

# Theology on the Web.org.uk

*Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible*

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](https://paypal.me/robbradshaw)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

---

A table of contents for *The Baptist Quarterly* can be found here:

[https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles\\_bq\\_01.php](https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bq_01.php)

## The Muslim Dogma of Tradition.

MISS HILDA MACLEAN, of the Victorian Baptist Foreign Mission, read a paper in December 1927 to the annual conference of Australasian missionaries in Bengal, on "The Traditions among Ordinary Muhammedans." Its object was not only to show how Islam in Bengal is really based on the Traditions, but as a corollary to set forth their leading features as rendered into English by Mr. William Goldsack, and to urge that approach must be made to the Mussulman along their lines. This practical aim is beside the mark for a stay-at-home Englishman; but the facts as to the Traditions raise interesting points as to inspiration, and as to parallel facts in Christendom. We may first cite some evidence as to the popularity of the Traditions.

At a recent Bengal Women's Educational Conference, a Muslim lady speaker, pleading that the Quran should be translated into the vernaculars so that it might be not only read but understood, confessed:—"We seldom act according to the teachings of the Quran. It is merely read and repeated, parrot-wise, and tied with a cloth, and kept with great care. A few days ago, in a mass meeting of Muslims held at Allahabad, Miss Jafia Soleman, an educated Egyptian lady, asked those amongst the audience who could really understand the teachings of the Quran, to raise their hands. Only three men did so. If our men are so poor in their knowledge of the Quran, it is needless to say how much poorer their women must be." Turn then to the villages and see. In almost any home, ask what they read, and they will produce, along with the children's school books and possibly a popular novel or life of Muhammed, some filthy, dirty, ragged, coverless volume, which probably contains some garbled story from the "Kasas." Happy indeed is the woman who can afford to buy the complete work, and happy those who can gather to hear it read aloud.

What is the "Kasas"? It aims at giving the traditional histories of all the prophets, from the creation of the "Light of Muhammed" before the beginning of the world, to the advent of Muhammed himself; and the histories of the four Imams. The original was written in the fifth century after the prophet's death, and is most readable, however ridiculous and unclean some of the stories are. A glance at the index shows many familiar names: Adam, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, and the building of the

Kaaba, Lot, Isaac, Joseph (sixty pages), Job, Pharaoh, Moses and the children of Israel (another sixty pages), Elijah, Elisha, Samuel, Saul, David and Solomon (150 pages), John the Baptist, Zechariah, Mary and Jesus (twenty pages).

This ancient work is not only widely circulated in the village dialect, but is the basis of children's books for the home, text-books in Muslim primary schools, volumes for the lending libraries. In some cases the stories are told as we ourselves might relate them; in others the main object is to exalt Muhammed, so that we hear of the Splitting of the Moon, the Night Journey to Heaven, constantly cited by Muslim children to show how superior their prophet is to Christ.

Go back a step, and ask where the writer of the "Kasas" obtained his material. He drew chiefly on six collections of Traditions, committed to writing in the third century after Muhammed. The chief of these collectors was Al Bukhari. He says in his preface that he was inspired to the task by a dream in which he seemed to be driving away flies from the person of Muhammed; an interpreter told him that the flies were lies which had settled upon the apostolic tradition; so he decided to gather and sift the current traditions. Sixteen years did he give to this task, travelling from Iraq to Egypt, interrogating 40,000 men, collecting 600,000 traditions, of which he memorised a third. He was critical, prayed over his work, and never committed a tradition to writing without an ablution and a prayer. From his mass of material he chose about 7,000, and since many are doublets, his collection actually enshrines about 3,000 stories. He does not expressly state the principles on which he chose or rejected; but it does not seem that he considered internal evidence, for the stories are often childish or absurd or even immoral. He did record traditions which explain laws and customs that were not enjoined in the Quran. But in every case he was most careful to show the continuity of the tradition, by some formula such as:—"A told me that B (the son of C the son of D) said to him from his father, from E, from F (the son of G), I have heard from H (the son of I) that he heard from J (the son of K) that he heard the prophet say—or that he heard the prophet do—or that he noted the prophet permitted, such and such a thing." The utmost care was taken that the complete chain of tradition should be exhibited, that each link should be identified.

The veracity of each man manifestly is important; and Al Bukhari was so far conscious of this that he discarded 593 out of 600 stories. He might have good opportunities for distrusting many men, and for trusting others. But while he might dare to neglect men of recent generations, it was dangerous for an orthodox Muslim to hesitate about the Companions of the

Prophet. Attend then to those earliest links in the chain; they consist of four men who knew Muhammed long and closely, three men and a woman who knew him towards the end.

The four Older Companions were Abu Bakr, Omar, Uthman and Ali. It is unfortunate that comparatively few traditions came through them. This was not for want of curiosity, but one of them distrusted his own memory:—"Were it not that I feared lest I should add to the facts in relating them, or take therefrom, verily I would tell you." And another had occasion to rebuke a tendency to glorification:—"I fear that if I tell you one thing, ye will add thereto a hundred, as from me." It had been wonderful if all transmitters of tradition could resist that temptation.

No scruples seem to have hindered the four younger people. One of them alone is responsible for twice as many anecdotes as the four Older Companions together; it is satisfactory to know that he was freely charged by his contemporaries with sheer invention; it is less satisfactory that Al Bukhari nevertheless incorporated many traditions which depend solely on this one man, Abu Hurairah, who had been a convert only three years when the Prophet died, and was but a lad then.

Ibn Abbas, the second, was only fourteen years old at Muhammad's death; yet Al Bukhari relies on him for as much information as the four Older Companions together. The third, Anas bin Malik, was nineteen at the prophet's death; a man of no birth, standing, or education. The fourth was Ayesha, the child-wife, "utterly unscrupulous, passionately partisan, and lacking in character": she is the authority for more than 2,000 anecdotes. To these four young people are due all the stories attributing miraculous powers to Muhammad.

What now is the attitude of Muslims to these traditions? The villager in Bengal knows them better than the Quran itself, and they are the practical standard of both faith and practice. But what of the Muslim theologians? The great bulk of them, the Sunnis and the Wahabis, agree that while the Quran is the word of God Himself, dictated to the prophet by the angel Gabriel, yet the Traditions are inspired on a lower level, so that the words are human, and only the ideas divine. These theologians uphold the practice of the prophet as binding; thus because he picked up his rice with three fingers, this is the standard Muslim method. Some of them were afraid to use their own judgement when no precedent was quoted; one man knew that Muhammad ate water-melons, but because he did not know whether the prophet broke them, bit them, or cut them, he thought it wiser to abstain; he even tried to force his scruples on others, and forbade a poor woman to spin by the light of

torches carried along the street, because no one knew if the prophet had ever used another man's light without asking leave. Such extreme views illustrate the outcome of this line of theology. But from the second century there was a divergent line of men who pointed out flaws in the traditions and ridiculed them. The Shiahs of Persia and India rejected all which did not depend on their patron, Ali, one of the four Older Companions; of his recollections they have five books. And even among the Sunnis to-day there are a few who minimize or even reject, going "Back to the Quran."

The whole course of events reminds us how Islam is but a revised Judaism: the Jewish Scriptures were supplemented by tradition, and this both by theologians and the populace came to be in practice more highly esteemed, till even in our Lord's day there were some who made the word of God of none effect by their tradition. It is equally interesting to compare with doings in Christian circles.

A Muslim says that nothing whatever was written down from the lips of Jesus, and therefore nothing in the Christian Scriptures stands on the same plane of the Quran. All the sayings attributed to Him are due to the memory of some Older Companions, perhaps Peter and Matthew, and to some Younger Companions, such as Mark and John, and to one man who was not a Companion at all, Luke. To a Muslim there would be a grave defect in that Luke gives no vouchers for his stories; thus the stories of the Prodigal Son and of the Good Samaritan have no attested pedigree. Another large part of the New Testament is a collection of letters by Paul, who was no Companion, and whose relations with the Companions were on his own showing somewhat strained. Paul does once or twice emphasize that he was transmitting a tradition, but he also declares emphatically that he taught on his own authority, believing that he too had the spirit of Christ. A Muslim pays no attention to letters by men whom he does not acknowledge as prophets, nor even to a Revelation to a Companion, but limits himself to the Injil, the Gospel through the prophet Jesus: he puts the original on a level with his own Traditions, inspired as to ideas, not words; but he does not hesitate to use the Lower Criticism, and say that even what the Companions handed on has not reached us without alteration.

But we have a mass of literature which presents other analogies; apocryphal gospels, ecclesiastical traditions. The general sense of Christians has discarded several gospels, although they are attributed to Companions, such as Peter. They can be shown to have originated at a late period, and can often be traced to definite places; they are not complete stories, but

are evidently supplements to the four Canonical Gospels; they abound in anecdotes which strain our credulity: we readily endorse the judgement passed upon them in the third and fourth centuries, that they are unworthy of public use. Yet there are scattered incidents in them which have found wide acceptance; that Mary was ever a virgin, that an ox and an ass worshipped at the manger, that the wise men from the East were three kings, &c., &c.

These indeed were taken up and stamped with some ecclesiastical authority, and so we are led on to consider ecclesiastical traditions generally, of which one has lately excited some attention—that communion should be fasting. It would be well if those who speak glibly of tradition would heed the rigid test of Islam—that every link in the chain of tradition should be named and approved. In the early days there was a consciousness of this, men did appeal to the churches founded by apostles, did enumerate the men who in unbroken succession presided over them; in the remarkable case of Jerusalem, a rival prelate often pointed out with care that there was a gap, and the tradition of the original church faded away at Pella, while the church of *Ælia Capitolina* on the same site did not inherit the tradition. But “tradition” has come in practice to mean something very different—the code of rules and the body of doctrine which have been evolved in the course of centuries. A decision arrived at in Nicea, in Constantinople, at Trent, in the Vatican, may be promulgated with authority, and be accepted ever since; but it is not, in the true sense of the word, an apostolic tradition; it is handed down from a definite time and place, and depends on the authority of the Church, not on the direct authority of Christ.

While in many parts of Christendom the Traditions do seem as important as in Islam, it would seem that Christian theologians might learn something as to Inspiration and Tradition from Muslim thinkers.