The root ‘l-m occurs frequently in the literature concerned with the traditions of the Prophet. This fact is not surprising. It is confirmed by the many pages of references listed in Concordance, IV, 313a25–339b39. It is, perhaps, not surprising either, but not quite as expected, that some monographs on traditions on knowledge were soon written and that the collections of hadîth, which laid the foundations for the religio-legal complex of later Islam, came to include special chapters, or “books,” devoted to the topic of “knowledge.”

The great legal compilation of the Imam Mâlik (b. ca. 91/710, d. 179/795) takes us back into the eighth century. The Muwaḏḏa‘ contains a chapter on “the search after knowledge,” which occurs within the context of other moral prescriptions. It consists of only one tradition, or rather, wisdom saying, going back to Mâlik himself, which quotes the pre-Islamic sage from the Qur‘ân, Luqmân, as exhorting his son in these words: “Son, sit at the feet of the scholars and close to them, for God gives life to the hearts through the light of wisdom, like as He gives life to the dead soil through rain from heaven.”1 This saying is quoted by later authors in a number of slightly different recensions.2 Unfortunately,

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1 Cf. Mâlik. Muwaţţa‘, 1002 (Cairo 1370/1951): IV, 429 f. (Cairo 1355/1936), with the commentary of az-Zurqânî, which does not add anything of importance.
2 Cf. al-Jâhiz, Bayân, ed. ‘Abd-as-Salâm Hârûn. II, 149 (Cairo 1367–69/1948–50), where another long saying ascribed to Luqmân is similarly introduced; Rasâ’il Ikhwân as-safâ‘, I, 272; al-Mubashshir, 265, II. 6 and 8, where similar remarks are ascribed to Luqmân, while the saying in the form it has in the Muwaţţa‘ appears on p. 272, 11 10 f., followed there by references—rare in al-Mubashshir—to Muslim conditions: ath-Tha‘labî, Qisas-al-anbiyâ‘, in the chapter on Luqmân, corresponding only to the first half of the saying; al-Ghazzâlî, Ilyâ‘, I, 8, trans. N. A. Faris, 17; Ibn ‘Abd-al-Barr, Jâmî‘, I, 106, quoting Mâlik, on his authority and that of other scholars, with some slight distortion, in one place obviously due to the printer; az-Zamakhshari, Rabî‘ al-
nothing can be said about its earlier history, except that it does not seem to occur in the related wisdom literature going under the name of Alīqar. It might very well have been derived from an old collection of wisdom sayings of non-Arab or Arab origin. It might even have been invented by Mālik himself, although this would seem to be very unlikely. The absence from the Muwatta’ of other and, from the Islamic point of view, more authoritative quotations is significant. It indicates that Mālik was not aware of other relevant material that he might have considered worthy of inclusion in his work in this particular connection. There is no reason in the world why he should not have included it, had he known about it and thought it genuine and important. There was every reason to mention it. None of the material included in the chapters on ‘ilm in later hadith collections is referred to in Mālik’s chapter on ‘ilm, a clear indication that the situation which led to the inclusion of that material had not yet reached the stage which suggested, if it did not demand, its inclusion. In Mālik’s generation, ‘ilm apparently had not yet achieved the stage of a problem in traditionist religious thought and scholarly methodology.

Of the large hadith collections only those which arrange their material topically, as against works arranged according to transmitters, are of interest to us here. The largest part of the earlier literature of this type preceding the six so-called “canonical” collections, has not yet been recovered or is known so far only in fragmentary fashion. The Jāmi’ of the Egyptian jurist, ʿAbdallāh b. Wahb (b. 125/742–43, d. Shaʿbān 25, 197/May 1, 813), whose principal teacher had been the Imam Mālik and who was supposedly nicknamed “Diwān al-‘ilm” because of his vast knowledge, included a “Book on Knowledge.” This we learn from quotations in Ibn ʿAbd-al-Barr’s Jāmi’. Ibn Wahb’s Kitāb id-‘Ilm cited statements by Mālik to the effect that “knowledge does not rest in the large amount of transmitted material, but it is a light that God has placed in the hearts of men,” and that “knowledge and wisdom are a light by which God guides whomever He wishes;