PROSPECTS AND LIMITS IN THE STUDY
OF THE HISTORICAL MUḤAMMAD

Andreas Görke

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

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

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[1] Cf. Patricia Crone, "What do we actually know about Mohammed" (www.opendemocracy.net/faith-europe_islam/mohammed_3866.jsp, accessed 8 February, 2010) for a recent overview and assessment of the sources related to the life of Muḥammad.

[2] John Wansbrough, *Quranic studies: Sources and methods of scriptural interpretation*, Oxford, 1977.

Christoph Luxenberg, on the other hand, hold that at least part of the Qurʾān is of pre-Islamic origin.[3] Yet, even if we accept the traditional dating of the Qurʾān within the first century of Islam, the text remains very vague and open to interpretation when it comes to possible references to Muḥammad. The Qurʾān usually only refers to events and does not narrate them, and in general it does not mention the names of persons or places. Muḥammad himself is mentioned only five times by name and many verses which are usually interpreted in light of the life of Muḥammad could well be understood as referring to someone or something else. To sum up, the Qurʾān on its own is of little use for reconstructing the life of Muḥammad.[4]

The non-Muslim literary sources do not provide relief either. There are a number of sources referring to the beginnings of Islam that predate the Islamic sources.[5] However, they do not contain substantial material pertaining specifically to the life of Muḥammad.[6] In many cases, these sources are also open to interpretation.[7] Finally, there are no non-Muslim sources that could highlight the social, political or spiritual context of the Ḥijāz at the relevant time and thus provide a background against which information on Muḥammad could be assessed.[8]

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

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[3] Günter Lüling, *Über den Ur-Qurʾān: Ansätze zur Rekonstruktion vorislamischer christlicher Strophenlieder im Qurʾān*, Erlangen, 1974. Christoph Luxenberg, *Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran: Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache*, Berlin, 2000.

[4] Cf. Michael Cook, *Muhammad*, Oxford, 1983, 69–70; Rudi Paret, *Mohammed und der Koran: Geschichte und Verkündigung des arabischen Propheten*, Stuttgart, 1985, 166–8; Francis E. Peters, "The quest of the historical Muhammad", *International journal of Middle Eastern studies*, vol. 23, no. 3, 1991, 300; Andrew Rippin, "Muḥammad in the Qurʾān: Reading scripture in the 21st century", in: Harald Motzki (ed.), *The biography of Muḥammad: The issue of the sources*, Leiden, 2000.

[5] A list of the most important non-Muslim sources can be found in Ibn Warraq, "Studies on Muhammad and the rise of Islam: A critical survey", in: id. (ed.), *The quest for the historical Muhammad*, Amherst, 2000, 31–4. For a thorough analysis of these sources see Robert G. Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as others saw it: A survey and evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian writings on early Islam*, Princeton, 1997.

[6] Robert G. Hoyland, "The earliest Christian writings on Muḥammad: An appraisal", in: Harald Motzki (ed.), *Biography*, esp. 292.

[7] See for instance Patricia Crone & Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The making of the Islamic world*, Cambridge [etc.], 1977, and the numerous reviews it received; Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*.

[8] Cf. Peters, "Quest", 292.

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

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

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

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[9] Following the works of Ignaz Goldziher, *Muhammedanische Studien*, vol. II, Halle, 1890; Leone Caetani, *Annali dell' Islam*, vol. I, Milan, 1905; Henri Lammens, "Qoran et tradition: Comment fut composée la vie de Mahomet", *Recherches de science religieuse*, vol. 1, 1910.

[10] See for example the works of Wansbrough, *Quranic studies*; id., *The sectarian milieu: Content and composition of Islamic salvation history*, Oxford, 1978; Patricia Crone, *Slaves on horses: The evolution of the Islamic polity*, Cambridge, 1980; id., *Meccan trade and the rise of Islam*, Oxford, 1987.

[11] Yehuda D. Nevo & Judith Koren, *Crossroads to Islam: The origins of the Arab religion and the Arab state*, Amherst, 2003, 11.

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

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

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

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[12] Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic origins: The beginnings of Islamic historical writing*, Princeton, 1998, 25–31.

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

This situation has led some scholars to exclude the question of historicity or authenticity from their research and instead focus on the study of the Islamic tradition concerning Muḥammad.[13] This approach has also the advantage of not being subject to possible ideological reservations. Other scholars, however, seek to overcome the difficulties in the source material and to open new methodological pathways in their quest for the historical Muḥammad.

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

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

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[13] E.g. Uri Rubin, *The eye of the beholder: The life of Muḥammad as viewed by the early Muslims*, Princeton, 1995, 1; cf. Hartmut Bobzin, *Mohammed*, München, 2000, 119.

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

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

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

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

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[14] A tendency to accept negative statements about Muḥammad as historical while rejecting positive statements as later idealisations and embellishments can be found for instance in Henri Lammens, *Le berceau de l'Islam: L'Arabie occidentale à la veille de l'hégire*, Roma, 1914; id., *Fāṭima et les filles de Mahomet: Notes critiques pour l'étude de la sīra*, Roma, 1912; cf. Carl Heinrich Becker, "Prinzipielles zu Lammens' Sīrastudien", *Der Islam*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1913; Theodor Nöldeke, "Die Traditionen über das Leben Muhammeds", *Der Islam*, vol. 5, no. 1, 1914. The recent book of Hans Jansen, *Mohammed: Eine Biographie*, München, 2008, exhibits the same tendency.

[15] Harald Motzki, "Der Prophet und die Schuldner: Eine ḥadīṯ-Untersuchung auf dem Prüfungstand", *Der Islam*, vol. 77, no. 1, 2000.

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

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

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

The method has been successfully applied to traditions about the life of Muḥammad in a couple of studies.[16] Other studies have focused on legal matters[17] or on the early Islamic conquests.[18]

The third approach consists of an analysis of comprehensive corpora of texts. While the *isnād-cum-matn*-analysis concentrates on single events documented in variants of a small number of accounts, this approach aims at analysing all traditions traced back to certain persons. For the field of the biography of Muḥammad, the most obvious candidates for such an analysis are the oldest known authorities in the field, like Abān b. ʿUthmān (d. c. 105/723), ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr (d. c. 93/712), Shuraḥbīl b. Saʿīd (d. c. 123/741), ʿAbdallāh b. Abī Bakr (d. c. 120/738), or Saʿīd b. al-Musayyab (d. c. 94/713).[19] This approach may be combined with an *isnād-cum-matn*-analysis of the individual traditions to eliminate later additions and false ascriptions. The combination of both approaches sheds light on what the earliest authorities in the field of the biography of the Prophet deemed noteworthy and on what they did not report. It also yields a clearer picture of the transmission of the reports.

Several attempts were made to collect the corpora of texts of some of the earliest authorities on the biography of the Prophet.[20] Of those, the traditions going back to ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr received the most scholarly

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[16] Gregor Schoeler, *Charakter und Authentie der muslimischen Überlieferung über das Leben Mohammeds*, Berlin, 1996; Andreas Görke, "The historical tradition about al-Ḥudaybiya: A study of ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr's account", in: Motzki (ed.), *Biography*; Andreas Görke & Gregor Schoeler, "Reconstructing the earliest *sīra* texts: The Hiǧra in the corpus of ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr", *Der Islam*, vol. 82, no. 2, 2005; Harald Motzki, "The murder of Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq: On the origin and reliability of some *maghāzī*-reports", in: id. (ed.), *Biography*.

[17] Harald Motzki, "The Prophet and the cat: On dating Mālik's *Muwaṭṭaʾ* and legal traditions", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, vol. 22, 1998; Ulrike Mitter, *Das frühislamische Patronat: Eine Studie zu den Anfängen des islamischen Rechts*, Würzburg, 2006.

[18] Jens Scheiner, *Die Eroberung von Damaskus: Quellenkritische Untersuchung zur Historiographie in klassisch-islamischer Zeit*, Leiden, 2010.

[19] On these and other early authorities on the biography of Muḥammad cf. Josef Horovitz, "The earliest biographies of the Prophet and their authors", *Islamic culture*, vol. 1, 1927, vol. 2, 1928; re-edited with introduction and notes by Lawrence Conrad as Josef Horovitz, *The earliest biographies of the prophet and their authors*, Princeton, 2002.

[20] See e.g. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Dūrī, *The rise of historical writing among the Arabs*, Princeton, 1983, 100–10 (corpus of Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī); Muḥammad Bāqshīsh Abū Mālik, *al-Maghāzī li-Mūsā b. ʿUqba*, Agadir, 1994 (corpus of Mūsā b. ʿUqba); and the works mentioned in the following footnote.

attention,[21] and his corpus was the first to be studied using the *isnād-cum-matn* analysis.[22] It is therefore the most suitable corpus to demonstrate what kind of information can be gained from such a study.

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

The *sīra*-traditions traced back to ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr feature in general different *asānīd* than his exegetical or legal traditions, although there is a certain overlap. These distinctions in the lines of transmission can be seen as an indication that the *asānīd* are not arbitrary inventions. However, while some traditions are well documented and exist in several independent transmissions, some *asānīd* seem to have be invented or forged by al-Wāqidī and, possibly, Ibn Isḥāq.[23]

Using the *isnād-cum-matn* analysis, it is possible to reconstruct the contents of ʿUrwa's accounts of the events mentioned. These usually consist of the basic outline of the story. While in some cases single phrases can be shown to go back to ʿUrwa, in general it is impossible to reconstruct the wording of his accounts.[24]

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

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[21] Joachim von Stülpnagel, *ʿUrwa Ibn az-Zubair: Sein Leben und seine Bedeutung als Quelle frühislamischer Überlieferung*, Tübingen, 1957; Dūrī, *Rise*, 79–89; Salwā Mursī al-Ṭāhir, *Bidāyat al-kitāba al-tārīkhiyya ʿinda l-ʿArab: Awwal sīra fī l-Islām*, ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr b. al-ʿAwwām, Beirut, 1995; Khalīl Ibrāhīm, "ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr", *al-Mawrid*, vol. 5, 1976.

[22] Andreas Görke & Gregor Schoeler, *Die ältesten Berichte über das Leben Muḥammads: Das Korpus ʿUrwa ibn az-Zubair*, Princeton, 2008.

[23] Ibid., 255–7, 285–6.

[24] Ibid., 258–60, 289.

Many Qurʾānic elements and possible elaborations of Qurʾānic verses which in the later tradition are connected with certain events do not figure in ʿUrwa's traditions, although there are a few references to Qurʾānic verses.[25] Likewise, legal traditions, which are often associated with certain events in the life of Muḥammad—and which may represent attempts to support certain legal positions—are not included in ʿUrwa's historical accounts.[26]

In this context, ʿUrwa's letters to the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik (r. 65/685 to 86/705) deserve particular attention. Their contents are corroborated by other long traditions going back to ʿUrwa and transmitted independently by different students of his, and they can thus be traced back to ʿUrwa with some certainty. In comparison with other traditions, the letters display some features which suggest that they were less affected by processes of redaction and revision. The letters are very much matter-of-fact, they contain almost no miraculous stories and very few embellishments. Persons who later came to play a decisive role in early Islam, such as the rightly guided caliphs, do not figure prominently in these letters. Moreover, occasional sayings of the Prophet Muḥammad are not introduced with a complete isnād, but instead with sentences like "it is alleged that the Prophet said…".[27]

Josef Horovitz held that the letters of ʿUrwa represent the oldest written notes on events in the life of Muḥammad.[28] This view is debatable, as the letters were transmitted through lectures just as were other traditions and thus were subject to change. Nevertheless, it seems that the letters were much less reworked than other traditions in the process of transmission.

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

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[25] Ibid., 264–6.
[26] Andreas Görke, "The relationship between maghāzī and ḥadīth in early Islamic scholarship", forthcoming in Bulletin of the school of Oriental and African Studies.
[27] Cf. Görke & Schoeler, Berichte, 264, 288.
[28] Horovitz, Biographies, 26.

on the life of Muḥammad deemed noteworthy and which episodes of the story of his life may have been introduced only at a later time.

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

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

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

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

[29] Cf. Michael Lecker, *The "Constitution of Medina": Muḥammad's first legal document*, Princeton, 2004, for a discussion of several problematic terms.
[30] Abū ʿUbayd al-Qāsim b. Sallām, *Kitāb al-amwāl*, Muḥammad Ḥāmid al-Faqī (ed.), Cairo, 1353/1935, 194–6.

it does not of course mean that its ascription to Muḥammad is valid. It seems very probable that in the transmission of treaties and other documents more attention was paid to the wording than in the transmission of other traditions. This assumption is corroborated by the fact that the different versions of these documents display fewer variants than do those of other traditions. We observed a similar tendency in the letters of ʿUrwa to the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik above. A systematic appraisal of the *gharīb al-ḥadīth* literature might lead us to other texts which can with a high probability be assumed to be very old.

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

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

Even if we assume that these earliest traditions reflect the general outline of the events correctly—as research in oral history/oral tradition suggests might be the case—the quantity of historical facts about the life of Muḥammad that can be deduced in this way remains small. Based on the traditions of ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr, for instance, only the following facts relating to the time before the *hijra* may probably be considered historical: when Muḥammad starts receiving revelations from God, he is at first frightened and distressed, but then starts to proclaim the message he receives. At first, the Meccans' reactions range from being unconcerned to showing sympathy. This changes when Muḥammad begins to preach against their gods. Subsequently

the Muslims are harassed and some of them emigrate to Abyssinia. The situation in Mecca at best ameliorates a little for a short while and thus Muslims begin to emigrate to Medina. Finally Muḥammad follows them together with Abū Bakr and settles in Medina. This is approximately the extent of what can be deduced as probable historical facts from the traditions of ʿUrwa for the time before the *hijra*. The situation is better for the time after the *hijra*, and as we have seen, the corpus of ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr contains a couple of long traditions relating to this time, namely about the Battle of Badr, the Battle of the Moat, the slander about ʿĀʾisha, the expedition of al-Ḥudaybiya, and the conquest of Mecca and its aftermath. Nevertheless, there are a number of important events concerning which we do not have traditions from ʿUrwa, for instance the Battle of Uḥud or the farewell pilgrimage. Some of these gaps may be filled, once more traditions, texts, and corpora are analysed, but there are limits inherent in the material. Thus the dating of events in the life of Muḥammad will always remain speculative. The earliest authorities on the life of Muḥammad apparently were not interested in chronological details. The interest in chronology only emerged a generation or two later.[31] It is possible, however, to develop a relative chronology, as some accounts presuppose the prior occurence of certain events.

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

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[31] Cf. Schoeler, *Charakter*, 169; Görke & Schoeler, *Berichte*, 167, 272–3, 277–8, 292.

[32] Ernest Renan, "Mahomet et les origines de l'islamisme", *Revue des deux mondes*, Nouvelle Periode, vol. 12, 1851, 1065.

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