

The Preservation of the Qur'an and Hadith

From its inception during the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him), Islamic doctrine was documented simultaneously and given priority to the preservation of the scripture. As a result, one of the earliest expressions of religiosity focused on studying, reciting, and writing down the scripture. When Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) died, the preservation of the scripture was also a conscious concern among his companions and successors. Early historical sources refer to immediate efforts undertaken by successors of Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) to collect the chapters of the Qur'an, which were written down by His various companions. And this preservation and protection is the promise of God towards His last religion and guidance of people. Allah said in the Quran:

"Indeed. It is We who sent down the message, and indeed, We will be its guardian." (Quran, 15:9)

Within about two decades after the death of Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him), various existing copies of parts of the Qur'an were collected and collated by a committee of close companions of Muhammad who were known for their knowledge of the Qur'an. This committee was commissioned by the third successor of Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him), Uthman ibn Affan, and the committee's systematic effort is the basis of the codified official text currently used by Muslims. The thematic randomness of the verses and chapters of the Qur'an in its current format clearly illustrates that the early companions who produced this official version of the Qur'an were primarily concerned with establishing the text and made no attempt to edit its contents in order to produce a coherent narrative. Because of this, scholars agree that the Uthmanic text genuinely reflects, both in its content and form, the message that Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him) preached.

Interpretations of the Qur'an

Despite the consensus among Muslims on the authenticity of the current format of the Qur'an, they agree that many words in the Qur'an can be interpreted in equally valid ways. The Arabic language, like other Semitic languages, has consonants and vowels, and the meanings of words are derived from both. For several centuries, the written texts of the Qur'an showed only the consonants, without indicating the vowel marks. As a result, there are different ways in

which many words can be vocalized, with different meanings; this allows for various legitimate interpretations of the Qur'an.

One of the disciplines for the study of the Qur'an is exclusively dedicated to the study and documentation of acceptable and unacceptable variant readings. According to Muslim scholars, there are some 40 possible readings of the Qur'an, of which 7 to 14 are legitimate. The legitimacy of different possible interpretations of the scripture is supported by a statement in the Qur'an that describes verses as either unambiguously clear, or as ambiguous because they carry a meaning known only to God. Therefore, with the exception of a small number of unquestionably clear injunctions, the meaning of the Qur'anic verses is not always final.

The Qur'an is the primary source of authority, law and theology, and identity in Islam. However, in many cases it is either completely silent on important Islamic beliefs and practices or it gives only general guidelines without elaboration. This is true of some of the most basic religious obligations such as prayer, which the Qur'an prescribes without details. Details elaborating on the teachings and laws of the Qur'an are derived from Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him), the example set by Prophet Muhammad's life, and in particular from the hadith, the body of sayings and practices attributed to him.

Hadith

As the second source of authority in Islam, Hadith complements the Qur'an and provides the most extensive source for Islamic law. The ultimate understanding of the Qur'an depends upon the context of Prophet Muhammad's life and the ways in which He demonstrated and applied its message. There is evidence that Prophet Muhammad's sayings and practices were invoked by his companions to answer questions about Islam. Unlike the Qur'an, however, in the early periods Hadith was circulated orally, and no attempts were made to establish or codify it into law until the beginnings of the second century of Islam.

Compilation of Hadith in a dynamic timeline

Due to the late beginnings of the efforts to collect and compile reports about Prophet Muhammad's traditions, Muslim scholars recognize that the authenticity of these reports cannot be taken for granted. Many spurious reports were often deliberately put into circulation to

support claims of various political and sectarian groups. Other additions resulted from the natural tendency to confuse common practices that predated Islam with new Islamic laws and norms. The fading of memory, the dispersion of the companions of the prophet over vast territories, and the passing away of the last of these companions also contributed to the problem of authenticating Prophet Muhammad's traditions.

To establish the authority of Hadith on firmer ground, Muslim scholars developed several disciplines dedicated to examining and verifying the relative authenticity of various reports attributed to the Prophet (Peace Be Upon Him). The contents of sayings, as well as the reliability of those who transmitted them, were carefully scrutinized, and the Ahadith were classified into groups granted varying degrees of authenticity, ranging from the sound and reliable to the fabricated and rejected. This systematic effort culminated in the 9th (AD) century, some 250 years after the death of Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Upon Him), in the compilation of several collections of sound (Sahih) Hadith. Of six such highly reliable compilations, two in particular are considered by Muslims to be the most important sources of Islamic authority after the Qur'an. These are Sahih Muslim and Sahih Al-Bukhari (the sound books of Muslim and Bukhari).

The documentation of every Quranic verse and every Hadith word by so many assigned people in the time of its revelation, made Islam unique and perfect religion. Historically, the compilation of Hadith went hand in hand with the elaboration of Islamic law and the parallel development of Islamic legal theory. Initially, neither the law nor its procedures were systematically elaborated. By the beginning of the 9th (AD) century, the use of these two sources was systematized and a complex legal theory was introduced.

In its developed form, this theory maintains that there are four sources from which Islamic law is derived. These are, in order of priority, the Qur'an, the Hadith, the consensus of the community (ejmaa), and legal analogy (qiyas). Functional only when there is no explicit ruling in the Qur'an or Hadith, consensus confers legitimacy retrospectively on historical practices of the Muslim community. In legal analogy, the causes for existing Islamic rulings are applied by analogy to similar cases for which there are no explicit statements in either the Qur'an or Hadith. Using these methods, a vast and diverse body of Islamic law was laid out covering various aspects of personal and public life.

In addition to the laws pertaining to the five pillars, Islamic law covers areas such as dietary laws, purity laws, marriage and inheritance laws, commercial transaction laws, laws pertaining to relationships with non-Muslims, and criminal law. Jews and Christians living under Muslim rule are subject to the public laws of Islam, but they have traditionally been permitted to run their

internal affairs on the basis of their own religious laws.