

# The Bible and The Qur'an

**A Question of Integrity**

Steven Masood

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To both Muslims and Christians



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Transliteration of Qur'anic words in Arabic follow Haleem Elias's, *The Holy Qur'aan: Transliteration in Roman Script*, (Delhi: Faheem Publishers, 1981).

All dates are CE (Christian era) unless otherwise stated as BCE (Before the Christian era).



## Introduction

Islam and Christianity claim to be **revealed** and **historical** faiths. They both claim that God intervened in the lives of people to lead them into “the straight path.” Both set great store in the records they hold. The truth of their respective faiths is held to depend on the accuracy of their own books and traditions. When the believers of these two faiths, Muslims and Christians, read each other’s Scriptures, they find many similarities as well as some important differences.

Muslims believe that the original messages transmitted by previous prophets, including Moses and Jesus, were essentially the same as the message brought by Muhammad and preserved in the Qur'an. They conclude that the differences arise from errors in the Bible; the divergence must be the result of some problem with the Bible alone. It is not the Qur'an, they assert, but the Bible which is in the wrong. They claim that Christians and Jews have added their own innovations to the Bible during the course of time, so there are bound to be differences between the teachings of the two Scriptures.

Against such views Christians believe that the Bible’s message has not been corrupted. The differences between the Bible and the Qur'an are due to the circumstances of the production of the Qur'an, and *not* to changes in the Bible. For Christians, the Bible is the reliable record of God’s revelations. Since they claim the trustworthiness of the Bible, they question Muslim claims concerning the Qur'an.

These conflicting views cause us to question the **authenticity** and **integrity** of both Scriptures. Certainly, a minority of Muslims do believe in the integrity of the Bible. It is the majority’s opinion which

## *Introduction*

concerns us: that the Bible is corrupted in such a way that it cannot be trusted while the Qur'an is perfect, intact, word for word, syllable for syllable, as it was first revealed to Muhammad.

Since the rise of higher biblical criticism in the wake of 17th-18th century Enlightenment, Muslims have also adopted the methods of Western critics, using their sophisticated tools to discredit the Bible. However, they do not dare apply the same instruments and techniques of **biblical criticism** to the Qur'an and other Islamic sources. Those few who have published thoughtful but inconsequential speculation have found themselves condemned in *fatwah*, decrees declaring them to be apostates and beyond the pale of Islam. Thus, the many who are fearful of violent repercussions tend to steer clear and confine themselves to applying the new methods of interpretation to the exegesis of the text, while the more fundamental questions on the validity and sources of the text of the Qur'an remains unmasked.

The theory of **corruption**, as used to discredit the Bible, is not restricted to a few academics or adults. From the age of six or seven, many Muslim children are taught that corruption has occurred. For example, the following passage is from a book written for children and used in many Islamic centers in the West:

The Qur'an has in it the names of the other books which were sent down by Allah to earlier messengers before Muhammad (pbuh). The book given to the prophet Ibrahim (pbuh) is called SAHIFA (scrolls). The prophet Musa (pbuh) was given TAWRAT (Torah). The prophet Dawud (pbuh) was given ZABUR (Psalms). The prophet Isa (pbuh) was given INJIL (Gospel). Books given to the prophets before Muhammad (pbuh) were either lost or changed by their followers.

The Sahifa of Ibrahim (pbuh) cannot be found now. The Zabur, the Tawrat and the Injil have been changed by their followers. They added their own words. This is why we do not get these

books as they came in first. The Qur'an is the complete book of guidance from Allah, it is with us today, without any change, with nothing added or taken away. It is the last book of guidance for mankind from Allah.<sup>1</sup>

Another book written for children adds the idea that "A Muslim believes in all the Books of Allah. But as the earliest Books are lost or changed, a Muslim follows the Qur'an alone."<sup>2</sup>

Whether Muslim or Christian, no one likes having their holy books criticised. However, if a book is held up as perfect, as having fully preserved the message of God, its perfection should be demonstrable against all criticism and tests of its contents. The standards and measures chosen should be equally applicable to any book which calls itself inspired, which would appear to include the Bible and the Qur'an.

It is with this desire that the following pages are put together. In them, we will look at the **standards** for scriptural integrity set up by Muslims and Christians in their conversations and writings, to apply these same standards to both the Bible and the Qur'an. Islamic, Christian, and other sources are used to shed light on various related issues.

While some examples are dealt with in detail, this brief book cannot be an exhaustive study. The intention is to rather concentrate on the essential issues, typical questions, and problems raised between Muslims and Christians. It hopes to show how some arguments can lead to serious errors if they are used as a "standard" with which to check the authority of a scripture.

The first three chapters detail the **ideologies** which have grown up around the Muslim and Christians beliefs, as well as the theories of how the Scriptures are inspired and preserved. Both the

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<sup>1</sup> Ghulam Sarwar, *Islam for Younger People*, p. 29.

<sup>2</sup> *The Children's Book of Islam*, Part One, p. 22.

**traditions** and the **historicity** of the Bible and Qur'an are presented and compared.

Chapter 4 surveys and challenges the Qur'anic testimony that no one can change the Word of God. In chapter 5, the discussion targets the question of **errors** and **contradictions** within the texts of the Bible and the Qur'an. Chapter 6 addresses the argument that the Qur'an does not confirm the Scriptures which Christians have today. Statements like the following are dealt with: "The Bible is unknown to the Qur'an; there was only one Injil (New Testament) and because Christians do not have the Gospel in the original Aramaic in which it was first written, the current gospel narratives are untrustworthy." Some light is also shed on subjects like *Isnad* - the chain of transmission, pagan origins and the human element in the Bible and the Qur'an.

Some people claim that a document named *The Gospel of Barnabas* is the original gospel. Some even base their presentation of the life and teaching of Jesus upon this document, rather than on the Qur'an, the Bible, or the traditions. Chapter 7 addresses this issue.

The majority of Muslims affirm their faith in the miraculous nature of the Qur'an, *Ijaz al-Qur'an*. They believe that because of its divine origin, no text like the Qur'an could be produced. Some Muslims reject the Bible because they believe its teaching and content are not as clear and eloquent as the text of the Qur'an. Chapter 8 goes into detail on this subject, considering the side effects which such a belief in **inimitability** brings. Chapter 9 deals with the Islamic doctrine of **abrogation**, *al-Nasikh wa al-Mansukh*, to enquire whether it is the Bible or only parts of the Qur'anic revelation that are annulled. Finally, Chapter 10 brings all these themes together to conclude the discussion.

# 1

## The Scriptures: the traditional views

Muslims and Christians believe that God chose to reveal himself and his will to people by speaking through prophets and apostles. He enabled them to share his message with their fellow human beings in order to explain our existence on earth and our direction for the future. Christians believe that the Bible contains the necessary guidance while Muslims uphold the Qur'an and value its direction.

### The Bible

The title “Bible” is derived from a Greek word, *biblia*, originating in *biblos*. It is a translation of the Hebrew word *seper*; the term simply means “books.”<sup>1</sup> It is suggested that the title was used by early Christians. The earliest evidence for the use of this title by Christians is found in the second letter of Clement (d. 150).<sup>2</sup> As a title, it appears in the lists of the canonical books in the 5th century. It was adopted into Latin and came into English as *bibul*, *bibil* and, at last, with the modern spelling “Bible.”

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<sup>1</sup> Colin Brown, edited, *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol.1, pp. 242-244.

<sup>2</sup> Derek Williams, ed., *New Concise Bible Dictionary*, p. 60.

There are two main sections of the Bible: the Old Testament and the New Testament. The word “Testament” is from the Latin word *testamentum*, which is used to trans-late the Greek word *diatheke* (covenant), thereby denoting the relationship between God and his people (2 Corinthians 3:6, 14; Hebrews 9:15). In Arabic, words like *Misaq* or *Ahd* stand for “covenant.” Thus in the Arabic, Urdu, and Farsi languages, the Old Testament is called “*Ahd al-Qadim*” and the New Testament “*Ahd al-Jadid*.”

It is possible to divide the Bible into four major parts: the Torah, the Psalms, the books of the Prophets, and the *Injil* – the Gospel. The word *Injil* here is taken in its broadest sense to mean the whole of the New Testament. The Bible contains law, prophecy, history, poetry, counsel, and much more.

The contents of the Old Testament section of the Bible were written centuries before Christ, mainly in the Hebrew language. The Jews consider this collection of manuscripts to be their holy book in its entirety; they do not call it the Old Testament. They refer to their Scriptures as the TeNaKh, an acronym based on the initial letters of the three words *Torah* - the Law, *Nebi'im* – the prophets, and *Ketubim* - the writings.<sup>3</sup>

The books of the New Testament were written in Greek, which was the common language in use at the time, much as English is unofficially the universal language today. However, as time passed, the Bible (both the Old Testament and the New Testament) was translated into other languages for people from other nationalities, backgrounds, and languages.

Most Christians see the Bible as containing insights into God’s dealings with the people of Israel. These dealings eventually paved the way for all the peoples of the earth to share in the promise

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<sup>3</sup> Fredrick Fyvie Bruce, *The Canon of Scripture*, pp.19, 29.

that God first made to Abraham (who is known to Muslims as *Ibrahim*). Christians believe that God fulfilled this promise by sending Jesus. Furthermore, they assert that the Bible tells them, in more detail than any other book, who Jesus is and how he fulfilled the ancient prophecies about him given through Abraham, Moses, and other prophets. Although for Christians the Bible is significant, it is Jesus who is the eternal Word and revelation of God. The Bible is the written record or Scripture which unfolds the story of salvation for all human beings, as achieved through Jesus.

### **The Qur'an**

The title comes from a verb *qara'a*, which means to recite.<sup>4</sup> The Qur'an was written in early Kufic manuscripts without a diacritic or vowel point known as the *hamza*. This caused some to believe that the word *Qur'an* was from the word *Qarna*, which means to put together.<sup>5</sup> Other scholars such as the Orientalists believe that the word Qur'an may be derived from the Syriac word *qeryana*, meaning "Scripture reading, lesson." The word *qeryana* was used in Christian liturgy in the 5th to 7th century, in the liturgical phrase "*qeryana d-yom ba'awatta*" which means "reading for the day of supplication."<sup>6</sup>

Suyuti (d. 1505) in his *Itqan* narrates that when Abu Bakr (d. 634) put together the Qur'an, he asked the people to give the collection some name. Some suggested *Injil*, other *As-sefar* but no one liked it. Then Ibn Masood said that he had seen a book in *Habesha* (today's Ethiopia and Eritrea) called as '*al-Mushaf*'. Thus Abu Bakr was the first one to call the Qur'an as *al-Mushaf*.

The Qur'an comprises 114 chapters. Each chapter is called a *Sura* (pl. *suwar*). The corresponding word in Hebrew, *shurah*, means a

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<sup>4</sup> Subhi Salih, *Ulum al-Qur'an*, (Urdu trans. Ghulam Ahmad), p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> Jalaluddin Suyuti, *Al-Itqan fi Ulum al-Qur'an*, Vol 1., p. 67.

<sup>6</sup> Clifford Edwin Bosworth, ed., *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol.5, p. 400.

<sup>7</sup> Suyuti, *Al-Itqan fi Ulum al-Qur'an*, Vol 1., page, 69.

row, e.g. of bricks in a wall.<sup>8</sup> Each Sura is divided into verses termed *ayat*, (singular form - *aya* or *ayah*) a word which is related to the Hebrew *oth* and the Syriac *atha*.<sup>9</sup>

There are different systems of numbering the verses. According to *Koofi*, there are 6239 verses in the Qur'an; the *Shami* system makes it 6225. The *Makki* system declares 6219. According to *Madni* they number 6211, but according to the *Basri* system the verses total 6204.<sup>10</sup> However, most Muslim writers state that the number of verses in the Qur'an is 6247 or 6360 if the opening verse of *Bismillah* for each *Sura* is included. Suyuti states that Ibn Abbas said, "The Qur'an has 6616 verses."<sup>11</sup>

Each *Sura* is traditionally labelled as Makkan (revealed in Makkah) or Madinan (revealed in Madina). Makkan revelations are in some places intermixed with Madinan revelations, so a *Sura* marked as Makkan may also contain verses revealed to Muhammad during the Madinan period, and vice versa. The collection of *suwah* in the Qur'an as we have it today shows no chronological order of composition, although many scholars, both Muslims and non-Muslims, have tried to construct one.

To Muslims, the Qur'an is the word of God "vowel for vowel, syllable for syllable"<sup>12</sup> revealed in Arabic to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel at intervals over a period of some twenty years. It is considered to be uncreated and eternally existent on *lauh mahfuz*, a guarded tablet in heaven (Sura 85:22). Though the Qur'an was sent

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<sup>8</sup> Mohamed Abdulla Pasha, *Sixth Century and Beyond*, p. 75; Arthur Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an*, pp. 180-182.

<sup>9</sup> Arthur Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an*, pp. 72-73.

<sup>10</sup> Qamar Naqvi, *Sahayef*, p. 395.

<sup>11</sup> Jalaluddin Suyuti, *Al-Itqan fi Ulum al-Qur'an*, Vol 1, p. 89

<sup>12</sup> Abul A'la Mawdudi, *The Message of the Prophet's Seerat*, p. 14.

to Muhammad at specific times, it was always there with God. As God is, the Qur'an is.

The Qur'an describes itself in several passages as being the word of God. It is from Allah, the God of Ibrahim, Ismael, Ishaq, Yaqub and Musa, the same God who revealed the Torah and the Injil. It deals with three main themes: *Tawhid*, the unity of God, *Risalah*, the prophethood, and *Akhira*, the hereafter. The message for the most part is plain and direct, though some passages are acknowledged to be obscure.

The traditional belief of many Muslims is that the Qur'an cannot be fully expressed in any language other than Arabic. Translations are available, however, produced by both Muslims and non-Muslims. As with the Bible, both classical and modern commentaries are also available which differ, sometimes radically, in their interpretations of the text.

### **The Islamic and Christian views of revelation**

The subject of revelation is important to both Muslims and Christians. The Arabic verb and noun, *awha* and *wahy*, are the technical terms of Islamic theology for the communication of the messages or revelations to Muhammad. They occur more than sixty times in the Qur'an and are usually translated into English as "revelation" or "inspiration." Another word, *nazzala* – meaning sent down, is also used in the Qur'an as the equivalent of *awha*. "It is He who sent down to thee the Book," *nazzala alaykal-kitaba*. (Sura 3:3)

The Qur'an speaks of the various ways by which the revelation was sent, but more information can be found about its forms and methods in the *Abadith*, the collections of traditions. The traditional views were developed in the second and third centuries of Islam and emphasise that revelation came in different forms.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, p. 31.

Sometimes a revelation was a sudden introduction of an idea into the mind. Some revelations were through dreams and visions. At other times God spoke directly. However, often he sent his angel to deliver the message either in person or indirectly.<sup>14</sup> The traditional belief is that there was no human contribution to the process; God's word was conveyed verbatim to Muhammad. He simply heard it and faithfully conveyed it to his companions. They pre-served it in their memory and wrote it down as well.

Syed Hossein Nasr claims, "No Muslim would accept any other view than the Qur'an came verbatim from heaven."<sup>15</sup> Another Muslim scholar, Fazlur Rahman, how-ever, believes that "the Qur'an is entirely the Word of God and, in an ordinary sense, also entirely the Word of Muhammad."<sup>16</sup> Taking this a step further, Ali Dashti gives several examples from the Qur'an, asserting that it also contains statements from Muhammad on God's behalf.<sup>17</sup>

Explaining the process of revelation, Muslim scholors claim that Muhammad's experience of receiving revelation was a different kind of consciousness. Perspiration would pour from his forehead. Occasionally he would snort like a camel or be taken by a seizure. Often his eyes would turn red. At times, Gabriel would bring revelation appearing in his own form, with six hundred wings, each of which blocked the horizon, or in the form of a handsome young man. At other times, no person or being would be visible; the revelation would come to Muhammad with a noise resembling the

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<sup>14</sup> Mohamed Abdulla Pasha, *Sixth Century and Beyond*, p. 39

<sup>15</sup> Syed Hossein Nasr, "Response to Hans Kung's paper on Christian Muslim Dialogue" *Muslim World*, 77, p. 98.

<sup>16</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, p. 31.

<sup>17</sup> Ali Dashti, *Twenty Three Years: A Study of the Prophetic Career of Mohammad*, p.149.

sound of bells.<sup>18</sup> Muslim sources also relate that at times, Muhammad was uncertain of his revelation.

Circumstances were not always right for the revelation to descend. Once a puppy entered his house and died under the bedstead. Gabriel did not come until after the dead body was removed and the place cleansed. Al-Bukhari (d.870) and Al-Suyuti (d.1500) record that Gabriel would not enter a house where there was a dog or a picture.<sup>19</sup>

Influenced by these beliefs, many Muslims think that the Scriptures of both Jews and Christians should have descended in the same manner as is claimed for the Qur'an. However, the Bible does not mention the prophets fainting or feeling heavy during the receiving of revelation. The way the Biblical prophets and apostles received God's word is very different from the popular Muslim understanding. Their experiences of revelation were not physically painful or oppressive. By studying the text of the Bible, it becomes obvious that the recipients were enabled to distinguish divine truth. Even in the case of Christ's disciples, they were given the assurance, "it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you" (Matthew 10:20). In another place Jesus said to them, "I will give you words and wisdom that none of your adversaries will be able to resist or contradict" (Luke 21:15).

Some Muslims do differentiate between the Qur'an and earlier Scriptures in their manner of "descending" on prophets and apostles. Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406), a great Muslim historian, while holding to the orthodox idea about the Qur'an having descended word for word on Muhammad, claims that the Qur'an "differs from the Torah, the Gospel and other heavenly books. The prophets received their books in the form of ideas during the state of

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<sup>18</sup> Muhammad Muhsin, (ed. trans.), *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, Vol 1, p. 2.

<sup>19</sup> Suyuti, *Al-Itqan fi Ulum al-Qur'an*, Vol. I, p. 42.

revelation. After their return to a human state, they expressed those ideas in their own ordinary words.”<sup>20</sup> Although a Muslim, Ibn Khaldun seems to have come close to the Christian understanding of the way inspiration operated in the revelation of their own Scriptures.

Christians believe what the Bible says, “In the past God spoke to our fathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways” (Hebrews 1:1). There was a gradual unfolding of the revelation. The Bible declares that God used many methods to reveal his word and purpose. To some he spoke directly, while to others he spoke to through dreams or visions. To yet others he sent angels. He used the authors’ normal intelligence and their own literary style of writing in order to record Scripture.

Christians claim that the Holy Spirit<sup>21</sup> of God is responsible for the revelations. The recipients “spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit” (2 Peter 1:21; 1 Thessalonians 2:13). They believe that their “Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be throughly equipped for every good work.” (2 Timothy 3:16-17).

Therefore, Christians speak of the writers of the books of the Bible, not so much as having ‘received revelations’ by ecstasy or by word-for-word dictation,<sup>22</sup> but as being ‘in-spired’ – *theopneustos*, meaning, ‘God-breathed’ in the original Greek. In other words, God’s Spirit guided them as they wrote and spoke. They were not always passive receivers of a ‘word for word’ document.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibn Khaldun, *The Muqaddimah* (trans. Rosenthal, abr. ed. N. Dawood), p. 74.

<sup>21</sup> Muslims believe that the Holy Spirit is the angel Gabriel but Christians reject such a notion; they believe that the Holy Spirit is divine.

<sup>22</sup> Carson and Woodbridge, eds., *Scripture and Truth*, p. 205.

Another point to consider is that the Bible is not something received through one person, nor was it produced during a relatively short period of time as was the Qur'an. Some forty individuals, including kings, shepherds, fishermen, civil servants, priests, at least one general, and a physician were involved in the writing of this collection. Although they wrote at different times and in different circumstances, a remarkable uniformity stands in their central theme: the salvation of people.

In the Bible, some of the recipients of the revelations used expressions like the following: "The Spirit of the Lord spoke to me," and "This is what the Lord says," or "The word of the Lord came to me." In some places, we find experiences like that of the prophet Jeremiah who said, "Then the Lord reached out his hand and touched my mouth and said to me, 'Now I have put my words in your mouth ...'" (Jeremiah 1:9).

### **God's revelation in action**

The Bible begins with a simple outline of the story of creation and records the main events in Adam's life (Genesis 2-4). It then moves on to the story of Noah's and Abraham's encounters with God (Genesis 5-25). Condensed versions of these accounts can also be found in the Qur'an. The stories of Isaac, Ishmael, Jacob (also called Israel) and his descendants (known as *Bani Israel*, the Children of Israel) follow. Their stories illustrate one of the colorful and memorable phases of Old Testament history (Genesis 25-36). The link between the patriarchs and the arrival of the recognisable people of Israel is provided in the story of Joseph (Genesis 37-50), celebrated in retellings in the Qur'an (Sura 12).

During the time of Moses, the climax of God's revelation was the deliverance of the Israelites from Egypt and the giving of the Law (Exodus 1-40). These events are also mentioned in the Qur'an, with some omissions and alternative additions (Sura 2:51-53; 3:3; 7:103-157, etc.). Based on the oral narrative of these events, the Torah

became the accepted written account of God's Law to the Israelites. It also accounts how God redeemed his distressed people at particular times and places in history; God continued this process of intervening in human history. Thus, many books of the Bible contain the narratives, commands, and histories of the prophets. The books of the Prophets, the Psalms, and the Chronicles contain the materials that make up the remainder of the Old Testament after the Torah.

Christians state that God's revelation reached its climax around 2,000 years ago in the person of Jesus, the Christ. Both Muslims and Christians describe Jesus as the Word of God, although they may disagree in their understanding of this title. Jesus accepted the integrity of the Old Testament books. In his teaching and preaching, he referred to them as Scriptures (John 5:39; Matthew 21:42; 22:29; 26:54; Luke 4:21; 24:27; Mark 12:10). It is on his authority that Christians accept the validity of the Old Testament.

As for the New Testament, Christians do not believe that it descended on Jesus in the way the Qur'an is said to have descended on Muhammad. For them Jesus, as the Word of God, is God's revelation in action (John 1:1-14; Revelation 19:13; Hebrews 1:2). Jesus not only preached the Gospel, the good news of reconciliation of people to God; his life, death, and resurrection were also an essential part of the redemption process. Following Jesus' command, the disciples passed on this good news to the following generations, as preserved in the written accounts we now call the New Testament section of the Bible.

In Islam, the Qur'an as the Word of God has a primary status while Muhammad has the secondary status. In contrast, in Christianity it is Jesus who has the primary status as the Word of God and the Bible has a secondary status. According to Islamic theology, the Word of God became a book. According to Christology, God spoke and sent his message to the world through various people, but finally sent Jesus as his Word. Hence, while Muslims refer to the

Qur'an, a book, as divine and eternal, Christian refer to Jesus as divine and eternal, thereby emphasising that Jesus was with God before time began.

### **The aim of the revelation**

The need to *surrender to God's will* has always been central to God's message. We see good examples of this in the lives of his people. For example, Abraham surrendered himself and obeyed God's call to migrate to a foreign land. It was because of his faith in God and obedience in submission to God and his righteousness that he was called *Khalil ul-llah*, the friend of God (Qur'an, Sura 4:125; Bible, James 2:23). Moses, who could have lived an easy life, refused to remain in luxury as a member of Pharaoh's family. He surrendered himself to God and led the Israelites to freedom, out of their bondage to Egypt (Qur'an, Sura 7:103 ff.; 26:18 ff.; Bible, Hebrews 11:24). Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane prayed, "not my will, but yours be done" (Luke 22:42).

There is no disagreement between Christians and Muslims on the subject of surrendering to God. They even share the belief that "In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways" (Hebrews 1:1). There is disagreement, however, when considering whether God actually concluded his message by speaking through Jesus. Muslims claim that the mission of Jesus was not a universal one; he was sent only to the Israelites. It is the prophet Muhammad, they believe, who was sent for *all* people, about six hundred years after Jesus.

### **The traditional view of the compilation of the Scriptures**

It is uncertain when the whole of the Old Testament was first compiled to form a "canon." It is known, however, that at least three hundred years before Jesus, the books of the Torah, the Psalms, and the prophets were not only available together, but were also translated into a Greek version, known as the *Septuagint*. Jesus in his teaching

referred to and quoted from many parts of these Scriptures asserting that, “These are the Scriptures that testify about me . . .” (John 5:39). For this reason the Jewish Scriptures gained an enormous importance in Christian history, being regarded as a major part of their holy Scriptures.

The books of the New Testament were put together after Jesus’ ascension. The epistles were written between 49-70 CE with the exception of the epistles of John and Revelation, which were written in 80-100 CE. The majority of New Testament scholars agree on the following dates for the four Gospels which are the major part of the New Testament: Matthew, in 50-70 CE; Mark, in 65-70 CE; Luke, in 60-70 CE and John, at around the end of the first century. There are scholars, however, who claim that all of the New Testament was available in written form before 70 CE.<sup>23</sup>

Although it is part and parcel of Islamic belief to believe in the Scriptures of Christians and Jews, the majority of Muslims do not accept what Christians and Jews read today as Scriptures. For example, they do not accept the New Testament as being “*the*” Gospel. In their view, Jesus received a revelation called “*Injil*” which they assume he must have passed verbatim to his disciples.

Many Muslims believe that Jesus was given something that was written because they read in the Qur'an that Jesus was “given the gospel” (Sura 5:46; 57:27) and that he “was given the scripture” (Sura 19:30). The fact is that neither Jesus, Muhammad, or any other prophet (except Moses) received anything in writing from God. The sole exception is Moses, who only received the Ten Commandments in writing; the rest of the Law was given to him through other means. The Qur'an does say that God sent (*anzala*) the Gospel, and that Jesus was given (*a'tenaho*) “the book” although it may not be literally a

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<sup>23</sup> John A. T Robinson, *Redating the New Testament*, pp.221-253.

book or books that he received. Neither does the Qur'an indicate that Jesus received revelation in the same way Muhammad did. The Qur'an says that Jesus was taught the book, the Torah and the Injil (Sura 5:110). This does not mean that he became the recipient of the Gospel in the same way that Muhammed received the Qur'an.

Neither the Gospel narratives in the New Testament nor history offer any evidence for the Muslim belief that Jesus received a book from heaven, which he then passed on to his disciples. Instead, the Gospel narratives record that Jesus promised his disciples to send them the Holy Spirit, who would remind them of what he had said (John 14:26; 16:13).

It was with this guidance that the disciples wrote what Christians now have as the New Testament. The disciples were persuaded to do so because Jesus instructed them to declare openly what had been revealed to them and what he had said to them (Matthew 10:26f). No wonder the apostolic writings, the epistles in the New Testament, are also called the "word of God" because of the words of Jesus (cf. Luke 5:1; 8:21 with 1 Corinthians 14:26; Col. 1:25). The result of this understanding was that the early Christians accepted both the words of Jesus, as transmitted in the Gospels, and the apostolic writings, giving them recognition as authoritative records of the divine revelation. It is noteworthy that the Qur'an also testifies that the apostles of Jesus were inspired by God (Sura 5:111).

What then is the gospel, the Injil, which Jesus mentioned? Christians claim that this refers to the "good new." This term was used by Jesus, his apostles, and disciples not as the title of a book, but a description for the message, the good news about Jesus and his redeeming love.

In contrast with the views of Christians, Muslims believe that the Qur'an was revealed in stages during the lifetime of Muhammad. Only Muhammad received the revelation, which he then dictated to his companions. It was memorised by him and his companions. Most

of it was also written down on whatever material was available.<sup>24</sup> Among those who wrote such fragments were Uthman bin Affan, Ali bin Abi Talib, Muawiyya bin Abi Sufyan, Abdullah bin Masood, Ubayy Ibn Kab, Zaid Ibn Thabit, Abd Allah Ibn Abi Sara, and several others. It is said that Muhammad instructed scribes where to place newly revealed passages.

### **Recension of the Qur'an and the Bible**

We learn from Islamic sources that by the time of Muhammed's death, there was no complete official copy of the Qur'an available. The companions who were recommended by Muhammad as teachers of the Qur'an found that each had a collection of material that was different in terms of the numbers of chapters and in the actual text itself. According to popular traditions, the first attempt to compile these fragments into one volume (the process of recension) took place during the reign of the first caliph, Abu Bakr (632-634 CE). However, it was during the time of Uthman (644-656), the third caliph, that a standard "official" copy of the Qur'an was first prepared. This version was written in unpointed consonantal script. All other collections were ordered to be burnt (See Chapter 2 for details).

At the time of the Umayyad caliph, Abd al-Malik (685-705), the formal introduction of diacritical marks and vowel points had begun. However, the available manu-scripts show that such work, along with some other crucial refinements, continued well into the fourth and fifth century of Islam.<sup>25</sup> In spite of such a history, Muslims believe that today's copies are directly descended from the time of

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<sup>24</sup> Ahmad von Denffer, *Ulum Al-Qur'an: An Introduction to the Science of the Qur'an*, p.37.

<sup>25</sup> A. T. Welch, "Al-KUR'AN" in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol. 5, p. 408; See also Nabiah Abbott, *The Rise of the North Arabic Script and its Koranic Development*, pp.17-44.

Uthman, with the diacritical marks from the time of Al Hajjaj ibn Yusuf (d. 714), the governor general of Iraq under Abd al- Malik. It is also part of Muslims' belief that since God himself promised to be the protector of the Qur'an and that it has indeed been preserved, word for word, as it was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.

When we look at the history of the recension of the Bible we find, in contrast with the Qur'an, that Jews and Christians never attempted an "official" compilation of their books. In part, this was because they were not in a position of political power as Muslims were. Several centuries before Christ, the majority of the Jews agreed on the thirty-nine books of the Bible which are available today in the Old Testament. At the Jewish council of Jamnia held in 90 CE, the same 39 books were recognised as Holy Scripture. Following Christ's example, Christians accepted them as well. Naturally there have been debates about the books of the Old Testament just as there were among the early generations of Muslims about some parts of the Qur'an.

As for the New Testament, the four gospels Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John were known to have been written by or under the authority of the apostles of Jesus, along with the 13 epistles of Paul. However, the earliest list which corresponds to the New Testament as we have it today stems from Athanasius in his Easter Letter of the year 367.<sup>26</sup> The first major council of the Church to list the 27 books of the New Testament was the Synod of Hippo in the year 393. Christians believe that while such Church councils did not *confer* canonicity or demark the canon by an arbitrary decree, they did recognise and ratify the widespread consensus (*ijma*) that had already developed concerning the boundaries of the New Testament.

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<sup>26</sup> Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, p. 112.

## **Conclusion**

Although Muslims and Christians differ on the modes of revelation and inspiration, both sides uphold the view that their Scriptures are inspired and have been preserved very well through the ages. They both believe in the integrity of their Scriptures.

Christians believe that the Bible is the true record of God's message and his dealings. It is the Bible, they believe, that reveals how people can return to God. Conversely, Muslims believe that God revealed the concluding part of his message through Muhammad. Christians believe that Jesus not only came with the final message of God, but that he himself is the revelation of the nature of God.

We find Christians wholeheartedly admitting that God allowed a human element to come through in both the writing and transmission of their Scriptures, but Muslims take such an admission to be evidence and proof of the Bible's unreliability. They believe that the Qur'an is reliable and is preserved letter for letter as it was revealed to Muhammad, and that there was no human element in the transmission and recension to interfere with the text of the Qur'an, a claim we will examine in due course.

## Evidence for the reliability of the Qur'an

It is important to know what evidence exists when considering the reliability of the texts of the Bible and the Qur'an. The texts of these two books did not come into being all at once, so one has to find out the processes of redaction and "final adjustment" that took place. From the history of the transmission and recension of the Qur'an and of the Bible, we find that each Scripture was compiled over particular periods of time, the Bible from around 1,450 BCE to around 100 CE and the Qur'an from 610-650 CE.

What evidence is available to verify their integrity, veracity, and reliability? To find answers, we will consider the evidence of some of the available manuscripts, related documents, and other discoveries. This study is important because so many Muslims believe that the Bible has not been preserved in such a way as to be trusted, yet believe the Qur'an is well preserved and is therefore beyond such criticism.

Academics call an original manuscript an "autograph." No autographs of any part of the Bible or of the Qur'an exist today. The same is true in fact of all classical writings of antiquity. However, early copies of manuscripts are available to us. Other documents are available as well, which we can study in order to check what Muslims and Christians believe about their respective Scriptures. In this chapter,

we will look at the case of the Qur'an. We will follow in the next chapter with the evidence for the reliability of the Bible.

### **The text of the Qur'an**

Manuscript copies of the Qur'an from the century in which it was compiled are not available. While some writers say that a number of odd fragments date from the first century of the Islamic calendar, it can be safely stated, as in Ahmad von Denffers' words:

Most of the early original Qur'an manuscripts, complete or in sizeable fragments, that are still available to us now, are not earlier than the second century after the Hijrah.<sup>1</sup>

In spite of the continuous political supremacy of an Islamic empire ruling over communities with a highly developed literary tradition, (where Arabic became the essential language of religion, politics, and commerce) significant first century Qur'anic manuscripts do not exist. Similarly, there are no manuscripts at hand relating to the Islamic community during the period between the first Arab conquest (early 7th century CE) and the appearance, with the *Sira-Maghazi* narratives, of the earliest Islamic literature in the late 8th century CE.

Muslims often state that two of the *Uthmanic* recension copies from the time of Caliph Uthman (Cir. 650) are still available. One is said to be the copy preserved in the state library at Tashkent in Uzbekistan, known as the *Samarkand* or *Tashkent* codex.<sup>2</sup> It is written on parchment. About half of this manuscript has survived. It begins with the seventh verse of Sura 2 of the Qur'an and finishes with the text from Sura 43, verse 10. This means that 72 of the 114 known chapters of the Qur'an are entirely missing in this manuscript. In addition, many intervening pages are missing. It is written in a particular Kufic

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<sup>1</sup> Ahmad von Denffer, *Ulum Al-Qur'an*, pp.60-61.

<sup>2</sup> Muslim authorities have not allowed serious textual criticism and other processes to date these manuscripts.

script which, according to modern experts in Arabic calligraphy, did not exist until late in the eighth century CE. This script was not in use at all in Mecca (Makkah) and Madinah in the seventh century.<sup>3</sup> Although Muslim writers treat the document as coming from 650 CE,<sup>4</sup> Western orthographers, scriptologists, and other researchers believe that the textual style of calligraphy and the artistic illuminations between chapters are characteristic of a period at least one hundred and fifty years after Muhammad's death.<sup>5</sup> This means it cannot be either the copy prepared by Uthman for that region or the one that he was reading when assassinated in 656.<sup>6</sup>

The other manuscript is the *Topkapi* codex housed in the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul, Turkey. It is also written in a Kufic script on parchment with similar ornaments between chapters. However, a comparison between the two codices shows that they were not transcribed in the same place or at the same time. One difference is that while the Topkapi codex has eighteen lines to the page, the Samarkand has between eight and twelve.

For both of these copies of the Qur'an, analysis of the style and calligraphy suggests that they indeed are the oldest manuscripts of the Qur'an available. However, they cannot be dated earlier than the second century of Islam, almost one and a half centuries after the Uthman recension.<sup>7</sup>

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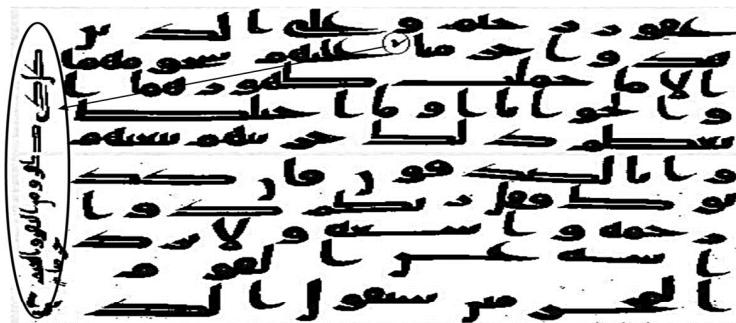
<sup>3</sup> Martin Lings and Yasin Hamid Safadi, *The Qur'an*, pp. 12, 13, 17.

<sup>4</sup> History of the Mushaf of Uthman in Tashkent, cited by Ahmad Von Denffer, *Ulum Al-Qur'an*, p.64.

<sup>5</sup> Isaac Mendelsohn, "The Samarkand Kufic Qur'an" *Muslim World*, 30, p.378.

<sup>6</sup> There are a few other Qur'ans in different parts of the Islamic world, (for example one at the the National Library in Cairo, Egypt) purporting to show the traces of the blood of Uthman upon certain pages, and thus the genuine 'Uthmanic Qur'an'.

<sup>7</sup> John Gilchrist, *The Qur'an: The Scriptures of Islam*, p. 137.



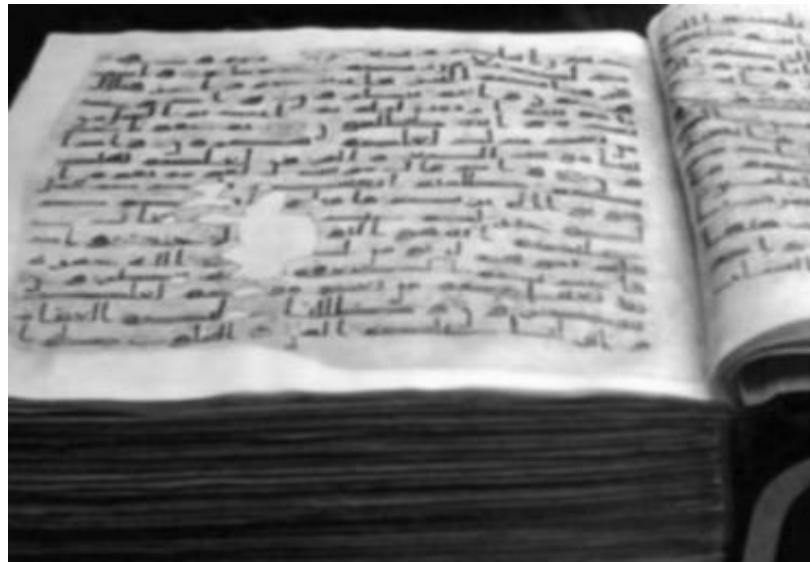
وَعَلَى الَّذِينَ هَادُوا حَرَّمَنَا  
 كُلُّ ذِي ظُفَرٍ وَمِنَ الْبَقَرِ وَالْغَنَمِ حَرَّمَنَا  
 عَلَيْهِمْ شُحُومُهُمَا إِلَّا مَا حَمَلْتُمْ ظُهُورُهُمَا  
 أَوِ الْحَوَالِيَا أَوِ مَا اخْتَلَطَ بِعَظِيمٍ ذَلِكَ جَزِّنَا هُمْ  
 بِبَغْيِهِمْ وَإِنَّا لَصَادِقُونَ

Figure 1. Verse from the Samarkand Kufic Qur'an

**Top:** A page from the Qur'an said to be one of the 'Uthmanic' copies sent out to various provinces. The text is in Kufic script without linear uniformity. The copyist left out several words in the middle of the second line; these were later added in the margin. It is also possible that these words were added to correct the different Uthmanic versions.

**Bottom:** Today's version of the same passage (Sura 6:146) which has incorporated the words in the margin into the main text.

There are a few other manuscripts, some of which are in private collections. The copies that are openly available for study are all from a later time than the two mentioned above. In later centuries of Islam, the calligraphers' names used to appear, usually at the end of the text of the Qur'an together with the date and place where the codex was copied. This emblem is known as colophon. However, researchers have found that some of the colophons in these manuscripts are known to have been forged. Thus, the dating and identification in that form becomes unreliable.



*Figure 2. The Topkapi codex*

*A page from the Topkapi codex in Istanbul. Although it is claimed to be an 'Uthmanic' copy, it differs in many details from the Samarkand copy and also has more lines per page. The manuscript cannot date earlier than the late eighth century CE.*

Among other manuscripts of the Qur'an available today, housed in the National Library of Tunisia is one which was originally inscribed in the late ninth or early tenth century. The script *Mashq* was employed. It is suggested that this copy was not meant for general reading but was rather written for the Abbasid Caliph, *al-Mamun* (d. 833), for the tomb at Mashhad in Persia of his father, Harun ar-Rashid. Somehow, it did not make its way to him but remained in the land of its origin. Though a number of its individual pages are held in private collections, the bulk of it is preserved in the library on display.

The oldest complete Qur'an, written in the *al-Mail* script, resides in the British Library, dated to the end of the eighth century.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Lings and Safadi, *The Qur'an*, pp. 17, 20.

Other surviving copies were written at the same time, in both the al-Mail and also the Hijazi scripts. There was one copy available in the National Library and Museum of Kuwait until the Iraqi invasion of 1990. Some believe it was stolen by the Iraqi soldiers and carried away in their retreat.<sup>9</sup> A manuscript of the Qur'an in the early *Naskh* script was written by the great Arab calligrapher Ibn al-Bawwab at Baghdad in 1001 CE. It now resides in the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, Ireland.

Intermittent work, due to Muslim opposition, continues on manuscripts found in 1972, in Sana'a, Yemen, housed now in the Yemen's House of Manuscripts. The oldest manuscript in this collection, according to one scholar, dates as early as 705 CE. It contains some significant variations from the text of the Qur'an used today. Whole sections are missing and, in some places, text has been added by much later hands.<sup>10</sup> According to Puin, a specialist in Arabic calligraphy and Qur'anic paleography based at Saarland University, the Yemeni manuscripts seem to suggest "an evolving text rather than simply the Word of God as revealed in its entirety."<sup>11</sup> These studies allow us to conclude that until other discoveries are made, the earliest Qur'anic manuscripts available, apart from perhaps a few papyrus

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<sup>9</sup> For a much fuller account: Gilchrist, *Jam'al-Qur'an*.

<sup>10</sup> Research by Dr. Puin Gerd-Rudiger et al. of Saarland University, Saabruken (published in German). Some Muslims are of the opinion that these manuscripts predate Uthman's official recension. These views were posted on the Internet in response to an article by Toby Lester, "What is the Qur'an?" *Atlantic Monthly*, 283 (Arizona, January 1999); see also the *Guardian* (England, Aug. 8, 2000).

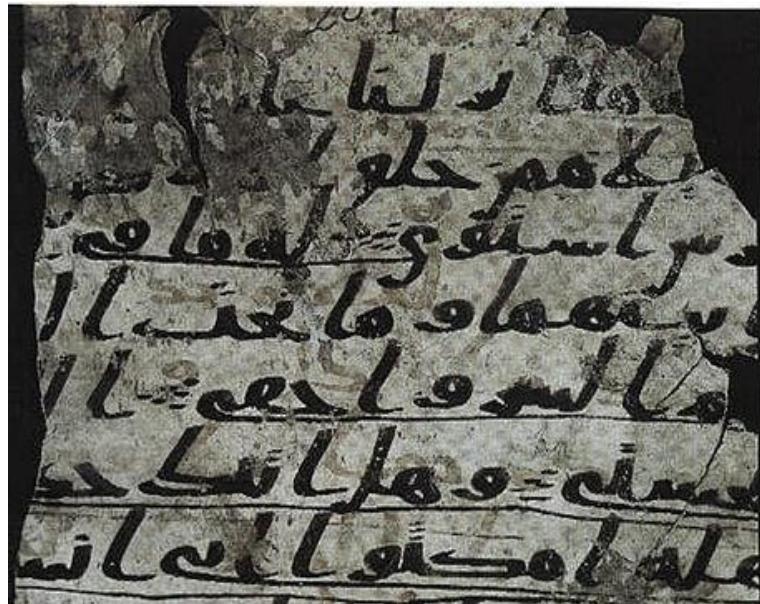
[www.guardian.co.uk/education/2000/aug/08/highereducation.theguardian](http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2000/aug/08/highereducation.theguardian)

<sup>11</sup> Toby Lester, "What is the Qur'an?" *Atlantic Monthly*, January 1999;

[www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1999/01/what-is-the-koran/304024/](http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1999/01/what-is-the-koran/304024/)

See also Gerd A. Puin, "Observations on Early Qur'an Manuscripts in San'a" in Stefan Wild, ed, *The Qur'an as Text*, pp. 107-111. See also: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerd\\_R.\\_Puin](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerd_R._Puin)

fragments and the incomplete San'a manuscript cannot be dated earlier than one hundred years after the time of Muhammad.



*Figure 3. A page from the Yemeni Qur'an fragments*

*The script is of the Hijazi type and is part of Sura 20:1-10  
(Picture by Dir. Puin Gerd-Rudiger)*

### **Available sources for the Qur'an**

After Muhammad's death in 632, in a period of just one hundred years, Muslim conquests covered an area greater than the Roman Empire. Although internal and external conflicts continued, by the end of the 8th century, Islam started to crystallize as a religious and political entity. From this period onward a vast body of literature, historical and exegetical, evolved to explain the Islamic Scripture and its law.

The most important elements of this era are the collections of the sayings and deeds of Muhammad known as *Hadith*, biographies of Muhammad (*Sira*), and commentaries (*Tafsir*) on the Qur'an. It is in these traditional sources that the documentary evidence for the

history of the collection of the Qur'an and its content is most widely available.

Among the Hadith collections, the compilation of Ismail al-Bukhari (d. 870) and that of Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj (d. 875) are treated as the most authentic. Together, their collections are called *as-Sahihān*, the two authentics.<sup>12</sup> These collections are in fact part of a series known as *al-kutub as-sittah*. These sources represent the first-hand external authority concerning the reliability of the Qur'an in Muslim writings.

Some support is also found in the *Sira* by Ibn Hisham (d. 834) which is said to have been originally written by Ibn Ishaq (d. 767). Other works, like Ibn S'ad's (d. 845) *Tabaqat*, are of some value. The *Tabaqat* contains a long chapter devoted to an account of those who collected the Qur'an.

Most of the earliest commentators on the Qur'an relied on the *Hadith* and *Sira* material. Later commentators added little and in fact, as time passed, many avoided any mention of either variant readings or the omission of texts in earlier copies of the Qur'an. A comprehensive assessment, based on all sources, reveals the fact that the present collection of the Qur'an is far from being a complete and accurate copy of all that Muhammad taught to his followers. The present Qur'an may contain the message of Muhammad but not the whole of it. Both Muslim and non-Muslim sources agree that the Qur'an has not come to us in full as was taught by Muhammad.

There could be many reasons for not having the whole of the Qur'an, though one is paramount. Muhammad did not give the whole of the Qur'an at one time setting nor did the immediate circle of disciples commit all of it to writing. Many Muslims were reciting portions of the Qur'an that differed from each other. Though many

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<sup>12</sup> Cyril Glasse, *The Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam*, p. 342.

Muslims today think the differences were confined to pronunciation, a study of the sources shows that the differences were more than that. It can be demonstrated from the various traditions of Islam that the differences in the recitation of the Qur'an extended far deeper than mere pronunciation. There were also differences in words, verses, and even chapters of the Qur'an. These differences existed even in the days of Muhammad. For example, Abdullah Ibn Masood (d. 650) reports:

We differed about a Sura as to whether it consisted of thirty five or thirty six verses, so we went to the Prophet who was engaged in conversation with Ali. When we told him we disagreed over the reading, his face reddened as he replied, "Those before you perished through their disagreements." He whispered something to Ali who said, "The Prophet commands you to recite as you were taught."<sup>13</sup>

During Muhammad's lifetime, the Qur'an was not codified into any one official compilation. Instead, his companions memorized different parts of the Qur'an as he dictated. Some were written down piecemeal on all sorts of materials, including palm leaves, stones, bones, leather, and so on.<sup>14</sup> Had Muhammad left a complete text with an official compilation, as some Muslims claim that he did, there would have been no need for his successors to have examined the various sources after his death, collecting and compiling the text of the Qur'an into a book.

### **The compilation under Abu Bakr**

According to *Sahih Bukhari*, the first compilation took place in the reign of the first caliph Abu Bakr (632-634). Shortly after Muhammad's death (d.632), several tribes from the outer regions of Arabia started a revolt. Abu Bakr had to send a large number of Muslims to

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<sup>13</sup> Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *Jami' al-Bayan 'an Ta'wil 'ay al-Qur'an* (Tafsir Tabari), vol. 3, pp. 23-24. See also John Burton, *The Collection of the Qur'an*, p. 149.

<sup>14</sup> Suyuti, *Al-Itqan fi Uulum al-Qur'an*, Vol. 1, p. 76ff.

suppress it. As a result of the ensuing battle of Yamama (633 CE), many of Muhammad's companions who had memorized parts of the Qur'an were killed. All this made Abu Bakr aware of the need to collect and preserve the Qur'an in written form.

According to Al-Qurtubi, "During the Battle of Yamama, four hundred and fifty reciters of the Qur'an were killed." In consequence, as Ibn Shihab relates, Abu Bakr was overwhelmed with sadness over such a loss. He adds, "When Muslims in the Yamama combat were injured, Abu Bakr panicked. He was afraid that a portion of the Qur'an would be lost. Therefore people came with what they already had with them."<sup>15</sup>

According to Al-Bukhari, Abu Bakr appointed Zaid bin Thabit to collect the Qur'an. He describes it in this way:

Narrated Zaid bin Thabit: Abu Bakr as-Siddiq sent for me when the people of Yamama had been killed ... Then Abu Bakr said (to me): 'You are a wise young man and we do not have any suspicion about you, and you used to write the Divine Inspiration for Allah's Apostle. So you should search for (the fragmentary script of) the Qur'an and collect it (in one book). By Allah! If they had ordered me to shift one of the mountains, it would not have been heavier for me than this ordering me to collect the Qur'an. Then I said to Abu Bakr, 'How will you do something which Allah's Apostle did not do?' Abu Bakr replied, 'By Allah, It is a good project.'<sup>16</sup>

Zaid eventually agreed to supervise the compilation. He is said to have collected the Qur'an from men's memories, date palms, white stones, etc. The completed text was kept by Abu Bakr and, after his death, by his successor Umar ibn al-Khattab (634-644 CE). Upon

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<sup>15</sup> Muhammad Izzat Darwaza, *Al-Qur'an al-Majid*, p. 54. Suyuti on the other hand seems to attributes this 'panic' to Umar who came to Abu Bakr and convinced him of collecting the Qur'an in one volume (Suyut, *Itqan*, vol. 1, p. 76).

<sup>16</sup> Muhammad Muhsin Khan, ed. trans., *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Vol. 6, p. 477.

Umar's death it passed to his daughter Hafsah (d.665).<sup>17</sup> This shows that it was not treated as an official copy. If it had been, then according to a set practice, they would have kept it in the office known as the treasury, *Baithulmal*. This tradition suggests that Abu Bakr collected the whole Qur'an into one book for the first time. It also implies that he made no critical study of the text with the aim to reduce the various manuscripts and other private compilations: to form one uniform standard.

This collection did not receive any official publicity, simply because some prominent teachers of the Qur'an, such as Ubay ibn Ka'b (d.639 or later), Abu Abdullah ibn Masood (d.653), Abu Musa Al-Ash'ari (d.662), Miqdad ibn Amr (d. 653), and other companions of Muhammad, were still alive. Muhammad in his lifetime had acknowledged Ka'b and Masood as the foremost authorities on the Qur'an.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps that was the reason that Zaid's collection faded into virtual obscurity and went into the private custody of Hafsah.<sup>19</sup>

According to some traditions, Muhammad's son-in-law Ali Ibn Abi Talib (d.661) had compiled his own copy of the Qur'an. He took it to Abu Bakr and Umar. However, they refused to accept this version and told Ali that they did have any need of the version of the Qur'an collected by him. In anger, Ali said, "By God! you will never be able to see it after this day."<sup>20</sup>

Although the majority of Muslims accept that it was in Abu Bakr's time that the first collection was made, this assertion is contradicted by another account, that it was during the reign of Umar (634-644 CE) that the Qur'an was first collected. According to yet another

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<sup>17</sup> Some scholars give the year of her death as either 661 or 662, according to Ibn al-Athir. It was the year 647 or 648 at the time when Marwan was governor of Madinah. (*Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Vol. III, p. 65).

<sup>18</sup> Khan, *Sahib al-Bukhari*, Vol. 5, p. 96.

<sup>19</sup> Khan, *Sahib al-Bukhari*, Vol. 6, p. 478.

<sup>20</sup> *Usul-al-Kafi*, p.671, cited by Nomani, *Irani Inqilab*, in Urdu, p. 260.

tradition, it was not Abu Bakr but Umar who ordered the compilation, though he died before it was completed.<sup>21</sup>

It has been argued that those who died in the battle of Yamama were mostly new converts and would not have known the Qur'an by heart. It is also strange that the copy prepared under Abu Bakr's control was not treated as an official copy, but almost as a private collection item that ended up in Hafsah's safekeeping. This situation aroused some suspicion, so much so that some assert that the story of the first compilation under Abu Bakr was invented by those who disliked Uthman (see below). Others suggest that this story was invented "to take the collection of the Qur'an back as near as possible to Muhammad's death" i.e. to gain respectability for the authenticity of the version of the Qur'an we have today.<sup>22</sup>

### **The Uthmanic recension**

According to tradition, the next step towards an official Qur'an was taken under the 3rd caliph, Uthman (d.656). The discrepancies and contradictions, which existed in the various readings of the Qur'an and copies of the companions of Muhammad, became a grave cause of dissension among Muslims, not only in Makkah and Madinah but as far away as Iraq and Syria. This prompted Uthman to take steps to suppress the doubts which had begun to arise in people's minds.

Muslims disagreed about the variant editions of the Qur'an so much that we are told, "During Uthman's time, pupils and teachers ended up killing each other. When Uthman found out about this, he said, 'Here in my presence, you lie in the Qur'an and make it full of

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<sup>21</sup> Ibn Sa'd, *Tabaqat*, Vol. 1, pp. 21-24, cited by Abdur Rahman Doi, *Qur'an: an Introduction*, p. 26.

<sup>22</sup> C. J. Adams, "Qur'an: The Text and its History" in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Mircea Eliade, ed., pp. 157-76.

mistakes, so those who are in faraway lands, they must be doing more than this.”<sup>23</sup>

Thus the Qur'an was officially collated between 650 and 656 CE, during Uthman's reign. There are several narratives describing how the official Qur'an was put together. The one quoted most often by Muslim writers is that Uthman appointed a committee, comprising of Zaid Bin Thabit and three other prominent Makkans, to collate the Qur'an. He asked for the manuscript of the Qur'an that had been deposited with Hafsah. Zaid and his committee made use of this earlier copy and further corrected it wherever they decided it was necessary. Uthman then sent copies of this new, official compilation to every Muslim province and “ordered that all other Qur'anic materials, whether written in fragmentary manuscripts or whole copies, be burnt.”<sup>24</sup>

This drastic action by Uthman is itself evidence that major textual differences existed between various copies of the Qur'an. Such differences were not only affecting the *qira* (recitation of the Qur'an) but also its form and content. Although Uthman was extremely successful in his destruction of all the old manuscripts, evidence exists that variant traditions of the consonantal text survived among the learned. Indeed, a great mass of material can be collected regarding the variant readings in the texts of Ubay, Ibn Masood and several others.

These variants are quoted verbatim in the classical commentaries and other works written by eminent Muslim scholars of their day. Nowadays, many Muslims prefer to claim that the differences between these Qur'ans were only to be found in the pronunciation, in the recitation of the text:

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<sup>23</sup> Suyuti, *Al-Itqan*, p.160.

<sup>24</sup> Khan, *Sahih Al-Bukhari*, Vol. 6, p. 479.

The variations which have become the subject-matter of discussion were not variations either of the text or verse or even variation of a word. They were all cases of enunciation of vowel points which did not in any way alter the meaning or significance of a word.<sup>25</sup>

If the difference only appeared in the verbal recital based on the same written text, why destroy it? The fact is that Uthman ordered the destruction of the written texts. Furthermore, there were neither vowel points nor even diacritical marks in the early written texts of the Qur'an. Therefore, the difference in recital would never have appeared in the written manuscripts. It is clear that Uthman was standardizing one written text of the Qur'an at the expense of all other versions of the Qur'an, with variant texts, "to be officially promulgated as the *textus receptus* of the Muslims."<sup>26</sup>

### **Early codices of the Qur'an**

Although the major early Qur'anic manuscripts were destroyed, much of the information about them and their variants is available in Muslim traditions, classical commentaries, and other books written by respected and eminent Muslim scholars. A study of these sources reveals that there were some fifteen codices that were affected by the decree of Uthman, including those belonging to companions of Muhammad: Ibn Masood, Ubay ibn Ka'b, Ali Ibn Abi Talib, and Abu Musa.

The Shia sect of Islam believes that Ali Ibn Abi Talib had compiled the real Qur'an and that it was different from the Uthmanic one. It remained in his possession and later passed on to his successors, the Imams. Many among them, known as the *Ithna Ashari* (fol-

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<sup>25</sup> Mahmood Ahmad Bashiruddin, *Introduction to the Study of the Holy Qur'an*, p.359.

<sup>26</sup> John Burton, *The Collection of the Qur'an*, p.138.

lowers of the twelve Imams), believe that Ali's copy of the Qur'an is now with the 12th Imam, Abul Qasim Muhammad ibn Hasan, called al-Mahdi,<sup>27</sup> who disappeared in 870. He is identified as the "Hidden Imam" who will reveal Ali's copy on reappearance.<sup>28</sup>

It seems that there were many among the companions of Muhammad who were not happy about the work of Zaid bin Thabit and his colleagues. Among these were people like Ibn Masood and Ali Ibn Abi Talib. Ibn Masood was one of the leading authorities on the Qur'anic text and one of the first Muslims to teach the Qur'an. He claimed to have recited more than seventy *suras* of the Qur'an in Muhammad's presence.<sup>29</sup> Because of his ability and knowledge of the Qur'an, Muhammad specially recommended him as one of the four to whom his followers should go to learn the Qur'an:

Narrated Masruq: Abdullah ibn Masood was mentioned before Abdullah bin Amr who said, "That is a man I still love, as I heard the Prophet saying, 'Learn the Qur'an from four: from Abdullah ibn Masood – he started with him – Salim, the freed slave of Abu Hudhaifa, Mu'dah bin Jabal, and Ubay bin Ka'b.'"<sup>30</sup>

Ibn Masood's codex became the standard text for the Muslims in and around Kufa in Iraq before Uthman's standardization. Despite the arrival of the official Uthmanic Qur'an, Abdullah Ibn Masood refused to abandon his own copy in its favor. The majority of Muslims at

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<sup>27</sup> A political adventurer named Mukhtar ibn Abi Ubaid (d.687) was the first to introduce the concept of the *Mahdi* (meaning the rightly-guided one). Some believe that the idea is similar to the biblical Messiah who would establish an ideal reign of absolute justice on earth. In later years, the idea of the Mahdi took a firm hold in the Shia theology. Mahdi became an essential figure and was later identified as the Hidden Imam who will reappear and establish Islamic rule, filling the world with righteousness. For a detailed Shia perspective, see Jassim M. Hussain. *The Occultation of the Twelfth Imam: A Historical Background*.

<sup>28</sup> Nomani, *Irani Inqilab*, p. 258.

<sup>29</sup> Abdul Hamid Siddiqui, ed. trans., *Sahih al-Muslim*, Vol.4, p. 1312.

<sup>30</sup> Khan, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Vol. 5, p. 96.

Kufa stood by him and his text. He advised them to hide their copies of the Qur'an and not give them up to destruction with these words, "Ya ahl al-Araaq, Aktumu al-Masahif al-lati indakum wa ghulquha" – O people of Iraq, hide your Qur'ans and shut them up under lock and key.<sup>31</sup>

This action of Ibn Masood resulted in the withdrawal of his stipend. It is recorded that the caliph forcibly seized and burnt Ibn Masood's own Qur'an. One day this controversy so enraged Uthman that he ordered a servant to forcibly throw Ibn Masood out of the mosque, thereby breaking his ribs.<sup>32</sup> This was the behavior shown towards a person about whom Muhammad had said, "I am indeed pleased with one among my people with whom Ibn Masood is happy, and I am displeased with the one with whom Ibn Masood is displeased."<sup>33</sup>

### **The Umayyad and Abbasid period**

Muslim writers boldly allege: "It is a truly miraculous fact that the text of the Qur'an has been preserved absolutely pure and entire, down to the last vowel point."<sup>34</sup> Such a claim is not substantiated by the history of the Qur'anic text, which shows that diacritical marks and vowel points were only fully introduced at least two hundred years after Muhammad's death.

In the light of Muslim traditions, an honest Muslim cannot deny the discrepancies in the Qur'an, which even include disagreements over the number of copies that Uthman sent to Makkah, Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Basra, and Kufa. Some claimed there were five, oth-

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<sup>31</sup> Ibn al-Athir (d. 1233), *al-Kamil fi al-Ta'rikh*, Vol.III, pp. 86-87; Khurshid, *Hazrat Usman ke Surkari Khatoot*, p. 102.

<sup>32</sup> Khurshid, *Hazrat Usman ke Surkari Khatoot*, p. 106.

<sup>33</sup> Shaikh Abdul Haqq, *Madarij-e-Nabuwat*, Part 2, p. 852.

<sup>34</sup> Zafrullah Khan, *Islam: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, p. 89.

ers four, still others seven.<sup>35</sup> The copy sent to Makkah was burned around the year 820. The copy sent to Madinah was lost in the days of Yazid b. Muawiya (d. 683). The copy sent to Iraq was lost in the days of Al-Mukhtar Ibn Abi Ubaid (d. 687).

During the Abbasid period (750 to around 1258), the writing of books became the hallmark of Islamic culture. The science and study of the Qur'an (*Ulum al-Qur'an*) thrived. Several scholars wrote about the variant manuscripts, as found in the codices of the companions of the prophet or of the second generation of Muslims. However, many of these writings did not survive, due mainly to the rivalry and political requirements of those in power. In spite of this, a collation of variants still survives in the book *Kitab al-Masahif*, by Ibn Abi Dawood (d. 928).<sup>36</sup>

It seems that Zaid's very first compilation, which remained in the possession of Hafsa, was considerably different from the Uthmanic canon prepared by Zaid and his committee. Such a difference is evident from the behavior of Marwan Ibn al-Hakam (d. 685) when he was governor of Madinah. Despite his many efforts, Hafsa refused to give him her manuscript of the Qur'an. In fact, after she died, Marwan sent his men to pry the book away from Hafsa's half-brother, Abdallah ibn Umar (d. 693), who yielded eventually, sending it to Marwan who then burnt it. No wonder Ibn Umar is reported to have said, "Let no man say, I have learned the whole of the Qur'an!"

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<sup>35</sup> Suyuti, *Al-Itqan fi Ulum al-Qur'an*, Vol. 1, p. 162.

<sup>36</sup> Arthur Jeffrey, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'an*. This book contains the *Kitab al-Masahif* of Ibn Abi Dawood, together with a collection of the variant writings from the codices of Ibn Masood, Ubai, Ali, Ibn Abbas, Anas, Abu Musa, and other early Qur'anic authorities. It presents examples of text predating the canonical text of Uthman. See also, Abi Dawood, *Kitab al-Masahif* (ed. Abdus Subhan Wa'iz), 2 vol.'

How can he have learned the whole of it when much of it has been lost? Let him say, I have learned what is present of it.”<sup>37</sup>

### **Text improvement and text uniformity**

By the time of the Ummayyad caliph, Abd al-Malik (685-705), the inadequacy of the existing script led Muslims to improve on the text to make it easier to read for a wider community. Al-Hajjaj bin Yusaf (694-714), the viceroy of Iraq, is said to have directed the work. He was also accused of making changes in the text,<sup>38</sup> but his accusers were powerless to control the text. Ibn Abi Dawood lists these amendments in considerable detail in the chapter *Ma Ghaira al-Hajjaj fi Mushaf Usman* – “What was altered by al-Hajjaj in the Uthmanic text.”<sup>39</sup> It is interesting to note that coins uncovered from the time of Abdul Malik have Qur'anic writings on them which suggest variant readings.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the quotations on the Dome of the Rock sanctuary (built by Abdul Malik in Jerusalem in 691), points to another variant reading.<sup>41</sup> A comparison of these inscriptions with the text of the present Qur'an suggests that through the years, the Qur'an went through an evolution during its transmission.

The coming to power of the Abbasid dynast in 750, when the new caliphs settled in Baghdad, coincided with the very thorough grammatical and analytical studies of the Torah and other parts of the Bible by both Jews and Christians. This influenced some Muslims to analyze the Qur'an. The first grammarian specializing in Arabic poet-

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<sup>37</sup> Suyuti, *Al-Itqan fi Ulum al-Qur'an*, Vol. 2, p. 32.

<sup>38</sup> Qamar Naqvi, *Sahyef*, p. 109.

<sup>39</sup> Ibn Abi Dawud, *Kitab al-Masahif*, cited by Jeffrey, *Materials for the History of the Qur'an*, p. 117.

<sup>40</sup> Michael Cook, *The Koran: A very short introduction*, pp. 58-60, 119.

<sup>41</sup> Micheal Cook, *Muhammad*, p. 74.

ic meter is considered to be Khalil ibn Ahmad (d.791), of the school of Basra, who lived in this time period.

It seems clear, in the light of the available collections of traditions and other indirect sources, that the process of improving the text of the Qur'an was only completed towards the end of the ninth century. In the early tenth century, to enforce further uniformity, additional strict measures were taken. Until that time, scholars and theologians were free to use the Uthmanic recension as their main source and also to browse among the various versions for study and reference. This facility was known as *Ikhtiyar* (choice). This *Ikhtiyar* did not confine itself to simply being a choice among possible pointings of a standard consonantal text, but rather extended to choosing between different texts.

In different districts, some of the variant readings of older codices were actually taught alongside the Uthmanic revised version. Some of these variations in the text started to appear in the writings of the teachers. This obviously caused dissension between various teachers and their associates. The first person recorded to be concerned with the problem, trying to bring uniformity, is said to be Malik Ibn Ans (d.795). He rejected several of the companions' versions, especially the version of Ibn Masood. Ibn Ans explicitly stated that it was invalid to perform *salah* (the five daily prayers) under the *imamah* (presiding) of someone who used the version of Ibn Masood.<sup>42</sup>

In the year 934, Ibn Mujahid (859-935) in Baghdad was authorized to define the only official permissible readings of the Qur'an. He achieved this through his influence with two of the *wazirs* (ministers), Ibn Isa and Ibn Muqlah, in the Abbasid government. The first step Ibn Mujahid took was to write a book entitled, *Al-qira'at as-saba* – The Seven Readings. He based his scholarship on the tradition that

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<sup>42</sup> Williams M. Watt and R. Bell, *Introduction to the Qur'an*, p. 48.

Muhammad had allowed the recitation of the Qur'an according to seven *ahruf* (letters). Although the tradition details what those seven methods are, Ibn Mujahid interpreted it as reciting the Qur'an in seven different ways. For this purpose, he chose (at his own discretion) seven of the many sets of readings that were in use in various districts, declaring them to be the authorized readings. The sets of "readings" were in fact different versions, one each from:

- Ibn Kathir (d.737) from Makkah
- Nafi (d.785) of Madinah
- Ibn Amir (d.736) of Damascus
- Abu Amr (d.770) of Basra
- Asim (d.744)
- Hamzah (d.772)
- al-Kisa'i (d.804) from Kufa.

Ibn Mujahid introduced not only a definite process of forming a canon, but also prohibited the use of any other *Iikhtiyar* (choice) and any other variations in the text, except the seven choices he had selected.<sup>43</sup> Furthermore, there were two different versions from each set of reading, thus making fourteen versions in all.

### **Pressure to conform**

Very soon, several scholars were publicly forced to renounce their preferences for other collections and variations. Among these were people like Ibn Miqsam (d. 934)<sup>44</sup> and Ibn Shannabudh (d.939) who were condemned to prison and forced to give up their own versions

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<sup>43</sup> Arthur Jeffery, "Progress in the Study of the Qur'an Text." *Muslim World*, (1935), No. 1, p. 9. See also: Christopher Melchert, "Ibn Mujāhid and the Establishment of Seven Qur'anic Readings", *Studia Islamica*, (2000), No. 91, pp. 5-22 ([www.jstor.org/stable/159626](http://www.jstor.org/stable/159626)).

<sup>44</sup> Or Ibn Muqsim – he was also known as Abu Bakr al-Attar.

of Ibn Masood and ibn Ka'b. The codex of Ali ibn Abi Talib was also rejected.<sup>45</sup> In his *Kitab al-Fihrist*, Abu al-Faraj Muhammad Ibn Ishaq al-Nadim (d.990) records some of the variants in Ibn Shanabudh's version of the Qur'an. Al-Nadim mentions Shanabudh's admission of being wrong and consequent repentance. He was not released, however, and later died in prison.<sup>46</sup>

Ibn Mujahid's system marked a change in the way that early readings of the Qur'an were studied. Although his system was accepted, during subsequent years all but two of the fourteen versions were dropped. The only two versions to survive, with modification to this present century, are claimed to be of Hafs (d.796) – the revised reading of Asim, and Warsh (d.812) – the revised reading of Nafi. Even among these two, it is Hafs (the revised reading of Asim) that is now widely used in practice. It has acquired canonical supremacy, except in the west and northwest of Africa, where the transmission of Warsh (the revised reading of Nafi) is often used.<sup>47</sup>

Many Muslims are completely unaware that the Qur'an has this history. Of those who do know about it, several nevertheless deny that variants in the Qur'an existed. Others claim, as we have said, that all variations were only cases of enunciation of vowel points which did not in any way alter the meaning or significance of a word.<sup>48</sup> Available research, however, shows that the differences in the copies of the Qur'an were more than just a question of spelling, choice of synonyms, use of particles, etc.<sup>49</sup> Nowadays, Muslims in their discuss-

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<sup>45</sup> Watt & R. Bell, *Introduction to the Qur'an*, p. 49.

<sup>46</sup> Dodge Bayard, ed. trans., *The Fihrist of al-Nadim*, Vol. 1, pp. 70-72.

<sup>47</sup> Adrian Brockett, "The Value of the Hafs and Warsh transmissions for the Textual History of the Qur'an" in Andrew Rippin, ed., *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an*, p. 31.

<sup>48</sup> Bashiruddin, *Introduction to the Study of the Holy Qur'an*, p. 359.

<sup>49</sup> Ahmad Von Denffer, *Ulum Al-Qur'an*, p. 47; Also, Ibn Abi Dawood, *Kitab al-Masahif*(ed. Abdus Subhan Wa'iz), vol. 2, pp. 418-476.