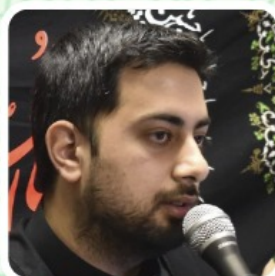


Approaches to Interpreting and Establishing a Historical Event

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A people's history plays a significant role in their current state of affairs. What occurred, how later generations studied and interpreted what occurred and what they do with those interpretations at any given time, all play a role in shaping, forming one's identity and giving a sense of direction and responsibility in day to day life. From a Muslim's perspective, the study of no other history is more important than the study of the Prophet's (p) life.

Depending on what school of thought one belongs to, what occurred after the demise of the Prophet (p) could be prioritized differently in terms of historical study. For the Imāms Shā'a, the next three centuries are also of utmost importance as that is the time frame in which the Imāms (a) lived in.

How one understands the lives of the Prophet (p) and the Imāms (a), or the events that surrounded them, play a dominant role in dictating our lives today. As a matter of fact, it can be argued that both the rise and the fall of the Islamic civilization – which is by far one of the most intriguing events to have occurred – are linked significantly to how Muslims were interpreting their history and what they thought to be its practical implications. It is always interesting to see that scholars who are concerned with the idea of re-establishing an Islamic civilization are heavily involved in the study of history. One such scholar who comes to mind is Rasūl Ja'fariyān – perhaps Iran's most influential historian.

In a recent post of his, titled "We Are a Repeat of the Safavids" he outlined the similarities of how Shā'ī scholarship and the community dealt with foreign knowledge under the Safavid government and how that eventually led to their intellectual demise, with how Shā'ī scholarship and the community are dealing with foreign knowledge today. He writes,

I have pointed out many times that during this period, efforts were made to give medicine and astronomy and other sciences a religious outlook – meaning base them on traditions. Majlis's Bihar is a conclusion of this specific attitude. This was the belief of the religious authorities. Naturally, anything that opposed this outlook was considered to be an opposition to religion and should be stood up against. Anything that took on this connotation was considered a deviation and abiding by it was considered to be taking on a path other than the ḥirāt al-Mustaḥm.

As a result, the Safavid era did not pay attention to the West at all, which had begun to change since at least 200 years by then. No one knew their language, no one travelled to the West and this is while a lot of products were entering into Iran from the West.

He continues,

I am not in any position to judge whether this religious approach of thinking to such an extent is right or not, but I can say that our lack of attention towards the sciences is rooted in an outlook whose roots can perhaps be found in this discussion. More than anything, it is this attitude that has importance. The interpretation of current phenomenon, the different realms and Adam, cosmology, change and transformation, indicators of a good life, the role of the sciences in a better and richer life, and many other similar topics are a result of our outlook, which does not seem to be based on an outlook concerned with the realities of this world. Man who is not connected to this world cannot do anything for himself in this world. Without a doubt, one can reconcile between this world and the hereafter, but it is very important that our outlook enables worldly change. We should always be cautious of not swooning off towards one side completely.

This text briefly demonstrates a few different types of approaches that exist when dealing with history – specifically history of the Prophet (p) and the later Imams (a). The contents of this post were inspired by a talk given by Shaykh Haider Hobbollah in Qom. The approaches are not necessarily restricted to the few that will be mentioned below, but these are the most common ones that are utilized by scholars.

Anytime we encounter a historical report, there are two steps that we need to take:

- 1) Foremost, we would need to establish that a report which describes an event truly occurred. If we were to establish that such an event did not occur, it would be a vain act to interpret it and explain it. Of course, such a report could still hold value for many other reasons – such as information about the authors who compiled them, or individuals who are narrating them, or they could be put alongside other similar reports for us to identify certain trends and so on.
- 2) Once we have established that an event took place, we would then need to interpret it and pinpoint exactly what can be understood from this report.

Both steps presume numerous principles and methodologies which could vary from one historian to another. Furthermore, one would assume that the logical order of these two steps would be to first establish the occurrence of an event and then interpret it. While this is theoretically correct, but since some of the tools and principles used in interpretation can and do play a role in determining whether an event occurred, it behooves one to discuss the second step first.

Interpreting a Historical Event

There are numerous approaches and hermeneutical principles historians will make use of in order to

interpret and discuss history. When it comes to the history of Islam, the biography of the Prophet (p) or the lives of the later companions and the Imams (a), the same idea holds true. Let us look at three common approaches taken by Muslim historians in their understanding of Islamic history – particularly the history of the Prophet (p) and the Imams (a).

1) Metaphysical

This approach presumes that theologically speaking, individuals such as the Prophet (p) or the Imams (a), and the events surrounding them are sacred and that their behaviour is divinely inspired at all given times. When one looks at a report concerning them with this presumption, one can find a lot of room for justifying various events. One opens the doors up to possibilities such as miracles, supernatural wonders like *karāmāt*, aspects of the unseen and so on.

This approach is very common amongst Muslim scholars and researchers. They will argue that one simply cannot treat the lives of the Prophet (p) or the Imams (a) as the lives of other influential and significant personalities through time, because they enjoy a greater grace of Allah (swt) than others around them. They will argue that the unseen and metaphysical aspects of existence play a dominant role in their lives and these personalities are not necessarily bound by the physical causes and effects we experience and witness in our day to day life.

If someone brings these presumptions and reads them into the history of the Prophet (p) and the Imams (a) in order to take lessons from them, they could possibly open the door to various explanations for many reports.

For example, if someone encounters an event which at face value seems strange, such as Imam Husayn (a) having killed a large number of enemies in the battle of Karbala, they might say this report is far-fetched because it is physically impossible for such a thing to happen in such a short time¹. Someone who presumes that there are aspects of causality governing the lives of these individuals, beyond what we can observe, could easily interpret these events and justify them by saying that the day could have been expanded for the Imam (a) or that the Imam (a) was given extraordinary strength by Allah (swt). This is not something that is rationally impossible or inconceivable.

As another example, someone may deny the event which mentions the sun returning back for Imam 'Alī (a) by saying this is physically absurd since the sun turning back would mean that the earth has to come to a complete halt and then spin the other way. At the rate at which the Earth is spinning already, coming to a complete halt would mean that everything would be uprooted and break off at around 1000 miles per hour – give or take. However, someone who reads this report with the aforementioned presumption could argue that it is not rationally inconceivable for such an event to occur without any destruction on the planet, as Allah (swt) is all powerful and allow this easily for the Imam (a).

In other words, when one studies the lives of these personalities, one is not dealing with just any other

physical account of history. Rather, we are looking at meta-history. Thus, in order to understand the event to the best extent possible, one simply cannot reduce the event to a mere physical explanation for it.

Needless to say, proponents of this approach (generally Muslim scholars) will still differ in the extent and instances to which this approach applies.

2) Physical

Proponents of this approach argue, when we deal with the history of the Prophets (p) or the Imāms (a), we do it like we treat the history of any other individual, or any other influential and significant person. There is no motivation to interpret their histories with metaphysical and supernatural explanations. The most extreme form of this approach can be seen in the way many Orientalists study Islam – or religion altogether.

The presumption in this approach is that there is no such thing as the metaphysical, or that even if there is, we are not convinced that it plays a significant role in their lives. Hence, all interpretations must be conducted within the framework of physical and sensory experiences. A historian or a person willing to study the lives of these individuals should not take into consideration the unseen, nor bring metaphysical justifications which are nothing more than mere rational possibilities and have no limits.

The conclusion of this approach is that when it comes to interpreting the lives of Imām ʿUsayn (a) and Yazīd vis-à-vis their physical contexts, there is no difference. Both lives need to be interpreted in light of the physical causes and effects governing this world and can be observed by us. The question however is, how can we justify and explain something physically? Two elements need to be pointed out:

1. Repetition: If we see actions that are or can be repeated. For example, if we have a report that says the Prophet (p) would eat bread or keep his hair long, then these reports can be explained easily because we can physically witness other humans eating bread and many others keep long hair. There is nothing extraordinary here. Therefore, repetition is an important factor for us to be able to interpret history. If an event is not generally repeated due to its uniqueness, then we have to see if there is another physical explanation for it.
2. Rational Justification: One should be able to justify the event with reason. Eating bread is possible to justify rationally and it is something reasonable, however, is it possible to reason with a report that might say, an individual stretched their hands and moved them towards heaven, took an apple from there, ate it and conceived a child from it? According to this second element, this would be something absurd, beyond what reason can explain and justify.

Once again, there are different degrees to which proponents of this approach could see events in purely physical terms. Many Muslim scholars will presume strictly this approach, though still giving the metaphysical some room for interference on the rare occasions.

3) Historical–Anthropological

Some Muslim scholars over the last century or two have proposed another approach to understanding certain narratives. The historical–anthropological approach critiques the proponents of the first method by saying it ends up taking away a lot from the reality of the event, and often times provides interpretations and justifications that are unprovable and mere claims to what could be possible. With respects to the second approach, the proponents of the historical–anthropological approach say, presuming that all historical events and incidents only progress in relation to their material surrounding is limiting the reality of an event.

In other words, both the overly metaphysical and overly physical approaches on their own are detrimental.

There is another factor that needs to be taken into consideration and that is what moves history along and allows for events to unfold the way that they do. These are neither physical reductions nor metaphysical exaggerations. The factor is acknowledging that individuals like the Prophet (p) or the Imāms (a) – and subordinate to them their companions and the general Muslim populous – possess a strength and a moving agent which is their belief itself. That belief translates into psychological and spiritual states which thereafter envelopes them or the society and causes them to behave in a certain way.

One should presume that there are beliefs and spiritual conditions these individuals are characterized with which we need to take into consideration when interpreting and explaining these reports. The job of a historian would, therefore, be to identify these characteristics and take lessons from them in order to make them a living tradition for ourselves today.

This is in one sense a metaphysical approach, but unlike the first case where one is ontologically interpreting an event citing the external interference of an immaterial entity, this is essentially a phenomenological interpretation. The interpretation conducted through this approach looks at the individuals and their conditions within any given context and considers their psychological and spiritual states to be a relevant factor in creating history.

Application on the Battle of Badr

The battle of Badr is considered one of the most important battles in the history of Islam. The Muslims who were not only fewer in numbers, but even from a military perspective were not very powerful, were up against a powerful army of disbelievers. The victory of the Muslims in this battle had such a positive impact on the Muslim community that it remained a part and parcel of their memories for generations after.

According to the **first approach**, this strange victory can be explained – like many Muslims scholars have done so – by referring to the reports indicating angels coming to help the Muslims. In essence,

there were two armies on the side of the Muslims – the Prophet (p) with his companions, and the army of the angels. A historian who takes the first approach will say that though there was perhaps a physical and strategic aspect to the battle, it was not that which led the Muslims to victory. In fact, the greater and more important role was played by this metaphysical aspect, which was the presence of angels assisting the Muslims against the disbelievers.

According to the **second approach**, one cannot look at this event outside of the very observable physical laws. They will say that the Muslims did indeed win this battle, but this was due to the strategic brilliance of the Prophet (p) and his companions, or there was a strategic mistake made by the disbelievers and the Muslims seized this opportunity. They could perhaps argue that had the disbelievers begun the battle with their archers as opposed to a one-on-one duel, the outcome would have been different. A proponent of this view will not care to consider anything extraordinary over there. Both elements of a physical event are also present since we can find many cases in history where a fewer and apparently weaker group of people overcame a greater number of people and this is nothing unreasonable either.

The proponents of the **third approach** will say that this event needs to be understood with two essential factors; the first being the material factor which is what took place in terms of battle strategy, and the second factor being the spiritual and psychological state of the Muslims which was at an all-time high and their faith in the Prophet (p) was strong. The second factor played a much greater role in the battle and dictated the physical decisions that were being made. The verses or the historical reports mentioning the presence of angels are all referring to Allah (swt) promising the Muslims of potential help if there is a need, not that angels were actually sent down.

Some of these scholars will also use the verses of the Qurʾān itself to suggest that the number of angels was simply being mentioned as a motivating factor. For example, verse 8:9 mentions 1,000 angels, whereas 3:124 mentions 3,000, while 3:125 mentions 5,000. Their belief that Allah (swt) and His promise is behind them, gave the Muslims spiritual strength which translated into greater determination and struggle to defeat the enemies.

The approaches are not limited to just these three, but these three are common. This post is not arguing for which of these approaches is correct and which of these is wrong. It is possible only one of them is correct, or that each of them is correct on a case by case basis or that there needs to be a combination of all three of these approaches at any given time. In any case, a person studying history and attempting to interpret it will have to establish for themselves how exactly they will be doing so. This requires rigorous understanding of one's own presumptions, be it theological or otherwise.

Establishing a Historical Event

Just as there were three approaches to interpreting history, particularly the history related to the Prophet (p) and the Imʿāms (a), there are also three common approaches to establishing a historical event.

1) Historical Source or Chain of Transmission

This is one of the most common approaches used by Muslim scholars and researchers. Hence, we see that before any scholar gets into any discussion of detailed interpretation, they will try to establish whether the sources in which a report is mentioned or the narrators who are reporting an incident are even reliable or not.

Within this approach, different researchers will differ on the instances of what and who they consider reliable. Some may give value to a historical report if the source it exists in is itself reliable. This is regardless of what the situation with its chain of transmissions is – they could be weak individuals narrating it or a chain may not exist at all. For example, someone may say that even though there are no chains of transmissions to many of the reports in the Maqatal of Abū Mikhnaf (d. 157 AH), which is the earliest extant source for the events of Karbalā and has been preserved in later works such as Tārīkh al-ʿabar (d. 310 AH), it does not matter.

They will argue that the book overall and subsequently its contents can be trusted and relied upon because the author is someone reliable and authoritative. In other words, for these scholars the earlier the source is to the event itself, the better it is. Depending on the methodology employed by the compiler of a book, later scholars and researchers may determine factors through which they will prioritize one work over another if need be².

On the other hand, there are scholars who will primarily be concerned with each and every single narrator in a chain itself. This is regardless of which book the report exists in. If a report has a weak chain of narrators, or it does not have a chain at all, this group of scholars will deem such a report unreliable and hence it would be difficult for them to argue for the occurrence of any given event in the way a report describes it.

2) Content and its Reasonability

This approach relies on questioning whether an event which speaks of an incident, or if it tells us something that the Prophet (p) or Imām (a) is saying or doing, is in accordance to reason and not absurd. The moment we bring the idea of reasonability or absurdity of an event, we enter into a very subjective discussion since reasonability can differ from person to person.

As an example, if someone has the approach where they give the interference of the metaphysical a lot of value, then what is reasonable for them would come across as very unreasonable to someone who does not give the unseen the same amount of value. One of the major critiques laid against Shahīd Muḥahhar when he labelled the reports of Imām ʿusayn (a) killing hundreds or thousands of individuals on the day of ʿAshūrā as unreasonable, was that what he is considering to be unreasonable instances are in fact perfectly reasonable. Hence, those who take this approach will readily accept many reports and narrations that may come across as absurd on first reading, as they argue that the lives of these individuals are exceptional and cannot be treated like the lives of other humans.

On the contrary, if someone gives the natural and physical development of events a lot more value, then what would be reasonable for them could be unreasonable for someone else. For example, there are some reports which indicate that the Banī Isrāʾīl increased in their population from a 1,000 to a million in just seventy years. Proponents of this understanding of what constitutes reasonability will argue that this is far-fetched and not something reasonable since human population growth from a 1,000 to a million cannot take place in such a short amount of time.

One principle that is very commonly cited by individuals who say reasonability is dependant on how life naturally works is '*Law Kān La-Bān*' (if it occurred, it would have been apparent)³. If a report appears in 9th or 10th century hijrī discussing a significant historical event, these scholars will not accept it. They will argue, that if such a significant event truly took place, then there is no way that it would have remained hidden and unknown from all earlier historians until this late. This is while other significant events would have been recorded down by historians and it is unreasonable to assume that all these major historians missed out on this event and someone in the 10th or 11th-century hijrī happens to come across it.

A response that is often given to this approach to reasonability by some critics is that there are many traditions that have simply come down to us during the later periods, not because they did not have a precedent, but because they remained hidden due to the challenging political climate. Perhaps earlier scholars were not even able to access some of these works due to their physical distance from one another, while others were completely lost, only to reappear later in a manuscript found in India or Yemen. This is something that factually occurs and hence these reports cannot be so easily dismissed as unreasonable.

A final approach to what constitutes reasonability is when one fundamentally treats historical events as natural occurrences unless there is strong evidence suggesting that the metaphysical played a role in a certain event. This approach does not deny the role of the unseen or the metaphysical from historical events but rather limits it to when there is clear evidence for it. Otherwise, what is reasonable are the habitual laws that govern the lives of other humans also govern the lives of the Prophet (p) or the Imams (a). They lived normal lives that followed the natural observable laws of this world, and if there were any cases where the unseen and metaphysical played a role then they were rare exceptional cases only.

All three of these approaches to reasonability play a significant role today in establishing what occurred historically speaking. Subsequent to that, they each play a role in how we interpret that event as well.

3) Reconciling the Text and the Source

A significant number of scholars take an approach where they attempt to reconcile both the content of a report and as well as the source it is from or the narrators that are transmitting it. This approach is also linked with one of the methods of interpretation, such as how much role one believes the metaphysical plays or not.

Proponents of this approach will say that both the text of a report and the source play a hand-in-hand role in helping us establish the veracity of a historical event. At times, we can identify that the text of a report is fabricated, exaggerated, or valid simply by looking at the narrators, while on other occasions we can look at the text and affirm whether the narrators could have transmitted such a tradition or not. One prominent example of this approach is that taken by Sayyid Murtaḥa ‘Askarī (d. 2007) in his extensive discussion on ‘Abdullah b. Sabī. Some accuse him as being the founder of Shī‘ī theology, however, Sayyid ‘Askarī demonstrates that such a person never existed, even though we have many reports mentioning him both in Sunnī and Shī‘ī sources.

A Final Word

A critical look at our history and its interpretation – as opposed to dogmatic approaches – is imperative, particularly for the day and age we are living in. The purpose of this post was to highlight to the readers the different methodologies employed by Muslim scholars when dealing with history and what possible implications each approach can have. These implications translate into present-day Muslim behaviour whether individually, as a community or as a state and hence need to be revisited and studied in every generation in order for us to stay up with the times and the ever-changing world. Nevertheless, as it can be seen, there is a lot of thought required before establishing the occurrence of an event and more importantly, interpreting it and making that interpretation a part and parcel of our lives.

1. This is an argument put forth by many Shī‘ī scholars for these type of reports. See for example ‘Ashura Misrepresentations and Distortions by Shahīd Muḥahharī.
2. According to ḥayyātullah Sayyid Madadī, classical Shī‘ī scholars and companions of the Imams were fond of this approach more so than pure biographical evaluation of each narrator. He has expanded on this idea in great length and refers to the theory as Naḥḥarīyyeh Fihristī or Farḥeh-ye Fihristī. He explains why Shī‘ī scholars concerned themselves more with the actual work itself, as opposed to the Ahl al-Sunnah scholars who concerned themselves more with the narrators by arguing that the political climate was favourable towards the Ahl al-Sunnah and they had many narrators who would be free to transmit traditions. At times you see that up to two-hundred individuals will narrate a tradition from one of their scholars. This is unlike the Shī‘ī where not only were they in a minority, but the political climate did not favour them either.

The conditions were such that it did not allow them to develop a system where they could be overly concerned with each and every narrator, and instead developed a system which would allow them to rely on a book itself. For example, ten people at most transmit the book of Ibn Abī ‘Umayr (d. 217 AH) who is one of the most famous companions of the Imams (a) and his book was one of the most popular works. Or the work of Farḥīz which is mostly transmitted by just one companion, ḥammīd b. ‘ṣa (d. 209 AH).

3. This is an extremely important principle and is also one of the principles used in jurisprudence by many influential jurists.

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