



**In Search of ‘Urwa’s *Sīra*:
Some Methodological Issues in the Quest for
“Authenticity” in the Life of Muḥammad**

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Abstract

This article raises important critical questions about efforts to reconstruct the “sīra” of ‘Urwa ibn al-Zubayr using the methods of *isnād* criticism, particularly as recently proposed by Gregor Schoeler and Andreas Görke. While al-Zuhrī and occasionally other authorities of his generation can often be persuasively linked with the traditions in question, the reach back to ‘Urwa is generally not convincing (and even less so, the occasional invocation of ‘Ā’isha and claims of “authenticity”). The primary difficulty is that the data of the biographical traditions generally cannot meet the demanding requirements of common-link analysis: their networks of transmission usually are not dense enough to establish sufficiently meaningful patterns beyond the early second century. Moreover, the arguments for ‘Urwa’s authorship often require a great deal of optimism regarding the accuracy of certain *isnāds* and an occasional willingness to accept hypothetically reconstructed lines of transmission or to overlook difficulties in the recorded patterns of transmission. Equally significant is the failure so far of this arduous method to reveal anything particularly “new” about the “historical Muḥammad” that could not otherwise be determined using simpler approaches.

Questions concerning the historical reliability of Muḥammad’s early biographies have come to pose one of the most vexing problems in the study of Islamic origins. Although many early nineteenth-century scholars of Islam were initially seduced by the wealth of detailed reports about the Prophet’s

The author would like thank the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation, and the American Council of Learned Societies for supporting the research and writing of this article, as well as the Orientalisches Seminar at the Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen and Prof. Stephen Gerö for hosting my stay during the von Humboldt fellowship.





life, believing that it was possible to know “year by year the fluctuations of his thoughts, his contradictions, his weaknesses,” with the turn of a new century this illusion was shattered, owing largely to the works of Ignác Goldziher and Henri Lammens. These two scholars, and many who followed in their wake, including Joseph Schacht in particular, pointed to the highly tendentious, artificial, and even contradictory nature of much traditional Islamic material, to the effect that it would never again be possible to exclaim as innocently as Ernest Renan that Islam had been born “in the full light of history.”¹ This methodological shift eventually gave rise to a new “skeptical” approach in the study of early Islam that would bring the “hermeneutics of suspicion” to bear on the early Islamic tradition in a manner comparable to the historical-critical study of Jewish and Christian origins. Nevertheless, it would be a number of years before this approach was thoroughly applied to analyzing the origins of Islam, an endeavor that has born much fruit over the last several decades particularly in English-language scholarship. The works of John Wansbrough, Patricia Crone, Michael Cook, Suliman Bashear, Larry Conrad, and Gerald Hawting (among others) have built on the insights of Goldziher, Lammens, and Schacht, ultimately reaching the conclusion that they not only are the earliest Islamic sources unreliable as witnesses to formative Islam, but that beginnings of Islam were in fact quite different from how these later sources remember it.²



¹) Ignác GOLDZIHHER, *Muhammedanische Studien*, 2 vols. (Halle, 1889–90), esp. II, 1–274; Engl. trans., idem, *Muslim Studies*, ed. S. M. STERN, trans. C. R. BARBER and S. M. STERN, 2 vols. (London, 1967–71), II, 15–251. Henri LAMMENS, “Qoran et tradition: Comment fut composée la vie de Mohamet?,” *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 1 (1910), 25–61; idem, “L’âge de Mahomet et la chronologie de la Sira,” *Journal Asiatique* ser. x, 17 (1911), 209–50; idem, *Fatima et les filles de Mahomet* (Rome, 1912); English trans. idem, “The Koran and Tradition: How the Life of Muhammad was Composed,” in *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, ed. IBN WARRAQ (Amherst, NY, 2000), 169–87; idem, “Fatima and the Daughters of Muhammad,” in *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, ed. IBN WARRAQ (Amherst, NY, 2000), 218–329; idem, “The Age of Muhammad and the Chronology of the Sira,” in *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, ed. IBN WARRAQ (Amherst, NY, 2000), 188–217. Joseph SCHACHT, “A Revaluation of Islamic Traditions,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 49 (1949), 143–54; idem, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford, 1950). The quotations are from Ernest RENAN, “Mahomet et les origines de l’Islamisme,” *Revue des deux mondes* 12 (1851), 1023–60, 1025; Engl. trans. idem, “Muhammad and the Origins of Islam,” in *The Quest for the Historical Muhammad*, ed. IBN WARRAQ (Amherst, NY, 2000), 127–66, 129.

²) E.g., John E. WANSBROUGH, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, London Oriental Series 31 (Oxford, 1977); idem, *The Sectarian*





Of course, not everyone accepted the full implications of the radical critique of the Islamic traditional materials proposed by Goldziher, Lammens, and Schacht, but the credulity of the first generation of scholarship had been severely chastened, and subsequent studies of Muḥammad would have to proceed in considerably more measured fashion. For those who wished to maintain some value in the traditional material, criteria would have to be defined that could with some measure of confidence distinguish between pious legend and historical “fact.” Unfortunately, many introductory works and biographies of Muḥammad have continued to proceed as if nothing has happened, reproducing more or less uncritically the traditional Islamic account of Muḥammad’s life: even works by prominent scholars of Islam, after initially acknowledging the many problems with the source material, often narrate the life of Muḥammad according to the traditional accounts.³ Specialists in Islamic origins cannot so easily ignore

Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History, London Oriental Series 34 (Oxford, 1978); Patricia CRONE and M. A. COOK, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge, 1977); Patricia CRONE, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge, 1980); eadem, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton, 1987); Michael COOK, *Early Muslim Dogma: A Source-Critical Study* (Cambridge, 1981); Suliman BASHEAR, *Arabs and Others in Early Islam*, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 8 (Princeton, 1997); idem, *Studies in Early Islamic Tradition* The Max Schloessinger Memorial Series, Collected Studies in Arabic and Islam 2 (Jerusalem, 2004); Gerald R. HAWTING, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization (Cambridge, 1999).

³) On the persistence of this problem, with some specific examples, see Fred McGraw DONNER, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 14 (Princeton, 1998), 7–9; and Robert G. HOYLAND, “Writing the Biography of the Prophet Muhammad: Problems and Solutions,” *History Compass* 5, no. 2 (2007), 581–602, 597 n. 6. As a specific example, Marshall Hodgson notes that “On the face of it, the documentation transmitted among Muslims about his life is rich and detailed; but we have learned to mistrust most of it; indeed, the most respected early Muslim scholars themselves pointed out its untrustworthiness”: Marshall G. S. HODGSON, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, 3 vols., I: *The Classical Age of Islam* (Chicago, 1974), 160. Nevertheless, Hodgson then proceeds to rehash the traditional account. Even F. E. Peters, who in one place writes, “Goldziher, Lammens and Schacht were all doubtless correct” with regard to our knowledge of Muḥammad’s life (F. E. PETERS, “The Quest of the Historical Muhammad,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23 [1991], 291–315, 303), later composed his biography of Muḥammad largely according to the accounts of the traditional sources: F. E. PETERS, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam* (Albany, 1994).





the issue, however, and some scholars have accordingly sought methods for identifying a reliable “historical kernel” embedded within the Islamic tradition’s hagiography of its prophet.⁴ Montgomery Watt, for instance, sought refuge in the supposed existence of “a solid core of fact” underlying the traditional accounts, providing their “basic framework” and a reliable chronological foundation that allowed him essentially to reproduce unaltered the traditional accounts of Muḥammad’s activities at Mecca and Medina.⁵ Nonetheless, Watt’s hypothesis regarding the reliability of this “authentic core” is more asserted than demonstrated, and in fact, scholarship on the *sīra* tradition has identified the chronology of Muḥammad’s life as among its most artificial elements.⁶ Such appeals by Watt and others to

⁴) Other efforts to exhume this historical kernel from the traditional accounts of Islam’s origins are noted in DONNER, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 16–20, where Donner notes that the more scholars have sought to recover this “kernel of historical fact” the farther it often retreats into the distance, seemingly reduced “to the vanishing point.” Oddly enough, neither Watt nor Paret (discussed below) are mentioned in this section.

⁵) Watt’s primary argument for this hypothesis is that “the ostensible sources for any series of events are always to be accepted unless some grounds can be shown for their rejection or partial rejection”: W. Montgomery WATT, “The Reliability of Ibn Ishāq’s Sources,” in *La vie du Prophète Mahomet: Colloque de Strasbourg, Octobre 1980*, ed. Toufic FAHD (Paris, 1983), 31–43, 32; republished in idem, “The Reliability of Ibn Ishāq’s Sources,” in *Early Islam: Collected Articles* (Edinburgh, 1990), 13–23. See also Watt’s earlier comments to a similar effect in idem, “The Materials Used by Ibn Ishāq,” in *Historians of the Middle East*, ed. Bernard LEWIS and P. M. HOLT, Historical Writings of the Peoples of Asia 4 (London, 1958), 23–34. Yet the problem with Watt’s approach is that Goldziher, Schacht, and many others have demonstrated that forgery was rampant in the early Islamic tradition (as the tradition itself acknowledges), and consequently it is in fact necessary to take the opposite approach, questioning the material unless there is evidence of its authenticity. See also the recent critique of Watt’s approach in HOYLAND, “Writing the Biography of the Prophet,” 584–85. The results of Watt’s optimistic confidence in the sources can be readily seen in W. Montgomery WATT, *Muhammad at Mecca* (Oxford, 1953) and idem, *Muhammad at Medina* (Oxford, 1956), both of which are largely grounded in an acceptance of the traditional Islamic accounts of Muḥammad’s life.

⁶) See, e.g., LAMMENS, “L’Âge de Mahomet,” esp. 212–15, Engl. trans., idem, “Age of Muhammad,” 189–91. See also SCHACHT, “Revaluation of Islamic Traditions,”; Rudolf SELLHEIM, “Prophet, Chalif und Geschichte: Die Muhammed-Biographie des Ibn Ishāq,” *Oriens* 18–19 (1967), 32–91, 70–71, 75–78; Lawrence I. CONRAD, “Seven and the Tasbī: On the Implications of Numerical Symbolism for the Study of Medieval Islamic History,” *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 31 (1988), 42–73, esp. 62–73; idem, “Theophanes and the Arabic His-





the existence of an “underlying chronological framework” ultimately amount to little more than a *petitio principii* that fails to answer legitimate doubts that have been raised regarding the reliability of this traditional material.

A rather different way out was proposed by Rudi Paret, who, unlike Watt and many other more “traditional” scholars, was willing to accept the radical conclusions concerning the reliability of the *ḥadīth* reached by Goldziher and Schacht. Paret acknowledged that their findings left a gaping hole between the beginnings of Islam and the earliest legal and theological traditions, but he suggested that it might be possible to narrow this gap through study of “die im engeren Sinn historische Literatur.”⁷ The Qurʾān alone cannot solve the problem, as Paret notes, since it is only useful as a historical document when read in conjunction with Muḥammad’s biography. Thus, a method must be found that can identify early and trustworthy material amidst the mass of pious legends assembled in the Islamic biographies of Muḥammad. Although Paret seems to concede that a great deal of the early *sīra* literature cannot pass for reliable historical data about the life of Muḥammad, he nonetheless identifies what he believed to be a genuine student-teacher relationship in the chain Ibn Ishāq < al-Zuhrī < ʿUrwa ibn al-Zubayr. According to Paret, traditions in Ibn Hisḥām’s *Sīra* and al-Ṭabarī’s *History* bearing this chain of transmitters could be trusted as reliable, breaking through the chronological barriers identified by Goldziher and Schacht and anchoring this material securely at

torical Tradition: Some Indications of Intercultural Transmission,” *Byzantinische Forschungen* 15 (1990), 1–44, 16; J. M. B. JONES, “The *Maghāzī* Literature,” in *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period*, ed. A. F. L. BEESTON, et al., The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature (Cambridge, 1983), 344–51, 349–50. Even Gregor Schoeler concedes the lateness and artificiality of the *sīra*’s chronology: Gregor SCHOELER, *Charakter und Authentie der muslimischen Überlieferung über das Leben Mohammeds*, Studien zur Sprache, Geschichte und Kultur des islamischen Orients 14 (Berlin, 1996), 15, 23, 32, 40, 131–34. Concerning the problem of chronology in the Islamic historical tradition more generally, see also DONNER, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 230–48, esp. 242–43; and Albrecht NOTH and Lawrence I. CONRAD, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition: A Source Critical Study*, trans. Michael BONNER, 2nd ed., Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 3 (Princeton, 1994), 40–45.

⁷) “Soweit Isnāde wesentlich über das Jahr 100 d. H. (718 n. Chr.) zurückreichen, haben sie für uns nicht die geringste Beweiskraft. Am Anfang der Überlieferung über den Urislam klafft eine Lücke.” Rudi PARET, “Die Lücke in der Überlieferung über den Urislam,” in *Westöstliche Abhandlungen*, ed. Fritz MEIER (Wiesbaden, 1954), 147–53, 150.





the end of the first Islamic century.⁸ Paret attempts to reach even further back into the fog of Islamic origins through an appeal to ʿUrwa’s decent from one of Muḥammad’s first followers, which would have afforded him at least indirect access to Muḥammad’s life and times. Yet while Paret draws attention to this frequent pattern of transmission, he fails to make clear why its mere attachment to a particular tradition should be regarded as a guarantee that such material actually derives from the first Islamic century.⁹ If it seems somewhat likely that a good deal of Ibn Ishāq’s material came from al-Zuhri, it is not at all certain that an ensuing attribution to ʿUrwa is always reliable. One must consider the possibility, for instance, that even by Ibn Ishāq’s time ʿUrwa had already acquired legendary status as an early authority on Muḥammad’s biography, to the effect that a large amount of unassigned *sīra* material was attracted to his name. Or it may be that Ibn Ishāq – or later tradents – freely attributed much of al-Zuhri’s material to the man traditionally identified as his teacher. The alleged connection of these traditions with ʿUrwa needs further justification and cannot simply be assumed.

Paret’s theory was first put into practice only a few years after his article’s appearance, in an unpublished Tübingen dissertation by Joachim von Stülpnagel on the topic of ʿUrwa’s importance as a source of early Islamic tradition, supervised by Paret himself.¹⁰ Much like his *Doktorvater*,

⁸) *ibid.*, 151.

⁹) Paret frequently highlights traditions from ʿUrwa in his biography of Muḥammad (originally published in 1957), without much justification for their authenticity or importance: Rudi PARET, *Mohammed und der Koran; Geschichte und Verkündigung des arabischen Propheten*, 9th ed. (Stuttgart, 2005), e.g., 57, 66, 102–3, 106. Walid Saleh, in his review of Hawting’s *Idea of Idolatry*, scolds “revisionism” for its attacks on the “German school” (presumably not Goldziher, Schacht, and Noth, *inter alios*), observing that “it is no wonder that one of the major works of this school, Rudi Paret’s *Mohammed und der Koran* is always absent from their bibliographies.” Walid A. SALEH, “Review of G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*,” *H-Mideast-Medieval*, *H-Net Reviews* February, 2005; available from <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10211>. Despite Saleh’s praise for Paret’s book, its absence from these studies seems largely excusable, inasmuch as this *Taschenbuch* biography of Muḥammad, like so many other examples of this genre, essentially adheres to the “basic framework” of the *sīra*, whose reliability has been sternly questioned, and not just by those in the “revisionist” camp (see, e.g., n. 87 above).

¹⁰) Joachim VON STÜLPNAGEL, “ʿUrwa Ibn az-Zubair: Sein Leben und seine Bedeutung als Quelle frühislamischer Überlieferung” (Ph.D. diss., Eberhard-Karls-Universität Tübingen, 1957).





von Stülpnagel largely assumes the reliability of this chain of transmission back to ʿUrwa, without offering much basis for its authenticity. Consequently, the study’s main accomplishment lies in assembling a sizeable corpus of alleged ʿUrwa traditions from the sources available at the time. While these reports derive from a wide range of sources, unsurprisingly the dissertation focuses principally on the large body *sīra* material attributed to ʿUrwa. Von Stülpnagel devotes considerable attention to the supposed “letters” written by ʿUrwa to the Caliph ʿAbd al-Malik, providing translations of all the alleged letter fragments as well as an analysis of selected themes and traditions. In his comments, von Stülpnagel frequently appeals to ʿUrwa’s relationship with his aunt ʿĀ’isha as offering validation for the traditions transmitted under his name: surely this favorite wife of the Prophet and daughter of the first Caliph provided ʿUrwa with a source of reliable information.¹¹ Yet this reach back to ʿĀ’isha only compounds the problems of von Stülpnagel’s largely unsubstantiated assumption that ʿUrwa in fact authored the traditions transmitted under his name. On more than one occasion von Stülpnagel himself acknowledges the problem of widespread forgery of *ḥadīth* and *isnāds*, even within the corpus of ʿUrwa traditions, yet he never identifies a systematic means of separating the wheat from the chaff: observations regarding the authenticity of traditions are offered in a very ad hoc and piecemeal fashion.¹² To his credit, von Stülpnagel presents what is perhaps the only sustained analysis of ʿUrwa’s “letters,” whose genuineness other scholars seem to have essentially assumed (see below), but otherwise he addresses the authenticity of the corpus of ʿUrwa material only rather cursorily and unconvincingly.¹³ In his brief discussion of the issue von Stülpnagel identifies some general characteristics of the ʿUrwa traditions’ transmission history that could appear to validate their authenticity, noting in particular their frequent parallel transmission through ʿUrwa’s son Hishām and al-Zuhri.¹⁴ Nevertheless, von Stülpnagel does not pursue these issues sufficiently to lay to rest any doubts about the material’s attribution to ʿUrwa, a task which he left for subsequent scholarship to assume.

For nearly forty years Paret and von Stülpnagel’s theory of an early and recoverable corpus of traditions authored by ʿUrwa remained a promising hypothesis that lay dormant and essentially untested. Lately, however, this approach has been revived by Gregor Schoeler and Andreas

¹¹) *ibid.*, e.g., 15, 36, 58, 116.

¹²) *ibid.*, e.g., 57, 118, 120, 123, 147.

¹³) *ibid.*, 104–13 (letters), 117–25.

¹⁴) *ibid.*, 122.





Görke, who have announced in a recent article their collaboration on an ambitious project aimed at reconstructing the biography of Muḥammad as it was taught by ʿUrwa in the later first century AH.¹⁵ The roots of this collective endeavor reach back to Schoeler’s 1996 monograph, *Charakter und Authentie der muslimischen Überlieferung über das Leben Mohammeds*, where Schoeler essentially attempts to advance von Stülpnagel’s project beyond the point where his study left off in addressing the thorny problem of “authenticity.” After a survey of the main early transmitters and sources for the *sīra* tradition, Schoeler’s monograph identifies a possible method for validating early biographical traditions and then applies it to two specific traditions from Muḥammad’s life attributed to ʿUrwa, arguing for their authenticity and, more or less implicitly, their accuracy.

Methodologically Schoeler’s study draws its inspiration from techniques initially developed by Schacht and later refined by G. H. A. Juynboll and Harald Motzki in their studies of the Islamic legal tradition. Schacht, in his *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*, was the first to propose that it was possible to learn something about the history of individual traditions through mining their *isnāds*, despite the artificiality of the earliest tradents identified by these chains of transmission. Through comparison of all the various *isnāds* assigned to a particular tradition in different sources, one can often identify a single transmitter on whom all the highly varied chains of transmission converge, the so-called “common link.”¹⁶ As Schacht rather reasonably concludes, this figure is most likely either the person who first placed a particular tradition into circulation or, alternatively, the one in whose name the tradition was originally circulated. Otherwise, it is difficult to explain how these highly variegated chains of transmission could converge on this single individual as their earliest common source. Nevertheless, as others have rightly cautioned, this method is not foolproof, and when tested against other more reliable criteria for dating, such *isnād* criticism often fails to provide an accurate date.¹⁷ The

¹⁵) Andreas GÖRKE and Gregor SCHOELER, “Reconstructing the Earliest *Sīra* Texts: The *Hiġra* in the Corpus of ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr,” *Der Islam* 82 (2005), 209–20. A more general description of the project can be found in Gregor SCHOELER, “Foundations for A New Biography of Muḥammad: The Production and Evaluation of the Corpus of Traditions from ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr,” in *Method and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins*, ed. Herbert BERG (Leiden, 2003), 19–28.

¹⁶) SCHACHT, *Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*, esp. 163–75.

¹⁷) Michael COOK, “Eschatology and the Dating of Traditions,” *Princeton Papers in Near Eastern Studies* 1 (1992), 25–47. See also Patricia CRONE, *Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law*, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization (Cambridge,





reason for this outcome, some have proposed, is the so-called “spread of *isnāds*” during the process of transmission, a problem that Schacht himself was the first to identify.¹⁸ As Schacht and others have recognized, it is highly probable that these authoritative chains of transmission were altered both by the complications of transmission over an extended period of time as well as by the editorial forces of an evolving Islamic tradition. The result is that many *isnāds* are contaminated and do not preserve an accurate record of historical transmission, particularly in the earliest stages of this process, which can create the illusion of false common links.

In order partly to safeguard against such problems, it would seem, Juynboll has introduced numerous refinements to this method, including the importance of identifying multiple “partial common links” deriving from the main common link.¹⁹ According to Juynboll, before a tradition can be dated with any accuracy using its *isnāds*, one must be able to identify not only a common link but also partial common links that depend directly on that early transmitter, each themselves having a number of pupils who transmit the material from them. Single strands of transmission, Juynboll notes, are often “dives” arising later in the process of

1987), 122–23 n. 53. Recently Andreas Görke has offered a response to Cook's article, although several of his criticisms were already acknowledged as problems by Cook, and other issues raised by Görke highlight problems that impinge on his own arguments in other articles, as will be seen in a moment: Andreas GÖRKE, “Eschatology, History, and the Common Link: A Study in Methodology,” in *Method and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins*, ed. Herbert BERG (Leiden, 2003), 179–208.

¹⁸) COOK, *Early Muslim Dogma*, 107–16; also idem, “Eschatology and the Dating of Traditions,” 24 and 40 n. 19, where he answers some objections by Juynboll to his explanation of this phenomenon. See also SCHACHT, *Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*, esp. 163–75; CRONE, *Roman, Provincial and Islamic Law*, 27–34; Norman CALDER, *Studies in Early Muslim Jurisprudence* (Oxford, 1993), 236–41.

¹⁹) See esp. G. H. A. JUYNBOLL, “Nāfiʿ, the *Mawlā* of Ibn ʿUmar, and His Position in Muslim *Ḥadīth* Literature,” *Der Islam* 70 (1993), 279–300; also idem, *Muslim Tradition: Studies in Chronology, Provenance, and Authorship of Early Ḥadīth*, Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization (Cambridge, 1983), esp. 206–17; idem, “Some *Isnād*-Analytical Methods Illustrated on the Basis of Several Woman-Demeaning Sayings from *Ḥadīth* Literature,” *Qantara* 10 (1989), 343–83. See also idem, “The Role of *Muʿammarūn* in the Early Development of the *Isnād*,” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 81 (1991), 155–75; idem, “Some Notes on Islam's First *Fuqahāʾ* Distilled from Early *Ḥadīth* Literature,” *Arabica* 39 (1992), 287–314; idem, “Early Islamic Society as Reflected in its Use of *Isnāds*,” *Le Muséon* 107 (1994), 151–94. These and several other articles have been republished in idem, *Studies on the Origins and Uses of Islamic Ḥadīth* (Brookfield, Vt., 1996).





transmission in an effort to increase the antiquity of a tradition, and unless excluded these rogue chains can lead to the identification of a false common link and a false date. Such a dense network of transmitters as well as direct precautions against “corrective” efforts within the tradition can establish a high degree of probability that a particular *ḥadīth* may be associated with an individual, to the effect that even Michael Cook has acknowledged such results are fairly convincing.²⁰ Motzki, however, has argued for removing some of Juynboll’s safeguards, seeing them as overly restrictive. In particular, he contends that the single strands excluded by Juynboll should be taken into account, enabling him to use such *isnāds* to establish a much earlier common link for certain traditions.²¹ Yet Motzki’s arguments in this instance are not persuasive, for reasons that Christopher Melchert especially makes clear,²² and it seems preferable that the more cautious principles set forth by Juynboll should remain in place. Given the widespread forgery of *ḥadīth* and the manipulation and potential spread of *isnāds*, this method is at its most persuasive when Juynboll’s criteria are met: otherwise, there is increasing room for doubt.

More recently, Motzki has proposed his own derivation of Schacht’s technique that he names “*isnād-cum-matn*” analysis. According to Motzki’s approach, in an authentic tradition one should expect to find a correlation between the patterns of transmission signaled by the *isnāds* and the different textual variants of that tradition (i.e., the different *matns*). That is, the different versions of the *matn* should correspond with specific lines of transmission identified using *isnād* criticism.²³ Motzki has

²⁰) This according to Juynboll, who reports in a footnote that Cook conceded this in a personal conversation: JUYNBOLL, “Some *Isnād*-Analytical Methods,” 356 n. 21.

²¹) Harald MOTZKI, “*Quo vadis, Ḥadīṭ*-Forschung?: Eine kritische Untersuchung von G. H. A. Juynboll: ‘Nāfi’, the *Mawlā* of Ibn ‘Umar, and His Position in Muslim *Ḥadīṭ* Literature’,” *Der Islam* 73 (1996), 40–80, esp. 49–54; idem, “*Quo vadis, Ḥadīṭ*-Forschung?: Eine kritische Untersuchung von G. H. A. Juynboll: ‘Nāfi’, the *Mawlā* of Ibn ‘Umar, and His Position in Muslim *Ḥadīṭ* Literature,’ Teil 2,” *Der Islam* 73 (1996), 193–231.

²²) Christopher MELCHERT, “The Early History of Islamic Law,” in *Method and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins*, ed. Herbert BERG (Leiden, 2003), 293–324, 303.

²³) This method has been most thoroughly applied in Harald MOTZKI, *The Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence: Meccan Fiqh before the Classical Schools*, Islamic History and Civilization, Studies and Texts 41 (Leiden, 2002). Motzki has applied this approach to the *ṣīra* tradition in an article discussed below, idem, “The Murder of Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq: On the Origin and Reliability of Some *Maghāzī* Reports,” in *The*





utilized this method with much success in various studies of the early Islamic tradition, including one focused on the *sīra* tradition (discussed below); yet while Motzki’s analysis persuasively locates a number of traditions in the early second century, his efforts to press beyond this barrier are considerably less convincing, as others have also noted.²⁴ By assuming that the common link signals a *terminus ante quem* – in opposition to other scholars who more cautiously look to this figure as a *terminus post quem* – Motzki often presses aggressively beyond the date of the common link, occasionally mounting rather speculative arguments with special pleading to push traditions earlier into the first century.²⁵ Such more conjectural conclusions are far less persuasive than Motzki’s detailed analysis of *isnāds* and traditions, through which he rather convincingly assigns a considerable amount of material to the beginning of the second century.

Schoeler and Görke have essentially adopted Motzki’s *isnād-cum-matn* method for their project, and although this approach has borne some success, one must ask if they, like Motzki, occasionally push the results too far, and moreover, how well this approach is suited to the considerably less dense *isnād* bundles yielded by the early *sīra* traditions. In all fairness it must be said that in combining the Paret/von Stülpnagel hypothesis with the tradition of *isnād* criticism, Schoeler and Görke have developed and deployed a very sophisticated method of analysis that represents perhaps the best effort thus far to identify early materials within the *sīra* traditions.²⁶ They have unquestionably reached some significant achievements in isolating several of the oldest Islamic traditions, but in their quest for “authenticity,” both scholars at times press the evidence beyond what it can bear. What follows will undertake an analysis of Schoeler and Görke’s proposed reconstruction of ʿUrwa’s *sīra*, examining each of the individual

Biography of Muhammad: The Issue of the Sources, ed. Harald MOTZKI (Leiden, 2000), 170–239. See also idem, “The *Muṣannaḥ* of ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī as a Source of Authentic *Aḥādīth* of the First Century A.H.,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 50 (1991), 1–21; idem, “The Collection of the Qurʾan: A Reconsideration of Western Views in Light of Recent Methodological Developments,” *Der Islam* 78 (2001), 1–34.

²⁴) E.g., MELCHERT, “Early History of Islamic Law,” 301–4; HOYLAND, “Writing the Biography of the Prophet,” 587.

²⁵) E.g., Harald MOTZKI, “Der Fiqh des al-Zuhri: die Quellenproblematik,” *Der Islam* 68 (1991), 1–44, esp. 38–42; idem, “The *Muṣannaḥ* of ʿAbd al-Razzāq”; idem, *Origins of Islamic Jurisprudence*. See also the various “ʿUrwa” traditions discussed below.

²⁶) Von Stülpnagel seems to have proposed, but did not carry through on, a rather similar endeavor: VON STÜLPNAGEL, “ʿUrwa Ibn az-Zubair,” 117.





traditions that they claim to have identified as authentic material from ʿUrwa, along with an additional study from Motzki that also aims to establish the authenticity of certain early *sīra* traditions.

According to Schoeler, “the traditions from ʿUrwah contain the entire basic framework of the life of Muḥammad,”²⁷ and in their most recent article, Görke and Schoeler present an outline of ʿUrwa’s *sīra*, which according to them included the following events:²⁸

- 1) The beginning of the revelation
- 2) The reaction of the Meccans – the emigration of some Muslims to Abyssinia – the meetings of al-ʿAqaba – the *hiġra* to Medina
- 3) The battle of Badr
- 4) The battle of Uḥud
- 5) The battle of the Ditch
- 6) The treaty of al-Ḥudaybiya
- 7) The slander about ʿĀʾiṣa
- 8) The conquest of Mecca

Of these traditions, the first and seventh have been treated at length in Schoeler’s monograph, the sixth in an article by Görke, and the second set of traditions is the focus of their most recent article:²⁹ the remaining traditions presumably await future investigation.³⁰ In addition, Motzki has



²⁷) SCHOELER, “Foundations for A New Biography,” 22.

²⁸) This list is quoted from GÖRKE and SCHOELER, “Reconstructing the Earliest *Sīra* Texts,” 213. Duri also provides a list of ʿUrwa traditions primarily from Ibn Hishām and al-Ṭabarī, but his presentation is not critical and simply assumes the authenticity of the material: Abd al-Aziz DURI, *The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs*, trans. Lawrence I. CONRAD, Modern Classics in Near Eastern Studies (Princeton, 1983), 79–89. One may additionally consult the catalog of traditions in VON STÜLPNAGEL, “ʿUrwa Ibn az-Zubair,” 37–53, as well as ʿUrwah ibn al-Zubayr, *Maghāzī Rasūl Allāh*, ed. M. M. Aʿzamī (Riyad, 1981), both of which rather uncritically assemble traditions in which ʿUrwa is identified as the source.

²⁹) Muḥammad’s arrival in Mecca is very briefly discussed by Schoeler in an article on the fragments Mūsā b. ʿUqba’s “*Maghāzī*,” although the evidence that he presents for attributing this tradition to ʿUrwa is not nearly as “certain” as he has proposed: Gregor SCHOELER, “Mūsā b. ʿUqbas *Maghāzī*,” in *The Biography of Muḥammad: The Issue of the Sources*, ed. Harald MOTZKI (Leiden, 2000), 67–97, 85–88 (Engl. summary 93–95).

³⁰) Unfortunately, Görke and Schoeler’s recent book on traditions ascribed to ʿUrwa appeared well after this article has already been accepted for publication. Nevertheless, with respect to the specific traditions treated in this article, the book adds nothing that would impinge on the arguments presented here. Moreover, with





published a study of reports concerning the murder of Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq, which, although not focused specifically on ʿUrwa, employs the same methodology as Schoeler and Görke in an effort to isolate “authentic” material from the *sīra*. These five traditions thus provide the primary material for evaluating this collective effort to recover a *sīra* from the first Islamic century composed by ʿUrwa or indeed by anyone else.

In contrast to the rather sanguine analysis of Görke and Schoeler, this study finds that while most of these traditions can be persuasively dated to the beginning of the second century, only very little material can be convincingly assigned to ʿUrwa himself. Its results thus largely affirm Chase Robinson’s conclusion that “in the present state of our knowledge, there is no reason to doubt that figures such as ʿUrwa ... took some interest in the past, circulating stories and (perhaps) even teaching about it. There is less reason to think they exercised any authority as authors (rather than storytellers), much less as recognizable historians.”³¹ Equally significant is the finding that in each instance where the *isnād-cum-matn* method of analysis appears to succeed in identifying early biographical traditions, the antiquity of these traditions can generally be determined even more definitively using traditional criteria of *matn* analysis. On the whole, this corpus of alleged ʿUrwa traditions does not hold forth much promise for future studies of *sīra* traditions that aim to recover early traditions on the basis of *isnāds* in the manner that von Stülpnagel, Görke, and Schoeler have proposed. For the moment, it would appear that *matn* criticism remains the most valuable tool for mining the early Islamic tradition to recover its oldest traditions.³²

regard to the four traditions additionally ascribed to the ʿUrwan “corpus” in their monograph (the battles of Badr, Uḥud, and the Trench, and the conquest of Mecca), each of these is even less persuasively assigned to ʿUrwa. Indeed, Görke and Schoeler both concede as much in the conclusion to their own study, judging the attribution to ʿUrwa more questionable in each case: Andreas GÖRKE and Gregor SCHOELER, *Die ältesten Berichte über das Leben Muhammads. Das Korpus ʿUrwa ibn Az-Zubair*, *Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* 24 (Princeton: Darwin Press, 2009), 256–7, 286. Thus, these traditions pose no challenge to the broader critique of this approach to the early *sīra* traditions made in this article, which could easily be extended to include these traditions.

³¹) Chase F. ROBINSON, *Islamic Historiography* (New York, 2002), 24.

³²) Pace Harald MOTZKI, “Dating Muslim Traditions: A Survey,” *Arabica* 52 (2005), 204–53, who nevertheless very helpfully describes the differences between *matn* based analysis and *isnād* based analysis, despite his criticisms of the former.





The Hijra Traditions

Görke and Schoeler's most recent article on 'Urwa's *sīra* provides a brief analysis of a large block of traditions attributed to 'Urwa that begins with the Meccans' response to Muḥammad's preaching and culminates with his *hijra*. Here they argue for the authenticity of these accounts, appealing, with von Stülpnagel, to 'Urwa's relationship with 'Ā'isha as validating the accuracy of their "general outline" (cf. Watt's "basic framework").³³ This analysis of the Hijra traditions is without a doubt the most ambitious of their recent attempts to assign elements of Muḥammad's biography to 'Urwa, inasmuch as this study seeks to authenticate not just a single tradition but an entire complex of traditions encompassing several major events from the traditional narrative of Islamic origins. According to Görke and Schoeler, this assemblage of traditions was originally a single, extended narrative composed by 'Urwa, beginning with the Meccans' opposition to Muḥammad's preaching, followed successively by the emigration of some early Muslims to Abyssinia (including the story of Abū Bakr and Ibn al-Dughunna), the spread of Islam in Mecca, the return of the refugees from Abyssinia, renewed hostility of the Meccans, the meetings of 'Aqaba, the departure of many Muslims for Medina, and concluding with Muḥammad's *hijra* to Medina in the company of Abū Bakr. It is perhaps unfortunate, however, that Görke and Schoeler have attempted to accomplish so much in this rather brief article, compressing their case for the material's authenticity into a mere five pages. The result is an argument that at times is potentially misleading, no doubt a consequence of its extremely dense presentation. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in the article's diagram of numerous *isnāds* that lead back to 'Urwa, presenting what would appear to be a fairly complex pattern of transmission for these traditions (see fig. 1). The schema seems to imply that the entire assemblage of traditions under consideration is transmitted with the full complement of *isnāds*, but in actuality no portion of this material is supported by all of the diagram's *isnāds*, and only Muḥammad's emigration with Abū Bakr to Medina comes close. The article unfortunately fails to explain this fact, leaving the distinct impression that each of these traditions is widely ascribed to 'Urwa across a wide range of tradents. Yet this is simply not the case.

³³) GÖRKE and SCHOELER, "Reconstructing the Earliest *Sīra* Texts," 219–20

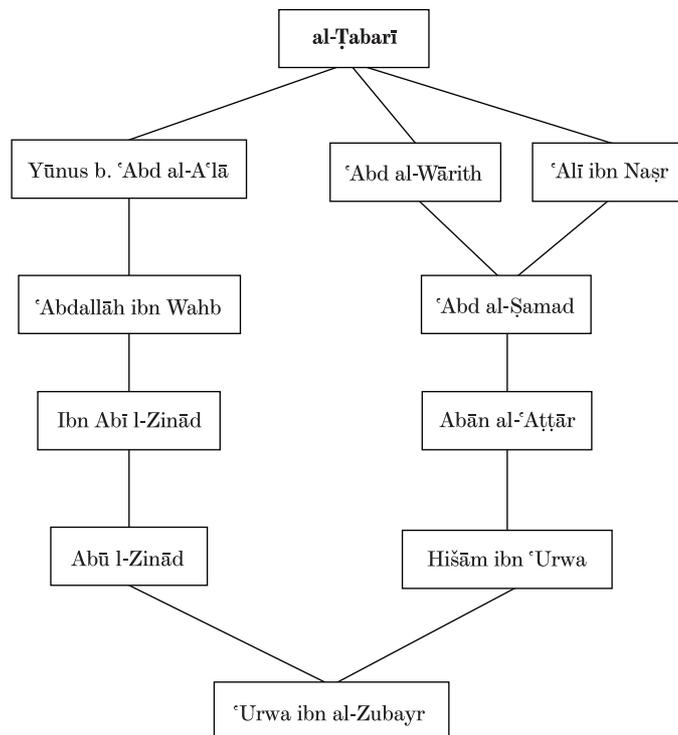




A. *The “Letters” of ‘Urwa: Meccan Persecution, Ethiopian Migration, and the Second Meeting in ‘Aqaba*

The majority of the material in question is in fact attributed to ‘Urwa by only a single authority, al-Ṭabarī, who over two centuries later assigns the bulk of these traditions to ‘Urwa in both his *History* and his *Tafsīr* (see fig. 2). In a rather lengthy narrative, transmitted in the guise of a “letter” written to one of the Umayyad caliphs, ‘Urwa is alleged to have recorded the key events from Islam’s earliest history in Mecca, at the court’s request. The narrative relates an initial persecution by the Meccans in response to Muḥammad’s preaching, a resulting emigration of some Muslims to Abyssinia, their return to Mecca, a second period of Meccan persecution, and Muḥammad’s meeting with Medinans in ‘Aqaba (the “second” meeting), concluding with an account of Muḥammad’s *hijra*. Yet with the exception of the *hijra*, which will be discussed separately below, all of these

Figure 2: The “Letters” of ‘Urwa: Meccan Persecution, Ethiopian Migration, and the Second Meeting in ‘Aqaba





traditions are ascribed to ʿUrwa by al-Ṭabarī alone, in the *History* with a single *isnād* through Hishām ibn ʿUrwa (ending with ʿAbd al-Wārith and ʿAlī ibn Naṣr), to which the *Tafsīr* also adds that he had heard something similar with a second line of transmission through Abū l-Zinād (ending with Yūnus b. ʿAbd al-Aʿlā).³⁴ Although this complex of traditions is sun-dered in the *History*, appearing as two separate blocks, the *Tafsīr* transmits them as a single narrative unit which al-Ṭabarī identifies as a letter sent by ʿUrwa either to the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik (according to the *isnād* through Hishām) or to his son al-Walīd (according to the *isnād* through Abū l-Zinād).³⁵ This discrepancy in the letter’s recipient is an important, if often overlooked, signal that these letters very well may not be what they purport, that is, genuine correspondence from ʿUrwa to one of the Umayyad caliphs.

For some uncertain reason, scholars of early Islam have long placed a high degree of confidence in the authenticity of this letter and its attribution, which perhaps explains why Görke and Schoeler are so quick to accept this material as genuinely originating from ʿUrwa without offering much argument. Yet the widespread acceptance of this letter comes despite the fact that it is witnessed by only a single source, al-Ṭabarī, who brings just two *isnāds* for support, and even these disagree as to exactly who was the alleged recipient of this “letter.” Rather surprisingly, the reasons underlying such conviction in the authenticity of this and other letters ascribed to ʿUrwa have never been clearly articulated, and the most thorough consideration of the issue to date can be found in von Stülpnagel’s brief (and unfortunately unpublished) discussion of the letter traditions.³⁶ Joseph Horowitz and – perhaps somewhat surprisingly – the skeptic Leone Caetani were among the earliest advocates of these letters, although both

³⁴) Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, ed. M. J. DE GOEJE, et al., 15 vols. (Leiden, 1879–1901), I, 1180–81, 1224–25; Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 12 vols. (Beirut, 1992), VI, 246–47. NB, the “first” meeting of ʿAqaba is not mentioned in ʿUrwa’s letter, although the article could be understood as stating that it is.

³⁵) The complete assemblage of traditions from both sources is best seen in VON STÜLPNAGEL, “ʿUrwa Ibn az-Zubair,” 61–65. Duri was apparently unaware of the evidence from the *Tafsīr*, as he argues for the possibility that the second set of traditions from the *History* was not a part of ʿUrwa’s “letter”: DURI, *Rise of Historical Writing*, 82.

³⁶) In Rudi PARET, “Recent European Research on the Life and Work of Prophet Muhammad,” *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society* 8 (1958), 81–96, 88, Paret expressed a hope that some of this dissertation would appear in *Der Islam*, which unfortunately never came to pass.





essentially assume rather than demonstrate their authenticity.³⁷ Caetani and Horovitz seem to believe that al-Ṭabarī transmits here an actual document, which may account for the extraordinary authority that they invest in these reports: this was after all an age when the reigning “prince of historians,” Leopold von Ranke, recommended that the historian should seek to “extinguish himself” before historical documents in order to learn “wie es eigentlich gewesen ist.”³⁸ Watt likewise believed in the existence of an actual document, writing of ʿUrwa’s letter that “Aṭ-Ṭabarī has preserved for us a copy of a written document of early date, which has every appearance of being genuine.”³⁹ Schoeler notes in his monograph that despite their extremely limited transmission, the authenticity of these letters is beyond dispute and that no critical scholars have ever raised any doubt concerning

³⁷) Josef HOROVITZ, *The Earliest Biographies of the Prophet and their Authors*, ed. Lawrence I. CONRAD, *Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* 11 (Princeton, N.J., 2002), 24–25; Leone CAETANI, *Annali dell’Islām*, 10 vols. (Milano, 1905–26), I, 267–69, 316–18.

³⁸) Elizabeth A. CLARK, *History, Theory, Text: Historians and the Linguistic Turn* (Cambridge, 2004), esp. 9–13. Rubin also notes the general influence of the nineteenth century’s “fetishism of documents” on the study of formative Islam: Uri RUBIN, *The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims: A Textual Analysis*, *Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* 5 (Princeton, 1995), 3. Regarding the strong influence of Ranke’s ideas specifically on early scholars of Islam, see Baber JOHANSEN, “Politics and Scholarship: The Development of Islamic Studies in the Federal Republic of Germany,” in *Middle East Studies: International Perspectives on the State of the Art*, ed. Tareq Y. ISMAEL (New York, 1990), 71–130, 79–83; and Robert IRWIN, “Oriental Discourses in Orientalism,” *Middle Eastern Lectures* 3 (1999), 87–110, esp. 104–5.

³⁹) WATT, *Muhammad at Mecca*, 100; see also 180–82. Duri likewise seems to believe that al-Ṭabarī transmits early documents, which he describes as “among the earliest and most trustworthy fragments to survive to modern times”: DURI, *Rise of Historical Writing*, 79. J. M. B. Jones estimates that ʿUrwa “certainly corresponded with the Umayyad caliph ʿAbd al-Malik on matters relating to the life of the Prophet”: JONES, “The *Maghāzī* Literature,” 345. Donner remarks that “we know, for example, that the caliph ʿAbd al-Malik had contact with one of the first figures to specialize in narratives about the Prophet’s life, ʿUrwa ibn al-Zubayr”: DONNER, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 166 (my emphasis). For similar views, see also PARET, *Mohammed und der Koran*, 102–3; Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*, 169; Josef VAN ESS, *Anfänge muslimischer Theologie: Zwei antiqadaritische Traktate aus dem ersten Jahrhundert der Hīgra*, *Beiruter Texte und Studien* 14 (Beirut/Wiesbaden, 1977), 26; RUBIN, *Eye of the Beholder*, 157, 258; idem, *Between Bible and Qurʾān: The Children of Israel and the Islamic Self-image*, *Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam* 17 (Princeton, 1999), 37.





their genuineness. In this sense, he continues, ʿUrwa's letters to ʿAbd al-Malik are comparable to the Constitution of Medina, which even skeptical scholars such as Patricia Crone will concede appears to be an early document, although attested by only two sources.⁴⁰

Astonishing as it may seem, Schoeler appears to be correct that no one has ever thought to question the authenticity of the letters of ʿUrwa.⁴¹ Nevertheless, his comparison with the Constitution of Medina, while perhaps rhetorically effective, seems far less justified. It is true that like the letters the Constitution of Medina is not widely attested, although it is generally recognized as an authentic document arising from the earliest Islamic community. Yet here the similarities end. For instance, the Constitution's attestation by two sources independently is extremely significant, and its existence in two recensions suggests that the tradition antedates Ibn Ishāq's *Sīra*, not to mention also the Constitution's transmission orally in a number of *ḥadīths*.⁴² If it were somehow possible to find a second recension of this tradition complex transmitted independently by another source as a letter of ʿUrwa, this could instill some limited confidence that we have here a historical narrative of some antiquity, although this fact alone would not secure ʿUrwa's actual authorship. Much more modestly, such evidence might enable us to identify the formation of this tradition complex sometime in the century prior to al-Ṭabarī's activity. Even in such circumstances, the letters would still lack the one thing that tugs the Constitution of Medina so forcefully toward the earliest strata of the Islamic tradition, namely, its arresting difference from the later formation of the Islamic tradition.

Schoeler's comparison overlooks this key difference between the content of the Constitution and the letters in relation to the established tradi-

⁴⁰) "Obwohl auch sie nur durch Weiterüberlieferung im Kollegbetrieb (insbesondere bei aṭ-Ṭabarī) erhalten sind, ist ihre Authentie auch von kritischen Gelehrten niemals bezweifelt worden; ebenso wenig wie die Echtheit der sog. Gemeindeordnung von Medina, die – wohlgemerkt – ebenfalls nur durch die Sammeltätigkeit zweier ʿulamāʾ (Ibn Ishāq und Abū ʿUбайд) erhalten ist." SCHOELER, *Charakter und Authentie*, 7–8. Schoeler discusses Crone's position on the Constitution of Medina at p. 8 n. 6 and p. 18. See also CRONE and COOK, *Hagarism*, 7–8, which Schoeler does not cite in this context.

⁴¹) Perhaps the only exceptions are COOK, *Early Muslim Dogma*, 60, 180 n. 72, 181 n. 95, who expresses some doubt, although Cook does not elaborate much on the issue, and Robinson, *Islamic Historiography*, 23–24, who also seems to doubt their authenticity. See also Alfred-Louis DE PRÉMARE, *Les fondations de l'islam: entre écriture et histoire*, L'Univers historique (Paris, 2002), 14–16.

⁴²) On the Constitution of Medina's oral transmission through *ḥadīth*, see CRONE, *Slaves on Horses*, 7.





tion. As Crone and Cook note, for example, what anchors the Constitution to a very early stage in the development of Islam is its “patently anomalous” character.⁴³ Or to quote from Watt, summarizing Wellhausen, “No later falsifier, writing under the Umayyads or ‘Abbāsids, would have included non-Muslims in the *ummah*, would have retained the articles against Quraysh, and would have given Muḥammad so insignificant a place.”⁴⁴ Moreover, such dissonance with the later tradition readily accounts for the Constitution’s rather limited attestation: it is easy to imagine later authorities censoring this document which contradicted so much of what they then “knew” to have been true about the beginnings of Islam. The Constitution’s preservation in only two early sources despite cutting against the grain of the tradition actually speaks strongly in favor of its antiquity. The same certainly cannot be said for ‘Urwa’s letters, which in no way run counter to the established tradition. While the Constitution’s weak attestation is easily explained by its anomalies, it is not so obvious how to account for the survival of this and other letters from ‘Urwa to ‘Abd al-Malik only in al-Ṭabarī’s writings. If in fact ‘Urwa wrote these letters to the Caliph, it is difficult to comprehend the failure of any other early sources to preserve them: surely these would have been highly prized narratives, known to Ibn Ishāq and others from al-Zuhri, yet all of these early authorities ignore them. Moreover, these accounts of Muḥammad’s early career transmitted as letters of ‘Urwa comport thoroughly with later Sunni orthodoxies, inviting the very real possibility that they are not in fact ‘Urwa’s compositions, but the work of later compilers or even a single individual who stitched together several discrete traditions, giving these larger narratives the framework of correspondence between ‘Urwa and ‘Abd al-Malik. Indeed, as will be seen below, invented letters constitute a frequent literary device of the Islamic historical tradition, inherited from the historians of Mediterranean antiquity. Consequently, it is long past time to raise in earnest the question of whether ‘Urwa’s letters to ‘Abd

⁴³) CRONE and COOK, *Hagarism*, 7–8.

⁴⁴) WATT, *Muhammad at Medina*, 225. See also Julius WELLHAUSEN, “Muhammads Gemeindeordnung von Medina,” in *Skizzen und Vorarbeiten*, 6 vols. (Berlin, 1884–99), IV, 65–83, 80; CAETANI, *Annali dell’Islām*, I, 402–3; and R. Stephen HUMPHREYS, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry* (Princeton, 1991), 92–98. Rubin has recently expressed some doubts about the “authenticity” of the Constitution; nevertheless, his conclusion that it reflects a very early conceptualization of Islamic identity in the context of the Near Eastern conquests marks its inter-confessional program as especially early: RUBIN, *Between Bible and Qur’ān*, 48–49.





al-Malik are in fact genuine, a matter which, despite widespread assent, hardly seems beyond doubt.

As von Stülpnagel correctly observes, it is almost certain that al-Ṭabarī did not have before him an actual document preserving a letter attributed to ʿUrwa. Differences in the accounts from the *History* and the *Tafsīr* seem to preclude the use of a written document, and al-Ṭabarī’s delineation of the *isnāds* whereby the traditions allegedly had reached him from ʿUrwa further indicates that he knew these traditions only by word of mouth.⁴⁵ In his analysis of the differences between the two accounts, von Stülpnagel concludes that al-Ṭabarī first composed the *Tafsīr*’s version of these events on the basis of ʿAbd al-Wārith’s report; by the time he came to relate the same events in his *History*, he had heard a second account of the letter from ʿAlī ibn Naṣr, and the *History*’s differences from the *Tafsīr* reflect his efforts to blend these two versions.⁴⁶ Nevertheless, this hypothesis rather strangely overlooks the fact that in the *Tafsīr* al-Ṭabarī identifies a second version of these events, in a “letter” having a different addressee, transmitted through an entirely separate chain of tradents, a piece of information oddly absent from the *History*. This difference could certainly suggest that al-Ṭabarī composed the *Tafsīr*’s version only after discovering a second report unknown to him when he wrote this section of the *History*. Von Stülpnagel’s failure to consider this possibility is symptomatic of his (and other scholars’) complete neglect of the alternative path of transmission through Abū l-Zinād and its naming of al-Walīd as the letter’s re-

⁴⁵) VON STÜLPNAGEL, “Urwa Ibn az-Zubair,” 106–7: “Wenn Ṭabarī ursprünglich die Briefe schriftlich vorgelegen hätten, wäre die Angabe eines Isnād vielleicht doch nicht möglich oder notwendig gewesen. Man muß deshalb annehmen, daß sie ihm nur mündlich vorgetragen worden sind.” The different addressees signaled by the two *isnāds* of the *Tafsīr* also are surely evidence that al-Ṭabarī was not looking at a document. Görke and Schoeler also note at one point that al-Ṭabarī “heard” this tradition: GÖRKE and SCHOELER, “Reconstructing the Earliest *Sīra* Texts,” 215. Von Stülpnagel provides a composite translation of the two versions, although given the nature of his presentation, it can be somewhat difficult to appreciate the differences between these two versions: VON STÜLPNAGEL, “Urwa Ibn az-Zubair,” 62–65. Nevertheless, Rubin has translated the passage from the *Tafsīr* into English, and comparison with the translated passage from the *History* shows clearly even in translation that the differences between the two versions preclude the possibility of an actual document: RUBIN, *Eye of the Beholder*, 157; cf. Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *The History of al-Ṭabarī: Volume VI, Muḥammad at Mecca*, trans. W. Montgomery WATT and M. V. McDONALD, SUNY Series in Near Eastern Studies (Albany, N.Y., 1988), 98–99, 136.

⁴⁶) VON STÜLPNAGEL, “Urwa Ibn az-Zubair,” 107.





ipient: he repeatedly identifies this material as also belonging to ʿUrwa’s letter to ʿAbd al-Malik without ever addressing the complicated issues raised by the *Tafsīr*’s second *isnād*.⁴⁷ In any case, one must somehow account for the fact that al-Ṭabarī has either suppressed ʿAlī ibn Naṣr’s transmission in the *Tafsīr* or the *isnād* through Abū l-Zinād with its address to al-Walīd in the *History*, and admittedly it is not particularly clear why al-Ṭabarī would have opted for either action.

When placed under a modicum of scrutiny, however, al-Ṭabarī’s transmission of this alleged letter from ʿUrwa does not seem worthy of the unquestioned confidence with which previous scholarship has invested it. Ultimately these two accounts constitute a *ḥadīth* which, like so many other traditions, was first recorded only rather late and by a single source, leaving no possibility of common-link analysis, whereby one could establish some level of probability that it circulated at an earlier date. Given these circumstances, there is really no justification for investing these traditions or their *isnāds* with any more authority than would be given to other similar *ḥadīth*. Simply because al-Ṭabarī reports that he (and apparently he alone) heard that ʿUrwa once wrote a letter to one of the Umayyad caliphs on these topics is no cause to leap to the conclusion that these are *ipsissima verba* from ʿUrwa’s pen (or lips for that matter). In fact, several factors would appear to invite suspicion – rather than affirmation – of these traditions.

Firstly there is the issue of the *isnāds* themselves, which are somewhat problematic on their own terms. Although scholarship widely identifies this “letter” as addressed to ʿAbd al-Malik, such discussions essentially continue von Stülpnagel’s suppression of al-Ṭabarī’s second *isnād* in the *Tafsīr*, which says that ʿUrwa’s letter was addressed to al-Walīd. The question of whether ʿUrwa wrote a letter to ʿAbd al-Malik or al-Walīd is essen-

⁴⁷) This neglect of the second chain of authorities from the *Tafsīr* and its identification of al-Walīd as the letter’s recipient continues to the present. Presumably, the persistent identification of this letter as addressed to ʿAbd al-Malik results from the fact that Horovitz and Caetani appear to have been unaware of the second *isnād* from the *Tafsīr*, and thus their early work on the correspondence with “ʿAbd al-Malik” solidified this idea. Duri also overlooks the evidence from the *Tafsīr*. Von Stülpnagel and those following him knew of the *Tafsīr*’s report but still have continued to treat these traditions as if addressed to ʿAbd al-Malik, presumably as a result of the early momentum in this direction established by Horovitz and Caetani. Nevertheless, in light of different reports cited by al-Ṭabarī we should be more careful about identifying the letter’s alleged recipient, particularly since this difference could alert us to potential problems with the reliability of these traditions and their transmission.





tially moot, inasmuch as the existence of any such letter itself seems doubtful. More important is the disagreement between al-Ṭabarī’s two sources: if they differed on such a basic point as the letter’s addressee, how can one take any confidence that other aspects of this very weakly attested *ḥadīth* are reliable? As Michael Cook has noted in his study of early Islamic religious epistles, a letter that is transmitted with divergent *praescriptiones* is a prime suspect for forgery.⁴⁸ Moreover, the contents of the second account that al-Ṭabarī heard from Yūnus b. ʿAbd al-Aʿlā are unknown, other than that he considered them similar to ʿAbd al-Wārith’s version – at least when he was composing his *Tafsīr*! This problem raises a larger point that is well addressed by Görke in a separate article, namely, the issue of combined *isnāds*: when a source brings a *ḥadīth* with multiple chains of transmission in this way, it is simply not possible, as Görke himself concludes, to know if the traditions were in fact identical or merely similar in some vague sense.⁴⁹ The divergence in these two reports concerning the letter’s recipient along with the absence of the second *isnād* from al-Ṭabarī’s *History* certainly invites suspicion that there were some significant differences between the two accounts. Likewise, von Stülpnagel regarded such “double *isnāds*” with suspicion, suggesting that a collector would often give two chains of traditions when he had doubts about a particular tradition or the reliability of its transmitters, hoping to secure more questionable *ḥadīth* with multiple transmissions.⁵⁰ Perhaps similar concerns lie behind al-Ṭabarī’s addition of the second *isnād* through Yūnus b. ʿAbd al-Aʿlā in the *Tafsīr* or his naming of ʿAlī ibn Naṣr as a second source of the tradition that he heard from ʿAbd al-Wārith in the *History*: one possible explanation is that these inconsistencies reflect two different strategies for shoring up a tradition that al-Ṭabarī himself thought had a weak transmission history.

Furthermore, the framing of these traditions as a letter invites suspicion since, as Albrecht Noth has demonstrated, letters constitute one of the main “formal elements” of the early Islamic historical tradition. Generally such letters are not historical documents but a literary form designed to suit various purposes within the broader historical narrative in which they appear. Indeed, the use of invented letters or epistolary exchanges was a standard convention of the classical historiographical tradition that had been practiced for over a millennium before the rise of Islam, and it is no surprise to find that the Islamic historical tradition is replete with such

⁴⁸) COOK, *Early Muslim Dogma*, 52–53.

⁴⁹) GÖRKE, “Eschatology, History, and the Common Link,” 198.

⁵⁰) VON STÜLPNAGEL, “ʿUrwa Ibn az-Zubair,” 120.





letters. The early Islamic histories are so suffused with forged epistles that, as Noth concludes, “our first task ... would not be to determine whether or not such letters are literary fictions, but rather whether or not they are original documents ... But if we wish to use the testimony of the transmitted letters, then we must begin with the assumption that they are not ‘authentic.’”⁵¹ So far, this approach has not been adopted in dealing with ‘Urwa’s letters; to the contrary, their authenticity has widely been taken for granted. But if we apply this critical standard to the complex of traditions from al-Ṭabarī’s writings, there seems to be little reason for upholding their authenticity as genuine letters of ‘Urwa, as has been the case to this point. Indeed, as Michael Cook has observed, ‘Abd al-Malik is a favored recipient of forged epistles in the Islamic tradition, to the effect that “the epistle to ‘Abd al-Malik is almost a sub-genre itself.”⁵²

Al-Ṭabarī transmits other traditions in the guise of letters written by ‘Urwa in his *Tafsīr* and *History*, where several additional “epistles” from ‘Urwa to ‘Abd al-Malik appear, most having the same *isnād* as the *hijra* complex. These “letters” describe Muḥammad’s *hijra* to Medina, the battle of Badr, the conquest of Mecca, the battle of Ḥunain, the battle of Ṭā’if, the separation from Khuwaila, the slander of ‘Ā’isha, the declaration of Ḥums, and the death of Khadija.⁵³ The *History*’s accounts of the battles of Ḥunain and Ṭā’if and the *hijra* are not actually presented as letters, but von Stülpnagel identifies them as such since they bear the same *isnād* that al-Ṭabarī elsewhere assigns to ‘Urwa’s letters.⁵⁴ Yet excepting only the *hijra* tradition, about which more will be said below, none of these “letters” is adduced by any other early Islamic source, nor is their content otherwise

⁵¹) NOTH and CONRAD, *Early Arabic Historical Tradition*, 76–87, esp. 84–85; expressed earlier in Albrecht NOTH, *Quellenkritische Studien zu Themen, Formen und Tendenzen frühislamischer Geschichtsüberlieferung*, Bonner orientalistische Studien, neue Serie 25 (Bonn, 1973), 71–80. See also COOK, *Early Muslim Dogma*, 51–52. Cf. WATT, “Reliability of Ibn-Ishaq’s Sources,” 32.

⁵²) COOK, *Early Muslim Dogma*, 60. See also Suleiman Mourad’s recently published study of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, where he concludes that the letters ascribed to al-Ḥasan are later forgeries, including in particular a letter addressed to ‘Abd al-Malik: Suleiman Ali MOURAD, *Early Islam between Myth and History: Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d. 110H/728CE) and the Formation of His legacy in Classical Islamic Scholarship*, *Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science* 62 (Leiden, 2006), 121–58, 176–239.

⁵³) al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, I, 1284–88, 1633–36, 1654–55, 1669–70, 1770; Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jam’ī al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, 30 vols. (Cairo, 1902–3), II, 162, vol. XVIII, 15–19, vol. XXVIII, 4–5.

⁵⁴) VON STÜLPNAGEL, “‘Urwa Ibn az-Zubair,” 108–9.





ascribed to ʿUrwa, leaving al-Ṭabarī as the lone writer who transmits these alleged letters of ʿUrwa from ʿAbd al-Wārith (and sometimes ʿAlī ibn Naṣr or Yūnus b. ʿAbd al-Aʿlā).⁵⁵ Such limited attestation does not speak very strongly for the authenticity of this material, and like the letter considered in Görke and Schoeler’s article, other epistles ascribed to ʿUrwa reporting events after the *hijra* may have been composed at any time between the lifetimes of ʿUrwa and al-Ṭabarī’s source.

Nevertheless, al-Ṭabarī also reports two additional letters of ʿUrwa from rather different authorities, and these both have a somewhat limited attestation outside of his writings. Firstly, in the *History* al-Ṭabarī relates a brief letter from ʿUrwa to ʿAbd al-Malik concerning the “separation from Qutailla” bearing a different, and rather short, *isnād*: ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Abī al-Zinād < Hishām ibn ʿUrwa < ʿUrwa.⁵⁶ The same “letter” clarifying Muḥammad’s relationship with Qutailla is also recorded by Ibn Saʿd, who in his *Ṭabaqāt* gives a similar *isnād* modified only by the insertion of his teacher al-Wāqidī: Muḥammad b. ʿUmar < ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Abī al-Zinād < Hishām ibn ʿUrwa < ʿUrwa.⁵⁷ Ibn Saʿd’s awareness of this “letter” would appear to confirm that the tradition may actually go back to ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Abī al-Zinād, al-Ṭabarī’s alleged source, although perhaps al-Ṭabarī himself knew of this tradition from either al-Wāqidī or Ibn Saʿd, in view of his rather abbreviated *isnād*. In any case, such meager evidence hardly can link this material definitively with ʿUrwa.

Perhaps somewhat more significant is the letter of ʿUrwa on the “women’s *hijra*” that al-Ṭabarī records in his *Tafsīr* on the authority of Ibn Ḥumaid < Salama < Muḥammad b. Ishāq < al-Zuhrī.⁵⁸ Allegedly addressed to Ibn Abī Hunaid, a friend of the caliph al-Walīd, this letter responds to Ibn Abī Hunaid’s questions about *sūra* 60.10, clarifying the status of women from Quraysh who became Muslims without their guardians’ permission. The same letter is also attested from Ibn Ishāq < al-Zuhrī in Ibn Hishām’s *Sīra*, as well as in al-Wāqidī’s *Maghāzī*, from Muḥammad b. ʿAbdallāh < al-Zuhrī, and in Ibn Saʿd’s *Ṭabaqāt*, who transmits the tradi-

⁵⁵) A very brief précis of the *hijra* is transmitted as a letter from ʿUrwa to ʿAbd al-Malik in Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, 6 vols. (Beirut, 1969), VI, 212. This tradition will be considered separately and in more detail below in the discussion of the *hijra* traditions circulated in ʿUrwa’s name.

⁵⁶) al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, III, 2458

⁵⁷) Muḥammad Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt [Biographien Muhammeds, seiner Gefährten und der späteren Träger des Islams, bis zum Jahre 230 der Flucht]*, ed. E. Sachau, 9 vols. (Leiden, 1904–28), VIII, 103

⁵⁸) al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, XXVIII, 42.





tion from al-Wāqidī with the same *isnād*.⁵⁹ Despite these rather limited lines of transmission, it seems plausible that this tradition goes back to al-Zuhrī, who placed this clarification of the Qurʾān into circulation as a letter from ʿUrwa to an associate of al-Walīd (not, however, to either ʿAbd al-Malik or al-Walīd himself). In contrast then to the many other ʿUrwan epistles transmitted by al-Ṭabarī, we have here a piece of Qurʾānic exegesis in the form of a letter from ʿUrwa that can possibly be dated to the beginning of the second Islamic century. That is not to say that the tradition transmits an actual piece of correspondence from ʿUrwa: it is certainly possible that al-Zuhrī himself may have invented the epistolary framework, and while the attribution to ʿUrwa cannot be excluded, it is not at all certain. What is important, however, is that this *ḥadīth* affirms the existence of an early tradition ascribing a letter to ʿUrwa, which very well may have made him a target for the attribution of other “letters” by the later tradition. That is, if ʿUrwa had an early reputation as someone who had once written to court officials on a topic related to Muḥammad’s career, it is easy to imagine that other materials would have found their way to him, particularly in the letter format that was so favored by the early Islamic historians: parallels from formative Christianity abound, for instance.⁶⁰

Moreover, one wonders if perhaps this correspondence between ʿUrwa and ʿAbd al-Malik was invented partly to “rehabilitate” ʿUrwa’s reputation in the eyes of later tradition by associating him with this caliph, rather than his own brother, ʿAbd Allah ibn Zubayr, who was ʿAbd al-Malik’s main political rival. According to the prevailing narrative, Ibn Zubayr rebelled against ʿAbd al-Malik during the second civil war by claiming the caliphate for himself. Yet as Chase Robinson has recently argued, it would seem that during the period from 683 to 692 Ibn Zubayr actually possessed the most widely recognized claim to the caliphate. Accordingly, ʿAbd al-Malik, whose authority was originally limited to Syria and a relatively small circle of Umayyad family members, should instead be viewed as a rebel against

⁵⁹) ʿAbd al-Malik Ibn Hishām, *Kitāb sīrat Rasūl Allāh [Das leben Muhammed’s nach Muhammed ibn Ishāk bearbeitet von Abd el-Malik ibn Hishām]*, ed. Ferdinand WÜSTENFELD, 2 vols. (Göttingen, 1858–60), I, 754–55; Muḥammad ibn ʿUmar al-Wāqidī, *Kitāb al-maghāzī lil-Wāqidī*, ed. Marsden JONES, 3 vols. (London, 1966), II, 631–33; Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt*, VIII, 6–7.

⁶⁰) E.g., the various forged letters falsely ascribed to Paul, Ignatius of Antioch, or Clement of Rome. See also WANSBROUGH, *Sectarian Milieu*, 125–26, who draws similar comparisons between formative Christianity and formative Islam, citing the seminal work of Walter BAUER, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, trans. Robert A. KRAFT and Gerhard KRODEL (Philadelphia, 1971).





the caliphate of Ibn Zubayr, albeit one who was ultimately successful in challenging the latter’s reign.⁶¹ In any case, ʿAbd Allah ibn Zubayr’s authority over the Hijāz in this period is generally acknowledged, and one would imagine that his brother ʿUrwa, a resident of Medina, supported his brother’s political cause rather than that of the pretender ʿAbd al-Malik, an alignment that is indicated by a number of traditions. Nevertheless other traditions underscore ʿUrwa’s loyalty to ʿAbd al-Malik after his brother’s defeat, and it seems quite possible that this correspondence may be part of the later Islamic tradition’s campaign to establish a sort of harmony between the Zubayrids and the Marwanids through ʿUrwa. While von Stülpnagel suggests that ʿUrwa wrote these letters only somewhat reluctantly, at ʿAbd al-Malik’s behest, it may be instead that later tradition has attempted to broker a symbolic truce between the two main factions of the second civil war by inventing an active correspondence between ʿAbd al-Malik and his main opponent’s brother, ʿUrwa ibn Zubayr.⁶² This possibility gives further reason to suspect the authenticity of ʿUrwa’s letters to ʿAbd al-Malik (or al-Walid), which may have been invented at least in part to serve this broader purpose.

Given the propensity for forged letters in the Islamic and Western historiographic traditions, it is hard to place much confidence in the authenticity of ʿUrwa’s other “letters” based on the rather slim evidence of al-Ṭabarī. The divergent addressees of these “letters” could also suggest that their epistolary format is a secondary element, and the eventual identification of a caliph, rather than merely an associate, as the recipient may reflect an interest in heightening the “official” nature of the imagined correspondence. Moreover, it is certainly telling that other early authorities, such as Ibn Ishāq, fail to include these “letters,” transmitting their accounts of these events from different sources. Although an argument from silence can only ever have a somewhat limited force, it is rather peculiar that Ibn Ishāq’s *Sīra* and other early biographical sources show no awareness of these “letters,” and if they were authentic it is difficult to imagine that no historian of early Islam before (or even after) al-Ṭabarī made recourse to what would have been unusually important documents. Thus, it would appear that the “letters” of ʿUrwa are not entirely worthy of the firm confidence that has been invested

⁶¹) Chase F. ROBINSON, *ʿAbd al-Malik*, Makers of the Muslim World (Oxford, 2005), 31–48.

⁶²) See HOROVITZ, *Earliest Biographies of the Prophet*, 16–20. Von Stülpnagel presents ʿUrwa essentially as an impartial scholar who remained above the political struggles of his day: VON STÜLPNAGEL, “ʿUrwa Ibn az-Zubair,” 7–20, esp. 7, 18. Nevertheless, such a portrait seems historically somewhat dubious.





in their authenticity. With the exception of the letter on the women's *hijra*, there is little evidence for either the antiquity or "authenticity" of the traditions in question. Ultimately, these traditions are *ḥadīths* witnessed by only a single source, and consequently, their worth should be measured in the same manner as other such *ḥadīths* – with a healthy dose of skepticism.

B. The Story of Abū Bakr and Ibn al-Dughunna

According to Görke and Schoeler, the narrative of Ibn al-Dughunna's patronage of Abū Bakr also belongs to this complex of "authentic" ʿUrwa material. In this tradition, Abū Bakr flees Mecca in the face of persecution, and during his flight he encounters a certain Ibn al-Dughunna, who persuades him to return to Mecca under his patronage and protection. Abū Bakr agrees, but when he subsequently refuses to adhere to the terms brokered by Ibn al-Dughunna, he quickly loses the latter's protection. Then in some versions (but not all), Muḥammad follows with the announcement that his followers should migrate to Medina, ordering Abū Bakr to remain behind with him in Mecca.⁶³ Although the Ibn al-Dughunna tradition enjoyed a slightly broader circulation than ʿUrwa's "letters," from which its transmission is separate, this story also is not particularly well attested, and ultimately its transmission history cannot secure the tradition to ʿUrwa's authority in the way that Görke and Schoeler maintain. Likewise, while Görke and Schoeler assert that this story relates Abū Bakr's flight to Ethiopia along with the first migration (*hijra*) described in ʿUrwa's "letter," allowing them to merge the two traditions, it does not appear that such a connection can be sustained from the accounts themselves.

Only a handful of sources actually transmit a version of this tradition, often with considerable differences, and its absence from some of the most important early biographical collections raises significant questions about its origins. For instance, al-Ṭabarī for whatever reason does not record this tradition: perhaps it was unknown to him, or perhaps he did not find it worthy of reporting. Likewise, al-Wāqidi and his disciple Ibn Saʿd

⁶³) Of the traditions ascribed to ʿUrwa through his son Hishām, only al-Ṭabarī's "letter" to ʿAbd al-Malik includes Muḥammad's announcement of the *hijra* and his command that Abū Bakr remain behind with him in Mecca. The other *hijra* traditions ascribed to Hishām lack these elements. Consequently, it is not possible to link these traditions convincingly with ʿUrwa. Nevertheless, the various *hijra* traditions discussed below do seem to presume that Muḥammad's followers had indeed already left Mecca while Abū Bakr and some others remained behind with Muḥammad.





do not relate the episode. Of the main early sources for the life of Muḥammad, only Ibn Hishām brings this tradition, naming as his source Ibn Ishāq (< al-Zuhrī < ʿUrwa < ʿĀ'isha).⁶⁴ Inasmuch as both al-Ṭabarī and al-Wāqidī had access to Ibn Ishāq's *Sīra* through different lines of transmission, the absence of this story from their narratives is rather puzzling.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, the significance of its exclusion is not entirely clear: did al-Ṭabarī and al-Wāqidī (or their sources) simply decide to omit the episode, or is it possible that Ibn Hishām added the tradition during his revision of Ibn Ishāq's *Sīra*, perhaps citing its attribution to al-Zuhrī from another source? The failure of these and other sources to associate this tradition with Ibn Ishāq leaves some doubt regarding the authenticity of Ibn Hishām's attribution, and it is certainly not out of the question that he himself invented the *isnād* through Ibn Ishāq.

Aside from Ibn Hishām's *Sīra*, only three other sources relate this story: the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Bukhārī, Bayhaqī's *Dalā'il al-nubuwwa*, and, perhaps most importantly, ʿAbd al-Razzāq's *Muṣannaf*.⁶⁶ Bukhārī and Bayhaqī present very similar accounts, both given on the authority of al-Layth < ʿUqayl < al-Zuhrī < ʿUrwa as transmitted by Yaḥyā ibn Bukayr (Bukhārī) or Ibn Ṣāliḥ (Bayhaqī).⁶⁷ In contrast to Ibn Hishām's account, however, Bukhārī and Bayhaqī's version of the episode identifies Ethiopia as Abū Bakr's intended destination, seeming to suggest a connection with the tradition of a larger emigration to Ethiopia, the so-called "first *hijra*" that was triggered by early persecutions. Abū Bakr does not get very far, however, before he encounters Ibn al-Dughunna at a place called Bark al-Ghimād, from which

⁶⁴) Ibn Hishām, *Kitāb sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, I, 245–46.

⁶⁵) On al-Wāqidī's knowledge and use of Ibn Ishāq, see HOROVITZ, *Earliest Biographies of the Prophet*, 114–15, esp. n. 111, where Conrad notes various opinions as to the precise nature of al-Wāqidī's use of Ibn Ishāq.

⁶⁶) Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi' al-ṣaḥīḥ [Le Recueil des traditions mahométanes par Abou Abdallah Mohammed ibn Isma'īl el-Bokhāri]*, ed. M. Ludolf KREHL and Th. W. JUYNBOLL, 4 vols. (Leiden, 1862–1908), II, 58–60 & III, 36–37 (Kitāb al-Kafāla, bāb 4, ḥadīth 1, and Kitāb manāqib al-Anṣār, bāb 45, ḥadīth 9); Engl. trans. in Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih al-Bukhari Arabic-English*, ed. Muhammad Muhsin KHAN, 9 vols. (Al Nabawiya, 1976), III, 277–80 and V, 158–60. Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥusayn Bayhaqī, *Dalā'il al-nubuwwah wa-mā'rifat aḥwāl ṣāḥib al-sharī'ah*, ed. ʿAbd al-Mu'ṭī Qal'ajī, 7 vols. (Beirut, 1985), II, 471–73. ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ṣanʿānī, *al-Muṣannaf*, ed. Ḥabiburrahmān A'zamī, 11 vols. (Beirut, 1983), V, 385–87.

⁶⁷) Note that Bayhaqī used Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ* as a source when compiling his collection, and so he may not in fact report from al-Layth independently of him: see e.g. Bayhaqī, *Dalā'il al-nubuwwah*, II, 475.





point the story continues more or less according to Ibn Hishām's account. Yet while Ibn Hishām similarly identifies persecution as the precipitating factor behind Abū Bakr's departure, his account does not seem at all compatible with the destination announced by Bukhārī and Bayhaqī. Ibn Hishām reports that after first securing Muḥammad's permission Abū Bakr set out from Mecca for an indiscriminate location, meeting up with Ibn al-Dughunna after only a day or two's journey, presumably not very far from Mecca. More importantly, in Ibn Hishām's version, it seems highly improbable that Abū Bakr's goal could have been Ethiopia, inasmuch as Ibn Hishām has already related the return of the Muslims who had fled to Ethiopia just prior to the story of Abū Bakr and Ibn al-Dughunna. According to Ibn Hishām's chronology, the emigration of some early Muslims from Mecca to Ethiopia not only had already taken place but had come to an end before Abū Bakr's meeting with Ibn al-Dughunna.

Moreover, despite the clear indication of Ethiopia as Abū Bakr's intended destination in Bukhārī and Bayhaqī's account, a connection between Abū Bakr's personal flight and the tradition of a first "*hijra*" to Ethiopia in these collections is also dubious. Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ*, for instance, lacks a narration of the emigration to Ethiopia, although a handful of traditions otherwise refer to two migrations or to the presence of Muslims in Ethiopia, perhaps suggesting his knowledge of this tradition.⁶⁸ Yet Bukhārī's collection fails to explain either how or when these Muslims reached Ethiopia, and despite what could seem to be implied in his version of the Ibn al-Dughunna story, there is no indication that Abū Bakr's effort to flee from Mecca to Ethiopia occurred within the context of this broader movement of people. In fact, judging from the narrative sequence in both Bukhārī and Bayhaqī, it does not seem possible to link Abū Bakr's flight with this early exodus to Ethiopia: as presented in both collections, the Ibn al-Dughunna episode took place just prior to Muḥammad's announcement of the migration to Medina, at which point both sources describe the relocation of those Muslims who had previously fled to Ethiopia directly to Medina (apparently without returning first to Mecca). With such a compressed timeline, it is difficult to imagine Abū Bakr's flight as somehow coincident with a migration to Ethiopia, at least as it is presented by Bukhārī and Bayhaqī. Neither source, in any case, provides convincing evidence for postulating such a link.

⁶⁸ E.g., al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmi' al-ṣaḥīḥ*, I, 119 (Kitāb al-Ṣalāh, bāb 48, ḥadīth 1); II, 284–85 (Kitāb Farḍ al-khumus, bāb 15, ḥadīth 5); II, 429–30 (Kitāb Faḍā'il al-ṣaḥāba, bāb 7, ḥadīth 2). See also al-Bukhārī, *Translation*, I, 251, IV, 237–38, V, 32–33.





Consequently, Görke and Schoeler’s claim that this version of the Ibn al-Dughunna story, as ascribed to ʿUrwa through al-Zuhrī, relates Abū Bakr’s flight within the context of a broader emigration of Muḥammad’s followers to Ethiopia is perhaps a little misleading.⁶⁹ Ibn Hishām says absolutely nothing about Ethiopia in connection with the Ibn al-Dughunna incident, and in all three accounts it would appear that Abū Bakr set out alone sometime well after the migration to Ethiopia and just shortly before the emigration to Medina. Although a connection between this tradition and the migration to Ethiopia would certainly be helpful for Görke and Schoeler’s broader thesis by establishing a link between this material and ʿUrwa’s letters, their assertion simply is not well supported by the evidence. Moreover, in a separate account of Muḥammad’s *hijra*, al-Bukhārī reports a tradition from Ibrāhīm b. Musa < Hishām < Maʿmar < al-Zuhrī < ʿUrwa that just four months prior to the *hijra* Abū Bakr wanted to join the other Muslims in Ethiopia but was told by the prophet to wait with him in Mecca.⁷⁰ Although Görke and Schoeler somewhat speciously reference this passage as confirming ʿUrwa’s authorship of the Ibn al-Dughunna tradition, clearly ʿUrwa cannot have taught both that Abū Bakr set out for Ethiopia shortly before the *hijra* and that he followed Muḥammad’s orders and remained in Mecca instead.⁷¹ Far from affirming either the tradition’s attribution to ʿUrwa or its connection with the migration to Ethiopia, this misappropriated *ḥadīth* seems instead to belie both notions.

On the whole then, the story of Ibn al-Dughunna’s patronage does not appear to be linked with the “first *hijra*” to Ethiopia, as Görke and Schoeler propose. If anything, the accounts preserved by Bukhārī and Bayhaqī might suggest instead a close connection between Abū Bakr’s “flight” and the “second” *hijra* to Medina, inasmuch as Muḥammad’s announcement of the migration to Yathrib follows immediately after Ibn al-Dughunna’s abandonment of Abū Bakr. Nevertheless, Ibn Hishām’s version of the (second) *hijra* fails to establish any linkage between this event and Ibn al-Dughunna, and he postpones Muḥammad’s announcement of the migration to Medina until considerably later in his biography, when he reports the incident, as al-Ṭabarī, without an *isnād*. Thus, the witness of Ibn Hishām’s *Sīra* should chasten any thoughts that a connection between Ibn al-Dughunna and the *hijra* to Medina, let alone to Ethiopia, can be traced back to ʿUrwa, or even al-Zuhrī. Ibn Hishām’s failure to connect the

⁶⁹) GÖRKE and SCHOELER, “Reconstructing the Earliest *Sīra* Texts,” 217.

⁷⁰) al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, IV, 77 (Kitāb al-Libās, bāb 16, ḥadīth 1). See also al-Bukhārī, *Translation*, VII, 469–70.

⁷¹) GÖRKE and SCHOELER, “Reconstructing the Earliest *Sīra* Texts,” 220.





story of Abū Bakr and Ibn al-Dughunna with either Ethiopia or the Median *hijra* means that his report cannot verify either element as belonging to an earlier common source, even on the off chance that his unconfirmed *isnād* is accurate.

Finally, ʿAbd al-Razzāq’s version of the Ibn al-Dughunna story agrees with Bukhārī and Bayhaqī in identifying Ethiopia as Abū Bakr’s intended destination, but ʿAbd al-Razzāq goes one step further by introducing this story with a brief summary of the Ethiopian *hijra*. Presumably it was this configuration that inspired Görke and Schoeler to suppose a link between Abū Bakr and the flight to Ethiopia.⁷² ʿAbd al-Razzāq’s preface certainly seems to suggest that Abū Bakr initially set out within the context of this broader migration across the Red Sea, although ʿAbd al-Razzāq is alone in implying such a connection. Excepting this narrative framework, however, ʿAbd al-Razzāq’s account of the Ibn al-Dughunna episode largely comports with Bukhārī and Bayhaqī’s version. Not long after his departure, Abū Bakr returns to Mecca under Ibn al-Dughunna’s protection, and when Abū Bakr subsequently renounces Ibn al-Dughunna’s patronage, Muḥammad’s announcement of the general emigration to Medina follows immediately.⁷³ The result is that, even more so than in Bukhārī and Bayhaqī, ʿAbd al-Razzāq’s presentation compresses rather severely a much longer sequence of events that unfolds between the emigration to Ethiopia and the *hijra* to Medina in other early sources. Al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Hishām, for instance, present the flight to Ethiopia as a consequence of Meccan persecution following Muḥammad’s initial preaching, seemingly a decade or so before the *hijra*, while Ibn Saʿd’s *Ṭabaqāt* dates the emigration to Ethiopia rather precisely to the fifth year after Muḥammad’s prophetic commission.⁷⁴

⁷²) ʿAbd al-Razzāq, *al-Muṣannaf*, V, 384–85.

⁷³) *ibid.*, V, 385–87.

⁷⁴) al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, I, 1169–81; Ibn Hishām, *Kitāb sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, I, 203–17; Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt*, I.1, 132–39, esp. 136. Like many later historians, Ibn Saʿd describes two separate migrations to Ethiopia: after the first, the emigrants return to Mecca, and when the Meccans continue to treat them harshly, they flee to Ethiopia a second time. Watt, following Caetani, suggests that this more recent interpretation arose from ambiguities in Ibn Hishām’s account of the migration to Ethiopia: WATT, *Muhammad at Mecca*, 110–11; CAETANI, *Annali dell’Islām*, I, 262–72. Nevertheless, it is possible that this structure developed to harmonize the two separate traditions about the return of the emigrants from Ethiopia: according to some authorities they returned to Mecca before the emigration to Medina (as in Ibn Hishām & al-Ṭabarī [*Annales*, I, 1193, 1196, 1198]), while according to others they were still in Ethiopia when Muḥammad proclaimed the migration to Medina,





By contrast, ʿAbd al-Razzāq’s presentation seems to collapse all of these events into a rather narrow timeframe, the precise length of which is difficult to ascertain.

Although the chronology of Ibn Hishām’s early biography is itself highly suspect, comparison of his report with the Ibn al-Dughunna episodes related by ʿAbd al-Razzāq, Bukhārī, and Bayhaqī suggests that these three *ḥadīth* collections likely preserve an account of this event that over the course of transmission has fused together several earlier and independent elements into a single condensed narrative. In essence, we have here a sort of “mini-history” of Islam from the initial reaction against Muḥammad’s early preaching to his *hijra*, focused on themes of persecution and flight. The Ibn al-Dughunna story, illustrative of both these themes, is likely included here to bridge the gap between the two *hijras* standing at the beginning and the end of Islam’s Meccan period. This complex of traditions, however, does not appear to be the work of ʿUrwa, as Görke and Schoeler maintain, but instead is likely the product of a later editor (or editors), as evidenced by the separation of these events in other early sources. The differences in chronology and context among the various versions of this story – especially the differences between Ibn Hishām’s version and the other two “al-Zuhri” accounts – suggest that the setting of the Ibn al-Dughunna episode within the broader framework of Islamic origins was the work of later transmitters and not a part of the “original” account.

Most importantly, however, Görke and Schoeler’s assignment of the Ibn al-Dughunna story to ʿUrwa simply is not supported by the evidence. ʿUrwa is not in fact even the common link for this material: the *isnāds* identify al-Zuhri as their common link, and if anyone were to be identified as the “author” of this tradition, it would be al-Zuhri (see fig. 3). But even this conclusion must remain somewhat tentative. As already noted, the tradition is rather poorly attested in the early sources. Such limited evidence yields an *isnād* bundle of just three “single strands,” one of which, Ibn Hishām’s *isnād*, has been already placed in some doubt. Likewise, it would be reassuring if ʿAbd al-Razzāq’s account, which he traces through Maʿmar, were to appear in either al-Wāqidi’s *Maghāzī* or Ibn Saʿd’s *Ṭabaqāt*, both of which transmit a great deal of material from Maʿmar not attested in other early sources.⁷⁵ This rather meager *isnād* bundle does not even

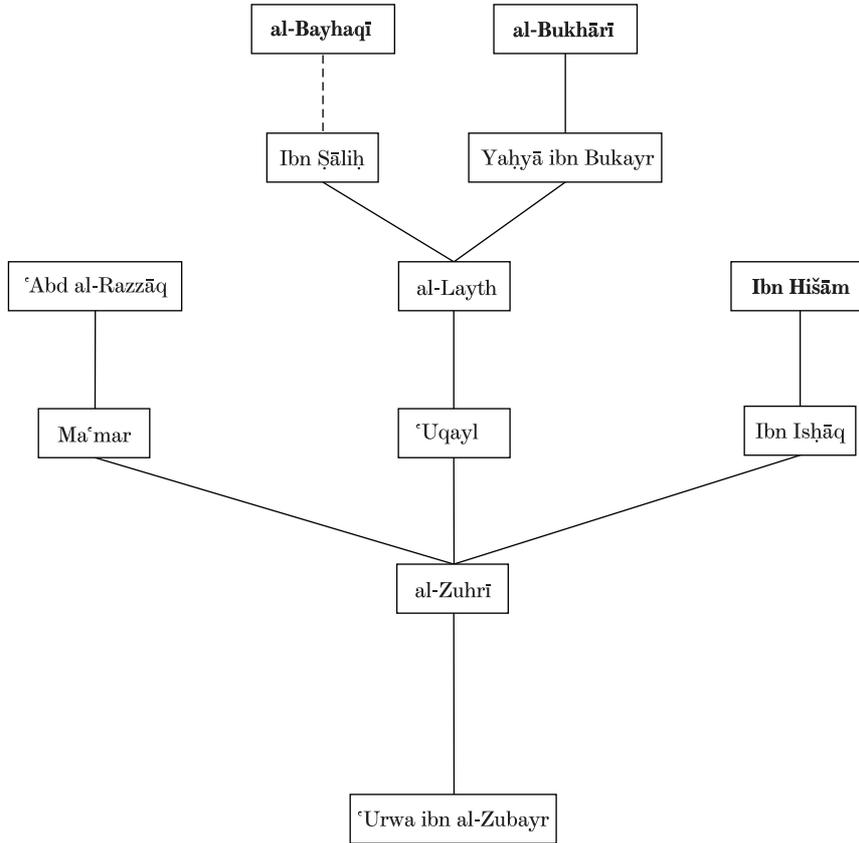
and they went from Ethiopia to Medina (Bukhārī, Bayhaqī, & ʿAbd al-Razzāq). Ibn Saʿd’s harmony allows for both movements.

⁷⁵) Nevertheless, Ibn Saʿd, who does not include the Ibn al-Dughunna story, transmits his account of Muḥammad’s announcement of the emigration and his order that Abū Bakr remain behind on the authority of al-Wāqidi < Maʿmar < al-





Figure 3: The Story of Abū Bakr and Ibn al-Dughunna and the Migration to Medina



come close to meeting the standards outlined by Juynboll for identifying a common link who can be associated with the “origins” of a particular tradition. The story’s attestation is simply inadequate for this method: as Görke himself notes in response to Michael Cook’s article on the dating of eschatological traditions, “[i]f we want a study using *isnād*-analytical methods to yield any relevant results, we need a large number of variants of a tradition and a large number of sources where this tradition is recorded.”⁷⁶ These criteria are not met by the Ibn al-Dughunna tradition and certainly not by the alleged letters of ‘Urwa; these traditions unfortu-

Zuhrī < ‘Urwa & Abū Umāmah ibn Sahl ibn Ḥunayf < ‘Ā’isha: Ibn Sa’d, *Ṭabaqāt*, I.1, 152–3.

⁷⁶) GÖRKE, “Eschatology, History, and the Common Link,” 186.





nately are not well attested enough to produce meaningful results through *isnād* criticism. In the absence of anything even approaching the density of transmission that Juynboll requires, one can easily imagine possible corruption of the evidence through the manipulation of *isnāds*, a phenomenon whose impact Görke himself acknowledges in responding to Cook. We have already noted the possibility that Ibn Hishām has introduced this tradition to his *Sīra* in Ibn Ishāq's name, and similar modifications are certainly not out of the question along the other two strands of transmission, particularly inasmuch as their composite appearance suggests a more advanced stage in the editing of *ḥadīth*.

For instance, the first of Bukhārī's two accounts of the Ibn al-Dughunna episode provides a rather alarming example of how such manipulation continued to affect *isnāds* even after the transition to writing had been made. According to Görke and Schoeler, this first version of the Ibn al-Dughunna story had been transmitted to Bukhārī from ʿUrwa through a different chain of authorities from the second account, reaching him from Abū Šālih < ʿAbdallāh ibn Wahb < Yūnus < al-Zuhrī < ʿUrwa. In the edition of Bukhārī's *Šaḥīḥ* cited by Görke and Schoeler, this is in fact the *isnād* that accompanies the tradition.⁷⁷ Yet rather astonishingly, the three main editions of Bukhārī's *Šaḥīḥ* all provide a different *isnād* for this *ḥadīth*, one that is actually identical to the *isnād* of his second version of the Ibn al-Dughunna story! The Leiden, Cairo, and Istanbul editions all assign both versions the same *isnād*, Yaḥyā b. Bukayr < al-Layth < ʿUqayl < al-Zuhrī < ʿUrwa.⁷⁸ The basis of the edition cited by Görke and Schoeler is not known to me, nor is the source of this disparity with the standard editions, but this difference in their *isnāds* is quite troubling, showing evidence of the manipulation of *isnāds* even after Bukhārī's collection, presumably by copyists. It is difficult to conjecture which of the two *isnāds* may have been the original, since one can identify tendencies running in either direction. It could be that a copyist discovered that the same tradition had different

⁷⁷) Muḥammad ibn Ismāʿīl al-Bukhārī, *Šaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 7 vols. (Damascus/Beirut, 1990), II, 804–5; (Kitāb al-Kafāla, bāb 4, ḥadīth 1). In their diagram of the lines of transmission, Görke and Schoeler indicate that Ibn Ḥuzayma reports something on the authority of Yūnus ibn ʿAbd al-Aʿlā < ʿAbdallāh ibn Wahb < Yūnus < al-Zuhrī < ʿUrwa, but they do not give any reference to this tradition in the article: GÖRKE and SCHOELER, “Reconstructing the Earliest *Sīra* Texts,” 216.

⁷⁸) al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmiʿ al-Šaḥīḥ*, II, 58–60; Muḥammad ibn Ismāʿīl al-Bukhārī, *Šaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 9 vols. (Cairo, 1966), IV, 130–34; Muḥammad ibn Ismāʿīl al-Bukhārī, *Šaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8 vols. (Beirut, 1981), III, 58–59; see also al-Bukhārī, *Translation*, III, 277–80.





isnāds, and judging this to be an error, he harmonized the text so that the strongest *isnād* would be brought in justification for both instances. Or perhaps he had concerns about the trustworthiness of certain transmitters in the first *isnād*, thus replacing it with the second *isnād*. Alternatively, it may be that a copyist found what he regarded different versions of the same tradition with identical *isnāds*, and thinking it a mistake that the two distinct versions would have identical pedigrees, he found an alternative line of transmission that made better sense to him.

In any case, the discrepancies of these editions highlight a potentially severe weakness in the *isnād*-analytical methods advanced by Schacht, Juynboll, Motzki, Görke, Schoeler, and others: the lack of critical editions. In the absence of more reliable editions, it is perhaps unwise to place so much weight on the value of *isnāds* as reported by the handful of manuscripts that underlie many of our textual editions. As this instance demonstrates, *isnāds* are not always uniform across a manuscript tradition, and in the case of Görke and Schoeler's analysis of the Ibn al-Dughunna episode, following the reading of an obscure edition of Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ* has led them to identify a fourth line of transmission not supported by the primary editions of the text. With so little evidence to work with, an additional path of transmission would be important to their argument for the tradition's antiquity, but unfortunately, this testimony does not seem to be reliable.⁷⁹ On the whole, this problem highlights the value of maintaining Juynboll's high standards for *isnād* criticism: only traditions with highly dense *isnād* bundles in which several "partial common links" transmit independently from the common link can be analyzed using this method. Such traditions are, as Juynboll acknowledges, quite rare, but in these instances it is possible with a reasonable amount of probability to identify the individual who first placed a *ḥadīth* into circulation.⁸⁰ Unfortunately, the story of Abū Bakr and Ibn al-Dughunna falls far short of this threshold, and as with the "letters" of 'Urwa there seems to be little compelling reason to identify 'Urwa as the author of these traditions. Indeed, even the attribution to al-Zuhrī, who is the actual common link, seems somewhat questionable: three single strands present an extremely weak case, and differences in the *matns* certainly could suggest a somewhat later tradition.

⁷⁹) Nevertheless, even if it were the better reading from the manuscripts, as Görke rightly notes, multiple lines of transmission brought by a single source should in any case be viewed with some suspicion: GÖRKE, "Eschatology, History, and the Common Link," 186–87.

⁸⁰) See esp. JUYNBOLL, "Some *Isnād*-Analytical Methods"; and idem, "Nāfi", the *Mawlā* of Ibn 'Umar."





C. *Muḥammad's Hijra*

The story of Muḥammad's *hijra* to Medina in the company of Abū Bakr is, perhaps unsurprisingly, the best documented of the various ʿUrwa traditions examined by Görke and Schoeler's article, and consequently, analysis of its *isnāds* suggests a likelihood that these accounts preserve a fairly early tradition, reaching back to the beginning of the second Islamic century and perhaps, in its most basic outline, having some loose connection to ʿUrwa. Yet even here there are significant problems. While most of the lines of transmission represented in the article's *isnād* bundle support this tradition, unfortunately several belong to other traditions and have nothing to do with the *hijra*, again raising the problem of how this schema combines evidence from separate *ḥadīths* somewhat haphazardly. The bulk of the relevant *isnāds* trace this particular *hijra* tradition back to ʿUrwa through either his son Hishām or his disciple al-Zuhrī (see fig. 4). Nonetheless, the transmission through Hishām is fairly weak, attested only sparsely in a handful of sources, and the tradition from al-Zuhrī is also surprisingly limited, consisting in essence of two single strands, one from ʿUqayl through Layth, witnessed by Bukhārī and Bayhaqī,⁸¹ and a second from Maʿmar, preserved by ʿAbd al-Razzāq.⁸²

Although the article's *isnād* diagram identifies a second line of transmission from Maʿmar through al-Wāqidi in Ibn Saʿd, Görke and Schoeler fail to provide a corresponding reference. Presumably they have in mind the *hijra* scene from volume one of the *Ṭabaqāt*, which unfortunately does not present a very reliable witness: here Ibn Saʿd brings this tradition with five different *isnāds* (including two through al-Zuhrī from different sources), remarking that the accounts exhibited great diversity, which he apparently has synthesized into a composite narrative.⁸³ Such a report is of course completely worthless for any attempt to date the tradition using

⁸¹) al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, III, 38–39 (Kitāb manāqib al-Anṣār, bāb 45, ḥadīth 9); note that the *ḥadīth* continues further, but at the top of p. 39, Bukhārī introduces a different *isnād* for what follows. Also, al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, II, 24–25 (Kitāb buyūʿ, bāb 57, ḥadīth 1) relates only Muḥammad's arrival at Abū Bakr's house, his announcement of the *hijra*, and Abū Bakr's offer and Muḥammad's purchase of a camel, with the same *isnād*. See also the English translations in al-Bukhārī, *Translation*, III, 196–97 & V, 161–63. Bayhaqī, *Dalāʾil al-nubuwwah*, II, 473–75.

⁸²) ʿAbd al-Razzāq, *al-Muṣannaf*, V, 388–92.

⁸³) Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt*, I.1, 153–54. See the relevant remarks concerning combined or synthetic reports in DONNER, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 264–66.





isnāds. Likewise, the transmission of this tradition through Ibn Ishāq is more complicated than Görke and Schoeler’s analysis allows. Ibn Ishāq reports having heard a similar account from ʿUrwa, although according to Ibn Hishām he identified his immediate source only as “a man whom I have no reason to doubt”; in reporting the same tradition, however, al-Ṭabarī supplies Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Tamīmī as the missing link.⁸⁴ While Görke and Schoeler use this information to discover a third, independent line of transmission back to ʿUrwa through Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān, the discrepancies between the two sources regarding the identity of this tradent actually hinders, rather than strengthens, their argument. The strong possibility that al-Ṭabarī himself is responsible for adding Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān’s name to the list of transmitters presents considerable difficulties for using Ibn Ishāq’s report to evaluate the antiquity of this tradition. In view of this tradent’s anonymity in Ibn Hishām’s report, Ibn Ishāq’s account is extremely problematic for any use in *isnād*-critical dating, as discussed further below.

Unfortunately, the overall effect of this evidence is not nearly as compelling as Görke and Schoeler would seem to suggest, and one senses that again they lean too much on the scholarly inertia favoring the authenticity of ʿUrwa’s “letters.” The tradition of ʿUrwa’s courtly correspondence includes an account of Muḥammad’s *hijra* to Medina with Abū Bakr, which appears in al-Ṭabarī’s *History* separately from the stories of the Ethiopian emigration and the meeting at ʿAqaba.⁸⁵ Unlike these other traditions, however, the *hijra* tradition is absent from al-Ṭabarī’s *Tafsīr*, and even in the *History* this *hijra* narrative lacks any epistolary framework, leading Abd al-Aziz Duri to argue that, although he believed the report to have originated with ʿUrwa, it was never a part of his correspondence with ʿAbd al-Malik.⁸⁶ Görke and Schoeler argue on the basis of similar *isnāds* that the *hijra* account also belonged to the letters, but more decisive evidence is afforded by Ibn Ḥanbal, whose *Musnad* includes a brief account of the *hijra* in the format of a letter to ʿAbd al-Malik.⁸⁷ Ibn Ḥanbal’s report begins by explaining that ʿAbd al-Malik initially wrote to ʿUrwa, who then responded with a short letter describing Muḥammad’s *hijra*.⁸⁸ In the report that fol-

⁸⁴) Ibn Hishām, *Kitāb sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, I, 327–29; trans. Alfred GUILLAUME, *The Life of Muhammad* (London, 1955), 223–24. al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, I, 1237–40.

⁸⁵) al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, I, 1234–37.

⁸⁶) DURI, *Rise of Historical Writing*, 82–83.

⁸⁷) GÖRKE and SCHOELER, “Reconstructing the Earliest *Sīra* Texts,” 215; Görke and Schoeler note the passage from Ibn Ḥanbal on 214, n. 29.

⁸⁸) Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, VI, 212





lows, the beginning of al-Ṭabarī's account of the *hijra* appears almost verbatim, as Ibn Ḥanbal describes Muḥammad's midday arrival at Abū Bakr's house announcing his permission to emigrate, followed by Abū Bakr's request to accompany Muḥammad, the latter's assent, Abū Bakr's offer of a camel, and Muḥammad's acceptance only on the condition that he be allowed to purchase the beast, bringing Ibn Ḥanbal's version to a conclusion.

Ibn Ḥanbal writes that he had heard this *ḥadīth* from ʿAbd al-Ṣamad, who was also al-Ṭabarī's source through both ʿAbd al-Wārith and ʿAlī ibn Naṣr, suggesting that ʿAbd al-Ṣamad (d. ca. 821–22) had circulated these traditions in the format of a letter from ʿUrwa to ʿAbd al-Malik almost two centuries after the *hijra*. Nevertheless, it is not possible to conclude anything further about the prior history of this tradition on the basis of these two reports, nor regarding its epistolary format; the *ḥadīth* may well be the work of ʿAbd al-Ṣamad, who, drawing on other early sources and traditions, created this ʿUrwan letter. Moreover, one cannot argue from the part to whole: this fragment can neither vouch for the more extensive narrative of the *hijra* preserved in al-Ṭabarī's *History*, nor can it verify the authenticity of other "letters" that al-Ṭabarī ascribes to ʿUrwa. As noted already above, the invention of letters is a literary topos characteristic of both the classical and Islamic historical traditions, and this impulse may account not only for the initial production of this "letter;" but could also have inspired al-Ṭabarī – or one of his sources – to expand on ʿAbd al-Ṣamad's brief letter either by extending its narrative or even creating new letters ascribed to ʿUrwa.

Two additional sources transmit accounts of the *hijra* claiming to derive from ʿUrwa through his son Hishām, Ibn Saʿd's *Ṭabaqāt* and Ibn Ḥibbān's *Ṣaḥīḥ*, both of which produce rather terse and distinctive narrations of this event.⁸⁹ When we compare these reports with the version from ʿUrwa's "letter" and triangulate all three accounts to identify a core narrative that might have been transmitted from Hishām ibn ʿUrwa, the results are extremely meager. If in fact the *isnāds* are accurate, which is by no means a certainty, it would appear that Hishām related the following account concerning Muḥammad's *hijra*. Muḥammad announced his migration from Mecca to Abū Bakr, who requested and received permission to accompany Muḥammad. They hid for several days in a nearby cave while ʿĀmir b. Fuḥayrah secretly brought them sheep to milk. Then they set out from Mecca together with ʿĀmir, riding on two camels that belonged to Abū Bakr.

⁸⁹) Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt*, III, 212–13; Muḥammad Ibn Ḥibbān, *Ṣaḥīḥ ibn Ḥibbān*, 18 vols. (Beirut, 1984–91), XIV, 182–83.





Görke and Schoeler make no attempt to explain the stark differences among the various Hishām ibn ʿUrwa traditions, particularly in regard to their length, but presumably they would identify the three rather brief accounts preserved by Ibn Saʿd, Ibn Ḥanbal, and Ibn Ḥibbān as distillations of the much longer narrative witnessed by al-Ṭabarī. There is, however, no good reason for assuming this relationship, and it is instead much more likely that various elements beyond this basic core have been added by individual transmitters who had knowledge of other *hijra* traditions, particularly those of al-Zuhrī and Ibn Ishāq. In fact, comparison of all four versions suggests that al-Ṭabarī’s “letter” has probably combined individual elements from the other three accounts, rearranging the order somewhat to present a smoother account. Consequently, the *isnāds* from these sources should not be adduced as somehow validating al-Ṭabarī’s more ample account in the manner that Görke and Schoeler have proposed. Only this bare outline has the support of all four sources, and this only somewhat tenuously.

Turning to the traditions from al-Zuhrī and Ibn Ishāq, one finds a rather uniform account of Muḥammad’s *hijra* ascribed to al-Zuhrī by ʿAbd al-Razzāq, Bukhārī, and Bayhaqī, immediately preceded in all three collections by the Ibn al-Dughunna story. It is certainly not out of the question that this report derives from al-Zuhrī sometime at the beginning of the second Islamic century, but with such limited transmission history, essentially amounting to two single strands, it is difficult to be entirely sure. The lack of parallel support from Ibn Ishāq’s *Sīra* is both surprising and problematic. As noted already above, according to Ibn Hishām, Ibn Ishāq transmitted the story of the *hijra* from ʿUrwa only on the authority of an anonymous person who is characterized as trustworthy. Al-Ṭabarī, however, bridges the gap between Ibn Ishāq and ʿUrwa by naming Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān as a tradent, but this is a figure that Ibn Ishāq elsewhere identifies explicitly by name, and his suppression from this account by Ibn Ishāq seems unlikely. Much more probable is either the substitution of Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān for Ibn Ishāq’s anonymous informant by al-Ṭabarī or one of his sources, or, alternatively, Ibn Ishāq’s failure to provide the tradition with an *isnād*, leaving Ibn Hishām and al-Ṭabarī to invent their own independently.

Unfortunately, Görke and Schoeler overlook these problems and rather astonishingly conclude that Ibn Ishāq’s *hijra* narrative is in fact a fourth version of the al-Zuhrī tradition. Despite the alarming lack of any direct evidence for its attribution to al-Zuhrī, Görke and Schoeler blithely assign Ibn Ishāq’s account to al-Zuhrī, adding the observation that, in contrast to the other al-Zuhrī versions from ʿAbd al-Razzāq, Bukhārī, and Bayhaqī,





which are extremely similar, Ibn Ishāq's account "tells the same story, but in a completely different wording."⁹⁰ This conclusion would appear to involve an assumption that Ibn Ishāq had received the Ibn al-Dughunna story from al-Zuhrī together with an account of the *hijra*, as it appears in the collections of Bukhārī, Bayhaqī, and ʿAbd al-Razzāq. Thus Görke and Schoeler seem to presume that the *isnād* from the Ibn al-Dughunna episode can be extended to encompass Ibn Ishāq's *hijra* account as well, allowing them to assign it also to al-Zuhrī, despite the lack of positive evidence for this attribution. Moreover, since the *isnād* for Ibn Ishāq's *hijra* narrative differs from that of his Ibn al-Dughunna story (at least as this episode is reported by Ibn Hishām), Görke and Schoeler take this opportunity to multiply the lines of transmission. Instead of more cautiously reflecting on the different *isnāds* and their problems as important signs that the traditions of Ibn al-Dughunna and the *hijra* were originally independent, Görke and Schoeler, guided by their assumption that all of these reports ultimately derive from ʿUrwa, resolve that "Ibn Ishāq thus combines in his report a version of the al-Zuhrī recension with a third recension we shall call the Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān recension." Yet this effort to merge these different traditions and their *isnāds*, despite their apparent independence, in order to multiply lines of transmission is not persuasive and is potentially misleading.

There is indeed a sort of sleight of hand here, whereby Görke and Schoeler exploit Ibn Ishāq's report to simultaneously bolster al-Zuhrī's alleged transmission of a *hijra* account from ʿUrwa by assuming that al-Zuhrī was Ibn Ishāq's source, while also creating a third line of transmission, in addition to Hishām ibn ʿUrwa and al-Zuhrī, from ʿUrwa through Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān. Such manipulation not only creates the illusion that al-Zuhrī's account was transmitted independently by three different pupils (instead of only two), but it also achieves the same effect for ʿUrwa, giving the semblance of three independent lines of transmission from ʿUrwa as well. This maneuver augments the appearance of reliable transmission from both authorities at once, and Ibn Ishāq correspondingly appears in the article's *isnād* bundle as transmitting this tradition both from al-Zuhrī (< ʿUrwa) and Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān (< ʿUrwa). Unfortunately, however, Görke and Schoeler's use of Ibn Ishāq's report in this way is more than a little duplicitous, stretching the evidence well beyond what it can ultimately bear. Seemingly more prudent is von Stülpnagel's conclusion that al-Ṭabarī most likely found Ibn Ishāq's report

⁹⁰) GÖRKE and SCHOELER, "Reconstructing the Earliest *Sīra* Texts," 217–18.





in exactly the same state as Ibn Hishām, filling in Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān for the mystery tradent on his own initiative. Consequently, al-Ṭabarī’s “repaired” *isnād* should be viewed as “nicht recht glaubhaft” and thus cannot be relied upon for historical purposes, let alone put to such double duty.⁹¹ Likewise, Ibn Hishām’s anonymous tradent remains unknown and should not be used to conjure up additional lines of transmission from either al-Zuhrī or ʿUrwa. A more careful analysis of these traditions would necessarily leave both of these reports aside.

Admittedly, Ibn Ishāq’s unnamed source could possibly have been al-Zuhrī; this certainly cannot be ruled out given how much of his *Sīra* rests on this authority. It would be strange, however, for Ibn Ishāq to neglect naming him in this one instance when he otherwise does so routinely. Yet it is rather surprising to find Görke and Schoeler so casually and confidently assigning Ibn Ishāq’s account of the *hijra* to al-Zuhrī when neither of the two sources transmitting this tradition ascribes it to his authority: indeed, both sources identify someone else as Ibn Ishāq’s informant. Despite these facts, Görke and Schoeler have invented the *isnād* Ibn Ishāq < al-Zuhrī < ʿUrwa to authenticate Ibn Ishāq’s *hijra* tradition when no source actually gives this chain of transmission!⁹² Although they do not specify the basis for this mysterious *isnād*, they seem to have assumed that since Ibn Hishām gives this *isnād* for Ibn Ishāq’s version of the Ibn al-Dughunna story, clearly Ibn Ishāq must have known the *hijra* story from the same authorities. Again, the problem here seems to lie with an original assumption that all of this material was transmitted as a conglomerate from ʿUrwa. Nevertheless, even though the *hijra* account ascribed to al-Zuhrī by other sources does in fact combine the Ibn al-Dughunna and *hijra* traditions into a single narrative, according to Ibn Hishām, Ibn Ishāq transmitted the two traditions independently from one another, supported by different *isnāds*, while al-Ṭabarī does not even include the Ibn al-Dughunna story at all. Thus, to suggest that the *isnād* from Ibn Hishām’s Ibn al-Dughunna narrative can somehow be extended to authorize Ibn Ishāq’s *hijra* narrative as well, despite the clear indication of an alternate chain of transmitters by both Ibn Hishām and al-Ṭabarī – not to mention the complete absence of the Ibn al-Dughunna story from al-Ṭabarī’s *History* – is quite misleading. Perhaps more importantly, this invention of an *isnād* for

⁹¹) VON STÜLPNAGEL, “ʿUrwa Ibn az-Zubair”, 84.

⁹²) See GÖRKE and SCHOELER, “Reconstructing the Earliest *Sīra* Texts,” 217, where this *isnād* is given in connection with references (see n. 38) to Ibn Ishāq’s *hijra* account in Ibn Hishām and al-Ṭabarī, neither of which in fact provides this *isnād*!





Ibn Ishāq's *hijra* tradition in a modern scholarly article in order to make its transmission fit the pattern that interpreters believe the tradition should have taken is both remarkable and troubling: that this could happen in an academic study only underscores the gravity of the situation posed by the potential manipulation of *isnāds* in the medieval as well as modern Islamic tradition. If modern Western scholars could "connect the dots" in this fashion to produce an *isnād* for a tradition that doesn't actually appear in the sources, how much more readily must the Muslim collectors and copyists of the middle ages have done exactly the same thing on numerous occasions?

Consequently, Ibn Ishāq's *hijra* narrative should by no means be identified as belonging to a corpus of al-Zuhri traditions, nor may its *isnāds*, such as they are, be used to validate al-Zuhri's transmission of this tradition. Al-Zuhri's account must stand or fall on the testimony of 'Abd al-Razzāq, Bukhārī, and Bayhaqī alone, and while these three sources present an arrestingly narrow pattern of transmission when compared with the legal *ḥadīth* analyzed by Juynboll and Motzki, one could perhaps very tentatively propose that these reports may originate from al-Zuhri's teaching. As for the possibility that any of these *hijra* traditions derive from 'Urwa's authority, however, the evidence does not support any claims reaching beyond the slim kernel of traditions transmitted through his son Hishām, and even this remains somewhat tenuous. Cautious analysis of these traditions requires openness to the possibility that elements not included in this skeleton of a narrative were added by later transmitters, such as al-Zuhri. Thus, *isnād* criticism leaves us with the possibility that 'Urwa may have taught a basic version of Muḥammad's *hijra* in the company of Abū Bakr and 'Amir b. Fuhayrah, transported by Abū Bakr's camels after a brief period of hiding in a cave.

Nevertheless, further complications arise from the papyrus version of Wahb b. Munabbih's "*Sīra*," as noted several decades ago by Martin Kister. This papyrus, written in 228 AH, is regarded by many scholars as "probably the earliest extant document of *sīra*-literature," preserving fragments from a biography of Muḥammad ascribed to Wahb.⁹³ Wahb was active around the turn of the second Islamic century, making him a near contemporary of 'Urwa, and even if these fragments ascribed to Wahb are not authentic (a distinct possibility), their traditions are undeniably early, having been copied shortly after Ibn Hishām's death and perhaps even before

⁹³) M. J. KISTER, "On the Papyrus of Wahb b. Munabbih," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 37 (1974), 545–71, 545.





al-Ṭabarī had been born.⁹⁴ The account of Muḥammad’s *hijra* in the Wahb papyrus differs significantly from the ʿUrwa traditions on some key points, raising additional questions about the “authenticity” of these traditions. According to Wahb’s version, which is given on the authority of ʿAlī himself, Muḥammad planned his *hijra* with ʿAlī, summoning ʿAlī to his house and directing him to sleep in his bed, so that the Meccans would not know that he had fled, instructing him also to inform Abū Bakr that he could be found hiding in the cave of Thawr. When Abū Bakr arrived at Muḥammad’s house, the prophet had already left, and ʿAlī told him that he could find Muḥammad at the cave. Abū Bakr then went after Muḥammad, and when Abū Bakr drew near, he startled Muḥammad, who injured his foot and had to slow down. Abū Bakr was eventually able to catch up with Muḥammad, and the two entered the cave together.⁹⁵

Wahb’s account has very little in common with ʿUrwa’s, aside from Abū Bakr and Muḥammad hiding together in the cave of Thawr, and as Kister notes, similar traditions focused on ʿAlī’s central role in the *hijra* can be found in a number of other collections, including particularly, but not exclusively, sources of Shīʿa provenance.⁹⁶ Likewise, the papyrus disagrees with the ʿUrwa narrative in regard to who cared for Muḥammad during his stay in the cave: the ʿUrwa traditions name ʿĀmir b. Fuhayra and, in many versions, ʿAbdallāh b. Abī Bakr and Asmāʾ bint Abī Bakr as well, while the papyrus reports that ʿAlī and Asmāʾ visited Muḥammad in the cave, which Kister regards as a blending of Shīʿī and Sunnī traditions.⁹⁷ Of the ʿUrwa traditions, only Ibn Ishāq’s account ascribes any role to ʿAlī, reporting that Muḥammad ordered him to stay behind in Mecca to settle his accounts, while the al-Zuhri and Hishām narratives exclude him entirely. That these early accounts could be so thoroughly different should be of grave concern for any effort to reconstruct what “really” happened at the origins of Islam, or, somewhat less ambitiously, how these origins were remembered at the close of the first Islamic century. Clearly these earliest narratives have already been manipulated in various ways to suit the needs of intra-religious squabbles between Shīʿīs and Sunnīs, leaving no obvious means for deciding which of their two contradictory accounts is closest to the historical “facts.” This methodological problem should serve as a helpful remin-

⁹⁴) For more on Wahb, see HOROVITZ, *Earliest Biographies of the Prophet*, 30–39.

⁹⁵) Raif Georges KHOURY, *Wahb b. Munabbih: Der Heidelberger Papyrus PSR Heid. Arab. 23*, Codices Arabici Antiqui 1 (Wiesbaden, 1972), 140–43.

⁹⁶) KISTER, “Papyrus of Wahb,” 564–71.

⁹⁷) KHOURY, *Wahb b. Munabbih*, 146–47; KISTER, “Papyrus of Wahb,” 569.





der that even on the rare occasions where it might be possible to identify outlines of a tradition reaching back to ʿUrwa or Wāḥb, over the course of what amounts to the better part of a century between their activities and Muḥammad’s *hijra*, the events of Islamic origins had become so mythologized according to sectarian and other theological interests that it is often nearly impossible to identify anything “authentic” from these accounts.

D. Summary

Görke and Schoeler’s effort to place this large complex of *sīra* traditions leading up to the *hijra* under ʿUrwa’s authority unfortunately is not very persuasive and is fraught with a variety of methodological problems. Nevertheless, perhaps a major fault with their approach lies not so much in its argumentation as with the unusual confidence that scholarship on early Islam has often invested in the so-called letters of ʿUrwa. Indeed, one imagines that Görke and Schoeler’s thesis was presented with such extreme brevity largely because the authenticity of this block of material could be assumed as taken for granted. Yet on closer examination, there seems to be little basis for such widespread conviction regarding the authenticity of ʿUrwa’s letters. If it is to be believed that these “letters” are indeed genuine works of ʿUrwa, then a better argument will need to be made than has heretofore been presented. Consequently, the link between ʿUrwa and the traditions about the Ethiopian migration and the meeting at ʿAqaba stands very much in doubt. Moreover, the Ibn al-Dughunna episode is transmitted from ʿUrwa only through al-Zuhrī, and thus the methods of common-link analysis identify al-Zuhrī rather than ʿUrwa as the figure who may be associated with this tradition. Yet even the transmission from al-Zuhrī is rather sparse and does not inspire a great deal of confidence. Finally, analysis of the *hijra* itself reveals a slim core of tradition that might be associated with ʿUrwa, although again one wishes for a denser, more regular pattern of transmission. Nevertheless, the early *hijra* traditions recorded in the Wāḥb b. Munabbih papyrus call into question nearly every aspect of the ʿUrwan *hijra* narrative. Even if certain basic elements of this *hijra* tradition can be linked with some probability to ʿUrwa, Wāḥb’s early account of the *hijra* stands as a stark reminder that, in contrast to Görke and Schoeler’s final conclusion, considerable reasons do in fact remain “to doubt that they do reflect the *general outline* of the events correctly.”⁹⁸

⁹⁸) GÖRKE and SCHOELER, “Reconstructing the Earliest *Sīra* Texts,” 220.





Thus, despite the application of this promising method, the problems of early Islamic history remain rather intractable. Their solutions will undoubtedly require more than identifying an early tradition attributed to an author who should have had access to reports from those involved in the events themselves: as comparison with the study of Christian origins bears witness, for instance, such problems are certainly not unique to the Islamic tradition, but typical of the obstacles facing any effort to reconstruct the beginnings of a religious movement over great chronological distance.⁹⁹

The Beginnings of Revelation: The *Iqraʾ* Accounts

Schoeler’s initial efforts to reconstruct the history of formative Islam using the methods of *isnād* criticism were published in his monograph on the early biographies of Muḥammad, where he investigates the possible “authenticity” of two well known traditions from the life of Muḥammad: the beginnings of Muḥammad’s revelations – the so-called “*iqraʾ* accounts” – and the scandal over ʿĀ’isha, to be discussed in the following section. The monograph opens with a thorough introduction to the early *sīra* tradition and its major figures, before turning to what is surely one of the most analyzed moments from Muḥammad’s biography, the onset of the Qur’anic revelations. Schoeler begins this section by offering a brief overview of a widely circulated report about Muḥammad’s initial religious experiences, allegedly transmitted by al-Zuhrī from ʿUrwa (< ʿĀ’isha). As an exemplar of this account, he summarizes ʿAbd al-Razzāq’s version of the story, as reported from Maʾmar (< al-Zuhrī < ʿUrwa < ʿĀ’isha).¹⁰⁰ The narrative begins with Muḥammad’s spiritual retreats (*taḥannuth*) to the cave of Ḥirāʾ, where one day he is suddenly surprised by an angel. The angel commands him to “recite” (*iqraʾ*), and after initial protests of inability, Muḥammad recites the beginning of *sūra* 96. Terrified by the experience, he returns to Khadija, and when he pleads with her, “wrap me up, wrap me up,” she com-

⁹⁹) By way of comparison, for example, the authors of the canonical gospels of the Christian tradition, writing only forty to fifty years after the death of Jesus, should have similarly had access to reports from those involved in the events themselves, and yet these narratives cannot simply be taken at face value as an accurate report of Christian origins; their accounts are already highly theologized according to the principles of primitive Christian “salvation history.” See, e.g., Bart D. EHRMAN, *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium* (New York, 1999), 32–40, 46–53.

¹⁰⁰) SCHOELER, *Charakter und Authentie*, 62–64.





forts him. Then Khadija brings Muḥammad to her cousin Waraqa, who also reassures him, explaining that he is receiving a revelation (*nāmūs*) similar to the one received by Moses. Several versions mention Muḥammad's thoughts of suicide, occasioned by his tremendous fear (understandably excised from some later collections), while many of the reports assigned to Ma'mar's authority also include an account of the temporary cessation (*fatra*) of Muḥammad's revelations.

Schoeler appends an extensive catalogue of traditions having a similar pedigree through al-Zuhrī (< 'Urwa < 'Ā'isha) that is indeed impressive, as is the *isnād* bundle diagramming the various trajectories of the story's transmission.¹⁰¹ The network is densest through the link 'Abd al-Razzāq < Ma'mar, but enough other paths lead back to al-Zuhrī to establish him as the likely source of a tradition about Muḥammad's first experience of revelation. Nevertheless, the precise nature of what al-Zuhrī may have taught his students about this episode is not exactly clear. Schoeler, for his part, resolves the analysis of these al-Zuhrī traditions with the conclusion that essentially all of the narrative elements present in his archetypal account from 'Abd al-Razzāq's *Muṣannaf* are sufficiently confirmed by other sources that one may assume that a nearly identical version of this story had its origin with al-Zuhrī. Only certain differences in the order of events obscure al-Zuhrī's original tradition. And while Ma'mar is definitely a nodal figure in the transmission of this *ḥadīth*, Schoeler notes that several sources indicate parallel transmissions from al-Zuhrī through Yūnus b. Yazīd and al-Layth b. Sa'd (< 'Uqail b. Khālid), seeming to confirm the ascription of this tradition complex to al-Zuhrī at the beginning of the second Islamic century, some one-hundred and twenty years (or more) after the events described.

Nevertheless, certain accounts of Muḥammad's initial revelation transmitted from al-Zuhrī by Ibn Ishāq and al-Wāqidi differ considerably from these other versions, so significantly in fact that it almost seems methodologically questionable to represent them in the same *isnād* bundle with the other traditions, as Schoeler does. According to Ibn Ishāq, as witnessed by Ibn Hishām, al-'Uṭāridī, and al-Tirmidhī, al-Zuhrī related only a very brief account of Muḥammad's initial revelations, describing them as "visions, resembling the brightness of daybreak, which were shown to him in his sleep" and caused him to crave solitude.¹⁰² There is no angel, no com-

¹⁰¹) *ibid.*, 65, 171–76.

¹⁰²) Ibn Hishām, *Kitāb sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, I, 151; trans. GUILLAUME, *Life of Muhammad*, 105. See also 'Uṭāridī's version in Muḥammad Ibn Ishāq, *Kitāb al-siyar wa-al-maghāzī*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Beirut, 1978), 120 and 132; and Muḥammad ibn





mand to recite (*iqra'*), and, perhaps most importantly, no connection to the Qur'ān: instead, Muḥammad's revelations come in the form of rather generic visions of light. How is this terse and unadorned report from al-Zuhrī to be squared with the considerably more profuse version known through Ma'mar and others? According to Schoeler, the differences between the two accounts reflect Ibn Ishāq's deliberate decision to abbreviate al-Zuhrī's teaching in light of the much longer account that follows it, which, although quite similar to the Ma'mar (< al-Zuhrī) version, derives from a different authority, Wahb b. Kaysān, a client of the family of al-Zubayr. In order to avoid repetition, Schoeler proposes, Ibn Ishāq has drastically reduced al-Zuhrī's account to its bare elements.¹⁰³ Although more will be said about Ibn Ishāq's second, longer version below (i.e., the Wahb narrative), one must consider the strong possibility that the differences between the two al-Zuhrī narratives are not the result of Ibn Ishāq's excisions but may instead reflect two distinct versions taught by al-Zuhrī on different occasions. It certainly is conceivable that al-Zuhrī initially taught his pupils the rather minimalist account transmitted by Ibn Ishāq, a report that al-Zuhrī had himself presumably inherited from the earlier Islamic tradition. The second version, ascribed to al-Zuhrī through Ma'mar, Yūnus, and others, is perhaps al-Zuhrī's own composition, created on the basis of this brief report, to which he added other traditions that he discovered about the beginnings of revelation. The similarities between the longer al-Zuhrī tradition and Ibn Ishāq's long version from Wahb b. Kaysān, as observed by Schoeler, could suggest that the Wahb account was a primary source for al-Zuhrī's new narrative. In this case, Ibn Ishāq's separate transmission of these two revelation accounts would seemingly reflect his knowledge of al-Zuhrī's main supplementary resource in its independent form, as well as his teacher's original teaching.

Rather significantly, the same conclusion is also suggested by Ibn Sa'd's *Ṭabaqāt*, which independently of Ibn Ishāq ascribes an identical tradition to al-Zuhrī, although Ibn Sa'd's witness is somewhat complicated by the fact that he transmits both the shorter and longer al-Zuhrī traditions simultaneously. Reporting from al-Wāqidī, whose sources were Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh and Ma'mar (< al-Zuhrī < 'Urwa), Ibn Sa'd writes that the first revelations were like daybreak that came to Muḥammad as a dream (suggesting sleep). Also like Ibn Ishāq, Ibn Sa'd notes that

¹⁰³ 'Īsā Tirmidhī, *Sunan al-Tirmidhī wa-huwa al-jāmi' al-ṣaḥīḥ*, ed. 'Abd al-Wahhāb 'Abd al-Laṭīf and 'Abd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad 'Uthmān, 2nd ed. (Beirut, 1983), V, 257.

¹⁰³) SCHOELER, *Charakter und Authentie*, 75–76.





with the coming of revelation Muḥammad yearned for solitude, adding that he would spend several nights at a time in the cave of Hīrāʾ, returning only to gather additional provisions.¹⁰⁴ Here again there is no angel, no *iqraʾ*, no Warāqa. In the following chapter, however, Ibn Saʿd ascribes the full *iqraʾ* narrative to al-Zuhrī, on the authority of al-Wāqidi < Maʿmar,¹⁰⁵ and presumably for this reason, Schoeler posits once again that Ibn Saʿd gives at first only a very “abbreviated” version of the onset of revelation, followed by the complete *iqraʾ* narrative in the subsequent chapter.¹⁰⁶ Yet as with Ibn Iṣḥāq, it is quite possible that Ibn Saʿd, rather than abbreviating his initial report from al-Zuhrī, transmits two distinct accounts that were taught by al-Zuhrī on different occasions (in this case to Maʿmar). It is not at all clear, for instance, why Ibn Saʿd would at first present his own “abbreviated” version of al-Zuhrī account, only to follow it immediately with the full narrative that was his alleged source. Unless he actually had two separate traditions that were ascribed to al-Zuhrī, why would he even bother with such repetition and revision? Moreover, the strong similarities between the two short al-Zuhrī narratives in Ibn Iṣḥāq and Ibn Saʿd, which appear to have been transmitted independently, seem to exclude Schoeler’s theory of abbreviation: if this were the case, it is somewhat difficult to explain how both authors could have abbreviated this longer account in almost identical fashion. Their correspondence is much more readily understood if instead they both transmit an early tradition actually taught by al-Zuhrī himself, a short narrative reporting Muḥammad’s initial visions of light, without the Qurʾānic adornments occasioned by the angel’s visitation. Such an hypothesis is further supported by the traditions ascribed to ʿUrwa through his son Hishām, as explained by Uri Rubin in his rather convincing *matn* analysis of these early traditions, discussed below.

Schoeler is of course not content to rest with an ascription to al-Zuhrī, and he presses further to make a case for ʿUrwan authorship of this tradition. His arguments for this attribution, however, are both extremely complicated and tenuous. As Schoeler has successfully demonstrated, a rather sizeable number of revelation traditions trace their heritage back to ʿUrwa through al-Zuhrī, making al-Zuhrī’s connection with this tradition rather clear. Nevertheless, in order to establish any plausible association with ʿUrwa, it would be necessary to show compelling evidence of independent transmission from ʿUrwa that bypassed al-Zuhrī, and despite Schoeler’s

¹⁰⁴) Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt*, I.1, 129.

¹⁰⁵) *ibid.*, I.1, 130.

¹⁰⁶) SCHOELER, *Charakter und Authentie*, 81, 171.





best efforts, this simply is not possible at present. Only a small handful of *ḥadīth* concerning the beginnings of revelation claim descent from ʿUrwa through different channels, and most of these have such problematic transmission histories that they are historically useless for any attempt to discern the character and authenticity of the earliest *sīra* traditions. Really the only significant evidence for transmission from ʿUrwa not involving al-Zuhrī is a report surviving only in Ibn Saʿd’s *Ṭabaqāt* that takes the alternate route to ʿUrwa via his son Hishām. Interestingly enough, this very brief account shares remarkable similarities with al-Zuhrī’s shorter narrative, ascribing to ʿUrwa the teaching that one day Muḥammad began to have visions of light and hear sounds, which frightened him. When he told Khadīja about his experiences, fearing that perhaps he had become a soothsayer (*kāhin*), she reassured him that God would not do that to him and that his visions were true.¹⁰⁷

In his monograph, Schoeler argues rather hastily that this report in fact preserves a genuine tradition from ʿUrwa, although his analysis of the report is not nearly as compelling as his own confidence in its authenticity might suggest.¹⁰⁸ Firstly, Schoeler argues that the *isnād* itself presents a nearly fail-safe (*fast sicheres*) sign of authenticity, since it ends with ʿUrwa and has not been “elevated” to ʿĀ’isha. Here of course Schoeler has in mind a principle of analysis first proposed by Goldziher and then refined into a system by Schacht based on a general theory of the backward growth of *isnāds* to increasingly higher authorities. Accordingly, traditions bearing shorter *isnāds* are earlier: as Schacht explains, “generally and broadly speaking, traditions from Companions and Successors are earlier than those from the Prophet.”¹⁰⁹ Schoeler’s conclusion is thus certainly well grounded within the tradition of Schachtian analysis, and he invokes a rule that has long held sway within the study of early Islam, even among those who, like Schoeler himself, are not always willing to accept the full consequences of Schacht’s approach. Nevertheless, despite its widespread application, Rubin has demonstrated quite compellingly in a recent study that this principle simply does not hold true, particularly in the case of the biographical traditions, which are the focus of Rubin’s analysis.¹¹⁰ Even more to the point, Rubin has specifically examined the revelation traditions and

¹⁰⁷) Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt*, I.1, 130. The complete *isnād* is ʿAffān b. Muslim < Ḥammād b. Salama < Hishām b. ʿUrwa < ʿUrwa.

¹⁰⁸) SCHOELER, *Charakter und Authentie*, 79–81.

¹⁰⁹) GOLDZIHHER, *Muslim Studies*, II, 148; SCHACHT, *Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*, 3, 163–75.

¹¹⁰) RUBIN, *Eye of the Beholder*, 234–60.





the al-Zuhrī < ʿUrwa < ʿĀʾisha chain in particular, reaching the convincing conclusion that “[t]he traditions about the first prophetic revelation of Muḥammad exhibit no history of backwards growth in their *isnāds*” and that “the occurrence of ʿĀʾisha’s name does not indicate backwards growth.”¹¹¹ Consequently, Schoeler’s firm confidence in this rule is somewhat misplaced, and ʿĀʾisha’s absence from Ibn Saʿd’s *isnād* is not in and of itself a secure indicator of either the tradition’s antiquity or its authenticity.

Schoeler additionally argues that this *ḥadīth*’s report that Muḥammad feared he had become a madman (*kāhin*) because of his visions and auditions is a sign of its antiquity in comparison with the more generic “fear for his soul” described by many of the al-Zuhrī narratives: Schoeler suggests that here al-Zuhrī has moderated an earlier tradition, presumably by generalizing it. Likewise Schoeler invokes close parallels with Khadija’s response to Muḥammad in a few other versions of the al-Zuhrī recension, although he fails to specify which ones. Nevertheless, these arguments are not entirely persuasive, and ultimately Schoeler’s analysis must confront here the rather considerable problem that he more or less elides in his examination of the al-Zuhrī traditions, namely, the extreme brevity of this tradition in comparison with the much larger *iqraʾ* complex that he wants to authenticate. Schoeler eventually raises the question of whether ʿUrwa taught the tradition in this short form or if perhaps it has been abbreviated, concluding initially that the question is certainly unanswerable. Surprisingly, however, he immediately resolves the conundrum, and continuing in his earlier pattern, he decides that the second possibility, abbreviation, is probably correct, which, of course, is necessary for his hypothesis.¹¹²

Nevertheless, Rubin’s studies of the revelation traditions afford a much less arbitrary means of escaping this impasse, and regrettably, Schoeler’s monograph does not engage these works, leaving to the side this viable alternative to his approach.¹¹³ In contrast to Schoeler’s focus on *isnāds* as a

¹¹¹) *ibid.*, 249–50.

¹¹²) SCHOELER, *Charakter und Authentie*, 80–81. Cf. TOR ANDRAE, “Die Legenden von der Berufung Muḥammeds,” *Le monde oriental* 6 (1912), 5–18, 6–7, who reaches the opposite conclusion – that ʿUrwa in fact taught this short tradition.

¹¹³) In all fairness, the study of these traditions published in Rubin’s book, *Eye of the Beholder*, appeared only the year before Schoeler’s monograph: RUBIN, *Eye of the Beholder*, 103–12. Nevertheless, most of the basic ideas from this chapter were published in an earlier article: *idem*, “*Iqraʾ bi-smi rabbika ...!*” *Israel Oriental Studies* 13 (1993), 213–30, esp. 218–20. Schoeler gives a bibliographic notice of the article’s existence at the beginning and cites Rubin’s opinion regarding another ver-





means of dating Islamic traditions, Rubin takes an approach centered on the *matns* themselves, which, while not ignoring the *isnāds* entirely, looks to the content of *ḥadīth* as potentially more valuable for understanding the history of early Islamic traditions.¹¹⁴ With regard to the traditions about the beginning of revelation, Rubin structures his study around the presence – or absence – of Qurʾānic elements in the various narratives, building on earlier observations by Tor Andrae and Richard Bell in this regard.¹¹⁵ Rubin assumes a process of “Quranisation” that gradually reshaped the traditions of revelation (among others) through a process of literary revision aimed at bringing them more into agreement with the Islamic belief that the Qurʾān is in fact the content of Muḥammad’s prophetic revelation. Thus, whereas Schoeler seems to assume that the entire revelation complex, including the visions, *tahannut*, *iqraʾ*, *ufuq*, Khadija, and Waraqa episodes, is primitive, Rubin’s approach views this conglomerate as the result of literary development and seeks to understand the process by which the tradition grew and was overlaid with various Qurʾānic and biographical traditions. Central to Rubin’s analysis are several accounts of the beginnings of revelation that lack any Qurʾānic overlay, including the Hishām ibn ʿUrwa tradition, all of which happen to survive in Ibn Saʿd’s *Ṭabaqāt*, although some also appear in other collections.¹¹⁶ These versions, he explains, “preserve the sheer universal elements of revelation adapted to Arabian surroundings, but not yet to Quranic models,” suggesting their priority in relation to the “Quranicised” narratives that populate the *ḥadīth* collections.¹¹⁷

sion of the *iqraʾ* narrative attributed to ʿAbdallāh b. Shaddād, but he does not otherwise engage with its ideas. Schoeler has since responded directly to Rubin’s proposals in a review article, where he continues to maintain that the non-Qurʾānic traditions are simply abbreviations, although his arguments to this effect are not persuasive: Gregor SCHOELER, “Uri Rubin: The Eye of the Beholder,” *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes* 88 (1998), 213–27, 222.

¹¹⁴) See for instance, as noted above, the final chapter of RUBIN, *Eye of the Beholder*, which critiques the use of *isnāds* for dating traditions. See also Motzki’s summary of *matn* analysis in MOTZKI, “Dating Muslim Traditions,” 206–14, although Motzki’s article is essentially a defense of *isnād* based dating against the principles of *matn* analysis.

¹¹⁵) Richard BELL, “Mohammed’s Call,” *The Muslim World* 24 (1934), 13–19, esp. 15–16; ANDRAE, “Die Legenden,” esp. 15. Andrae’s study is rather strangely overlooked by Rubin. See also Richard BELL, “Muhammad’s Visions,” *The Muslim World* 24 (1934), 145–54.

¹¹⁶) Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt*, I.1, 129–30.

¹¹⁷) RUBIN, *Eye of the Beholder*, 108.



While Rubin does not fully elucidate the logic behind this supposition, its basis is fairly obvious: not only does it adhere to the text critic's maxim, *brevior lectio potior*,¹¹⁸ but it is also much easier to conceive of the gradual adaptation of these revelation traditions to conform with Islamic beliefs about the Qur'ānic text than it is to imagine later traditionists stripping this pivotal moment in Muḥammad's career of its bond to the sacred text. These are both points on which Schoeler's analysis founders, as he fails to offer a compelling explanation why Ibn Sa'd, or Ibn Ishāq or al-Zuhrī or Hishām ibn 'Urwa for that matter, would sever the connection between Muḥammad's revelation and the Qur'ān by reducing this moment to indefinite visions and voices. The alternative, however, is much easier to envision: Muḥammad's religious experience of intense light and auditions, a rather generic and ubiquitous religious phenomenon,¹¹⁹ was gradually rewritten to conform with the Islamic belief that the content of these revelations was the text of the Qur'ān. Although Western scholarship since Lammens has inclined toward a view of the *sīra* as largely exegetical of the Qur'ān, designed to provide it with a context by supplying the "circumstances of revelation" (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), in this particular instance it seems probable that the tradition has evolved in the opposite direction.¹²⁰ Belief in Muḥammad's prophetic experience was surely one of the earliest tenets

¹¹⁸) See e.g., L. D. REYNOLDS and Nigel Guy WILSON, *Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, 1991), 291.

¹¹⁹) See, e.g., William JAMES, *The Varieties of Religious Experience; A Study in Human Nature* (New York, 1902), 246–56, 379–429; Evelyn UNDERHILL, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness* (Mineola, N.Y., 2002), 232–97.

¹²⁰) See esp. Rubin's remarks on this topic in Uri RUBIN, "The Life of Muḥammad and the Qur'ān: The Case of Muḥammad's Hijra," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 28 (2003), 40–64, 40–42. Although Rubin concludes on this basis that the *sīra* traditions are frequently older than the Qur'ān, which he believes to be quite late (see esp. idem, *Eye of the Beholder*, 226–33), this is not necessarily the case. Rather, Rubin's findings would appear to be a sign of parallel and independent development of the Qur'ānic traditions alongside of certain early historical traditions about the beginnings of Islam. Rubin's research has identified a process according to which these two traditions were eventually merged, once the Qur'ān and its authority had become established. Thus while the *sīra* traditions on the whole would still seem to be largely exegetical in the sense that Lammens describes, it appears that Rubin has identified in this case (among others) a very early tradition that had taken hold of the early Islamic memory before the equation of the Qur'ān with the content of Muḥammad's revelations became established.



of the nascent Islamic faith; nevertheless, prior to the collection and authorization of the Qurʾānic text,¹²¹ ideas about the nature of his revelations were very likely of a more generic nature, almost certainly with strong influence from the biblical matrix on which the Qurʾān itself draws. Once the Qurʾān had been assembled, however, and established as holy writ, its contents would need to be grafted onto the moment of Muḥammad’s initial prophetic experiences, as reflected in the canonical traditions.

Moreover, Rubin’s identification of various non-Qurʾānic, biblical elements at the heart of these un-“Quranicised” accounts seems to militate against Schoeler’s proposal that they are mere abbreviations. Even if Schoeler’s hypothesis could somehow account for the removal of certain Qurʾānic references, it fails to explain why these would then be “replaced” by non-Qurʾānic motifs apparently drawn from the biblical tradition. As Rubin notes, “the very notion that the Prophet saw light and heard voices is alien to the Quran. Nowhere in the scripture [i.e., the Qurʾān] is there any reference to visions of light (*ḍawʿ*), or to the hearing of a voice (*ṣawṭ*).

¹²¹) Although the Islamic tradition and much modern scholarship on early Islam hold the Qurʾān to be a rather transparent record of Muḥammad’s teaching that was committed to writing within about twenty years of his death, other alternative hypotheses of the Qurʾān’s formation seem much more plausible. For instance, although Wansbrough’s suggestion that the *ne varietur* Qurʾān dates only to the early ninth century does not seem very likely, his arguments for the Qurʾān’s formation much later than the Islamic tradition remembers are generally persuasive: WANSBROUGH, *Quranic Studies*, esp. 43–51. See also Andrew RIPPIN, “Literary Analysis of Qurʾān, Tafsīr, and Sīra: The Methodologies of John Wansbrough,” in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, ed. Richard C. MARTIN (Tuscon, 1985), 151–63, 227–32. The reign of ʿAbd al-Malik has emerged as a period in which the Qurʾān’s final collection and standardization seems highly likely: see DE PRÉMARE, *Les fondations de l’islam*, 278–306; idem, *Aux origines du Coran: questions d’hier, approches d’aujourd’hui*, L’Islam en débats (Paris, 2004), esp. 57–136. Cf. Paul CASANOVA, *Mohammed et la fin du monde: étude critique sur l’Islam primitif* (Paris, 1911–24), 103–42; Alphonse MINGANA, “The Transmission of the Kurʾān,” *Journal of the Manchester Egyptian and Oriental Society* 5 (1916), 25–47; CRONE and COOK, *Hagarism*, 17–18; Robert G. HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam 13 (Princeton, 1997), 500–1. Chase Robinson has recently endorsed this idea, and even Angelika Neuwirth, in responding to de Prémare’s work, has conceded that the *ne varietur textus receptus* of the Qurʾān was perhaps not established until ʿAbd al-Malik’s rule: ROBINSON, *ʿAbd al-Malik*, 102–4; Angelika NEUWIRTH, *Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren: die literarische Form des Koran – ein Zeugnis seiner Historizität?*, 2nd ed. (Berlin, 2007), 18*–22*, esp. 19*.





Neither is there in the Quran any reference to a terrifying encounter with the angel which causes the Prophet a critical state of anxiety.¹²² These are in fact “biblical rather than Quranic conventions” that reflect the tradition’s initial formation within an apologetic context as early Islam sought to define itself against the “People of the Book,” forging an image of their prophet that conformed to biblical models. Nevertheless, inasmuch as the Qur’ān came to be understood to be the main product of Muḥammad’s prophetic experiences, it eventually became necessary to inscribe the sacred text onto the very moment when his revelations began. This Qur’ānic grafting took two primary forms, one in which the angelic visions of *sūras* 53 and 81 are introduced (the *ufuq* motif), and another in which Muḥammad recites a brief passage from the Qur’ān in response to the angel’s command to “recite” (*iqra’*), usually the beginning of *sūra* 96, which conveniently begins with the *iqra’* imperative. The canonical accounts of the *muṣannaḥ* collections generally have both elements, and always the *iqra’* episode, securing the traditional bond between Muḥammad’s revelations and Qur’ān.¹²³

Various “non-canonical” accounts, however, lacking some if not all of the Qur’ānicizing motifs survive in different biographical collections, and particularly in Ibn Sa’d’s *Ṭabaqāt*. For instance, in addition to the Hishām ibn ‘Urwa tradition discussed above, another tradition purporting to originate with Ibn ‘Abbās describes Muḥammad’s terrifying experience of voices and light, as a result of which Khadija brings him to Waraqa. Waraqa responds that, if Muḥammad is telling the truth, then he has begun to receive a revelation (*nāmūs*) like the one received by Moses.¹²⁴ The absence of any Qur’ānic elements suggests that this is a particularly early account, as does Waraqa’s raising the question of Muḥammad’s truthfulness: in the more heavily Qur’ānicized narratives Waraqa responds by expressing strong confidence in Muḥammad and his prophecy. Likewise, a similar account from the *Ṭabaqāt*, also attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās, lacks the *iqra’* episode, although it begins with the *ufuq* motif instead of visions of light and voices. The frightened Muḥammad then flees to Khadija for

¹²²) RUBIN, *Eye of the Beholder*, 109.

¹²³) Nevertheless, Tirmidhī’s collection, one of the six canonical collections, contains the short al-Zuhri tradition, which lacks these Qur’ānic elements, including the *iqra’* episode: Tirmidhī, *Sunan*, V, 257.

¹²⁴) Ibn Sa’d, *Ṭabaqāt*, I.1, 130. See also Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, I, 312; Sulaymān ibn Aḥmad Ṭabarānī, *al-Muḥjam al-kabīr* ed. Ḥamdī ‘Abd al-Majīd al-Salafī, 2nd ed. (Beirut, 2002), XII, no. 12839. Regarding the meaning of *nāmūs*, see the discussion below.





comfort, and she brings him to Waraqa, who confirms his status as a prophet.¹²⁵

Yet the first of Ibn Saʿd's four non-Qurʾānic revelation accounts is al-Zuhrī's short version (from al-Wāqidi), which describes this event simply as a dreamlike experience of visions of light. Although Rubin does not include this version in his analysis of the revelation narratives, it seems increasingly clear that al-Zuhrī's short version belongs together with the other early non-Qurʾānicized accounts.¹²⁶ Inasmuch as Ibn Saʿd transmits this report almost identically and yet independently of Ibn Ishāq, it is rather unlikely that its brevity can be attributed merely to Ibn Ishāq's concern to avoid redundancy, and Schoeler's off-hand remark that Ibn Saʿd has independently shortened the al-Zuhrī report is neither explained nor warranted.¹²⁷ Moreover, it is difficult to imagine that if al-Zuhrī's account already included such clear links to the Qurʾān both Ibn Ishāq and Ibn Saʿd (or his sources) would have severed this connection and reduced the episode to generic visions of light, removing the all important *iqraʿ* scene or Muḥammad's pleas with Kadīja to wrap him up, a reference to the opening verses of *sūras* 73 and 74.

The traditions ascribed to ʿUrwa through his son Hishām and to Ibn ʿAbbās are in fact remarkably similar to al-Zuhrī's short account and seem to offer confirmation of its possible authenticity and antiquity. Moreover, Rubin's approach to these traditions affords a much less arbitrary means of judging the value of Hishām ibn ʿUrwa's account of his father's teaching, which seems, contrary to Schoeler's personal judgment, to preserve a very primitive account rather than an abbreviation. Even if it does not actually derive from ʿUrwa's teaching, it would appear that this report reflects a very old tradition, and its strong similarities to the shorter al-Zuhrī account transmitted by Ibn Ishāq and Wāqidi seems to confirm the antiquity of this basic narrative. Yet even if Hishām's tradition does originate with ʿUrwa, which certainly is possible, this account affords absolutely no basis for concluding that ʿUrwa transmitted the full revelation complex, as Schoeler would seemingly have it.¹²⁸

¹²⁵) Ibn Saʿd, *Ṭabaqāt*, I.1, 129–30. See also Aḥmad ibn Yaḥyā Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-ashraf*, ed. Muhammad Hamidullah (Cairo, 1959), I, 104.

¹²⁶) Rubin identifies a few other “non-Qurʾānic” accounts of Muhammad's initial revelations in RUBIN, “*Iqraʿ bi-smi rabbika ...!*” 219.

¹²⁷) SCHOELER, *Charakter und Authentie*, 81.

¹²⁸) He concludes, “man wird annehmen dürfen, dass Hišām eine ausführlichere Version von seinem Vater gehört und weiterüberliefert hat”: *ibid.*





Perhaps with this in mind, Schoeler looks to establish another line of transmission from ʿUrwa, turning next to a set of traditions ascribed to Ibn Lahīʿa from Abū l-Aswad Yatīm ʿUrwa (< ʿUrwa). Despite Schoeler’s apparent confidence in these reports about the beginnings of revelation, their transmission is in fact so irregular that they are historically worthless for any investigation of Islamic origins. This alleged Abū l-Aswad narrative is witnessed primarily by a rather lengthy account from Bayhaqī’s *Dalāʿil*, as well as in a fragmentary form attested by Ibn Kathīr and Ibn Ḥajar. Schoeler notes from the outset that the transmission history of this *ḥadīth* is “extremely problematic,” inasmuch as it survives in two rather different recensions transmitted only by later sources. Yet despite this seemingly blunt recognition, the situation is in fact much worse than Schoeler here admits. In another study, for instance, Schoeler himself assesses traditions from ʿUrwa that are transmitted through Abū l-Aswad as being in general unreliable, noting as well the similar conclusions reached by his colleague Andreas Görke in his study of the al-Ḥudaybiya traditions. In regard to the latter, Schoeler observes that Abū l-Aswad’s account of al-Ḥudaybiya “either does not go back to ʿUrwah at all or at least adopts motifs from other transmissions,” and he judges it “useless for a reconstruction of the contents of the original ʿUrwah tradition,” proposing that “reconstruction has to be limited to the recensions of al-Zuhrī and Hishām.”¹²⁹ Rather tellingly, in the same article Schoeler equally declares Abū l-Aswad’s report from ʿUrwa about the beginnings of revelation as “similarly problematic”: this reflects what would appear to be a noteworthy departure from his earlier monograph, where these Abū l-Aswad traditions form the lynchpin of his efforts to assign the full *iqraʿ* narrative to ʿUrwa’s authority.¹³⁰

Turning to the traditions themselves, one finds, as promised, an extremely problematic transmission history. According to Schoeler, the long recension from Bayhaqī’s *Dalāʿil* initially appears without an *isnād*, beginning instead, “as it has come to our ears.” For the attribution to ʿUrwa, Schoeler directs his readers to the *ḥadīth*’s conclusion, where the *isnād* Ibn Lahīʿa < Abū l-Aswad < ʿUrwa appears, a chain which, as Schoeler again emphatically notes, has not been elevated to include ʿĀʿisha.¹³¹ Nevertheless, Schoeler’s claims regarding the genealogy of this tradition unfortunately are somewhat misleading. To be sure, the text of the *ḥadīth* begins, “as it has come to our ears,” but these words are preceded unmistakably by

¹²⁹) SCHOELEER, “Foundations for A New Biography,” 26.

¹³⁰) *ibid.*, 26 n. 21

¹³¹) SCHOELEER, *Charakter und Authentie*, 81.





an *isnād*! According to Bayhaqī, it was in fact none other than al-Zuhrī who reported this tradition, having heard it from Saʿīd b. al-Musayyib, who is the one alleged to have said, “as it has come to our ears.”¹³² There is little question that this *isnād* through al-Zuhrī belongs to this *ḥadīth*, particularly since the attribution to al-Zuhrī is repeated in the midst of the narrative, at the top of its second page in the edition. An *isnād* from ʿUrwa and Abū l-Aswad indeed follows at the story’s conclusion, where Bayhaqī notes that al-Layth reported something similar from these authorities. Moreover, while Schoeler additionally signals two transmissions of this account from Bayhaqī in much later sources, al-Suyūṭī’s *al-Khaṣāʾiṣ* and Ibn Kathīr’s *Bidāya*, he rather oddly notes that both authors give a “false” *isnād* (through al-Zuhrī) as a result of having misunderstood Bayhaqī.¹³³ Yet it seems that perhaps Schoeler has misunderstood Bayhaqī in failing to notice the chain of transmitters at the beginning of this narrative. Both al-Suyūṭī and Ibn Kathīr give the *ḥadīth*’s *isnād* as Mūsā b. ʿUqba < al-Zuhrī < Saʿīd b. al-Musayyib, in clear agreement with Bayhaqī’s text, without any mention of transmission from Abū l-Aswad. In any case, Bayhaqī’s identification of al-Zuhrī as the primary source of this tradition, as confirmed by these later sources, casts substantial doubt on what Schoeler already characterizes as a problematic line of transmission to ʿUrwa. Despite the second *isnād* leading back to ʿUrwa through Abū l-Aswad given at the *ḥadīth*’s conclusion, Bayhaqī’s characterization of this second report as “similar” to al-Zuhrī’s cannot be relied upon for establishing ʿUrwan authorship of the *iqraʾ* tradition.

Schoeler additionally notes two shorter recensions that relate both the *ufuq* episode and the *iqraʾ* account on the authority of *isnāds* leading back to ʿUrwa through Abū l-Aswad. Nevertheless, one of these reports appears in the *Tafsīr* of Ibn Kathīr, who in his *Bidāya* cites the full tradition from Bayhaqī (through al-Zuhrī) and thus cannot be regarded as an independent witness, particularly since Bayhaqī has already supplied this alternative *isnād*, albeit without a *matn*.¹³⁴ Quite possibly, Ibn Kathīr found a tradition needing an *isnād* and presumed that this must have been the “similar” tradition mentioned by Bayhaqī. The other short version occurs in Ibn Ḥajar’s fifteenth-century commentary on Bukhārī’s *Ṣaḥīḥ*, where

¹³²) Bayhaqī, *Dalāʾil al-nubuwwah*, II, 142–45.

¹³³) Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Khaṣāʾiṣ al-kubrā*, ed. Muḥammad Khalil Harrās, 3 vols. (Cairo, 1967), I, 231–33; Ismāʿīl ibn ʿUmar Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya fī al-tārīkh*, 14 vols. (Cairo, 1932–9), III, 13–15.

¹³⁴) Ismāʿīl ibn ʿUmar Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm*, 4th ed., 4 vols. (Cairo, 1956), IV, 249.





he relates the story according to the *riwāya* of Abū l-Aswad < ʿUrwa.¹³⁵ Ibn Ḥajar does not further identify his source, and such a truncated *isnād* is rather worthless for any sort of *isnād* criticism. One would suspect that he knows the tradition from either Bayhaqī or Ibn Kathīr, and thus without further information, the value of his witness for tracing the tradition back to ʿUrwa is extremely doubtful.

Given this weak and irregular transmission, as well as Schoeler’s own negative assessment of the tradition and its tradents in his subsequent article, it is somewhat surprising that in his monograph Schoeler confidently makes rather aggressive claims about ʿUrwa’s authorship on the basis of this tradition. Although he initially warns that it would be unwise to draw any sweeping conclusions from this problematic version, it seems that this is exactly what he does. Despite its overall weakness, Schoeler maintains that the Abū l-Aswad tradition ensures that the complete narrative of Muḥammad’s first revelation as transmitted through al-Zuhrī is in fact the work of ʿUrwa and moreover that the tradition in this form was already well known and widespread in the first Islamic century.¹³⁶ Yet Schoeler’s argument is hardly compelling. There is no evidence that the Abū l-Aswad < ʿUrwa tradition circulated independently of Bayhaqī’s collection, and its inclusion in his *Dalāʾil* certainly offers no assurance that this tradition goes back to ʿUrwa through this chain of transmission, a lineage which even Schoeler characterizes as highly problematic. More to the point is that Bayhaqī identifies al-Zuhrī (< Saʿīd b. al-Musayyib) as the source of this tradition, merely noting at its conclusion that Ibn Lahfā reported something similar from Abū l-Aswad and ʿUrwa. This notice can hardly stand as evidence for transmission of this tradition complex from ʿUrwa independently of al-Zuhrī: Bayhaqī relates the tradition on al-Zuhrī’s authority!

Nonetheless, it is certainly not inconceivable that some elements of the revelation traditions may have once been related by ʿUrwa. One would in fact expect to find traditions about Muḥammad’s prophetic inspirations that are quite old, and even the most skeptically minded investigator must acknowledge that surely belief in Muḥammad’s prophetic status belongs to the very earliest layers of Islamic tradition, even before ʿUrwa’s activity. Yet the evidence offered by *isnāds* for ʿUrwa’s involvement is rather frail and cannot vouch for his “authorship” of anything much beyond the vi-

¹³⁵) Aḥmad ibn ʿAlī Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Fatḥh al-bārī bi-sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. Ṭāḥāʿ Abd al-Raʿūf Saʿd, Muṣṭafā Hawwārī, and al-Sayyid Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Muʿṭī, 28 vols. (Cairo, 1978), I, 54.

¹³⁶) SCHOELER, *Charakter und Authentie*, 85.





sions of light and voices reported in the *ḥadīth* ascribed to his son Hishām. Assuming that Ibn Saʿd has accurately preserved both this tradition and its chain of tradents, his account affords the only possible evidence for transmission from ʿUrwa independently of al-Zuhrī. Consequently, there is no basis whatsoever for attributing to ʿUrwa all the various elements characteristic of al-Zuhrī’s longer version. If any part of these traditions about the onset of revelation may possibly be ascribed to ʿUrwa, it would be limited to Muḥammad’s initial religious experience of visions and auditions.¹³⁷

Interestingly enough, this conclusion aligns rather well with the findings of Rubin’s analysis of the process of Qurʾānicization, which determines that traditions describing the generic experience of visions of light and voices, absent the various Qurʾānic embellishments, are most likely the oldest. In addition, such an early ʿUrwan tradition would also clarify the reports from Ibn Ishāq and al-Wāqidī indicating that al-Zuhrī taught only a basic account of Muḥammad’s initial visions of light, a tradition that both al-Zuhrī and Hishām ibn ʿUrwa presumably would have inherited from ʿUrwa. It seems altogether credible then that a tradition ascribing generic religious experiences of voices and visions to Muḥammad at the beginnings of his prophecies had begun to circulate by the end of the first Islamic century, if not even earlier, and ʿUrwa himself may very well have related such traditions to his pupils. Both *isnād* criticism and analysis of the *matns* seem to support this conclusion. Nevertheless, there is no persuasive evidence that the full tradition complex, including the *tahannut*, *iqraʿ*, *ufuq*, Khadija, and Waraqa episodes, can be ascribed to ʿUrwa, and both approaches suggest instead that the various Qurʾānic and other traditional elements are later additions, presumably effected in part by al-Zuhrī.

We have not, however, with ʿUrwa reached the end of Schoeler’s analysis of this early tradition: convinced that he has demonstrated ʿUrwa’s authorship of the *iqraʿ* narrative, Schoeler pursues his investigation further still, hoping to uncover ʿUrwa’s sources. After briefly considering the possibility that ʿĀ’isha was ʿUrwa’s source, as indicated by the majority of the ʿUrwan *isnāds*, Schoeler quickly concludes in the negative. The tradition’s origins must be sought elsewhere, he resolves, proposing to locate them in Ibn Ishāq’s longer account of the onset of revelation. As noted above, Ibn Ishāq reports having heard a similar version of this story from

¹³⁷) Christopher Melchert raises a similar critique of Motzki’s analysis of early Islamic law, in which he uses slightly divergent *ḥadīth* to authenticate a particular tradition: MELCHERT, “Early History of Islamic Law,” 303.





Wahb b. Kaysān, a client of the Zubayr family, who claimed to have overheard the *qāṣṣ* ʿUbayd b. ʿUmayr as he was telling the story to ʿAbdallāh b. al-Zubayr. Schoeler argues that Ibn Ishāq’s long account holds the key to understanding the early history of this tradition complex, demonstrating the antiquity of the complete narrative, even if one cannot be entirely certain of its historical accuracy. Yet inasmuch as ʿUrwa’s authorship of the complete revelation narrative is itself not sufficiently in evidence, any quest for his sources seems rather pointless, and thus we will not dwell very long on this particular tradition. While the Wahb tradition’s attribution to Ibn Ishāq is secure, Schoeler’s ensuing conjectures regarding the story’s earlier transmission are highly speculative and occasionally even verge on undermining the reliability of his general approach.

According to Schoeler, both Wahb and ʿUrwa knew this story not from the sources indicated by the *isnāds* (ʿĀ’isha and ʿUbayd), but rather as a family tradition circulating among the members of the Zubayrid clan, who had initially learned it from the *qāṣṣ* ʿUbayd. Yet in order to make this work Schoeler must “correct” the *isnāds* to suit his theory, as most clearly seen in his diagram of what he refers to as the “expurgated” (*gereinigte*) ʿUrwa recension. Schoeler’s chart adjusts the process of transmission to reflect his hypothesis by filling in several “inferred” (*erschlossene*) lines of transmission to replace others that he deems “improbable” (*unwahrscheinlich*).¹³⁸ Here as well as elsewhere Schoeler’s study seems genuinely vulnerable to criticisms such as are levied by Herbert Berg to the effect that “Schoeler accepts the claims of the *isnāds* unless they disagree with his conclusions, in which case he decides that they have been manipulated.”¹³⁹ Although Schoeler vigorously rebuffs Berg’s critique in an extended response to his review,¹⁴⁰ it seems rather difficult to escape the conclusions drawn by Berg, particularly in this instance: Schoeler’s willingness to manipulate *isnāds* when they do not suit his theory presents a considerable weakness in his overall approach.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸) SCHOEELER, *Charakter und Authentie*, 100–3. The diagram is on p. 101; see also the related diagram on p. 91 that makes similar judgments in correcting the *isnāds* to suit the theory.

¹³⁹) HERBERT BERG, “Review of Gregor Schoeler, *Charakter und Authentie der muslimischen Überlieferung über das Leben Muhammads*,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 119 (1999), 315–17, esp. 317a.

¹⁴⁰) GREGOR SCHOEELER, “Character and Authenticity of the Muslim Tradition on the Life of Muhammad,” *Arabica* 48 (2002), 360–66, esp. 363.

¹⁴¹) Consider also the “invention” of an *isnād* for Ibn Ishāq’s *hijra* tradition noted above.





Nevertheless, if we approach Ibn Ishāq's Wahb tradition using Rubin's method, this narrative is seen to be even more thoroughly Qur'anicized than al-Zuhri's version. As Rubin observes, "the tradition abounds in Quranic material," including, in addition to the *iqra'* and *ufuq* episodes, the revelation of the Qur'an in the month of Ramaḍān (2.185) and Gabriel's appearance at night (in reference to 97.1 and 44.2).¹⁴² These additional Qur'anic elements suggest that Ibn Ishāq's long version is a younger, rather than older, tradition in comparison with the other early accounts, a conclusion also borne out by other features of the text. For instance, Ibn Ishāq's Wahb account must explain the meaning of *tahannuth* for its audience, while the al-Zuhri version can take this knowledge for granted, suggesting closer proximity to the original context. Likewise, in conjunction with these spiritual retreats, Ibn Ishāq reports that Muḥammad regularly fed the poor who came to him, adumbrating the Islamic practice of almsgiving, and at the conclusion of his retreats, before returning home, he is said to circumambulate the Ka'bah seven times, prefiguring of the rites of the *hajj*. Moreover, it would appear that by the time of Ibn Ishāq's Wahb tradition, the understanding of the "*nāmūs*" that had been sent down to Moses, which Waraqa informs Muḥammad that he too was receiving, had begun to shift. Although the meaning of this peculiar word has long been the subject of some debate, it seems most likely that this term reflects the Greek νόμος, referring to the "Law" that was delivered to Moses as a metaphor for the "great revelation" that both he and Muḥammad received.¹⁴³ While the Islamic tradition often interprets the word as meaning a "revealer" or "one who was sent down," hence referring to the angel Gabriel rather than the revelation itself, the concept was probably initially borrowed from the Greek in a context where the early Muslims were first defining themselves against Jews and Christians. As this setting retreated farther into the past, the term's original sense became equally remote, and "Arabic" meanings had to be discovered for this Greek word. Whereas the al-Zuhri short version still seems to operate with this original sense of

¹⁴²) RUBIN, *Eye of the Beholder*, 107–8.

¹⁴³) On *nāmūs* as a borrowing of the Greek νόμος, see, e.g., Alois SPRENGER, "Ueber den Ursprung und die Bedeutung des arabischen Wortes Nāmūs," *Zeitschrift der deutschen morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 13 (1859), 690–701; BELL, "Mohammed's Call," 15–16; WATT, *Muhammad at Mecca*, 51; al-Ṭabarī, *History of al-Ṭabarī: Volume VI*, 68 n. 101 and 72 n. 114; Claude GILLIOT, "Reconsidering the Authorship of the Qur'an: Is the Qur'an Partly the Fruit of a Progressive and Collective Work?," in *The Qur'an in its Historical Context*, ed. Gabriel SAID Reynolds, Routledge Studies in the Qur'an (London, 2008), 88–108, 91, 104 n. 33.





nāmūs, Ibn Ishāq's longer narrative has begun the process of seeking an alternative meaning for the word, which seems to be yet another sign of its relatively more recent formation.

Finally, as Schoeler begins to offer his conclusions, he returns to a tradition from Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* that he had originally signaled in a footnote near the beginning of this chapter.¹⁴⁴ Bede's story of the monk Caedmon offers some interesting parallels to Muḥammad's *iqra'* narrative, first identified by the Old Norse scholar Klaus von See and subsequently reproduced by Rudolf Sellheim in his study of the revelation traditions.¹⁴⁵ Sellheim is careful not to draw any sweeping conclusions from these similarities, but Schoeler determines on this basis that a version of the traditions of Muḥammad's first revelations must have already reached Europe by 711 CE (93 AH) or shortly thereafter and had been reworked into a Christian legend before the middle of the eighth century.¹⁴⁶ Yet not only is there no evidence for any circulation of the *iqra'* episode by this point, but the interval for transmission is much too short for Schoeler's conclusion to be credible. Moreover, the similarities between these two accounts can be more readily explained by common influence from the biblical tradition, as Sellheim tentatively suggests, and studies by Bell and Rubin have demonstrated the Bible's clear impact in shaping the story of Muḥammad's prophetic call, traditions that presumably also underlie Bede's narrative.¹⁴⁷ Accordingly, Schoeler's conclusions here overreach far beyond what the evidence will allow, and it seems extremely unlikely that Bede was under any influence from the *iqra'* story, whose antiquity he certainly does not demonstrate.

Therefore, despite his thorough analysis of a broad range of traditions purporting to relate Muḥammad's experiences at the beginning of his revelations, Schoeler does not succeed in ascribing the traditional visions-*taḥannut-iqra'-ufuq*-Khadīja-Waraqqa conglomerate to ʿUrwa. The evidence of the *isnāds* simply cannot support such a conclusion. On the contrary, the correlation of traditions and *isnāds* suggests alternatively that a simple account relating Muḥammad's initial experience of voices and visions of light may with some plausibility go back to ʿUrwa, and the results

¹⁴⁴) SCHOELER, *Charakter und Authentie*, 60–61 n. 203.

¹⁴⁵) Klaus VON SEE, "Caedmon und Muhammad," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 112 (1983), 225–33; Rudolf SELLHEIM, "Muḥammeds erstes Offenbarungserlebnis," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 10 (1987), 1–16, 13–16.

¹⁴⁶) SCHOELER, *Charakter und Authentie*, 116.

¹⁴⁷) See, in addition to Sellheim, BELL, "Mohammed's Call," 16; and RUBIN, "*Iqra' bi-smi rabbika ...!*," 216–18.





of Rubin’s analysis of the process of Qur’ānicization confirm that such a tradition is likely to be the earliest. As a result, we may conclude with a fair amount of certainty that by the end of the first Islamic century a tradition of Muḥammad’s experience of visions of light and hearing voices at the beginning of his revelations had begun to circulate, and there is certainly a possibility that ʿUrwa b. Zubayr was involved in the early transmission of this story. Nevertheless, it is perhaps worth pausing for a moment to reflect on the rather minimal achievement of this result. Even without such complex analysis, one would presumably be safe in assuming that a generic belief in Muḥammad’s prophetic experience must have stood at the core of the Islamic tradition from its very beginning. Thus, despite some limited measure of success, in this instance the *isnād*-critical approach ultimately reveals relatively little about the nature of early Islam that could not be otherwise deduced through alternate means.

The ʿĀ’isha Scandal

The other major component of Schoeler’s monograph, his study of the traditions about the “Ā’isha scandal” (*ḥadīth al-ifk*), meets with more success than his investigation of the revelation traditions, although once again the results do not present a ringing endorsement for the general reliability of either the *sīra* traditions or the ascription of their “basic framework” to ʿUrwa. This rather lengthy story revolves around accusations of adultery levied against ʿĀ’isha, occasioned when she was accidentally left behind by a caravan and returned to Medina in the company of another man. Gossip about ʿĀ’isha’s alleged infidelity spread rapidly across the city but ultimately was quashed by a Qur’ānic revelation (24.11) and Muḥammad’s accusations against certain of her slanderers.¹⁴⁸ The tradition circulated widely on the authority of al-Zuhri, who reports that he compiled his account from four different sources, one of whom was ʿUrwa, and Juynboll convincingly argues that the story is indeed al-Zuhri’s composition, concluding that “after he had asked around, Zuhri put all the bits and pieces of a certain rumor which still floated around in Medina together and arranged those into one continuous narrative.”¹⁴⁹ Juynboll further notes

¹⁴⁸) See, e.g., Ibn Ishāq, *Kitāb al-siyar*, I, 731–37; al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, I, 1518–26; al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, II, 153–57 (Kitāb al-Shahādāt, bāb 15); al-Bukhārī, *Translation*, III, 504–12; these and other traditions are indicated in SCHOELER, *Charakter und Authentie*, 177–79.

¹⁴⁹) JUYNBOLL, “Early Islamic Society,” 179–85, esp. 181–82.





that we may take some confidence that al-Zuhrī based his account on actual reports from the sources indicated, inasmuch as references to the ‘Ā’isha scandal also appear in traditions transmitted from ‘Urwa through his son Hishām. Schoeler develops Juynboll’s argument more fully, and his analysis of the story’s transmission through al-Zuhrī and Hishām ibn ‘Urwa demonstrates that many key elements of the tradition – although by no means the complete narrative transmitted by al-Zuhrī – can likely be traced to ‘Urwa at the end of the first Islamic century.¹⁵⁰ It would appear then that the rumors of ‘Ā’isha’s infidelity belong to the earliest layers of the Islamic tradition. Perhaps it is even possible, as Schoeler muses, that ‘Urwa learned the story from his aunt ‘Ā’isha herself, although this proposal remains purely speculative, and surely their kinship was just as suggestive in the minds of early Islamic traditionists as it is to Schoeler.

Nevertheless, as Schoeler himself is quick to recognize, the relative antiquity of this account is signaled equally by its sharp dissonance with later (Sunni) Islamic tradition and piety, which looked to ‘Ā’isha as the “mother of the faithful” and held her in extremely high regard. As Schoeler observes, “the main outlines of the story *go against* the usual pattern (‘Ā’isha as ‘mother of the believers’), even that the entire story (like the story of the satanic verses, f.i.) must have been a matter of extreme awkwardness for the Prophet, something that his disciples would hardly have invented.”¹⁵¹ The preservation of this story against the interest of the later tradition is certainly a compelling argument for its early origin, if not even its authenticity: it is difficult to imagine the fabrication of rumors about ‘Ā’isha’s infidelity after she had come to be so revered. Although Robert Hoyland has recently characterized such reasoning as “highly dubious,”¹⁵² this “criterion of dissimilarity” or “criterion of embarrassment” is a cornerstone of Historical Jesus Studies,¹⁵³ and its application here and elsewhere to the life of Muḥammad is both welcome and appropriate.¹⁵⁴ As evidence against this principle Hoyland refers to John Burton’s explanation of the Satanic Verses episode: while scholars have overwhelmingly looked to this “embarrassing” moment from Muḥammad’s career as almost cer-

¹⁵⁰) See SCHOELER, *Charakter und Authentie*, 144–53, 180.

¹⁵¹) SCHOELER, “Character and Authenticity,” 362; see also idem, *Charakter und Authentie*, 164.

¹⁵²) HOYLAND, “Writing the Biography of the Prophet,” 585.

¹⁵³) See, e.g., EHRMAN, *Jesus*, 91–94.

¹⁵⁴) In the study of early Islam, this principle was perhaps first and most influentially articulated by Goldziher: see GOLDZIHNER, *Muhammedanische Studien*, II, 29–30; Engl. trans. idem, *Muslim Studies*, II, 39–40.





tainly genuine, since “it is unthinkable that the story could have been invented by Muslims,”¹⁵⁵ Burton suggests that the story was indeed invented to show “that Qurʾānic verses could be divinely withdrawn without verbal replacement.”¹⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Burton’s rather complicated argument has not gained much traction, and his proposal that the entire story was invented simply to provide justification for a particular form of Qurʾānic abrogation is not very persuasive and certainly does not afford grounds for abolishing this core principle of historical and textual analysis.¹⁵⁷ Hoyland further remarks that this sort of reasoning “implies that our modern views on what is favourable or not coincide with those of early Muslims.” Yet Burton’s alternative merely replaces this modern viewpoint with the arcane world of early Qurʾānic exegesis, and one must admit that it is certainly no less problematic to view the origins of Islam through the prism of the medieval Islamic tradition and its interpretive categories. In this regard, Gerald Hawting’s analysis of the Satanic Verses tradition offers a far more compelling interpretation than Burton’s.¹⁵⁸ Arguing on the basis of the Qurʾān, Hawting identifies angelic intercession rather than idolatry as the main issue here, establishing a credible context for this episode within the religious milieu reflected in the Qurʾān. Likewise, Hawting makes equally clear the improbability that the story is a later fabrication based on the Qurʾān, as well as explaining its suppression in many sources as a result of the Islamic tradition’s association of Muḥammad’s opponents with polytheism and idolatry.¹⁵⁹

Admittedly, Hoyland’s caution that one must be careful about assuming that modern ideas of tension or contradiction within the Islamic tradition coincide with those of early Muslims is an important point. Such concerns certainly warrant constant and careful consideration, but they need not paralyze historical analysis: reconstruction of the past always involves

¹⁵⁵) WATT, *Muhammad at Mecca*, 103.

¹⁵⁶) HOYLAND, “Writing the Biography of the Prophet,” 585; see John BURTON, “Those are the High-Flying Cranes,” *Journal of Semitic Studies* 15 (1970), 246–64.

¹⁵⁷) Rubin, for instance, evaluates Burton’s hypothesis as “an oversimplified view that the traditions were invented merely to provide a Quranic basis for one of the formulas of the *naskh* theories”: RUBIN, *Eye of the Beholder*, 162 n. 16. See also HAWTING, *Idea of Idolatry*, esp. 134–35.

¹⁵⁸) HAWTING, *Idea of Idolatry*, esp. 130–49.

¹⁵⁹) These arguments are directed primarily against RUBIN, *Eye of the Beholder*, 156–66. Although Rubin does not directly address the issue of historicity, the implication of his study seems to be that the whole episode is fabricated on the basis of the Qurʾān.





viewing its events through the lens of the present, no matter which methods or criteria the historian applies.¹⁶⁰ No (post-)modern historian can escape the limitations of her social and intellectual context, and as salubrious as Hoyland's warning is to historians in general, it seems there is no alternative "view from nowhere" that does not bring contemporary concerns and perspectives to the analysis of the past. If we are to abandon the toolkit of modern historical study simply because of its own historical contingencies, then we presumably must resign ourselves either to a radical historical agnosticism or to the indigenous critique of the Islamic tradition itself. Moreover, application of this criterion of historical analysis is not simply a matter of judging a tradition "either false or authentic," as Hoyland somewhat falsely draws the dichotomy, but instead this method affords principles for identifying a probability that certain material is unlikely to have originated in specific historical circumstances. The point of such analysis is not then to determine whether the 'Ā'isha scandal actually happened just as the tradition describes it or not, but rather to identify a probability that the story's invention by later traditionists is highly unlikely, although certainly not impossible. While Hoyland's implicit critique of modern historiography's claim to divide "truth" from fiction is welcome, his rejection of this method of analysis for its failure to yield such "objective" results is not persuasive.

Thus even though Schoeler's arguments for attributing the main elements of the 'Ā'isha scandal tradition to 'Urwa are reasonably compelling, the "authenticity" of the material itself is quite another matter. It seems clear that this is a relatively early tradition, likely passed along by 'Urwa, but can we therefore be certain that these events actually transpired in the way that 'Urwa relates? Schoeler suggests that indeed this narrative does report actual historical "facts," and he aims to persuade his readers that 'Urwa's account accurately describes an episode from Muḥammad's lifetime, related to him most likely by 'Ā'isha herself. With surprising candor, Schoeler begins his discussion by acknowledging the instabilities of oral tradition, noting that research in this area has determined that the process of transmission very often transforms material to comport with the expectations of its transmitters, in order to fit "the logic of what-must-have-happened."¹⁶¹ Consequently, Schoeler agrees that Crone and Cook are largely correct in viewing much of early Islamic tradition as highly tendentious and unreliable, offering a needed critique of Watt and others in his camp for their occasional credulity. Yet Schoeler additionally maintains that

¹⁶⁰) See, e.g., CLARK, *History, Theory, Text*.

¹⁶¹) SCHOELER, *Charakter und Authentie*, 164–67.





despite the frequent failings of oral tradition, it is occasionally possible to recover authentic reports of key events from the beginnings of Islam, particularly in the period after the *hijra*. Traditions that can be assigned to ʿUrwa, for instance, are only a generation or two removed from the events that they describe, and, citing the same research on the nature of oral tradition, Schoeler argues that reports so close to the events themselves are much more likely to be accurate and untouched by the transfiguring forces of oral transmission. Nevertheless, as Chase Robinson has recently noted, “a relatively accurate oral history is predicated on a more or less stable social system, one that holds to old truths and conventions; in societies undergoing rapid social and political change (such as early Islam), oral history tends to be much less accurate.”¹⁶² Robinson’s remarks on this subject thus provide a much needed counterweight to Schoeler’s general confidence in the reliability of “early” oral transmission, cautioning against any hasty assumptions regarding the general veracity of such traditions.

On the whole, however, there is much to be said for Schoeler’s analysis of these traditions, and it may well be that ʿUrwa’s report reflects with some accuracy an episode in which ʿĀ’isha was accused of adultery by some members of the early community. Nevertheless, just how much of the story’s arrangement and its details depend on ʿUrwa’s fashioning is not clear: the Qur’ānic revelation, for instance, that vindicates ʿĀ’isha is presumably a later adornment and may be ʿUrwa’s contribution. Other elements, such as ʿĀ’isha’s lost necklace and the question of performing ablutions in the desert may also be embellishments. The core of the story, however, that ʿĀ’isha at some time went missing and upon her return was accused of adultery, seems credible, and this tradition may indeed reach back to the life of Muḥammad. It may even be that ʿĀ’isha herself was the original source, as Schoeler suggests, although it is equally plausible that this attribution results from the fact that she is the story’s central character. In any case, the ʿĀ’isha scandal does indeed appear to be an especially early tradition, attesting that despite the enormous problems confronting any effort to recover the “historical Muḥammad” from the much later traditions of the *sīra* and *ḥadīth* literature, in certain instances it may be possible to isolate some basic details that have a rather high level of historical credibility. The ʿĀ’isha scandal seems to present one of these rare occasions. Nevertheless, it is again worth noting just how meager the resulting historical “kernel” is: ʿĀ’isha was probably accused of adultery, and after an ensuing ruckus within the community of believers, her name was

¹⁶²) ROBINSON, *Islamic Historiography*, 10.





cleared. This is hardly information capable of throwing light on the nature of formative Islam. Moreover, Schoeler's painstaking analysis of the various *matns* and the accompanying *isnāds* serves merely to confirm in this instance what can otherwise be determined through applying standard criteria of historical criticism. As Schoeler himself ultimately concludes, the accusations of adultery against ʿĀ'isha are probably authentic inasmuch as their fabrication by the later tradition seems highly unlikely.

AL-ḤUDAYBIYA

Schoeler's primary collaborator, Andreas Görke, has published a similar study of traditions concerning the treaty at al-Ḥudaybiya, using the same methods of analysis to argue that ʿUrwa may be identified as their original author.¹⁶³ These *ḥadīths* relate Muḥammad's attempt to enter Mecca as a pilgrim, prior to its conquest. When he is refused entry, Muḥammad concludes an agreement with the Meccans, establishing a ten-year truce and making arrangements to allow for pilgrimage in the future. As is generally the case with the traditions that Schoeler has studied, the *isnāds* from the al-Ḥudaybiya traditions similarly offer compelling evidence that an early version of the story can with some confidence be assigned to al-Zuhri. Görke's proposed connection with ʿUrwa, however, is much less clearly in evidence and remains somewhat dubious. Görke aims to establish ʿUrwa's authorship by identifying lines of transmission from ʿUrwa that are independent of al-Zuhri, and he initially finds two possible routes: one through Abū l-Aswad and another through Hishām ibn ʿUrwa. The Abū l-Aswad tradition proves to be a dead end, as Görke himself concludes. Traditions circulated from ʿUrwa having Abū l-Aswad as a tradent are frequently unreliable, as Görke and Schoeler have both noted, and Görke speculates that Ibn Lahī'a may in fact be responsible for this particular tradition regarding al-Ḥudaybiya.¹⁶⁴ In any case, Abū l-Aswad's report cannot be used to assign the traditions of al-Ḥudaybiya to ʿUrwa, since "it seems probable that this tradition does not go back to ʿUrwa."¹⁶⁵ Thus Görke's efforts to link ʿUrwa with al-Ḥudaybiya stand or fall with the traditions attributed to his son Hishām.

¹⁶³) Andreas GÖRKE, "The Historical Tradition about al-Hudaybiya. A Study of ʿUrwa b. al-Zubayr's Account," in *The Biography of Muhammad: The Issue of the Sources*, ed. Harald MOTZKI (Leiden, 2000), 240–75.

¹⁶⁴) *ibid.*, 258; see also SCHOELER, "Foundations for A New Biography," 26.

¹⁶⁵) GÖRKE, "Historical Tradition about al-Hudaybiya," 258.





Unfortunately, there is only very limited attestation for a tradition about al-Ḥudaybiya transmitted from ʿUrwa through Hishām, as often seems to be the case. Two early collections, Abū Yūsuf's *Khardā* and Ibn Abī Shayba's *Muṣannaf*, report a similar account of al-Ḥudaybiya on the authority of Hishām that does not occur in other sources, although the narrative is witnessed only partially by Ibn Abī Shayba.¹⁶⁶ Such narrow evidence does not present a very firm foundation upon which to build an argument for ʿUrwan authorship. Moreover, Abū Yūsuf and Ibn Abī Shayba both knew the story of al-Ḥudaybiya in al-Zuhri's version through Ibn Ishāq as well as other sources, raising questions about the independence of the account ascribed to Hishām. Nevertheless, close textual agreements between Abū Yūsuf and Ibn Abī Shayba suggest that they had a common source for this tradition, making it unlikely that they could have independently rewritten a version of al-Zuhri's account. Thus it would seem that both Abū Yūsuf and Ibn Abī Shayba encountered a tradition about al-Ḥudaybiya that was attributed to Hishām ibn ʿUrwa, alleging his father as its source. The value of their testimony, however, for identifying ʿUrwa as the creator of the al-Ḥudaybiya story remains somewhat questionable. Lacking broader attestation for this narrative and its ascription to ʿUrwa through Hishām, it is difficult to place much confidence in the possibility of ʿUrwan authorship. There are simply not enough lines of transmission to reach the degree of probability attained, for instance, by Juynboll's *isnād*-critical studies of certain legal *ḥadīth*. It remains quite possible, for instance, that someone else composed this narrative on the basis of al-Zuhri's account and placed it into circulation under Hishām's name sometime before its discovery by Abū Yūsuf and Ibn Abī Shayba.

Alternatively, it is no less plausible that Hishām himself composed this narrative on the basis of al-Zuhri's account, eliding his debt to this source and attributing the story directly to his father instead, a possibility that applies to other traditions bearing his name as well. Although Görke and Schoeler frequently invoke Hishām ibn ʿUrwa as an independent witness to his father's teaching, it is worth noting that Hishām (d. 146/763) is more a contemporary of Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767) than of al-Zuhri (d. 124/742),

¹⁶⁶ Abū Yūsuf Yaʿqūb, *Kitāb al-kharāj* (Cairo, 1884), 127–30; French trans., Abū Yūsuf Yaʿqūb, *Le livre de l'impôt foncier (Kitāb el-kharāj)*, trans. Edmond Fagnan, Bibliothèque archéologique et historique 1 (Paris, 1921), 320–28; ʿAbdallāh ibn Muḥammad Ibn Abī Shayba, *al-Kitāb al-Muṣannaf fī al-aḥādīth wa-l-āthār*, ed. ʿAbd al-Khāliq al-Afghānī and Mukhtār Aḥmad al-Nadwī, 15 vols. (Bombay, 1979–83), XIV, 429–33.





dying just four years before the former and more than twenty years after the latter. Indeed, inasmuch as ʿUrwa (d. 94/712) must have died when Hishām was still quite young, it seems rather likely that Hishām would have first heard many of the teachings ascribed to his father only as they were being related by al-Zuhrī. Statistical analysis of medieval archives from Western Europe shows the average life expectancy for men who reached the age of twenty-five to have been approximately 25.7 additional years during periods when the Black Plague was not a factor, for a total of just over fifty years on average.¹⁶⁷ Assuming these data from medieval Europe are roughly comparable to life expectancies in the medieval Near East, it seems rather improbable that Hishām would have reached adulthood before his father’s death, which occurred fifty-one years before his own.¹⁶⁸ If we assume, following Donner, that tradents “needed to be at least fifteen years old to fully comprehend” what they were learning and that “few people lived beyond the age of sixty,” serious questions arise concerning Hishām’s alleged transmission of information directly from his father.¹⁶⁹ To the contrary, it seems somewhat improbable that Hishām ibn ʿUrwa would have learned very much about the origins of Islam directly from his father himself, and more likely he would have had to rely instead on his father’s pupils, such as al-Zuhrī. Given the length of time between his father’s death and his own professional activity, it stands to reason that even if ʿUrwa’s narratives were not taken directly from al-Zuhrī’s accounts, ʿUrwa’s memories may very well have been strongly determined by al-Zuhrī’s teachings. Inasmuch as both men were members of a relatively small group of elite scholars in eighth-century Medina, it seems rather likely that al-Zuhrī’s traditions concerning the life of Muḥammad would have impacted the stories told by the younger Hishām.

Moreover, according to the traditional Islamic sources, there was a degree of personal enmity between Ibn Ishāq and Hishām ibn ʿUrwa, and the

¹⁶⁷) See M. A. JONKER, “Estimation of Life Expectancy in the Middle Ages,” *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A (Statistics in Society)* 166 (2003), 105–17, esp. Table 1. Jonker notes in the conclusions that this result comports with the findings of other previous studies on this topic.

¹⁶⁸) Juynboll also identifies 50 as the average lifespan of men in the early Islamic world, noting with considerable skepticism that all the early transmitters of *ḥadīth* are alleged to have lived extremely long lives, on average reaching approximately 76 years of age: see G. H. A. JUYNBOLL, “On the Origins of Arabic Prose: Reflections on Authenticity,” in *Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society*, ed. G. H. A. JUYNBOLL, *Papers on Islamic History* 5 (Carbondale, 1982), 161–75, 170.

¹⁶⁹) DONNER, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 204 n. 3.





latter had accused Ibn Ishāq of circulating reports in Hishām’s name that originated with his wife.¹⁷⁰ While there is no guarantee that any of this is in fact true, it nevertheless suggests circumstances that could impugn the trustworthiness of Hishām’s alleged reports from his father. A personal rivalry with al-Zuhrī’s greatest student, Ibn Ishāq, certainly gives cause to suspect that Hishām may have attributed traditions directly to his father that he learned only from al-Zuhrī: competition with al-Zuhrī’s most famous disciple certainly could have inspired such “one-upsmanship.” Likewise, Hishām’s accusations against Ibn Ishāq invite suspicion that others may have circulated traditions under his name, in this case his wife. Consequently, one should perhaps not place too much stock in such a narrowly attested tradition, particularly from this source. While it may indeed be that the story of al-Ḥudaybiya originates with ʿUrwa, the weak tradition attributed to him through his son Hishām cannot establish a very strong probability that ʿUrwa was its author. In contrast to al-Zuhrī then, whose connection to the story is well established by a complex pattern of transmission with two well defined partial common links in Ibn Ishāq and Maʿmar, ʿUrwa’s association with the traditions of al-Ḥudaybiya remains rather tenuous.

Görke, however, concludes that the traditions ascribed to al-Zuhrī and Hishām do in fact both originate with ʿUrwa, and as he subsequently considers the historicity of ʿUrwa’s underlying report, he proceeds a bit more cautiously than does Schoeler’s analysis of the ʿĀ’isha scandal. Görke is somewhat less sanguine that ʿUrwa’s report reflects a “description of what really happened,” acknowledging that already by this time “[c]hanges may have occurred in the process of transmission from the eyewitnesses to ʿUrwa.”¹⁷¹ Several tendencies appear to have already exerted their influence on this narrative, including the glorification of Muḥammad through ascribing miracles to him, geminations and triplications, the presence of early Muslim leaders among the *dramatis personae*, and the use of biblical models, among various other *topoi*. Nevertheless, Görke proposes that we can still excavate actual historical events from this narrative by focusing on those elements “presenting the Muslims in an unfavorable manner or in a way that is contrary to the usual patterns.”¹⁷²

Certain features of the story do in fact seem unlikely to have been fabricated by the later tradition, as is exemplified particularly well by the article on al-Ḥudaybiya by Furrukh Ali. Ali begins his quest to discover “an

¹⁷⁰) See HOROVITZ, *Earliest Biographies of the Prophet*, 77–78.

¹⁷¹) GÖRKE, “Historical Tradition about al-Hudaybiya,” 259.

¹⁷²) *ibid.*, 261.





alternative version” of the meeting al-Ḥudaybiya with the conclusion that the events of this encounter must have transpired differently from how they are remembered in the accepted version, inasmuch as “[t]he Prophet’s acceptance of the humiliating terms imposed by the Meccans appears to be a dishonorable and pusillanimous act,” traits incompatible with the view of Muḥammad in Islamic piety.¹⁷³ As the presuppositions underlying Ali’s modern study illustrate with remarkable clarity, there must similarly have been considerable pressure within the early Islamic tradition to remember these events differently. The same convictions about Muḥammad’s “honor, valor, and adherence to principles that one would expect from a Prophet of God”¹⁷⁴ that presumably led to the creation of new, more flattering accounts of al-Ḥudaybiya have likewise inspired Ali to conclude that these less embarrassing versions must therefore be more historically accurate. Ali’s article thus bears an intriguing witness to the sustained influence of pressures to revise awkward aspects of the tradition even in the later twentieth century, affirming the improbability of their invention by the early traditionists.

Here again, however, we are back with the “criterion of dissimilarity” or “criterion of embarrassment,” whereby analysis of the *matn* itself without any need to appeal to *isnāds* can identify certain elements as likely reflections of an early tradition. In this case as with the ʿĀ’isha scandal, the analysis of *isnāds* adds very little to what can otherwise be known through study of the *matns* themselves. It is indeed striking that both arguments ultimately appeal to criteria derived from analysis of the *matns*, and it is this approach, rather than *isnād* criticism, that provides the primary basis for a claim of antiquity. Thus, these two most successful attempts to identify authentic traditions from the first century using *isnād* criticism (i.e., al-Ḥudaybiya and the ʿĀ’isha scandal) appear rather ironically to validate instead the effectiveness of *matn* criticism. In contrast then to Motzki’s claims that *isnād* criticism provides “more sophisticated methods of dating *ḥadīths* than relying either on the compilations containing the traditions or on the *matn*,”¹⁷⁵ the results of Schoeler and Görke’s studies of the

¹⁷³) Furrugh B. ALI, “Al-Ḥudaybiya: An Alternative Version,” *The Muslim World* 71 (1981), 47–62, 47.

¹⁷⁴) *ibid.*

¹⁷⁵) See most recently Harald MOTZKI, “Introduction: *Ḥadīth*: Origins and Developments,” in *Ḥadīth: Origins and Developments*, ed. Harald MOTZKI (Burlington, VT, 2004), xiii–lxiii, xlii–li, quotation at xlvi; *idem*, “Dating Muslim Traditions,” esp. 206–14. This idea was perhaps first proposed in Harris BIRKELAND, *The*





early *sīra* traditions would seem to affirm that *matn* analysis is more useful for identifying the earliest traditions, at least within the context of the biographical traditions. While the methods of *isnād* criticism first proposed by Schacht and subsequently refined by Juynboll have been shown useful for pinpointing the earliest circulation of a limited number of traditions primarily in the second Islamic century, the methods of *matn* criticism, particularly as advocated by Goldziher and Schacht, have proven the most effective for identifying early historical traditions perhaps arising from the first century.¹⁷⁶

Furthermore, Görke’s reflections on the historicity of the account that he assigns to ʿUrwa remind us that already by ʿUrwa’s time various *topoi* and tendencies had been active on the Islamic community’s memories of its origins. As he rightly notes, certain features of the al-Ḥudaybiya story appear to reflect the impact of literary and theological redaction. Therefore, even if on rare occasions it may prove possible to isolate an especially early report, one must nevertheless bear in mind that such narratives have almost certainly already been adjusted to reflect the community’s “salvation history.” Once again, the Christian gospels stand as compelling evidence of just how radically a tradition’s memory can shift over the course of only a few decades, and there is no reason to expect anything remarkably different in the evolution of the early Islamic tradition.



The Murder of Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq

Finally, one should also consider in this context Motzki’s lengthy study of the murder of Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq, which, although it does not aim to assign traditions to ʿUrwa, nevertheless utilizes the same methods employed by Görke and Schoeler in an effort to verify the historicity of material from the *sīra*. Motzki has chosen this particular tradition, he explains, because it is a “rather marginal” episode that does not involve Muḥammad himself, and thus its transmission is likely to be free from the various theological and literary tendencies that have shaped other stories in the *sīra*.¹⁷⁷ The story involves the murder of a prominent Jewish oppo-

Lord Guideth: Studies on Primitive Islam, Skrifter utg. av det Norske videnskapsakademi i Oslo. II. Hist.-filos., klasse, 1956, no. 2 (Oslo, 1956), 6–7.

¹⁷⁶) See esp. GOLDZIHHER, *Muhammedanische Studien*, II, 22–31; Engl. trans. idem, *Muslim Studies*, II, 33–40; SCHACHT, *Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence*, 176–89.

¹⁷⁷) MOTZKI, “Murder of Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq,” 171–72.





ment of Muḥammad, carried out by his followers on his instructions. The different versions describe how these assassins were able to breach Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq's dwelling, followed by rather elaborate, and often contradictory, accounts of the murder itself and the killers' return to Muḥammad after the deed. While there is in fact a minor tradition about Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq's murder ascribed to ʿUrwa, even Motzki estimates its historical worth as highly questionable,¹⁷⁸ and thus he decides to focus his investigation on three more well attested accounts of this assassination that do not name ʿUrwa as a transmitter.

Of these three traditions, the one assigned to al-Zuhrī has the most complex transmission history, and its circulation by al-Zuhrī once again seems very likely. Nevertheless, the various *isnāds* do not agree regarding al-Zuhrī's source, pointing instead to one of several members from the Kaʿb family. While many investigators would find such variation problematic, perhaps reflecting the efforts of later transmitters seeking to “grow” the *isnād* back to al-Zuhrī's source, Motzki draws confidence from this confusion, seeing it as solid evidence that “the information originates from the Kaʿb b. Mālik family.”¹⁷⁹ Elsewhere Motzki evaluates this identification of al-Zuhrī's source with members of the Kaʿb family as “certain,” reaching the rather peculiar conclusion that “the fact that the *isnād* is defective ... speaks in favor rather than against the reliability of al-Zuhrī's *isnād*.” Nonetheless, Motzki resolves that it is not possible to identify any particular individual as al-Zuhrī's source, and he concludes that the story al-Zuhrī received was likely “a condensation of the reports which the participants in the expedition had given and which were retold among the members of their tribe from generation to generation in order to praise the great deeds of their ancestors in favor of Islam.” Motzki additionally observes that “[t]he link between the Kaʿb b. Mālik family and the assassins is obvious. The latter were all members ... of the Banū Salima to whom also the descendents of Kaʿb b. Mālik belonged.”¹⁸⁰ While Motzki sees signs of authenticity in these ties of kinship, surely a link between the Kaʿb family and the assassins was no less “obvious” to the early authors of Islamic history, who may themselves have invented this connection between the Kaʿb family and Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq's murder. In any case, there is no reason to assume that al-Zuhrī simply received the surviving narrative as “a conden-

¹⁷⁸) *ibid.*, 222–24.

¹⁷⁹) *ibid.*, 177–79; see also the *isnād* diagram on 238. NB that while this diagram could give the mistaken impression that al-Zuhrī serves as an “inverted common link,” this is not the case.

¹⁸⁰) *ibid.*, 206–7.





sation of the reports” already made by members of the Kaʿb family: the resulting account is more than likely al-Zuhrī’s own composite, based on rumors and legends about the event that were then circulating in Medina. Thus it seems best to leave authorship of this account of Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq’s murder with al-Zuhrī, who presumably pieced together the various traditions about this episode, many of which may have originated among the members of the Kaʿb family as tall tales about the eminence of their ancestors.

A second, somewhat less well attested tradition is ascribed to a certain “Abū Ishāq,” whom Motzki identifies with Abū Ishāq al-Sabīʿī, a second-century Kūfan scholar (d. 126–29/743–46). Only four collectors record this Abū Ishāq tradition, al-Ṭabarī, Bukhārī, Bayhaqī, and Rūyānī, leaving a network of transmission considerably less dense than is the case with the al-Zuhrī version. On the surface at least, there could appear to be a reasonable probability that this Kūfan contemporary of al-Zuhrī placed this second account of Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq’s murder into circulation. Yet this *ḥadīth*’s transmission and the identification of its common link are both a bit more problematic than Motzki’s analysis discloses. None of the various *isnāds* actually identifies Abū Ishāq al-Sabīʿī as a transmitter, referring instead to an otherwise unidentified “Abū Ishāq” who emerges the tradition’s common link.¹⁸¹ Motzki does not bring either this ambiguity or its significance to his readers’ attention, although surely he is aware of the considerable problems that Juynboll has identified with this transmitter and traditions associated with his name.

The *kunya* (agnomen) Abū Ishāq, as Juynboll observes, “seems to have been uncommonly popular in Kūfa and on a lesser scale also in Baṣra.” This suggests “that there were perhaps quite a few people who wanted to share, by borrowing Abū Ishāq as-Sabīʿī’s *kunya*, in this famous traditionist’s glory,” with the result that “what appears to be the transmission of one person was in reality the work of many of the same name among whom one or two, in this case as-Sabīʿī and ash-Shaybānī, became eventually marked as key figures.” These two figures, Juynboll explains, were thus gradually “credited with the work of many, otherwise almost anonymous, Abū Ishāqs,” many of whom may in fact be entirely fictitious, casting doubt “on a substantial percentage of Kūfan and Baṣran *isnāds*.” Moreover, Juynboll

¹⁸¹ al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, I, 1375–77. al-Bukhārī, *al-Jāmiʿ al-ṣaḥīḥ*, II, 252–53 and III, 76–78 (Kitāb al-Jihād, bāb 155, and Kitāb al-Maghāzī, bāb 16); al-Bukhārī, *Translation*, IV, 164–65 and 248–55; Bayhaqī, *Dalāʾil al-nubuwwah*, IV, 34–38; Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥusayn Bayhaqī, *al-Sunan al-Kubrā*, 10 vols. (Beirut, 1968), IX, 80–81; Muḥammad ibn Hārūn Rūyānī, *Musnad*, 3 vols. (Cairo, 1995), I, 215–16.





further notes that “Abū Ishāq as-Sabīʿī is the sort of controversial figure to whom is ascribed a great deal of highly doubtful material,” warranting heightened suspicions regarding any material transmitted under this moniker. On the whole, Abū Ishāq *isnāds* were frequently employed as “highly useful tools to bring certain materials into circulation as prophetic traditions,” leading Juynboll to a rather sweeping dismissal of traditions associated with “Abū Ishāq.” “If store is to be set on *isnāds* at all,” he writes, “those with one unspecified Abū Ishāq at the Successor level are dubious in the extreme irrespective of the texts they support.”¹⁸²

Consequently, this second tradition about the murder of Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq is a great deal more problematic than Motzki’s study reveals. Each of the four sources traces the story’s lineage through an unidentified Abū Ishāq at the Successor level, a condition which, according to Juynboll’s analysis of the early Islamic tradition, marks this *ḥadīth* as “dubious in the extreme.” It is surprising that Motzki fails to address the numerous difficulties surrounding transmission ascribed to this figure, and he does not raise any critique of Juynboll’s findings nor does he offer any reason why this particular tradition should stand as an exception. Absent such explanations, it is difficult to place much confidence in Motzki’s identification of Abū Ishāq al-Sabīʿī as responsible for circulating this tradition, let alone its ascription to the Companion al-Barāʾ b. ʿAzib. Without a better answer to the problems identified by Juynboll, it seems best for the time being to leave this Abū Ishāq tradition to the side in any historical analysis.

According to Motzki, a third version of Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq’s murder occurs in al-Ṭabarī’s *History* and al-Wāqidi’s *Maghāzī*, both of which ascribe the story to ʿAbd Allāh b. Unays (d. 54/674), the alleged killer himself according to both narratives.¹⁸³ Nevertheless, it is not at all clear that these two accounts should be understood as conveying a single tradition, as Motzki presents them, and despite his assertions to the contrary, the two reports differ so markedly in their content that they are best viewed as in fact two independent accounts. Motzki claims that “even a superficial reading of both texts reveals obvious structural correspondences and many similarities in content,”¹⁸⁴ yet these similarities are themselves often superficial and occasionally even strained. Motzki attempts to justify his association of the two traditions with a table comparing their different textual “units,” but the points of contact that he identifies are

¹⁸²) JUYNBOLL, *Muslim Tradition*, 141–42. See also idem, “On the Origins of Arabic Prose,” esp. 170–71.

¹⁸³) al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, I, 1381–83; al-Wāqidi, *Kitāb al-maghāzī*, I, 391–95.

¹⁸⁴) MOTZKI, “Murder of Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq,” 212.





either minute or, in some cases, not apparent.¹⁸⁵ A quick read of Motzki's translations of the two accounts, based on earlier renderings by J. N. Mattock, should persuade most readers that the two traditions are in fact largely independent, having only a few points of overlap. Indeed, Mattock's study of this episode correctly identifies these two accounts as independent traditions, as does Gordon Newby's brief analysis in an article on Arabian Judaism.¹⁸⁶

It is of course important for Motzki's argument that these two *ḥadīths* are considered as a single tradition, inasmuch as only then can he postulate the report's origin from its common link, identified by the *isnāds* as ʿAbd Allāh b. Unays. Nevertheless, even if one were persuaded that these accounts reflect a single tradition descended from a common source, the network of transmitters in this instance is not sufficiently dense that their convergence on ʿAbd Allāh b. Unays reveals any meaningful evidence that he is its author, particularly since he is the story's central actor. Moreover, al-Wāqidi narrates a fragmentary account of the murder with a slightly different *isnād* that seems to contradict his first chain of transmitters, and Motzki must correct what he believes are the errors in both *isnāds*, adding transmitters to the second (which does not actually name ʿAbd Allāh b. Unays) in order to harmonize their transmissions.¹⁸⁷ On the whole, the evidence of the *isnāds* does not present a very compelling case for any connection with ʿAbd Allāh b. Unays, even if this were a single tradition. To the contrary, it seems highly likely that each of the two narratives was independently assigned to ʿAbd Allāh b. Unays because he appears as the murderer in both accounts, as well as in the al-Zuhrī version. Consequently, these *ḥadīths* cannot be reliably authenticated by using their *isnāds*.

Motzki nevertheless identifies a number of parallels between the two "ʿAbd Allāh b. Unays" accounts and al-Zuhrī's narrative, which he believes signal an early and authentic tradition underlying all three versions, perhaps originating with ʿAbd Allāh b. Unays himself. Yet these similarities very likely reflect the dependence of both ʿAbd Allāh b. Unays narratives on parts of al-Zuhrī's report, rather than pointing to some early common

¹⁸⁵) For examples of the latter, compare al-Ṭabarī's units 7 and 8 with units 11 and 26 respectively in al-Wāqidi's account, as Motzki suggests. Here and in other instances I fail to see the "obvious" similarities.

¹⁸⁶) J. N. MATTOCK, "History and Fiction," *Occasional Papers of the School of Abbasid Studies* 1 (1986), 80–97; Gordon D. NEWBY, "The *Sīrah* as a Source for Arabian Jewish History: Problems and Perspectives," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 7 (1986), 121–38.

¹⁸⁷) MOTZKI, "Murder of Ibn Abi l-Ḥuqayq," 180–81.





source. This certainly would be a possibility in the case of al-Wāqidī, whom modern scholars have often accused of plagiarizing Ibn Ishāq's *Sīra*, although, as Motzki notes, there is presently no consensus in this regard.¹⁸⁸ Nevertheless, it need not be al-Wāqidī, or al-Ṭabarī for that matter, who is responsible for the creation of these narratives. Both compilers very likely found these traditions more or less in the state that they transmit them, and presumably some earlier, anonymous individuals produced these accounts from traditions already in circulation (including al-Zuhrī's in particular), assigning them to the murderer himself, ʿAbd Allāh b. Unays, as a means of heightening their "authenticity." Although Motzki offers several reasons why he thinks al-Wāqidī's story is not dependent on al-Zuhrī's version, his arguments are not decisive and cannot exclude this possibility.¹⁸⁹ Consequently, the traditions assigned to ʿAbd Allāh b. Unays are of rather dubious historical value for any effort to recover an authentic, early account of Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq's murder. These accounts reflect not a single tradition but two separate *ḥadīths* having some minor points of contact with each other as well as with al-Zuhrī's tradition and perhaps being dependent on the latter. Moreover, each account is supported only by a single-strand *isnād* ending with the narrative's principal actor, an extremely likely target for forgers. Such circumstances do not inspire much confidence in either the antiquity or accuracy of these two accounts, and consequently they are also best left aside from any efforts to identify the earliest traditions about Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq's assassination or to assess the general reliability of material from the *sīra* tradition.

In sum, Motzki's analysis does not succeed in its attempt to locate these traditions about the murder of one of Muḥammad's opponents within the first Islamic century, nor does he persuasively demonstrate that the core elements of these accounts reflect a "historical reality" from the life of Muḥammad. Although an account of these events can be traced with some credibility to al-Zuhrī, the traditions assigned to Abū Ishāq and the two distinct narratives attributed to ʿAbd Allāh b. Unays by al-Wāqidī and al-Ṭabarī have problematic transmissions, and thus their *isnāds* are not useful for historical analysis or dating. Lacking even approximate dates for the initial circulation of these *ḥadīths*, it is not possible to invoke them as witnesses to an earlier tradition on which al-Zuhrī drew when composing his own version. Nevertheless, even if one were to accept Motzki's rather questionable dating of these accounts, the results are quite "meager," even by his own estimation. The "historical kernel" witnessed by these reports, Motzki

¹⁸⁸) See the references at *ibid.*, 217 n. 121.

¹⁸⁹) *ibid.*, 217–18.





concludes, consists of no more than the information that Muḥammad sent several men to kill Abū Rāfiʿ b. Abī l-Ḥuqayq, and they entered his dwelling somewhere outside of Medina and killed him, in the course of which one man suffered a foot injury.¹⁹⁰ This conclusion does not reach much beyond Mattock's observation that "the only point on which [these accounts] agree is that Abū Rāfiʿ was killed in the course of a raid by five men."¹⁹¹

Nevertheless, one certainly must admit that neither of these deductions seems at all historically improbable in itself, and on the surface of things, it is entirely plausible that Muḥammad may have ordered the assassination of a prominent Jewish opponent and that some of his followers carried out the deed. As Paret notes, the political assassination of Jewish opponents is a prominent theme of the *sīra* traditions, and it is indeed possible that Muḥammad occasionally dealt with certain opponents in this manner.¹⁹² Nevertheless, given the relative frequency of political assassination as a theme in Muḥammad's biography, one cannot completely exclude the possibility that the story of Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq's murder was composed in imitation of these other stories. Al-Zuhrī in fact supplies the potential motive for such a fabrication when he sets the episode within the context of the rivalry between al-Aws and al-Khazraj, two Medinese tribes. According to al-Zuhrī, these two tribes

competed one with the other for Islam like two stallions. Every time Aws did something, the Khazraj said, 'By God they shall never surpass us in merit for Islam!' and when the Khazraj did something, the Aws said the same. When the Aws had killed Kaʿb b. al-Ashraf, the Khazraj said, 'By God, we shall not rest until we satisfy the Messenger of God as they did.' They conferred over the most important person among the Jews and asked the Prophet for permission to kill him – he was Sallām b. Abī l-Ḥuqayq al-ʿAwar Abū Rāfiʿ.¹⁹³

Certainly such tribal rivalries maintained their influence even after the death of Muḥammad and his initial followers, and consequently one should not rule out the possibility that this account was largely fabricated by members of the Khazraj in response to the tradition of al-Aws' role in Kaʿb b. al-Ashraf's murder.¹⁹⁴ Motzki himself suggests the origin of al-Zuhrī's

¹⁹⁰) *ibid.*, 232.

¹⁹¹) MATTOCK, "History and Fiction," 95.

¹⁹²) PARET, *Mohammed und der Koran*, 155–56; see also WATT, *Muhammad at Medina*, 18–19, 208–20.

¹⁹³) ʿAbd al-Razzāq, *al-Muṣannaf*, V, 407–10, citing Motzki's translation from MOTZKI, "Murder of Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq," 191. See also Ibn Hishām, *Kitāb sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, I, 714–15; and al-Ṭabarī, *Annales*, I, 1378–80.

¹⁹⁴) See DONNER, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 164.





account in stories that were told “among the members of their tribe from generation to generation in order to praise the great deeds of their ancestors in favor of Islam.”¹⁹⁵ It is certainly a possibility that such a desire to eulogize the tribe’s ancestors for their service to both Muḥammad and Islam gave rise to this narrative, particularly if the Khazraj’s arch-rivals the Aws were claiming such glories for their progenitors in the assassination of Ka’b b. al-Ashraf: if such a counter-story did not already exist one would certainly have to be “invented.” Yet even if the tradition’s kernel relates an incident from the life of Muḥammad, as Motzki has proposed, it ultimately does not reveal much about the “historical Muḥammad” or the nature of his religious movement: unfortunately, such information would add very little to our understanding of the earliest history of the Islamic religion.

One final point that Motzki largely marginalizes is the clear impact of certain biblical traditions on the shape of these reports. P. Jensen was the first to propose influence from the biblical accounts of the murders of Ishba’l (2 Samuel 4) and ‘Eglōn (Judges 3.15–26) on the various narratives of Ibn Abi l-Ḥuqayq’s assassination, and the latter story’s influence seems particularly likely, as Joseph Horowitz was also persuaded.¹⁹⁶ Motzki, however, waits until the very end of his article to raise this possibility, which he quickly dismisses. Any points of contact, he concludes, “are very few in number and so general” in nature as to be essentially meaningless in his estimation. Nevertheless, it would be very helpful for the reader if Motzki had introduced the issue of potential biblical models at the outset of his article, enabling a consideration of this possibility from the very beginning. Despite Motzki’s rather rough dismissal, the biblical imprint on this narrative is readily apparent in a number of details, including the emphasis on the doors and the manner of execution. Perhaps Motzki holds this possibility to the very end for rhetorical purposes, so as to introduce this possibility only after making a case for the tradition’s historical accuracy and thereby making any biblical influence somewhat easier to disregard. In any case, while it seems rather unlikely that the story of Ibn Abi l-Ḥuqayq’s as-

¹⁹⁵) MOTZKI, “Murder of Ibn Abi l-Ḥuqayq,” 207

¹⁹⁶) P. JENSEN, “Das Leben Muhammeds und die David-Sage,” *Der Islam* 12 (1922), 84–97, 91, 95; JOSEF HOROVITZ, “Biblische Nachwirkungen in der *Sira*,” *Der Islam* 12 (1922), 184–89, 185. More recently, Ze’ev Maghen has explored parallels between David and Muḥammad, particularly with regard to the traditions about Bathsheba and Zaynab: ZE’EV MAGHEN, “Intertwined Triangles: Remarks on the Relationship between Two Prophetic Scandals,” *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 33 (2007), 17–92. I thank David S. Powers for this reference.





sassination was invented entirely in imitation of these biblical models, their impact on the manner in which the story was remembered and retold is rather clear, and as Motzki notes, this influence must have come at a very early stage in the tradition. This episode from the *sīra* certainly reflects more than just a calque on the traditions of the Hebrew Bible, but the latter’s clear influence should caution against placing too much confidence in the details of even early traditions from the *sīra*, inasmuch as they have already been shaped by various literary and theological tendencies, as Rubin’s work demonstrates in particular. Moreover, while Motzki is unquestionably correct in concluding that the Bible’s influence has affected only a few general points of the story, given a narrative “kernel” that is, by his own estimation, itself “rather meager” and quite general, the impact of the biblical models suddenly seems quite large, and many of the specific details seem to owe their origin to this literary influence. Consequently, even if this tradition is particularly early, it holds extremely little information of any value for reconstructing either the beginnings of Islam or the life of Muḥammad. In the end, all that remains is a report that Muḥammad’s followers carried out a political assassination at his command, an occurrence which in and of itself certainly does not seem improbable.



Conclusions

Despite its lack of a specific focus on ʿUrwa, Motzki’s analysis of Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq’s murder mirrors in its ambitions the similar studies by Schoeler and Görke. In their collective effort, these three scholars have sought to rehabilitate the historicity of the *sīra* tradition, at least in part, by arguing that certain elements from Muḥammad’s biography crystallized at an early stage and thus possess reasonable claim to authenticity. The main target of this campaign is presumably the so-called “skeptical” school of early Islamic studies, as represented primarily in the works of Lammens, Schacht, Wansbrough, Cook, and Crone. This approach views the early biographies of Muḥammad as little more than pious hagiographies, composed to provide a backdrop for the Qurʾān that was suited to the needs and concerns of second-century Islam. While Motzki, Schoeler, and Görke all willingly concede to these “skeptics” that a great deal of Muḥammad’s traditional biography is indeed highly artificial, having little to do with historical “reality,” they nevertheless wish to argue that using certain source-critical methods it is possible to extract nuggets of genuine history from Muḥammad’s lifetime. All three scholars moderately chastise the credulity of many Western biographies of Muḥammad,





posing as an alternative the use of *isnāds* for dating traditions and, in the case of Schoeler and Görke, appealing to the importance of an alleged teacher-pupil relation between ʿUrwa and al-Zuhrī. With this toolkit, they maintain, it is largely possible to escape Wansbrough’s agnosticism and avoid Cook and Crone’s recourse to non-Islamic materials.

It remains then to assess the fruits of this collective endeavor: does it in fact deliver on its promise to recover “authentic” traditions from the life of Muḥammad in a manner that both avoids uncritical acceptance of the traditional Islamic biography of Muḥammad and attains a level of historical probability capable of assuaging the skeptic’s doubts? The actual results are unfortunately considerably less dramatic than even the relatively minimalist proposals advanced by each of these studies. Schoeler and Görke’s analysis of the *hijra* draws the most sweeping conclusions, claiming to authenticate a large tradition complex while additionally proposing a rather significant corpus of genuine “ʿUrwa” material. Yet as we have seen, the data do not support the full extent of their conclusions, and only a narrow portion of this *hijra* conglomerate is widely attested as having any association with ʿUrwa. For instance, the traditions of Meccan persecution, the migration to Ethiopia, and the second meeting in ʿAqaba are attributed to ʿUrwa only by al-Ṭabarī, who supports his report with two single-strand *isnāds*. Consequently, *isnād* analysis cannot vouch for these traditions, and only an unexamined scholarly consensus regarding the so-called letters of ʿUrwa can be counted in their favor. As noted above, the authenticity of these “documents” has stood largely unchallenged since their early validation by Caetani, but in light of the widespread forgery of epistles in the Islamic historical tradition, as well as the improbability that al-Ṭabarī ever saw such a “document,” their acceptance as genuine writings of ʿUrwa seems an unwarranted assumption sustained largely through repetition. The evidence linking a tradition of Abū Bakr’s encounter with Ibn al-Dughunna to ʿUrwa also is not sufficient. At best Schoeler and Görke have identified al-Zuhrī as the common link who is perhaps responsible for first placing this tradition into circulation, but the testimonies are so sparse that *isnād* criticism cannot establish with a high degree of probability that the report actually goes back to al-Zuhrī. Only the actual account of Muḥammad’s *hijra* shows any solid evidence of a possible connection with ʿUrwa, although the rudimentary narrative verified by the complete *isnād* bundle is in fact quite meager. It seems likely then that a rather basic report about the *hijra* may be traced back to ʿUrwa, and it certainly is no surprise to find that the outlines of this central event in the formation of Islam, which became the anchor for its calendar, reach back into the latter part of the first Islamic century. Yet competing accounts of the *hijra*, at





variance with the ʿUrwan narrative on certain key points, apparently had also begun to circulate quite early, and thus a connection with ʿUrwa offers no guarantee of the report’s authenticity: the politics of succession had already taken hold of this episode, leaving little possibility of determining what “really” happened during Muḥammad’s flight.

Similarly, there are signs of a connection between ʿUrwa and an early account of Muḥammad’s initial religious experiences. As with the *hijra* traditions, Schoeler again asserts ʿUrwa’s authorship of a large block of narrative material, but analysis of the *isnāds* and *matns* supports only the attribution of a simple report describing Muḥammad’s experience of voices and visions of light to ʿUrwa. Rubin’s analysis of the process by which this moment from Muḥammad’s biography came to be thoroughly Qurʾānicized seems to confirm that this basic account of generic religious experiences is most likely primitive. Yet again these results are not particularly remarkable: the Muslims must have believed from a very early stage that Muḥammad had some type of divine contact, and religious experiences of voices and visions are widely attested phenomena, particularly from the biblical tradition. Not only then is it likely that this tradition reaches back into the later first century, but it seems quite plausible that Muḥammad himself might have described such experiences to his early followers. Otherwise, it is difficult to imagine the formation of a religious movement around him as its prophet.

As for the traditions of the “Ā’isha scandal,” Schoeler argues convincingly, following Juynboll, that the reports behind this narrative most likely belong to the generation before al-Zuhrī, and ʿUrwa was probably one of his informants. Nevertheless, the relative antiquity of this tradition is largely secured by its dissonance with later tradition, where Ā’isha was revered as the mother of the faithful: in such a context it is difficult to imagine the invention of rumors that she had been accused of adultery. The basic elements of this story, that for a time Ā’isha was missing and on her return accused of adultery and then vindicated, quite possibly reflect events from the life of Muḥammad. Yet this information also reveals very little about either Muḥammad or the nature of earliest Islam.

Görke’s study of the traditions about al-Ḥudaybiya convincingly links this episode to al-Zuhrī’s teaching, but the attempt to make a connection with ʿUrwa is much more strained. The alleged transmission through Hishām ibn ʿUrwa (< ʿUrwa) is extremely limited and cannot guarantee a link to ʿUrwa. Moreover, Hishām’s age relative to his father, al-Zuhrī, and Ibn Ishāq raises difficult questions about the actual sources of any traditions that he may have placed in circulation. In the end even Görke backs away from *isnāds* to argue for the tradition’s antiquity on the basis of the *matn*’s content, maintaining that despite the influence of a number of literary





and theological tendencies on the shape of the narrative, a historical core can be identified by focusing on those elements that portray the Muslims unfavorably or in a manner not commonly found in the later tradition. Here again the oldest material is identified not using *isnāds* but through *matn*-critical approaches, particularly the criterion of dissimilarity or embarrassment. Once more, however, this search for “factual historical events” from the life of Muḥammad yields only miniscule results: it would appear that Muḥammad once concluded a treaty with his opponents regarding the surrender of fugitives on terms that were unfavorable to his followers. Other elements, including even the location, al-Ḥudaybiya, remain somewhat uncertain.

Finally, Motzki convincingly shows that a tradition of Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq’s assassination derives from al-Zuhri’s teaching, but his efforts to press even earlier are not persuasive. Firstly, Motzki overlooks some rather serious problems with traditions assigned to Abū Ishāq. As Juynboll has convincingly demonstrated, complications with this *kunya* leave traditions attributed to Abū Ishāq “dubious in the extreme” and essentially useless for historical purposes. Thus Motzki’s use of Abū Ishāq traditions in his search for al-Zuhri’s sources is extremely problematic, and the conclusions drawn on their basis are best disregarded. The second prong of Motzki’s argument rests on the presumed identity of two traditions from al-Ṭabarī and al-Wāqidi, yet as other commentators have remarked, these narratives are best regarded as separate accounts, and their apparent independence undermines his analysis. Moreover, Motzki’s quarantine of the biblical tradition fails to do justice to the influence that literary models from the Hebrew Bible appear to have had on the shape of these narratives, and the possibility that the entire episode is largely a product of tribal rivalry is not even entertained. Ultimately, however, as even Motzki himself concludes, such painstaking analysis yields only rather negligible results: a report circulated by al-Zuhri that Muḥammad sent several men to kill an opponent, and while executing the man, one of the assassins injured a foot.¹⁹⁷ Once again, this is hardly information capable of shedding much light on either the life of Muḥammad or the nature of his religious movement.

In sum then it would appear likely that an account of Muḥammad’s experience of visions and voices at the onset of his revelations and a basic nar-

¹⁹⁷) Chase Robinson reaches a similar conclusion, characterizing Motzki’s project in this article as “promising,” but concluding that “the method is extraordinarily laborious and the payoff (the historical ‘kernel’) very modest”: Chase F. ROBINSON, “Reconstructing Early Islam: Truth and Consequences,” in *Method and Theory in the Study of Islamic Origins*, ed. Herbert BERG (Leiden, 2003), 101–34, 122 n. 100.





rative of his flight to Medina in the face opposition had taken shape by the later first century, some fifty years or more after his death. Likewise, the story of ʿĀ’isha’s suspected adultery and her acquittal seems to belong to this period, and indeed all three traditions may very well be rooted in the life of Muḥammad. Perhaps Muḥammad also concluded a treaty regarding fugitives that was not in his followers’ favor or ordered the assassination of an opponent: these traditions are convincingly assigned to al-Zuhrī, and they certainly are conceivable within the life of Muḥammad. Nonetheless, these are remarkably modest results, particularly for so much effort, and there is little indication that continued application of this rigorous methodology is likely to yield much more information. One certainly may wonder with Motzki, “whether the outcome will justify the time and energy needed for such an enterprise.” In fact, Motzki himself predicts that “[t]he historical biography which will be the outcome of all these source-critical efforts will be only a very small one.”¹⁹⁸ Although Motzki somehow finds room for optimism in this conclusion, the achievements of this approach, while not insignificant, are rather minimal.

So far, *isnād*-critical study of the *sīra* tradition reveals little that cannot already be known through other methods, although it is certainly valuable to see these conclusions affirmed by this approach. Nevertheless, to this point the sort of information that this method has been able to verify is not particularly useful for knowledge of Muḥammad’s life and his religious teaching. The Qurʾān of course continues to serve as the primary source for the latter, but our understanding of Muḥammad’s career and of the Qurʾān itself rests largely on information derived from the *ḥadīth*, and it is essential that we carefully chart this sea of forgery and fables to find the oldest traditions. Unfortunately, the *isnād*-critical approach advocated by Schoeler, Görke, and Motzki has proven to be of rather limited usefulness in this regard, at least with respect to discerning significant information concerning the life and teaching of Muḥammad. Although the method in itself is certainly commendable, the data of the early biographical tradition generally do not seem capable of meeting the demanding requirements of this approach: in particular, the networks of transmission often are not sufficiently dense to establish a meaningful pattern. Likewise, as Donner observes, the early historical traditions, including the *sīra*, were not initially transmitted according to the more rigorous standards of the standard “*ḥadīth* format,” meaning that this method of analysis, borrowed from the study of legal *ḥadīth* is not likely to yield the same quality

¹⁹⁸) MOTZKI, “Murder of Ibn Abi l-Ḥuqayq,” 234–35.





of results when applied to the *sīra* traditions.¹⁹⁹ Consequently, the achievements of this method in attempting to push beyond Ibn Ishāq's *sīra* and into the first century are disappointingly limited, and for knowledge of this period we must continue to rely largely on the traditional principles of *matn* analysis, as advanced particularly by Goldziher and Schacht, in consultation with the careful study of contemporary non-Islamic sources, as first implemented, albeit rather boldly, by Cook and Crone.²⁰⁰



¹⁹⁹) DONNER, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 255–71.

²⁰⁰) Pace MOTZKI, “Dating Muslim Traditions,” esp. 214, 252. For a much more cautious attempt to use non-Islamic sources to this end, see now HOYLAND, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*.

