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Inaugural Lecture
HARALD MOTZKI

Methods of Dating Muslim Traditions

There are hardly any sources available for the historically most important period of Islam, its first 150 years of existence. We only have at our disposal traditions that can be found in later written collections. The historical reliability of these traditions is doubtful because religious and political developments possibly – sometimes even demonstrably – have distorted, embellished or even created such traditions.

Four main types of dating methods are applied by Western scholars of early Islam to ascertain the historical reliability of traditions, namely: those based on the texts *mutūn* of a tradition; texts based on the collections in which the traditions can be found; those that use the chains of transmitters *asānīd*; and those that take stock of texts as well as the chains of transmitters.

Dating based on the texts of traditions have dominated *Ḥadīth* research ever since Ignaz Goldziher's *Muhammedanische Studien*. Several criteria are applied, such as complexity of the text, level of development, in-

ternal coherence of the textual elements, style and vocabulary. The result tends to be a relative, sometimes absolute chronology of the texts. However, research into the plausibility of the premises and the conclusions that are applied make it clear that results are often unconvincing and that there is no real footing in the texts for the purposes of absolute dating. This is a general problem with the methods that try to date traditions solely on the basis of the texts. The method seems to be useful only when combined with other dating criteria.

Dating based on the collections of traditions received a significant impulse by Joseph Schacht, who applied this method in his book *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*. The *e silentio* conclusion plays an important role in this method – a dangerous one given that it provides little certainty because of the few available sources on early Islam.

Dating based on chains of transmitters is applied mainly by Gautier H.A. Juynboll, who developed the *isnād* analysis to a high level. Of crucial importance for this method is the phenomenon of common links, i.e. the same names of persons who come up at a comparable level in the various chains of transmitters of the same *Ḥadīth*. In general, it is assumed that the oldest common link or an immediately preceding common link is the author of the tradition in question. This interpretation of the common link is actually based on premises that can hardly withstand criticism.

Dating on the basis of chains of transmitters as well as texts seems to be the most successful method. In the *isnād-cum-matn* analysis, interdependencies between the chains of transmitters and their corresponding texts that can be determined in many traditions play an important role. These interdependencies are seen as indications that we are dealing here with a real process

of transmission and not with mere fiction. Thanks to the combination of *isnād* and text analysis, it is possible to make more positive pronouncements on the common links and thus on the dating of a tradition, on the development of the text, and on mistakes and forgeries the variants may contain.

Only after plenty of traditions are dated can scholars of Islam venture to make pronouncements on the authenticity and historicity of what has been transmitted in the sources. Until now, however, things have not developed to that extent. ◀

Harald Motzki was appointed to the Chair of Methodology of Research in Islamic Studies at the Institute of Languages and Cultures of the Middle East, University of Nijmegen. This article is a summary of his inaugural lecture delivered on 9 February 2001. The full text of the lecture was published separately in Dutch. E-mail: h.motzki@let.kun.nl