

Anonymous MIT student

Professor Peter McMurray

21M.289

7 March 2015

Project 1: Understanding the Temporal Contexts of Islam through the Qur'an and Hadiths

Having very little exposure to Islam previous to reading the Qur'an and the collections of hadiths by Sahih al-Bukhari and Ibn 'Arabi, the exploration of Islam and media together is as much a history class as a critical analysis of how information flows. Timing is critical to understanding the value these documents add to the Islamic faith and to logical thought. Different time periods are characterized by different contexts. There was a time before Muhammad's revelations which was without Islam, a time during which he and his followers were pronouncing their faith and establishing Islam, and present day, where the value of the Qur'an as a text is more weighted and also more personal.

A book is silent. It does not voice its contents; yet for the Qur'an and the hadiths, the contents were first voiced and then put into writing. For the Qur'an to then be received present day, the transmission of the Qur'an passes through many nodes of reception. Starting with Muhammad reading the Qur'an as instructed by Gabriel in surah 96 (*The Quran* 468), the Qur'an is then passed to his followers, after which it enters into a book format in Arabic, which is then translated into English and written in a new book. As part of standard signal processing theory, each node in the path from transmitter to receiver is an opportunity for noise to be introduced and for part of the signal to be lost. The information which Muhammad intended for his followers to receive is received best by someone who can interact with Muhammad directly -

hearing the Qur'an from Muhammad himself, observing Muhammad's behavior and instruction first-hand, and being able to ask questions and receive answers. Understanding information is a process. A book is silent, and it cannot assist in completing one's understanding of the message by answering questions.

Even though the Qur'an and hadiths require interacting with a far removed version of the Qur'an, the act of writing down what was being recited and said by Muhammad was necessary for the message to carry on through periods of turmoil and transformation. If technology allowed for Muhammad to recite directly across temporal boundaries, the information would be conveyed through its ideal form. Because all men share in human mortality, there is no way to have minimized the transfer pathway to a one on one interaction with Muhammad. The creation of the book form of the Qur'an was motivated by the temporality of the people who could recite its message. If every person who had memorized the Qur'an and could recite it died (all hafiz), would Islam be lost to time? Putting the Qur'an and the things said by Muhammad into writing can be likened to hitting the save button on a Word document.

A Word document is a virtual form of a paper. A paper is the concatenation of ideas into a complete argument or record, and papers have utility in the way they can be used to communicate many ideas through a single unit of media. All of the wisdom contained in the message and the work that goes into communicating the message is as temporal as the medium within which it is stored. If this Word document were not saved after two more pages were typed hereafter, there would be no means of communicating the ideas in those two pages without typing them again (or presenting them in some other format). The Qur'an and the hadiths are significant because they secure immortality for the message revealed to Muhammad, at least to a reasonable extent (i.e. under the assumption there is no realistic way for someone to destroy

every copy of these texts, both paper and digital). The Qur'an is thus valuable as a storage device for accessing Muhammad's revelations in the present.

To understand the significance of the act of writing the Qur'an, it is important to note when it was written. The Qur'an was not the first book written by a prophet claiming to be under the authority of God (i.e. the Holy Bible), nor the last (the Book of Mormon). It is interesting the Torah and the Bible were established before the Qur'an, as it means the Qur'an is written in a time when it can respond to the other faiths and present itself as the true (almost as if "the corrected") record of the people and miracles which are foundational to the Abrahamic faiths.

Several surahs in the Qur'an share characters and stories with the Torah and the Bible, such as the creation story in surah 7:11-27 and the story of Noah in surah 71. Many people at that time were conscious of Judaism and Christianity and could recognize parts of the Qur'an because of an awareness of the texts of the other faiths. The presence of something familiar in Muhammad's Qur'an grounded it by giving something to which many people could relate. Also, by having two other monotheistic religions to reference, the Qur'an can make comparisons. It is a strong means of crafting an argument to have an example of right – for Muslims, anything read in the Qur'an or said by the Prophet – and wrong, which is how the Qur'an characterizes many aspects of the Jewish and Christian faiths.

Hadith 7 in Book 1 of Sahih al-Bukhari's hadith collection demonstrates the value of being able to ask questions of the source of the message and having the other Abrahamic faiths for comparison. Heraclius uses questions posed to Abu Sufyan to gain a complete understanding of who Muhammad is and what he proclaims about Islam. As part of Heraclius's deductive reasoning, he draws on the lives of other prophets which he could not have done if Muhammad and his revelations had come before the other Abrahamic faiths. During the lifetimes of

Muhammad and his companions, people could understand Islam through these kinds of interactions. Today, these interactions are still valuable to those seeking to understand Islam. Muhammad and the works of his time can be understood through the hadiths.

It is worth noting some hadiths are recognized as more credible or more sound accounts of the sayings of Muhammad and his followers than others. This lends insight into the context of the hadiths both in time and as media. A written text has no credibility of its own. Only the person writing the text has credibility. In the case of the hadiths, credibility is an idea spanning every generation between present day and Muhammad's lifetime. The two periods are bridged by a chain of transmission, and the diligence of Muslims to recite and eventually write down Muhammad's speech is what allows people today to follow Muhammad's example. Even between well-known hadith collections such as Sahih al-Bukhari and *The Complete Forty Hadith* collected by Imam an-Nawawi, there is disparity in the soundness of the hadiths. The construct of having hadith classified as Sahih (sound), Hasan (good), Da'if (weak) or Maudu' (fabricated, forged) as explained on the Islamic Awareness website is a result of having information pass over multiple lifespans with the intent of retaining the accuracy of the original message. There would be no question of the credibility of the things Muhammad said if they were heard first-hand. The more sound a hadith in its transmission, the stronger it stands as a device for instructing Muslims in practicing Islam.

Focusing lastly on the present day, even though the Qur'an and the hadiths give a vitality to the message revealed to Muhammad, the Arabic version of the Qur'an has little to no value to English speakers. If the message was kept in Arabic and restrained from being translated into other languages, it would be no less temporal than the recitation by hafiz. If all those capable of reading and speaking Arabic died, would Islam be lost to time? For the message to continue

onwards, either the Arabic language has to be preserved as the final medium through which the message can be transmitted, or the message itself must be preserved in modern languages, thus moving through another node in its transmission. Value itself becomes contextual. The English version of the Qur'an may have value to an individual while the Arabic version does not. From this idea sprouts the question of what new media will be valuable in the future for storing and conveying the information revealed to Muhammad so that the medium does not lose relevance.

If direct recitation from Muhammad to the receiver is the most succinct means for transferring information, why must this be a temporally dependent solution? There is an interesting friction between what is necessary for the message to last and what is preferential in order to maximize quality. The practice of Islam is currently dependent on the Qur'an and the hadiths. There are opportunities for the message to be received through recitation, yet even so, the recitation is almost certainly a transmission coming after the Qur'an, with the reciter's understanding of Islam taken from the Qur'an and the hadiths. With so many nodes in the transmission pathway, there is expansive room for noise in Islam, yet the diligence of believers and scholars to preserve the message as accurately as possible slows the degradation of the signal. It is reasonable to believe Muhammad's Qur'an has not lost its value.

Works Cited

“The Classification Of Hadith: According To The Reliability And Memory Of Reporters.”

Islamic Awarness. 2015. Web. 8 March. 2015

An-Nawawi, Imam. *The Complete Forty Hadith*. 3rd ed. London: Ta-Ha Publishers, Ltd., 2004.

Print.

The Quran. New Delhi: Goodword Books, 2010. Print.

“Sahih al-Bukhari.” *Sunnah.com*. Web. 7 March. 2015.

MIT OpenCourseWare
<http://ocw.mit.edu>

21M.289 Islam/Media
Spring 2015

For information about citing these materials or our Terms of Use, visit: <http://ocw.mit.edu/terms>.