CHAPTER ONE

THE AKHBÃRÎ-UŠÛLÎ DISPUTE AND THE EARLY
“AKHBÃRÎ” SCHOOL

For most Muslim writers, both in the contemporary period and in the past, God’s revelation to humanity comprises two principal elements: the Qur’ân and the Sunna. However, the form and content of both of these elements continues to be matters of dispute and discussion. The text of the Qur’ân (“the Book”, al-Kitâb) was subject to variant readings (qirâ‘ât), which at times indicate differences in the possible meaning of a particular passage.1 Furthermore, some Muslim scholars conceived of verses which were absent from the text of the Qur’ân as we have it today, though present in the recitation revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.2 The Sunna, on the other hand, was a somewhat theoretical concept which a Muslim could come to know through an examination of the extant reports of the Prophet’s actions and an assessment of what is indicated by the words and actions of the Prophet found in the literary genre known as ḥadîth (pl. aḥādîth). The aḥādîth were only potential indicators of the Prophet’s example. Other possible indicators included the words and actions of the Prophet’s companions and those of his successors who were inspired by his example. The “recited revelation” (waḥy matlû, that is, the Qur’ân) was used during the performance of Muslim rituals, and therefore had a ritual function which the unrecited revelation (waḥy ghayr al-matlû, that is, the Sunna) did not have. This, however, was not always an indication of the Qur’ân’s primacy over the Sunna. Nor was the relative stability of the Qur’anic text, compared with the amorphous concept of Sunna, always sufficient to guarantee the greater authority of the former. Some scholars felt the relationship between Qur’ân and

1 For a view that the two qirâ‘as (and by implication, most of the other variant readings) in current usage do not affect the sense of variant verses, see Brockett, “The Value of the Hafs and Warsh Transmissions”. That most qirâ‘as are exegetical asides rather than true variants, see Burton, Collection, pp. 29–45 and Wansbrough, Qur’anic Studies, pp. 205–206.

2 The classic example of this is the “Stoning Verse”, on which see Burton, Collection, pp. 72–85 and his Sources of Islamic Law, pp. 122–164.
Sunna to be one akin to text and commentary; others felt them to be two separate (and equal, albeit complementary) sources of knowledge of God’s intended message. Occasionally, one finds groups which accept the Qur’ān but reject the *Sunna* entirely.

Amongst the disputed indicators of the Prophet’s *Sunna* were both the actions of his companions and those who came after him. In the absence of an explicit (and historically reliable) statement of the Prophet, is it permitted to turn to a statement made by one of his companions? What of those who came after the Prophet but may have been preserving Prophetic practices which were not recorded in *hadith*? Can these reports act as indicators of the *Sunna*? Answers to these questions were much disputed by Muslim scholars, and continue to be important for Muslims into the modern period. What is to be included in the concept of revelation has elicited a variety of responses from Muslim scholars (the *ulamā*). Hence “scripture”, the record of God’s communication with humankind is, at the same time, both centrally important and disputed. Beyond these disputes concerning the content of scripture, there were disputes concerning interpretation. What interpretive processes were legitimate, and which were to be rejected? These were formally separate from the question of content, though discussion concerning what scripture meant inevitably impacted on what counted as scripture. At times, a textual variant accorded with doctrine (perhaps generated independently from scripture), and was therefore given preference over other variants. At other times, a segment of possible scripture became so resistant to an acceptable interpretation that it became easier for Muslim writers to argue for its abrogation (or more radically, its exclusion from the canon). Most classical Muslim authors can be described as

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3 On the relationship between Qur’ān and Sunna, see Burton, *Sources of Islamic Law*, pp. 18–31.
5 On the Imāmī rejection of the companion reports as sources of information for Prophetic practice, see Kohlberg, “The attitude of Imāmī Shi’ites”.
6 The most pertinent example of this being the practice of the “people of Madina” being a source in Mālikī jurisprudence. See Dutton, *The Origins*, pp. 32–52.
7 On the effects of disputes about canonicity on the methods of exegesis, see Wansbrough, *Qur’ānic Studies*, pp. 207–227. He refers to the “related but distinct processes of hermeneutical derivation [i.e. exegesis] and textual adjustment [i.e. revelatory content]” (p. 148).
8 See the examples in Burton, *Sources of Islamic Law*, pp. 56–80.