The Reform Project

Progressive, enlightened voices from the Arab Muslim world

Towards a

Model Curriculum

For the reform of the educational syllabus

in the teaching of the humanities

[B] Courses:

Applying the Methodology

[B] Courses - Applying the methodology

Course B1 — Modern historical methodology

Module		Units	
B1.1	The case for a new historiography	B1.1.1	The current deficit in critical historical method
		B1.1.2	The need to develop a critical historiography
B1.2	The historical/critical method	B1.2.1	The rise, fall and rise of scientific historiography
		B1.2.2	Sources, stages and methods of historical enquiry
		B1.2.3	Skepticism and the false criteria of reliability
		B1.2.4	The role of falsifiability

Course B2 — Applying scientific historiography to the environment of Islam's emergence

Module		Units	
B2.1	Recent research on early Islamic origins	B2.1.1	Introduction to the contributions of scientific Orientalist research
		B2.1.2	The role of students in disseminating / augmenting this research
B2.2	The cultural and religious environment	B2.2.1	The explanatory value of the comparative approach
		B2.2.2	The religious climate of Late Antiquity - Prophecy and Monotheism
		B2.2.3	The religious climate of pre-Islamic Arabia - The *jāhiliyya* misnoma
		B2.2.4	Judaic and Christian heterodoxy and the Arabian Peninsula
B2.3	The economic and political environment	B2.3.1	The Arabs on the fringes of empires
		B2.3.2	The political upheavals of the 6th-7th century Middle East
		B2.3.3	The economies of the Arabian peninsula
		B2.3.4	The historical and geographical conditions of the Hijāz
B2.4	The historical emergence of Islam	B2.4.1	The historiography of early Islam: Modern approaches
		B2.4.2	Early Muslim historiography: The compilation of the *Sīra* & *Maghāzī*
		B2.4.3	The historiography of early Islam: New evidence sources
		B2.4.4	The early dynasties and the developing definition of Islam

Course B3 — The Scripture in history

Module		Units	
B3.1	The propriety of the application	B3.1.1	The validity and religiously productive function of the application
		B3.1.2	The Qur'ān as a developing dialogue responding to change
B3.2	The cultural environment in the Qur'ān	B3.2.1	Ancient conceptions of the physical universe in the Qur'ān
		B3.2.2	Legends and mythological elements reflected in the Text
		B3.2.3	Ancient Arabian concepts and literary patterns reflected in the Text
		B3.2.4	Other cultural influences reflected in the Text
		B3.2.5	Judaic elements reflected in the Text
		B3.2.6	Christian elements reflected in the Text
		B3.2.7	Unitarian polemic and Christian heterodoxy
B3.3	The cultural environment in the Sunna	B3.3.1	Mythological conceptions in the Sunna texts
		B3.3.2	Judaic elements reflected in the Sunna texts
		B3.3.3	Christian elements reflected in the Sunna texts

Applying the methodology

Having established the propriety of modern approaches to knowledge, the student is introduced to the results of this methodology as it applies to the history of the Muslim Middle East. The work of conscientious scholars is positively evaluated for its contribution to reviving Muslim historical awareness, and an objective, non-sacralised approach to the historical record is vindicated. By introducing the complexities of political, geographical and economic influence upon the course and characteristics of Muslim history (as opposed to the polarities of faith/non-faith) the student is enabled to evaluate objectively the causes for the rise, decline and resurgence of the Islamic world.

Course B1 – Modern historical methodology

At present, the student of history in the Muslim Middle East is ill-served by current textbooks that have absorbed uncritically an unscientific, 'sacralised' narrative of the past. While the employment of history for a didactic purpose may be justifiable on religious terms as a helpful contextualisation of early events in the Islamic period, it cannot be applied as a universal filter to eras, peoples and places for whom the Islamic revelation is not their point of reference. To do so, as explained earlier, is to make Muslim peoples fundamentally detached from the world that preceded them and surrounds them.

It cannot even be applied confidently to the history of the Muslim peoples themselves, since that would be to deprive them of the fruits of other disciplines such as literary criticism, sociology, geology, topography, linguistics, palaeography and archaeology, numismatics, comparative literature and historiography – to name but a few – which adduce extra dimensions and perspectives to the task and cast valuable light upon the past and how it has shaped the present. A history that merely leaps from axiom to axiom cannot interpret reality; it can only elevate a substitute, self-contained reality in its stead. It leaves students ill-prepared to evaluate their own culture.

Part of the reticence to apply modern methods, achievements and standards of historiography, is a misplaced fear of damage to what is improperly conceived as the delicate fabric of faith. This fear has generated what appears to be a peculiar standoff between two methods and purposes of history writing, whereby the one (religious and subjective) is engaged in a form of continuous warfare with the other (scientific and objective).[1] But the believer has nothing to fear from the historian, for the historian only provides enrichment to the experience of faith, from precisely those extra dimensions and perspectives that modern historiographic methods bring to the table: obscurities are clarified, speculations corrected and entire new vistas opened to the historical, cultural and spiritual pedigree of Islam, and to the contribution it has made, and makes, to the world. The *Course B1 - Modern historical methodology* is designed to break this logjam, to enable the Muslim student to shake off the tendency to be 'supra-historical' and learn to recognise historical context and the ability to change, as times change, thus gaining new and deeper insights and understanding of the complex weft of the heritage of Islamic civilisation.[2]

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[1] 'Abd al-Majīd al-Ṣaghīr notes how "in Islamic thought and scholarly research, historiography constitutes one of the great cultural voids. Indeed, for some of the *fuqahā'* and scholars of Islam historiography has become a suspect discipline whose exponents are mistrusted … Such a standpoint as this, one that casts doubt upon the value of historiography, has embedded in Islamic culture the possibility of evaluating their scholarship and knowledge, understanding their intentions, and determining their scholarly issues and preoccupations in a way that is almost totally removed from any discussion of the historical circumstances and the political and social conditions of those whose fundamental purpose was to adapt to problems and seek solutions." A-M. al-Ṣaghīr, استئناف المراجعة النقدية لتراثنا الإسلامي مطلب ديني وعقلي في نفس الآن , الإحياء, التحليلية Vol. 26, November 2007, pp.39-40.

[2] To recap the observation by the *Arab Human Development Report*: "History is based on methodology, on an objective approach and on maintaining an intellectual distance from the past. The goal of any historian of a great civilisation, while sympathising with and understanding the subject of research, should always be the quest for facts. The temptation to fall in love with the heritage must always be resisted." AHDR 2003, p.114.

o   *Module B1.1: The case for a new historiography*

In this preparatory module the educator will be able to alert the student to the shortcomings of current historical writing. These include the pre-occupation with *aṣāla,* the instinctive quest for 'authenticity' to a pre-determined template, which has led to a historiographic endeavour that barely rises much above this level of a 'sacred history' unfolding according to a binary, teleological scheme of a perennial struggle against the forces of Disbelief. The result of this preoccupation is the construction of what is in effect a pseudo-historical background[3] on which to project, by a process of reverse-engineering, aetiological explanations of what earlier generations of scholars conceived of, as demanded by their particular understanding of the Qur'ān and the Sunna.[4]

This unscientific, sacralised historiography places too much reliance upon the didactic purpose of the mediaeval Muslim historians, without at the same time testing their opinions according to other criteria in other research disciplines. By relying uncritically on these historians, any real assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the Islamic world at any point in history is impeded and no satisfactory explanation of its development and evolution over its history is possible. The result has been an inordinate tendency to explain events, successes or failures, advances or recessions, as periods of *religious* strength or weakness.

In highlighting common failures in historical writing, the educator in unit *B1.1.1* can demonstrate the value of distinguishing the *purposes* of a historian from the *data* of history. A good example of this, in the context of the Muslim world, is the *jāhiliyya* concept comprehensively adopted by Muslim historians (see *Module B2.2*). Driving this conception was an impulse to present the full dimensions of the religious change in the Arabian peninsula, with the result that a large amount of material was accumulated to provide the appropriate pre-Islamic contrast. The result of this didactic purpose was that only data that provided a contrast to Islamic values was presented in the historical works, with no religiously dispassionate evaluation undertaken of pre-Islamic society, politics and religious belief.

Such didactic purposes do not make good history. Moreover, it can have unfortunate results. In the case of the unsubstantiated *jāhiliyya* assumption of a culturally unalloyed faith revealed to a culturally unalloyed, primitive people, the Arab Muslim student is induced to believe that history begins effectively only with the advent of Islam – an assumption that can only make them 'cultural orphans' and leave them ill-prepared to evaluate the developments that took place outside the Islamic world, but which influenced it and were in turn influenced by it.[5]

The implications of faulty history do not stop there. In unit *B1.1.2* (*The need to develop a critical historiography)* the educator can enumerate for the student a number of the negative effects of an unreformed historical method. These will include the problem of *cultural quarantining* mentioned earlier, in that the prevailing focus on *aṣāla* has acted to effectively criminalise modernity. By placing the ideal of virtue and knowledge in the *salaf al-ṣāliḥīn,* in the paragons of an era as yet uncontaminated by a contemporary culture conceived of as 'western', the student is made to invest his hope in the enduring comprehensiveness of their vision. An uncritical antiquarianism like this might be harmless enough were it not for the fact that the religious investment in this sacralised history sets off the believer from his contemporaries across the globe who longer function according to this type of historical consciousness.[6] Under this *aṣāla* pre-

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[3] That is, a background that places the narrative "above history or superior to it, or even without any relation to history altogether". See Hashem Saleh, 'Orientalism and the historicization of the Islamic heritage', *Almuslih.org.*

[4] Prof. Hasan Hanafi succinctly summed up the gap between the two approaches to history: " Western thought continues to flourish since it has gifted the world the two concepts of Man and History, while eastern thought – Islam included – remains fixated on God and Eternity". Hasan Hanafi, 'A manifesto for reform,' *Almuslih.org.*

[5] Unchecked, this 'cultural orphanism' can develop into cultural narcissism, a sense of 'specialness' and a 'disconnect' with the rest of the world, and thence to cultural xenophobia, which is a trajectory that produced the ethical disequilibrium inherent in the doctrine of *al-walā' wal-barā'.*

[6] Saudi journalist Muhammad Aal Al-Sheikh defined the problem: "Those who read the history of today's leading Western societies will see that the reason they emerged from medieval culture and entered into the age of enlightenment, which led them to cultural superiority in all scientific and theoretic fields, is that they dealt with their heritage in a critical, rational, and substantive way … Our

occupation, any acquiescence to the cultures and sciences of the contemporary world shatters the primacy of the *salaf*, and thus constitutes a form of *kufr*. That Muslims are thus motivated to fight against this modernity on religious grounds, is one of the tragic consequences of a wayward historiography.

The educator can also demonstrate the *ethical implications* of the deficit. By reverse-engineering historical investigation to the primacy of the scriptural text, a conceptually simpler reductive literalism will always trump any calls for evaluating historical context using more widely sourced evidence and tools. Unchecked by these external tools, a fault-line develops between reality as mediated by human experience and conscience, and reality as mediated by a closed text. This fault-line equally separates a conscience-based ethics, from a textually-based ethics, one that generates a false moral hierarchy in which being *atextual* is considered worse than being *amoral* (these themes are developed further in the *D Courses - Revitalising Islamic thought and culture*).

This misuse of history has narrowed the room to manœuver for progressive Muslim thinkers and at the same time has lead to the political instrumentalisation of the heritage by Islamist movements. These have created taboos over applying historical methods to Qurʾānic studies or sanctified areas of law in order to immunise against historical discussions on the *dīn* and *dawla* doctrine that underpins their case for an Islamist political system. Recent events have demonstrated how the absence of an objective, scientifically constructed history, and the detaching of Islam's foundational texts from the realities of time and place, has lent authority to anachronistic modes of thought that are at odds with universal values, and allowed certain currents of politicized Islam to mold their reading of scripture to their pre-conceptions, and to their will, with tragic results.[7]

The key to breaking this equation, therefore, lies with the historian. The emancipation of the student from the grip of 'mytho-history' to a history governed by human imperatives, and the fostering of critical, evidence-based methodology will have its inevitable reflection in the development of independent critical judgement, and this will in turn open up new vistas of creativity.

o *Module B1.2: The historical/critical method*

The quest for a scientific methodology for the recording of past events is ancient. The Greek author Herodotus (c484-c425 BC), considered to be the father of the genre as we know it today, used a specific term to denote his endeavours: *IΣTOPIAI* ('*historiai*').[8] This term, from which we get our word 'history,' means 'researches' or 'inquiries', and Herodotus believed his work was the outcome of research: what he had seen, heard, and read but supplemented and verified by inquiry. From this early start the genre was progressively tightened up to minimise fabulous or improbable accounts, until, as mentioned earlier, the model of Thucydides (c460-c400, dubbed the father of 'scientific history') and his *Peloponnesian War* stands out as exemplary for a conscientious analysis of events, even where the narrative would prove disadvantageous to his own political perceptions. Subsequent eras of history-writing proved less conscientious in expelling miraculous or improbable explanations, although notable exceptions stood out – Ibn Khaldūn and his *Muqaddima* being one of them.

In this module the educator can outline the features of a scientific historiography as has come to be developed in the modern era, building upon the insights of predecessors and highlighting

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mental problem... is that we read our history, specifically its glorious parts, in an unscientific manner, and view our own period using the rationale of yesteryear while doggedly refusing (at times to the point of declaring it *kufr*) to read it according to today's rationale and the current critical tools that mankind has achieved". Muhammad Aal Al-Sheikh أزمة المثقف العربي المعاصر, *Al-Jazirah* (Saudi Arabia), November 24, 2015.

[7] Cf. Muhammad Aal Al-Sheikh, *ibid*: "[This unscientific history] has resulted in our falling into the trap of a greater agony at the present time: terrorism as represented best by ISIS and its siblings. For ISIS cite history in their defence, separating events and the words of *fuqahā'* from their causes, contexts and temporal conditions, and then pull it down over our own era, arguing that historical precedent is sufficient to demonstrate the religious soundness of their behaviour."

[8] Paradoxically, the Arabic word derived from the Greek term: أسطورة is used to denote 'legend' or 'fable'.

examples of methodological failures (unit *B1.2.1*). This unit will demonstrate how three distinct facets of historical reality are absolutely necessary for the student of history (and indeed as the historian) to embrace: historical chronology, historical mechanisms and historical philosophy. That is, *when* things happened, *how* things happened and *why* things happened. The last of these facets is crucial, since without a knowledge of why things happened history has no meaning and makes no sense.

It will also highlight the basic requirements to develop wide expertise in the period or event under investigation: knowledge of prior research in the field, proficiency in the relevant primary source language (or languages if there are other external sources), and experience in the widest possible spectrum of sources. It will also inculcate the employment of established rules of thumb, such as Richard Carrier's Rules of Historical Method and some more 'mathematical approaches such as Bayes' Theorem and its application to historical research, and the need to avoid common pitfalls such as the reliance on previous assumptions, the attraction of short cuts and tendentiousness in the presentation of evidence that supports the historian's prior thesis, irrespective of its strength.

The module will outline the arenas of evidence gathering and factors of probability, including physical evidence (archaeological, architectural, numismatic), literary evidence (with emphasis on the original language of a text, and its original textual and socio-cultural context). Further important features explored include evaluation methods, such as the 'argument to the best explanation' by which the plausibility of an event, along with its explanatory scope (explaining more facts than any other) and the lack of contradictory indications supersede attempts of multiplying *ad hoc* interpretations that might be tendentiously manipulated to fit the evidence or account for missing evidence (unit *B1.2.2*).

The following unit (*B1.2.3)* concentrates on the vital contributions made by adopting a skeptical approach to all evidence as a starting point, particularly as it relates to credulousness (the problems of deficient memories, tendentiousness and mendacity) or confusion (speculation or unproven inferences conflated with fact), and by maintaining awareness of false criteria of reliability (the presumed moral probity of the source, irrelevant demonstrations of reliability elsewhere, rhetorical persuasiveness and inducements to believing).

Much as with the development of effective scientific investigation, the educator can emphasise the importance of falsifiability in historical analysis (unit *B1.2.4*). The conscientious historian will seek to test his thesis and eliminate bias by addressing all relevant and significant evidence *against* what he or she claims took place, including any relevant arguments from silence. The more extraordinary the claim, the more extraordinary is the evidence that is demanded. If the evaluation results are ambiguous it means that however probable a thesis is in terms of precedent, it can never be more than a relative probability. Disciplines such as these, and the preparedness to accept provisionality, can be demonstrated as the mark of an honest historical investigation.

Course B2 – Applying scientific historiography to the environment of Islam's emergence

With the student introduced to the validity of the objective standards of historical research, the objective, de-sacralised historiographic method will be extended to the level of the historical emergence of Islam and the environment of the faith's gestation. The validity and religiously productive function of the application is clear from the example of *jāhiliyya* above; scientific historical methods have a clear role in breaking the stasis of Islamic thought and culture, as presently inculcated into students. It does this by demonstrating that Islam from its very inception is imbued with concepts shared, derived and developed from its cultural and intellectual cradle, with commonalities therefore of faith and civilisation that outnumber the points of difference. In this Course the educator can demonstrate these commonalities as being not only in the trajectory of revelation faiths but also in the ethical purposes of religious believers in these faiths. Ultimately, as history demonstrates that the pattern of Muslim life and cultural behaviour has never been fixed, but rather has constantly interacted with, and mutually contributed to, other

cultures to form an even greater cultural compound, the student is enabled to benefit from other cultural patterns and contribute to them from a position of strength and self-confidence.

o   *Module B2.1: Recent research on early Islamic origins*

The educator can introduce the student to the vibrant field of research based on the new historiographic methods, from their inception in the 19th century to the present day. An important feature of this introduction will be highlighting the positive evaluation by progressive Muslim thinkers of the work of non-Muslim scholars, who applied to Islam the same historical-critical method which these latter scholars had developed in their analysis of the Jewish and Christian heritages. In so doing the educator can illustrate the astonishing breadth of the endeavour and the richness of the results in fields as diverse as pre-Islamic history and religious phenomenology, comparative religion, the cultural constituents of the Qur'ānic text, the philological studies on the Qur'ān, early Islamic history and Muslim historiography.

A relatively new field of endeavour, and one that promises fascinating results is archaeology. The obscurity of ancient Arabia is slowly being illuminated as physical explorations of pre-Islamic sites, the constant discovery of new epigraphic materials including inscriptions and numismatics and the analysis of topography, are opening up new vistas of research and understanding of a region that is revealing itself to be far more developed than most Islamic scholars and western Islamicists alike had ever imagined.[9]

At the same time the educator can demonstrate how to distinguish between scholarly works of Orientalism with a positive purpose, and earlier works of the genre that were undertaken with a political motive and which lacked the objective rigour required for proper research.[10] An important role that the educator can play in this module is thus to encourage interest and engagement in the work now being undertaken by progressive Muslim and non-Muslim scholars in this important field of endeavour, not only by carrying out original research but also by making the sources and results of this research available to the broader public in the Middle East by translating these works into Arabic.[11] Such a function is not purely of academic interest, but plays a direct role in opening up arenas of discussion in areas hitherto rendered off-limits to date by rigid religious orthodoxies, thereby contributing to the revitalisation of Islamic thought and culture.

o   *Module B2.2: The cultural and religious environment*

Broadening the scope of reading in the history of the early Muslim era, and applying the new historical method to the field, has proved particularly productive. Up to the recent period, traditional approaches to the era have promoted the conception of a pristine faith brought down and perfected to primitive people labouring under pagan Arab error, or at best under some corrupted vestiges of Judaeo-Christian culture. From this arose the assumption that Islam swept away all before it and that the pre-existing Arab *jāhiliyya* ('age of ignorance') had nothing to contribute religiously or intellectually. In this module, on the other hand, the educator can demonstrate that rigorous application of scientific historiographic methods has highlighted how the cultural and religious environment pre-dating the revelation was far more nuanced, and that the pre-Islamic communities were not *jāhilī*, as the canonical history books maintain.

Moreover, many of the regulations and customs of Islam are conditioned by this environment and can trace their pedigree ultimately to the cultural norms of this period. For there are reflections of this cultural cradle in Islam, for instance, in the form of the pilgrimage to Mecca, the special status of the month of Ramadan, the Friday gatherings, the obligation to fast, the veiling and

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[9] For an indication of this breadth see the categories in the online library on the *Almuslih.org* website.

[10] Important treatments on this difference can be found at *www.almuslih.org* and the essays by Hashem Saleh: In praise of Orientalism! and Orientalism and the historicization of the Islamic heritage (Arabic - *www.almuslih.net*: اثناء على الاستشراق and (الاستشراق وأرخنة التراث

[11] A preliminary, but growing, list of Arabic translations is available on the *Almuslih.org* online library. Seesection المصادر العربية وكتب الاستشراق التي ترجمت إلى العربية .

seclusion of women, the washing ritual of *wuḍū'*, the belief in *Jinns,* and many of the *ḥadd* punishments.

The accumulated endeavours of scholars has shed much interesting light on the cultural and religious environment influencing events preceding the lifetime of the Prophet,[12] but a highly stimulating arena of historical interest, which the educator can introduce to the student, is the *religious and doctrinal hinterland* to the revelation of the Qur'ān. Hitherto early Muslim exegetes had located the context of the Revelation as highly circumscribed to an Arabian arena, effectively insulating it from religious and cultural developments in the world beyond. As a result, non-Muslim scholars had made unwarranted assumptions that reflections of cultural and religious concepts in the discourse of the Prophet had somehow to be imperfectly understood as 'foreign borrowings'.

But objective research is highlighting the inaccuracy of these assumptions. The Prophet, as an Arabian, was not an outsider to the religious debates and controversies taking place in the broader Middle East but rather was a full participant in these debates. The educator can illustrate how current scholarship is revealing how developments of great significance for the Islamic period were not only underway prior to the seventh century, but were also intertwined with the history of areas adjacent to Arabia. In the two centuries preceding the life of the Prophet three powers – Rome, Persia and Ḥimyār – were vying for influence in the peninsula, and that included ideological influence. References to polytheism on Ḥimyārite inscriptions in the south had long vanished, and with Zoroastrian Persia and Christian Rome to the north, much of central Arabia was 'encircled' by states with monotheistic (or universal) religions. Scholars have thus been intrigued by the term *mushrikūn* encountered in the Qur'ān, noting that the understanding of it as referring to 'polytheists' – those who 'associate' other divinities alongside God – is puzzling, since the Quraysh are described as believers in the God of Abraham whose monotheism had been corrupted by pagan elements. This indicates that they seem to be of the same doctrinal community as the people who denounced them, holding some kind of combination of Biblical-type monotheism and Arabian paganism, rather than outright idolaters.

Muslim historians have also long detailed the role of the *ḥunafā'* as representing a form of religious 'prototype' to the message of the Prophet, and the association with certain Christian figures such as Baḥīra and Waraka ibn Nawfal during the period of the revelation. But recent research is casting a spotlight not only on the role of Judaism and Christianity in preparing the doctrinal ground in the peninsula, but more penetratingly on the existence of a cradle of Judeo-Christian apocalypticism, eschatology and Messianism. Studies on the literary precursors to the Qur'ān, especially the scriptural and parascriptural traditions of the older religious communities, the existence of heterodox groups rejecting certain specifics of Jewish and Christian theology and doctrine, are highlighting the meaning of references in the Qur'ān which were hitherto unexplained, and revealing them to be responses that engaged narratives and motives with which its audience must already to some degree have been familiar. The fact that the Qur'an seems to record splits in monotheist communities in Arabia has the potential to transform our understanding of how the new faith arose, for it points to the possibility of situating Islam within a spectrum of Late Antique religious debate, an arena of 'sectarian milieux', on the fringes of the great empires.

The educator can therefore demonstrate in this module how the new approaches to history are adding penetrative depth to studies in the field, and are elucidating much that has been left unexplained about this momentous period for world history. At the same time the educator can correct the common tendency to consider the factors underlying the phenomenon of Islam to be supra-historical, unsullied by religious and doctrinal evolution (the '*jāhiliyya*' preconception), and instead enable the student to root Islamic thought *within* the historical and spiritual weft of human endeavour.

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[12] A useful list of this research can be found in the *Almuslih* online library under the section: 'Pre-Islamic Arabia - The Political, Anthropological and Economic Environment'

o *Module B2.3: The economic and political environment*

No less important a field of endeavour for the origins of Islam are the political conditions of this region. This has now become an established research focus, particularly within the framework of Late Antique studies, as more materials are being uncovered and studies conducted in the fields of archaeology, epigraphy, comparative literature and religious/ideological polemics. The educator can highlight exciting new discoveries and theories which cast much light on how Roman, Persian, and Ḥimyārite interests intersected in Arabia via the use of Arab proxies, and in a way that infused ideological along with political concerns. This created an environment that by the sixth century was polarised along political and sectarian lines (units *B2.3.1* to *B2.3.2*).

The increased precision in historical method applied to this era and region has also thrown up fascinating new problems to resolve, such as the relationship between economic conditions and the rise of Islam. The educator can introduce, for the evaluation of the student, the theories on Qurayshī transitions to a mercantile economy which undermined traditional social order and ties of kinship, thus creating a moral malaise to which the message of the Prophet was a response, or alternative theories which fundamentally re-evaluate the economic model and point to a tension between the interests of *mushrikūn* agriculturalists and *mu'minūn* traders. These studies open up important questions as to the role and importance of Makka in Arabian trade, and indeed, as to its position as the cradle of Islam (units *B2.3.3* and *B2.3.4*).

o *Module B2.4: The historical emergence of Islam*

In this module the educator can introduce the student to the stimulating debate on the early development of Islam and the re-evaluations of the work of the early Muslim historians. As the scientific historical method is applied here, the introduction of new fields of investigation, such as epigraphy, comparative literature, numismatics, and archaeology is adding new dimensions to the understanding of this pivotal period.

The educator can demonstrate how, after the earlier product of western historians that often had polemical motives, a more scientific approach to history took form after the Enlightenment and the application of this approach to early Muslim history gained pace in the mid-19th century. Preferring to use Muslim historical sources as a starting-point, on the grounds that these would be untainted by polemic bias, historians trained in this scientific methodology of history were nevertheless faced with the problem of the lateness of the earliest sources, with respect to the events they were describing (well over one hundred years after Muhammad's death in the earliest examples). They also noted that the traditional narratives not only rehearsed this late material, or weaved into them unverified and unverifiable oral traditions, but also maintained a stylised account of Islamic origins that reflected either the political interests of second or third century *hijra* patrons or served an overarching didactic purpose, describing the chain of events in terms of the unfolding of the consequences of the prophetic mission. In other words, a 'sacralised' history. In the recent period a more forthright sceptical approach to early Muslim history has argued that the origins of Islam are so deeply obscured by successive waves of didactic reworking that nothing meaningful can be derived from the traditional accounts, although more recent historians are nuancing this, supporting the industry and objective motives of the Muslim historians (unit *B2.4.1*).

In this context, the educator can usefully examine the process of early Muslim historiography as demonstrated in the compilation of the *sīra* (prophetic biography) and *maghāzī* (armed raids) literature (unit *B2.4.2*). Historians have variously understood the process; as being either *ḥadīth* material that has been arranged chronologically in order to provide a coherent narrative and make sense of disjointed traditions on the life of the Prophet, or conversely, that much *ḥadīth* material is taken from various joined-up narratives that have subsequently become detached from historical context in order to provide religiously normative texts, valid on and beyond the age of their collection. Others have argued that a combination of both may have occurred, but that *sīra* and *maghāzī* literature emerged as two distinct fields of endeavour with their own distinctive

features.[13] Even so, few scholars consider this literature to be straightforward history, and they argue that the didactic purpose is clearly evident in these proto-historical disciplines, since they were essentially answering to the needs of the growing community of believers to define themselves as a community of *Muslims* who were distinct from other monotheist believers. The educator can illustrate from these materials how this definition progressed, and how in subsequent eras they came to be used to adjudicate internal disputes over political and religious leadership within the community.

In unit *B2.4.3* the educator can open up the students' vision to the fascinating contribution of new sources of evidence to early Muslim history. Traditional Muslim historians naturally focused on interpreting the wealth of materials internal to the doctrinal narrative. While there were alternative accounts external to this narrative, many of them pre-dating the established Muslim historical materials, it is only in the modern period, with the application of new, scientific methods of research that these materials have come to be fully considered, both by Muslim and non-Muslim historians. They include near contemporary accounts in Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian writings of the expansion of the Arabs and later, through archaeological surveys, epigraphy and numismatics, which give indications that these new players on the scene appeared to profess a new type of religious faith. The educator can demonstrate how new stimulating vistas of the debate include discussions on how early this new religious consciousness appeared, and whether early Muslim historiography can be considered as much the product of a community *creating*, as *recording*, a history. And, indeed, whether the Islamic conquests were in fact conquests, or a more gradual process of increasing presence and influence as a result of the gradual receding of imperial influence in the Middle East. New perspectives on early Muslim history have been greatly enriched by the application of non-canonical sources to this question.

These new perspectives are of particular value for the period of early Islamic dynastic rule. In unit *B2.4.4* the educator will be able to apply the new methodologies to illustrate the fluidity of the conception of Islam during this period, as illustrated by the change in *miḥrāb* direction in early mosques – an 'architectural abrogation' as it were – from the region of south-western Jordan to further south towards the Hijaz. The educator can thus trace how, at the time of the establishment of Arabic as the official language of the emerging empire, the pattern of Early Arab dynastic rule emerges from the late-Antique, Byzantine Roman template into something more ethnically rooted in the Arabian peninsula. In so doing, the definition of the faith and culture of Islam in its formative developing period can be located at least as much in the broader near East outside the Arabian context as within the peninsula; that is, that the Islamic faith was culturally, as much as doctrinally, a two-centuries long developing project. Thus one of the most important products of these new approaches is how they reveal that the concept of a deeply scored dividing-line between pre-Islamic and Islamic periods is not tenable. A signal contribution of the educator here is to inculcate a new consciousness in the student in the importance of bridging the gap (which is still largely followed by traditional textbooks) of contextualising the emergence of Islam not as a break in history but as a cultural synthesis, an organic product of this period in Late Antiquity, expressing continuities that bind the 6th to the 8th centuries AD.

For the period following this era of the origins era, the historiographic materials are more plentiful, they are progressively less focused on universal themes of 'salvation history' and more on the specific political interests of the historians' ruling patrons, the establishment of consistent legal systems and the preoccupations of good governance. And it is in demonstrating this that the educator can play a particularly important role: to illustrate the reality of the historical record of Islamic rule in a way that arms the student against fictional conceptions of an 'authentic prototype' that provide the foundations for, and are instrumentalised by, proponents of political Islamism.

In this respect, the work of modern historians on early Islam, believers, sceptics or non-believers, is more important than ever, since it provides a much-needed stimulus to an arena that has

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[13]   Andreas   Görke: *The   relationship   between   maghāzī   and   hadīth   in   early   Islamic   scholarship,* Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, Vol. 74, Issue 02, June 2011, pp 171-185.

remained conservative and unproductive. By their investigating objectively historical contexts that ultimately underpin Islamic *tafsīr* and *fiqh*, it opens up the potential for new and progressive interpretations of Islam for the contemporary world.

Course B3 – The Scripture in history

o   *Module B3.1: The propriety of the application*

The study of the Qur'ān as a historical document using modern approaches to historical analysis is a relatively recent phenomenon, and has been promoted by historians, Muslim and non-Muslim, who have been fascinated by the questions of where and when the Text came into being. The issue of its historical context is more than merely a dry academic concern, since the process of historical investigation itself has a liberating effect on the fabric and internal dynamism of religious belief. It does this by illustrating the doctrinal influences and points of continuity, and equally the points of originality, of the Prophetic message. On the other hand, Muslim scholars have noted how the doctrine of a Qur'ān lying 'outside of history' has had a stagnating effect on ethical development and the prospects of professing a progressive Islam in the contemporary world.

Modern research is increasing at a fast pace. The results of this research, quite naturally, produce a full spectrum of theories, from confirmation of the traditional narrative that the compilation of the Qur'ān took place shortly after the death of the Prophet, to assertions that place this process as taking place two centuries later and outside the Arabian peninsula, while still others suggest that there are materials in the Qur'ān that pre-date the life of the Prophet or are adaptations from earlier Judaeo-Christian works. At the same time, researchers from the Islamic world are fully contributing to this important field of endeavour and nuancing these earlier approaches with important insights from perspectives within the domain of faith.[14]

In this module the educator can demonstrate how it is important for the student to make a separation between the arenas of historical research and transcendental faith. The contemporary historians certainly understand that the work of historical analysis and the faith-claims of the Islamic revelation exist on entirely different planes that do not intersect:

> Since the faith-claims of revealed religions reside above all in supernatural events, and since the historian and historical analysis are unable to evaluate these supernatural events, the work of the historian cannot threaten, or call into question, the faith-claims of such religions. [15]

The supernatural is simply beyond the capacity of historical discourse to engage. This separation will doubtless require believers to change their ways of viewing both history and scripture. It will require them to see the scriptural Text less as a literal historical record (held at the same time by many, paradoxically, to be 'outside of history') than containing symbolic or allegorical passages used to articulate transcendental faith. And since no one can claim with any certainty or authority how a transcendent God would choose to communicate with a prophet, the historical analysis of the revelation can ultimately only be of secondary importance in one's faith.

The educator can perform a signal service to students firstly by removing the common perception that the modern historical approaches to the scriptural Text constitute negatively motivated acts of criticism, but rather that they are making stimulating contributions to the understanding of the Text precisely because of its historical role (rather than as a document relating actual history). Secondly, by rendering cultural and religious affiliation in this way more supple and flexible, the educator can underline how the separation of the two arenas is not only historically, but *religiously* productive. The educator can thus make a significant contribution to loosening the

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[14] A useful list can be viewed in M. Karimi-Nia, 'The Historiography of the Qur'an in the Muslim World: The Influence of Theodor Nōldeke', *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 15.1 (2013): Edinburgh University Press, pp.46-68.

[15] Fred M. Donner, *The historian, the believer, and the Qur'ān*, in G.S. Reynolds (ed) *New perspectives on the Qur'ān, The Qur'ān in its historical context 2*, Routledge, 2011, pp.34-5.

grip of morally limiting conservatism, and at the same time open up the student – and the next generation – to accommodating modernity without a loss of the essentials of faith.

Once the reticence to approach the Text as a document in history is removed, the educator in unit *B3.1.2* can illustrate the essentially 'dialogic' approach of the Qur'ān to its environment. Significant portions of the Text are addressed to those who are sceptical and fail to believe, and modern scholarship is nuancing the understanding of who the *kāfirūn* are; that is, whether they are simply 'pagans' or those whose theological or doctrinal background is more closely intermeshed in a shared monotheistic cultural milieu. Similarly, the Text strongly indicates an accumulative dialogic relationship in the form of temporal and abrogating verses,[16] a process by which the Qur'ān cancels out verses which are no longer considered appropriate to new developments, or which the Companions themselves requested be revealed.[17] These incidents, whereby opposing voices become audible through their subsequent refutation, illustrate that there were ongoing debates and dialogues underpinning the emergence of this new religious community and accordingly reflected in the Text.

By validating this 'dialogic' approach of the emergence of the Qur'ān and the new faith within the human environment, as part of the historical legacy of Late Antiquity, an argument is equally made for *continuing this dialogue,* for prising open the 'official closed corpus'[18] of scripture and for licensing change on much broader and more radical levels. Most importantly, it serves to deconstruct the cultural and doctrinal 'quarantine' promoted by current educational programmes in the Middle East, which seek to present Islam as existing in some historical, ethical and epistemological isolation from the rest of the world.

o   *Module B3.2: The cultural environment in the Qur'ān*

Having made the student aware that there are no grounds for this isolation, the educator can proceed to illustrate how the cultural environment of the new faith, the theological cradle of its birth, is fully reflected in the scriptural Text. In the units of *Module B3.2* the continuities can be demonstrated: from ancient perceptions of the physical universe such as geocentrism (referred to above in unit *A1.2.6*), the seven heavens and the creation of man from clay, to religious concepts such as the Preserved Tablet (*al-Lūḥ al-Maḥfūẓ*) and the race of the *Jinn*[19]. More specifically Arabian concepts and literary patterns are also reflected in the Text; these include the priestly *sajʿ* prose, aniconism, animal sacrifice, stone reverence, the elements of *wuḍūʾ* and the *Ḥajj* rituals and the Sabian influence in the sacredness of the month of *Ramaḍān*. The Late Antique cultural environment reflected in the Text also includes legends and mythological elements such as Gog and Magog (*Yaʾjūj* and *Maʾjūj*) and *Dhū al-Qarnayn*, both part of the 'Tales of the Ancients'[20] now turned to a different moral and ethical purpose. There are also some specifically theological influences, such as the Zoroastrian eschatological doctrines of *barzakh* and the bridge of *Ṣirāṭ* or the Manichean concept of a 'seal of the prophets'.

In units *B3.2.5* to *B3.2.6* the educator can focus on Judaeo-Christian lore reflected in the Text, from the legend of *Khidr*, to the Hebraic vocabulary of terms such as *Jahannum* and *sifr*, to the verbal interrelationship between the Text and some Rabbinic commentaries.[21] Christian

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[16] There are 50 *sūras* in the Qur'ān that contain 'circumstantial verses', that is, actions and events taking place that triggered the revelation of a verse.

[17] Cf. 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb's requests, recorded by the Ḥadīth collectors, on taking as a place of prayer (*muṣallā*) the place where Ibrāhīm prayed, on the veiling of women, and on disciplining the Prophet's recalcitrant wives (*Ṣaḥīḥ* al-Būkhārī: https://sunnah.com/bukhari/8/53); and on the prohibition of wine (*Sunan* Abī Dāʾūd: https://sunnah.com/abudawud/27/2).

[18] As mentioned earlier, this is the term adopted by Mohamed Arkoun to denote texts, tenets, themes and traditional *fiqh* rulings that constitute a self-contained *dogmatic enclosure,* one which allows "a system of beliefs and unbeliefs to operate freely without any competing action from inside or out." Mohamed Arkoun, *Islam: To Reform or To Subvert?* Saqi Books, London 2006, p.87.

[19] The Roman *genii* or tutelary spirits via the Aramaic *ginnayê*.

[20] Qur'ān VIII (*al-Anfāl*),31.

[21] Such as the tale of Abraham escaping from the *'Ōr'* of the Chaldaeans, which a Rabbinic commentator interpreted as 'fire' (cf. Qur'ān XXI (*al-Anbiyāʾ*),68-71) and the close parallelism between Qur'ān V (*al-Māʾida*), 32: "anyone who spares a life, it shall be as if he spared the lives of all the people" and the *Mishna Sanhedrin* 37a and *Talmud Sanhedrin* 4:5: "and if anyone saves a single life, it

legendary elements will include, for instance, the Tale of the Companions of the Cave (*Aṣḥāb al-Kahf*),[22] the description of the torments of Hell,[23] and the numerous references to passages in the apocryphal and Gnostic Gospels.[24] In these units the educator can also highlight how, beyond the numerous allusions and references to Biblical doctrines and legends, which were directed at an audience that was highly familiar with these references, the Qur'ān presents itself as an affirmation and renewal of the scriptures earlier revealed to the People of the Book.[25] It is this fact which has enabled Muslim commentators over the centuries to refer back to the Biblical scriptures to explain much in the Text that appeared obscure to them.[26]

A fascinating theme is opened up in unit *B3.2.7,* where the educator can introduce the student to a particularly stimulating example of the dialogic fabric of the Qur'ān. This concerns how the Text reflects the polemics waged in the heterodox Christian milieux in the region over Christology, that is, the debate on the nature of Jesus between the unitarian conception and the trinitarian conception. Scholars have noted the dominant position of Christ in the Qur'ānic text[27] and how passages such as Qur'ān IX (*al-Tawba*), 30-33 have all the elements of an inter-Christian polemic. This has led many to re-evaluate the meaning of the Qur'ānic term *mushrikūn* from something denoting 'polytheists' to something indicating specifically 'trinitarian Christians'. At the same time they note the unexpected mention of Jesus not being crucified (a preoccupation mirroring a 2nd century Christian heresy known as *Docetism*) which a unitarian conception of the nature of Christ would not have felt the need to emphasise. This further hints at a specifically inter-Christian polemic among "those that disagreed about him [who] are full of doubt, with no knowledge to follow, only supposition". [28] One further element indicating the inter-Christian embedding of the Qur'ān is the remarkable number of religious terms and names in the Text demonstrating Christian Palestinian Syriac forms.[29] Philological questions such as these have spawned a whole academic field investigating the Aramaic/Syriac hinterland of the Qur'ānic text and how far these may or may not have influenced the formulation of the Qur'ān.[30]

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is on him as if he saved a whole world". Another interesting example is the account of the valley of the ants in Qur'ān XXVII (*al-Naml*) 18 which closely follows the Rabbinic text *Jellinek* 150:22: "Enter your houses; otherwise Solomon's legions will destroy you."

[22] Qur'ān XVIII (al-Kahf), 9-26.

[23] These descriptions closely parallel the elaborate descriptions, for instance, in the 2nd c. apocryphal *Apocalypse of Peter.*

[24] Examples are: the miracle of the palm tree Qur'ān XIX (*Maryam*), 23 and the *Gospel of Pseudo-Matthew*; the tale of Jesus and the clay birds, Qur'ān III (*Āl 'Imrān*), 49 and Qur'ān V (*al-Mā'ida*), 110 and the *First and Second Gospels of the Infancy of Christ*; the Angels bowing to Adam Qur'ān VII *(al-A'rāf)*, 11 and the Christian legends of *The Life of Adam and Eve* and *The Cave of Treasures.*

[25] Qur'ān III (*Āl 'Imrān*), 84 and Qur'ān X (*Yūnus*), 94.

[26] Early Muslim exegetes such as Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767) and Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) regularly cited traditions on the biblical background to Qur'ānic passages or explained the meaning of the Qur'ān's Arabic vocabulary in the light of other languages.

[27] Jesus (*ʿĪsā*) is referred to no less than 36 times in the Qur'ān, whereas the name '*Muḥammad*' is mentioned four times plus another variant as '*Aḥmad*'. Unlike Muḥammad, ʿĪsā is referred to as 'without sin' (Qur'ān III (*Āl 'Imrān*),35-36) and alone has a cosmic antagonist in the 'Anti-Christ' (*al-Masīḥ al-Dajjāl*).

[28] Qur'ān IV (*al-Nisā'*), 157: "They killed him not, nor crucified him, but the resemblance of ʿĪsā was put over another man, those that disagreed about him are full of doubt, with no knowledge to follow, only supposition: they certainly did not kill him". The Qur'ānic commentator and cousin of the Prophet Ibn ʿAbbās (ob. 687/68) names the 'resemblance' as a Roman soldier Tatianus, while the Christian writer Irenaeus (ob. c.130 AD) quotes the Gnostic theologian Basilides as naming him Simon of Cyrene.

[29] Examples are: صلوة (*şlwt*) formed on the Syriac ܨܠܘܬܐ (*şlwṯ*); زَكَوٰة (*zakwt*), from the Syriac ܙܟܘܬܐ (*zakūṯ*); حَيَوٰة (*ḥywt*) from the Syriac ܚܝܘܬܐ (*ḥywṯ*), each archaic spellings used by the Companions and later adjusted to conform more closely with Arabic morphology (زكاة, صلاة, حياة respectively). The term مُهَيْمِنُ (*muhaymin*) at Qur'ān LIX (*al-Ḥashr*), 23 is also the Syriac ܡܗܝܡܢ (*mhaymen*), as is طُور (*ṭūr*) in the phrase طُورِ سَيْنَاءَ (*ṭūr sīnā'* - 'Mount Sinai') at Qur'ān XXIII (*al-Mu'minūn*), 20 which is from the Syriac ܛܘܪ (*ṭūr sīnā*). The sobriquet for 'Yūnus' at Qur'ān XXI (*al-Anbiyā'*), 87 – *Dhū al-Nūn* – which is uniquely found in the Qur'ān and which is understood by the exegetes as 'He of the Fish', comes from the Syriac word ܢܘܢ (*nūn*) meaning 'fish'. Other names such as *Sulaymān, Isḥāq, Ilyās, Yūnus* and *Fir'awn* are also specifically Syriac forms of the originally Hebrew names (some of them via the Greek Septuagint translation), while *Iblīs* appears to be a misreading of the Greek διαβολος ('*diabolos'*) via the Syriac ܕܐܒܠܘܣ *dh-iablūs* with the dropping off by haplography of the initial *dh* 'of'. Some scholars have argued that some Arabic words of the *f'lān* form in the Text, such as *furqān* and *qur'ān,* are also originally Syriac forms (respectively ܦܘܪܩܢ *pūrqān* 'salvation' and ܩܪܝܢ *qeryān* 'scriptural reading').

[30] A curious *hadīth*-like report in Ibn 'Asākir's *Tārīkh Dimashq* points to at least a tradition that the Prophet took an interest in texts in Hebrew and Syriac: "According to Zayd ibn Thābit: the Messenger of God said: 'I have a number of writings, and I don't want just

o   *Module B3.3: The cultural environment in the Sunna*

In this following module the educator can extend this historical anthropological embedding of early Islam into the cultural constituents in the *Ḥadīth* and *Sīra* texts. Subjects for these units may include the antiquity of legends such as the horse *Burāq* with its Assyrian, Greco-Roman and Zoroastrian equivalents, and the Zoroastrian models for the Night Journey of the Prophet (the *Miʿrāj*), the institution of the five daily prayers and the list of the multiple Names of God. Equally, the educator can demonstrate the influence of Judaic legendary lore in the *Ḥadīth*, such as the tale of Adam and the Angels which ultimately goes back to Gnostic origins,[31] the early Rabbinic 'Torture of the Grave' accounts[32] and the tale of the whale *Nūn* upon which the earth is supported.[33] Details such as these were so plentiful that a separate discipline, the *Isrāʾīliyyāt,* was initiated to guide the Muslim enquirer as to the 'Jewish interpolations' that had infected the body of the Sunna.[34] Similarly, the educator can illustrate the accounts in the Sunna literature that have their origins in Christian legends and apocrypha. These can include citations re-used in the *ḥadīth*[35] or entire New Testament parables such as that of the Workers in the Vineyard[36] and thus reflecting, according to some scholars, the influence of Arabic translations of these works which later seeped into the body of the *Ḥadīth* collections.

This *Course B3 – The Scripture in history* familiarises the student to the multi-layered fabric of the Qurʾān and the cultural and doctrinal currents that influenced the emergence of the new faith. The effect of this objective reading of the Qurʾān, under the new historiographic methods, is to root the Qurʾān *within* history, revealing a text framed to an audience whose education and culture was *an integral part of the shared civilisation of Late Antiquity and in dialogue with it.*

In presenting the contribution of objective historical methods to understanding the environment of the scripture, the educator is introducing a more nuanced approach to the process of the emergence of the Qurʾānic text and the cultural influences on the development of the Sunna. This approach not only brings advantages for history, but also for religious faith, since assumptions of a Text untouched by history and standing outside of history can only produce a host of problems and contradictions that trouble the faith of the believer. Instead, the educator can place the relationship of the Muslim to his faith on a transparent basis, freed of divine legends and obscurantism, and place Islam (in the face of Islamist pretensions) on an equal footing with other faiths, thus putting an end to destructive religious narcissism.

Changing the way students read history and scripture in this way will therefore demand changes in the way they understand the subsequent trajectory of history and heritage, and the educator can illustrate these necessary changes in the modules of *Course C* and *Course D* that follow.

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anybody to read them. Could you learn Hebrew writing, or Syriac?' To which I replied: 'Yes, and I learned them within 17 days!'" Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh Dimashq,* ed. Muhibb ad-Dīn al-ʿAmrawī, Beirut, Dār al-Fikr, 1995-2000, Vol. XIX, p.303

[31] Such as the accounts in *Ṣaḥīḥ* al-Bukhārī 7516 and *Sunan* Abī Dāwūd 4702.

[32] From the *Ḥibbuṭ ha-Ḳeber* ('Beatings of the Grave') of Yiẓḥaḳ ben Parnak of the early AD era.

[33] *Al-Mustadrak*, 3840, classed *Ṣaḥīḥ* by al-Ḥākim. The commentators go on to name the whale as *Bahamūt*, which is the Hebrew *Behemōth.*

[34] The Prophet's ḥadīth حَدِّثُوا عَنْ بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ وَلَا حَرَجَ ('Relate traditions from the children of Isrāʾīl; there is no harm' - Sunan Abī Dāwūd 3662) is considered to have opened up the way to the entry of much Jewish lore into the hadith collections.

[35] Such as the quotation by Paul (I *Corinthians* 12: 25-26) that in a form found in a Gnostic text (the *Apocryphal Gospel of John* 37:56) 'what eye has not seen, nor ear heard, and what has not entered into the heart of man, I have prepared for those who believe in me' closely equates to *Ṣaḥīḥ* al-Bukhārī 4780 (Book 65, Ḥadīth 302).

[36] *Matthew* 20:1-16 and *Ṣaḥīḥ* al-Bukhārī 2268 (Book 37, Ḥadīth 8).