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-Zuhri 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 ‘Aisha 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 Muhammad” that could not otherwise be determined using simpler approaches.

Questions concerning the historical reliability of Muhammad’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...
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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


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 Muhammad 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 Muhammad have continued to proceed as if nothing has happened, reproducing more or less uncritically the traditional Islamic account of Muhammad’s life: even works by prominent scholars of Islam, after initially acknowledging the many problems with the source material, often narrate the life of Muhammad according to the traditional accounts. Specialists in Islamic origins cannot so easily ignore
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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 Ḥishāq’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 Ḥishāq’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 Ḥishāq,” 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.

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 *hadith* 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.” The Qur’ān 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 *ṣīra* 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 Iṣḥāq < al-Zuhri < ‘Urwa ibn al-Zubayr. According to Paret, traditions in Ibn Hisḥām’s *Ṣīra* 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

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the end of the first Islamic century. Paret attempts to reach even further back into the fog of Islamic origins through an appeal to 'Urwa’s decent from one of Muhammad’s first followers, which would have afforded him at least indirect access to Muhammad’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. 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 ‘Urwa is always reliable. One must consider the possibility, for instance, that even by Ibn Ishāq’s time ‘Urwa had already acquired legendary status as an early authority on Muhammad’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 ‘Urwa 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 ‘Urwa’s importance as a source of early Islamic tradition, supervised by Paret himself. Much like his Doktorvater,
von Stülpnagel largely assumes the reliability of this chain of transmission back to 'Urwa, without offering much basis for its authenticity. Consequently, the study's main accomplishment lies in assembling a sizeable corpus of alleged 'Urwa 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 *sira* material attributed to 'Urwa. Von Stülpnagel devotes considerable attention to the supposed "letters" written by 'Urwa to the Caliph 'Abd 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 'Urwa's relationship with his aunt 'A'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 'Urwa with a source of reliable information.11 Yet this reach back to 'A'isha only compounds the problems of von Stülpnagel's largely unsubstantiated assumption that 'Urwa in fact authored the traditions transmitted under his name. On more than one occasion von Stülpnagel himself acknowledges the problem of widespread forgery of *hadith* and *insāds*, even within the corpus of 'Urwa 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 'Urwa's "letters," whose genuineness other scholars seem to have essentially assumed (see below), but otherwise he addresses the authenticity of the corpus of 'Urwa material only rather cursorily and unconvincingly.13 In his brief discussion of the issue von Stülpnagel identifies some general characteristics of the 'Urwa traditions' transmission history that could appear to validate their authenticity, noting in particular their frequent parallel transmission through 'Urwa'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 'Urwa, 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 'Urwa remained a promising hypothesis that lay dormant and essentially untested. Lately, however, this approach has been revived by Gregor Schoeler and Andreas

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11) ibid., e.g., 15, 36, 58, 116.
12) ibid., e.g., 57, 118, 120, 123, 147.
14) ibid., 122.
Görke, who have announced in a recent article their collaboration on an ambitious project aimed at reconstructing the biography of Muhammad as it was taught by 'Urwa in the later first century AH. The roots of this collective endeavor reach back to Schoeler’s 1996 monograph, Charakter und Authentik 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 Muhammad’s life attributed to 'Urwa, 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.” 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. The


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. 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. 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

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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 hadith may be associated with an individual, to the effect that even Michael Cook has acknowledged such results are fairly convincing. 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. Yet Motzki’s arguments in this instance are not persuasive, for reasons that Christopher Melchert especially makes clear, and it seems preferable that the more cautious principles set forth by Juynboll should remain in place. Given the widespread forgery of hadith 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. 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.


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 sīra tradition in an article discussed below, idem, “The Murder of Ibn Abi l-Huqayq: 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.\(^\text{24}\) 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.\(^\text{25}\) 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.\(^\text{26}\) 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 ῾Urwa’s sīra, examining each of the individual


\(^{26}\) Von Stülpnagel seems to have proposed, but did not carry through on, a rather similar endeavor: von Stülpnagel, “Urwa Ibn az-Zubair,” 117.
traditions that they claim to have identified as authentic material from 'Urwa, along with an additional study from Motzki that also aims to establish the authenticity of certain early sîra traditions.

According to Schoeler, “the traditions from 'Urwa contain the entire basic framework of the life of Muḥammad;”27 and in their most recent article, Görke and Schoeler present an outline of 'Urwa's sîra, 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-'Aqaba – the hiǧra 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 Ḥiṣa
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

28) This list is quoted from Görke and Schoeler, "Reconstructing the Earliest Sîra Texts," 213. Duri also provides a list of 'Urwa traditions primarily from Ibn Hishām and al-Ṭabarānī, 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, "'Urwa Ibn az-Zubair," 37–53, as well as 'Urwa ibn al-Zubayr, Maghāzī Rasūl Allāh, ed. M. M. Aẓami (Riyad, 1981), both of which rather uncritically assemble traditions in which 'Urwa 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. 'Uqba's "Maghāzī," although the evidence that he presents for attributing this tradition to 'Urwa is not nearly as "certain" as he has proposed: Gregor Schoeler, "Mūsā b. 'Uqba's 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 'Urwa 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 ῾Urwa, 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 ῾Urwa 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 ῾Urwa 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 ῾Urwa … 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 ῾Urwa 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 ῾Urwan “corpus” in their monograph (the battles of Badr, Uhud, and the Trench, and the conquest of Mecca), each of these is even less persuasively assigned to ῾Urwa. Indeed, Görke and Schoeler both concede as much in the conclusion to their own study, judging the attribution to ῾Urwa more questionable in each case: Andreas Görke and Gregor Schoeler, Die ältesten Berichte über das Leben Muhammads. Das Korpus ῾Urwa 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.

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 ʿUrwa’s sīra provides a brief analysis of a large block of traditions attributed to ʿUrwa 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 ʿUrwa’s relationship with ʿAisha as validating the accuracy of their “general outline” (cf. Watt’s “basic framework”). 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 ʿUrwa, 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 ʿUrwa, 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 ʿAqaba, 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 ʿUrwa, 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 ʿUrwa across a wide range of tradents. Yet this is simply not the case.

In Search of 'Urwa's Sira

Figure 1 [From Gheike and Schmid, "Reconstructing the Earliest Sira Texts," 2016]
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-Ṭabarî, who over two centuries later assigns the bulk of these traditions to Urwa in both his History and his Tafsîr (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 Muhammad’s preaching, a resulting emigration of some Muslims to Abyssinia, their return to Mecca, a second period of Meccan persecution, and Muhammad’s meeting with Medinans in ‘Aqaba (the “second” meeting), concluding with an account of Muhammad’s hijra. Yet with the exception of the hijra, which will be discussed separately below, all of these
traditions are ascribed to 'Urwa by al-Ṭabarī alone, in the History with a single isnād through Hishām ibn 'Urwa (ending with ʿAbd al-Wārith and ʿAli ibn Nāṣr), 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-ʿAlī).34 Although this complex of traditions is sundered 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 'Urwa 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 Horovitz 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 GORKE, et al., 15 vols. (Leiden, 1879–1901), I, 1180–81, 1224–25; Muhammad 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, “Urwa 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. Caetani and Horovitz seem to believe that al-Tabari 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.” Watt likewise believed in the existence of an actual document, writing of Urwa’s letter that “Al-Tabari has preserved for us a copy of a written document of early date, which has every appearance of being genuine.” 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


their genuineness. In this sense, he continues, 'Urwa's letters to 'Abd 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.  

Astonishing as it may seem, Schoeler appears to be correct that no one has ever thought to question the authenticity of the letters of 'Urwa.  

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 hadiths.  

If it were somehow possible to find a second recension of this tradition complex transmitted independently by another source as a letter of 'Urwa, this could instill some limited confidence that we have here a historical narrative of some antiquity, although this fact alone would not secure 'Urwa'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-Tabari'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-

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40) "Obwohl auch sie nur durch Weiterüberlieferung im Kollektivbetrieb (insbesondere bei aṭ-Ṭabarī) erhalten sind, ist ihre Authentizität auch von kritischen Gelehrten niemals bezweifelt worden; ebenso wenig wie die Echtheit der sog. Gemeindeordnung von Medina, die – wohlgegründet – ebenfalls nur durch die Sammelaktivität zweier 'ulama' (Ibn Ishāq und Abū 'Ubaid) erhalten ist." Schoeler, Charakter und Authentizität, 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 hadith, 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.\footnote{Crone and Cook, 
\textit{Hagarism}, 7–8.} Or to quote from Watt, summarizing Wellhausen, “No later falsifier, writing under the Umayyads or Abbāsids, would have included non-Muslims in the \textit{ummah}, would have retained the articles against Quraysh, and would have given Muḥammad so insignificant a place.”\footnote{Watt, \textit{Muhammad at Medina}, 225. See also Julius Wellhausen, “Muḥammad’s Gemeindeordnung von Medina,” in \textit{Skizzen und Vorarbeiten}, 6 vols. (Berlin, 1884–99), IV, 65–83, 80; Caetani, \textit{Annali dell’Islam}, I, 402–3; and R. Stephen Humphreys, \textit{Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry} (Princeton, 1991), 92–98.} 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-Tabari’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

\footnote{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, \textit{Between Bible and Qurʿān}, 48–49.}
In Search of ‘Urwa’s Sīra

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 ‘Urwa. 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 ‘Urwa further indicates that he knew these traditions only by word of mouth.\(^\text{45}\) 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 Abd al-Wārīth’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 ‘Alī ibn Naṣr, and the History’s differences from the Tafsīr reflect his efforts to blend these two versions.\(^\text{46}\) 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-Walid as the letter’s re-

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\(^{45}\) 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. Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Ṭabarī, The History of al-Ṭabarī: Volume VI, Muhammad at Mecca, trans. W. Montgomery Watt and M. V. McDonald, SUNY Series in Near Eastern Studies (Albany, N.Y., 1988), 98–99, 136.

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

When placed under a modicum of scrutiny, however, al-Tabari's transmission of this alleged letter from 'Urwa does not seem worthy of the unquestioned confidence with which previous scholarship has invested it. Ultimately these two accounts constitute a hadith 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 hadith. Simply because al-Tabari reports that he (and apparently he alone) heard that 'Urwa 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 'Urwa'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 'Abd al-Malik, such discussions essentially continue von Stülpnagel's suppression of al-Tabari's second isnād in the Tafsīr, which says that 'Urwa's letter was addressed to al-Walid. The question of whether 'Urwa wrote a letter to 'Abd al-Malik or al-Walid is essen-

47) This neglect of the second chain of authorities from the Tafsīr and its identification of al-Walid as the letter's recipient continues to the present. Presumably, the persistent identification of this letter as addressed to 'Abd 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 “Abd 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 'Abd 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-Tabari 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.
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tially moot, inasmuch as the existence of any such letter itself seems doubt-
ful. More important is the disagreement between al-Tabari’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 hadith
are reliable? As Michael Cook has noted in his study of early Islamic religi-
ous epistles, a letter that is transmitted with divergent praescriptiones is
a prime suspect for forgery. Moreover, the contents of the second account
that al-Tabari heard from Yunus b. ‘Abd al-‘Alā are unknown, other than
that he considered them similar to ‘Abd 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
isnād: when a source brings a hadith 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. The divergence in these two reports concerning the letter’s recipi-
ent along with the absence of the second isnād from al-Tabari’s History
certainly invites suspicion that there were some significant differences
between the two accounts. Likewise, von Stülpnagel regarded such “double
isnād” with suspicion, suggesting that a collector would often give two
chains of tradents when he had doubts about a particular tradition or
the reliability of its transmitters, hoping to secure more questionable
hadith with multiple transmissions. Perhaps similar concerns lie behind
al-Tabari’s addition of the second isnād through Yunus b. ‘Abd al-‘Alā
in the Tafsīr or his naming of ‘Ali ibn Naṣr as a second source of the tradi-
tion that he heard from ‘Abd al-Wārith in the History: one possible expla-
nation is that these inconsistencies reflect two different strategies for shor-
ing up a tradition that al-Tabari himself thought had a weak transmission
history.

Furthermore, the framing of these traditions as a letter invites suspici-
on since, as Albrecht Noth has demonstrated, letters constitute one of the
main “formal elements” of the early Islamic historical tradition. Gener-
ally 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) Michael Cook, Early Muslim Dogma, 52–53.
50) von Stülpnagel, “‘Urwa 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-Tabari’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-Tabari 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 ‘Uthmān, the separation from Khwaila, the slander of Ḥārūn, the declaration of Hums, and the death of Khadija.\(^{53}\) The *History’s* accounts of the battles of ‘Uthmān and ‘Abbās and the *hijra* are not actually presented as letters, but von Stülpnagel identifies them as such since they bear the same isnād that al-Tabari 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

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\(^{52}\) *Cook*, *Early Muslim Dogma*, 6. See also Suleiman Mourad’s recently published study of al-Ḥasan al-Ṣawrī, 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-Ṣawrī (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.


ascribed to 'Urwa, leaving al-Tabari as the lone writer who transmits these alleged letters of 'Urwa from 'Abd al-Wārith (and sometimes 'Ali ibn Naṣr or Yūnus b. 'Abd al-ʿAlā'). 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 'Urwa reporting events after the hijra may have been composed at any time between the lifetimes of 'Urwa and al-Tabari's source.

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

Perhaps somewhat more significant is the letter of 'Urwa on the "women's hijra" that al-Tabari records in his Ṭafsīr on the authority of Ibn Humaid < Salama < Muḥammad b. Ishaq < al-Zuhri. Allegedly addressed to Ibn Abī Hunaid, a friend of the caliph al-Walid, 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 Ishaq < al-Zuhri in Ibn Hishām's Siḥa, as well as in al-Wāqidi's Maghāzī, from Muḥammad b. Abdalāh < al-Zuhri, and in Ibn Saʿd's Ṭabaqāt, who transmits the tradi-

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55) A very brief précis of the hijra is transmitted as a letter from 'Urwa to 'Abd al-Malik in Ahmad 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 'Urwa's name.

56) al-Tabari, Annales, III, 2458


58) al-Tabari, Jamiʿ 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-Zuhri, who placed this clarification of the Qurān into circulation as a letter from 'Urwa to an associate of al-Walid (not, however, to either 'Abd al-Malik or al-Walid himself). In contrast then to the many other 'Urwan epistles transmitted by al-Ṭabarī, we have here a piece of Qurānic exegesis in the form of a letter from 'Urwa 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 'Urwa: it is certainly possible that al-Zuhri himself may have invented the epistolary framework, and while the attribution to 'Urwa cannot be excluded, it is not at all certain. What is important, however, is that this hadith affirms the existence of an early tradition ascribing a letter to 'Urwa, which very well may have made him a target for the attribution of other “letters” by the later tradition. That is, if 'Urwa 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 'Urwa and 'Abd al-Malik was invented partly to “rehabilitate” 'Urwa's reputation in the eyes of later tradition by associating him with this caliph, rather than his own brother, 'Abd Allah ibn Zubayr, who was 'Abd al-Malik's main political rival. According to the prevailing narrative, Ibn Zubayr rebelled against 'Abd 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, 'Abd 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


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.\textsuperscript{61} In any case, \textsuperscript{61}Abd Allah ibn Zubayr’s authority over the Hijaz in this period is generally acknowledged, and one would imagine that his brother \textsuperscript{61}Urwa, a resident of Medina, supported his brother’s political cause rather than that of the pretender \textsuperscript{61}Abd al-Malik, an alignment that is indicated by a number of traditions. Nevertheless other traditions underscore \textsuperscript{61}Urwa’s loyalty to \textsuperscript{61}Abd 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 \textsuperscript{61}Urwa. While von Stülpnagel suggests that \textsuperscript{61}Urwa wrote these letters only somewhat reluctantly, at \textsuperscript{61}Abd 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 \textsuperscript{61}Abd al-Malik and his main opponent’s brother, \textsuperscript{61}Urwa ibn Zubayr.\textsuperscript{62} This possibility gives further reason to suspect the authenticity of \textsuperscript{61}Urwa’s letters to \textsuperscript{61}Abd 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 \textsuperscript{61}Urwa’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 \textsuperscript{61}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 \textsuperscript{61}Urwa are not entirely worthy of the firm confidence that has been invested


\textsuperscript{62}See Horovitz, \textit{Earliest Biographies of the Prophet}, 16–20. Von Stülpnagel presents \textsuperscript{61}Urwa essentially as an impartial scholar who remained above the political struggles of his day: von Stülpnagel, “Urwa 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 *hadiths* witnessed by only a single source, and consequently, their worth should be measured in the same manner as other such *hadiths* – 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” *'Urwa* 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), Muhammad follows with the announcement that his followers should migrate to Medina, ordering Abū Bakr to remain behind with him in Mecca. Although the Ibn al-Dughunna tradition enjoyed a slightly broader circulation than *'Urwa’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 *'Urwa’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 *'Urwa’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-Tabari 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 Sa’d

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63) Of the traditions ascribed to *'Urwa* through his son Hishām, only al-Tabari’s “letter” to Abd al-Malik includes Muhammad’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 *'Urwa*. Nevertheless, the various *hijra* traditions discussed below do seem to presume that Muhammad’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 Muhammad, only Ibn Hisham brings this tradition, naming as his source Ibn Ishaq (< al-Zuhri < 'Urwa < 'Aisha). Inasmuch as both al-Tabari and al-Waqidi had access to Ibn Ishaq's Sira through different lines of transmission, the absence of this story from their narratives is rather puzzling. Nevertheless, the significance of its exclusion is not entirely clear: did al-Tabari and al-Waqidi (or their sources) simply decide to omit the episode, or is it possible that Ibn Hisham added the tradition during his revision of Ibn Ishaq's Sira, perhaps citing its attribution to al-Zuhri from another source? The failure of these and other sources to associate this tradition with Ibn Ishaq leaves some doubt regarding the authenticity of Ibn Hisham's attribution, and it is certainly not out of the question that he himself invented the isnad through Ibn Ishaq.

Aside from Ibn Hisham's Sira, only three other sources relate this story: the Sahih of Bukhari, Bayhaqi's Dalail al-nubuwwa, and, perhaps most importantly, Abd al-Razzaq's Musannaf. Bukhari and Bayhaqi present very similar accounts, both given on the authority of al-Layth < 'Uqayl < al-Zuhri < 'Urwa as transmitted by Yahya ibn Bukayr (Bukhari) or Ibn Sallih (Bayhaqi). In contrast to Ibn Hisham's account, however, Bukhari and Bayhaqi's version of the episode identifies Ethiopia as Abi 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. Abi Bakr does not get very far, however, before he encounters Ibn al-Dughunna at a place called Bark al-Ghimad, from which

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64) Ibn Hisham, Kitab sirat Rasul Allah, I, 245–46.
65) On al-Waqidi's knowledge and use of Ibn Ishaq, see Horovitz, Earliest Biographies of the Prophet, 114–15, esp. n. 111, where Conrad notes various opinions as to the precise nature of al-Waqidi's use of Ibn Ishaq.
67) Note that Bayhaqi used Bukhari's Sahih as a source when compiling his collection, and so he may not in fact report from al-Layth independently of him: see e.g. Bayhaqi, Dalail 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 Muhammad’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. 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 Muhammad’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-Ṣalāḥ, bāb 48, ḥadīth 1); II, 284–85 (Kitāb Farḍ al-khumus, bāb 15, ḥadīth 5); II, 429–30 (Kitāb Fadā’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 'Urwa through al-Zuhri, relates Abū Bakr's flight within the context of a broader emigration of Muhammad's followers to Ethiopia is perhaps a little misleading. 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 'Urwa's letters, their assertion simply is not well supported by the evidence. Moreover, in a separate account of Muhammad's *hijra*, al-Bukhārī reports a tradition from Ibrāhīm b. Musa < Hishām < Ma'amr < al-Zuhri < 'Urwa 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. Although Görke and Schoeler somewhat speciously reference this passage as confirming 'Urwa's authorship of the Ibn al-Dughunna tradition, clearly 'Urwa cannot have taught both that Abū Bakr set out for Ethiopia shortly before the *hijra* and that he followed Muhammad's orders and remained in Mecca instead. Far from affirming either the tradition's attribution to 'Urwa 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 Muhammad'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 Muhammad's announcement of the migration to Medina until considerably later in his biography, when he reports the incident, as al-Tabari, 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 'Urwa, or even al-Zuhri. Ibn Hishām's failure to connect the

story of Abū Bakr and Ibn al-Dughunna with either Ethiopia or the Medinan 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. 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. 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 Sa’d’s Tabaqāt dates the emigration to Ethiopia rather precisely to the fifth year after Muḥammad’s prophetic commission.

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73) ibid., V, 385–87.
74) al-Ṭabarī, Annales, I, 1169–81; Ibn Hishām, Kitāb sīrat Rasūl Allāh, I, 203–17; Ibn Sa’d, Tabaqāt, I, 1, 132–39, esp. 136. Like many later historians, Ibn Sa’d 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, 'Abd 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 'Abd al-Razzāq, Bukhārī, and Bayhaqi suggests that these three hadith 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 hijra 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 'Urwa, 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 'Urwa simply is not supported by the evidence. 'Urwa 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 'Abd al-Razzāq's account, which he traces through Ma‘mar, were to appear in either al-Wāqidi’s Maghaẓi or Ibn Sā’d’s Tabaqāt, both of which transmit a great deal of material from Ma‘mar not attested in other early sources.75 This rather meager isnād bundle does not even

75) Nevertheless, Ibn Sā’d, who does not include the Ibn al-Dughunna story, transmits his account of Muhammad's announcement of the emigration and his order that Ābi Bakr remain behind on the authority of al-Wāqidi < Ma‘mar < al-
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-

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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 hadīth.

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 ʿUbaydah ibn Wahb < Yūnus < al-Zuhri < ʿUrwa. In the edition of Bukhārī’s Sāhih cited by Görke and Schoeler, this is in fact the isnād that accompanies the tradition. Yet rather astonishingly, the three main editions of Bukhārī’s Sāhih all provide a different isnād for this hadīth, 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, Yahyā b. Bukayr < al-Layth < ʿUqayl < al-Zuhri < 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, Sāhih al-Bukhārī, 7 vols. (Damascus/Beirut, 1990), II, 804–5; (Kitāb al-Kāfala, bāb 4, hadīth 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-ʿAlī < ʿAbdallāh ibn Wahb < Yūnus < al-Zuhri < ʿUrwa, but they do not give any reference to this tradition in the article: Görke and Schoeler, “Reconstructing the Earliest Sīra Texts,” 216.

isnād, 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, Motzkü, 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 Sahīh 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. 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 hadith into circulation. 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-Zuhri, who is the actual common link, seems somewhat questionable: three single strands present an extremely weak case, and differences in the matn 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.

In Search of 'Urwa’s Sīra

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 'Urwa 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 'Urwa. 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 hadīths somewhat haphazardly. The bulk of the relevant isnāds trace this particular hijra tradition back to 'Urwa through either his son Hishām or his disciple al-Zuhri (see fig. 4). Nonetheless, the transmission through Hishām is fairly weak, attested only sparsely in a handful of sources, and the tradition from al-Zuhri is also surprisingly limited, consisting in essence of two single strands, one from 'Uqayl through Layth, witnessed by Bukhārī and Bayhaqī,81 and a second from Ma’mar, preserved by 'Abd al-Razzāq.82

Although the article’s isnād diagram identifies a second line of transmission from Ma’mar through al-Wāqidi in Ibn Sa’d, 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 Sa’d brings this tradition with five different isnāds (including two through al-Zuhri 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-Jāmi‘ al-saḥīḥ, III, 38–39 (Kitāb manāqib al-Anṣār, bāb 45, hadith 9); note that the hadith continues further, but at the top of p. 39, Bukhārī introduces a different isnād for what follows. Also, al-Bukhārī, al-Jāmi‘ al-saḥīḥ, II, 24–25 (Kitāb buyū‘, bāb 57, hadith 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, Dalā’il al-nubuwwah, II, 473–75.


83) Ibn Sa’d, Ṭabaqāt, I, 1, 153–54. See the relevant remarks concerning combined or synthetic reports in DONNER, Narratives of Islamic Origins, 264–66.
Figure 4: Muhammad’s Hijra

Stephen J. Shoemaker

al-Bukhari

Yahya ibn Bukayr

Ibn Shihab

al-Bayhaqi

Ibn Sa'd

Yazid ibn Harun

Abd al-Razzaq

Uqayl

al-Zuhri

Abu Usama

Hammad b. Salama

Al-Tabari

Abd al-Samad

Ibn Hisham

Abd al-Warith

Ibn Humayd

Salama

?!!! [Anonymous]

Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Rahman

Urwa ibn al-Zubayr
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 Urwa, 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-Ṭabarî 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 Urwa 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-Ṭabarî 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 Urwa’s “letters.” The tradition of Urwa’s courtly correspondence includes an account of Muḥammad’s ḥijra to Medina with Abū Bakr, which appears in al-Ṭabarî’s History separately from the stories of the Ethiopian emigration and the meeting at ᾀqaba.85 Unlike these other traditions, however, the ḥijra tradition is absent from al-Ṭabarî’s Tafsīr, and even in the History this ḥijra narrative lacks any epistolary framework, leading Abd al-Azīz Duri to argue that, although he believed the report to have originated with Urwa, it was never a part of his correspondence with ʿĀbd al-Malik.86 Görke and Schoeler argue on the basis of similar isnāds that the ḥijra account also belonged to the letters, but more decisive evidence is afforded by Ibn Ḥanbal, whose Musnad includes a brief account of the ḥijra in the format of a letter to ʿĀbd al-Malik.87 Ibn Ḥanbal’s report begins by explaining that ʿĀbd al-Malik initially wrote to Urwa, who then responded with a short letter describing Muḥammad’s ḥijra.88 In the report that fol-

86) DURU, Rise of Historical Writing, 82–83.
87) GÖRKE and SCHELER, “Reconstructing the Earliest Sīra Texts,” 215; Görke and Schoeler note the passage from Ibn Hanbal 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 Hanbal 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 Sahih, 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. Fuhayrah secretly brought them sheep to milk. Then they set out from Mecca together with ʿĀmir, riding on two camels that belonged to Abū Bakr.

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Görke and Schoeler make no attempt to explain the stark differences among the various Hishâm ibn 'Urwa traditions, particularly in regard to their length, but presumably they would identify the three rather brief accounts preserved by Ibn Sa’d, Ibn Hanbal, and Ibn Hibbân as distillations of the much longer narrative witnessed by al-Ṭabarî. 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-Zuhri and Ibn Ishâq. In fact, comparison of all four versions suggests that al-Ṭabarî’s “letter” has probably combined individual elements from the other three accounts, rearranging the order somewhat to present a smoother account. Consequently, the isnâds from these sources should not be adduced as somehow validating al-Ṭabarî’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-Zuhri and Ibn Ishâq, one finds a rather uniform account of Muḥammad’s hijra ascribed to al-Zuhri by ʿAbd al-Razzâq, Bukhârî, and Bayhaqî, 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-Zuhri 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 Ishâq’s Sîra is both surprising and problematic. As noted already above, according to Ibn Hishâm, Ibn Ishâq transmitted the story of the hijra from ʿUrwa only on the authority of an anonymous person who is characterized as trustworthy. Al-Ṭabarî, however, bridges the gap between Ibn Ishâq and ʿUrwa by naming Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmân as a tradent, but this is a figure that Ibn Ishâq elsewhere identifies explicitly by name, and his suppression from this account by Ibn Ishâq seems unlikely. Much more probable is either the substitution of Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmân for Ibn Ishâq’s anonymous informant by al-Ṭabarî or one of his sources, or, alternatively, Ibn Ishâq’s failure to provide the tradition with an isnâd, leaving Ibn Hishâm and al-Ṭabarî to invent their own independently.

Unfortunately, Görke and Schoeler overlook these problems and rather astonishingly conclude that Ibn Ishâq’s hijra narrative is in fact a fourth version of the al-Zuhri tradition. Despite the alarming lack of any direct evidence for its attribution to al-Zuhri, Görke and Schoeler blithely assign Ibn Ishâq’s account to al-Zuhri, adding the observation that, in contrast to the other al-Zuhri versions from ʿAbd al-Razzâq, Bukhârî, and Bayhaqî,
which are extremely similar, Ibn Ishāq’s account “tells the same story, but in a completely different wording.” This conclusion would appear to involve an assumption that Ibn Ishāq had received the Ibn al-Dughunna story from al-Zuhri together with an account of the *hijra*, as it appears in the collections of Bukhārī, Bayhaqī, and Abd 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-Zuhri, 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 ‘Urwa, resolve that “Ibn Ishāq thus combines in his report a version of the al-Zuhri recension with a third recension we shall call the Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Rahmān 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-Zuhri’s alleged transmission of a *hijra* account from ‘Urwa by assuming that al-Zuhri was Ibn Ishāq’s source, while also creating a third line of transmission, in addition to Hishām ibn ‘Urwa and al-Zuhri, from ‘Urwa through Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Rahmān. Such manipulation not only creates the illusion that al-Zuhri’s account was transmitted independently by three different pupils (instead of only two), but it also achieves the same effect for ‘Urwa, giving the semblance of three independent lines of transmission from ‘Urwa 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-Zuhri (< ‘Urwa) and Muḥammad b. ‘Abd al-Rahmān (< ‘Urwa). 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-Tabari most likely found Ibn Ishāq’s report

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In exactly the same state as Ibn Hishām, filling in Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Rahmān 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.  

Likewise, Ibn Hishām’s anonymous tradent remains unknown and should not be used to conjure up additional lines of transmission from either al-Zuhri 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-Zuhri; 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-Zuhri 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-Zuhri < ʿUrwa to authenticate Ibn Ishāq’s hijra tradition when no source actually gives this chain of transmission! 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-Zuhri 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

[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-Razzaq, 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 ʿUrwa’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 ʿUrwa may have taught a basic version of Muḥammad’s *hijra* in the company of Abū Bakr and ʿĀmir 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 ʿUrwa, 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

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al-Ṭabarī had been born.\(^94\) The account of Muḥammad's *hijra* in the Wahb papyrus differs significantly from the 'Urwa 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 'Alī himself, Muḥammad planned his *hijra* with 'Alī, summoning 'Alī 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 'Alī 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 'Urwa's, aside from Abū Bakr and Muḥammad hiding together in the cave of Thawr, and as Kister notes, similar traditions focused on 'Alī's central role in the *hijra* can be found in a number of other collections, including particularly, but not exclusively, sources of Shi‘a provenance.\(^96\) Likewise, the papyrus disagrees with the 'Urwa narrative in regard to who cared for Muḥammad during his stay in the cave: the 'Urwa 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 ʿĀli visited Muḥammad in the cave, which Kister regards as a blending of Shi‘a and Sunni traditions.\(^97\) Of the 'Urwa traditions, only Ibn Isḥāq’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 Shi‘is and Sunnis, 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.


\(^{96}\) Kister, “Papyrus of Wahb,” 564–71.

der that even on the rare occasions where it might be possible to identify outlines of a tradition reaching back to 'Urwa or Wahb, 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 'Urwa’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 'Urwa. 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 'Urwa’s letters. If it is to be believed that these “letters” are indeed genuine works of 'Urwa, then a better argument will need to be made than has heretofore been presented. Consequently, the link between 'Urwa and the traditions about the Ethiopian migration and the meeting at 'Aqaba stands very much in doubt. Moreover, the Ibn al-Dughunna episode is transmitted from 'Urwa only through al-Zuhri, and thus the methods of common-link analysis identify al-Zuhri rather than 'Urwa as the figure who may be associated with this tradition. Yet even the transmission from al-Zuhri 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 'Urwa, although again one wishes for a denser, more regular pattern of transmission. Nevertheless, the early hijra traditions recorded in the Wahb b. Munabbih papyrus call into question nearly every aspect of the 'Urwan hijra narrative. Even if certain basic elements of this hijra tradition can be linked with some probability to 'Urwa, Wahb’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.”

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 Iqra’ 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 Muhammad, where he investigates the possible “authenticity” of two well known traditions from the life of Muhammad: the beginnings of Muhammad’s revelations – the so-called “iqra’ accounts” – and the scandal over ’Āisha, 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 Muhammad’s biography, the onset of the Qur’ānic revelations. Schoeler begins this section by offering a brief overview of a widely circulated report about Muhammad’s initial religious experiences, allegedly transmitted by al-Zuhri from ’Urwa (< ’Āisha). As an exemplar of this account, he summarizes Ḥabd al-Razzāq’s version of the story, as reported from Ma’mar (< al-Zuhri < ’Urwa < ’Āisha).100 The narrative begins with Muhammad’s spiritual retreats (taḥannuth) to the cave of Hira’, where one day he is suddenly surprised by an angel. The angel commands him to “recite” (iqra’), and after initial protests of inability, Muhammad 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.
frets him. Then Khadija brings Muhammad to her cousin Waraq, who also reassures him, explaining that he is receiving a revelation (nāmūs) similar to the one received by Moses. Several versions mention Muhammad’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 Muhammad’s revelations.

Schoeler appends an extensive catalogue of traditions having a similar pedigree through al-Zuhri (< URWA < ASHA) 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-Zuhri to establish him as the likely source of a tradition about Muhammad’s first experience of revelation. Nevertheless, the precise nature of what al-Zuhri may have taught his students about this episode is not exactly clear. Schoeler, for his part, resolves the analysis of these al-Zuhri traditions with the conclusion that essentially all of the narrative elements present in his archetypal account from ‘Abd al-Razzāq’s Musannaf are sufficiently confirmed by other sources that one may assume that a nearly identical version of this story had its origin with al-Zuhri. Only certain differences in the order of events obscure al-Zuhri’s original tradition. And while Ma’mar is definitely a nodal figure in the transmission of this hadith, Schoeler notes that several sources indicate parallel transmissions from al-Zuhri through Yūnus b. Yazīd and al-Layth b. Sa’d (< Uqail b. Khālid), seeming to confirm the ascription of this tradition complex to al-Zuhri at the beginning of the second Islamic century, some one-hundred and twenty years (or more) after the events described.

Nevertheless, certain accounts of Muhammad’s initial revelations transmitted from al-Zuhri by Ibn Ishāq and al-Waqidi 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-‘Uthmān, and al-Tirmidhī, al-Zuhri related only a very brief account of Muhammad’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, 1, 151; trans. Guillaume, Life of Muhammad, 105. See also ‘Uthmān’s version in Muḥammad Ibn Ishāq, Kitāb al-siyar wa-al-maghāzī, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Beirut, 1978), 120 and 132; and Muhammad 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-Zuhārī 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 Iṣḥāq’s deliberate decision to abbreviate al-Zuhārī’s teaching in light of the much longer account that follows it, which, although quite similar to the Ma‘mar (< al-Zuhārī) version, derives from a different authority, Wāḥb b. Kaysān, a client of the family of al-Zubayr. In order to avoid repetition, Schoeler proposes, Ibn Iṣḥāq has drastically reduced al-Zuhārī’s account to its bare elements.103 Although more will be said about Ibn Iṣḥāq’s second, longer version below (i.e., the Wāḥb narrative), one must consider the strong possibility that the differences between the two al-Zuhārī narratives are not the result of Ibn Iṣḥāq’s excisions but may instead reflect two distinct versions taught by al-Zuhārī on different occasions. It certainly is conceivable that al-Zuhārī initially taught his pupils the rather minimalist account transmitted by Ibn Iṣḥāq, a report that al-Zuhārī had himself presumably inherited from the earlier Islamic tradition. The second version, ascribed to al-Zuhārī through Ma‘mar, Yūnus, and others, is perhaps al-Zuhārī’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-Zuhārī tradition and Ibn Iṣḥāq’s long version from Wāḥb b. Kaysān, as observed by Schoeler, could suggest that the Wāḥb account was a primary source for al-Zuhārī’s new narrative. In this case, Ibn Iṣḥāq’s separate transmission of these two revelation accounts would seemingly reflect his knowledge of al-Zuhārī’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 Iṣḥāq ascribes an identical tradition to al-Zuhārī, although Ibn Sa‘d’s witness is somewhat complicated by the fact that he transmits both the shorter and longer al-Zuhārī traditions simultaneously. Reporting from al-Wāqīdī, whose sources were Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh and Ma‘mar (< al-Zuhārī < *Urwa*), Ibn Sa‘d writes that the first revelations were like daybreak that came to Muḥammad as a dream (suggesting sleep). Also like Ibn Iṣḥāq, Ibn Sa‘d notes that

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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 Hira, returning only to gather additional provisions.\textsuperscript{104} Here again there is no angel, no *iqra*, no Waraqah. In the following chapter, however, Ibn Saʿd ascribes the full *iqra* narrative to al-Zuhri, on the authority of al-Wāqidi < Maʿmar.\textsuperscript{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 *iqra* narrative in the subsequent chapter.\textsuperscript{106} Yet as with Ibn Ishāq, it is quite possible that Ibn Saʿd, rather than abbreviating his initial report from al-Zuhri, transmits two distinct accounts that were taught by al-Zuhri 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-Zuhri 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-Zuhri, why would he even bother with such repetition and revision? Moreover, the strong similarities between the two short al-Zuhri narratives in Ibn Ishāq 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-Zuhri himself, a short narrative reporting Muḥammad’s initial visions of light, without the Qur’ānic 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-Zuhri, 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-Zuhri, making al-Zuhri’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-Zuhri, and despite Schoeler’s

\textsuperscript{104} Ibn Saʿd, ʿ Ṭabaqāt, I.1, 129.

\textsuperscript{105} ibid., I.1, 130.

\textsuperscript{106} Schoeler, *Charakter und Authentie*, 81, 171.
best efforts, this simply is not possible at present. Only a small handful of hadīth 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 Khadija 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.  

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. 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 ʿÂisha. 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.” 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. 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.


the al-Zuhri ← Urwa ← ʿA’isha chain in particular, reaching the convincing conclusion that “[t]he traditions about the first prophetic revelation of Muhammad exhibit no history of backwards growth in their isnāds” and that “the occurrence of ʿA’isha’s name does not indicate backwards growth.”\footnote{Schoeler, Charakter und Authentie, 80–81. Cf. Tor Andræe, “Die Legenden von der Berufung Muhammeds,” Le monde oriental 6 (1912), 5–18, 6–7, who reaches the opposite conclusion – that ʿUrwa in fact taught this short tradition.} Consequently, Schoeler’s firm confidence in this rule is somewhat misplaced, and ʿA’isha’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 hadith’s report that Muhammad 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-Zuhri narratives: Schoeler suggests that here al-Zuhri has moderated an earlier tradition, presumably by generalizing it. Likewise Schoeler invokes close parallels with Khadija’s response to Muhammad in a few other versions of the al-Zuhri 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-Zuhri traditions, namely, the extreme brevity of this tradition in comparison with the much larger iqra’ 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.\footnote{It is, however, strange that Schoeler gives a bibliographic notice of the article’s existence at the beginning and cites Rubin’s opinion regarding another version of the revelation traditions, appearing 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, “Iqra’ bi-smi rabbika …!,” Israel Oriental Studies 13 (1993), 213–30, esp. 218–20.}

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.\footnote{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, “Iqra’ 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 version of the revelation traditions, appearing 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, “Iqra’ bi-smi rabbika …!,” Israel Oriental Studies 13 (1993), 213–30, esp. 218–20.} In contrast to Schoeler’s focus on isnāds as a
means of dating Islamic traditions, Rubin takes an approach centered on the *matn* 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.\(^\text{114}\) With regard to the traditions about the beginning of revelation, Rubin structures his study around the presence—or absence—of Qur’ānic elements in the various narratives, building on earlier observations by Tor Andrae and Richard Bell in this regard.\(^\text{115}\) 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 Qur‘ān is in fact the content of Muhammad’s prophetic revelation. Thus, whereas Schoeler seems to assume that the entire revelation complex, including the visions, *taḥannūt*, *iqrāʾ, ṣaff, ḫadija*, 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 Qur’ānic and biographical traditions. Central to Rubin’s analysis are several accounts of the beginnings of revelation that lack any Qur’ānic overlay, including the Hishām ibn ῾Urwa tradition, all of which happen to survive in Ibn Sa‘d’s *Ṭabaqāt*, although some also appear in other collections.\(^\text{116}\) 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 “Quranised” narratives that populate the *ḥadīth* collections.\(^\text{117}\)

\(^{114}\) 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.


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, but it is also much easier to conceive of the gradual adaptation of these revelation traditions to conform with Islamic beliefs about the Qur’anic 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-Zuhri or Hishām ibn ʿUrwa for that matter, would sever the connection between Muḥammad’s revelation and the Qurʾān 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, was gradually re-written to conform with the Islamic belief that the content of these revelations was the text of the Qurʾān. Although Western scholarship since Lammens has inclined toward a view of the sīra as largely exegetical of the Qurʾān, designed to provide it with a context by supplying the “circumstances of revelation” (āshāb al-nuzūl), in this particular instance it seems probable that the tradition has evolved in the opposite direction. Belief in Muḥammad’s prophetic experience was surely one of the earliest tenets.

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120) See esp. Rubin’s remarks on this topic in Uri Rubin, “The Life of Muḥammad and the Qurʾān: 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 Qurʾān, 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 Qurʾānic 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 Qurʾān 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 Qurʾān with the content of Muḥammad’s revelations became established.
of the nascent Islamic faith; nevertheless, prior to the collection and au-
thorization of the Qurʾānic text, 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 Muhammad’s initial
prophetic experiences, as reflected in the canonical traditions.

Moreover, Rubin’s identification of various non-Qurʾānic, biblical ele-
ments 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 (dawʾ), or to the hearing of a voice (qawt).

121) Although the Islamic tradition and much modern scholarship on early
Islam hold the Qurʾān to be a rather transparent record of Muhammad’s teaching
that was committed to writing within about twenty years of his death, other alter-
native hypotheses of the Qurʾān’s formation seem much more plausible. For in-
stance, 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 persua-
sive: WANSBROUGH, Quranic Studies, esp. 43–51. See also Andrew R IPPIN, “Liter-
ary Analysis of Qurʾān, Tafsīr, and Sīra: The Methodologies of John Wansbrough,”
in Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies, ed. Richard C. MARTIN (Tucson, 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,
sANOVA, 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 Pré-
mare’s work, has conceded that the ne varietur textus receptus of the Qurʾān was per-
haps not established until ʿAbd al-Malik’s rule: ROBINSON, ʿAbd al-Malik, 102–4;
Angelika NEUWIRTH, Studien zur Komposition der mekkanischen Suren: die liter-
arische 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:

"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 Qurʾān 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 Qurʾānic 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 Qurʾān 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 musannaf collections generally have both elements, and always the iqra’ episode, securing the traditional bond between Muḥammad’s revelations and Qurʾān."

Various “non-canonical” accounts, however, lacking some if not all of the Qurʾānicizing motifs survive in different biographical collections, and particularly in Ibn Sa’d’s Ṭabaqāt. For instance, in addition to the Ḥishām ibn ‘Urwā 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. The absence of any Qurʾānic elements suggests that this is a particularly early account, as does Waraqa’s raising the question of Muḥammad’s truthfulness: in the more heavily Qurʾānicized 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

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123) Nevertheless, Tirmidhi’s collection, one of the six canonical collections, contains the short al-Zuhri tradition, which lacks these Qurʾānic elements, including the iqra’ episode: Tirmidhi, Sunan, V, 257.
124) Ibn Sa’d, Ṭabaqāt, I.1, 130. See also Ibn Ḥanbal, Musnad, I, 312; Sulaymān ibn Ahmad Ṭabarānī, al-Mu’jam al-kabīr ed. Ḥamdī Ṣabd al-Majīd al-Salāfī, 2nd ed. (Beirut, 2002), XII, no. 12839. Regarding the meaning of nāmūs, see the discussion below.
comfort, and she brings him to Warqa, who confirms his status as a prophet.125

Yet the first of Ibn Sa‘d’s four non-Qur’anic revelation accounts is al-Zuhri’s short version (from al-Waqidi), 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-Zuhri’s short version belongs together with the other early non-Qur’anicized accounts.126 Inasmuch as Ibn Sa‘d transmits this report almost identically and yet independently of Ibn Ishq, it is rather unlikely that its brevity can be attributed merely to Ibn Ishq’s concern to avoid redundancy, and Schoeler’s off-hand remark that Ibn Sa‘d has independently shortened the al-Zuhri report is neither explained nor warranted.127 Moreover, it is difficult to imagine that if al-Zuhri’s account already included such clear links to the Qur’ān both Ibn Ishq and Ibn Sa‘d (or his sources) would have severed this connection and reduced the episode to generic visions of light, removing the all important iqra’ scene or Muḥammad’s pleas with Kadija to wrap him up, a reference to the opening verses of sûras 73 and 74.

The traditions ascribed to ‘Urwa through his son Hishām and to Ibn ‘Abbās are in fact remarkably similar to al-Zuhri’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 ‘Urwa’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 ‘Urwa’s teaching, it would appear that this report reflects a very old tradition, and its strong similarities to the shorter al-Zuhri account transmitted by Ibn Ishq and Waqidi seems to confirm the antiquity of this basic narrative. Yet even if Hishām’s tradition does originate with ‘Urwa, which certainly is possible, this account affords absolutely no basis for concluding that ‘Urwa transmitted the full revelation complex, as Schoeler would seemingly have it.128

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125) Ibn Sa‘d, Ṭabaqāt, I.1, 129–30. See also Aḥmad ibn Yāhūya Balāḏurī, Ansāb al-ashrāf, ed. Muhammad Hamidullah (Cairo, 1959), I, 104.
126) Rubin identifies a few other “non-Qur’anic” accounts of Muhammad’s initial revelations in Rubin, “Iqra’ bi-smi rabbika …!,” 219.
127) Schoeler, Charakter und Authentie, 81.
Perhaps with this in mind, Schoeler looks to establish another line of transmission from Urwa, turning next to a set of traditions ascribed to Ibn Lahi′a from Abū l-Aswad Yatim Urwa (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 *Dalāʾil*, as well as in a fragmentary form attested by Ibn Kathir and Ibn Hajar. Schoeler notes from the outset that the transmission history of this hadith 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-Hudaybiya traditions. In regard to the latter, Schoeler observes that Abū l-Aswad’s account of al-Hudaybiya “either does not go back to Urwah at all or at least adopts motifs from other transmissions,” and he judges it “useless for a reconstruction of the contents of the original Urwah tradition,” proposing that “reconstruction has to be limited to the recensions of al-Zuhri and Hišām.”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 *iqraʾ* 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 *Dalāʾil* 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 hadith’s conclusion, where the *isnād* Ibn Lahiʿa < Abū l-Aswad < ʿUrwa appears, a chain which, as Schoeler again emphatically notes, has not been elevated to include ʿAbī Ḥaṭha.131 Nevertheless, Schoeler’s claims regarding the genealogy of this tradition unfortunately are somewhat misleading. To be sure, the text of the hadith begins, “as it has come to our ears,” but these words are preceded unmistakably by

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130) ibid., 26 n. 21
an *isnād*. According to Bayhaqi, it was in fact none other than al-Zuhri who reported this tradition, having heard it from Sa‘īd b. al-Musayyib, who is the one alleged to have said, “as it has come to our ears.” There is little question that this *isnād* through al-Zuhri belongs to this *ḥadīth*, particularly since the attribution to al-Zuhri is repeated in the midst of the narrative, at the top of its second page in the edition. An *isnād* from ‘Urwa and Abū l-Aswad indeed follows at the story’s conclusion, where Bayhaqi notes that al-Layth reported something similar from these authorities. Moreover, while Schoeler additionally signals two transmissions of this account from Bayhaqi in much later sources, al-Suyūṭī’s *al-Khaṣāṣib* and Ibn Kathir’s *Bidāya*, he rather oddly notes that both authors give a “false” *isnād* (through al-Zuhri) as a result of having misunderstood Bayhaqi. Yet it seems that perhaps Schoeler has misunderstood Bayhaqi in failing to notice the chain of transmitters at the beginning of this narrative. Both al-Suyūṭī and Ibn Kathir give the *ḥadīth*’s *isnād* as Mūsā b. ‘Uqba < al-Zuhri < Sa‘īd b. al-Musayyib, in clear agreement with Bayhaqi’s text, without any mention of transmission from Abū l-Aswad. In any case, Bayhaqi’s identification of al-Zuhri 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 ‘Urwa. Despite the second *isnād* leading back to ‘Urwa through Abū l-Aswad given at the *ḥadīth*’s conclusion, Bayhaqi’s characterization of this second report as “similar” to al-Zuhri’s cannot be relied upon for establishing ‘Urwan authorship of the *iqra*’ tradition.

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

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he relates the story according to the *rivâya* of Abû l-Aswad <ˈUrwa. Ibn Hajar does not further identify his source, and such a truncated *isnâd* is rather worthless for any sort of *isnâd* criticism. One would suspect that he knows the tradition from either Bayhaqi or Ibn Kathir, and thus without further information, the value of his witness for tracing the tradition back to ˈUrwa 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 Abû l-Aswad tradition ensures that the complete narrative of Muḥammad’s first revelation as transmitted through al-Zuhri 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. Yet Schoeler’s argument is hardly compelling. There is no evidence that the Abû l-Aswad <ʿUrwa tradition circulated independently of Bayhaqi’s collection, and its inclusion in his *Dala’il* 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 Bayhaqi identifies al-Zuhri (<Saʿid b. al-Musayyib) as the source of this tradition, merely noting at its conclusion that Ibn Lahṣ’a reported something similar from Abû l-Aswad and ʿUrwa. This notice can hardly stand as evidence for transmission of this tradition complex from ʿUrwa independently of al-Zuhri: Bayhaqi relates the tradition on al-Zuhri’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 *isnâds* for ʿUrwa’s involvement is rather frail and cannot vouch for his “authorship” of anything much beyond the vi-

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sions of light and voices reported in the hadīth ascribed to his son Hishām. Assuming that Ibn Sa’d has accurately preserved both this tradition and its chain of traditions, his account affords the only possible evidence for transmission from 'Urwa independently of al-Zuhri. Consequently, there is no basis whatsoever for attributing to 'Urwa all the various elements characteristic of al-Zuhri’s longer version. If any part of these traditions about the onset of revelation may possibly be ascribed to 'Urwa, 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 Qurʾanicization, which determines that traditions describing the generic experience of visions of light and voices, absent the various Qurʾanic embellishments, are most likely the oldest. In addition, such an early ‘Urwan tradition would also clarify the reports from Ibn Ishāq and al-Wāqidi indicating that al-Zuhri taught only a basic account of Muḥammad’s initial visions of light, a tradition that both al-Zuhri and Hishām ibn ‘Urwa presumably would have inherited from ‘Urwa. It seems altogether credible then that a tradition ascribing generic religious experiences of voices and visions to Muḥammad at the beginnings of his prophetic career had begun to circulate by the end of the first Islamic century, if not even earlier, and ‘Urwa himself may very well have related such traditions to his pupils. Both isnād criticism and analysis of the matn seem to support this conclusion. Nevertheless, there is no persuasive evidence that the full tradition complex, including the tahannat, iqra’, ufuq, Khadija, and Waraqa episodes, can be ascribed to ‘Urwa, and both approaches suggest instead that the various Qurʾanic and other traditional elements are later additions, presumably effected in part by al-Zuhri. We have not, however, with ‘Urwa reached the end of Schoeler’s analysis of this early tradition; convinced that he has demonstrated ‘Urwa’s authorship of the iqra’ narrative, Schoeler pursues his investigation further still, hoping to uncover ‘Urwa’s sources. After briefly considering the possibility that ‘Aisha was ‘Urwa’s source, as indicated by the majority of the ‘Urwan 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

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137) Christopher Melchert raises a similar critique of Motzki’s analysis of early Islamic law, in which he uses slightly divergent hadīth to authenticate a particular tradition. Melchert, “Early History of Islamic Law,” 303.
Wahb b. Kaysän, a client of the Zubayr family, who claimed to have overheard the qaṣṣ 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 its 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 (ʿA’isha and ʿUbayd), but rather as a family tradition circulating among the members of the Zubayrid clan, who had initially learned it from the qaṣṣ 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). 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.” Although Schoeler vigorously rebuffs Berg’s critique in an extended response to his review, 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.

138) Schoeler, 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.


141) Consider also the “invention” of an isnād for Ibn Ishāq’s hijra tradition noted above.
Nevertheless, if we approach Ibn Ishāq’s Wāhib 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 ʿiqra’ and ʿufq episodes, the revelation of the Qur’ān in the month of Ramadān (2.185) and Gabriel’s appearance at night (in reference to 97.1 and 44.2). 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 Wāhib account must explain the meaning of ṭabarannūth 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 Kaʿbah seven times, prefiguring of the rites of the ḥajj. Moreover, it would appear that by the time of Ibn Ishāq’s Wāhib 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 νομος, referring to the “Law” that was delivered to Moses as a metaphor for the “great revelation” that both he and Muḥammad received. While the Islamic tradition often interprets the word as meaning a “reveler” 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

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nāmās, 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-*taḥannat-iqra*-ufq-Khadija-Waraqa 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

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


147) See, in addition to Sellheim, Bell, “Mohammed’s Call,” 16; and Rubin, “*Iqra* bi-smi rabbika ...!,” 216–18.
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of Rubin’s analysis of the process of Qur’anicization 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 Muhammad’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 Urwa 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 Muhammad’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 ’Aisha Scandal

The other major component of Schoeler’s monograph, his study of the traditions about the “’Aisha scandal” (hadrīth 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 Urwa. This rather lengthy story revolves around accusations of adultery levied against ’Aisha, occasioned when she was accidentally left behind by a caravan and returned to Medina in the company of another man. Gossip about ’Aisha’s alleged infidelity spread rapidly across the city but ultimately was quashed by a Qur’anic revelation (24.11) and Muhammad’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 Urwa, 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-sīyar, 1, 731–37; al-Ṭabarī, Annales, 1, 1518–26; al-Bukhārī, al-Jāmi‘ al-ṣahih, 11, 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.

that we may take some confidence that al-Zuhri based his account on actual reports from the sources indicated, inasmuch as references to the 'A'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-Zuhri and Hishām ibn 'Urwa demonstrates that many key elements of the tradition—although by no means the complete narrative transmitted by al-Zuhri—can likely be traced to 'Urwa at the end of the first Islamic century.\textsuperscript{150} It would appear then that the rumors of 'A'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 'A'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 'A'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 ('A'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."\textsuperscript{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 'A'isha's infidelity after she had come to be so revered. Although Robert Hoyland has recently characterized such reasoning as "highly dubious,"\textsuperscript{152} this "criterion of dissimilarity" or "criterion of embarrassment" is a cornerstone of Historical Jesus Studies,\textsuperscript{153} and its application here and elsewhere to the life of Muḥammad is both welcome and appropriate.\textsuperscript{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-


\textsuperscript{151} Schoeler, "Character and Authenticity," 362; see also idem, \textit{Charakter und Authentie}, 164.

\textsuperscript{152} Hoyland, "Writing the Biography of the Prophet," 585.

\textsuperscript{153} See, e.g., Ehrman, \textit{Jesus}, 91–94.

\textsuperscript{154} In the study of early Islam, this principle was perhaps first and most influentially articulated by Goldziher: see Goldziher, \textit{Muhammedanische Studien}, II, 29–30; Engl. trans. idem, \textit{Muslim Studies}, II, 39–40.
certainly genuine, since "it is unthinkable that the story could have been invented by Muslims." Burton suggests that the story was indeed invented to show "that Qur'anic verses could be divinely withdrawn without verbal replacement." 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 Qur'anic abrogation is not very persuasive and certainly does not afford grounds for abolishing this core principle of historical and textual analysis. 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 Qur'anic 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. Arguing on the basis of the Qur'ān, 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 Qur'ān. Likewise, Hawting makes equally clear the improbability that the story is a later fabrication based on the Qur'ān, as well as explaining its suppression in many sources as a result of the Islamic tradition's association of Muhammad's opponents with polytheism and idolatry.

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

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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.
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 Qur'ān.
viewing its events through the lens of the present, no matter which methods or criteria the historian applies. 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 ᾿Aisha 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 ᾿Aisha 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 ᾿Aisha 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.” 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.
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 *Urwa*, 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.”

On the whole, however, there is much to be said for Schoeler’s analysis of these traditions, and it may well be that *Urwa’s* report reflects with some accuracy an episode in which *‘Aisha* 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 *Urwa’s* fashioning is not clear: the Qur’anic revelation, for instance, that vindicates *‘Aisha* is presumably a later adornment and may be *Urwa’s* contribution. Other elements, such as *‘Aisha’s* lost necklace and the question of performing ablutions in the desert may also be embellishments. The core of the story, however, that *‘Aisha* 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 Muhammad. It may even be that *‘Aisha* 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 *‘Aisha* scandal does indeed appear to be an especially early tradition, attesting that despite the enormous problems confronting any effort to recover the “historical Muhammad” from the much later traditions of the *sira* and *hadith* literature, in certain instances it may be possible to isolate some basic details that have a rather high level of historical credibility. The *‘Aisha* scandal seems to present one of these rare occasions. Nevertheless, it is again worth noting just how meager the resulting historical “kernel” is: *‘Aisha* was probably accused of adultery, and after an ensuing ruckus within the community of believers, her name was

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cleared. This is hardly information capable of throwing light on the nature
of formative Islam. Moreover, Schoeler's painstaking analysis of the vari-
ous *matn* and the accompanying *isnād* 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 'Ā'isha are probably authentic inasmuch
as their fabrication by the later tradition seems highly unlikely.

**AL-Hudaybiya**

Schoeler's primary collaborator, Andreas Görke, has published a similar
study of traditions concerning the treaty at al-Hudaybiya, using the
same methods of analysis to argue that 'Urwa may be identified as their
original author.¹⁶³ These *hadiths* relate Muḥammad's attempt to enter
Mecca as a pilgrim, prior to its conquest. When he is refused entry, Muḥam-
mad 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 *isnād*
from the al-Hudaybiya 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 'Urwa, however, is much less
clearly in evidence and remains somewhat dubious. Görke aims to establish
'Urwa's authorship by identifying lines of transmission from 'Urwa that
are independent of al-Zuhri, and he initially finds two possible routes: one
through Abū l-Aswad and another through Hishām ibn 'Urwa. The Abū
l-Aswad tradition proves to be a dead end, as Görke himself concludes.
Traditions circulated from 'Urwa having Abū l-Aswad as a tradent are fre-
cquently unreliable, as Görke and Schoeler have both noted, and Görke
speculates that Ibn Lahi'ā may in fact be responsible for this particular
tradition regarding al-Hudaybiya.¹⁶⁴ In any case, Abū l-Aswad's report
cannot be used to assign the traditions of al-Hudaybiya to 'Urwa, since “it
seems probable that this tradition does not go back to 'Urwa.”¹⁶⁵ Thus
Görke's efforts to link 'Urwa with al-Hudaybiya stand or fall with the
traditions attributed to his son Hishām.

of 'Urwa 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.
Unfortunately, there is only very limited attestation for a tradition about al-Hudaybiya transmitted from 'Urwa through Hishām, as often seems to be the case. Two early collections, Abū Yūsuf's Khardā and Ibn Abī Shayba's Musannaf, report a similar account of al-Hudaybiya on the authority of Hishām that does not occur in other sources, although the narrative is witnessed only partially by Ibn Abī Shayba. Such narrow evidence does not present a very firm foundation upon which to build an argument for 'Urwan authorship. Moreover, Abū Yūusuf and Ibn Abī Shayba both knew the story of al-Hudaybiya 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 Yūusuf 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 Yūusuf and Ibn Abī Shayba encountered a tradition about al-Hudaybiya that was attributed to Hishām ibn 'Urwa, alleging his father as its source. The value of their testimony, however, for identifying 'Urwa as the creator of the al-Hudaybiya story remains somewhat questionable. Lacking broader attestation for this narrative and its ascription to 'Urwa through Hishām, it is difficult to place much confidence in the possibility of 'Urwan authorship. There are simply not enough lines of transmission to reach the degree of probability attained, for instance, by Juynboll's īssād-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 Yūusuf 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 'Urwa 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).

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dying just four years before the former and more than twenty years after the latter. Indeed, inasmuch as 'Urwa (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-Zuhri. 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.\footnote{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.} 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.\footnote{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 *hadīth* 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.} 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.\footnote{Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 204 n. 3.}

To the contrary, it seems somewhat improbable that Hishām ibn 'Urwa 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-Zuhri. Given the length of time between his father’s death and his own professional activity, it stands to reason that even if ‘Urwa’s narratives were not taken directly from al-Zuhri’s accounts, ‘Urwa’s memories may very well have been strongly determined by al-Zuhri’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-Zuhri’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 ‘Urwa, and the
latter had accused Ibn Ishāq of circulating reports in Hishām’s name that originated with his wife.\footnote{See Horovitz, Earliest Biographies of the Prophet, 77–78.} 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-Zuhri’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-Zuhri: competition with al-Zuhri’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 ῾Urwa, the weak tradition attributed to him through his son Hishām cannot establish a very strong probability that ῾Urwa was its author. In contrast to al-Zuhri 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 Ma’mar, ῾Urwa’s association with the traditions of al-Ḥudaybiya remains rather tenuous.

Görke, however, concludes that the traditions ascribed to al-Zuhri and Hishām do in fact both originate with ῾Urwa, and as he subsequently considers the historicity of ῾Urwa’s underlying report, he proceeds a bit more cautiously than does Schoeler’s analysis of the ῾Aisha scandal. Görke is somewhat less sanguine that ῾Urwa’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 ῾Urwa.”\footnote{Görke, “Historical Tradition about al-Ḥudaybiya,” 259.} Several tendencies appear to have already exerted their influence on this narrative, including the glorification of Muhammad through ascribing miracles to him, geminations and triplications, the presence of early Muslim leaders among the \textit{dramatis personae}, and the use of biblical models, among various other topos. 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.”\footnote{Ibid., 261.}

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
alternative version” of the meeting al-Hudaybiya 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 Muhammad in Islamic piety.\(^\text{173}\) 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”\(^\text{174}\) that presumably led to the creation of new, more flattering accounts of al-Hudaybiya 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 ḵisnad can identify certain elements as likely reflections of an early tradition. In this case as with the ḥāʾisha scandal, the analysis of ḥisnād 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 ḥisnād 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 ḥisnād criticism (i.e., al-Hudaybiya and the ḥāʾisha scandal) appear rather ironically to validate instead the effectiveness of matn criticism. In contrast then to Motzki’s claims that ḥisnād criticism provides “more sophisticated methods of dating ḥadiths than relying either on the compilations containing the traditions or on the matn,”\(^\text{175}\) the results of Schoeler and Görke’s studies of the


\(^{174}\) 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, xli–li, quotation at xlvii; 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.\footnote{See esp. \textit{Goldziher}, \textit{Muhammedanische Studien}, II, 22–31; Engl. trans. \textit{idem}, \textit{Muslim Studies}, II, 33–40; \textit{Schacht}, \textit{Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence}, 176–89.}

Furthermore, Görke's reflections on the historicity of the account that he assigns to 'Urwā remind us that already by 'Urwā'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-Hudaybiya 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.

\textbf{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 'Urwā, 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.\footnote{\textit{Motzki}, "Murder of Ibn Abī l-Ḥuqayq," 171–72.} The story involves the murder of a prominent Jewish oppo...
nent of Muhammad, carried out by his followers on his instructions. The different versions describe how these assassins were able to breach Ibn Abî l-Ḥuqayq's dwelling, followed by rather elaborate, and often contradictory, accounts of the murder itself and the killers' return to Muhammad after the deed. While there is in fact a minor tradition about Ibn Abî l-Ḥuqayq's murder ascribed to 'Urwa, even Motzki estimates its historical worth as highly questionable, and thus he decides to focus his investigation on three more well attested accounts of this assassination that do not name 'Urwa as a transmitter.

Of these three traditions, the one assigned to al-Zuhri has the most complex transmission history, and its circulation by al-Zuhri once again seems very likely. Nevertheless, the various isnâds do not agree regarding al-Zuhri's source, pointing instead to one of several members from the Ka'b family. While many investigators would find such variation problematic, perhaps reflecting the efforts of later transmitters seeking to “grow” the isnâd back to al-Zuhri's source, Motzki draws confidence from this confusion, seeing it as solid evidence that “the information originates from the Ka'b b. Mâlik family.” Elsewhere Motzki evaluates this identification of al-Zuhri's source with members of the Ka'b family as “certain,” reaching the rather peculiar conclusion that “the fact that the isnâd is defective … speaks in favor rather than against the reliability of al-Zuhri's isnâd.” Nonetheless, Motzki resolves that it is not possible to identify any particular individual as al-Zuhri's source, and he concludes that the story al-Zuhri 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 Ka'b b. Mâlik family and the assassins is obvious. The latter were all members … of the Banû Salima to whom also the descendents of Ka'b b. Mâlik belonged.” While Motzki sees signs of authenticity in these ties of kinship, surely a link between the Ka'b family and the assassins was no less “obvious” to the early authors of Islamic history, who may themselves have invented this connection between the Ka'b family and Ibn Abî l-Ḥuqayq's murder. In any case, there is no reason to assume that al-Zuhri simply received the surviving narrative as “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 Ka'b b. Mâlik family and the assassins is obvious. The latter were all members … of the Banû Salima to whom also the descendents of Ka'b b. Mâlik belonged.” While Motzki sees signs of authenticity in these ties of kinship, surely a link between the Ka'b family and the assassins was no less “obvious” to the early authors of Islamic history, who may themselves have invented this connection between the Ka'b family and Ibn Abî l-Ḥuqayq's murder. In any case, there is no reason to assume that al-Zuhri simply received the surviving narrative as “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.”

178) ibid., 222–24.

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

180) ibid., 206–7.
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sation of the reports” already made by members of the Ka‘b family: the resulting account is more than likely al-Zuhri’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-Huqayq’s murder with al-Zuhri, who presumably pieced together the various traditions about this episode, many of which may have originated among the members of the Ka‘b 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-Sabī‘ī, 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-Zuhri version. On the surface at least, there could appear to be a reasonable probability that this Kūfan contemporary of al-Zuhri placed this second account of Ibn Abī l-Huqayq’s murder into circulation. Yet this *hadīth*’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-Sabī‘ī as a transmitter, referring instead to an otherwise unidentified “Abū Ishāq” who emerges the tradition’s common link. 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 Basra.” This suggests “that there were perhaps quite a few people who wanted to share, by borrowing Abū Ishāq as-Sabī‘ī’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-Sabī‘ī 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 Başrān *isnāds*.” Moreover, Juynboll

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further notes that “Abū Ishāq as-Sabī’i 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.”

Consequently, this second tradition about the murder of Ibn Abī l-Huqayq 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 hadith 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-Sabī’i as responsible for circulating this tradition, let alone its ascription to the Companion al-Barā’ī b. ‘Āzib. 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-Huqayq’s murder occurs in al-Ṭabarī’s History and al-Wāqidī’s Maghāzī, both of which ascribe the story to ‘Abd Allāh b. Unays (d. 54/674), the alleged killer himself according to both narratives. 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,” 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

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either minute or, in some cases, not apparent.\textsuperscript{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.\textsuperscript{186}

It is of course important for Motzki’s argument that these two hadiths 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 ‘Abd 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 ‘Abd 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 ‘Abd Allāh b. Unays) in order to harmonize their transmissions.\textsuperscript{187} On the whole, the evidence of the isnāds does not present a very compelling case for any connection with ‘Abd 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 ‘Abd Allāh b. Unays because he appears as the murderer in both accounts, as well as in the al-Zuhri version. Consequently, these hadiths cannot be reliably authenticated by using their isnāds.

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

\textsuperscript{185}) For examples of the latter, compare al-Tabarī’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.


source. This certainly would be a possibility in the case of al-Wāqīḍī, 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-Wāqīḍī, 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-Zuhri’s in particular), assigning them to the murderer himself, ῾Abd Allāh b. Unays, as a means of heightening their “authenticity.” Although Motzki offers several reasons why he thinks al-Wāqīḍī’s story is not dependent on al-Zuhri’s version, his arguments are not decisive and cannot exclude this possibility. 189 Consequently, the traditions assigned to ῾Abd 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 hadīths having some minor points of contact with each other as well as with al-Zuhri’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 Muhammad’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 Muhammad. Although an account of these events can be traced with some credibility to al-Zuhri, the traditions assigned to Abū Ishāq and the two distinct narratives attributed to ῾Abd Allāh b. Unays by al-Wāqīḍī 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 hadīths, it is not possible to invoke them as witnesses to an earlier tradition on which al-Zuhri 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

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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 Rāfīʾ 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 Rāfīʾ 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-Zuhri 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-Zuhri, 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 Ka'b 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 Abī Rāfīʾ. 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 Ka'b b. al-Ashraf's murder. 194 Motzki himself suggests the origin of al-Zuhri's

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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.
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 ance-
cestors in favor of Islam.” 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 assassina-
tion of Kaʿb 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 re-
lates an incident from the life of Muḥammad, as Motzki has proposed, it ul-
timately 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
Ishaʿa (2 Samuel 4) and ʿEglôn (Judges 3.15–26) on the various narratives
of Ibn Abi l-Huqayq’s assassination, and the latter story’s influence seems
particularly likely, as Joseph Horovitz was also persuaded. Motzki, how-
ever, 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 es-
timation. Nevertheless, it would be very helpful for the reader if Motzki
had introduced the issue of potential biblical models at the outset of his ar-
ticle, enabling a consideration of this possibility from the very beginning.
Despite Motzki’s rather rough dismissal, the biblical imprint on this nar-
rative is readily apparent in a number of details, including the emphasis on
the doors and the manner of execution. Perhaps Motzki holds this possibil-
ity to the very end for rhetorical purposes, so as to introduce this possibil-
ity 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-Huqayq’s as-

\[195\) Motzki, “Murder of Ibn Abi l-Huqayq,” 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
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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 ‘Urwa, Motzki’s analysis of Ibn Abi l-Huqayq’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 crystalized 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 Qur’ān 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 Urwa and al-Zuhri. 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 histori-
cal probability capable of assuaging the skeptic’s doubts? The actual re-
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 “Urwa” material. Yet as we have seen,
the data do not support the full extent of their conclusions, and only a nar-
row portion of this hijra conglomerate is widely attested as having any as-
sociation with Urwa. For instance, the traditions of Meccan persecution,
the migration to Ethiopia, and the second meeting in Aqaba are attributed
to Urwa 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
Urwa can be counted in their favor. As noted above, the authenticity of
these “documents” has stood largely unchallenged since their early vali-
dation 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 Urwa
seems an unwarranted assumption sustained largely through repetition.

The evidence linking a tradition of Abū Bakr’s encounter with Ibn al-Dug-
humna to Urwa also is not sufficient. At best Schoeler and Görke have
identified al-Zuhri 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-Zuhri. Only the actual account of Mu-
hammad’s hijra shows any solid evidence of a possible connection with
Urwa, although the rudimentary narrative verified by the complete isnād
bundle is in fact quite meager. It seems likely then that a rather basic re-
port about the hijra may be traced back to Urwa, 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
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... variance with the ‘Urwan narrative on certain key points, apparently had also begun to circulate quite early, and thus a connection with ῾Urwa 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 Muhammad’s flight.

Similarly, there are signs of a connection between ῾Urwa and an early account of Muḥammad’s initial religious experiences. As with the hijra traditions, Schoeler again asserts ῾Urwa’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 ῾Urwa. Rubin’s analysis of the process by which this moment from Muḥammad’s biography came to be thoroughly Qur’ānicized 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 “‘Aisha scandal,” Schoeler argues convincingly, following Juynboll, that the reports behind this narrative most likely belong to the generation before al-Zuhri, and ῾Urwa was probably one of his informants. Nevertheless, the relative antiquity of this tradition is largely secured by its dissonance with later tradition, where ‘‘Aisha 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 ‘‘Aisha 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-Hudaybiya convincingly links this episode to al-Zuhri’s teaching, but the attempt to make a connection with ῾Urwa is much more strained. The alleged transmission through Hisḥām ibn ῾Urwa (< ‘Urwa) is extremely limited and cannot guarantee a link to ῾Urwa. Moreover, Hisḥām’s age relative to his father, al-Zuhri, and Ibn Ishaq 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
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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-Hudaybiya, remain somewhat uncertain.

Finally, Motzki convincingly shows that a tradition of Ibn Abi l-Huqayq’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-Wāqidī, 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-

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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.
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tative of his flight to Medina in the face of opposition had taken shape by the later first century, some fifty years or more after his death. Likewise, the story of \textquoteleft\textquoteleft A\textquoteright isha\textquoteleft 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 Mu\textasciitilde{hamm}ad. Perhaps Mu\textasciitilde{hamm}ad also concluded a treaty regarding fugitives that was not in his followers\textquoteleft favor or ordered the assassination of an opponent: these traditions are convincingly assigned to al-Zuhri, and they certainly are conceivable within the life of Mu\textasciitilde{hamm}ad. 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, \textquotedblleft whether the outcome will justify the time and energy needed for such an enterprise.	extquotedblright In fact, Motzki himself predicts that \textquoteleft\textquoteleft [t]he historical biography which will be the outcome of all these source-critical efforts will be only a very small one.	extquotedblright\footnote{Motzki, \textquotedblleft Murder of Ibn Abi l-Huqayq,	extquoteright 234–35.} Although Motzki somehow finds room for optimism in this conclusion, the achievements of this approach, while not insignificant, are rather minimal.

So far, isn\textasciitilde{d}-critical study of the si\textasciitilde{ra} 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 Mu\textasciitilde{hamm}ad\textquoteleft s life and his religious teaching. The Qur\textasciitilde{\'}an of course continues to serve as the primary source for the latter, but our understanding of Mu\textasciitilde{hamm}ad\textquoteleft s career and of the Qur\textasciitilde{\'}an itself rests largely on information derived from the hadith, and it is essential that we carefully chart this sea of forgery and fables to find the oldest traditions. Unfortunately, the isn\textasciitilde{d}-critical approach advocated by Schoeler, G\textit{ör}ke, 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 Mu\textasciitilde{hamm}ad. 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 si\textasciitilde{ra}, were not initially transmitted according to the more rigorous standards of the standard \textquoteleft\textquoteleft hadith format,\textquoteright meaning that this method of analysis, borrowed from the study of legal hadith is not likely to yield the same quality.
of results when applied to the *sira* traditions. Consequently, the achievements of this method in attempting to push beyond Ibn Ishāq’s *sira* 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.

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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.*