tradition literature, spiders occur in their thousands, whereas the true isnād bundles, with a historically tenable cl [common link], are at most a few hundred” (1993: 215). It was therefore well-nigh impossible to determine the chronology and provenance of most hadith.

Wael Hallaq and Harald Motzki have sought to overcome this apparent impasse. For Hallaq, the authenticity debate as outlined above is irrelevant. He argues that “mainstream Muslim scholarship” does not consider the vast hadith literature to be a true representation of the words and deeds of Muḥammad. For legal purposes only mutawātir hadith—hadith that are preserved “through textually identical channels of transmission which are sufficiently numerous as to preclude any possibility of collaboration on a forgery” (1999: 78)—are authentic. For all other hadith, “authenticity can be asserted only in probabilistic terms” (1999: 81). The hadith scholars (muḥaddithūn) were more interested in pious religious practice than in the epistemological concerns of the jurists. They preferred a sound (ṣaḥīḥ), good (ḥasan), and weak (daʿīf) typology. Moreover, the jurist and hadith scholar al-Nawawī (d. 676/1278) even argued that ṣaḥīḥ does not imply certainty unless it is mutawātir, while his teacher Ibn al-Ṣalāḥ (d. 643/1245) maintained that the hadith in both al-Bukhārī’s Ṣaḥīḥ and in Muslim’s Ṣaḥīḥ were trustworthy because Muslims had agreed that they were—that is, consensus (ijmāʿ) generated the certainty. With only a handful of mutawātir hadith, Hallaq suggests that the debate over authenticity is “pointless” since both jurists and traditionalists acknowledge “the precarious epistemological status of the literature” (1999: 90).

Motzki, on the other hand, is not willing to forgo the debate. He employs two approaches to date traditions: historical source analysis and the isnād-cum-matn method. It is with respect to the latter that in the past I have characterized Motzki as too sanguine about the value of the isnād (Berg 2000). Motzki examines the Muṣannaf of the Yemeni hadith scholar ʿAbd al-Razzāq (d. 211/827), reconstructing the earlier collections that he employed. Since ʿAbd al-Razzāq’s immediate informants in the Muṣannaf have differing numbers of reports and are unique with respect to the types and sources of their materials, it seems implausible that he fabricated his sources. Moreover, there is external biographical material that supports that these informants were his teachers. Their existence established, these sources can, in turn, be analyzed using the same methodology, pushing our knowledge of the sources, and, in particular, Meccan jurisprudence, to the beginning of the second century Ah (2012: 5–6; 2002).
Motzki’s isnād-cum-matn methodology is really a middle position between the skepticism of Goldziher and Schacht and the wholesale acceptance of Abbott and al-Azami. Motzki also represents the continuation of Schacht’s claims about the (albeit limited) historical information contained within an isnād, although he challenges Juynboll’s assertion—that no method for analyzing hadith exists—by not restricting himself to analysis of only the isnād as Juynboll had. Motzki starts with the observation that similarities and variations in the matn of related hadith are often reflected in the isnād. In other words, there is a correlation between the matn and the isnād. In so doing, Motzki dismisses Wansbrough’s contention (1977: 183) that the isnād was merely a literary device and a fairly late innovation (“The presence of isnāds as halakhic embellishment is, from the point of view of literary criticism, a superfluity”). The only historical value of the isnād, therefore, is as an indicator that the text took its extant form quite late. For Motzki, by contrast, this close correlation between textual variant and isnād suggests two key facts: (1) the isnād may, at least in part, reflect the actual transmission history of the matn to which it is attached; and (2) matn variations may, at least in part, be a product of that transmission history. Careful analysis of both the isnād and matn of all the extant versions of related hadith often allows one to reconstruct earlier versions of the hadith. Even a hadith’s origins can be determined, and who and how it was adapted during transmission until recorded in extant sources. Although the method often allows the original disseminator or fabricator of the tradition to be identified, Motzki asserts, it can only be used on traditions for which there exist sufficiently large number of closely related, interconnected hadith in the various sources of the Sunna and Prophetic biographical (ṣīra) or exegetical (tafsīr) literatures—they must be, in a sense, mutawātir. In the examples published by Motzki, most hadith are argued to be considerably earlier than suggested by Goldziher, Schacht, and Wansbrough and thereby undercut the skeptical and revisionist positions. Motzki’s intermediate position is not just with respect to his methodology, but also to his conclusions. First, when using the isnād-cum-matn method as opposed to source criticism, Motzki speaks only of individual reports, not of the Sunna or individual works as a whole. Second, this methodology seems to support the authenticity of many hadith but not all. Some hadith are fabrications. To completely dismiss Motzki’s method, one would have to take the hyper-skeptical position that each and every person listed in the isnād has been fabricated. But if even the first person listed is historically accurate, then Motzki’s methodology can be employed.

Modern Scholarship on the Quran

Modern scholarship on the Sunna bleeds into Western scholarship on the Quran. Those who are skeptical about the historicity of hadith naturally bring the same perspective to the Quran, which is hardly surprising given that information about the revelation, collection, canonization, and interpretation of the Quran comes to us via the hadith format. Recently Behnam Sadeghi and Mohsen Goudarzi (2012: 3–4) made a useful four-part classification: scholars who more or less accept the traditional Muslim account of the collection and canonization of the Quran are “traditionalists”; in the revisionist camp stand Wansbrough, Patricia Crone, Alfred-Louis de Prémare, and David Powers (and, I would add, Christoph Luxenberg), who each in different ways tend to see the canonization process as a more drawn-out affair; there is a much larger group of skeptics or agnostics who are deeply suspicious of Muslim traditions about the Quran but who find little convincing evidence in the

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4 Andrew Rippin makes this point most forcefully:
“The single most important element here is to recognize that the isnād, as a mechanism, came to be required at a certain point in Islamic history as the element that provided authenticity and validity to reports supposedly stemming from earlier authorities. The presence of isnāds automatically dates a report to the second century or later, at least in its final recension” (1994: 61).
revisionist positions; and a more recent group of “neo-traditionalists,” who do not take the traditional account at face value, but critically evaluate the literary sources and in so doing, support the main features of the traditional account. These include Motzki, Muhammad Muḥaysin, and Michael Cook, the latter being a former revisionist.

Although there is much valuable and exciting scholarship on the Quran, the focus here is on the modern scholarship that most directly touches on the Quran as a “divine source” for Sharia. Most modern scholars of the Quran recognize that there are conflicting accounts in the sources about the collection of the Quran, and that rival codices may have survived for a very long time (Cook 2000: 119–26; Watt and Bell 1970: 40–56). Western Christian critique or, more accurately, criticism, is as old as Christendom’s access to the Quran. Modern scholarship on the Quran—which many consider a continuation of this older polemic—began in 1833 with Abraham Geiger, who argued, using the Quran as his primary source since it was “Muḥammad’s Quran,” that “Muḥammad really did borrow from Judaism, and that conceptions, matters of creed, views of morality, and of life in general, and more especially matters of history and of traditions, have actually passed over from Judaism into the Qurān” (1970: 156). In 1892 Theodor Nöldeke was more circumspect: “How these revelations actually arose in Muhammad’s mind is a question which it is almost idle to discuss as it would be to analyze the workings of the mind of a poet” (1992: 5). Nevertheless, Nöldeke saw the Quran as intimately tied to the life of Muḥammad with the revelations of the Quran often responding to current events as they arose. This is particularly evident in Nöldeke’s extensive analysis of the chronology of the revelations of the suras (1909–26: 58–234). The traditional Muslim dating relied primarily on the occasions of revelation (asbāb al-nuzūl), whereas Nöldeke (and others, such as Hartwig Hirschfeld and Régis Blachère) examined the internal evidence of the Quran, subjecting it to the scrutiny of historical and literary criticism, that is, using references to known public events and the evolving vocabulary and style. The result of this work has won wide acceptance but surprisingly differs only in minor respects from Muslim chronologies. Although Geiger’s and Nöldeke’s suggestions clearly undercut the divine status of the Quran, they do accept the basic Islamic history of how the Quran came to be and was subsequently collected.

This acceptance was challenged more by Richard Bell and John Burton. Bell saw the changes in grammatical construction, assonance, and subject matter of a sura as evidence of discontinuity within that sura. He attempted to provide a chronology for these independent passages using some of the same techniques as Nöldeke: certain ideas, style, and vocabulary belonged to a certain period and could be used to roughly date the passages in which they appeared. Not only did this produce a far more complex chronology, but one that more intimately tied the Quran to the culture, mind, and events of Muhammad. Moreover, he argued, “the Quran was in written form when the redactors [Zayd b. Thābit et al.] started their work, whether actually written by Muḥammad himself, as I personally believe, or by others at his dictation” (1937–39, 1: vi; see also Watt and Bell 1970: 16–19). With his co-author W. Montgomery Watt, Bell also points out, following Friedrich Schwally, that the account of the Quran’s compilation is problematic: the death of so many Muslims at the battle of Yamānā, which is said to have motivated the collection under Abū Bakr, did not involve many Muslims who would have memorized much of the Quran; Abū Bakr’s collection inexplicably had little authority; and there is mention of rival codices with textual variants, different orders of the suras, and even two additional short suras (1970: 40–47). Then, on the basis of the absence of the “stoning verse” from the Quran, Burton suggested that contradictory hadith about the collection of the Quran under the first three caliphs were meant to obscure Muḥammad’s hands-on editing of the Quran: “What we have today in our hands is the muṣḥaf of Muḥammad” (1977: 239–40). The underlying assumption of Geiger, Nöldeke, Bell, and Burton was that the Quran is a human production—by Muḥammad—and not a divine one.

Although these efforts have been criticized as “orientalist,” they are not revisionist, because they all largely accept the traditional Muslim account of early Islam. In 1977 John Wansbrough took a far more skeptical stance, pointing out that most of what we know about early Islam is the product
of literary activity from over a century later. As with Geiger and Bell, Wansbrough’s Islam was born within a Judeo-Christian milieu, although he suggested that the milieu may have been outside of Arabia. Whereas orientalist scholarship had suggested a stronger, even authorial connection between Muhammad and the Quran, Wansbrough seemingly severed the connection between the “Arabian prophet” and the scripture. His examination of Quranic style suggested to him not a single author or editor, but “an organic development from originally independent traditions during a long period of transmission” (1977: 47). Just as disconcerting was his late dating for the canonization of the Quran (“it is of course neither possible, nor necessary, to maintain that the material of the canon did not, in some form, exist prior to that period of intensive literary activity”) but the ne varietur text only occurred “towards the end of the second century” (1977: 44). In addition, Patricia Crone has argued on the basis of an example of exegetes unanimously misunderstanding a Quranic passage and of an example of a discontinuity between Quranic legislation and Islamic law that the traditional account of the Quran’s origins and canonization seems very unlikely (Crone 1994).

That Günter Lüling and the pseudonymous Christoph Luxenberg are also labeled revisionists is an indication that the term is applied only to those scholars who deviate from the traditional account and is not based on shared methodologies or specific conclusions. In 1974 Lüling argued that the shorter, poetic, and sometimes obscure suras (up to one-third of the Quran) were revisions of pre-Islamic, originally Christian hymns. The very incoherence of some Quranic passages suggested to him that later editing and misinterpretation took place, aided greatly by the early unvoweled, unpointed Arabic script. Luxenberg also examined Quranic passages that remain problematic. His methodology is to examine exegetical and lexicographical works in order to glean any hint of an Aramaic reading for problematic terms. If he finds none, Luxenberg then searches for Syro-Aramaic homonyms that might better explain the passages. If again unsuccessful, he seeks to discover Aramaic roots by altering the diacritical points and vocalizations (since neither was present in the first written versions of the Quran). Luxenberg intends to demonstrate that the materials that went into the Arabic Quran were excerpted from a Syriac canonical and/or proto-scriptural Urtext. Having found—contested—examples to support his claim, Luxenberg maintains that Mecca was an Aramean settlement in which an Aramaic-Arabic hybrid was spoken. Later Arabic-speaking exegetes and philologists were unfamiliar with the hybrid language and the written Quran’s defective script, which was standardized only in the second half of the eighth century. Consequently, there were numerous misinterpretations and misreadings (Luxenberg 2000). Most scholars of Islam, if they do not ignore Luxenberg, heap scorn upon him, but Claude Gilliot points out that Arabia closely interacted with the nearby Aramaic, Jewish, and Christian cultures, and suggests the Aramaic trail set by Lüling, Luxenberg, and others may yet lead to the pre-Quranic lectionary (Gilliot 2010: 164).

Although not deviating as far as Wansbrough and Luxenberg, others still take issue with the traditional account that has the collection and canonization process end with the ‘Uthmānic recension. De Prêmare and Stephen Shoemaker argue most forcefully that the Quran was relatively fluid well after ’Uthmān and that it was the Umayyad caliph ’Abd al-Malik (d. 86/705) together with his governor in Iraq, al-Hajjāj, who standardized and canonized the Quran—the Marwānid hypothesis first put forth by Paul Casanova (de Prêmare 2002: 278–306; also 2010: 189–221; Shoemaker 2012: 146–58; Casanova 1911: 103–42; for an argument against, Sadeghi and Bergmann 2010: 343–435). The most striking examples of this fluidity are the inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock and variant readings of the rival codices. In his study of ’Abd al-Malik Chase Robinson examines the state of the Quran during his reign. He cites the absence of manuscripts that would support the traditional view (as both Wansbrough and de Prêmare did), and questions how in a single generation, God’s word moved “from individual lines scribbled on camel shoulder blades and rocks to complete, single, fixed and authoritative text on papyrus or vellum” and how the rudimentary polity could have the authority to canonize a text (2005: 102). ’Abd al-Malik, on the other hand, had the motivation and means to impose such standardization, and a few sources imply this late canonization (see also Cook 2000: 119–22; Powers 2009: 155–96, 227–33).
Arguing primarily against the Wansbroughian thesis, Fred Donner suggests, however, that the Quranic text “as we now have it, must be an artifact of the earliest historical phase of the community of Believers, and so can be used with some confidence to understand the values and beliefs of that community” (1998: 61). Had the Quran been compiled later, at roughly the same time as hadith began to circulate, he posits, it would contain the intense sectarianisms of the first two centuries of Islam—the debates about religious and political authority, the mention of Muḥammad’s contemporaries in order to bolster or hinder their descendants’ political aspirations, and the plethora of anachronisms that abound in hadith. Their absence in the Quran suggests that it was complete before they arose. Another argument for an early Quran (Sadeghi and Bergmann 2010: 365–6, 416) is that the Marwānid thesis requires ʿAbd al-Malik to have imposed an empire-wide false memory about ʿUthmān, to whom Muslims of the late first and early second century in different cities and from clashing communities (including the proto-Shiʿis) all traced the standard Quran back. The empire was divided by sects and tribes and spread over such a large geographical region that such an empire-wide conspiracy or amnesia is not plausible.

Motzki also defends the traditional account of the collection of the Quran using isnād analysis and his isnād-cum-matn analysis. The former shows that 29 transmission lines of the hadith detailing the initial collection by Abū Bakr all intersect with Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī (d. 124/741-2), and the latter confirms this because the matn variations are closely correlated with their isnād. A similar analysis of the hadith describing the collection by ʿUthmān again converge with al-Zuhrī and display the same correlation. Al-Zuhrī is, therefore, the terminus post quem, and so both accounts can be dated to the first quarter of the second century ʿAH, or to the last decades of the first century even, since there is no reason to doubt the isnād sources that al-Zuhrī cites (2001: 15–31). Motzki has not pushed these traditions back to the time of Companion eyewitnesses, but if he is correct, he has seriously undermined the claims of Wansbrough and other revisionists.

These issues of redaction and canonization are closely tied to the status of the Quran in Sharia. Evidence for the lateness of the completion of those processes is the apparent absence of the Quran in the earliest texts of Islamic law, although several scholars have taken up this challenge. Yasin Dutton has argued that the Quran and hadith—though the isnād is not “sufficiently elaborated” (1999: 3)—are present in Mālik’s Muwaṭṭāʾ. Hallaq goes further, arguing that the Quran was a source of Islamic law even in the Meccan period. Hallaq suggests that our modern dichotomous distinctions between law and morality have influenced our thinking on the role of the Quran in Islamic law (2009b: 256–7). Since the Quranic terms are pervasively and cosmologically moral, “law” took off where and when morality began, with the revelation of the first suras in Mecca. It was then and there that the intricate moral blueprint was given further “legal” and other elaborations, which became the full-fledged Sharia, one that was morally grounded and supremely Quranic from the very start (2009b: 279; also 2005: 19–25).

To be convinced by Hallaq, of course, one must completely reject the revisionist claims and largely dismiss the skeptical ones.

**New Departures**

A new departure in the study of these two sources would be simply to leave behind the authenticity debate. As Angelika Neuwirth has pointed out, even if questions of redaction and canonization are

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5 For example, see the treatment of Muḥammad’s uncle al-ʿAbbās, purportedly a late convert and eponymous ancestor of the Abbasid caliphs (Berg 2010).

6 Hallaq is responding to Schacht’s almost single-minded focus on hadith as the primary source for Sharia at the expense of the Quran. Others who have challenged Schacht’s claim are Motzki—the origin of Islamic jurisprudence is some 70 years earlier than Schacht had it—though he does not give an early or significant enough role to the Quran (2002: 295–6), and Coulson—who emphasizes the early use of the Quran, but minimizes its legal content to 500 verses or even 80 (1964: 12). Hallaq finds both their conclusions problematic.
not solved, other aspects of the Quran remain open to investigation. She points out that the Quran’s own stylistic techniques suggest its own orality. As a result, the attempt to link a ne varietur text to canonization or canonization to the ne varietur text by revisionists and (neo-)traditionalists misses the point. Other needs, besides legal ones, may have driven the desire for a fixed text (2003: 13). Neuwirth’s Corpus Coranicum project seeks to document the historical development of the Quran in both written and oral form. Similarly, Jonathan Brown’s exploration of the canonization of the Ṣahih of al-Bukhārī and of Muslim (2007) looks to depart from the authenticity debate and move on to other important questions in the development of the Sunna.

Ignoring the debate is not the same as resolving it. Perhaps the most promising approach would be to apply Motzki’s isnād-cum-matn method to the entire corpus of the Sunna in so far as possible. This historical-critical approach has provided intriguing (if not always convincing) results when applied to hadith outside the Sunna. An examination of the hadith from the sīra literature (Görke and Schoeler 2008) found most, but not all, of the major events of Muḥammad’s life in Mecca and especially Medina to be early (which for the authors means “historical”). A similarly exhaustive study (Scheiner 2010) was made of the historical accounts of the conquest of Damascus but the conclusions were far more negative. Similar approaches were taken for early Muslim tafsīr (Muranyi 2003) and grammar (Versteegh 1993). Another interesting variation of this method is employed by Sadeghi (2008), who calls it his “traveling tradition test,” which compares the content of the main with the cities represented within the isnād. Like Motzki, Sadeghi finds evidence for an early provenance for several hadith. It is this wider applicability of the historical-critical approach outside of just the Sunna that is likely to help it overcome skepticism. Moreover, the observed correlations between the text and the isnād require an alternative explanation if the method is to be rejected—either organic growth or a widespread fabrication of the isnād, as Juynboll suggests and Wansbrough assumes, should have produced randomness, not correlations. Until revisionists proffer an explanation, even the skeptic must admit that at least some part of the isnād reflects actual transmission history, and thus Motzki’s isnād-cum-matn method can be employed. Unfortunately, as his method can only be used if there are enough related hadith with sufficient variation in order to find correlations, it is not applicable on a wide scale.

Still, questions remain about how far this method can be extended and what can be concluded about the reconstructed original version. For example, Motzki concluded that hadith about the Ṭāhānic redaction of the Quran trace back to al-Zuhrī, which is significant because Motzki maintains that chronological proximity increases the likelihood of historical accuracy:

It may be possible and sensible to ask whether parts of the events that the sources depict really happened. The reason is the closeness of the source to the reported events. Yet the chance is greater that, to give an extreme example, an eyewitness report of an event transmitted some decades later is less affected by later developments than a description of the same event given two centuries later by someone who, although perhaps basing himself on traditions about the event, tries to make sense of it for his time (2010: 288).

But al-Zuhrī worked in the administration of ʿAbd al-Malik. Might not Motzki’s conclusions about Abū Bakr’s and Ṭāhānic’s roles in collecting the Quran therefore be evidence in support of the Marwānid hypothesis? It is on these historical claims that Motzki’s isnād-cum-matn method remains particularly vulnerable.

Research into the origins of the Quran is benefiting from access to new manuscripts—not just reconstructed ones as is the case for the Sunna. Sadeghi examines the lower text of the Ṣanʿāʾ 1 codex, arguing that it is neither an Ṭāhānic text nor one of the “rival” Companion codices of ʿAbd Allāh b. Masʿūd or Ubayy b. Kaʿb. It must therefore have diverged from the former sometime in the mid-seventh century. On this basis he also argues that the formation of the revelations into suras predates Ṭāhānic’s standardization of the text (Sadeghi and Bergmann 2010; Sadeghi and Gourdarzi 2012).
Moreover, Sadeghi’s conclusion also supports the existence of non-extant but reported Companion codices such as those by Ibn Masʿūd, Ibn Kaʿb, and Abū Mūsā l-Ashʿarī, which Wansbrough and Burton had doubted. Like Motzki, Sadeghi believes that “the earliest manuscripts can be used to work one’s way back in time. Our knowledge can extend to a period before the manuscripts” (Sadeghi and Gourdarzi 2012: 16). Sadeghi’s conclusions certainly contradict the revisionists’ views, but they are as damning of the aforementioned widespread skeptical agnosticism, and the traditional view does not come through unscathed either—the ‘Uthmānic text was likely “a hybrid formed on the basis of a number of Companion codices … in which preference was usually given to the majority reading” (Sadeghi and Gourdarzi 2012: 22). Sadeghi posits the existence of a prototype of the Quran to Muḥammad, in which the verses of revelations were already fixed into suras in his time, though the order of the suras relative to each other was not fully fixed. He is clearly in the neo-traditionalist camp, since the standard version of the Quran today is the most “faithful representation, among the known codices, of the Quran as recited by the Prophet” (Sadeghi and Bergmann 2010: 346, 413–4). A faithful representation is not quite the same, of course, as an exact copy of a heavenly archetype.

While the scholarly debate continues about the conclusions reached by neo-traditionalists such as Motzki and Sadeghi, skeptics and revisionists must at least contend with their methodologies and the conclusions they have produced. To deny that they might allow us to peer further into the Islamic past than our extant texts would be to deny the methodologies that have given us the Documentary Hypothesis or allowed for the reconstruction of the Q document. And although it might be comforting to those who embrace the traditional position that some of these neo-traditionalist methodologies seem thus far to be confirming some of their beliefs about the origins of the Quran and the Sunna, these methodologies are also a double-edged sword. They ultimately treat both sources of Islamic law not as divine, as they are traditionally understood to be, but as very ordinary, human texts subject to very profane historical analysis.

References


