3-28-2007

A Task of Faith and Logic: Authenticating Revelation and Tradition

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This paper examines ways in which Muslims authenticate revelation and tradition through the isnād chains attached to hadīth and through the inimitability of the Qur'ān. The study of isnād chains and the study of inimitability differ in obvious ways, but are both complex, highly developed fields in the study of Islam. The studies of these authentication methods have developed over time since at least the ninth century. Ultimately, although isnād chains have been studied from historical perspectives and inimitability from literary perspectives, these systems of validating revelation and tradition derive their power from Allah himself, through popular faith in the basic tenets of Islam.

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Islam is not just a religion; it is a way of life. Although this view is debatable, it is a common interpretation of Islam. It is true that Muslims integrate their religion into many parts of their lives, from daily prayer, to ethical choices, to legal systems. The basis for all of these aspects comes, primarily, from the Qur'ān and hadīth, revelation and tradition. Because guidance from these sources is important to Muslims, different ways of validating them have been developed. The two methods used by the Islamic community to authenticate these interconnected components of their religion are distinctly different; however, both systems derive their power from God through popular faith in the basic tenets of Islam.

Revelation and tradition are, indeed, the ultimate sources for Muslims to draw on for issues of faith, practice, law, or daily life. "The development of theology in Islam stems… from the contemplation of the twin sources of authority: the Qur'ān and hadīth" (Rippen and Knappert 15). Wael Hallaq, a modern scholar of Islam, affirms this statement, claiming that there are two fundamental sources: the Qurān and sunna. "According to the fundamental Islamic tenet, nothing can be regarded as valid or binding if it is not somehow grounded in these sources" (Hallaq 428). Although this source does not directly address hadīth, as Patricia Crone puts it, tradition is a way to "find the Sunna" (Crone 126). Al-Ghazzālī, an important Muslim theologian of the late eleventh century, noted additional sources of information. He discussed four roots in the science of revelation: the Qur'ān, the sunna, consensus of the community, and tradition of the companions to the Prophet (Gätje 67).

No matter how many sources a Muslim relies on, the Qur'ān and the hadīth are generally considered to be the primary sources, with the Qur'ān being superior to the hadīth. As the Encyclopaedia of Islam indicates, over time, tradition

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became second in authority after the Qur'ān (Robson 23). More specifically, certain collections of hadīth are the most important. Six collections of hadīth became canonized in the late ninth century and these are second only to the Qur'ān (Juynboll 376).

Although revelation and tradition are distinct concepts, they influence each other in important ways. For example, the Qur'ān is often interpreted within hadīth (Juynboll 378). Rippen and Knappert reiterate this idea, and add that hadīth reflect disputes of the early Muslim community and cover questions that arose from studying the Qur'ān, such as what exactly constitutes wine (Rippen and Knappert 8). Some scholars believe hadīth were triggered by the Qur'ān. For example, there are different hadīth about the Qur'ān coming down on a night during Ramadan which likely stem from sūra 97:1-3 (Juynboll 381). These verses read: "We have indeed revealed this (Message) in the Night of Power...The Night of Power is better than a thousand Months." (Ali 569). In addition to using hadīth to explain portions of the Qur'ān, Muslims have used tradition to support ideas about the Qur'ān. For example, an Ismā'īli writer of the 1100s used a hadīth to support the idea that the Qur'ān is an unchallengeable miracle (Poonawala 380).

The idea of the Qur'ān as a miracle is a crucial one for those who wish to authenticate revelation. This concept is generally based on the Qur'ān's inimitability, or the fact that no human can create anything like it. The Qur'ān itself states in sūra 10:37, "This Qur'ān is not such as can be produced by other than Allah; on the contrary it is a confirmation of (revelations) that went before it" (Ali 569). The Qur'ān also clearly states that its verses are signs from God (Martin 527). Al-Baidāwī, a famous Qur'ānic exegete of the thirteenth century, connected the inimitability of the Qur'ān with its divine nature in his explanation of sūra 12:1-3. "These verses constitute the verses of the sūra which presents itself clearly as inimitability...or as that which makes clear to anyone who reflects upon it that it comes from God"(qtd. in Gätje 53).

To prove to the non Muslims of the sixth century that the Qur'ān was truly divine and inimitable, God raised the challenge to try and produce something like the Qur'ān. Several

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Qur'ānic verses encourage Muhammad to challenge people who do not believe in the Qur'ān to produce sūras like those within it. These "challenge verses" are taken to mean that the Qur'ān is a miracle, or mu'jiz, in technical Islamic terms. Islamic theologians are careful to distinguish between mu'jiz, religious miracles sent by God, and 'ajība, man made miracles, such as beautiful art (Martin 527). This distinction was intended to make it clear that a person can produce something beautiful and difficult to reproduce without being divinely inspired.

In connection with the divine nature of the Qur'ān, scholars are also careful to clarify that the miracle of the Qur'ān is not from Muhammad, but simply transmitted through him. The Qur'ān itself denies miracles in connection with Muhammad by using the term signs (Wensinck 295). This implies that they are signs from God and emphasizes that Muhammad is not a miracle worker. Az-Zamaksharī, a famous grammarian and exegete of the twelfth century, takes this position in his writing on sūra 29:50. He states that Muhammad had no choice in the miracle; instead, the miracle was from God. "He (God) sends down among them only what he wishes. It is not for me (Muhammad) to make a choice from among God's signs" (qtd. in Gätje 72).

In fact, Muhammad's inability to produce miracles, especially of a literary nature, enhances the miraculous quality of the Qur'ān. Sūra 36:69 supports this point saying "We have not instructed (the Prophet) in Poetry, nor is it meet for him: this is no less than a Message and a Qur'ān making things clear" (Ali 373). Zamaksharī interprets this verse as meaning that Muhammad could not have written poetry even if he had wanted to. Zamaksharī posits that Muhammad was purposefully created to be uneducated so that the evidence for his prophetic mission would be more convincing (Gätje 61).

Although Muhammad was not a miracle worker, he was the seal of the prophets, and this makes him an important source for Muslims. Because of his unique position, his actions and utterances have been passed down in the hadīth. "Hadīth [are] the traditions which are ultimately seen to derive from Muhammad" (Rippen 4). Hadīth has two sections: matn or text

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which relates an event concerning the life of Muhammad, and isnād, or chain of authorities. To be valid, a hadīth must come from Muhammad or from a close companion on down to the compiler (Rippen and Knappert 8). As Textual Sources for the Study of Islam indicates, hadīth are not only about Muhammad. The following is an example of a hadīth from a companion. "The honoured Sayyid Ahmad al-Dawraqi reports with an isnād traced to Mansur ibn Zadan, one of the generation of successors to Muhammad, that Mansur would recite the entire Qur'ān between the midday and the afternoon prayer" (Rippen and Knappert 102).

Because the isnād is proof of the source of a hadīth it became a very important concept in traditional Islamic thought. Rippen and Knappert write that "without a fault free chain of transmitters, a hadīth cannot be considered trustworthy" (Rippen 8). The Encyclopaedia of Islam states "it is often said that the validity of a tradition depends not on the text but on the isnād" (Robson 27). Due to the importance of isnāds to hadīth collections, "isnāds occurring in the canonical collections are, on the whole, accepted almost without question by the Islmaic world as historically reliable authentication devices" (Juynboll 378).

Just as the Islamic world relied heavily on isnāds to justify tradition, many thinkers emphasized the inimitability of the Qur'ān to defend revelation. However, this concept did not develop fully until a few centuries after Muhammad's death. The earliest texts which directly refer to the Qur'ān's inimitability date from the ninth century (Martin 530). By the late ninth century, this idea developed into a new type of writing which used miracles to establish Muhammad's prophecy (Martin 532).

Although these ideas surfaced formally in the ninth century, the idea of challenging people to produce something like the Qur'ān is based on a cultural practice from pre-Islamic times in which people competed to emulate a poet or poem (Martin 528). Apparently a person called Musaylima responded to the Qur'ānic challenge in the seventh century by reciting Qur'ān-like verses and was deemed a false prophet (Martin

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529). Regardless of any attempts to imitate the Qurʾān, the argument that the Qurʾān was a unique literary achievement eventually became part of larger discussion of the Qurʾān as a miracle (Martin 528).

The use of hadīth, and more specifically isnād, also developed over time. Early Muslims did not even know that hadīth were an important source because there were no formal hadīth yet (Robson 23). Before the late Umayyad period Muslims relied on the Qurʾān and upstanding people of that time instead of hadīth (Crone 127). An unfortunate side effect for thinkers of that time was that those who came before the emphasis on isnād were not as easily accepted by later Muslims. One such scholar was Muqatil ibn Sulayman (Rippen and Knappert 3).

By contrast, at-Tabarī, an important Qurʾānic exegete of the late ninth century was the first to place emphasis on isnād chains, and was well accepted by later scholars (Rippen and Knappert 3). Although it may not have been popular early on, the practice of producing authorities for tradition may well have begun in first century after Muhammad's death (Robson 23). The isnād itself developed at the end of the seventh century (Juynboll 378). The hadīth was put into books during the late ninth, early tenth century and had achieved semi-canonical status in the Sunni community. The six generally accepted books of hadīth were collected during this time also (Rippen and Knappert 7). However, "before the recognized books were compiled, the body of Tradition had grown enormously, and serious students recognized that much of it was fabricated." In fact, some people within the Muslim community reportedly created outrageous stories, attached isnāds to them, and used them to impress people or sold them (Robson 24).

Because Islamic thinkers were concerned about validating revelation and tradition an intense study of both the Qurʾān and the hadīth emerged. Various Muslim theologians have written extensively about the inimitability of the Qurʾān. Ar-Rummani, a Muʿtazilite thinker of the tenth century, wrote about inimitability at length. He gave seven aspects of inimitability: 1. No one has imitated the Qurʾān. 2. There has

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been a challenge to imitate it. 3. God prevents people from imitating it. 4. It is eloquent. 5. It contains true predictions. 6. It is out of the ordinary. 7. It is analogous to all other miracles. He also analyses ten types of literary eloquence found in the Qur'ān, using different verses to support each type (Rippen and Knappert 49).

Al-Bāqillānī, a prolific Ash'ari writer of the late tenth century analyzed the Qur'ān in a similar fashion. He claimed that the Qur'ān proves itself to be a miracle not just because it has prophecies but because of its literary qualities and inimitability. He considered these traits to be recognizable without the challenge. Bāqillānī gave three types of miracles: 1. prophecies 2. stories of the past which Muhammad, being illiterate, could not have known 3. a literary excellence unattainable by man. By these standards, "a Qur'ānic phrase embedded in other speech stands out like the central jewel of a necklace" (Thomson 621).

Although some thinkers agreed on different aspects of the Qur'ān's miraculous nature, some of these points proved controversial. Whether or not inimitability and uniqueness was found in style alone or in both style and content was a point of contention (Thomson 620). This controversy can be seen in the ideas of an Ismā'īli writer of the twelfth century. He opposed those who said the Qur'ān was a miracle because of literary features alone, claiming that the Qur'ān was a miracle in both style and content (Poonawala 381). His logic ran that if the only miraculous feature of the Qur'ān was literary and aesthetic, only Arabic speakers would think of it as a miracle, but the Qur'ān is meant for all, so the meaning must be a miracle as well (Poonawala 382). Despite voices like these, from the tenth century on, people such as ar-Rummani and al-Askari have deduced the Qur'ān's miraculous nature from its eloquence. This literary argument is perhaps the primary and most common argument for the uniqueness of the Qur'ān (Thomson 620).

Isnāds also faced extensive criticism and study. Ghazzālī wrote that there are four studies concerning Traditions: 1.the study of authorities and their relationships to each other 2.the study of the reliability of the transmitters 3.the

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study of circumstances under which transmitters lived 4.the study of the life spans of transmitters (Gätje 67). Muslims spent a lot of time and energy figuring out if the supposed transmitters lived, where they lived, if they could have known the transmitter from whom they got the hadīth, and if they were reliable. According to Rippen and Knapper, hadīth criticism became isnād criticism in classical Islamic times (Rippen and Knappert 8).

   Isnād criticism consisted of a few different elements. A complicated way of defining isnād bundles developed, based on how many strands there were and how many sources fed into one collector (Juynboll 379). Different ways of transmission were also classified, along with the minimum and maximum age for transmitting (Robson 27). Transmitters were criticized by scholars for making things up, for being senile, for forgetting the exact hadīth but transmitting anyway, and various other problems. Due to this criticism, scholars began to compile books of biographies on the people in isnāds. These were compiled from the ninth century on. Traditions were also given general ranks: sound, good, weak or infirm. Sound hadīth were further categorized, depending on who was in the chain (Robson 25). Although this study may seem excessive, it was very important for traditional Muslims to make sure that the hadīth they were following did indeed come from Muhammad, because Muhammad was the prophet as authenticated by the Qur'ān.

   One aspect of the Qur'ān that theologians used to validate Muhammad was, of course, the inimitability of the Qur'ān. "The inimitable Qur'ān was understood by the theologians to be a miracle that served as an earthly sign and proof of Muhammad's claim to be a prophet, akin to Moses' division of the Red Sea and Jesus' raising of the dead" (Martin 527). In other words, "the Qur'ān is the Prophet's most dazzling miracle and an overwhelming proof of his prophethood" (Poonawala 382). To counter accusations that he was crazy, possessed, a wizard, or a poet, Muhammad "pointed above all to the character of his revelation, which was so structured that no being except God could have produced it. So the Qur'ān became

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a miracle that prohibited Muhammad's opponents from doubting his mission" (Gätje 9).

Because the Qur'ān is the words of God, as proven through its miraculous nature, the verses are extremely important. The content of the Qur'ān was also used to justify Muhammad as a valid prophet. At one point, the Qur'ān says Muhammad is not a soothsayer, madman or poet (Martin 528). This verse is aimed at refuting those accusations from non-Muslims in his time. The Qur'ān also indicates that Muhammad was a chosen person, in sūra 22:75 (Rubin 446). This verse reads "Allah chooses messengers from angels and from men" (Ali 277). The Qur'ān also deals with the duty to obey Muhammad and his unique position among other people (Rubin 447).

This authentication of Muhammad through the Qur'ān, and, thereby, through God, makes his life a worthy example for Muslims to follow. Theologians and other believers seek to follow God by understanding God acting through Muhammad (Ehlert 360). "As God's chosen messenger, the Prophet is the recipient not only of his revelation but also of his infinite supervision, compassion and protection." God also guided Muhammad in rituals and told him when to pray (Rubin 446).

Muhammad himself also believed that he was an example for his people. "The decisive point for Muhammad's mission as a prophet originated, of course, with the conviction that he was a chosen 'messenger' of God who was given responsibility in matters of faith, not only for himself but also for his people" (Gätje 5). Therefore, "for their part believers are expected to take the Prophet as their model in their devotion to God…Their love for God is the reason they must follow the prophet" (Rubin 447). Due to Muhammad's unique status, the hadīth was recorded to be a source of law for the community after Muhammad's death (Rippen 7).

However, in order to believe in the authenticity of the Qur'ān and hadīth, a person must first accept the basic tenets of Islam: that there is no God but God and Muhammad is his prophet. Ultimately it is belief in this statement that allows revelation and tradition to be authenticated. Once this belief is established, it can be seen that both the Qur'ān and hadīth are validated through God, whether directly or indirectly through

Muhammad. These two sources are invaluable to Muslims, especially to traditionalists who believe that guidance comes from the past. As Crone put it, "the Prophet had been the last window onto God's will" as the final seal of the prophets (Crone 127). Muslims who have strong faith in God, and believe that He sent down his final guidance in the early seventh century, will turn to the past for guidance themselves, and will be able to authenticate revelation and tradition through their faith in God.

Although this exploration of revelation and tradition certainly oversimplifies the complexity of these concepts throughout different periods in Islamic history, in different Islamic communities and in different theological sects, it is still possible to observe a certain pattern. If a person believes in one ultimate God with Muhammad as his prophet, this person will want to live by God's revelation and the Prophet's tradition. It is this faith and this desire which provides the framework for authenticating revelation and tradition. The natural human wish to affirm personal beliefs has led to much study of different aspects of the miraculous nature of the Qur'ān, thereby assuring its divine nature. The miracle of the Qur'ān also affirms Muhammad, who in turn gave the Sunna for people to live by. Again, the human craving for reassurance led to study of isnād chains to validate hadīth. Relying on their faith and using these methods, Muslims authenticate their scripture, traditions, and ultimately their way of life.

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