

*In the Name of Allah
Most Gracious, Most Merciful*

*All praise is due to God alone, Who revealed His divine speech for the guidance of mankind
And chose truthful and trustworthy men, whom He protected, to explain and manifest that guidance.
May peace be upon the word of God, the spirit from him, the Messiah, Jesus, son of the Blessed Mother.
May the best benedictions and peace be upon the seal of prophethood, Muhammad Ibn Abdullah;
Upon his family, companions and all who follow him until the final hour.
To proceed:*

**A Comparison on the Preservation
Of Prophetic Narrations**
By: Wm. Halim Breiannis
hvsmrspct@aol.com

Having been asked by a friend and student to respond to the question of the difference between the narrations of the prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) as found in Hadith literature and those narrations of the Messiah (peace be upon him) as found in the bible, I have prepared this for his benefit. This is not meant to be a detailed account but rather a short reply to make the matter clear, still, there must be three matters examined to make the matter clear. The first is the science of Hadith methodology, the second is the history of the compilation and preservation of the bible and the third, just for clarity, is a look at the narrations of Jesus (peace be upon him) in Islamic literature. Again, each of these are only to be touched upon as to go deeply into details will no doubt make this small letter grow into a full book, exhausting the average reader.

The science of prophetic narrations (Hadith) has always proved problematic for western minds because it is a science truly unique to Islam. In the halls of oriental studies it has historically been compared to what is called the "telephone game" and so dismissed as unreliable. It seems that this is mostly due to the lack of reference in their own history and traditions. So, to begin we will look at three matters - when were the prophetic narrations first recorded, when was the science itself first codified and what is the criterion for acceptance of a narration as "acceptable". Mentioning these three matters should be sufficient to lay a foundation before showing the difference between this science and what is known as the "telephone game".

It was during the lifetime of the prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) that the narrations were first written down. In the first stages of revelation, those who were recording his words were told to cease due to fear that they would mix between his words and those of the scriptures which were being revealed. Still, those who wrote them retained them. Later, when this fear was no longer necessary the prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) told his companions that they could record his words as nothing came out from his mouth except the truth, whether in times of anger or in times of jest. What is more, despite the written words, the Arab culture was an oral culture historically noted for memorization. So, much more was narrated from heart to heart, of those nearest to the God's messenger, than that which was written by them.

After the first generation, that of the companions of God's messenger (peace and blessings be upon him), there were people entering Islam from far and wide and what was seen was a rise of claimants to knowledge. With this came the beginning of forged narrations. This was done either to support a deviant position, to encourage people towards good deeds or even to market products, amongst other reasons. It was due to this that the question arose, "who are your men?" Meaning, from whom did you hear this, who taught it to you. Based on that question a science developed. Between 100 and 200 years after the death of God's messenger (peace and blessings be upon him) the science developed so that the narrations themselves were scrutinized but also the chains of narrators through which they arrived to the students were examined. Who each person in the chain would be examined, the number of reporters in each stage would be examined, as would how it was narrated - was it written and read upon the student by the teacher or was it read upon the teacher by the student and so on. After the men in the chain were examined, then the words of the narration would be examined - did they contradict the what was known from the Qur'an and authentic narrations, was the language that which was used by the prophet (peace and blessings be upon him), etc.. In this way, the science developed until it was codified within the first few centuries of the life of God's messenger (peace and blessings be upon him).

What then was the criterion for which a narration would be accepted as a sound narration authenticated as the words of God's messenger? There are five conditions. The first is that the chain be unbroken, meaning that in every stage or generation the narration was narrated directly from teacher to student. As for this condition the narrations are broken down into two branches - 1) the mass transmitted which is that narration of something either seen or heard (not thoughts, visions or dreams) which was narrated by so many in every generation that it would be impossible for them to come together to agree upon a lie or an error; and 2) the singular narration which is any narration which does not meet the standard of the mass transmission. This singular narration is the further divided into three categories - that which has at least three narrators in every generation, that which has at least two, and that which has at least one narrator in every generation...anything that falls below this is weak (unacceptable as a narration attributed to God's messenger).

The second condition is that each person who narrates the Hadith have an impeccable memory or system of record (writing, reviewing and protecting their collections). This was routinely checked, both from what they themselves narrated throughout the years (seeing if there was ever any change) as well against what others narrated from the same teacher (seeing if any diverged from what they were initially taught). Those who made very few errors (by way of example only, let us say 1 error out of 5,000 narrations) were considered strong and their narrations were relied upon as authentic. Those who were slightly weaker (as an example, let us say 1 error for every 3,000 narrations) were considered as reliable but not strong and so their Hadith were viewed as "good" and accepted but not authentic. If someone fell into more errors than this, their narrations would not be viewed as acceptable. And this in itself has an entire field that grew around it - did an individual have a strong memory in his youth which grew duller as he aged and if so, did he narrate to so and so in his youth or in his senior years? Did so and so have impeccable books but a weak memory and if so did he narrate to so and so while with his books or not! And so on.

The third condition was a matter of uprightness. Did the narrators in this chain live according to, not just the Islamic law but also the prophetic mannerisms? Were they righteous? Were good and honest? Were they known to uphold social norms or break them? If a person was known to miss their prayers or cheat or be abusive, this would have a bearing on their acceptability as a narrator of Hadith. If on the other hand, the individuals were known to be upright and God fearing and also possess an impeccable memory (or recording system) they would be viewed as "trustworthy" and their narrations would be acceptable. This was whether they were Sunni or Shiite, male or female, wealthy or poor, young or old.

The fourth condition was that there be congruency between the narrations. This is where the words of the narration themselves began to be scrutinized. Did the teaching of this narration contradict the teachings of another narration. Again, this condition had an entire field of study arise around it. Was the contradiction real? Was the teachings mutually exclusive or could the meanings be joined? Which one had the stronger chain with the more trustworthy narrators? And so on.

The fifth condition was one of the highest levels of scholarship...looking for any form of hidden defect. These might include a weak or unknown narrator; accidental inclusion of the words of a narrator; someone leaving out who they heard it from to hide a weakness; or fabricating that they heard from someone they did not hear from. This is a major aspect of the science which scholars have exhausted themselves regarding for over a thousand years in order to protect the guidance from God, through His messenger (peace and blessings be upon him).

If any of these conditions are not met satisfactorily, the narration was and is rejected. The men of this science have no vested interest in including this arraign or rejecting that one but rather enter this field in order to preserve guidance and protect the religion. They sacrifice seeking God...this must be understood well.

This, of course, is an over simplification of the science, but as we mentioned, it is not our aim to go into details. Instead, with this foundation established we want to show how this science is different from what is known as the telephone game. In that game, one person receives a message which they whisper once and only once into another person's ear, who then whispers what they heard to the next person and so on until the message arrives at the final recipient who then reveals the message he has heard. When doing this, a message as clear as "this game is revealing" can be altered so far as to say "there is shame in revelation"...or worse. There are many reasons for this alteration of the initial message and from them is the fact that everyone is energized by the game, the message is whispered, usually only once, there are those who didn't hear it properly but feel pressured to convey what they think was said, and others who intentionally alter it for fun - and so by the end the message is greatly distorted. So, before even looking at the science of prophetic narrations, let's do a mental experiment and ask the questions - how much different would the outcome be if the message was spoken out loud to each recipient? If it was told to two or three recipients at a time who could then cross check and verify what was said? If the message was written down by each recipient and then checked to ensure it was correct before they relayed it to the next recipients? If each person had some vested interest that the message be passed on correctly, as received? Without a doubt, under

such conditions, even if the exact words were slightly altered, the message would surely be preserved. That is the case of the prophetic narrations and the conditions in which we find them most often narrated.

This is not something tossed by the way side with the invention of the printing press but rather something that is preserved and honored to our own time. We have chains of narrators from today reaching back to the messenger of God (peace and blessings be upon him) so that this slave of his Lord has only 18 persons between him and God's messenger (peace and blessings be upon him) in chains which meet all of the conditions of authenticity that span over 1400 years.

Having hopefully made clear the matter of prophetic narrations in Islam, we will now address the history of compilation and preservation of the bible, specifically addressing the New Testament. We will keep this section as brief as possible because there is no need to go to great lengths in discussing this matter and, what is more, I fear being considered biased regarding this matter, despite my objectivity. What needs to be made clear here is that I am not looking to discuss whether the Bible is sound or unsound, the word of God or man, or adulterated or preserved as scripture. If that were the discussion we would have weighed it against the Qur'an and not the prophetic narrations. Instead, the point of this section is to ask the question, "Are the narrations of Jesus (peace be upon him) authentically preserved so that one may arrive at certainty regarding them?" If that is the actual question, which I believe it is, then we can simply ask ourselves a few questions to arrive at the answer. Those questions include, "which of the authors of the gospels found in the bible actually met Jesus and heard what they recorded directly from him?" "Who did they hear it from if not directly from Jesus?" "Who did they entrust with their gospels after themselves?" "Through what chain of narrators did these gospels reach us?" "Do we have anything recorded in the language Jesus actually spoke, that has been preserved since his lifetime?" And so on. With these general questions, we will proceed to look a little at the history of the bible.

The New Testament is made up of four sections, the four Gospels, the book of Acts, the Epistles, and the book of Revelation. As for the Gospels, they are the telling of the story of Jesus (peace be upon him), recounting in it his ministry, his teachings and some of his special features amongst other things. The book of Acts recounts the story of the birth of the church after Christ. The Epistles are those letters written to various early church groups in different lands, and the book of Revelation is a book recounting a dream or vision of what would occur at the end of this life. What is interesting to point out right from the beginning is that not a single author claims revelation. Some say they were inspired to write and others are chronicling their history (such as the book of Acts) and others were simply writing out of necessity (such as the epistles). Because our focus is not that of Christian doctrine, the history of the Church or eschatology, the only section of the New Testament that really concerns our topic is the Gospels.

Establishing that, we then must also acknowledge that these four gospels were absolutely not the only gospels in circulation in the first three centuries of the Church. There were literally over a dozen other gospels accepted by and utilized by the early Church. From them were the Gospel of the Nazareans, the Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Truth, the Gospel of Mary, One of Peter, Andrew, Barnabas, and even another Gospel of Mark to name just a few. This is not

controversial or denied by Church historians. The Canon of four Gospels which we have come to know today first appeared in a letter written by a Bishop of Alexandria named Athanasius in the year 367 CE. Even after this time, the other Gospels could be found still used in various locations of the Christian world but they were deemed more and more as apocrypha by the "official" Church and the books which we are familiar with became canonized...but even they were suspected of being copies of a more original Gospel named by historians as "Gospel X".

The Church itself was still divided between east and west also. You had the Roman Church, the Greek Church, the Eastern European Church and the Churches of Africa (which tended to be mostly Unitarian). This is important not only because it was through the Church councils under the authority of the Roman Church that finally determined the canon of the bible but also because it was that Church which determined the very language of the bible. The original gospels are believed to have been written in Aramaic and only later translated to Greek by the Byzantine Church and then into Latin, which became the official language of the church. The bible at this point became known as "The Vulgate" which can translate to mean "The liturgical Vernacular" as it was through Latin that the bible was then written, read, understood and explained and all masses and rituals were conducted in Latin, the official language of the church. The problem here is, there is not a single original copy of any gospel in its original language of Aramaic by which to check the portions of Greek texts that are found, let alone the Latin translations of the Greek, and the Latin exegesis'. This of course does not take into account the Slavic translations of the Greek and Latin texts used in the Slavic Church.

Then there arose a recognized problem as the Vulgate spread across Europe, the understandings, explanations and even language continued to become farther and farther removed from the words recorded in the Greek scriptures. After about a thousand years, the Church itself became ignorant of the Greek language altogether so that even some of its greatest thinkers such as Thomas Aquinas didn't have access to it. Add to this that the Roman Church and the Slavic Church would regularly get into physical skirmishes over missionaries entering one another's borders for missionary work based upon their separation due to linguistic usages and the understandings borne of them. It wasn't until the 1400 century CE that the Church began an effort to return to a literacy in the Greek language. And then in the Protestant reformation there was a call for a return, not just to Greek but even to Hebrew (Aramaic). But what is found, it was in this period that the bible was being re-written into Greek and Aramaic - but this was being done from the Vulgate, not from originals! So the linguistic course of the bible was Aramaic to Greek to Latin to Greek and Aramaic based upon the Latin translations.

Another issue arose in that, though the Church was "unified" the understandings and interpretations would vary based on the lands, cultures and politics of exegete. This continued until the bible was again translated, this time into several languages. For our discussion, we will simply mention the translation into the "authorized version" which we know as the King James Bible. From that Authorized version arose at least eight other officially recognized and accepted translations into English. What is well known and understood by translators of any language is this - a translation is itself a commentary based upon the translator's own understanding and interpretation of what a text means. Due to this, any verse of the bible will necessarily be translated in a light dependent upon the translator's church's interpretation of

that verse and/or their credal stance. It is for this reason that we find even in official English translations, the meanings do not always agree.

This linguistic history was highlighted because it is important to understand that the words we discuss as "narrations of Jesus (peace be upon him)" certainly have some disconnect from what he actually said - whether he was speaking to the officials in Hebrew or to the common folk in Koine Greek...and we have no way of discerning this nor if the words we narrate convey the same contextual meanings meant when they were spoken. This seems like a huge barrier, but there is a larger one ahead of us. Of the four Gospels that have been canonized, only one author is believed to have ever actually met Jesus (peace be upon him). Matthew is believed to be the disciple known as Levi though this can not be proven but there is no doubt that Mark and Luke never met the Messiah (peace be upon him). John, well that is an entirely different matter as there is a great deal of historic difference regarding who this author was - some claiming he was the disciple John, others dismissing this as a false attribution. Based on the divergence of the contents of his gospel from the other three, it seems safe to say that it was not the disciple of Jesus who wrote it, but God alone knows the reality. Similar is true of Matthew, but to a much lesser extent. So, in reality, three of the four never met Jesus and are writing third hand accounts while the fourth may or may not be speaking from his own experiences mixed with whatever he was informed of concerning whatever occurred in his absence.

Then the next dilemma arises. Who had possession of the original books? How did they acquire them? Then who? Then who? How many people's hands did these books pass through before they became canonized after three hundred years? We have no record of this at all and so can not verify whether changes were made - be they additions, deletions or alterations. It is well recorded that such changes crept into the gospels over the centuries as we see in the exposure of the last verses of the Gospel of Mark being rejected as later additions. The questions are - what changes were made, by who, when and why? But we can never come to answer these with certainty because there remains no original texts or chain of narration with biographies of the men in that chain by which to evaluate these matters. Having established this (perhaps unnecessarily at too much length) I believe it is safe to say that we must answer our question, "Are the narrations of Jesus (peace be upon him) authentically preserved so that one may arrive at certainty regarding them?" with "no".

With this basic comparison between the preservation of Prophetic narrations in Islam and Christianity, we will now look at narrations of Jesus (peace be upon him) in Islamic traditions, and this will be discussed in light of the Qur'an as well as Hadith literature. The narrations of Jesus (peace be upon him) in Islam are through that which we are told by God in His revealed speech (the Qur'an), or through that which we were informed of via the prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him). All claims of narrating the words of Jesus (peace be upon him) in Islam will thus be equally weighed according to the conditions of prophetic narrations - but only back to the book of Allah or the prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him). Examples of such quotes are God's informing is in the Qur'an,

*"He said: I am indeed a servant of God,
He has given me revelation and appointed me as a prophet"
(19:30)*

And,

*"And behold! God will say:
O Jesus, Son of Mary!
Did you say to men,
'worship me and my mother as gods alongside Allah?'
He will say:
'Glory to Thee!
Never could I say what I had no right to say.
Had I said such a thing you would have known it.
You know what is in my heart,
Though I do not know what is in Yours.
You indeed know fully all that is hidden'."
(5:116)*

And,

*"When Jesus came with clear signs, he said:
'Now I come to you with wisdom,
And to make clear to you some of the matters upon which you dispute;
Therefore, be mindful of God and obey me'."
(43:63)*

And,

*"The Messiah said:
'O' Children of Israel!
Worship God,
My Lord and your Lord.
Surely whoever associates others with God,
Then God has forbidden him the garden,
And his abode is the fire;
And there shall be no helpers for the unjust'."
(5:72)*

This suffices for some of the narrations of Jesus (peace be upon him) as mentioned in the Qur'an. To be clear, all that is mentioned here are narration of Jesus (peace be upon him), not what is said about him. Perhaps we shall address that matter before closing this work. For now, however, we will mention some of those narrations of the Messiah (peace be upon him) which have reached us through the Hadith literature.

It is found in "the Muwwata" of Imam Malik that Anas Ibn Malik (may Allah be pleased with him) reported that Jesus son of Mary, (peace be upon them both) said, "Do not speak much without remembering God, for by doing so, you harden your hearts. Surely a hard heart is distant from God though you are unaware. Do not, like lords, look at the faults of others. Rather, like servants, look at your own faults. In truth, humanity is comprised of only two types, the afflicted and the sound. So show mercy to the afflicted, and praise God for well-being."

Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal (may Allah be pleased with him, reported in his "Musnad" that Once someone asked Jesus (peace be upon him), "How are you able to walk on water?" Jesus replied, "With certainty." Then someone said, "But we also have certainty!" Jesus then asked them, "Are stone, clay, and gold equal in your eyes?" They replied, "Certainly not!" Jesus responded, "They are in mine."

Imam Ahmad also reported that Jesus, the son of Mary (peace be upon them both), was known to have said, "Love of this world is the source of every wrong action, and there is much harm in wealth."

Imam Ahmad also reported That it is related that Jesus, the son of Mary (peace be upon them both), said, "It is of no use to know something if one does not act upon it. In truth, an abundance of knowledge only increases one in pride if one does not act accordingly."

In a narration that has some weakness in its chain of narrators, Fakhru-d-Deen Ar-Razi said Jesus, the son of Mary (peace be upon them both), is reported to have said, "God has given me the power to give life to the dead, sight to the blind, sound to the deaf; but He did not give me the power to heal the fool of his foolishness."

These five narrations give some idea of what has been preserved of the narrations of Jesus Christ (peace be upon him) in the Islamic literature of prophetic narrations. Our trust in these narrations lie upon the science of prophetic narration, the meeting of the conditions of that science back to the prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) and our belief and trust in his truthfulness of speech, uprightness of character and reception of revelation.

When we began we mentioned that there would be three matters examined - the science of Hadith methodology, the history of the compilation and preservation of the bible and, for the sake of clarity, a look at the narrations of Jesus (peace be upon him) in Islamic literature. It is hoped that we have done this sufficiently and made the issues clear. Still, I feel I would be remiss if I did not add just a brief description of what a muslim believes regarding Jesus, the son of Mary (peace be upon them both).

When Hanna, the mother of Mary (may God's peace be upon them both), was pregnant, she dedicated that which was in her womb to the temple, fully expecting it to be a boy. It was odd that a female be dedicated to the temple. When Mary was born, her mother "lamented" that it was a girl but God replied saying that the male is not like the female! Meaning that the female has qualities that men can not reach. So Mary was placed under the care of her uncle, the prophet Zachariah (peace be upon him) who also served the temple. Mary was raised within the temple walls, behind layers of locked doors to protect her and the sanctity of the temple. Yet, despite these locked doors, whenever Zachariah visited her, he would find her with fresh foods,

fruit out of season and the like. He enquired from where she received it and she told him it was delivered from God. This then gave him hope of a child (as he and his wife were both exceedingly old) and he called out to God at that very moment and God blessed his family with their only child - John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus (peace be upon them all).

Mary (peace be upon her) was educated in the temple and sheltered therein but by God's command a child began to form in her womb. Then an angel appeared to her in her cell and blew into the body in her womb a spirit sent by God. Upon reaching full term, Mary left the temple and delivered her child, miraculously, having never been touched by any man. When she returned, the people immediately began to question her, to point out her noble lineage and to question her purity. Thus, in the face of her accusers, Jesus spoke while a baby defending his mother. This is when he said that which I quoted above, "I am indeed a servant of God, He has given me revelation and appointed me as a prophet. He has made me blessed wherever I may be and He has enjoined upon me prayer and almsgiving as long as I live; and He has enjoined upon me dutifulness to she who has bore me and He has not made me arrogant or unblessed. Peace upon me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I shall be raised alive!"

Jesus (peace be upon him) called his people, the children of Israel, back to the truth after they had deviated. They became so fixated upon the outward manifestations of the religion that they fell short with regards to the spiritual dimension of their faith...Jesus was sent to call them back to matters of the heart and soul. He was anointed by God as a prophet and a messenger, and granted many miracles to prove his station with God - included in this is the ability to heal by laying of hands.

His people accused him of blasphemy and worked together with the Roman state to have him tried and persecuted but God protected His faithful and sincere servant, raising the messiah up to the heavens alive and in the flesh. He will then return in the last days to fight and vanquish the anti-Christ, establish God's kingdom on earth and then die with those faithful believers with him before the final hour. Like all other humans, he will then be raised again and stand judgement before God Almighty. It is said that his knees will shake in fear as he stands before the Lord - but surely he is free of any wrong and will, in the end, be in the highest ranks of the gardens of bliss.

This is so brief, with so many beautiful points left out, and perhaps some left unclear. Because of this, I will state clearly that every Muslim must believe that Jesus (peace be upon him) is the word of God, a spirit from Him, the Messiah born of the Virgin Mary miraculously. He was a prophet and messenger and granted miracles such as the speaking as an infant, feeding the masses with little, healing the lame, the leper and the ill by the laying of hands, and restoring the dead to life. He was taken up alive in the flesh and will return in the last days to fight and defeat the antichrist before establishing God's kingdom upon the earth. He will then die and be raised on the day of judgement, made to stand before His Lord and Creator before being entered into the highest ranks of Paradise.

The problem with this brevity is much is left unexplained. This is a problem but also a benefit as it invites interaction and conversation. Believers are commanded to come together upon a common word - that common word is the call of every prophet - "The Lord your God is

One". It is the Islamic belief that the foundation of truth, the foundation of uprightness, the foundation of True religion can be found in the words attributed to Jesus in the bible when, at his trial, he was asked about the two greatest commandments and he is said to have said (peace be upon him), "love your God with all your heart, mind and soul." And, "love for your neighbor what you love for yourself." Throughout the Qur'an, again and again, God refers to "those who believe and do upright deeds...". He tells us, "they are the best of creatures." True religion hinges upon one establishing, protecting and perfecting their relationship with God, and, establishing, protecting and perfecting their relationship with His creation. This is the common ground upon which we hope to meet in order to speak freely and grow together.

We will close this work with a narration from the prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings be upon him) which we feel is most pertinent. He (peace and blessings be upon him) said,

"He who bears witness that there is no True God except Allah,
Alone,
having no partner with Him;
that Muhammad is His slave and His Messenger;
that Jesus is a slave of God and His Messenger
and he (Jesus) is His Word which He communicated to Mary
and His spirit which He sent to her;
that the Gardens of bliss are true
and Hell is true;
(Whoever bears witness to all of that)
Allah will make him enter The Garden,
accepting whatever deeds he accomplished".