

Qur'an: A Work of Multiple Hands? **Denis Giron**

[The Qur'an] is strikingly lacking in overall structure, frequently obscure and inconsequential in both language and content, perfunctory in its linking of disparate materials, and given to the repetition of whole passages in variant versions. On this basis it can plausibly be argued that the book is the product of belated and imperfect editing of materials from a plurality of traditions.[1]

This is the conclusion Michael Cook and Patricia Crone came to after following the scholarship of Dr. John Wansbrough. The argument is that textual analysis of the Qur'an will lead one to realize that Islam's holiest scripture is actually nothing more than a compilation of variant traditions; traditions that were floating around at the time of the book's writing. Such theories are formulated by applying modern Biblical scholarship to the Qur'an.

In the nineteenth century, scholars took an in depth look at the Torah, the first five books of the Bible, which is essentially Judaism's equivalent of the Qur'an. Literary and historical analysis caused these scholars to theorize that the Torah is not a single narrative but a composite of four different source documents cleverly combined in such a way as to appear to be one continuous narrative chronicling the early history of the Hebrew people. The process through which the discovery was made came to be known as Documentary Hypothesis or Higher Criticism, and is credited largely to the nineteenth century historian and Bible scholar, Julius Wellhausen. This theory has since gained greater popularity due to the writings of Richard E. Friedman[2] and others.

In recent years, Muslims, when in discussions with their Christian counterparts on the topic of the Bible versus the Qur'an, have willingly parroted this theory, not fully understanding how scholars came to these conclusions. To the Muslims, the fact that Western scholars had concluded that the Bible is nothing more than variant traditions woven together into a single text was more than enough to invalidate the Bible, and somehow simultaneously validate the Qur'an. What none of these Muslims ever realized was that the same theories could be applied quite easily to the Qur'an as well.

Qur'an: The Speech of Allah?

The claim that the Qur'an is the word of God is, at this point, wholly unsupported. This is a claim that Muslims accept on blind faith. To a Muslim, such statements may seem both blasphemous and outrageous, but we must approach such things rationally. We cannot take a certain group on their word when it comes to the origins of their tribal folklore. To be fair, a Muslim would first have to prove that God, or Allah, actually exists before they can begin attributing books to Him or Her.

However, the style of the Qur'an is something that will undoubtedly come up when putting forth any theory about the Qur'an's origin. Muslims will no doubt be somewhat offended by the application of Biblical criticism to the Qur'an. The Bible does not read as the direct "word of God" the way the Qur'an does. For example, in the Bible, God is consistently referred to in the third person (e.g. "God said to Moses," et cetera). The Qur'an, on the other hand, is narrated in the first person[3]. It is generally presented as God's word to Muhammad. Because of this, Muslims will claim there is no comparison between the Qur'an and Bible.

First of all, it should be noted that the examples that this article will focus on will be the variant stories presented in the Qur'an (regardless of the narrator), thus the exact style will be, at times, irrelevant. Second, despite the propaganda of the Islamic missionaries, the Qur'an is not always presented as the speech of God. Numerous critics of the Qur'an have pointed to instances where God is mentioned in the third person. Regarding these critics, Benjamin Walker writes:

"Some asked what need there was for God to take oaths like any mortal being, as when he swears by the fig and olive, and by Mount Sinai (95:1); by the declining day (103:1); and by the stars, the night and the dawn (81:15-18). Above all, they asked why the Almighty had to swear on himself[.]"[4]

Another, rather obvious example would be al-Fatihah, the opening chapter of the Qur'an. As Ibn Warraq notes, "[t]hese words are clearly addressed to God, in the form of a prayer." [5] Much like the critics mentioned by Walker above, one might wonder why God would begin with the words bismillah, ar-Rahman, ar-Raheem ("in the name of God, the most merciful, the most benevolent").

One final example would be the verse [6] that Muslims claim is referring to the israa [7]. The verse begins with "asraa bi cabdeehee lailan," ("glory to Him who caused his servant to travel by night"). If we were to even accept the fantastic claim that the Qur'an is the word of some provincial sky god, one would need to ask who is speaking in this verse, and even label it an interpolation! Why does the Mighty Phantasm of Islam feel the need to praise himself? Surely this is the speech of Muhammad, Jibreel [8], or whomever the reciter(s) of the Qur'an may have been.

Putting aside the assumption that Allah is the source of the Qur'an (i.e. the skygod hypothesis), this verse still is a possible example of an interpolation in the Qur'an. The verse continues, "from the sacred place of worship, to al-masjidul-aksa." According to Islamic tradition, Muhammad went from Mecca to Jerusalem, stopping at al-masjidul-aksa, or the al-Aksa Mosque. The problem is, the al-Aksa Mosque in Jerusalem was built roughly 46 years after the traditional time given for Muhammad's death. Therefore, if this verse is in fact claiming that Muhammad paid a visit to this Mosque, one would have to conclude that the verse was an interpolation added into the text.

Some Muslims have tried to reconcile this error by claiming that al-masjidul-aksa is actually the temple of Herod, but this is impossible, as that temple was destroyed five centuries before the traditional time given for Muhammad's birth. In short, to claim that it was referring to the temple of the Jews is to admit an error in the Qur'an, and to instead accept that it is a reference to the actual masjidul-aksa now standing in Jerusalem is to admit that this is an interpolation placed in the Qur'an after Muhammad was long dead. The only reasonable response I have seen is that put forth by Saqib Virk [9]. Virk decided to abandon Orthodox Islamic tradition, and claim that Muhammad merely went to "the farthest mosque" (the literal translation of al-masjidul-aksa), which is an unknown point. Stories about Muhammad visiting Herod's temple or the al-Aksa Mosque were merely created afterwards to make sense of the verse.

Qur'an: The Speech of Muhammad?

I originally was inspired to write this article after reading Zulfikar Khan's essay "Koran - The Ultimate Truth" [4]. Khan's essay is an unflinchingly brutal attack on the Qur'an's integrity, which focuses mainly on the issue of contradictions in the text. While the essay is a fun read, Khan commits what I feel is a fallacy committed by many critics of Islam: he assumes that because the Qur'an is not the word of God, it must be the word of Muhammad. For example, Khan will show a numerical discrepancy in the Qur'an, and exclaim something along the lines of "apparently,

Muhammad didn't know how to add integers."

Zulfikar Khan exposed numerous contradictions in the Qur'an, and there is no doubt that Muslim apologists will offer all kinds of wild confabulations in an attempt to reconcile each one. It is quite obvious that in the world of apologetics, such characters are more than willing to sacrifice their intellectual integrity in order to salvage their cherished beliefs. Regardless, this is not an issue I'm interested in. At this time, the issue is with regards to the fact that Khan never considered the possibility that the Qur'an is a work of multiple authors. Surely numerous conflicting statements in a text is a sign that the text is from a plurality of sources.

The failure to consider authors other than Muhammad, the fallacy of bifurcation[11], is a problem that is found in nearly all criticisms of Islam. Everything we know about Muhammad comes not from the Qur'an, but from extracanonical sources such as sira literature, and various ahadith compilations; and, unfortunately, critics are a bit too willing to accept it all on face value. Even with writers such as Ibn Warraq[12] and Ibn al-Rawandi[13], writers who have set a new tone in secular criticism of Islam, there is a hint of conflict. The writer seems torn between rejecting the traditional claims about the Qur'an's origin, and working with these traditions in order to formulate an understanding of Muhammad's role.

The reality is we have no reliable sources from which we can make any decisions with regard to the role Muhammad played in the creation of the Qur'an. The Qur'an itself tells us nothing, outside of a few ambiguous mentionings of a certain muhammad, or "praised one." All information on Muhammad, who he was, his interaction with Jibreel, his prophethood, et cetera, are derived from a highly questionable source: the ahadith. These are traditions that were, for the most part, written down and compiled more than two hundred years after the events they are allegedly relating. In fact, by the admission of the Muslims themselves, the most respected ahadith are those compiled by Imam Bukhari, who died in the late ninth century (roughly 870 CE), nearly two hundred and forty years after the time that Muhammad allegedly lived.

Furthermore, the dating system of the early Muslims is so weak that the issue of the gap in time between the writing of the ahadith and the events they are reporting becomes even more of a problem. According to Islamic tradition, Muhammad was born during 'am-al-fil, the year of the elephant, which was allegedly 570 CE. This was, according to Islamic folklore, a year that many of the pre-Islamic Arabs remembered, because it is when an army of Ethiopian warriors on Elephants was repelled by birds throwing stones. Following that, we get another tradition that tells us that Muhammad was called to prophethood at the age of forty (approximately 610 CE). It is from here that the Islamic calendar starts, based on a shaky tradition, that is itself based on another shaky tradition, and therefore it is totally unreliable[14].

Muslims will, no doubt, demand that we accept the highly tendentious ahadith collections as a reliable source of information, but there is no real reason to do so. Many of these traditions contradict one another, or are of a highly absurd nature. Even worse, the Qur'an itself seems to warn the believers against resorting to any hadith-based information. One verse of the Qur'an[15] warns against those who spread "frivolous stories" (lahv-al-hadith), and yet another[16] says, in a very straight forward way: "tilka aayaatullahi nutloohaa 'alayka bil haqqi fabi-ayyi *HADEETHI* ba'dallaahi wa aayaatihi yoominoon," or "These are the revelations of God which we recite to you correctly; in what hadith[17] other than God and his revelations will they believe?"

Qur'an: Repetitive Revelation?

From the literary point of view, the Koran has little merit. Declamation, repetition, puerility, a lack of logic and coherence strike the unprepared reader at every turn. It is humiliating to the human intellect to think that this mediocre literature has been the subject of innumerable commentaries, and that millions of men are still wasting time absorbing it.[18]

This description of the Qur'an by Salomon Reinach is rather fitting, particularly the part about repetition. One would wonder why the same statement needs to be said over and over again if it is from a single person. What is worse, many of these duplicate statements differ in context and wording. Once one is aware of this, it is easier to understand the theory that the Qur'an is a work of multiple hands.

The first example will be the discussion between Allah and Iblis (or Satan) that allegedly took place at the time Adam, the first man according to the Islamic folklore, was created. As the story goes, when Allah created Adam, He demanded all the angels prostrate before the first man (it seems this would be an act of shirk[19], but that's another issue). Everyone bowed before Adam, with the exception of Iblis. A conversation between Allah and Iblis took place, and resulted in Iblis being expelled from heaven. Now we will look at two versions of the story (ten verses each), one from fifteenth chapter of the Qur'an (surah al-Hijr), and the other from the thirty eighth chapter of the Qur'an (surah Sad).

[al-Hijr 15:28] Behold! thy Lord said to the angels: "I am about to create man, from sounding clay from mud moulded into shape;

[al-Hijr 15:29] "When I have fashioned him (in due proportion) and breathed into him of My spirit, fall ye down in obeisance unto him."

[al-Hijr 15:30] So the angels prostrated themselves, all of them together:

[al-Hijr 15:31] Not so Iblis: he refused to be among those who prostrated themselves.

[al-Hijr 15:32] (God) said: "O Iblis! what is your reason for not being among those who prostrated themselves?"

[al-Hijr 15:33] (Iblis) said: "I am not one to prostrate myself to man, whom Thou didst create from sounding clay, from mud moulded into shape."

[al-Hijr 15:34] (God) said: "Then get thee out from here; for thou art rejected, accursed.

[al-Hijr 15:35] "And the curse shall be on thee till the day of Judgment."

[al-Hijr 15:36] (Iblis) said: "O my Lord! give me then respite till the Day the (dead) are raised."

[al-Hijr 15:37] (God) said: "Respite is granted thee."

[al-Hijr 15:38] "Till the Day of the Time appointed."

[Sad 38:71] Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: "I am about to create man from clay:

[Sad 38:72] "When I have fashioned him (in due proportion) and breathed into him of My spirit, fall

ye down in obeisance unto him."

[Sad 38:73] So the angels prostrated themselves, all of them together:

[Sad 38:74] Not so Iblis: he was haughty, and became one of those who reject Faith.

[Sad 38:75] (God) said: "O Iblis! What prevents thee from prostrating thyself to one whom I have created with my hands? Art thou haughty? Or art thou one of the high (and mighty) ones?"

[Sad 38:76] (Iblis) said: "I am better than he: thou createdst me from fire, and him thou createdst from clay."

[Sad 38:77] (God) said: "Then get thee out from here: for thou art rejected, accursed.

[Sad 38:78] "And My curse shall be on thee till the Day of Judgment."

[Sad 38:79] (Iblis) said: "O my Lord! Give me then respite till the Day the (dead) are raised."

[Sad 38:80] (God) said: "Respite then is granted thee-

[Sad 38:81] "Till the Day of the Time Appointed."

Now the two stories are essentially the same. First, one wonders why this story needs to be repeated. If, as is the claim of Orthodox Islamic tradition, Muhammad was receiving this information from God, why would God need to say this numerous times? Aside from the above two versions, the story also appears numerous times elsewhere in the Qur'an[20]. Worst of all, all these versions differ in one detail or another.

One question that I have asked Muslims before with regard to the verses above is: what was the exact conversation? What exactly did Allah say to Iblis? What was Iblis' exact response? The Muslims may claim that al-Qur'an yufassiru bacduhu bacdan (different parts of the Qur'an explain one another), and others will simply say that such questions should not be asked, but the reality is that none of them have an answer. The reason for this is that, while the general theme of the story is the same, the exact details differ. This is undoubtedly caused by multiple traditions that were floating around at the time of the Qur'an's compilation; variant traditions that were woven into the text.

There are numerous other examples of repetition, such as the story of Jesus' miraculous virgin birth, obviously taken from Christian folklore, and ultimately coming from Hindu folklore[21]. While the story is generally the same, the exact dialog between Mary and the angel(s) differs[22]. Moreover, surah al-Imran 3:45 begins with "When the angels said..." while the version in Maryam 19:17 only has one angel. Muslims have tried to reconcile this by claiming that the version in al-Imran is actually referring to only one angel, but he is spoken of in a plural tense out of respect. Regardless of how true this claim is, the fact still stands that in one version the angel is given this "royal plurality," while in the other he is not given such respect. This points to variant traditions.

Qur'an: A Compilation of Contradictions?

In the previously mentioned essay of Zulfikar Khan, numerous contradictions are mentioned. While Muslims may be able to explain away some, there are others that are simply inescapable. One

example would be the contradiction between surah Ha Mim As-Sajdah 41:9-12 and surah An-Nazi'at 79:27-30. Here are the respective verses, courtesy of the scientifically conscious Ahmed Ali translation:

[Ha Mim As-Sajdah 41:9-12] Say "Do you refuse to believe in Him who created the earth in two spans of time, and set up compeers to Him, the Lord of all the worlds? He placed firm stabilisers rising above its surface, blessed it with plenty and growth, and ingrained the means of growing its food within it, sufficient for all seekers in four spans. Then he turned to the heavens, and it was smoke. So He said to it and the earth: "Come with willing obedience or perforce." They said: "We come willingly." Then he created several skies in two spans [...]

[An-Nazi'at 79:27-30] Are you more difficult to create or the heavens? He built it, Raised it high, proportioned it, gave darkness to its night, and brightness to its day; And afterward spread out the earth.

Putting aside the absurd idea of clouds that speak (they said: "we come willingly;" talking water vapor?), and other nonsense that can be found in the above, I would like to comment on the obvious contradiction between these two variations of the creation story. In the first version, the heavens are adorned after it was said the earth was in existence, while the latter claims exactly the opposite. It is quite easy to see how these contradictory accounts came to be in a single text. Before the Qur'an was compiled, there must have been different people with their own traditions. When the text was put together, variant traditions were given equal consideration, and included into the compilation.

One more quick example should be more than enough. In the Qur'an, on two occasions it is written that the Jews, the Christians, the mysterious Sabians, and anyone else who believes in God and does good deeds shall have nothing to fear or regret[23]. However, surah al-Imran 3:85 contradicts this claim, by stating that anyone who chooses a religion other than Islam will have paradise denied them. Some heterodox Muslims, such as the followers of Rashad Khalifa, have translated islaam in surah al-Imran to mean "submission to God," thus including Jews and Christians, and making the verse fit with the previously mentioned verses.

Unfortunately this still does not work when one considers surah an-Nisa' 4:150-151, which speaks of painful punishments for those who do not accept all the prophets of Islam. These differing views cannot be reconciled, and amount to a contradiction. This contradiction is so embarrassingly obvious that tafsir[24] informs us that al-Imran abrogates the the other verses. The claim of abrogation opens the door to arguments about invalid verses, Allah changing his mind, and the dubious claim that the Qur'an is a copy of an unalterable book in heaven[25]. It is quite obvious that there were different persons or groups with their own versions of what God said. Some preached a tolerant Islam, where Jews and Christians were seen as fellow believers; others had a differing view, where only Muslims were on the right path.

Conclusion

Through all this, it has been shown that the Qur'an is indeed given to repetition of whole passages of variant versions. Blatant contradictions have been shown. With this now before us, how can we conclude that this text is the word of an Almighty God, or even a single Arab nomad? It is quite clear that the Qur'an is, as Cook and Crone said at the outset, "the product of belated and imperfect editing of materials from a plurality of traditions." There is simply no other possibility. Whenever

the Qur'an was compiled, its compiler(s) took numerous variant traditions into consideration, and included many, or even all, of them into the official cannon. The result is the Qur'an we have today.

Post Script: Book Recommendation

At the time I started toying with this theory, I received an email from Orientalist scholar Dr. Christoph Heger (Christoph.Heger@t-online.de), who wrote:

I have been too busy as to participate in a lot of interesting discussions which you, Dionisio [Denis], initiated. But I would like to let you know the conviction of mine and others that you are right, of course: The transmitted Qur'an is the work of multiple hands, comprising texts of different origins and having gone through various stages of editing. It is a really rewarding target of scholarly research to discover these various origins and strata.

So those who are able to read German I may point to a new work on Qur'an scholarship:

Luxenberg, Christoph, Die syro-aramäische Lesart des Koran : ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache. Berlin (Das Arabische Buch) 2000. 312 p. ISBN 3-86093-274-8 Pb. : DM 58.00, sfr 58.00

A rough translation of the German title would be "The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Qur'an - a Contribution to Decyphering the Language of the Qur'an". It is really illuminating!

Notes

1. Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World, (Cambridge, 1977) p. 18
2. For example, see Who Wrote the Bible? by Richard E. Friedman
3. Though it should be noted that this is first person plural, as in "We said to Moses," et cetera.
4. Walker, Foundations of Islam, (Peter Owen, 1998) p. 156
5. Warraq, Why I Am Not a Muslim, (Prometheus, 1995) p. 106
6. Surah Bani Israa'il 17:1
7. This is, according to Islamic folklore, the event where Muhammad flew on his flying horse to Jerusalem, and then ascended into heaven.
8. That is, the angel Gabriel, of Judeo-Christian folklore, who, according to Islamic tradition, is the one who brought Allah's message to Muhammad.
9. Virk is a Qadiani Muslim of internet fame. This argument is not from a published work; rather it is taken from the quasi-intellectual dialog that takes place in the usenet newsgroup soc.religion.islam.
10. Zulfikar Khan's essay, at the time of this writing, could be found on-line at <http://www.flex.com/~jai/satyamevajayate/koran.html>
11. The assumption that the source of the Qur'an is either Allah, or Muhammad, without considering other possibilities.
12. Consider the aforementioned Why I Am Not a Muslim, as well as The Origins of the Koran (Prometheus, 1998), both by Warraq.
13. Consider al-Rawandi's Islamic Mysticism: A Secular Perspective (Prometheus, 2000), as well as the second chapter of Ibn Warraq's Quest for the Historical Muhammad (Prometheus, 2000), which was also written by al-Rawandi.
14. For more on the shaky Islamic calendar, see Conrad, Lawrence I, Abraha and Muhammad,

Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 50 (1987) pp. 225-240; this same article can also be found reprinted in Warraq, Quest for the Historical Muhammad, pp. 368-391.

15. Surah Luqman 31:6

16. Surah al-Jathiyah 45:6

17. Hadith (plural: ahadith) can be translated as "tradition," "story," et cetera.

18. Reinach, Salomon, Orpheus: A History of Religion, (New York, 1932), p. 176, as cited in both Warraq, Quest for the Historical Muhammad, p. 9, and Katz, Bernard, The Ways of an Atheist, (Prometheus, 1999), p. 145

19. The act of worshipping something other than Allah.

20. See surat al-Baqarah 2:34; al-A`raf 7:11-15; Bani Israa'il 17:61; et cetera.

21. See The Mahabharata, abridged translation by Krishna Dharma, p. 62. Kunti, a virgin, is visited by a celestial being (in this case, the sun god Surya, not the angel Gabriel), and he informs Kunti that she is going to bear a child. She exclaims that is impossible since no man has touched her, to which the celestial being replies that such things are easy for God.

22. Compare surah al-Imran 3:45-50 with surah Maryam 19:16-21.

23. See surat al-Baqarah 2:62, al-Ma'ida 5:69, and also consider al-'Asra 103:2-3.

24. Orthodox commentary on the Qur'an, somewhat of the Islamic equivalent of Rabbinic commentary.

25. Surah al-Buruj 85:21-22.

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