The Reality Effect in Early Muslim Literature

Marina Apaydin (MsEE, MBA, MA, PhD)
American University of Beirut, Lebanon

Abstract

For the purposes of this paper, reality is considered to be absolute, while its perceptions are multiple and subjective – as are the original historical accounts. Legends, on the contrary, lack detail and represent a harmonious logical sequence of events. Early Muslim writings such as Ibn Saʿd's works and Ḥadith, coming on the heels of pre-Islamic poetry with its abundance of descriptive details, continued the use of *Jahiliah* rhetoric techniques in an effort to provide precision to the historical account. While the variations in Ḥadiths' versions are a natural feature of oral traditions put into writing, it creates contradictions that sought a solution through the process of source authentication. However, the authenticity of the source does not automatically equate with the reliability of the content.

The 'minimum common denominator' method used by the early Ḥadith collectors for establishing the truthfulness of a Ḥadith resulted in proliferation of texts with the least details, shaping them into the form of a legend. Described by Roland Barthes (1970) as *l'effet de réel*, these methods of representing reality through providing extensive anachronistic details, and incorporation of historical characters alongside mythical events began to be intentionally applied only when early Muslim texts started being used as the basis for lawmaking: the insignificant details were removed to avoid contradiction and provide cohesiveness, while the new anachronistic details were added to provide authority, and "help" establish authenticity.

This paper reviews the relationship between authenticity and reality, analyzes the role of details of early Muslim literature in producing the ***reality effect***, and discusses the attitudes of classical and modern scholars towards this problem.

Keywords: Reality effect, Ḥadith, early Muslim literature.

Introduction: Is there a devil in the details?

When a reader is presented with a narrative, how do we know what is fiction and what is reality? When scholars peruse through manuscripts, how can they figure out which characters are fictional and which are real? In a

miraj story of the Prophet Muḥammad, how can we determine if his companion Burak really existed or was he just a product of the imagination?

In this paper, I study the role of details in the production of reality. I argue that details are one of the most important parts of the reality litmus test. Details are important in historical texts as they are important in modern times in determining what is true, and what is just a fictional story, or a legend. For example, in our days, when you are summoned by the INS[4] for a Green Card interview, you have to prove that your claim of having marital relations with an American citizen is **true**; so they ask you about seemingly insignificant and unrelated details: the brand of the garbage bags, the color of the bathroom tiles, the position of the mailbox, and so on. In contrast, when training KGB[5] agents to **credibly** represent a new identity, the focus is on the creation of a cohesive *legend*, a story that flows logically through the known past events and connects them with the present. The details are discussed only schematically.

A similar disparity can be observed in early Muslim literature. Some *Ḥadiths* and *sīras*[6] burst forth with an extraordinary number of minute details, such as color, length, density and position of the hair on the Prophet Muḥammad's body. There is even mention of the shape of his comb (Haq, 1990). On the other hand, the Ḥadiths were deemed "certainly truthful" (*mutawātir*) if they were spread "through textually identical channels of transmission which are sufficiently numerous as to preclude any possibility of collaboration on a forgery" (Hallaq, 1999, p. 78). The identical match requirement of this selection methodology would automatically favor texts with the most basic common denominator, i.e., the texts with the least number of details.

Additionally, the **truthfulness** of the Ḥadith should be ascertained through their **authenticity**; achieved by lengthy *isnāds* (sequence) of trustworthy transmitters. This is problematic; if the authenticity condition is a **necessary** requirement for Ḥadith truthfulness, is it also **sufficient**? And why was it important to establish this truthfulness then and why is it relevant now?

In this paper, I will review the relationship between authenticity and reality, analyze the role of details in early Muslim literature in producing

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4 Immigration and Naturalization Service in the United States, infamous for its exhausting interviews of those who seek American residence on the basis of marriage to an American citizen.

5 Komitet Gosudarstvennoi Bezopastnosti (Internal Intelligence Service in the former Soviet Union).

6 *Ḥadiths* represent textual version of Prophet Muḥammad's sayings, while *sīras* refer to descriptions of his life.

fiction and reality and discuss the attitudes of classical and modern scholars towards this issue.

Reality and its perceptions

The most commonly used terms are usually also the most approximate. Mikhail Blok

What is reality? Although everybody intuitively knows the answer, a myriad of scholars across various fields debate this subject. I believe that the issue should be split into two parts, whereby the reality itself may be an unambiguous absolute, while the perceptions of reality by various observers are multiple and subjective. Furthermore, similar perceptions may result in different descriptions, leading to an even greater number of variations in the representations of reality.

Representations can be either visual or textual,[7] and the scope of this paper concerns the latter. Reality in textual Muslim literature is transformed into its symbolic-imaginary form: textual representation ("le semblant" in Lacan's (1966) definition) through the medium of language. During this transformation, the outcomes are subjective and ambiguous. However, "cette ambiguité n'est pas une imperfection de la conscience ou de l'éxistence, elle en est la définition" (Merleau-Ponty, 1945, p. 26). It is no coincidence that empirical research (Leroy, 2014) has demonstrated that a single type of variation of the stimuli can result in three types of the verbal responses,[8] each representing the truthful description of the perception of a respondent.

The importance of the differences in perceptions of the same instance of reality is determined by the purpose of observation. The difference in cloth or a hairstyle is meaningless for a medical description, but very relevant to a religious one. Thus, the **true** importance of details in representation of reality depends on their relevance to the subject matter. In the effort to get away from insignificant details, a new type of Ḥadith classification based on the **underlying meaning** of the text (*al-tawātur al-ma'nawī*) was introduced in the middle of the 9th – early 10th century. Nevertheless, the original **literal** match (*al-tawātur al-lafẓī*) was still considered to possess superior certainty on the basis of a larger number of matching details (regardless of whether they were relevant or not). This type of classification implies that the larger number of details creates **an impression** of a more precise, thus truthful representation of reality. What does make people think so?

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7 By "visual" I refer to images and not to written texts, which are essentially visual in their sensor reception. "Textual" means written and spoken information.

8 The subjects were exposed to two consecutive instances of lightning and asked to describe the difference between the two. The unassisted replies were given in terms of 1) distance (far/close); 2) speed (fast/slow); 3) intensity (strong/weak).

The reality effect

Roland Barthes (1970) who studied in depth *l'effet de réel* maintains that details are one of the main tools used by authors to provide a text with the effect of reality (p. 80-81). Details can be either descriptive or numerical, and create an impression that the author was indeed present at the scene s/he describes (and is, therefore, able to describe it through **any** level of details).[9] The problem, of course, arises from the fact that eyewitnesses of an event have a limited ability to remember **all** the details, and their perception of the details is subjective, leaving the great possibility that their accounts would be different.

In the account of the qualities of the constitution of the Prophet Muḥammad (Haq, 1990, pp. 484-503), Abraham Ibn Muḥammad quotes Ali stating that the Prophet had "body without hair," and that "his hairs were neither curly nor straight," while "a person among al-Ansar" quotes the same Ali saying "the hair from his neck to navel were like a branch of a tree," and "his hair was straight without curls (Haq, 1990, p. 484)."

Abraham Ibn Muḥammad says, "his complexion was white," while as per Nafi‗Ibn Jubayr Ibn Mut‗im, Ali said he had a "reddish complexion (Haq, 1990, p. 485)." Other reported color variations range from "shining white," to "tawny" and "darkly whitish." The Prophet's hair either "fall over his shoulders" (al-Bara), or "are not allowed to pass his ear" (Anas). He either advises dying the gray hair "to oppose the Jews and Christians" (Abu Hurayrah), or "dislikes the changing of the color of gray hair" (Abdullah). Sometimes Muḥammad applies collyrium "to either of his eyes trice at the time of sleep" (Ibn Abbas), while other times apparently only "twice to the left eye" (‘Imrān Ibn Abā Anas) (Haq, 1990, p. 485-503).

The question is not really whether these accounts are intrinsically true or not, as the hair could grow, the skin could become tainted under the sunlight, and the Prophet could change his eye make-up habits as he pleased. The real question here is what was the purpose of recording such seemingly insignificant details? If details indeed create an impression of the informant's intimate knowledge of the events, and his closeness to the Prophet, then they can serve another purpose: to establish informant's reputation as a credible source, and to provide an authority to his **other**, even unrelated statements. This logic could work as follows: if the informant was so familiar with the Prophet's appearance, and has such a good memory that he could even remember that the Prophet's shoes had two laces, and his comb was made of ivory, then the informant's account of an important event should also be credible. Thus, one could conclude that the credibility of a narrator was an important part of establishing textual authentication.

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9 "What can be more "real"… than a date" – exclaims Barthes (1970, p. 207).

The question of authenticity

Unlike scholars of other fields such as classicists or Egyptologists, the Middle Eastern scholars were especially preoccupied with the issue of source authenticity, which dealt with the question of whether the statements attributed to particular people were indeed theirs. However, some[10] do not consider it as an important question, suggesting that source authenticity does not automatically confirm the accuracy of the transmission. Nevertheless, the authenticity of early Muslim texts has been a subject of much heated debate since the pre-modern period. In modern times, Ignaz Goldziher (1971) began a discourse about the Ḥadiths that has now been expanded to encompass more than 200 articles and three-dozen books. Within this discourse, the authenticity of the Ḥadiths was questioned within the framework of source criticism that analyzed the reliability of primary and secondary sources. For the purpose of this paper, the final verdict regarding the number of Ḥadiths which are really authentic is not as important as the argument on which such a verdict is based. It turns out that scholars based the Ḥadith authenticity on the reliability of its *isnād* (chain of transmitters). The most reliable ones (*saḥīḥ*) are those that were "transmitted in an uninterrupted manner by persons all of whom, from the first tier to the last, are known for their just character (*'udūl*) and **excellent memory** (*dabṭ*) (Hallaq, 1999, p. 85)." After all, how would we know if someone had an excellent memory, if not by the number of details he remembers? An interesting topic of research might be an analysis of the relationship between the narrator's perceived reliability, and the number of details he/she provides, but such research is beyond the scope of this paper.

In some cases, when the details were insufficient and a Ḥadith was considered "weak," referring to the ultimate authority (who would obviously have the most just character and the best memory of all), God, could have enhanced Ḥadith reliability - as it is done in the 40 Ḥadith Qudsi (Rubin, 1995).

While this hypothesis shows how the details can be used in the argument for source authenticity, it does not equate source authenticity with the ability of the narrator to represent reality – for, as it has been explained previously, perceptions of reality can be very subjective. In short, there are two issues that should be treated separately, if not independently: source authenticity, and the truth within the representation of reality. I will next turn to the different narrative types used in non-fiction texts.

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10 E.g. Michael Morony (personal communication) and Wael Hallaq (see arguments in Hallaq (1999)).

From history to legend

In his study concerning representation of reality, Erich Auerbach (1968) contrasts Homer's narrative style with that of the Old Testament. Homer's detailed narrative is "externalized, uniformly illuminated phenomena… in a perpetual foreground," while the Jewish writers emphasize "only the decisive points… what lies between is nonexistent (Auerbach, 1968, p.11)." Auerbach concludes that "The Homeric poems conceal nothing… thus **he cannot be interpreted** (Auerbach, 1968, p.13)."

If "the ambiguity is the result of insufficient amount of information (Leroy, 2014, p. 3)," then the role of details is to decrease ambiguity, therefore eliminating the need for interpretation. However, in real life, the number of details of an event is infinite before even considering the perception of participants. In his book, Auerbach concludes that "**the historical event** which we witness, or learn from the testimony of those who witnessed it, runs much more variously, contradictorily, and confusedly," while the "**legend** arranges its material in a simple and straightforward way; it detaches it from its contemporary historical context, so that the latter will not confuse it; it knows only clearly outlined men who act from few and simple motives and the continuity of whose feelings and actions remains uninterrupted (Auerbach, 1968, p.19)."

Auerbach's conclusion reconciles Barthes' call for details and Ibn Saʿd's contradictory accounts. While the narrators were zealously supplying details in Ḥadiths in order to demonstrate historicity (Barthes), they did perceive reality in different ways (Ibn Saʿd). Thus the details diverged – a normal feature of historical discourse (Auerbach). On the other hand, during the process of Ḥadith authentication, those with fewer details have, paradoxically, higher propensity of being chosen, as more people would remember the general idea as opposed to idiosyncratic details. As a result of this "natural selection," historical events took on legendary forms. Deprived of details and/or context, they became harmonious, but required interpretation.

According to Chase Robinson (2003), "it is a nature of pre-modern historiography that the transformation of event witnessed or remembered into story recorded and transmitted was perilous…accuracy as to "fact" was much less important than validity as to life-vision… historical truth in the Middle Ages was a perishable commodity (Robinson, 2003, p.153)."

From legend to history

If an historical event becomes a legend by losing details and harmonizing its plot into a logical sequence, can a reverse process be observed where a legend can attempt to become history by adding the attributes of reality as in Barthes' model? I will further discuss two legendary

descriptions: the night travel of Prophet Muḥammad to Jerusalem and back in Ibn Hisham's *sīra* (Ibn Hisham, 2003, pp. 163-72),[11] and the story of the Queen of Sheba in the Quran.

In the first story, the reality effect is achieved using two techniques: dramatic details and introduction of historical figures. In a matter of one night, Prophet Muḥammad travels on a winged horse, Al-Burāk, to Jerusalem, from where he ascends to God's throne, and then returns to Mecca. The story is rich in dialogue, a rhetorical method that was "invented as a matter of course (Robinson, 2003, p.153)."

The method of adding details is used in various ways. The legendary angel Jibrīl is rendered real by abundant and quite dramatic details of his **actions**: Jibrīl kicks Muḥammad with the foot (twice) to wake him up, takes him by his shoulder, and puts his hand on Al-Burāk's mane (Ibn Hisham, 2003, p. 164). Al-Burāk is humanized by the details of its feelings: "he felt ashamed so much that he started sweating (Ibn Hisham, 2003, p. 164)." The prominent historical characters – Abraham, Moses, and Jesus are introduced as another tool of the reality effect; they witness Muḥammad's ascension to heaven. All of them are described in great detail: Moses is tall and thin with curly hair and an "eagle nose," Jesus is "a handsome man with straight hair and freckles," and Abraham simply looks just like Muḥammad (Ibn Hisham, 2003, p. 166). Most interestingly, the description of Muḥammad's appearance that occupies several pages in Ibn Saʿd is reduced by Ibn Hisham to one paragraph containing the most frequently repeated qualities: black eyes, long eye-lashes, and fleshy palms and feet, thus making descriptive inconsistencies disappear.

Inclusion of this concise physical description of the Prophet as a **separate section *within* the story of travel** (Ibn Hisham, 2003, p. 166) could have served another purpose. Mixing most probably very real details about Muḥammad, with fictitious details about mythical Jibrīl, Al-Burāk, and historical Moses, Jesus, and Abraham, makes the whole story appear more "real" if one agrees to believe in miracles, which was quite normal in pre-modern times. On the other hand, when it comes to proving that Muḥammad did visit Jerusalem, the narrator is suddenly very vague, and does not provide any details about what the Prophet saw in the city, instead stating "they were confirmed by Abu Bakr who had been to Jerusalem before (Ibn Hisham, 2003, p. 165)." This begs the question: why not share these details with the audience?

The second narrative about the Queen of Sheba also lacks dramatic details, but uses the historical figure of King Salomon. This story is what Robinson calls "topoi, images or passages that occur so frequently that they

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11 Quotes from Russian sources are in my translation into English.

can only be counted as narrative motifs (Robinson, 2003, p.152)." Indeed, it vagabonds from the Torah, to the Gospels, to the Quran; each time changing the "moral of the story." Bilqīs Al-Hadrani (1994) argues that the story in the Torah represents the economic relationships between the Hebrews and the Sabaeans, while Muslims value the story for the Queen's conversion to Islam. The details that adorn the story in the Qu'ran are "miraculous" rather than realistic, and thus the story is "more productive in fanciful storytelling than scholarly *tafsi (*Stowasser, 1994, p. 73)." Should this lead us to conclude that quality and abundance of details contributing to the *reality effect* are more significant, and historical characters alone – without realistic details, will not render the legend true? The next question then would be how the details are used.

Different trees that make up a forest

Based on the analysis of numerous fictional and historical texts and art pieces, Russian linguist Boris Uspensky (2000) introduced the notion of "spatial-temporal point of view (Uspensky, 2000, pp. 261-63)," i.e., the focal point of a narrative. This is akin to a close-up camera shot, whereby only the subject in focus can be seen in detail, leaving the vague peripheral objects in the background. The perspective (as a feature of reality) in art is achieved by diminishing the number of details as the viewer moves away from the main object of the painting into the background. Similarly, the main character of the text is usually described in much detail, while the secondary figures remain quite schematic, and even allegoric. This opinion is consistent with what we saw in Ibn Saʿd (Hallaq, 1999) and Ibn Hisham (2003). In the travel story, the virtual focus moves from Jibrīl, to Al-Burāk, to previous prophets, to culminate in the whole section on Muḥammad's physical characteristics.

Details describe not only the superficial appearances; they are even more powerful when it comes to emotions, expressions, and personal characteristics. Gombrich (1960) argues that expressive details assign identity to portraits, while the classical Greek beauty is essentially emotionless and thus unreal. In the texts, however, the situation is a bit different, as there is a standard range of "polished" emotions (rejoiced, got angry, etc.) that do not necessarily provide the reality effect to the narrative, but other, more personal emotions that do (an attempt to create reality by depicting Al-Burāk "becoming ashamed").

In his description of the Soviet propaganda efforts to convince the Russians that Jesus was a myth, Mikhail Bulgakov (1995) made the Editor of a newspaper publicly criticize a famous Author's poem. The criticism boiled down to stating that the author had failed to achieve the "mythical effect," because "Jesus turned out…altogether alive… invested with a full range of negative characteristics (p.5)" – i.e., he turned out too much like a historical

figure rather than a mythical one, and this is exactly what the editor was trying to avoid, the historicity of Jesus.

Other types of details, dialogues, and numeric quantities have already been mentioned. Chase Robinson (2003) believes that these are used to "fill out and spice up what might otherwise be fairly lean and prosaic accounts." He argues that "real armies do not act so formulaically [shouting "God is great!"]… numbers were often used stereotypically; four, seven, eleven, and their multiples being particular favorites (Robinson, 2003, pp.152-53)." Indeed, when we do not remember the exact quantity, we round it, so forty does not necessarily mean exactly forty, but any number between the high thirties, and low forties. Therefore, odd numbers would signal the intention to convey the message that the quantity is remembered exactly. Sometimes, doing so gives us a clear indication of such an attempt to create a reality effect, like in Ibn Saʿd: "Muḥammad had 17 gray hairs in his beard (Haq, 1990, p. 11)." It is hard to imagine anybody, even as close to the Prophet as his wife Aisha counting his gray hairs.

A striking example of the peculiarity of odd numbers can be found in the Qu'ran. In Sūrah 74(30-31) we read that over hell there "…are 19 [angels]. And we have set none but angels as guardians of the fire; and **we have fixed their number** only as a trial for unbelievers – in order that the people of the book **may arrive at certainty** (Ali, 1999, pp. 1559-60)." [12] It is known that pre-modern people tended to attribute a mystical meaning (Robinson, 2003, pp.152-53) to numbers, but 19 is not amongst the commonly used "magical" number list (3, 4, 7, 11 and their multiples). The text seems to clearly indicate that this rare and odd number was selected intentionally; so that believers should have no doubt that it was a "real sign of God."

Some details may have connotations Goldziher (1971), and act as codified signifiers. The fact that Muḥammad is described as "not tall and not short (Haq, 1990, p. 484)," with hair that is "neither straight, not curly (Haq, 1990, p.507)," might mean that he is "one of his tribe," and therefore this can act as more than just a literal description. At the same time, comparing his appearance with that of Abraham indicates a clear attempt of prefiguration, a vague advanced representation of the subsequent event.[13]

Finally, a very common type of detail is the anachronistic one, which is added post-factum to create a cohesive narrative of a fulfilled prophecy. Chase Robinson (2003) gives "a fairly prosaic example" of a Saljuk sultan's

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12 Emphasis is mine.

13 For example, the story of Jonah—being swallowed by a great fish and then, after spending three days and three nights in the belly of the beast, is vomited out on dry ground—was seen by early Christians as an anticipation or prefiguration of the story of Christ's own death and resurrection.

"prophetic" dream where he was told (of course, three times) that he would live for 70 years (Robinson, 2003, p.151). Sure enough, he did.

Although the types and place of details vary; they all come together in one narrative and become an integral part of it. Russian philosopher Pavel Florensky (2000) remarks that "while each element has its own form and meaning, when they come together as one, their meaning changes to reflect the complex interactions among the elements (p. 260)." Without going into a post-structuralist discussion about the melosimy of the meanings, I will next focus only on the meaning **intended by the author**; for as one of the *mutawātir* Ḥadiths ascertains, "acts are judged by intentions (Hallaq, 1999, p.87)."

Details: A rhetorical technique or a political tool?

Now that we have reviewed the types of details that can be provided in a narrative, the fundamental question remains about the intentions of those supplying the details. Did they **intentionally** provide details (fictitious or not) with the purpose of creating the reality effect, or was it just a part of their rhetorical style? The answer will depend on whether the details formed a part of the original text or were added later.

We should not forget that the early Muslims followed on the heels of the pre-Islamic poets, whose heritage was well known and popular in Muḥammad's milieu. Not only was *Jahiliah* poetry full of dramatic details, the poems were also enhanced by metaphor and allegories (e.g., "locks and bits of forefronts flying like butterflies over the battlefield"). Was this done in an effort by the poet to create the reality effect? Probably it was not, at least, at that time. Rather, it was a skilled rhetoric technique used to produce a superior piece of poetry that would win the poetical contests in Mecca.14

Assuming the continuity of tradition and the effects of intertextuality,15 it would be reasonable to suppose that the original authors of early Muslim texts were just describing the events in the best rhetorical traditions of their forefathers. Indeed, we can see the familiar *Jahiliah* metaphor of a pearl in Ibn Saʿd's description of Muḥammad: "the drops of his sweat were like pearls (Haq, 1990, p. 484)" or a graphic description of the sinners who "throw the burning charcoal in their mouths, which exit from their behind" (p. 170) in Ibn Hisham (2003).

Since the Qu'ran and the Ḥadith were initially transmitted as oral traditions, adding beautifying details was an integral part of the process.

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14 *Jahiliah* poets used to compete in poetry contests, and sometimes this skill was used as a tool to settle an argument whereby a "better" poem would win.

15 A process of shaping of text meaning by another text, e.g. Boris Vian's *Vendredi* being inspired by Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, and Salman Rushdi's *Satanic Verses* borrowed ideas from Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*.

Even in today's world, oral traditions such as folksongs and ballads are "passed along and **paraphrased** or used by others for whom it also functions as a way of articulating shared attitudes or feelings (Toelken, 1986, p. 147)." Thus, the multitude of variations of Muḥammad's description in Ibn Saʿd is quite expected.

Another possible reason for providing a detailed description might have been an increasing restriction on the visual representation of living creatures in the Islamic milieu. If the visual representation of the Prophet was forbidden, it would be natural to have a copious textual description to compensate for this lacuna. Another interesting topic for research might be comparing the presence of detailed textual descriptions in the Persian part of the Islamic world, where the prohibition on images was not strictly upheld, with the textual descriptions found in more conservative Sunni regions.

The change in the narrators'/transmitters' agendas probably occurred when the texts started to be used as a guide for religious behavior, and the basis for a legal system. Such a basis needed to be cohesive and credible. Therefore, the contradicting, insignificant details might have been removed and other meaningfully relevant (such as anachronistic prophecies), added. At the same time, in the quest for authenticity, scholars scrutinized the *isnād* constructed by narrators with the goal of approving, or rejecting a particular piece of information to be canonized. In Goldziher's (1971) opinion, the investigation of Ḥadith that had legal relevance was much more rigorous than of those dealing with ethical or behavioral issues.

Indeed, political reasons deeply rooted in the struggle for power have frequently been the main driver of many literary and other creative works. For this purpose, the reality effect was used intentionally and quite forcefully. One of the main purposes of Bulgakov's book was to expose Soviet propaganda, which was trying to turn Jesus into a mythical hero similar to the ancient Greeks. Bulgakov accomplishes this task by providing a quite detailed account written in a historical style, of the last day of Jesus, told from the point of view of Pontius Pilate,[16] as an eye witness and the main actor of that day. Bulgakov's purpose was only to show that Jesus was not a myth, but a real person (not necessarily the Messiah),[17] and thus the details in this story are many, which creates the ultimate reality effect – a broad description by an eye witness, a very similar technique to that of Ḥadith transmitters.

The reality effect techniques can be seen in today's society as well. Half a century after Bulgakov, on a different continent, Mel Gibson had a

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16 The fifth prefect of the Roman province of Judaea, from AD 26–36, best known as the judge who authorized the crucifixion of Jesus.

17 And this is exactly what the Soviet propaganda was against: recall the Editor's instigation to the Poet to explain to the people that Jesus was a myth.

different agenda in his movie *The Passion of the Christ* (2004). Representing reality in a movie is much more difficult and expensive than in a text. The director has to render **everything** the camera lens captures as real, irrespective if the object is in, or out of focus. The writer, however, may choose what to describe, and what to skip. And so, *The Passion* is as real as it can get: Jesus speaks in Aramaic with Pilate who replies in Latin, the costumes are designed in consultations with historians, and the blood looks quite real too. However, amidst all this seeming authenticity, Gibson plants his agenda: the Gospel he bases the script upon is that of Luke, the most anachronistic of all. The Gentile Luke sees Jesus as a Messiah, thus his details differ from those (more historically descriptive) of Matthew and Mark (Asimov, 1981, pp. 836-38 (Mathew), pp. 906-11 (Mark)). For example, while the last two "describe the crucified Jesus as abandoned and reviled by all, Luke's Messiah forgives his crucifiers in a noble manner "for they know not what they do" (Luke 23:34) (Asimov, 1981, p. 950). Gibson amplifies the reality of Luke's anachronistic message by saturating even the background with so much detail, that the reality of the prophetic message is beyond any doubt for a captive audience – fooled by a detailed realistic context within which the prophetic script is placed.

Luckily for the pre-modern Muslim lawmakers, the cinema did not exist at that time, and all they had to deal with was a text – a relatively easy means for adding and subtracting the necessary details to make it suit the purpose.

Conclusion: Look behind the façade

Now we understand that even if the reality is absolute, its perceptions are multiple and subjective, as are the original historical accounts. The legends, on the contrary, lack detail and represent a harmonious logical sequence of events.

The first Muslim writings coming on the footsteps of the pre-Islamic poetry with its metaphoric details continued the use of *Jaḥiliah* rhetoric techniques in an effort to create a precise historical account within the limitations placed by the strict Islamic restrictions regarding visual representations. As a result, the variations in Ḥadith versions are a natural feature of oral traditions put into writing. Many variations of Ḥadiths with similar meanings led to contradictions which Ḥadith scholars attempted to solve through the process of source authentication. However, the authenticity of the source does not automatically equate with the reliability of the content. Moreover, the "minimum common denominator" method used by the early Ḥadith collectors for establishing the truthfulness of a Ḥadith, resulted in the proliferation of texts with few details; thus turning what could have been authentic historical accounts into a sort of "historical legend."

There is no doubt that many modern scholars will continue wrestling with what Hallaq (1999) calls "the pseudo-problem of Muslim source authenticity (Hallaq, 1999, pp. 75-90)." This paper has attempted to refocus the issue towards what seems to be a more fundamental question of the intentions of those creating a reality effect. In doing so, we have further demonstrated how Barthes' methods of creating *l'effet de reel*; through providing extensive details and incorporating historical characters side by side with fictional characters and mythical events, were applied in pre-modern as well as in modern times. I suggest that these methods began to be intentionally applied only when early Muslim texts started being used as a basis for lawmaking: the insignificant details were removed to avoid contradiction and provide cohesiveness, while the new anachronistic details were added to provide authority, and help establishing the authenticity. Therefore, it might be more fruitful to investigate the possible hidden agendas of various stakeholders of the process of documentation, revision, and distribution of early Muslim texts.

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