

The Quran as a Historical Source

The Quran is the holy scripture of Islam. It is believed by Muslims to be the divine word of God; it was produced in the seventh century CE by the prophet Muhammad (Sonn 2) who recited its contents over a period of 23 years. It contains 114 chapters, or suras, covering many aspects of society and how to live ethically and faithfully (Sonn 2). The Quran is a valuable historical source because of its relevance to people's everyday lives and experiences, but it is weakened by its religious purpose and its original role in guiding, rather than documenting, people's experiences.

The origins of the Quran give it a centrally indispensable role in understanding Islamic and general history of the Middle East. Being a document written in seventh century Arabia, it provides insight into what was considered important about the current cultural, political, and economic situation. For example, the Quran talks extensively about the need to treat orphans kindly and charitably (Quran 4:8) and demanding that in certain cases, "the same concern for orphans" should be shown as concern for one's own children (Quran 4:9). We begin to understand that in seventh-century Arabia, there must have been significant numbers of orphans, or that at the very least, orphans were a notable problem, because what the Quran considers as moral and charitable revolves around helping orphans. Similarly, the Quran's repeated mention of liberating slaves (Quran 4:25) suggests that there were many slaves in society. It would be unlikely, for instance, for a holy text to talk extensively about slaves if that region did not hold significant numbers of slaves to begin with, or if slaves were an unrelatable and rare element of people's lives. We further understand from chapters like the eighth sura (Battle Gains) that conflict was prevalent, or even necessary, for society at the time, which reinforces what we know about the often-violent spread of Islam and the work of Muhammad as a military commander.

Again, if Arabia were peaceful at that time, a whole sura explaining how to fairly share in the spoils of war would likely not be in the Quran. All in all, from analyzing simply the topics of discussion in the Quran, we can learn about what was considered important or prevalent to people in seventh-century Arabia, qualifying the Quran as a valuable historical source.

Despite its value, the Quran also has flaws as a historical source. It is centrally focused on the idea of God and a need to place trust and faith in God. This is evident in many verses, and at the beginning of every sura. A philosophical discussion of God is outside the scope of this paper, but what is true is that the existence of God can neither be proven nor disproven. Therefore, constant references to God in the Quran is the equivalent of many unsubstantiated statements that we know are not verifiable. However, this is to be expected from a religious text, and in fact is not a significant impediment in historical understanding if we keep in mind the religiosity of the text and normalize out the religious elements; if we are able to discern and separate religious verses from more historical ones, the Quran's value as a historical source is mostly still present.

A final notable flaw is the nature of its audience and its place in society. While many historical sources are written after events or time periods, and thus have the liberty to talk about events or changes that really occurred, the Quran is a text that was written and then meant to be followed by Muslims. Therefore, the historical accuracy of the Quran is determined by how it was interpreted and how closely and literally it was followed by Muslims of that time. For example, the Quran dictates that for inheritance, "a son should have the equivalent ... of two daughters (Quran 4:11) – but we cannot be sure, based on the Quran alone, if this was widely done or not; in other words, we are not sure how seriously Muslims of the time took this point. Therefore, we cannot know whether such a way of dividing inheritance was part of seventh-century Arabian history or not, introducing a degree of uncertainty in our historical conclusions.

There needs to be (and often are) other pieces of evidence that tell us how literally the Quran was followed at the time; only then we can verify the validity of many of the Quran's statements.

All in all, the Quran is a valuable historical source revealing what is pertinent to everyday society, but is limited by its saturation of religious theme, and by its nature as a guiding, rather than descriptive, resource.

References

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