Isnād-cum-matn Analysis and *Kalāla*: Some Critical Reflections

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This review article responds to Pavel Pavlovitch's study on the understanding of the term *kalāla* in the first three centuries of Islamic history of thought. It focuses in particular on the author's application of the so-called *isnād-cum-matn* analysis (ICMA), showing that some of his methodological reasoning is innovative, while some is to be questioned.

The Quranic term *kalāla* is enigmatic. In Q 4:176, for example, *kalāla* refers to someone who has died leaving only one or more siblings, in which case they are entitled to inheritance; in Q 4:12 *kalāla* is also used in the context of Quranic inheritance law but, depending on the vocalization of the preceding verb, *yūrathu* (passive) or *yūrithu* (active), it is usually interpreted as referring to the heirs of the deceased and not to the deceased him- or herself. The correct lexical understanding of the term, the—possibly contradictory—relationship between the two Quranic verses, and the legal implications of both passages have puzzled Muslim scholars for centuries and are still keeping modern Islamicists busy. Following upon the publications of David Powers (1982, 1986, 2009) and Agostino Cilardo (2004), Pavel Pavlovitch, Professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski," has dedicated to this issue a new study that is under review here.

Pavlovitch's main concern is to answer the question of what *kalāla* meant in the second/eighth century (p. ix). Or, put differently: How did Muslim linguists, exegetes, and legal scholars understand and interpret the term at that time? Following John Wansbrough, Pavlovitch uses the term *masora* from the rabbinic tradition to refer to the linguistic understanding of *kalāla*, while he employs the term *halakha* when the legal context is meant (p. xi n. 7). However, his objective is not only to list various understandings and interpretations of the term, but also to study the intellectual development that was connected to it. Accordingly, "the history of *kalāla* . . . involved a comprehensive, yet not always straightforward, interaction between scriptural and sunnaic norms, which, in combination, shaped the theoretical and practical outlines of Islamic law during the second century AH" (p. xi). In other words, Pavlovitch intends to reconstruct part of the second/eighth-century scholarly discourse on *kalāla* (although this is not stated *expressis verbis*).

To attain these objectives Pavlovitch makes use of the so-called *isnād-cum-matn* analysis (ICMA), i.e., a combined approach to chains of authorities (sing. *isnād*) and texts (sing. *matn*) in clusters of hadith (reports on the Prophet or other authoritative early figures). This method allows one ultimately to establish a chronology regarding the textual development and transmission of these reports by reconstructing older versions and dating them on the basis of the *floruit* of the earliest common transmitter (the so-called common link, CL). This philological method is very detailed and labor-intensive, but Pavlovitch has mastered it very

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well and is aware of the method's many intricacies. As has been observed (and as is the case in this study too), the rigidity of this method, however, ends up classifying only a few texts as ancient and reliable, so that the historical information they yield is equally scarce; this circumstance might be regarded as disappointing when we consider the enormous number of hadith preserved in the various collections. However, the reports reconstructed on this basis can be used for the historical reconstruction of events and—as in this case—of debates with a very high degree of reliability. In addition, whenever ICMA is applied—be it in cases of biography (*sīra*),[1] Islamic law,[2] history,[3] or exegesis[4]—the basic method has needed some fine-tuning. Pavlovitch therefore developed some adaptations (eight, by my count), the mention (and assessment) of which will be of help for the prospective reader of the monograph.

(1) According to Pavlovitch, "the floruit of . . . the Common Link . . . may be identified as the time period when this *matn* variant was put into circulation" (p. xii). This very common assessment of the CL's role is in itself not problematic; regarding the exact *floruit*, however, on the one hand, Pavlovitch tries to narrow it down on the basis of biographical information "with the precision of less than a decade," yet, on the other hand, in most cases he defines it, quite generously and "tentatively," as "the last four or five decades of the CL's lifetime" (p. 48). He does not give a reason for this definition, which provides for quite a large time span since we cannot know whether an average scholar was active for forty or fifty years. (For this reason I chose in my work a period of twenty-five years, which lies in the middle of Pavlovitch's figures.[5])

(2) When assessing an *isnād*-bundle Pavlovitch does not want to anticipate the analysis by defining a scholar "at whose level the *isnād* branches out to several later transmitters" (p. 25) as common link (CL), partial common link (PCL), or seeming CL/PCL. Therefore—following G. H. A. Juynboll—he uses the more general term "key transmitter." In the course of his analysis, he later specifies the key transmitters accordingly. On the one hand, this is a valid refinement of the method; on the other hand, it complicates the analysis unnecessarily and can sometimes lead to confusion when an obvious PCL or CL is initially not described as such, but is identified only after lengthy discussion (e.g., pp. 149, 287).

(3) Pavlovitch distinguishes between "direct collectors" (DCRs) and indirect collectors (my expression, not his). While the first are "collectors who transmit directly on the authority of a key figure" (p. 25), the latter transmit from the key figure via one or two intermediates. This distinction is probably due to Pavlovitch's assessment of the single strand, which he held to be inauthentic in most of his cases because it could not be corroborated by other evidence.[6] Regarding the single strand below the CL, Pavlovitch argues that "the CL would have supplied them [i.e., the traditions] with *isnād*s that may have included real transmitters along with fictitious persons" due to a faulty memory or previous anonymous circulation (pp. 28–29). For this reason, the author does not reflect on the provenance of the information a

1. See most recently Görke and Schoeler 2008; and my review of the preceding, Scheiner 2012.
2. See Motzki 1998.
3. See most recently Scheiner 2011.
4. See most recently Motzki 2017.
5. Scheiner 2010: 169.
6. In Pavlovitch's words, "the single strands are to be treated as possible cases of unhistorical ascription. This is not to say that I advocate outright rejection of single strands above the CL level; such *isnād*s may be accepted when accompanied by the evidence of PCL transmissions" (p. 31). Indeed, "by introducing single-strand *isnād*s, *ḥadīth* transmitters concealed borrowings from multiple sources, masked uncertainty about provenance, or alleged discovery of previously unknown traditions" (p. 113).

certain CL might have received,[7] which in my view is unfortunate: even if rejected systematically, the single strands do offer in their first tier information about the *possible* source for each CL's information. Hence, a careful analysis should have included at least a discussion about whether it was feasible that the respective CL received the information from the transmitter mentioned in the single strand below him. As for the single strands above the CL, according to Pavlovitch, "it is equally unreasonable . . . that there would be so many cases of only one student becoming a teacher or *ḥadīth* transmitter" (p. 29). This valid, but pessimistic hypothesis that Pavlovitch proposes has, however, a strongly negative effect on his analysis of *isnād*-bundles. By not taking into account many of the single strands contained therein, Pavlovitch dismisses a great part of the evidence the sources offer us and, hence, comes to conclusions about PCLs and CLs that would have been different (i.e., more numerous PCLs in a given bundle and older CLs) had he taken these single strands into account. In my view, which is based on many case studies proving that single strands can be trusted, Pavlovitch's distrustful stance is unwarranted. This difference in our perspectives indicates how one's acceptance of arguments made in previous studies and one's preconceptions of the scholarly transmission culture of the first three centuries influence the outcome of any given ICMA study.

(4) Pavlovitch employs the term "hollow *isnād*" several times (pp. 79, 237, 429, 479), which although never defined seems to refer to an *isnād* that directly connects two scholars through several centuries without providing any names of intermediate transmitters.

(5) Pavlovitch adopted a suggestion from Behnam Sadeghi (p. 55 n. 224) for the *matn* representation, which he calls "*matn*-composites." In such a composite, "all similar *matn* variants passing through a single key figure" are depicted. If these variants agree in some words, they are written in bold; if they disagree, variants are added in square or curly brackets (braces). Independent traditions that belong to the same cluster of traditions but are not represented in "*matn*-composites" are called "witnesses" (p. 55). With KD standing for "*Kalāla* Definite" (KQ for "*Kalāla* in the Qurʾān," KU for "*Kalāla* Undefined," KR for "*Kalāla* in InteRmediate Traditions"), the reader is presented with designations such as "Matn-composite KD-1" (p. 378), "Witnesses KD-1" (p. 387), or "Isnād Diagram KD-1" (p. 377). To aid the reader, Pavlovitch has provided a list of pages for all *matn*-composites, witnesses, and *isnād* diagrams given in the volume (pp. xiv–xvi). The use of "*matn*-composites" is very helpful to grasp textual commonalities of several traditions quickly, yet the sheer abundance of abbreviated references to clusters, *matn*-composites, and witnesses sometimes confounds the reader, proving at the same time how complex the presentation of ICMA results can be.

(6) Although he is aware that a *matn* can be reconstructed in detail, Pavlovitch believes that *matn* reconstructions should consider the "gist" of a tradition (p. 31). In addition, he treats "short legal maxims as earlier than traditions that include these maxims together with elements of literary embellishment," because "vaguely formulated *matn*s predate their clearer and more elaborate counterparts" (p. 39). Pavlovitch calls this rule "the criterion of conceptual transparency" (p. 301). Again, this idea, which Pavlovitch borrowed from Joseph Schacht, is reasonable, but excludes—on a methodological level—the possibilities that a shorter tradition represents a later excerpt of an earlier longer version or that a given CL or PCL transmitted both a long tradition and an abbreviated one, or more, during his career. The methodological exclusion of the second option is particularly surprising, since Pavlovitch

7. Viz., "I usually do not analyze the single strands extending between the CL (or the seeming CL) and the earliest transmitter in the *isnād* line" (p. 346).

observes this phenomenon several times in his study, most often in relation to long and shorter traditions transmitted by the legal scholar ʿAbd al-Razzāq (d. 211/827).

(7) Pavlovitch introduces a numerical argument when reconstructing the *matn*. According to his criterion of "frequency of use," the reconstructed version must follow the wording of the majority of PCLs (or direct collectors) and must disregard textual variants found in the minority's texts (p. 40). This is a very handy rule, because it allows the reconstruction of a CL's *matn* quite easily. At the same time, however, it ignores the possibility that a given CL may have circulated two different versions of a tradition on purpose, either because of a change of view or because the tradition was narrated in various scholarly contexts differently.

Finally, (8) connected to the "frequency of use" criterion is another rule that Pavlovitch calls "criterion of priority of occurrence." Accordingly, he prefers textual elements of earlier PCLs or direct collectors to variant expressions of later key figures (p. 40), which is a methodology that is widely observed in many other ICMA studies.

With these tools (and rules) Pavlovitch examines a vast amount of *kalāla* traditions found in Arabic literature. Since his interest lies in the conveyed meaning of *kalāla*, he does not study traditions that are "not directly related to the definition of *kalāla*" or that do not have an *isnād*.[8] Furthermore, he leaves out traditions found in Shiʿi hadith collections and those that speak about the abrogation of Q 4:176 (pp. 52–53). Still, the amount of traditions he has analyzed is impressive.

Chapter one (pp. 1–56), the first of six, contains a detailed discussion of ICMA and the methodological points just mentioned. Chapters two to five are taken up with the discussion of twenty-nine hadith clusters (abbreviated as C1, C2, etc.—see below). Chapter six (pp. 491–518) represents the concluding summary, followed by two appendices: appendix two lists all reconstructed (or "base") versions of the clusters, while in appendix one these versions have been organized chronologically.

In chapter two (pp. 57–161), clusters C1–C8, in which "The Meaning of *Kalāla* is Unknown," are assembled; chapter three (pp. 162–251) contains clusters C9–C12, in which "The Meaning of *Kalāla* is Hidden"; chapter four (pp. 252–375) brings together clusters C13–C20, in which "The Meaning of *Kalāla* is Defined in the [so-called] Summer Verse"; while chapter five (pp. 376–490) includes clusters C21–C29, which represent regional definitions of *kalāla* and scholarly disputes about the meaning of the term. Within each of these chapters the author mentions one or two excursus in which he contextualizes his findings methodologically or content-wise. Each chapter ends with a chronological presentation of the reconstructed versions and the author's deductions regarding the intellectual development of the understanding of *kalāla*.

Hence, Pavlovitch concludes in chapter two that the Kufan scholar Ibrāhīm al-Nakhaʿī (d. ca. 96/715) put into circulation his "personal opinion" cast in a tradition ascribed to ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb according to which the meaning of *kalāla* is unknown (pp. 156–58). This tradition was then adopted and changed, i.e., fictionalized, by other scholars over the centuries, starting with ʿAmr b. Murra (d. 118/737) and ending with Ibn Saʿd (d. 230/845), and in the process showed a "tendency towards greater determinacy" (p. 161). In chapter three, Pavlovitch concludes that "the traditions treating the meaning of *kalāla* as unknown predate by at least a quarter of a century the traditions in which its meaning was known to ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb" (p. 247). Chapter four ends by showing that various scholars argued over centuries whether Muḥammad's alleged and enigmatic statement, "Let the verse that was sent

8. This, however, should not be followed in further ICMA studies, since sometimes traditions without *isnād* can be associated to a cluster due to *matn* commonalities.

down in summer be sufficient for you," refers to the mention of *kalāla* in Q 4:12 or Q 4:176. According to Pavlovitch, these "*kalāla-cum*-summer-verse narratives" were associated with Q 4:12 by scholars from the Hijaz, Basra, and Kufa at the beginning of the second/eighth century (p. 362), but in the middle of the same century, "the summer-verse linguistic tag" was transferred to Q 4:176 (p. 363), possibly, according to Pavlovitch, because the Quran was not yet definitively codified. In chapter five, the author discusses the development of definitions of *kalāla* from Kufa, Medina, Mecca, and Basra. Accordingly, al-Zuhrī (d. 124/742) transmitted in Medina the earliest tradition about its meaning (as referring to a person who dies leaving no child, *man laysa lahu walad*). This meaning embraces the Quranic text of Q 4:176. Al-Zuhrī's contemporary in Kufa, al-Suddī (d. 127/745), understood *kalāla* to mean someone who dies leaving no child and no parent, *lā yadaʿu walad wa-lā wālid* (p. 484). Not accepting al-Suddī's view, the Kufan jurist Isrāʾīl b. Yūnus (d. 162/769) put into circulation a tradition in which *kalāla* does not refer to the deceased, but to heirs other than the parent and child. This understanding, which was to become the "classical" version in Kufa and Basra, was based on Q 4:12 and took into account a semantic difference between the two Quranic verses. In Mecca, Sufyān b. ʿUyayna (d. 198/814) adopted the Medinan version and himself added the term parent to it, i.e., *kalāla* meant "a person who dies leaving no child and no parent" (p. 486). In the general summary (pp. 491–96), Pavlovitch repeats most of his chapter conclusions and presents a more detailed chronology of this intellectual development, which need not be outlined here. He also focuses on the Companions to whom all these traditions are attributed—ʿUmar, Ibn ʿAbbās, Abū Bakr, and ʿAlī—and concludes that "these attributions . . . are undoubtedly second-century back-projections of rival legal and exegetical doctrines." Furthermore, he sees "Schacht's theory about the backward growth of *isnād*s" corroborated "with ample . . . evidence" (p. 499).

Having presented the author's method and main results, a detailed assessment of his arguments would normally be due. However, in this (already too long) review it is impossible to discuss his analyses cluster by cluster, to comment on his deductions from specific *isnād*-bundles or *matn*-composites, or to challenge his just presented conclusions. Such an assessment can only be undertaken in an extensive paper in which all traditions are evaluated anew based on methodological assumptions that differ in part from Pavlovitch's adaptations mentioned above. Such an approach would support some of the author's identifications of PCLs and CLs, but would, as I see it, generally lead to an older dating of many clusters. This different dating would then have a direct effect on the intellectual development as presented above and would most likely lead to another reconstruction regarding the history of ideas about *kalāla*.

Instead, what I am able to do is to call some of Pavlovitch's methodological approaches into further question and to comment on his presentation of results in a more general form, in order to qualify some of his views and to help the reader to contextualize this study. I will concentrate on three major points.

First, Pavlovitch dismisses single strands (or other evidence) in many places that would have led me to establish a given transmitter as PCL or CL, e.g., al-Faḍl b. Dukayn (p. 62), al-Aʿmash (p. 148), Ibn Ṭāwūs (p. 172), al-Ṭabarī (p. 192), al-Aʿmash (p. 204), Hammām b. Yaḥyā (p. 284), Abū Isḥāq (p. 304), Sufyān b. ʿUyayna (p. 325), Jarīr b. ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd (p. 336), Abū Isḥāq (p. 385), Ṭāwūs b. Kaysān (p. 412), ʿAmr b. Dīnār (p. 420), Yazīd b. Hārūn (p. 444), ʿĀṣim b. Sulaymān (p. 453), and Shuʿba (p. 474). Consequently, Pavlovitch often opts (and argues) for a specific transmitter to have quoted a different figure and to have obscured this quotation by adding a new *isnād* in which the quoted figure did not feature. In other words, Pavlovitch argues for many cases the existence of a so-called spread of *isnād*.

Among these cases are, e.g., Sufyān b. ʿUyayna (pp. 84–85), al-Darāquṭnī (p. 90), al-Anṣārī (p. 114), an unnamed transmitter (p. 132), ʿAbdallāh b. Yazīd b. Muqriʾ (p. 155), Abū ʿUbayd (p. 172), al-Bayhaqī (p. 204), Abū Bakr b. ʿAyyāsh (p. 305), al-Ṭaḥāwī (p. 346), Ibn Abī Ḥātim (p. 380), and ʿAbd b. Ḥumayd (p. 438). Although Pavlovitch brings forward arguments for each and every such case (sometimes, however, seeming to portend a conspiracy, e.g., p. 290), these arguments appear to me to be often over-complicated, too far-fetched, and contradictory in comparison to simply accepting the given (single) *isnād* evidence.[9] One of the later scholars who are presented several times as having manipulated *isnād*s is al-Muttaqī (d. 975/1568). Al-Muttaqī often quotes traditions with an *isnād* running directly to a very early transmitter of the *matn*, without intermediate transmitter. Instead of arguing that this was al-Muttaqī's way of citing hadith, i.e., he was only interested in the first transmitter, and he was most likely known for this method, Pavlovitch insinuates that al-Muttaqī circumvented the CL on purpose (p. 193). In sum, Pavlovitch's presentation of single strands leaves the impression that manipulating *isnād*s was a common practice among Muslim scholars from many fields of knowledge and in many regions—against which notion it has been convincingly argued in many earlier ICMA studies[10] and hence should be rejected, in my view.

Second, a major part of Pavlovitch's overall argument of the historical development of *kalāla* rests on the premise that he associates reconstructed versions with particular centers of learning, as the following statement shows: "The regional affiliation of the PCLs and the CL of C21 indicates that the definition of *kalāla* as 'those relatives except for the parent and the child' represents Kufan doctrine" (p. 386). Asserting the "regional affiliation" of a scholar is very speculative. What is the reference for this affiliation? Respective information in later biographical dictionaries? Even if that information were correct, how do we know that a scholar transmitted a specific tradition in the place with which he is associated, as Pavlovitch himself points out ("It is difficult, however, to determine the area of diffusion of a given tradition, especially when we take into account the practice of 'travelling in pursuit of knowledge'") (p. 29). He also asserts that "regionalism [as visible in the *isnād*] remains an uncorroborated assumption" (p. 48). If this is so, why construct an argument based on regional affiliations to such a large degree?

Third, a comment regarding the author's argumentation is due. Pavlovitch often formulates very cautiously. Typical examples are "al-Juʿfī . . . may have been the CL who put into circulation the original narrative in C19" (p. 354) or "Owing to this uncertainty [of not knowing the CL], we should not exclude the possibility that Abū Bakr b. ʿAyyāsh copied Muʿammar b. Sulaymān's tradition while claiming to have received it from Abū Isḥāq" (p. 305). While the first example creates the impression that the author shies away from definite statements, the latter only narrates one possibility. Could other possibilities have been taken into account? For instance, that both scholars received the tradition from their alleged source Abū Isḥāq, or that they took it from a common teacher, but forgot the teacher's name and ascribed it independently to Abū Isḥāq, or even that Ibn ʿAyyāsh invented a dive in order to connect his version with the older Abū Isḥāq (actually, this possibility is formulated a page later, p. 306). Many more such possibilities, which Pavlovitch in this context calls "mental

9. In one rare case, Pavlovitch spends a lot of ink to argue *for* accepting a single-strand *isnād*, leading him to the conclusion that "single-strand *isnād*s may sometimes be useful witnesses to the history of Muslim traditions" (pp. 389–90). This finding would seem to challenge whether a skeptical attitude toward single strands is warranted, and is reinforced by another case in which Pavlovitch accepts "Shababa [. . . who] is the knot of a spidery structure" as "originator of *matn*-composite KD21" (pp. 465–66), i.e., as CL, although all transmission lines through him are single strands.

10. For instance, Schoeler 1996/2011, Görke and Schoeler 2008, Motzki 2010.

exercise[s]" (p. 309), could be thought of with some creativity. Hence, my point is how to deal with many possible interpretations without being arbitrary. If many interpretations are possible, the reader expects to come across an argument about which is the most likely and why. It is exactly this specification that I missed in many places throughout the book.[11]

Furthermore, Pavlovitch has the tendency to avoid affirming a result—saying, for instance, "ICMA points to the considerably later ʿAbdallāh" (p. 156) or "ICMA does not confirm" (p. 244). Yet, more precisely, since ICMA does not "do" anything, it is the author's interpretation of a given cluster, with the help of *isnād* and *matn* analytical tools, that leads him to a specific conclusion. Had the result been expressed in this way, the individual approach of the author becomes clear and allows other scholars to reach other conclusions by using similar tools.

The many abbreviations (most of which are introduced in this review), newly coined expressions—in particular, the often used x-cum-y constructions: "Maʿmar-*cum*-ʿAbd al-Razzāq traditions" (p. 196) or "the *kalāla-cum*-summer-verse traditions" (p. 252)—and anticipations of and recourses to other deductions or previously quoted traditions get in the way of understanding the author's train of thought at times. This is not to say that Pavlovitch does not try hard to lead the reader effectively through his evidence and reasoning. Rather, it is an observation that such a complex method as ICMA requires particular effort in communicating information—a point that was particularly well practiced by one of the "fathers" of ICMA, Harald Motzki.

Finally, there are only a very few typos—the work was edited very carefully. I noted the following: C21–C25 are missing in the table of contents; a reference to RV 9, i.e., Reconstructed Version 9, is missing on p. 121; the reference to ʿAbd al-Aʿlā's reconstructed version should be RV 15 rather than RV 16 (p. 224); one of Pavlovitch's comments of the proofs is found in *isnād* diagram KR-1 (p. 163); and *matn* is misspelled on p. 23 as "math."

In conclusion, Pavlovitch has studied an enormous corpus of hadith and has proven that there was a polyphony of scholarly voices from the first/seventh to the third/ninth centuries regarding the understanding of the Quranic term *kalāla*. Some of them had a linguistic, others an exegetical, and again others a legal agenda. All these voices took part in a common discourse—some responded to earlier understandings, others developed new and independent readings. Furthermore, Pavlovitch has shown that in some cases it is particularly difficult to date *kalāla* traditions as well as to argue a case for their geographical distribution and relationships to one another. Although a solid five-year research project on the understanding of *kalāla* in early Islamic history has come to an end with this monograph, in my view the last word on this topic has not yet been spoken.

11. In the particular case discussed here, I would risk being criticized for being too confident by sticking to the evidence in the *isnād*-bundle, accepting the claim of both PCLs that they received the tradition from Abū Isḥāq, and hence establishing the latter as CL of the cluster. On this basis I would then reconstruct the *matn* pertaining to the CL.

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