PROSPECTS AND LIMITS IN THE STUDY OF THE HISTORICAL MUḤAMMAD

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It is well known that the source material relating to the historical Muhammad is highly problematic.¹ There are no non-literary sources that pertain directly to the life of Muḥammad. Archaeological remains, inscriptions, or coins dating from the putative time of his life either do not exist or are not accessible to research. No archaeological surveys in Mecca or Medina have been conducted and it is unlikely that this will change anytime soon. Surveys in other parts of Saudi Arabia may give insights into the cultural background of Arabia in the 6th century AD, but they do not contain information about Muḥammad himself. Coins and inscriptions with a specific Islamic content or directly referring to Muḥammad only appear at the end of the 1st/7th century, about 50 or 60 years after his purported death. Moreover, the relics attributed to Muḥammad, such as his teeth, hairs, sandals, swords, mantle and standard, which are kept in the Topkapı palace and other places, share the fate of relics attributed to other venerated figures: their authenticity is highly questionable.

The situation is not much better when we look at the Muslim literary sources: there are no or almost no contemporary literary sources from the 1st/7th century that contain noteworthy information about Muḥammad. One notable exception is the Qurʾān, the text of which was more or less fixed 20 to 25 years after Muḥammad’s death in the view of the majority of scholars—Muslim as well as Western—of early Islam. This view is not unchallenged, however. John Wansbrough, for instance, claims that the Qurʾān reached its final form only in the 2nd/8th or 3rd/9th century, which would considerably reduce its value as a source about the life of Muḥammad.² Günter Lüling and


Christoph Luxenberg, on the other hand, hold that at least part of the Qur’an is of pre-Islamic origin. Yet, even if we accept the traditional dating of the Qur’an within the first century of Islam, the text remains very vague and open to interpretation when it comes to possible references to Muhammad. The Qur’an usually only refers to events and does not narrate them, and in general it does not mention the names of persons or places. Muhammad himself is mentioned only five times by name and many verses which are usually interpreted in light of the life of Muhammad could well be understood as referring to someone or something else. To sum up, the Qur’an on its own is of little use for reconstructing the life of Muhammad.

The non-Muslim literary sources do not provide relief either. There are a number of sources referring to the beginnings of Islam that predate the Islamic sources. However, they do not contain substantial material pertaining specifically to the life of Muhammad. In many cases, these sources are also open to interpretation. Finally, there are no non-Muslim sources that could highlight the social, political or spiritual context of the Hijāz at the relevant time and thus provide a background against which information on Muḥammad could be assessed.

In order to make any substantive statements about the details of the life of Muḥammad, we are therefore largely dependent on the Muslim

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literary sources. These sources, as is well known, date from the 2nd/8th century and later, i.e. at least 150 to 250 years after the events they describe. The reliability of these sources was challenged already at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century9 and then increasingly from the 1970s onward.10 The scepticism was not confined to single traditions that were called into question, but encompassed all of the Muslim tradition material. Consequently, the traditional account of the origins and the early history of Islam, as presented in the Muslim sources, as a whole was challenged and regarded as unreliable and biased. This trend came to a climax in the assertion that Muḥammad did not exist as a historical person and that all things we presume to know about him are backward-projections from the 2nd/8th and 3rd/9th centuries.11

It is indeed problematic to use the Muslim literary sources as historical sources for the life of Muḥammad. They are by no means straightforward accounts of the life of Muḥammad, and numerous studies have demonstrated the extent to which different incentives and tendencies have influenced and formed the traditions about his life. There are five main arguments against the reliability of these sources:

1. The Muslim accounts of the life of Muḥammad are only recorded in written sources that date from more than 150 years after Muḥammad’s purported death; they are neither supported by non-Muslim sources, nor substantiated by archaeological findings.
2. Some accounts are apparently inspired by verses from the Qurʾān. They thus do not constitute independent sources, but are only attempts to interpret Qurʾānic verses and to place them into a context.
3. Some accounts display obvious secondary tendencies that reflect later political, theological or legal debates.

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4. Often, the existing accounts are contradictory. They contain conflicting information regarding chronology, persons involved, and the course of events that cannot be reconciled.

5. The motivation of the accounts’ creators and transmitters should not be considered to be purely historiographical. Instead, it has to be assumed that they aimed at presenting the life of Muḥammad as salvation history, to provide a context for the Qurʾānic text, support certain legal positions by tracing them back to the Prophet, provide certain persons with a particular status by emphasising their role in the Prophet’s surroundings, or simply to entertain. The accounts are thus not only reshaped and distorted by secondary tendencies, but were never meant to present the life of Muḥammad in any objective way.

These arguments are usually also shared by less sceptical scholars, but they are viewed in a different light: the fact that some traditions display secondary tendencies does not imply that this is true for all traditions. The fact that accounts on the life of Muḥammad were only recorded in written sources more than 150 years after his purported death does not preclude the possibility that such accounts were transmitted faithfully and accurately in the time between the event and their recording in these sources. Also, a lack of contemporary sources does not entail the impossibility of making statements about the historicity of an event.

Apart from the different assessments of the facts, an important argument has been brought forward against the sceptical view: the traditions on the life of Muḥammad are—numerous contradictions in details notwithstanding—rather consistent in regard to the main features and the general outline of events. There are, for example, no traditions suggesting that Muḥammad was born outside Mecca, that there was nothing like the hijra or that the events took place in a different region or at a different time. Given that the Islamic community was divided into different groups and sects from a very early time and faced significant internal conflicts and hostilities due to the different views held by these groups, it is inconceivable that they nevertheless agreed on a fictitious common history of their origins. It is likewise inconceivable that a central authority would be able to impose such a uniform perception of that history and to suppress and eliminate any conflicting traditions.12

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While this argument is convincing, it only leads to the conclusion that the Muslim accounts on the life of Muhammad cannot be entirely fictitious but must have an authentic kernel. It remains an open debate, however, what this authentic kernel is. In other words: even if we accept that not all traditions on the life of Muhammad were forged, we still do not have a single tradition that can be assumed to be historical.

This situation has led some scholars to exclude the question of historicity or authenticity from their research and instead focus on the study of the Islamic tradition concerning Muhammad. This approach has also the advantage of not being subject to possible ideological reservations. Other scholars, however, seek to overcome the difficulties in the source material and to open new methodological pathways in their quest for the historical Muhammad.

It is obvious that the possible discovery of new sources—archaeological finds, very early documents, inscriptions or the like—might offer new data on the life of Muhammad. What is disputed, on the other hand, is whether more information on the historical Muhammad may be gained from the existing sources. In the following, I want to discuss four promising approaches to uncovering historical facts about Muhammad from the Muslim sources and to show in an exemplary manner what kind of information may be obtained in this way.

One approach which has been followed for a long time already is the concentration on accounts that run contrary to the later orthodox tradition and later tendencies. The Satanic verses may serve as an example for this kind of tradition. These accounts present Muhammad in an unfavourable way. Since the later tradition tried to explain and belittle these incidents but did not deny their occurrence, they must, according to this view, be accepted as historical. Otherwise it cannot be explained why these accounts should have been incorporated into the Muslim tradition. Although this approach is still followed on a small scale today—and with good reason—concentrating on it alone takes too narrow a view of the matter. The portrayal of Muhammad resulting from this approach is necessarily a negative one, since it is determined exclusively by traditions that present Muhammad in an

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unfavourable way, while accounts presenting Muhammad in accordance with later orthodox views tend to be viewed as forgeries.14

The second approach is the so-called *isnād-cum-matn* analysis, a term which was coined by Harald Motzki in his article “Der Prophet und die Schuldner”.15 The *isnād-cum-matn* analysis makes use of two features that characterise a large percentage of Muslim traditions. The first is the existence of common links, i.e. key figures who seem to have played a central role in the dissemination of a certain *hadīth* and appear in all or most of its *asānīd* (chains of transmission). The second feature is the correlation that usually exists between the text of a tradition (*matn*) and its paths of transmission.

An *isnād-cum-matn* analysis can yield substantive results only when there are enough variants of a tradition, in other words only when an account is adduced many times in many different sources. In these cases the *asānīd* very often share a common link, a name appearing in all or almost all chains of transmission, and traditions displaying a large similarity in their *asānīd* are usually also very close to each other in wording. In cases where there is a large number of variants of a tradition, this fact can best be explained by assuming that the transmission indeed took place according to the lines given in the *asānīd*.

Much has been said about the premises of the *isnād-cum-matn* analysis and the difficulties relating to it and this is not the place to reiterate these issues. However, in the case of well documented traditions with several variants, it is possible to gain insights into three aspects of the tradition. Firstly, it is possible to find out who is responsible for changes, additions, or omissions in the tradition. If all variants of a tradition that share an intermediate link contain a certain element and all variants which were transmitted by other persons do not have this element, we must assume that this element was brought


into circulation by the said intermediate link. Secondly, it is possible to detect false ascriptions, when single variants do not conform to the pattern of correspondence between isnād and matn. Thirdly, it is possible to establish which elements go back to the common link. At least all elements that are reported independently by several students of the common link must be considered to have been part of what the common link reported. It is of course possible that the common link presented different versions to different students at different times, and that therefore even more elements go back to the common link. But while this can not be established with certainty, the elements reported independently by several students undoubtedly were already brought forward by the common link.

The value of the results from this kind of analysis largely depends on who figures as the common link. The closer the common link is to the events he reports, the more likely it is that the reports reflect the general outline of the events correctly and the farther a common link is from the events, the less likely it is that his reports are reliable. This method thus brings us closer to the life of Muḥammad, but it does not provide us with any incontestable facts. In many cases, however, it may help to separate original reports from later additions and embellishments. The isnād-cum-matn analysis has a number of limitations, though:

1. For the biography of Muḥammad, the number of traditions that lend itself to such an analysis is limited. Many of the traditions on the life of Muhammad do not exist in enough variants for an isnād-cum-matn analysis to yield relevant results.
2. The wording of the different variants usually differs considerably. As a rule it is thus impossible to reconstruct the original wording of the common link’s reports, and the results are usually confined to the contents of the original reports.
3. In the field of the biography of Muḥammad, the earliest accounts that can be reconstructed in this way (in regard to their contents) in general date from 40 to 60 years after Muḥammad’s purported death and do not constitute eyewitness reports, though a few exceptions may emerge that allow for an earlier dating.
4. The isnād-cum-matn analysis is arduous and time-consuming. Dozens of textual variants have to be analysed and compared with each other. At least in some cases this effort stands in contrast to the rather meagre results.
The method has been successfully applied to traditions about the life of Muḥammad in a couple of studies. Other studies have focused on legal matters or on the early Islamic conquests.

The third approach consists of an analysis of comprehensive corpora of texts. While the isnād-cum-matn-analysis concentrates on single events documented in variants of a small number of accounts, this approach aims at analysing all traditions traced back to certain persons. For the field of the biography of Muḥammad, the most obvious candidates for such an analysis are the oldest known authorities in the field, like Abān b. ʿUthmān (d. c. 105/723), ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr (d. c. 93/712), Shurahbil b. Saʿīd (d. c. 123/741), ʿAbdallāh b. Abī Bakr (d. c. 120/738), or Saʿīd b. al-Musayyab (d. c. 94/713). This approach may be combined with an isnād-cum-matn-analysis of the individual traditions to eliminate later additions and false ascriptions. The combination of both approaches sheds light on what the earliest authorities in the field of the biography of the Prophet deemed noteworthy and on what they did not report. It also yields a clearer picture of the transmission of the reports.

Several attempts were made to collect the corpora of texts of some of the earliest authorities on the biography of the Prophet. Of those, the traditions going back to ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr received the most scholarly

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20 See e.g. ʿAbd al-ʿAziz Dūrī, The rise of historical writing among the Arabs, Princeton, 1983, 100–10 (corpus of Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhri); Muḥammad Bāqshīsh Abī Mālik, al-Maghāzī li-Mūsā b. Ḫuqba, Agadir, 1994 (corpus of Mūsā b. Ḫuqba); and the works mentioned in the following footnote.
attention, and his corpus was the first to be studied using the isnād-cum-matn analysis. It is therefore the most suitable corpus to demonstrate what kind of information can be gained from such a study.

The analysis of the corpus of traditions from ’Urwa showed that longer reports going back to ’Urwa are limited to seven events in the life of Muhammad and that most of these events took place after the hijra. Only the story of the first revelation and an account of the situation in Mecca and the harassment of the Muslims which finally leads to the hijra relate to the time before the hijra. The other accounts deal with the Battle of Badr, the Battle of the Moat, the slander about Ā’isha, the expedition of al-Ḥudaybiya, and the conquest of Mecca including the following expeditions against the Ḥawāzin in Ḥunayn and against al-Ṭā’īf.

The sīra-traditions traced back to ’Urwa b. al-Zubayr feature in general different asānīd than his exegetical or legal traditions, although there is a certain overlap. These distinctions in the lines of transmission can be seen as an indication that the asānīd are not arbitrary inventions. However, while some traditions are well documented and exist in several independent transmissions, some asānīd seem to have been invented or forged by al-Wāqidī and, possibly, Ibn Ishāq.

Using the isnād-cum-matn analysis, it is possible to reconstruct the contents of ’Urwa’s accounts of the events mentioned. These usually consist of the basic outline of the story. While in some cases single phrases can be shown to go back to ’Urwa, in general it is impossible to reconstruct the wording of his accounts.

It is noteworthy that many of the tendencies mentioned above, which have been adduced as arguments against the reliability of the Islamic tradition, can be shown to be later insertions or modifications that do not go back to ’Urwa. For instance, the traditions of ’Urwa do not contain any details regarding chronology. Only once is there mention of an event taking place in Ramaḍān, but no year is given.

24 Ibid., 258–60, 289.
Many Qurʾānic elements and possible elaborations of Qurʾānic verses which in the later tradition are connected with certain events do not figure in ʿUrwa’s traditions, although there are a few references to Qurʾānic verses. Likewise, legal traditions, which are often associated with certain events in the life of Muḥammad—and which may represent attempts to support certain legal positions—are not included in ‘Urwa’s historical accounts.

In this context, ‘Urwa’s letters to the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 65/685 to 86/705) deserve particular attention. Their contents are corroborated by other long traditions going back to ʿUrwa and transmitted independently by different students of his, and they can thus be traced back to ʿUrwa with some certainty. In comparison with other traditions, the letters display some features which suggest that they were less affected by processes of redaction and revision. The letters are very much matter-of-fact, they contain almost no miraculous stories and very few embellishments. Persons who later came to play a decisive role in early Islam, such as the rightly guided caliphs, do not figure prominently in these letters. Moreover, occasional sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad are not introduced with a complete isnād, but instead with sentences like “it is alleged that the Prophet said…”.

Josef Horovitz held that the letters of ʿUrwa represent the oldest written notes on events in the life of Muḥammad. This view is debatable, as the letters were transmitted through lectures just as were other traditions and thus were subject to change. Nevertheless, it seems that the letters were much less reworked than other traditions in the process of transmission.

It would be worthwhile to compare the corpus of traditions of ʿUrwa with the respective corpora of other early authorities on the life of Muḥammad, in regard to their contents, their use of Qurʾānic material, embellishments, and certain political, legal or theological tendencies. This would greatly enhance our knowledge about the form and transmission of the earliest traditions about the life of Muḥammad, and would help us to gain a clearer picture of what the earliest authorities

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25 Ibid., 264–6.
28 Horovitz, Biographies, 26.
on the life of Muḥammad deemed noteworthy and which episodes of
the story of his life may have been introduced only at a later time.

This approach has its limits as well. There are only a few early
authorities on the life of Muḥammad from whom a sufficient number
of traditions exists to make an analysis of this kind possible. Even in
the best case, the traditions that may be reconstructed date from at
least 40–60 years after the events they relate.

Both the isnād-cum-matn analysis and the analysis of corpora of tra-
ditions may be conducted more effectively in the years to come. More
and more sources are edited and thus the number of traditions and
variants is increasing and providing a more solid basis for analyses.
In addition, sources are increasingly available in digital form, which
facilitates the locating of traditions.

The fourth approach, and one which has not been pursued widely
so far, consists in the analysis of linguistic peculiarities of the texts
in question. There is a whole literary genre dealing with rare words
in the tradition literature, the gharib al-hadīth literature. These works
list and explain words that resisted the trend toward simplification
and adaptation of the language and thus had to be explained in later
times. It does not follow, of course, that every rare word attributed to
the Prophet was indeed uttered by him, and from a couple of rare and
antiquated words in a text it cannot be concluded that the whole text
is old. There are, however, a couple of texts which contain not only a
few isolated rare words, but in which several words and phrases had
to be explained. The best known example of such a text is the so-called
“Constitution of Medina”, which abounds with rare and antiquated
words and phrases which were not easily comprehensible to later gen-
erations and thus required explanation.29

Another example is a letter Muḥammad allegedly wrote to Ukaydīr,
the ruler of Dūmat al-Jandal in northern Arabia. The writing consti-
tutes an agreement on the usage rights of land and water resources. The
grammarians and philologists Abū ʿUbayd al-Qāsim b. Sallām apparently
deemed it necessary to explain as many as thirteen words and phrases
in this short letter, which is about half the letter.30 The large number of
rare words makes it likely that this letter is very old indeed, although

29 Cf. Michael Lecker, The “Constitution of Medina”: Muḥammad’s first legal docu-
ment, Princeton, 2004, for a discussion of several problematic terms.
30 Abū ʿUbayd al-Qāsim b. Sallām, Kitāb al-amwāl, Muḥammad Ḥāmid al-Faqī
it does not of course mean that its ascription to Muhammad is valid. It seems very probable that in the transmission of treaties and other documents more attention was paid to the wording than in the transmission of other traditions. This assumption is corroborated by the fact that the different versions of these documents display fewer variants than do those of other traditions. We observed a similar tendency in the letters of `Urwa to the caliph `Abd al-Malik above. A systematic appraisal of the *gharīb al-ḥadīth* literature might lead us to other texts which can with a high probability be assumed to be very old.

The results to be gained from such an approach are, of course, limited. It is likely that a couple of texts dating from the first century may still be unearthed from the literature in this way. The possibility cannot be excluded, however, that Muslim tradition put these texts in a false context, or that additions, omissions, or changes took place in the course of transmission. In the case mentioned above, however, Abū `Ubayd claims to have seen the document with his own eyes and copied it word by word, and it is not unlikely that he indeed did so. In this case we would only have to deal with scribal errors. We would then have a document which is short but which can be attributed to Muḥammad.

With the four methods presented here, much can be learned about the subject matter of the earliest traditions concerning the life of Muḥammad, what they looked like and how they changed in the course of time. It is possible to show that many tendencies that shaped the traditions about the life of Muḥammad did not affect these earliest traditions or did so only to a small degree. Linguistic analysis will furthermore enable us to date a couple of texts to the first century of Islam with a relatively high probability. Thus the gap between the oldest traditions or texts that can be reconstructed and the events referred to in these traditions may be reduced to some 40 to 60 years.

Even if we assume that these earliest traditions reflect the general outline of the events correctly—as research in oral history/oral tradition suggests might be the case—the quantity of historical facts about the life of Muḥammad that can be deduced in this way remains small. Based on the traditions of `Urwa b. al-Zubayr, for instance, only the following facts relating to the time before the *hijra* may probably be considered historical: when Muḥammad starts receiving revelations from God, he is at first frightened and distressed, but then starts to proclaim the message he receives. At first, the Meccans’ reactions range from being unconcerned to showing sympathy. This changes when Muḥammad begins to preach against their gods. Subsequently
the Muslims are harassed and some of them emigrate to Abyssinia. The situation in Mecca at best ameliorates a little for a short while and thus Muslims begin to emigrate to Medina. Finally Muḥammad follows them together with Abū Bakr and settles in Medina. This is approximately the extent of what can be deduced as probable historical facts from the traditions of ʿUrwa for the time before the hijra. The situation is better for the time after the hijra, and as we have seen, the corpus of ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr contains a couple of long traditions relating to this time, namely about the Battle of Badr, the Battle of the Moat, the slander about ʿĀʾisha, the expedition of al-Hudaybiya, and the conquest of Mecca and its aftermath. Nevertheless, there are a number of important events concerning which we do not have traditions from ʿUrwa, for instance the Battle of Uhud or the farewell pilgrimage. Some of these gaps may be filled, once more traditions, texts, and corpora are analysed, but there are limits inherent in the material. Thus the dating of events in the life of Muḥammad will always remain speculative. The earliest authorities on the life of Muḥammad apparently were not interested in chronological details. The interest in chronology only emerged a generation or two later.31 It is possible, however, to develop a relative chronology, as some accounts presuppose the prior occurrence of certain events.

The source value of the material on the life of Muḥammad collected in the Muslim literary sources should not be evaluated as a whole, as different kinds of material vary considerably in regard to their suitability for historical reconstructions. The four methods presented here aim at sifting out those parts of the Muslim tradition that contain reliable information on Muḥammad and at separating them from other parts that are less suitable for such analyses. By following this route, we will, bit by bit, be able to add more pieces to the puzzle of the historical Muḥammad. Even though we will never reach the optimistic stance of Ernest Renan that Islam was born in “the full light of history” and that the life of Muḥammad is “as well known to us as that of any reformer of the 16th century”,32 the prospects are good that we will at least be able to get a clear picture of the general outline of the later part of Muḥammad’s life.

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