

Reviews

Reconstruction of a Source of Ibn Ishāq's Life of the Prophet and Early Qurʾān Exegesis: A Study of Early Ibn ʿAbbās Traditions. By HARALD MOTZKI. Islamic History and Thought, vol. 3. Piscataway, NJ: GORGIAS PRESS, 2017. Pp. v + 144. \$58 (paper).

The oldest sources for the life of Muḥammad (*sīra*) date to about 180 years after the prophet of Islam's death, a fact that has led many scholars to doubt their historical reliability and instead see a theologically shaped portrayal of Muḥammad. To combat such "radical" skepticism, Harald Motzki and others have used the *isnād-cum-matn* analysis, which compares both the chains of transmission (sing. *isnād*) and the reports (sing. *matn*) themselves, to which the former are attached, in hopes of discerning the transmission history and even of reconstructing the earlier sources. In so doing, they attempt to significantly narrow the gap between the extant sources and the events they purport to describe, though it often remains difficult to discern the person who first promulgated (or invented) a particular tradition. Motzki is, of course, the chief proponent of this type of analysis and has had considerable success with it. In this short book he turns to a hitherto largely overlooked source for Muḥammad b. Ishāq's *sīra*, Muḥammad b. Abī Muḥammad (who, Motzki argues, died around 110/728f.).

Motzki's point of departure is Q 15:90–93, which several sources link to a story of the Quraysh meeting to counteract Muḥammad by suggesting he might be a diviner, one possessed, a poet, or a sorcerer. It is a passage over which Motzki and I have debated. A detailed *isnād-cum-matn* analysis of this passage using Ibn Hishām's narration and several others, primarily those of al-ʿUtāridī and Abū Nuʿaym al-Isfahānī, shows that the narration does in fact stem from Ibn Ishāq, though it is clear Ibn Hishām interfered with the original text of the *sīra*. Nevertheless, it pushes the latest possible date for the origin of the narrative back some fifty years to the time of Ibn Ishāq. That still leaves a 150-year gap between its recording and the events it purports to describe, but Motzki narrows that gap somewhat when he turns to Ibn Ishāq's apparent informant Muḥammad b. Abī Muḥammad. With only one of the main variations of this narrative extending back to Ibn ʿAbbās, Motzki is hesitant to narrow the gap more. He even entertains the possibility that the part of the *isnād* that connects Ibn Ishāq's informant via "Saʿīd b. Jubayr or ʿIkrimah" to the famed Companion is pure fiction.

Drawing on Ibn Kathīr, Motzki argues on the basis of conformity of wording and similar transmission chains that Muḥammad b. Abī Muḥammad is elsewhere merely (or also) identified as a *mawlā* of Zayd b. Thābit, who invoked Saʿīd b. Jubayr or ʿIkrima. This gives Motzki several more narrations that can be ascribed to Muḥammad b. Abī Muḥammad, and so it becomes clear that his interest lay exclusively in *asbāb al-nuzūl* (occasions of revelation) material. Despite his narrow focus, Muḥammad b. Abī Muḥammad should be seen as an important source for Ibn Ishāq alongside the far more well-known Shihāb al-Zuhri and Hishām b. ʿUrwa.

There is much a more skeptical scholar could quibble with in the argument so far. Some might argue that Motzki places too much trust in the *isnād* (and their independence from each other) when he suggests that those of the narration provided by Abū Nuʿaym and al-ʿUtāridī are more compelling than that of Ibn Hishām. Or, one could argue that the information Ibn Kathīr provides is not new, but he too reasoned as Motzki does, that the *mawlā* of Zayd b. Thābit must be this unknown Muḥammad b. Abī Muḥammad. Motzki also argues that conformity of wording between two narrations is an indication that both have the same author; other possibilities could certainly explain such conformity. In all these cases, and more generally, when there is uncertainty, Motzki certainly favors trusting the information in the sources. Perhaps the best example of this comes when he argues that many of the anonymous pericopes about Muḥammad's Jewish opponents ascribed by Ibn Hishām to Ibn Ishāq had originally come with chains of transmission that listed Muḥammad b. Abī Muḥammad as Ibn Ishāq's source. Other examples include Motzki's claim that the anonymous *shaykh min ahl Makka* and *shaykh min ahl Miṣr* are both identified as Muḥammad b. Abī Muḥammad and his claim that a number of pericopes have

the same author based on their structural resemblances; these pericopes are all *asbāb al-nuzūl* on a similar topic, thus it might be a topos. For skeptics, it may seem that he too often relies on textual similarities to justify claims about transmitters in the *isnād* and then uses those very transmitters to make claims about the textual similarities. I share that kind of skepticism, but I chose the word “quibble” above intentionally. Motzki is well aware of the skeptical approach; he often asks the skeptic’s likely questions (and then answers them). Much of what he presents may seem at times more circumstantial than definitive evidence, but Motzki does present a preponderance of evidence that makes for a compelling and convincing argument: Muḥammad b. Abī Muḥammad was a source for some of Ibn Ishāq’s *asbāb al-nuzūl* material.

And there is no shortage of skepticism from Motzki himself. A comparison of variants by Muḥammad b. Sāʿib al-Kalbī (another source for Ibn Ishāq) and Muḥammad b. Abī Muḥammad shows that each had different sources and were not dependent. Each may have had an older, aural or oral source in common. More importantly, differences suggest that Muḥammad b. Abī Muḥammad is not a *fictive isnād label*, but a real source. But Motzki is not willing to go much beyond that claim and the one to having shrunk the gap between events and its earliest discernible narrative to a century. There is no “methodological certainty” about the chains that claim Ibn Jubayr or ʿIkrima as Muḥammad b. Abī Muḥammad’s source(s)—though Motzki is also not willing to exclude the possibility. He even provides some indications that they might have been, but ultimately admits that the claim that the two were his sources is merely an “educated guess.” And, indeed, whether Ibn ʿAbbās was really their source “cannot be answered.”

To conclude, Motzki asks, can Muḥammad b. Abī Muḥammad be used as a source for history? He points out that sources chronologically and spatially closest to events about which they report deserve preference over later sources. Thus, he comes close to assuming that chronological proximity implies (greater) historical accuracy, which others who have used *isnād-cum-matn* analysis often claim. But Motzki seems to accept that at least in this case it is not possible to “penetrate the political and kerygmatic glorification.” After all, Muḥammad b. Abī Muḥammad is interested only in *asbāb al-nuzūl* material—finding plausible reasons for quranic passages, particularly in identifying Muḥammad’s opponents. Their portrayal gives “the impression of having been protocoled. It is hardly probable that such detailed knowledge [. . .] would still be discernible a half century later” (pp. 124–25). Those opponents would have been long dead or become affiliated with Islam. Moreover, the link to Ibn ʿAbbās inspires little confidence since he was not born at the time and that part of the *isnād* is employed “stereotypically.” All we can know for certain is that Ibn Ishāq did not invent this material and that it existed much earlier than has been suggested. In addition, we learn something of the Quran in this early period, for it was the basis for the accounts of Muḥammad b. Abī Muḥammad. As for using him as a source for history, Motzki urges “utmost caution.” Such skepticism is refreshing.

The value of Motzki’s analysis lies both in its understanding of how Ibn Ishāq’s material was transmitted and in discovering what amounts to a new source for Ibn Ishāq, Muḥammad b. Abī Muḥammad. There is still much for skeptics still to be skeptical about—after all, one hundred or even fifty years can do much to “history” when there are strong theological and political imperatives at play, as evidenced both within Islam and other religions. But Motzki and his *isnād-cum-matn* analysis have shown that uncritical skepticism is untenable (and I dare say, “radical” in the negative sense of the word). Moreover, even those who doubt the merits of this type of analysis need to become proficient with it—if they wish to challenge its conclusions.

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The Quran once owned by Egidio da Viterbo, its pages divided into four columns giving the Arabic original, a transcription of the Arabic in Roman characters, a Latin translation, and glosses by the