

**The Middle East Institute
George Camp Keiser Library**

Library Research Guide

on

The Koran

&

Hadith

by Kenneth Garden

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Kenneth Garden recently completed his dissertation in the Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations of the University of Chicago on Al-Ghazali's Revival of the Religious Sciences and its reception. He is currently the Qatar Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University.

The Koran

The Koran is the centerpiece of Islam as a religion and of Islamic religious sciences. It has been said that the Koran is to Muslims what Christ is to Christians, for Muhammad, as the Koran says (41.6), was but a man (though an exemplary man), while the Koran is the miracle of Islam, a work of inimitable (10,38) truth and beauty, the earthly manifestation of a text written on a preserved celestial tablet (85.22), the literal word of God. In the past, it was traditional in many Muslim societies for children to memorize the Koran when very young, sometimes completing the task with great festivity at the age of seven. Today the Koran is still studied in most public and private schools throughout the Muslim world. The importance of the original Arabic text is such that many non-Arab Muslims will memorize portions of the Koran in Arabic without understanding the exact meaning of the words. Most Arab Muslims have memorized large portions of the text, having studied it at school and having listened to recorded readings at home, on the radio, in taxi cabs and busses, and in shops and public spaces, especially on Fridays and during the month of Ramadan.

For many Muslims, steeped in the text and ethos of the Koran, there could be nothing clearer, more self-explanatory or self-evidently true. Indeed the Koran refers to itself several times as “clear” or “manifest” (15.1; 26,2&195; 27,1; 28,2; 36,69; 43,2). For a non-Muslim encountering the Koran for the first time, however, it can be a bewildering book, as indeed is most scripture when encountered for the first time. The various books of the Bible or the Buddhist Sutras must be read many times, ideally with guidance, before the reader is familiar with their concerns and before the themes of those books take on the resonance they have for initiates. So it is with the Koran.

Spelling and Pronunciation

in English and, as far as I know, no agreed-upon standard. It is becoming increasingly common to see the word written using the system created by Arabists for representing the Arabic alphabet in Latin letters: Qur'ān. A scholar of Arabic would know that the 'Q' represents the Arabic letter 'qāf', something like the letter 'k' pronounced further back in the throat; that the 'r' represents the letter 'rā', a rolled 'r' similar to the Spanish 'r'; that the apostrophe represents the letter 'hamza', a glottal stop; and that the 'ā' represents the letter 'alif', an 'ah' sound as in 'top' pronounced for roughly twice the duration. Non-Arabic speakers will be puzzled by this spelling and simply pronounce it Koran, which is about as close as an English speaker can come to the Arabic pronunciation. In my opinion, it is better in non-scholarly writing simply to use Koran, in keeping with the closest English approximation of the Arabic, though to some this may seem quaint, antiquated or "Orientalist." This is also the spelling used by the Library of Congress and most library catalogues.

The Koran is composed of chapters, known as suras, each with its own title, usually chosen on the basis of a striking image or theme of the chapter. These chapters range from three verses in length (103, 108, 110) to two hundred eighty-six (2). They were revealed in response to different events in the career of the Prophet Muhammad between 610 and his death in 632. Unlike Genesis, for example, the Koran contains few extended narratives, a notable exception being the sura “Joseph” (which makes for an interesting comparison with the story of Joseph in Genesis). The Koran is conscious of itself as scripture in a way that the Bible, for example, is not. It refers to the fact that a religion is expected to have scripture like the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament. These scriptures, according to the Koran, have been corrupted by the religious communities associated with them. In fact, Islam builds on Judaism and Christianity in the same way that Christianity built upon Judaism and the Koran reflects this. Rather than tell the story of Jesus or Moses at length, the Koran assumes a knowledge of these stories on the part of the reader and invokes pertinent elements of them.

The shorter chapters of the Koran consist of something akin to prayers (eg., 113, 114), admonitions (107), encouragement to believers (108), warnings to the unbelievers (103, 104), and invocations of stories that would have been known to Muhammad’s audience, some biblical, others not (105). The longer chapters are a mixture of these and other elements in an order that conveys rhetorical power, but rarely follows a narrative thread. The chapters themselves are not ordered chronologically by date of revelation or according to some narrative scheme, but more or less in descending order of size. All of these factors present challenges to a first-time reader of the Koran.

Ways of Approaching the Koran for the First-Time Reader

For a first-time reader, there are three possible approaches to the Koran: simply to read it as it is; to read representative selections of the Koran, arranged according to theme; or to read the Koran along with or after a secondary work on the Koran.

Advice on Reading the Koran with no Secondary Guide. A first-time reader may wish to start with the shorter chapters at the end of the book. These tend to be more focused on a single theme, and are a good way to become familiar with the themes of the Koran before plunging into

a longer chapter. These verses are also more poetic and give a better sense of the Koran's verbal power (to the extent that this is possible in translation). After becoming comfortable with the text, the reader can return to the beginning and read the *sura* of *The Cow*, which, like many of the longer (and later revealed) *suras* contains explicit commandments not found in shorter *suras* on such matters as prayer, inheritance, fasting, marriage and divorce and so on. We shall deal with the many translations of the Koran below.

Collections of Thematically Grouped Excerpts of the Koran. For a reader interested in seeing what the Koran has to say about individual topics, there are selective translations of the Koran with like-themed excerpts grouped together. An early example of this is Edward Lane's *Selections from the Kur-án, Commonly called, in England, the Koran; with an Interwoven Commentary* (1843). Many of the themes Lane chose to cover would still be of interest to readers today. These consist mainly of selections relating to Hebrew prophets and Jesus Christ, but also Muhammad and the Koran, Believers and Unbelievers, Paradise and Hell, and God and his Works. A drawback is that the collection makes little effort to select passages of the Koran that reflect the priorities and concerns of Muslims. Furthermore, the English translation of the Koran is that of Sale from 1734, and the language is a bit archaic. A better effort in this vein from 1988 is that of Kenneth Cragg, whose *Readings in the Qur'án* consists of a useful introductory essay and selections from the Koran on the themes of God and His Praise; God in Creation: Man and Nature; Prophets and Messengers from Adam to Jesus; Muhammad: The Prophet-Preacher and the Meccan Years; Muhammad: The Prophet-Ruler from the Medinan Climax; Faith and Religion; Society and Law; Unfaith, Judgment and the Last Things. The Koran uses repetition as a rhetorical device so Cragg is able to cover many of the Koran's concerns by excerpting only a third of the book, making *Readings* a good place to start for first-time readers.

Yet another such work is *Commandments by God in the Quran*, thematically grouped selections of the Koran by Nazar Mohammad. The themes chosen by the compiler are much more numerous than those chosen by Lane and Cragg, and include Man's Birth and Death, the Purpose of Human Life, Associating False Deities with God, Moral Diseases, Qualities of the Pious, and many others. Having been chosen by a Muslim, they may not address some questions that non-

Muslims would have concerning the Koran, but they are more informative of the concerns a Muslim might have when approaching the Koran (which is not to say that Nazar Mohammad speaks for all Muslims).

Guides to the Koran. For those who would like guidance on the Koran, there are several options. One is Michael Sells' translation of shorter chapters of the Koran, *Approaching the Qur'ān: The Early Revelations* (1999). It comes with a CD of Koranic recitation, and given the frequency with which such recordings are heard, in Arab countries at least, this is an important way to experience the Koran. Sells also gives useful background information on the Koran, the circumstances under which a verse was revealed, and common interpretations of a verse.

Another very clear introduction to the Koran is Fazlur Rahman's *Themes in the Qur'ān* (1994), which presents the worldview (and otherworldly view) of the Koran with respect to the themes of God, Man as Individual, Man in Society, Nature, Prophethood and Revelation, Eschatology, Satan and Evil, and the Emergence of the Muslim Community. Fazlur Rahman was a well-respected scholar of Islam, and his understanding of the Koran is certainly representative of that of many Muslims. *Themes in the Qur'ān* is an excellent introduction to the Koran, and will give the reader a perspective from which to make sense of the themes the Koran returns to again and again. Of course, this is Fazlur Rahman's reading.

A more neutral approach, though one that offers correspondingly less guidance, is that of Faruq Sherif's *A Guide to the Contents of the Qur'an*. Like the thematically arranged compilations of Koranic excerpts, Sherif's work covers seven broad themes: the Creator and His Creatures, the Prophet and the Qur'an, Previous Bearers of the Divine Message, Historical Events, Faith and Religion, the Other World, and Commandments. Unlike Fazlur Rahman, Sherif does not try to knit these themes together into a coherent worldview. Rather, he sums up the Koran's statements on various topics making no attempt to reconcile possible contradictions, and gives citations of the passages upon which he bases his claims (some of his citations appear to be wrong).

Two final books should be mentioned in this category, these being W. M. Watt and R. Bell's *Introduction to the Qur'an*, and the more recent *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction*, by Michael Cook. These are more scholarly introductions to the Koran, and Watt and Bell's book

in particular goes into detail that non-scholars may not find interesting or useful, such as the history of the collection of the chapters and verses of the Koran into a single volume by the early Muslims or a chapter on “The Qur’ān and Occidental Scholarship.” Their book does provide a brief overview of the life of Muhammad and the context in which the Koran was revealed, which is lacking in other books we have discussed. It also contains a chapter on “The Doctrines of the Qur’ān” which covers some of the themes dealt with in these other works. Both books offer a non-Muslim’s perspective on the work and raise questions about the historicity and authenticity of the Koran that non-Muslim readers might find interesting.

As for the varying readings of the Koran by Muslims throughout the centuries, this shall be treated below in a section on *tafsir*, or Koranic exegesis. It bears noting in this section that some works of exegesis would also be suitable introductions to the Koran.

Translations of the Koran

Translation of the Koran generally is a vexing question for Muslims, just as choosing a translation to read is a vexing question given the immense quantity of competing versions. Muslims believe that the Koran co-exists eternally with God, preserved on a tablet in Heaven in the Arabic language. Even a copy of the Koran in Arabic is thus, strictly speaking, not the Koran itself, and so is often referred to in Arabic as a *mushaf*: a volume or book. This, in addition to the usual problems of translation, means that an English rendering of the original cannot, in the eyes of most Muslims, be considered the Koran. Translations sometimes refer to themselves as an “interpretation” of the Koran, the “message” of the Koran, or the “meaning” of the Koran. However, given that less than a quarter of the world’s Muslims are Arabs, a non-Arabic speaking reader of the Koran in translation is in the same situation as the majority of Muslims.

The George Camp Keiser Library would be a good place to begin a study of the history of translation of the Koran into English, as it has a collection of 20 different English translations, including the first ever, *The Alcoran of Mahomet*, an English translation of the French translation from 1688. There is a great deal of stylistic variation among translations of the Koran. Some aim for clarity and accuracy, while others try to capture some of the poetic power of the original. Compare the following renditions of the opening chapter of the Koran or *al-fatihah*. The first translation is that of Abdallah Yousuf Ali, *The Glorious Kur’an* (1973). The second is the

translation of Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (1953). The last is a recent and well-regarded bilingual edition by `Ali Quli Qara`i, *The Qur`ān, With a Phrase by Phrase English Translation* (2004).

Praise be to God, Most Gracious Most Merciful	In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful	In the Name of Allah, the All-beneficent, the All merciful
Praise be to God, The Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds	Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds	All praise belongs to Allah Lord of all the worlds
Most Gracious, Most Merciful	The Beneficent, the Merciful	The All-beneficent, the All-merciful
Master of the Day of Judgment	Owner of the Day of Judgment	Master of the Day of Retribution
Thee do we worship, and Thine aid we seek	Thee (alone) we worship; Thee (alone) we ask for help	You [alone] do we worship, and to You [alone] do we turn for help
Show us the straight way	Show us the straight path	Guide us on the straight path
The way of those on whom Thou has bestowed thy Grace, Those whose (portion) is not wrath, and who go not astray	The path of those whom Thou hast favoured Not (the path) of those who earn Thine anger nor of those who go astray	The path of those whom You have blessed—such as have not incurred your wrath, nor are astray

The difference is mainly stylistic and for the first-time reader, interested in the text for reasons other than piety or scholarship, most recent translations will do. One point to make about the above translations is that the first translates the Arabic word *Allāh* as God and the others leave

the word untranslated. Some Muslims prefer to refer to God as he names himself in Arabic in the Koran, even when speaking other languages. However *Allāh* is the Arabic for “God” and is used also by Arab Christians. The refusal to render the word *Allāh* in English obscures the fact that Muslims see themselves as worshiping the same God as Christians and Jews

Koranic Exegesis, or *Tafsir*/Ta’wil

The George Camp Keiser Library also contains several volumes in English of Koranic exegesis, that is, attempts by Muslims to interpret or explain the Koran. There are two types of Koranic exegesis. The first is known as *tafsir*, which is a relatively straight-forward elucidation of the Koran that tries to clarify the text by explaining the context in which a verse was revealed and clarifying difficult language. The fact that there exist many different works of *tafsir* makes clear that there is another dimension to this genre, namely promoting a particular reading of the Koran and thus a different understanding of the religion as a whole. It must be kept in mind when reading *tafsir* that many interpretations represent the view of the author or of the broader tendency within Islam he represents.

A second type of exegesis is *ta’wil* or symbolic interpretation. Many works of *tafsir* will contain a certain amount of *ta’wil*, as there are some passages that cannot be understood literally. Symbolic interpretation is more frequently undertaken by mystics (Sufis) and the Ismailis, an esoteric Shiite sect, than by practitioners of other religious sciences.

One of the best overviews of Koranic exegesis is *The Qur’an and its Interpreters* by Mahmoud M. Ayoub. Rather than a translation of the exegesis of a single classical or modern exegete, *The Qur’an and its Interpreters* draws on 13 different exegeses, spanning over a thousand years of Koranic exegesis. Ayoub’s selection represents early works of exegesis that offer little more than *hadith* (basically a short narrative about Muhammad) relating to the topic of a *sura* or the circumstances under which it was revealed, as well as juristic, theological, philosophical, mystical, and modern exegeses. This is a wonderful resource for those who want a taste of the diversity of the Islamic intellectual heritage.

Another important Koranic exegesis available in English is that of Sayyid Abul A`la al-Mawdudi (1903-1979), one of the most important exponents of political Islam, founder of the *jama`at al-*

Islami in Pakistan, and a profound influence on the Egyptian Islamist Sayyid Qutb. Mawdudi wrote *Towards Understanding the Qur'ān* in part with first-time readers in mind. His introduction addresses the difficulties in reading the Koran for those unfamiliar with its style. This *tafsir* makes an interesting guide to the Koran for first-time readers, but it must be kept in mind that the exegesis it offers represents a very particular Islamic orientation.

Hadith and Hadith Criticism

Second to the Koran as an authoritative guide to correct and godly practice for Muslims is the *sunna* or tradition of Muhammad (from which comes the designation *Sunni*, as in Sunni Muslim or Sunni Islam; i.e., a Muslim or view of Islam that follows the community's understanding of the tradition of Muhammad rather than the leadership of his descendents, as do Shiite Muslims). This *sunna* comprises thousands of individual reports about the sayings and actions of Muhammad known as *hadith*. As there are many thousands of hadith recognized as authoritative by Muslim scholars, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to write anything that accurately characterizes them all as a body. What follows is first a discussion of types of hadith, their components, collections of hadith and the importance of hadith for Muslims, and second a discussion of hadith criticism. The second topic is much more difficult than the first. That many fraudulent stories and sayings of Muhammad ended up in circulation is recognized by both Muslim and Western scholars. However, Muslim and Western scholars differ radically over how they account for this fact, and how they try to identify a hadith as authentic or inauthentic. Many works on the topic of hadith, both Muslim and Western, address this debate in some way, and so a brief overview of the debate will be given here for the sake of background.

Hadith

Muslims look to hadith for information about the life of the beloved figure of Muhammad, seen as God's final and most perfect prophet, and a guide to be emulated even in mundane affairs such as clothing (men should not wear silk), beard length (at least a fist in length), and how to sleep (on one's right side). The extremely devout try to bring all of their life's actions into accordance with the example of the Prophet to increase their piety. The hadith are also looked to for information to supplement legal or ritual commandments found in the Koran. The Koran clearly states in numerous passages that prayer is obligatory, but it does not provide the details of how exactly prayer is to be performed. This information is found in the hadith. When attempting to come to a ruling on religious or legal matters, a Muslim will first look in the Koran for a verdict and turn to hadith only if a verdict is not found there.

Hadith Qudsi

It should be noted that the hadith do not contain only the words and deeds of Muhammad. There is also a category of hadith known as *hadith qudsi* or “holy hadith” in which God speaks. These are not considered a part of the Koran because, according to Muhammad Azami, it is possible that Muhammad’s own interpretation played a role in the wording of the text. A famous example of a *hadith qudsi*, often pointed to by Sufis as support for their practices and attempts to achieve unity with God, is as follows:

God the Almighty has said: Whosoever shows enmity to a friend of Mine, I shall be at war with him. My servant does not draw near to me with anything more loved by Me than the religious duties I have imposed upon him, and My servant continues to draw near to Me with supererogatory works so that I shall love him. When I love him I am the hearing with which he hears, his seeing with which he sees, his hand with which he strikes, and his foot with which he walks. Were he to ask [something] of Me, I would surely give it to him; and were he to ask Me for refuge, I would grant him it. (from the collection of Bukhari)

Transmission of Hadith and the *isnad*

There is agreement that hadith first circulated orally, being passed from one Muslim to another. The names of those who participated in the transmission of a hadith were noted in what was called an *isnad*, or chain of transmission, for the sake of keeping track of the people on whose authority the body of the hadith, or *matn*, was related. For Muslim scholars, the *isnad* is the key to determining the authenticity of a hadith, as we shall see below. Western scholars, too, have analyzed *isnads* in their own approach to determining the authenticity of hadith. An example of a full hadith with *isnad* is as follows:

Bukhari said that Sulayman Abu al-Rabi` informed him saying that Isma`il ibn Ja`far said that Nafi` ibn Malik informed him on the authority of his father that Abu Hurayra related that the Prophet said, “The signs of a hypocrite are three: whenever he speaks he tells a lie; whenever he makes a promise he breaks it/ whenever trusted with something he proves to be dishonest.” (Bukhari)

Even when hadith began to be written down in books, Muslims continued for a long time to copy their hadith not directly from other books, but rather on the basis of hearing a book read aloud. They kept track of who had copied a book of hadith from whom. Beyond the use of the *isnad*, this practice also served an important social and religious function. By transmitting hadith and inserting one's self into the chain of transmission for later generations, a Muslim inserted him or herself into the tradition of the Prophet. In fact, as Richard Bulliet points out in writing of the etiquette of hadith teachers in medieval Iran, they were to emulate Muhammad in preparing for class, walking to class and conducting class, because in an important sense they were representing Muhammad himself to their students in passing on his words and deeds to them (Richard Bulliet, *Islam: A View from the Edge*, 1994).

Hadith Collections

In the eighth century C. E., hadith began to be collected into compendiums. The first such effort was that of Malik ibn Anas (d. 179/795). His *Muwatta'* ("the smoothed path") was not intended primarily as a collection of hadith for their own sake, but rather as a work of law. Unlike later, more sophisticated treatises on legal theory, Malik's *Muwatta'* is a collection of hadith, thematically arranged, allowing jurists to find authoritative statements applicable to cases at hand. Though the *Muwatta'* is recognized as laying the foundation for hadith studies, it is not entirely accurate to say that it is a collection of hadith only. Malik includes statements of other early Muslims as authorities to be consulted. Such reports, since they are not about Muhammad, are correctly referred to as *athar* and not hadith. This is a point that is seized upon by Western scholars in their hadith criticism, as we shall see below. The *Muwatta'* has been translated and can be paged through for a sense of hadith material.

A second early collector of hadith was also a jurist, Ahmad ibn Hanbal (d. 241/855), whose *Musnad* (lit. "foundation," but a technical term for a type of collection of hadith) collected between thirty and forty thousand hadith. True to the *Musnad* genre of hadith collections, Ibn Hanbal's *Musnad* arranges its hadith by the person who first related them. Thus, all hadith in the collection reported originally by Ali, the nephew of the Prophet, would be under a single heading. Ibn Hanbal's *Musnad* is still a highly respected collection, despite the fact that it conveys hadith later determined to be false, and despite the fact that, like all *Musnad* collections, it is difficult to use when one is searching for a hadith on a particular topic. The hadith contained

in the *Musnad* represent only a small portion of the one million hadith that Ibn Hanbal is said to have memorized. Many of these were certainly identical in content but had different *isnads*. Nonetheless, this illustrates the difference between the thousands of hadith that were eventually deemed canonical and the vast number that were in circulation.

Canonical Collections of Hadith: Bukhari and Muslim and the “Six Books”

Later in the ninth century, the two hadith collections considered most authoritative today, those of Bukhari (d. 256/870) and Muslim (d. 261/875) were collected. These collections have been revered by Muslims ever since, and as books are second in authority only to the Koran. Bukhari’s criteria for selection were more strict than Muslim’s. Bukhari’s *Sahih* (“sound” or “authentic”) contains 2,602 distinct hadith, repeated several times such that each hadith is contained under every topic heading it pertains to, for a total of 9,082 items. Muslim’s *Sahih* contains 3,033 distinct hadith. Both works transmit many of the same hadith, though Bukhari recognizes 434 persons whom Muslim does not cite, and Muslim cites 625 persons whom Bukhari does not mention. These two books are referred to together as the *Sahihayn*, the two *Sahihs*, and a reader curious about the scope of material covered by hadith can page through translations of either collection. Together with four other books, those of Abu Dawud (d. 261/875), al-Tirmidhi (d. 279/892), al-Nasa’i (d. 303/915) and Ibn Maja (d. 273/886), they form a body of canonical hadith known as “the six books.”

These later four books fall into the category of *Sunan* (plural of *sunna*), that is, collections of hadith that cover mainly legal or ritual questions. One of the concerns of these authors was reproducing enough hadith to permit jurists to derive legal rulings from either the Koran, or the precedent of Muhammad, rather than relying on their own fallible judgement. The strict methodology of Bukhari and Muslim did not preserve enough hadith for this to be possible, so some of these compilers, especially Abu Dawud and Ibn Maja, included hadith of lesser reliability, including some that were considered “weak.” It should be noted that Bukhari and Muslim set out to collect only those hadith that were, according to their criteria, indisputably sound. Muslim did not claim to be collecting all sound hadith (Bukhari did not preface his *Sahih* with a methodological introduction, so it is not possible clearly to determine his objectives). Thus, the hadith of the collections of Malik Ibn Anas and Ahmad Ibn Hanbal and others continued to be consulted.

Shiite Hadith

Shiites refer to hadith by the word *khobar* (pl. *akhbar*), or “report,” “tiding.” They do not pay as much attention to the *isnad* beginning with the Companions of Muhammad, but rather to reports transmitted by Shiite imams—12 descendants of Muhammad designated by God, having a near prophetic status. The “four books” of the Shiites were compiled later in the tenth and eleventh centuries. They differ from the Sunni collections mainly in containing numerous references to the Shiite imams, references they believe were suppressed by the Sunnis.

Shorter Collections Aimed at Pious Reflection

Al-Nawawi, a thirteenth-century religious scholar who wrote a commentary on the *Sahih* of Muslim, also collected a short collection of forty hadith, which has been translated simply as *Al-Nawawi's Forty Hadith*. It can be read through in a couple of hours for an experience of hadith that al-Nawawi and many of his readers found inspiring, instructive, and a sort of bare minimum of hadith that should be known by all Muslims. *Forty Hadith* is meant to be read cover to cover rather than searched as a reference work for hadith relating to specific legal or ethical questions, and is a good place to start for a first-time reader of the hadith.

Hadith Criticism—Differing Methodologies between Western and Muslim Scholars

The difference between the approach of Muslim hadith scholars and Western scholars of hadith rests on a fundamental difference of approach to the Islamic tradition as a whole. A traditional Muslim attitude toward hadith is summed up in the following quote:

“...the *sunna*, or we may say *hadith*, of the Prophet...is the second main source of Islamic law, valid forever, and the life of the Prophet is a model which ought to be followed by Muslims irrespective of time and place. For this reason, the Companions, even in the life of the Prophet, began to diffuse the knowledge of the *sunna* and they were ordered by the Prophet to do so.” —M. M. Azami, *Studies in Hadith Methodology and Literature*, American Trust Publications: Indianapolis, 1977, p. 46.

In other words, hadith have a central role in Islam, this has been the case from the start, and because of this, Muhammad and his companions set out from the very beginning to preserve

them accurately for posterity. The traditional view of the means by which hadith were preserved by the early community is described in this quote by Anas ibn Malik, Muhammad's servant:

We sat with the Prophet, maybe sixty persons in number and the Prophet taught them *hadith*. Later on when he went out for any necessity, we used to memorize it amongst us, when we departed it was cultivated in our hearts.

To Muslim scholars, who believe that Islam was established by an omniscient God through an infallible prophet, it is entirely plausible that Muhammad would have foreseen the form his religion would take when more fully elaborated centuries later. He could have foreseen the centrality of hadith to this religion, and therefore taken steps from the very beginning to establish an authoritative body of hadith. This view of hadith finds support in the hadith themselves, such as the following: "Pass on knowledge from me even if it is only one verse." (Bukhari) and "God illumines the man who hears hadith from me, preserves it carefully, and passes it on to others." (Ibn Hanbal).

To Western scholars, it is not plausible that hadith, stories and sayings of Muhammad, would have been recognized and collected *as* hadith in a technical sense already in Muhammad's lifetime. A more believable scenario for them is that Muhammad spoke and acted rather more un-self-consciously than the above accounts would suggest, realizing maybe that he was a model for his community, but not someone whose every action and word would be emulated to the smallest detail by Muslims for centuries. After the death of Muhammad, members of the early community looked for guidance in the face of radically new situations, such as the conquest of a good portion of the known world. Additionally, converts to Islam from other religions looked for instruction in their new faith, sometimes asking questions emerging from their own cultural tradition that had never before occurred to the community. To answer such questions, examples from the life of Muhammad were recalled, and not always accurately. This body of recollections was eventually formalized as the sunna of Muhammad, made up of thousands upon thousands of hadith, some genuinely describing his words and deeds and others not.

Consider the hadith quoted above from the perspective of Western scholars: "God illumines the man who hears hadith from me, preserves it carefully, and passes it on to others." While this story is proof to Muslims that Muhammad endorsed the practice of scrupulously verifying, collecting, and reciting hadith, it is taken the opposite way by Western scholars. In this hadith,

Muhammad speaks self-consciously of hadith in a technical sense, something Western scholars assume it would not have occurred to Muhammad to do. For them, it is an example of a hadith circulated after Muhammad's time for the sake of endorsing a particular, late evolving practice—the collection and authentication of hadith—as were many hadith, and is only further proof that a good number of hadith accepted as authentic by Muslims are later accretions to the tradition.

It is not only Western scholars who question the authenticity of some hadith. That there were many forged hadith is a fact recognized by both Muslim and Western scholars. Their approaches to this problem and to the question of what portion of hadith can confidently be declared authentic differ rather drastically. What follows is a brief overview of their respective methods of hadith criticism. For a more detailed account, the reader should consult some of the books cited below.

The Muslim Approach to Hadith Criticism. Ibn Qutayba (d. 889), writing in the ninth century, shows the realization of hadith scholars of the widespread problem of the circulation of inauthentic hadith. He points to hadith spread by popular preachers claiming that lizards were disobedient Jews transformed by God, that a wolf was admitted to paradise for eating a tax-collector, and that in answer to the paradox of who created God, it was claimed on the authority of Muhammad that when God decided to create Himself, he first created fast horses, set them off at a gallop and then made Himself out of their sweat. He wrote:

Such idiocies bring Islam into disrepute, reduce non-Muslims to guffaws, and make the religion unattractive to apostate and potential convert alike. (*Ta'wīl mukhtalif al-hadīth*, pp. 7-8)

Of course, the collectors of hadith aimed at more than respect from non-Muslims. At stake in the question of authentic vs. forged hadith is nothing less than the ability to live life in accordance with God's final and most perfect revelation to humanity. In response to these and other concerns, it was decided that the authentic hadith had to be authoritatively separated from the inauthentic. Given the hundreds of thousands of hadith in circulation by this time, the undertaking was a mammoth one. It involved learning the relevant biographical details of the lives of thousands of men who appear in *isnads* and knowing from memory tens, if not hundreds of thousands of hadith along with their *isnads*. Muslims today hold the remarkable men who

undertook this task—Malik Ibn Anas, Ibn Hanbal, Bukhari, Muslim and the others—in great esteem, and it is not surprising that Muslim scholars today bristle at the suggestion on the part of Western scholars that their methodology was flawed, allowed in many inauthentic hadith, and that, as some more extreme scholars claim, it is impossible ever to know whether a given hadith is authentic.

The "Science of Hadith" was remarkably sophisticated. According to Egyptian religious scholar Ibn al-Mullaqin (d. 1400), this science was, at one time, divided into as many as 200 sub-fields. The fundamental criteria for determining the authenticity of a hadith, however, was assessment of its *isnad*. An *isnad* was assessed on two main criteria. One was whether all of its various links connected. There could be no anonymous transmitters, and all of the various transmitters' lives had to overlap in time and, at some point, in space with both the transmitters they heard a hadith from and those they passed it on to. The second criterion was the moral standing of the men in the chain of transmitters, that is, whether they were all honest, morally upstanding men who could be counted on not to lie and fabricate hadith. The methodology of assessing these biographical questions about hadith transmitters was known as the "Science of Men" (*ilm al-rijal*).

Knowing which men in an *isnad* could have known their predecessors and successors was an objective question as long as their birth and death dates were known. Of course, this criteria can be applied more and less strictly. Bukhari demanded evidence that two transmitters had in fact met, while Muslim asked only that there be evidence that they could have met. The question of the truthfulness of a transmitter is a much more subjective question. One early hadith scholar, Ibn Mubarak (d. 797), gave four major criteria for ruling a transmitter of righteous conduct (*ʿadl*): he must pray in congregation, not drink wine, must not tell lies, and must not suffer from any mental disqualifications. Different scholars came to different conclusions on this question regarding the same man. Ibn Qutayba, the one mentioned above who bemoaned the circulation of so many outrageously fabricated hadith, was assessed variously by different scholars. Some scholars, including the famous al-Suyuti, declared him trustworthy and a man of eminent learning. Al-Bayhaqi claimed that he had been a member of a heretical sect (the Karrāmiyya); al-Hakim called him a liar, claiming the consensus of the community on this judgment; and al-Dhahabi called him an anthropomorphist (i.e., one who ascribes human characteristics to the utterly transcendent God).

There was some attention paid to the content of a hadith as well. As we saw above, Ibn Qutayba rejected the popular hadith circulating in his day on the basis of the absurdity of their content. Ibn al-Qayyim (d. 1350) wrote of the process of rejecting a hadith based on content. He gave the example of a hadith circulating in his day according to which, whenever one says, “There is no deity but God,” the first part of the declaration of faith, God creates from this sentence a bird with seventy thousand tongues. Ibn Qayyim writes that the claim is absurd, that experiment rejects it, it contradicts the well-known *sunna*, it contradicts the Koran, it sounds like the saying of mystics, and so on.

Still, the most important criteria for determining the authenticity of a hadith was the *isnad*. One important reason for this was the desire to avoid subjecting God’s will and teachings to human reason. There is no rational reason why people should sleep on their right sides as opposed to on their backs, and yet God willed his Messenger to do so. Who are we to question this according to our human criteria?

Eventually, a standard was worked out for judging hadith transmitters on a scale of 1-12, ranging from Solidly Reliable (*thiqatun thabitun*) to Liar (*kadhhab*). Primarily on this basis, hadith were divided into two groups: accepted (*maqbul*) and rejected (*mardud*), with each category further subdivided by degrees. On the basis of this sophisticated system of hadith criticism, Muslim hadith critics were able to distill a body of hadith of undisputed soundness (those contained in the *Sahih*s of Bukhari and Muslim) as well as many additional hadith which may not be considered as sound, but whose authenticity was accepted enough that they could be used for legal and ritual purposes, as well as general piety.

The Approach to Hadith Criticism of Western Scholars. While Western scholars cannot but be impressed with the sophistication of the methods for determining the authenticity of an *isnad*, when turning to the *matn* or content of many hadith, they found reason to suspect that they could not have been from the time of the Prophet, as they clearly addressed concerns that arose after Muhammad’s death. The assumption in such cases is that later Muslims tried to find support for their faction or doctrinal position by placing words in Muhammad’s mouth.

An example of a situation that post-dates the death of Muhammad but is addressed in hadith is the struggle over the succession to leadership of the Muslims. After Muhammad’s death, the first caliph (successor) was Abu Bakr, followed by Umar, then Uthman, then Ali. There were

some who felt that Ali, a nephew of Muhammad and husband of his daughter Fatima, should have been the first caliph, not the fourth. From this faction emerged the Shiites. Thus, when Western scholars find a hadith that says, “When the Prophet was still among us, we compared no man with Abu Bakr and, after him, with Umar, and then Uthman. We made no distinction between the remaining Companions.” (Abu Dawud) they conclude that it was put into circulation after the death of Muhammad for the express purpose of de-legitimizing the claim of Ali to be caliph.

There are also hadith that have the opposite message: that Muhammad did intend for Ali to succeed him. Muhammad is said to have said, “He whose patron I am, Ali is also his patron.” (Ahmad Ibn Hanbal). Clearly it cannot be the case that both pro- and anti-Ali traditions are correct, and so it must be concluded that the method of *isnad* criticism was not foolproof.

Much as Muslim scholars looked at *matn* as well as the *isnad* in trying to authenticate hadith, so too did Western scholars find evidence for the inauthenticity of some hadith by looking at the *isnad* as well as the *matn*. In particular, some scholars have noticed that *isnads* sometimes “grow backwards.” That is to say, in early sources, a hadith will be found with an *isnad* that extends back to the early 8th century. In a later source, the same hadith will be found, but with an *isnad* that goes back to a companion of the Prophet. In a later source still, the same hadith is found with an *isnad* stretching back to the Prophet himself. The assumption of Western scholars is that as the importance of hadith grew and the science of hadith criticism became more sophisticated, demanding that hadith have verifiable prophetic origins, hadith were furnished with *isnads* that eventually stretched back to Muhammad.

These differences in approach to hadith stem from fundamentally different approaches to the religious tradition as a whole. The two schools of thought are unlikely to be reconciled. Books in English on the topic of hadith will fall into one or the other school.

Bibliography

John Burton, *An Introduction to the Hadith*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994 (210 pp). This book cannot be considered an introduction for those with little or no background in Islam or Islamic religious sciences. It falls into the Western school of focusing on the demonstrable inauthenticity of many hadith. Not only does Burton summarize the arguments of Western hadith scholars such as Goldziher and Schacht, he adds his approach to hadith study, which disqualifies his book as a true introduction to the hadith. Still, it is a valuable resource for those with some background in Islamic studies and an interest in a sophisticated discussion of hadith and hadith criticism.

M. M. Azami, *Studies in Hadith Methodology and Literature*. Indianapolis: American Trust Publications, 1977 (122 pp). Azami's work is a true introduction to hadith and hadith criticism for a beginner from a Muslim perspective. Azami has written a longer book responding to Western hadith studies by scholars like Schacht, and some of his observations and arguments come through also in this shorter work. Through his rebuttals, the reader can gain some sense of the criticisms, lending the work some inadvertent balance. A very readable work that gives a sense of the sophistication of Muslim hadith criticism. A good book for beginners and more advanced scholars alike.

Maulana Muhammad Ali, *A Manual of Hadith*. Lahore, 1951 (408 pp). The author is a member of the Ahmadiyya sect, and his work would be suspect to many Muslims. Still, the hadith he selects here are mainly from the "Six Books." The hadith are arranged thematically, allowing the reader to see what sort of hadith there are pertaining to given topics.

Al Nawawi's Forth Hadith, Ezzedin Ibrahim and Denys Johnson-Davies. Stuttgart: The Holy Koran Publishing House, 1976 (127 pp). This collection of forty hadith is a good source for someone who wants to read through a short selection of hadith on diverse topics to get a sense for the genre.

**APPENDIX:
LIST OF KORAN AND HADITH TRANSLATIONS AND COMMENTARIES**

Note: All of these titles are available in the George Camp Keiser Library.

Qur'an Translations (in chronological order)

The Alcoran of Mahomet / Translated from Arabic to French by Andre Du Ryer, and from French to English by Alexander Ross. London: R. Taylor, 1688.
BP 109 D8 1688 Rare Book

Selections from the Kur-an, Commonly Called, in England, the Koran / Commentary and Introduction (based on Sale) by Edward William Lane. London: James Madden and Co., 1843. / BP 110 L3 1843

The Koran / Translated into English from the Original Arabic by George Sale. London: Frederick Warne and Company, 187-? / BP 109 S3

A Comprehensive Commentary on the Quran: Comprising Sale's Translation and Preliminary Discourse, with Additional Notes and Emendations / By the Reverend E.H. Wherry. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1896. / BP 130.4 W5 Rare Book

The Speeches and Table-Talk of the Prophet Mohammad / Chosen and Translated, with Introduction and Notes, by Stanley Lane-Poole. London: Macmillan and Company, 1882 (1915 reprint). / BP 110 L35

The Qur'an / Translated, with a Critical Re-Arrangement of the Surahs, by Richard Bell. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937. / BP 109 B4 v.1-2

The Koran / Translated from the Arabic by the Reverend J.M. Rodwell. London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1943. / BP 109 R6 1943

The Holy Qur'an / Text, Translation and Commentary by A. Yusuf Ali. Cambridge, MA: Murray Printing Company, 1946. / BP 100 A21 1946

A Book of Quranic Laws / Compiled by Muhammad Valibhai Merchant. Lahore: Muhammad Ashraf, 1947. / BP 134 L4 M5

Translation of the Holy Quran / With Short Notes and Introduction by Muhammad Ali. Lahore: Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha'at Islam, 1948. / BP 109 M8 1948

The Message of Islam / By A. Yusuf Ali. London: John Murray, 1949. / BP 130 A35

The Short Koran: Designed for Easy Reading / Edited by George M. Lamsa. Chicago: Ziff-Davis Publishing Company, 1949. / BP 110 L29

The Holy Koran / An Introduction with Selections by A.J. Arberry. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1953. / BP 110 A7

The Koran (Qur'an) / Translated by E.H. Palmer. London: Oxford University Press, 1953.
BP 109 P3 1953

The Koran: An Edition Prepared for English Readers / Being an Arrangement in Chronological Order from the Translations of Edward W. Lane, Stanley Lane-Poole, and A.H.G. Sarwar. Mount Vernon, NY: Peter Pauper Press, 1953. / BP 110 L32

The Meaning of the Glorious Koran / An Explanatory Translation by Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall. New York: Mentor Books, 1953. / BP 109 P5 1953

The Koran Interpreted / By A.J. Arberry. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1955.
BP 109 A7 v.1-2

The Student's Quran: An Introduction / By Hashim Amir Ali. Hyderabad: Shalimar Publishers, 1959. / BP 109 A4

The Teaching of Islam in Verses from the Koran / By Yacoub Szyrkiewicz. Cairo: Islamic Congress, [no date]. / BP 101 S9

Selections from the Noble Reading: An Anthology of Passages from the Qur'an / Translated into Contemporary English by T.B. Irving. Cedar Rapids: Unity Publishing Company, 1968.
BP 110 I7

The Glorious Kur'an / Translation and Commentary by A. Yusuf Ali. Libyan Arab Republic: Call of Islam Society, 1973. / BP 109 A37 1973

The Holy Qur'an / Arabic Text, English Translation and Commentary by Maulana Muhammad Ali. Lahore: Ahmadiyyah Anjuman Isha'at Islam, 1973. / BP 100 E5 1973

The Message of the Qur'an / Translated and Explained by Muhammad Asad. Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980. / BP 109 A8 1980

Man in Qur'an and the Meaning of Furqan: Surat ul-Baqarah / Tafsir by Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri. Blanco, TX: Zahra Publications, 1982. / BP 128.17 H34 1982

Heart of Qur'an and Perfect Mizan: Surat Ya Sin / Tafsir by Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri. Blanco, TX: Zahra Publications, 1983. / BP 128.78 H34 1983

Beams of Illumination from the Divine Revelation: Juz' 'Ammah, the Last Section of the Qur'an / Tafsir by Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri. Blanco, TX: Zahra Publications, 1985.
BP 129.42 H34 1985

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Message Publications, 1991. / BP 109 M64 1991

Al-Qur'an / A Contemporary Translation by Ahmed Ali. Princeton: Princeton University Press,
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A. Mingana. Cambridge: W. Heffers and Sons, 1936. / BP 135 M55

A Manual of Hadith / by Maulana Muhammad Ali. Lahore: Ahmadiyya Anjuman Isha'at Islam,
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Pauper Press, 1958. / BP 135 A3 P4

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Bombay: Alamdard P. Press, 1960. / BP 135 H8

Mishkat Al-Masabih (4 vols.) / English Translation with Explanatory Notes by James Robson.
Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1963. / BP 135 A2 K435

An-Nawawi's Forty Hadith / Translated by Ezzeddin Ibrahim and Denys Johnson-Davies.
Damascus: Holy Koran Publishing House, 1977. / BP 135 A2 N313 1977

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Albany: SUNY Press, 1981. / BP 193.26 S54

Traditions of the Prophet: Ahadith / Javad Nurbakhsh. New York: Khaniqahi-Nimatullah
Publications, 1981. / BP 135 A3 N87 1981

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