

Basic Primary Sources in Islamic Religion

by Paula Youngman Skreslet

As the demand for university and seminary courses in Islamic religion expands, academic libraries struggle to achieve an appropriate level of instructional support. Few librarians have much training in Islamic culture and religion, and fewer in the Arabic language (or Persian, or Turkish), making the whole task seem quite intimidating. Librarians with experience in medieval studies, patristics, or scholastic theology will find they can cope more easily with the bibliographic challenges, but they will still have to deal with unfamiliar subject matter in a highly specialized area.

Text-based faith traditions deal first of all with their canonical scriptures: the Torah, the Bible, the Qur'an. Authoritative interpretations of scripture, theological works exploring the doctrinal implications of these texts, legal documents detailing the norms and standards of life in the religious community, historical works, and devotional and liturgical materials develop over time and become organized into the literature of the faith. Eventually, certain key works are recognized as "turning-point texts"—those that made an indelible impact upon the literature and are certain to be mentioned in any scholarly study of the subject.

My writing partner, Rebecca Skreslet, and I have created an introduction to these works entitled *The Literature of Islam: A Guide to the Primary Sources in English Translation* (Scarecrow, 2006), intended specifically for faculty members who are called upon to teach introductory or survey courses outside their own disciplines for graduate students in theology, medieval studies, world religions, or related fields; and for those responsible for library collection development in religion. (It is, of course, not intended for specialists in Islamic studies, who will already be reading these texts in their original languages.) This essay will offer a glimpse of some of the chief categories or genres in the literature of Islam and mention a few select works that are accessible in English translation.

THE QUR'AN

The foundation of Islamic religion is the belief that the express and verbatim Word of God was revealed in the text we know as the Qur'an (kooor-AHN). Orthodox teaching regards the Arabic text as eternal and uncreated, conveyed through the Prophet Muhammad; a version produced in another language is considered an interpretation, not an equivalent. But for the sake of believers and others who are not able to understand Arabic, many translations have been attempted.

The first translation of the Qur'an by a native English speaker who was a Muslim, Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, appeared in 1930, as *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957). With some exceptions, his translation tends to adhere closely to the literal contents of the text and is often the basis for scholarly study. The language is heavily archaic, however, and the structure monotonous. Another vintage translation often used in the classroom is Arthur J. Arberry's *The Koran Interpreted* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1955). This work has a more poetic rhetorical style but also some formatting problems, and the language suffers from archaism and excessive formality. The translation by 'Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali, *The Holy Qur-an* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1975), is somewhat old fashioned but readable, and is widely used by English-speaking Muslims, though his notes and commentary are considered unorthodox by some. Indeed, many highly sectarian or popular versions are available but must be used with caution.

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Contemporary scholarly translations are appearing, but it remains to be seen whether they will gain acceptance, remain in print, and establish themselves as credible sources for study. These works have the advantage of being able to employ the findings of current linguistic theory and discourse criticism to inform their approaches; some also take advantage of electronic multimedia resources to enrich the student's understanding of the material. Typically, however, they cover only a portion of the Qur'anic text. Works of this type include Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an: the Early Revelations* (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 2002), and Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *The Awesome News: Interpretation of Juz' 'Amma, the Last Part of the Qur'an*, 2nd ed. (s.l.: World Islamic Call Society, 1997). A complete and contemporary (but thoroughly prosaic) version well suited to the needs of scholars is Muhammad A.S. Abdel Haleem's *The Qur'an: a New Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), with useful reference features, critical annotations, and a strong introduction. For some sense of the rhetorical grace and spiritual power of the original, one could consult Sells; for a full rendering of its contents, perhaps Abdel Haleem. The Abdel Haleem text is available in searchable electronic form as part of *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*.

THE HADITH

In addition to the sacred text of the Qur'an, Muslims are able to draw upon another major source of guidance in faith and conduct: the example and verbal teaching of the Prophet Muhammad. His words and deeds, his customary behavior, his responses to a variety of problems and questions, even his tacit approval of others' behavior in his presence, became the standard to emulate. The *sunna* (SOON-nah) of the Prophet is his exemplary behavior or precedent.

The classic source of information about the *sunna* of the Prophet is the body of tradition known as *hadith* (hah-DEETH), a corpus of literature composed of brief narrative accounts of the words and deeds of the Prophet and other spiritual authorities. These narratives circulated as oral tradition, with links tracing back to the original witness; ultimately, they were composed as formal written collections. Two of these collections are widely recognized as comprehensive and reliable: the works of al-Bukhari and Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj. These are available in English as *The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih al-Bukhari* (Chicago: Kazi, 1979) and *Sahih Muslim* (New Delhi: Kitab Bhavan, 2000). However, it is often possible to find superior contemporary critical translations of brief, well-chosen excerpts from the *hadith* literature in anthologies, such as Calder, Mojaddedi, and Rippin's *Classical Islam* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003) or Arthur Jeffery's *Reader on Islam* (The Hague: Mouton, 1962).

Other *hadith* collections considered to be near-canonical texts are those by Abu Dawud, al-Tirmidhi, al-Nasa'i, and Ibn Majah; early works by Malik ibn Anas and Ahmad ibn Hanbal are also of the first historical and literary importance. The Shi'a recognize another four collections representing the specific concerns of their tradition; for some examples, see *A Shi'ite Anthology* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1981). A number of very well-known selections from the *hadith* are also available, such as *An-Nawawi's Forty Hadith* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1997). Some of these texts are difficult to locate in English, and I refer you to our book for more assistance.

The study of *hadith* by Islamic scholars gave rise to its own important literature, assessing and analyzing this body of material; some of these texts are available in English, such as Ibn al-Salah al-Shahrazuri's *Introduction to the Science of the Hadith* (Reading, UK: Garnet, 2005).

The *hadith* corpus also formed the basis of the distinctive and important genre of Islamic biography. Narratives focusing upon the life and leadership of the Prophet Muhammad were compiled to create the *sira* (SEE-rah) literature; works of this type include Ibn Hisham's redaction of Ibn Ishaq's great *Sirat Rasul Allah*, published in

English as *The Life of Muhammad* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), and Ibn Kathir's later *The Life of The Prophet Muhammad* (Reading, U.K.: Garnet, 1998-2000). The need to verify the origin of a given *hadith* account led to extremely detailed collective biographies of the individuals named in the chain of transmitters, evaluating their piety and scholarship and defining their modes of contact with other transmitters; for example, the *Kitab al-tabaqat al-kabir* of Ibn Sa'd (Karachi: Pakistan Historical Society, 1967). A fine edition in English of Islamic biography and bibliography is the *Fihrist al-'ulum* of Ibn al-Nadim (Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World, 1998).

SCRIPTURAL EXEGESIS

Many of the *hadith* narratives explain how passages in the Qur'an are to be understood and applied, through the words or example of the Prophet or his personal Companions. They contain, therefore, the earliest exegetical work in the Islamic tradition. The practice of exegesis developed into its own scholarly discipline, known as *tafsir* (taff-SEER).

A *tafsir* or commentary upon the Qur'an is intended to clarify in a systematic way the meanings of the Arabic text. Typically, the exegete will work through the Qur'an verse by verse, explaining any unusual vocabulary or grammatical constructions, or any difficulties in determining the semantic content or sense of a passage. For this reason, exegetical works do not lend themselves well to translation. A portion of the classic exegetical compendium *Jami' al-bayan* by the great 10th-century scholar Abu Ja'far al-Tabari has been published in English as *Commentary on the Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). This work is a particularly good example of the use of *hadith* narratives in the interpretation of the Qur'an.

The work of major medieval interpreters may be found excerpted in anthologies such as Rippin's *Classical Islam*, mentioned above, Rippin and Knappert's *Textual Sources for the Study of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), or Helmut Gätje's *The Qur'an and its Exegesis* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976). Medieval Shi'i interpretation is well represented by *The Qur'an: Shaykh Tabarsi's Commentary* (Lahore: Sh. Muhammad Ashraf, 1977), which also provides excerpts from Zamakhshari's *Kashshaf* and Fakhr al-Din al-Razi's *Mafatih*.

A good deal of 20th-century exegesis is available in English, reflecting a keen concern with faithful Muslim life in the modern era. Major works of this type include Mawlana Mawdudi's *Towards Understanding the Qur'an* (Markfield: Islamic Foundation, 2006) and Sayyid Qutb's *In the Shade of the Qur'an* (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1999-), both of them in contemporary critical translations.

ISLAMIC LAW

A key figure in establishing the recognized sources of Islamic law was the great medieval jurist Muhammad ibn Idris al-Shafi'i. In his groundbreaking work *Kitab al-risala fi usul al-fiqh* or *Treatise on the Principles of Jurisprudence*, al-Shafi'i stipulated the duty of obedience to the Prophet as binding upon all believers, and the Qur'an and the *sunna* together as the two inspired and authoritative sources from which laws could be derived to guide and direct the Muslim community.

Every act in the life of an individual believer or a Muslim community should be in accord with the *shari'a* (shar-EE-ah) or divine law. Therefore, the shaping of one's understanding of *shari'a* and the sources from which it is derived take on a crucial importance. The process of analysis and codification of the law as a human activity, carried out by jurists, is known as *fiqh* (FIK). As the study of the law took shape over time, several discrete trends,

disciplines, or orientations of legal thought became defined, among them the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, Hanbali, and Ja'fari "schools" of jurisprudence. Each of these schools has its own distinctive way of formulating legal opinions, and each has developed a massive body of literature in support of its approach.

This literature is far too complex to summarize in a few brief remarks, but some particularly helpful editions of landmark texts can be mentioned. The treatise by al-Shafi'i is available in an expert English translation by Majid Khadduri as *Islamic Jurisprudence: Shafi'i's Risala* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1961). A useful translation of a seminal legal text is *Al-Muwatta of Imam Malik ibn Anas: the First Formulation of Islamic Law* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1989). Unfortunately, many significant works in jurisprudence by other major figures have yet to appear in fluent and reliable English translations.

Fine critical editions of certain specialized legal texts can be found, such as *Abu Yusuf's Kitab al-Kharaj* (Leiden: Brill; London: Luzac, 1969), *The Islamic Law of Nations: Shaybani's Siyar* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966), or Ahmad ibn Hanbal's *Chapters on Marriage and Divorce* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993). Also in economics, government, and ethics, there are English editions of Ibn Taymiyya's *Public Duties in Islam* (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1982) and some Shi'i texts, such as *Combat with the Self* (London: Islamic College for Advanced Studies Press, 2003).

SUMMARY

This essay has touched upon a select set of texts from some of the most fundamental disciplines in Islamic studies: the Qur'an itself, the *hadith* sources and their criticism, exegetical commentaries, and the application of this material in the formation of law. Space does not permit a discussion of other very rich and significant bodies of literature in Islam such as history, theology, philosophy, spirituality, or mysticism, each of which deserves its own essay. This essay may provide some sense of the overall coherence of the discipline and encourage those who are new to this field to explore the literary wealth of this articulate and erudite community of faith.

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