

II. Traditional patterns of Islamic knowledge transmission

Transmission of knowledge has a specific status from the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Islamic sources take great efforts to explain the ways in which the Qur'an was received by Muhammad from Allah via the Angel Gabriel. The Qur'an itself explains its own nature, through the first word of Revelation: "Read!" (*The Qur'an*, Surah al-'Alaq, 'The Clinging Form', 96:1).

According to tradition, great care is taken in distinguishing the Revelation from any statement or action that Muhammad might take. The transmission of knowledge derived from Muhammad is itself wrapped in hadith sciences, especially the preservation of the *isnad* (chains of transmission) of sayings and actions of Muhammad – the veracity of each being classified according to the strengths of their narrators.

Awareness that a message – even a Prophetic one – can be distorted led to a rigidity (according to tradition) in the ways in which fragments of Qur'an-ic Revelation were collected, preserved and disseminated – in order that a single universal version of the Qur'an was made available. Minor differences or discrepancies were theoretically eradicated; recitation became a science of preservation of the Qur'an; copies of the text were written with great care, and awareness that the omission or insertion of a single diacritic point could change the meaning of a verse, and damage the divine status of the Qur'an.

Hadith sources suggest that Gabriel used to recite Qur'an with Muhammad once a year, and twice in the year of his death (Bukhari, 1981). According to tradition, portions of the Qur'an were memorised by followers during the lifetime of Prophet. This oral/aural tradition continued after Muhammad's death, emphasising that the first Muslim society was predominantly a non-literate one. However, fragments of the Qur'an were inscribed on wood, stones, and bones. According to tradition, as the Community slowly grew, after a Revelation, Muhammad and his Companions would undertake memorisation of every nuance of detail: the Revelation was to be dictated to scribes too.

Preservation also meant the development of a field of knowledge and awareness of the context(s) of when Revelation appeared (*asbab al-nuzul*). Revelation was not all received in one 'chunk', rather it was received in intervals; not in the final order of the Qur'an. The drawing together and 'codification' of the sources - *jam'al-Qur'an* - in oral and in written forms was undertaken by the Prophet, and subsequently (according to tradition) in the caliphates of Abu Bakr and 'Uthman.

One tradition states that the official recension of the Qur'an was edited by Zayd ibn Thabit - Muhammad's secretary - who compiled various versions and fragments of revelation together into a definitive order between 11-14 A.H., under the authority of Caliph 'Uthman. However, this tradition has been challenged by some scholars (for example, see the discussion in Robinson, 1996, 76-96; Wansbrough, 1977). The revelation received by Judaeo-Christian prophets prior to Muhammad is also seen as valid, if it does not conflict with

the Qur'an, with Muhammad's status being that of the 'final prophet', in a line reaching back to Adam.

The Qur'an holds a sacred status as the speech of God. Each portion of the Qur'an has a divine quality, and each word may be determined to be a proof of God. Therefore, the physical Qur'an-ic text in written or printed form holds a special place for Muslims, and has to be treated with care. The memorization of the Qur'an is seen as bringing the individual closer to God. According to tradition, there is an historical and linguistic continuity between the Arabic Revelation that Muhammad received, and the Arabic contained in copies of the Qur'an. No element of the text is deemed to have been altered, edited or amended in any way. The Qur'an-ic recitation of Muhammad is perceived to be identical to that of Muslims through to the present day. The Qur'an, as a sacred text, has a special status. Extracts from the text can be found forming part of the calligraphy inside mosques. The 'profane' use of the text is prohibited, and care must be taken if a text has to be disposed of (through wear and tear).

The Qur'an itself states that Muhammad himself memorised Revelation he received as: "... a messenger from God, reading out pages [blessed with purity], containing true scriptures." (*The Qur'an*, Surah al-Bayyina, 'Clear Evidence', 98:2) The Qur'an was also memorised by Muhammad's Companions, encouraged by Muhammad, in order that they could go out and present it to others. This was into the predominantly oral/aural culture of the Arabian peninsular, where literacy was rare. Indeed, Muhammad's own status as a 'literate' Prophet is a contentious issue: this is to emphasise that Muhammad did not write the text himself, as stated in the Qur'an

"You never recited any Scripture before We revealed this one to you; you never wrote one down with your hand. If you had done so, those who follow falsehood might have had cause to doubt." (*The Qur'an*, Surah al-'Ankabut, 'The Spider', 29:48)

"Those who follow the apostle, the unlettered prophet." (*The Qur'an*, 2004, Surah al-A'raf, 'The Heights', 7:157)

As can be seen from the above, the transmission of knowledge about the Qur'an has a special status in Islam. Similarly, the sciences of transmission of Islamic knowledge further evolved – with scholars travelling to various 'seats' of knowledge to acquire the benefit of other scholars, sources and seats of learning. Islam expanded rapidly following the death of Muhammad in 632. Within one hundred years of Muhammad's death, there were Muslim communities as far apart as Spain and China. There were also significant divisions and power struggles, reflecting different political, tribal and religious interests. Networks of knowledge emerged, some based on routes of trade as much as intellectual endeavour.

Significantly, there are a number of approaches to these themes, including the ways in which the Qur'an emerged. Historical and traditional readings can have marked differences, as outlined in the readings contained in the following activity:

Recommended reading

The *Encyclopaedia of Islam* on the Qur'an provides some more detail on this issue:

“*Kur'an*”, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Online Edition (available through Electronic Resources, Brill Online)

[Oxford Islamic Studies Online, Qur'an](#)

Other reading

cooke, miriam and Bruce B. Lawrence (eds), *Muslim Networks: from Hajj to Hip Hop* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), chapters 1 and 2.

David Waines, *An Introduction to Islam* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2nd ed. 2003), Chapter 2, 33-62. This illustrates the expansion of Islam, the development of tradition, and the creation of 'knowledge frameworks' – critical components in terms of ideas surrounding Muslim networks.

John Renard, *Seven Doors to Islam: Spirituality and the Religious Life of Muslims*, (Berkeley: University of California, 1996), chapter 1, 1-35. The spiritual dimension of Muslim networking should not be overlooked, especially as this contributes to the efficacy of networking. This chapter provides insight into the religious nature of the knowledge transmitted and popularised to a broad audience.

Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800* (Cambridge: University Press, 2003) especially chapters 6-7, 61-75. This offers an introductory analysis of the development of Islam, highlighting approaches and processes associated with the expansion of Islam. Other sections of this book are relevant in this module.