

[A reply for some of the points mentioned in the comments of Riverart in the post: Can the Qur'an and Early Islam Be Studied Critically (Like the NT and Early Christianity?) Guest Post by Stephen Shoemaker, 25 June 2023, Bart Ehrman Blog].

Thank you, Riverart. Your comments were genuine, and I would like to highlight the following points.

It would be easier to establish here the following short abbreviations:

- WSIS: Western Scholars of Islamic Studies.
- AOT: Anonymous Oral Tradition.
- COT: Chain Oral Tradition.

1# In my comments, did I imply anything related to faith, beliefs, or metaphysics?

How am I acting as an apologetic by discussing a type of an “Oral Tradition”?

The COT has nothing to do with faith and we don't regard COT to be God's inspired method. But the COT is a method that is recognized by common sense and understanding probabilities. I will discuss this further in point 6.

2# We don't regard Al-Bukhari book (The Saheeh) to be God's inspired book, and if you asked all Muslims about Al-Bukhari book then they will tell you that it is the most accurate book after the Quran. But the word “most accurate” does imply that it is not totally accurate. I do admit that many Scholars act as though Al-Bukhari book is totally accurate, but there were many well-known Muslims Scholars that rejected some narratives in Al-Bukhari, for example Al-Daraqutni who is a well-known ancient Hadith-Scholar (born in 901AD) and Al-Albani, who is well known recent Hadith-Scholar (born in 1914AD).

Nonetheless, All Muslim Scholars regard Al-Bukhari book to be based on a sincere and professional effort. Therefore, rejecting narratives in it requires a sincere and professional effort as well. This is not only related to Al-Bukhari book, but it is related to all sincere and professional books in all fields of knowledge.

It should be noted that there is a clear method for analyzing the COT narratives. First, we do the “Chain Analysis” to check if the chain is trusted. Then we do the “Content Analysis”, and some of the trusted narratives can be rejected due to the content analysis. I did explain this method in the following linked article:

<https://omr-mhmd.yolasite.com/resources/59-Notes-About-NobleQuran-19.pdf>

3# You compared the Muslims COT with the Talmud. But the Talmud isn't based on COT. The Jewish Scholars do claim that their data passed from a scholar to a scholar, but still, the transmission method is AOT. For example, Rabbi Akiva spoke about a narrative, which is documented in the Talmud after about a century or so, but we don't know the narrators between Akiva to the documentation. Therefore, this transmission was based on AOT.

For the Islamic narratives, the narrators between the source and the documentation is known, so if you open a COT audited book, you will find the author clarifying the narrators from the event to the documentation. This is a very unique method for transmitting data.

4# Regarding the disagreement between me and Stephen about the 40 or 100 Years:

Let me clarify the following:

- 1- We have the Prophet.
- 2- We have the Companions, who were the witnesses for the words of the Prophet.
- 3- We have the 1st followers (1F), which includes also the children of the Companions.
- 4- We have 2nd followers (2F).

In 40 APD (After the Prophet's Death), there were still companions alive, and the 1F did encounter with the Companions. So, the COT method was established without any gap between the witnesses and the 1F.

As I have said to Stephen: the WSIS can claim that Muslims Scholars are biased in their analysis. But equally, we can say that the WSIS are biased in analyzing the accounts of the Muslims. Therefore, the "Bias Card" can be issued from each party to the other. For this reason, let us just leave this card out and analyze the data:

The Muslims does have a claim and they also have the details related to What, When, Where, Who, Why, and How questions. The WSIS have a claim without any data. I do assume here that a claim with detailed data (that don't contradict with science) is much more reliable than a claim without data.

5# The Islamic culture did encourage memorizing the Quran from the start, as you cannot hold a book while praying. I don't think the Torah was widely memorized, neither the NT, but the Quran was memorized from many of the people (scholars and commons) from the start until today. So, from the start of this civilization, there were processes to train and improve the memory and keeping it active as possible, and this need to be added to the critical analysis.

6# You mentioned the Chinese Whisper: passing a story between 20 people and see how the story deviate through. However, this doesn't fit exactly with the COT method. So, let us invent here an experiment that might fit:

Notice first that most of the narrators in the Islamic COT were teachers. So, they didn't hear a verse at their 20's and then they pass it on at their 60's. Islamic laws and the life of Mohammed were the subject of their teaching.

So, let us have 5 people in our experiment that are morally good and have "strong memory", and let them be historians and we will invent a narrative that seems historical.

When I say that these people have strong memory then I expect that at all of them are able to conduct their classes perfectly without looking at any notes. Probably this is rare today, but this how things were in the past.

So, we have 5 historians with good morality and strong memory. We invent a story that seems historical and then we pass it through them: one telling the next in the same method of the “Chinese Whisper”.

Now ... what is the probability that the outcome would be the same (in general) as the input.

This is what I said before that the COT is based on common sense, and I am certain that the outcome here will be much more accurate than AOT. I think if we have 100 outputs passed on trusted single-chains then I would assume that we might have about 80% (or more) of the narratives to be accurate. However, this is an assumption, but it is almost a fact that the probability of accuracy is much higher than AOT.

Let us now have 10 historians making two chains (that is two groups of 5 historians). Let us pass the story for the first group and the second group. So, we have two outputs for the same input. If the two outputs were “generally the same”, then what is the probability that these two outputs are the same as the input (i.e. the probability of the accuracy of the outputs compared to the input)?

The probability of accuracy would be highly increased for this double-chain case.

How about if we have three groups of fives. Therefore, we would have three outputs for the same input. If these 3 outputs were generally the same, then what is the probability for the accuracy of these outputs compared to the input?

The probability of accuracy would be highly increased for this case than the case before.

Many Muslim Scholars regard that a narrative would be certain if it has more than 7 unique trusted chains, but less than that would be regarded likely with the 7 chains as the most likely.

This is what I meant before by the common sense and understanding probabilities. And I did explain this matter in detail in the linked article which I will put it here again as well:

<https://omr-mhmd.yolasite.com/resources/59-Notes-About-NobleQuran-19.pdf>

7# As I have said to Stephen: Ibn-Ishaq books are not regarded authoritative for the life of Muhammed; because these books are based on AOT and not COT.

Now, we don't reject these books, and we are actually using it as one of the sources related to the history of Arabs before Muhammed, and we would be using here the same tools that are used for analyzing the history of the Romans and the Greeks, as all of these histories are based on AOT. But we don't use these books as “evidences” and “main

data” for the life of Muhammed, but they might be used as “supporting” data. This is so, because the AOT narratives do have a large substantial margin of error.

So, it is really surprising that the WSIS would criticize the Muslims for some narratives in Ibn-Ishaq when the Muslim Scholars themselves don't regard Ibn-Ishaq to be authoritative for the life of Muhammed.

But the most surprising was when Stephen equated Ibn-Ishaq to the “Apocryphal Acts” and not to the 4 Gospels.

If we look at it objectively, then I think Ibn-Ishaq is probably more credible than the 4 Gospels:

- The 4 Gospels have 5 authors: Mark, Q, Matthew, Luke and John. But Ibn-Ishaq is only one author, but his work was edited by other historians (as Ibn-Hisham). However, let us give one positive point here for the 4 Gospels.
- But these 5 authors are anonymous, and we know nothing about them, but we know exactly who is Ibn-Ishaq. So, this would be a point for Ibn-Ishaq.
- Jesus was living in Palestine, speaking Aramaic. The stories of Jesus started to pass through the Jewish community via AOT. Then there were points of translations from the Jewish community to the Greek community, then the stories started to pass through Greek community via AOT, then it was collected by 5 anonymous authors.

So, we have 5 anonymous Greek authors writing in Greek for the Greeks about a Jewish man speaking Aramaic.

But in the case of Ibn-Ishaq, he was an Arab writing in Arabic for the Arabs about an Arab. Therefore, this would be a positive point for Ibn-Ishaq.

8# When Scholars applied the critical analysis to the NT, they didn't brush the NT off, and they didn't coin the whole NT to be unreliable. Critical analysis is not about criticizing, it is about objectively analyzing the subject and find the truth about it (or at least this is part of the analysis).

As all types of Oral Traditions (AOT & COT) have right data, deformed data, and false data,, then it is part of the critical analysis of the NT to create the criteria that can be used to filter the right data in the related Oral Tradition.

Did the WSIS use the same concept of this “Critical Analysis” in analyzing the Muslim's COT? Did the WSIS explain clearly how the Muslims analyzed the COT? Did the WSIS clearly explain the criteria of the Muslims in filtering the COT?

How on earth can people apply a professional critical analysis on a subject that they don't know the details of it. And I can positively say that Most of the WSIS don't know the details of the COT.

This was my question to Stephen when he told me that the COT is not reliable, and I did ask him about the criteria and reasoning that is used to come up with this conclusion. However, Stephen was under the impression that the COT is only related for the Laws. But this is very wrong: Muslims Scholars don't validate any narrative related to the life of Muhammed if it wasn't based on a trusted COT.

That what I was saying to Stephen that he is generating conclusions based on a source (Ibn-Ishaq) that is regarded by Muslim Scholars to be unauthoritative for the life of Muhammed.

9# Now this is my question to you, Riverart:

Regardless whether you agree with me or not about the high probability of the COT, still, I did include lot of solid data about the work of the ancient Muslims Scholars (single-chain, double chain, Ibn-Ishaq, Al-Bukhari, Al-Daraqutni, The criteria for COT, chain analysis, content analysis, etc.), which I think it is 100% accurate, meaning that Muslim Scholars did discuss the data I am presenting here.

However, suppose you did your research about the data here, and let us say for argument's sake that you concluded that the data that I have presented here was 60% accurate and 40% questionable (just for argument's sake). Does this 60% justify the claim that most of the WSIS are truly biased and they are not doing a proper and professional job in presenting the data from the source (i.e. the Muslims Scholars) before conducting their analysis and presenting their conclusions?

I mean here that if the data I am presenting here was 60% accurate (for argument's sake) then is it right for me to claim that most of the WSIS are presenting their conclusions without proper analysis?