

# THE QUR'AN-A CRITIQUE

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Text from JAY SMITH'S debate with DR. JAMAL BADAWI (August 9, 1995) at Trinity College, Cambridge; and further material from the debates at Teeside University, Middlesbrough (January 18, 1996), and from Southbank University, London (May 29, 1996)

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## INTRODUCTION:

In August of 1995 I was invited to debate the motion, "Is the Qur'an the Word of God?" with Dr. Jamal Badawi. The debate took place at Trinity College, Cambridge, and after our papers had been presented the debate was opened to the floor for an hour of questions from both the Muslims and Christians present. Below is the content of the paper which I gave at the debate, as well as further material which I used in the question and answer period, and further data which has come out since the time of the debate. Because of the interest shown in the topic, we have put this paper along with ten other apologetical papers, and certain Muslim rebuttals to the material, as well as a number of the popular 99 Truth Tracts on a web-site, on the internet (please use the following call number to access them: <http://www.domini.org/debate/home.htm>). Our hope is that with the material on this web-site the debate can continue around the world, and help to enliven the dialogue already begun by the Cambridge debate.

(Note: I have tried to footnote those statements which could prove to be contentious, or which would stimulate the readers to look for further data. I have used the Harvard model, which commences with the author's name, followed by the date of publication, and page number). Let us then begin our study.

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Islam claims that the Qur'an is not only God's Word, but that it is the final revelation given to humanity. It comes from the "Mother of all books" according to sura 43:2-4. Muslims maintain that the Qur'an is an exact word-for-word copy of God's final revelation which is found on the original tablets that have always existed in heaven. They point to sura 85:21-22 which says, "Nay this is a glorious Qur'an, (inscribed) in a tablet preserved." Islamic scholars contend that this passage refers to the tablets which were never created. They believe that the Qur'an is an identical copy of the eternal heavenly book, even so far as the punctuation, titles and divisions of chapters are concerned.

According to Muslim tradition, these 'revelations' began to be sent down (*Tanzil* or *Nazil*) (sura 17:85), to the lowest of the seven heavens in the month of Ramadan, during the night of power or destiny (*lailat al Qadr*) (Pfander, 1910:262). From there they were revealed to Muhammad in installments, as need arose, via the angel Gabriel (sura 25:32). Consequently, every letter and every word is free from any human influence, which gives the Qur'an an aura of authority, even holiness, and with such, its integrity.

Most westerners have accepted these claims from Muslims at face value. They have never had the ability to argue their veracity, because the claims could neither be proved nor disproved, as their authority was derived solely from the Qur'an itself (dispelling any attempt to wrest from the pages of the Bible fulfilled prophecies of Deuteronomy 18, John 14, 16; and perhaps others).

There has also been a reticence to question the Qur'an and the prophet due to the adverse response directed upon those who were brave enough to attempt it in the past. The fact is that for too long westerners have been content to assume that the Muslims had evidence and data to substantiate their claims.

It is only now, as secular scholars of Islam (known as "Orientalists") re-examine the Islamic sources, that evidence is being uncovered which puts into question much of what we have been led to believe concerning Muhammad and 'his revelation,' the Qur'an.

The findings of these scholars indicate that the Qur'an was not revealed to just one man, but was a compilation of later redactions (or editions) formulated by a group of men, over the course of a few hundred years (Rippin 1985:155; and 1990:3,25, 60). In other words, the Qur'an

which we read today is not that which was in existence in the mid-seventh century, but was more than likely a product of the eighth and ninth centuries (Wansbrough 1977:160-163). It was at this time, the Orientalists say, particularly in the ninth century, that Islam took on its classical identity and became that which is recognizable today. Consequently, the formative stage of Islam, they contend, was not within the lifetime of Muhammad but evolved over a period of 200-300 years (Humphreys 1991:71, 83-89).

Source material for this period, however, is sparse. Essentially the only sources which had been available to the historians were Muslim sources. What is more, outside the 'Qur'an,' the sources are all late. Prior to 750 A.D. we have no verifiable Muslim documents which can give us a window into this formative period of Islam (Wansbrough 1978:58-59). Nothing exists with which to corroborate 'Muslim Tradition' material (that is, Islamic history based on their traditions). Later documents simply draw upon earlier documents, which no longer exist today (if indeed they existed at all) (Crone 1987:225-226; Humphreys 1991:73). This classical period (around 800 A.D.) describes the earlier period, but from its own viewpoint, much like an adult, writing about their childhood will tend to remember those areas which were pleasant. Thus, the account is coloured, and biased, and as such cannot be accepted as authentic by historical scholars (refer to Crone's studies on the problems of the 'traditions,' especially those which were dependent on local storytellers, in Meccan Trade... 1987, pp.203-230 and Slaves on Horses, 1980, pp. 3-17).

Consequently, the demarcation line between what the historian will accept and that which Muslim Traditions maintain is growing further apart for the following reasons: Islam, according to orthodox Muslim scholars, gives complete credence to divine intervention for its revelation. Muslim Tradition asserts that Allah sent down his revelation to Muhammad via the angel Gabriel (*Jibril*) over a period of twenty-two years (610-632 A.D.), in which time many of the laws and traditions which delineate that which we define as Islam were formulated and worked out.

Yet it is this scenario which secular historians are balking at today, as it presupposes that in the early seventh century, Islam, a religion of immense sophistication, of intricate laws and traditions was formulated in a 'backward' nomadic culture and became fully functional in only twenty two years.

The *Hijaz* (central Arabia) before that time was hardly known in the civilized world. Even the later traditions refer to this period as *Jahiliyya* (or period of ignorance, implying its backwardness). Arabia before Muhammad did not have an urbanized culture, nor could it boast a sophisticated infrastructure needed to create, let alone maintain the scenario painted by the later traditions for the early period of Islam (Rippin 1990:3-4). So, how did it come together so neatly and so quickly? There is no historical precedence for such a scenario. One would expect such a degree of sophistication over a period of one or two centuries, provided there were other sources, such as neighbouring cultures from which traditions and laws could be borrowed, but certainly not within an unsophisticated desert environment, and certainly not within a period of a mere 22 years.

Secular historians cannot simply accept the position posited by the later traditions that this all came about by divine revelation, as they maintain that all of history must be substantiated with historical evidence. They are forced to stand back and ask how we know what we know, where the information originates, and whether it stands up to an "unbiased" or neutral historical analysis.

Historians had, therefore, been pushed into a dilemma. Due to their secular presuppositions they could not base their research on the existence of God, yet they could not throw out the Muslim Traditions (which naturally presuppose His existence), because they were the best and at times only documents available.

That is, until recently.

The new crop of historical experts on Islam (such as Dr. John Wansbrough, Michael Cook [both from SOAS], Patricia Crone formerly from Oxford now lecturing at Cambridge, Yehuda Nevo from the University of Jerusalem, Andrew Rippin from Canada, and others), while admitting that there is a mystery concerning the question of divine intervention, are now looking more closely at other sources concerning the Qur'an to ascertain clues to its origins. It is these sources which are now beginning to reveal evidence for alternative explanations to the beginnings of a religion which today encompasses 1/5th of the world's population, and is growing faster than any other major religion.

It is their work, therefore, that I would like to use, to understand better a possible origin for the Qur'an. It is their material, and others, which, I feel, Muslim apologists will need to face seriously in the years ahead, as much of this new data puts into serious doubt many of the claims forwarded by traditional Muslim scholars concerning their holy book, the Qur'an, and their prophet, Muhammad. Let us, then begin our analysis by taking a look at the sources for much of what we know concerning Islam, its prophet and its book.

## **[A] THE PROBLEMS WITH THE ISLAMIC TRADITIONS:**

In order to make a critique of the Qur'an it is important not to listen to what the exegetes are saying today, but to go back to the beginning, to the earliest sources of the Qur'an which we have at our disposal, to pick up clues as to its authenticity. One would assume that this should be quite easy to do, as it is a relatively new piece of literature, having appeared on the scene, according to Muslims, a mere "1,400 years ago."

### **(1) THE SOURCES:**

The question of sources has always been a contentious area for the secular scholar of Islam, as any study of the Qur'an must begin with the problem of primary versus secondary sources. Primary sources are those materials which are the closest, or have direct access to the event. Secondary sources concern any material which tends to be more recent and, consequently, is dependent on the primary sources. In Islam, the primary sources which we possess are 150-300 years after the events which they describe, and therefore are quite distant from those events (Nevo 1994:108; Wansbrough 1978:119; Crone 1987:204). For that reason they are, for all practical purposes, secondary sources, as they rely on other material, much of which no longer exists. The first and largest of these sources is that of "Muslim or Islamic Traditions." Because of the importance of the Muslim Traditions it is crucial that we deal with them first.

Muslim Traditions are comprised of writings which were compiled by Muslims in the late eighth to early tenth centuries concerning what the prophet Muhammad said and did back in the seventh century, and commentaries on the Qur'an. They are by far the most extensive body of material which we have today on the early period of Islam. They are also written in greater detail than anything else in our possession, in that they include dates as well as explanations for what happened. They are a complement to the Qur'an.

The Qur'an by itself is difficult to follow, as it leaves the reader confused while it jumps from story to story, with little background narration or explanation. It is at this point that the traditions are important as they fill in details which otherwise would be lost. In some instances the traditions prevail over the Qur'an; as for example, when the Qur'an refers to three daily prayers (suras 11:114; 17:78-79; 30:17-18 and possibly 24:58), while the five daily prayers

stipulated by the later traditions have been adopted by Muslims ever since (Glasse 1991:381).

A number of genres exist within these traditions. Their authors were not writers themselves, but were compilers and editors who drew together information “passed to them,” and produced it. There are many compilers, but the four who are considered by many Muslims to be the most authoritative in each genre all lived and assembled their material between 750-923 A.D. (or 120-290 years after the death of Muhammad). It may be helpful to list their works, along with their dates:

1) The **Sira** are accounts concerning the traditional life of the prophet (including his battles). The most comprehensive *Sira* was written by Ibn Ishaq (died 765 A.D.), though none of his manuscripts exist today. Consequently, we are dependent on the *Sira* of Ibn Hisham (died 833 A.D.), which was supposedly taken from that of Ibn Ishaq, though, by his own admission (according to the research of Patricia Crone) he omitted those areas which might have caused offense (such as anything which he felt was repugnant, poems not attested elsewhere, as well as matters which he could not accept as trustworthy) (Crone 1980:6).

2) The **Hadith** are thousands of short reports or narratives (*akhbar*) on the sayings and deeds of the prophet which were collected by Muslims in the ninth and tenth centuries. Of the six most famous collections of *Hadith*, those of al-Bukhari (died 870 A.D.) are considered by many Muslims as the most authoritative.

3) The **Ta'rikh** are histories or chronologies of the prophet's life, the most famous written by al-Tabari (died 923 A.D.) early in the tenth century.

4) The **Tafsir**, are commentaries and exegesis on the Qur'an, its grammar and its context; the best known also written by al-Tabari (died 923 A.D.).

## **(2) LATE DATES:**

Obviously, the first question which we must ask is why these traditions were written so late, 150-300 years after the fact? We simply do not have any “account from the ‘Islamic’ community during the [initial] 150 years or so, between the first Arab conquests [of the early seventh century] and the appearance, with the *sira-maghazi* narratives, of the earliest Islamic literature” [towards the late eighth century] (Wansbrough 1978:119). We should expect to find, in those intervening 150 years, at least remnants of evidence for the development of the old Arab religion towards Islam (i.e. Muslim traditions); yet we find nothing (Nevo 1994:108; Crone 1980:5-8).

There are Muslims who disagree, maintaining that there is evidence of earlier traditions, principally the Muwatta by Malik ibn Anas (born in 712 A.D. and died in 795 A.D.). Norman Calder in his book Studies in Early Muslim Jurisprudence disagrees with such an early date and questions whether works can be attributed to the authors listed. He argues that most of the texts we have from these supposedly early authors are “school texts,” transmitted and developed over several generations, and achieving the form in which we know them considerably later than the putative “authors” to whom they are usually ascribed. Following the current assumption that “Shafi’i’s law” (which demanded that all hadith be traced to Muhammad) did not come into effect until after 820 A.D., he concluded that because the Mudawwana does not speak of Muhammad’s prophetic authority whereas the Muwatta does, the Muwatta must be the later document. Consequently, Calder positions the Muwatta not prior to 795 A.D., but sometime after the Mudawwana which was written in 854 A.D. In fact Calder places the Muwatta not even in eighth century Arabia but in eleventh century Cordoba, Spain (Calder 1993). If he is correct then we are indeed left with little evidence of any traditions from the early period of Islam.

Humphreys crystallizes this problem when he points out that, “Muslims, we would

suppose, must surely have taken great care to record their spectacular achievements, while the highly literate and urbanized societies which they had subjugated could hardly avoid coming to grips with what had happened to them.” (Humphreys 1991:69) Yet, according to Humphreys all we find from this early period are sources which are, “either fragmentary or represent very specific or even eccentric perspectives,” completely annulling any possibility of reconstructing Islam’s first century adequately (Humphreys 1991:69).

The question, therefore, must be asked as to where the eighth and ninth century compilers actually obtained their material from?

The answer is that we just don't know. “Our evidence for documentation prior to 750 A.D. consists almost entirely of rather dubious citations in later compilations.” (Humphreys 1991:80) Consequently, we have no reliable proof that the traditions speak truly of the life of Muhammad, or even of the Qur’an (Schacht 1949:143-154). We are asked to believe that these documents, written hundreds of years later are accurate, though we are not presented with any evidence for their veracity, outside of *Isnads*, which are nothing more than lists purporting to give the names of those from whom these oral traditions were passed down. Yet even the *Isnads* lack any supportive documentation with which to corroborate their authenticity (Humphreys 1991:81-83)! However, more of that later in the paper.

**(a) Writing:**

Muslims maintain that the late dates of the primary sources can be attributed to the fact that writing was simply not used in such an isolated area at that time. This assumption is completely unfounded, as writing on paper began long before the seventh century. Writing paper was invented in the fourth century, and used extensively throughout the civilized world thereafter. The Umayyad dynasty was headquartered in the former Byzantine area of Syria (and not Arabia). Thus it was a sophisticated society and used secretaries in the Caliphal courts, proving that manuscript writing was well developed there.

Furthermore, we are told that Arabia (better known as the Hijaz) in the seventh century and earlier, was an area of trade, with caravans plying routes north-south, and possibly east-and west. While the evidence shows that the trade was primarily local (as we will discuss later), caravans were in use. How did the caravaneers keep their records? They certainly didn't memorize the figures.

And finally, we must ask how we came by the Qur'an if there was no-one capable of putting-pen-to-paper before that time? Muslims claim the existence of a number of codices of the Qur'an shortly after the death of Muhammad, such as those of Abdullah ibn Mas'ud, Abu Musa, and Ubayy b. Ka'b (Pearson 1986:406). What were these codices if they were not written documents? The Uthmanic text itself had to have been written, otherwise it would not be a text! Writing was available, but for some reason, no record was kept of those supposed earlier documents prior to 750 A.D.

**(b) Age:**

Other Muslim scholars maintain that the absence of early documentation can be blamed on old age. They believe that the material upon which the primary sources were written either disintegrated over time, leaving us with few examples today, or wore out from heavy handling and so were destroyed.

This argument is rather dubious. In the British Library we have ample examples of documents written by individuals in communities which were not too distant from Arabia, yet they predate these manuscripts by hundreds of years. On display are New Testament manuscripts such as the Codex Syniaticus and the Codex Alexandrinus, both of which were written in the fourth century, three to four hundred years before the period in question! Why have they not

disintegrated with age?

Where this argument is especially weak, however, is when we apply it to the Qur'an itself. The "Uthmanic text" of the Qur'an (the final canon supposedly compiled by Zaid ibn Thabit, under the direction of the third caliph Uthman) is considered by all Muslims to be the most important piece of literature ever written. As we noted earlier, according to Sura 43:2-4, it is the "mother of books." Its importance lies in the fact that it is considered to be an exact replica of the "eternal tablets" which exist in heaven (Sura 85:22). Muslim tradition informs us that all other competing codices and manuscripts were destroyed after 646-650 A.D. Even "Hafsah's copy," from which the final recension was taken was burned. If this Uthmanic text was so important, why then was it not written on paper, or other material which would have lasted till today? And certainly, if the earliest manuscripts wore out with usage, why were they not replaced with others written on skin, like so many other older documents which are still in existence today?

We have absolutely no evidence for the original Qur'anic text (Schimmel 1984:4). Nor do we have any of the alleged four copies which were made of this recension and sent to Mecca, Medina, Basra and Damascus (see Gilchrist's arguments in his book Jam' al-Qur'an, 1989, pp. 140-154, as well as Lings & Safadi's The Qur'an 1976, pp. 11-17). Even if these copies had somehow disintegrated with age, there would surely be some fragments of the documents which we could refer to.

By the end of the seventh century Islam had expanded right across North Africa and up into Spain, and east as far as India. The Qur'an (according to tradition) was the centrepiece of their faith. Certainly within that enormous sphere of influence there should be some Qur'anic documents or manuscripts which still exist till this day. Yet, there is nothing from that period at all.

While Christianity can claim more than 5,300 known Greek manuscripts of the New Testament, 10,000 Latin Vulgates and at least 9,300 other early versions, adding up to over 24,000 New Testament manuscripts still in existence (McDowell 1990:43-55), most of which were written between 25-400 years after the death of Christ (or between the 1st and 5th centuries) (McDowell 1972:39-49), Islam can not provide a single manuscript until well into the eighth century (Lings & Safadi 1976:17; Schimmel 1984:4-6). If the Christians could retain so many thousands of ancient manuscripts, all of which were written long before the seventh century, at a time when paper had not yet been introduced, forcing the dependency on papyrus which disintegrated, then one wonders why the Muslims are not able to forward a single manuscript from this much later period, when it was supposedly revealed? This indeed presents a problem for the argument that the earliest Qur'ans all simply disintegrated with age, or were destroyed because they were worn.

### **(c) Scripts:**

In response, Muslims contend that they do have a number of these "Uthmanic recensions," these original copies from the seventh century still in their possession. I have heard Muslims claim that there are original copies in Mecca, in Cairo and in almost every ancient Islamic settlement. I have often asked them to furnish me with the data which would substantiate their antiquity; a task which, to date, nobody has been able to do.

There are two documents, however, which do hold some credibility, and to which many Muslims refer. These are the Samarkand Manuscript, which is located in the Soviet State Library, at Tashkent, Uzbekistan (in the southern part of the former Soviet Union), and the Topkapi Manuscript, which can be found in the Topkapi Museum, in Istanbul, Turkey.

These two documents are indeed old, and there has been ample enough etymological and paleographical analysis done on them by scriptologists, as well as experts in Arabic calligraphy

to warrant their discussion here.

**Samarkand Manuscript:** (taken from Gilchrist's Jam' al-Qur'an 1989, pp. 148-150)

The Samarkand Manuscript is not at all a complete document. In fact, out of the 114 suras found in today's Qur'ans, only parts of suras 2 to 43 are included. Of these suras much of the text is missing. The actual inscription of the text in the Samarkand codex presents a real problem, as it is very irregular. Some pages are neatly and uniformly copied out while others are quite untidy and imbalanced (Gilchrist 1989:139 and 154). On some pages the text is fairly expansive, while on other pages it is severely cramped and condensed. At times the Arabic letter *KAF* has been excluded from the text, while at others it not only is extended but is the dominant letter in the text. Because so many pages of the manuscript differ so extensively from one another, the assumption is that it is a composite text, compiled from portions of different manuscripts (Gilchrist 1989:150).

Also within the text one can find artistic illuminations between the suras, usually made up of coloured bands of rows of squares, as well as 151 red, green, blue and orange medallions. These illuminations have compelled the scriptologists to give the codex a ninth century origin, as it is grossly unlikely that such embellishments would have accompanied a seventh century Uthmanic manuscript sent out to the various provinces (Lings & Safadi 1976:17-20; Gilchrist 1989:151).

**Topkapi Manuscript:**

The Topkapi Manuscript in Istanbul, Turkey is also written on parchment, and devoid of vocalization (see Gilchrist, 1989, pp.151-153). Like the Samarkand MSS it is supplemented with ornamental medallions indicating a later age (Lings & Safadi 1976:17-20).

Muslims claim that this too must be one of the original copies, if not the original one compiled by Zaid ibn Thabit. Yet one only needs to compare it with the Samarkand codex to realize that they most certainly cannot both be Uthmanic originals. For instance, the Istanbul's Topkapi codex has 18 lines to the page whereas the Samarkand codex in Tashkent has only half that many, between 8 and 12 lines to the page; the Istanbul codex is inscribed throughout in a very formal manner, the words and lines quite uniformly written out, while the text of the Samarkand codex is often haphazard and considerably distorted. One cannot believe that both these manuscripts were copied out by the same scribes.

**Script Analysis:**

Experts in manuscript analysis use three tests for ascertaining their age. To begin with they test the age of the paper on which the manuscript is written, using such chemical processes as Carbon -14 dating. This is adequate for recent documents such as the Qur'an, as precise dating of between plus or minus 20 years is possible. There has been a reticence to use it, however, because the amount of material that has to be destroyed in the process (1-3 grams) would require the loss of too much of the manuscript. A more refined form of carbon-14 dating known as AMS (accelerator mass spectrometry) is now used requiring only 0.5-1.0 mg. of material for testing (Vanderkam 1994:17). Yet, to date neither of these manuscripts have been tested by this more advanced and precise method.

Experts also study the ink of the manuscript and analyse its makeup, discerning from where it originated, or if it had been erased and copied over. But the age for these documents would be difficult to pinpoint because of the lateness of the document. These problems are compiled by the inaccessibility for westerners of these manuscripts for detailed research, due to a fear by those who guard them.

Thus the specialists must go to the script itself to analyse whether the manuscript is recent or old. This study is better known as Paleography. Styles of letter formation change over time.



These changes tend to be uniform as manuscripts were usually written by professional scribes. Thus the penmanship tended to follow easy to delineate conventions, with only gradual modifications (Vanderkam 1994:16). By examining the handwriting in texts whose dates are already known, and noting their development over time, a paleographer can compare them with other undated texts, and thereby ascertain the time period in which they belong.

It is when we apply the paleographical test to both the Sammarkand and Topkapi manuscripts that we arrive at some interesting conclusions concerning their dates. It is this evidence which is proving to be the most serious argument against the possibility that either of these two manuscripts could be those copied out for Uthman, or that they were even in existence in the seventh century.

#### The Kufic Script:

What most Muslims do not realize is that these two manuscripts are written in the *Kufic* Script, a script which according to modern Qur'anic experts, such as Martin Lings and Yasin Hamid Safadi, did not appear until late into the eighth century (790s and later), and was not in use at all in Mecca and Medina in the seventh century (Lings & Safadi 1976:12-13,17; Gilchrist 1989:145-146; 152-153).

The reasons for this are quite simple. Consider: The *Kufic* script, properly known as *al-Khatt al-Kufi*, derives its name from the city of Kufa in Iraq (Lings & Safadi 1976:17). It would be rather odd for this to be the official script of an Arabic Qur'an as it is a script which takes its name from a city that had only been conquered by the Arabs a mere 10-14 years earlier.

It is important to note that the city of Kufa, which is in present day Iraq, was a city which would have been Sassanid or Persian before that time (637-8 A.D.). Thus, while Arabic would have been known there, it would not have been the predominant language, let alone the predominant script until much later.

We know in fact, that the *Kufic* script reached its perfection during the late eighth century (up to one hundred and fifty years after Muhammad's death) and thereafter it became widely used throughout the Muslim world (Lings & Safadi 1976:12,17; Gilchrist 1989:145-146). This makes sense, since after 750 A.D. the Abbasids controlled Islam, and due to their Persian background were headquartered in the Kufa and Baghdad areas. They would thus have wanted their script to dominate. Having been themselves dominated by the Umayyads (who were based in Damascus) for around 100 years, it would now be quite understandable that an Arabic script which originated in their area of influence, such as the *Kufic* script would evolve into that which we find in these two documents mentioned here.

#### The Landscape Format:

Another factor which points to the late dates for these two manuscripts are the format with which they are written. One will observe that due to the elongated style of the Kufic script they both use paper which is wider than it is tall. This is known as the "Landscape format," a format borrowed from Syriac and Iraqi Christian documents of the eighth and ninth centuries. The earlier Arabic manuscripts were all written in the "upright format" (thanks to Dr. Hugh Goodacre of the Oriental and India Office Collections, who pointed this fact out to me before the Southbank debate).

Therefore, it stands to reason that both the Topkapi and Samarkand Manuscripts, because they are written in the *Kufic* script, and because they use the landscape format could not have been written earlier than 150 years after the Uthmanic Recension was supposedly compiled; at the earliest the late 700s or early 800s (Gilchrist 1989:144-147).

#### Ma'il and Mashq Scripts:

So what script would have been used in the *Hijaz* (Arabia) at that time? We do know that

there were two earlier Arabic scripts which most modern Muslims are not familiar with. These are the *al-Ma'il* Script, developed in the *Hijaz*, particularly in Mecca and Medina, and the *Mashq* Script, also developed in Medina (Lings & Safadi 1976:11; Gilchrist 1989:144-145). The *al-Ma'il* Script came into use in the seventh century and is easily identified, as it was written at a slight angle (see the example on page 16 of Gilchrist's *Jam' al-Qur'an*, 1989). In fact the word *al-Ma'il* means "slanting." This script survived for about two centuries before falling into disuse.

The *Mashq* Script also began in the seventh century, but continued to be used for many centuries. It is more horizontal in form and can be distinguished by its somewhat cursive and leisurely style (Gilchrist 1989:144).

If the Qur'an had been compiled at this time in the seventh century, then one would expect it to have been written in either the *Ma'il* or *Mashq* script.

Interestingly, we do have a Qur'an written in the *Ma'il* script, and considered to be the earliest Qur'an in our possession today. Yet it is not found in either Istanbul or Tashkent, but, ironically, resides in the British Museum in London (Lings & Safadi 1976:17,20; Gilchrist 1989:16,144). It has been dated towards the end of the eighth century, by Martin Lings, the former curator for the manuscripts of the British Museum, who is himself, a practising Muslim.

Therefore, with the help of script analysis, we are quite certain that there is no known manuscript of the Qur'an which we possess today which can be dated from the seventh century (Gilchrist 1989:147-148,153).

Furthermore, virtually all the earliest Qur'anic manuscript fragments which we do possess cannot be dated earlier than 100 years after the time of Muhammad. In her book Calligraphy and Islamic Culture, Annemarie Schimmel underlines this point when she states that apart from the recently discovered [Korans] in Sanaa, "the earliest datable fragments go back to the first quarter of the eighth century." (Schimmels 1984:4)

Interestingly, these Qur'ans from Sanaa still remain a mystery, as the Yemen government has not permitted the Germans who discovered them to publish their findings. Could this be a possible cover-up due to what these 'earliest' Qur'ans might reveal? There have been suggestions that the script in these early eighth century Qur'ans does not correspond to that which we have today. We still wait to know the whole truth.

From the evidence we do have, however, it would seem improbable that portions of the Qur'an supposedly copied out at Uthman's direction have survived. What we are left with is the intervening 150 years for which we cannot account. However, before proceeding with the Qur'an, let us return to the Muslim traditions and continue our discussion on whether these earliest sources of the Qur'an can provide an adequate assessment of the Qur'an's authority. The body of traditions which are most widely used are the *Hadith*.

### **(3) CREDIBILITY:**

There is much discussion not only amongst the secular historians, but within Islam as well, even today, as to the credibility of the hadith compilations.

As we noted earlier, the bulk of our historical texts on early Islam were compiled between 800-950 A.D. (Humphreys 1991:71). All later material used these compilations as their standard, while earlier material simply cannot be corroborated with any degree of authenticity (Humphreys 1991:71-72). It could be that the earlier traditions were no longer relevant, and so were left to disintegrate, or were destroyed. We don't know. What we do know is that these compilers most likely took their material from collections compiled within the decades around 800 A.D., and not from any documents which were written in the seventh century, and certainly not from the person of Muhammad or his companions (Humphreys 1991:73, 83; Schacht 1949:143-145; Goldziher

1889-90:72).

We also know that many of their compilations were paraphrases of earlier *Akhbars* (anecdotes and phrases) which they considered to be acceptable, though what their criterion was is still a mystery (Humphreys 1991:83). It now seems obvious that the early ninth century “schools of law” authenticated their own agenda by asserting that their doctrines came initially from the companions of the prophet and then from the prophet himself (Schacht 1949:153-154).

Schacht maintains that the origin for this undertaking was the scholar *al-Shafi'i* (died in 820 A.D.). It was he who stipulated that all traditions of law must be traced back to Muhammad in order to retain their credibility. As a result the great mass of legal traditions perpetrated by the classical schools of law invoking the authority of the prophet originated during the time of Shafi'i and later, and consequently express later Iraqi doctrines, and not those from early Arabia (Schacht 1949:145). It is this agenda imposed by each school of law concerning the choice of the traditions in the ninth and tenth centuries which many now believe invalidates the authenticity for the hadith.

Wansbrough agrees with Humphreys and Schacht when he maintains that literary records, although presenting themselves as contemporary with the events they describe, actually belonged to a period well after such events, which suggests that they had been written according to later points of view in order to fit the purposes and agendas of that later time (Rippin 1985:155-156).

Take the example of the Shi'ites. Their agenda is indeed quite transparent, as they maintain that of the 2,000 valid hadith the majority (1,750) were derived from Ali, the son-in-law of the prophet, to whom all Shi'ites look for inspiration. To a casual observer this looks rather suspect. If the premise for authenticity for the Shi'ites was purely political, then why should we not deduce the same premise was likewise at work with the other compilers of the traditions?

The question we must ask is whether or not there is an underlying “grain of historical truth” which is left for us to use? Schacht and Wansbrough are both sceptical on this point (Schacht 1949:147-149; Wansbrough 1978:119).

Patricia Crone takes the argument one step further by contending that credibility for the traditions has been lost due to the bias of each individual compiler. She states,

The works of the first compilers such as Abu Mikhnaf, Sayf b. `Umar, `Awana, Ibn Ishaq and Ibn al-Kalbi are accordingly mere piles of disparate traditions reflecting no one personality, school, time or place: as the Medinese Ibn Ishaq transmits traditions in favour of Iraq, so the Iraqi Sayf has traditions against it. And all the compilations are characterized by the inclusion of material in support of conflicting legal and doctrinal persuasions. (Crone 1980:10)

In other words, local schools of law simply formed different traditions, relying on local conventions and the opinions of local scholars (Rippin 1990:76-77). In time scholars became aware of this diversity and saw the need to unify Muslim law. The solution was found by appealing to Prophetic tradition, which would have authority over a scholar's *ra'y* (opinion). Hence the traditions attributed to the Prophet began to multiply from around 820 A.D. onwards (Schacht 1949:145; Rippin 1990:78).

Take the example of the *Sira*, which gives us the best material on the prophet's life. It seems to take some of its information from the Qur'an. Although *Isnads* are used to determine authenticity (which we now know to be suspect, as we shall see later), its authority is dependent on the authority of the Qur'an, whose credibility is now in doubt as well (also to be discussed in a later section). According to G. Levi Della Vida, in his article on the *Sira*, the formation of the *Sira* down to the period of its reduction to its “canonical” form seems to have taken place along

the following lines:

The continually increasing veneration for the person of Muhammad provoked the growth around his figure of a legend of hagiographical (idolizing) character in which alongside of more-or-less corrupt historical memories there gathered episodes modelled on Jewish or Christian religious tradition (perhaps also Iranian, although to a much lesser degree). (Levi Della Vida 1934:441)

He goes on to explain that this material became ,

organized and systematized in the schools of the Medina muhaddithun, through a 'midrash,' subtle and full of combinations, made up of passages from the Qur'an in which exegesis had delighted to discover allusions to very definite events in the life of the Prophet. It was in this way that the history of the Medina period was formed. (Levi Della Vida 1934:441)

We are therefore left with documents which hold little credibility (Crone 1987:213-215). Even earlier material helps us little. The Maghazi, which are stories of the prophet's battles and campaigns, are the earliest Muslim documents which we possess. They should have given us the best snapshot of that time, yet they tell us little concerning the prophet's life or teachings. In fact, oddly enough nowhere in these documents is there a veneration of Muhammad as a prophet!

#### **(4) CONTRADICTIONS:**

A further problem with the traditions are the contradictions, confusions and inconsistencies as well as anomalies which are evident throughout. For instance Crone asks, "What do we do with Baladhuri's statement that the *Qibla* (direction for prayer) in the first Kufan mosque was to the west...that there are so many Fatimas, and that 'Ali is sometimes Muhammad's brother? It is a tradition in which information means nothing and leads nowhere." (Crone 1980:12)

Certain authors wrote reports which contradict other reports which they had themselves written (Humphreys 1991:73; Crone 1987:217-218). Al-Tabari, for instance, often gives different, and sometimes conflicting accounts of the same incidents (Kennedy 1986:362). The question of how far al-Tabari edited his material therefore remains an open one. Did he select the *akhbar* (short narratives) which he used in order to develop and illustrate major themes about the history of the Islamic state? We don't know.

Ibn Ishaq informs us that Muhammad stepped into a political vacuum upon entering *Yathrib* (Medina), but then later tells us that he snatched away authority from a well-established ruler there (Ibn Hisham ed.1860: 285, 385, 411). Ibn Ishaq also relates that the Jews in Medina were supportive of their Arab neighbours, and yet were molested by them (Ibn Hisham ed.1860:286, 372, 373, 378). Which of these contradictory accounts are we to believe? As Crone points out, "the stories are told with complete disregard for what the situation in Medina may or may not have been like in historical fact." (Crone 1987:218)

Another difficulty are the seeming contradictory accounts given by different compilers (Rippin 1990:10-11). Many are variations on a common theme. Take for example the 15 different accounts of Muhammad's encounter with a representative of a non-Islamic religion who recognizes him as a future prophet (Crone 1987:219-220). Some traditions place this encounter during his infancy (Ibn Hisham ed.1860:107), others when he was nine or twelve years old (Ibn Sa'd 1960:120), while others say he was twenty-five at the time (Ibn Hisham ed.1860:119). Some traditions maintain that he was seen by Ethiopian Christians (Ibn Hisham ed.1860:107), or

by Jews ('Abd al-Razzaq 1972: 318), while others maintain it was a seer or a *Kahin* at either Mecca, or Ukaz or Dhu'l-Majaz (Ibn Sa'd 1960:166; 'Abd al-Razzaq 1972:317; Abu Nu'aym 1950:95, 116f). Crone concludes that what we have here is nothing more than "fifteen equally fictitious versions of an event that never took place." (Crone 1987:220)

Consequently it is difficult to ascertain which reports are authentic, and which are to be discarded. This is a problem which confounds Muslims and orientalist even today.

### **(5) SIMILARITIES:**

On the other hand, many of the traditions reflect the same material as the others, implying the recycling of the same body of data down through the centuries without any reference to where it originated.

Take for example al-Tabari's history of the life of the prophet which is much the same as Ibn Hisham's *Sira*, and much the same as his "Commentary on the Qur'an," which is much the same as Bukhari's Hadith collection. Because of their similarities at such a late date, they seem to point to a singular source early in the ninth century, from which all the others took their material (Crone 1980:11). Does this suggest a "canon" of material authorized by the *Ulama*? Possibly, but we can never be sure.

### **(6) PROLIFERATION:**

A further problem with these traditions is that of proliferation (Rippin 1990:34). As we have mentioned, these works begin to appear not earlier than the eighth century (200-300 years after the event to which they refer). Then suddenly they proliferate by the hundreds of thousands. Why? How can we explain this proliferation?

Take the instance of the death of 'Abdallah, the father of Muhammad. The compilers of the mid to late eighth century (Ibn Ishaq and Ma'mar) were agreed that 'Abdallah had died early enough to leave Muhammad an orphan; but as to the specific details of his death, 'God knew best' (Cook 1983:63).

Further on into the ninth century more seems to be known. Waqidi, who wrote fifty years later tells us not only when 'Abdallah died, but how he died, where he died, what his age was, and the exact place of his burial. According to Michael Cook, "this evolution in the course of half a century from uncertainty to a profusion of precise detail suggests that a fair amount of what Waqidi knew was not knowledge." (Cook 1983:63-65) This is rather typical of Waqidi. He was always willing to give precise dates, locations, names where Ibn Ishaq had none (Crone 1987:224). "It is no wonder," Crone retorts,

that scholars are so fond of Waqidi: where else does one find such wonderfully precise information about everything one wishes to know? But given that this information was all unknown earlier to Ibn Ishaq, its value is doubtful in the extreme. And if spurious information accumulated at this rate in the two generations between Ibn Ishaq and Waqidi, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that even more must have accumulated in the three generations between the Prophet and Ibn Ishaq." (Crone 1987:224)

Consequently, without any real supervision, or the desire to present any documentation the compilers became more than what their office permitted.

Muslim scholars who are aware of this proliferation excuse it by contending that the Muslim religion was beginning to stabilize at this time. Thus, it was natural that the literary works would also begin to appear more numerous. Earlier written material, they say, was no longer

relevant for the new Islam, and consequently was either discarded or lost (Humphreys 1991:72).

While there is some credence to this theory, one would assume that even a few of these documents would have remained, tucked away in some library, or within someone's collection. Yet there is nothing, and this is suspicious.

Of more importance, however, is whether the "Uthmanic Qur'anic text" (the final recension, supposedly compiled by Zaid ibn Thabit in 646-650 A.D., and the source for our contemporary Qur'an) would be included in this scenario? Certainly it would have been considered to be of relevance, for, as we have previously mentioned, according to tradition all of the other copies and codices were burned by the Caliph Uthman soon after, leaving this one text, from which four copies were made. Where are these copies today? The earliest manuscript segments of the Qur'an which we possess are not dated earlier than 690-750 A.D.! (Schimmel 1984:4) Are those who hold this position willing to admit that these four copies were also discarded because they were no longer relevant for the new Islam?

Furthermore, the sheer number of Hadith which suddenly appear in the ninth century creates a good deal of scepticism. It has been claimed that by the mid-ninth century there were over **600,000 hadith**, or early stories about the prophet. In fact, tradition has it that they were so numerous that the ruling Caliph asked Al Bukhari, the well-known scholar, to collect the true sayings of the prophet out of the 600,000. Obviously, even then there was doubt concerning the veracity for many of these Hadith.

Bukhari never spelled out the criteria which guided his choice, except for vague pronouncements of "unreliability" or "unsuitability" (Humphreys 1991:73). In the end, he retained only **7,397** of the hadith, or roughly a mere 1.2%! However, allowing for repetition, the net total was 2,762, gathered, it is said, from the 600,000 (A.K.C. 1993:12). What this means is that of the 600,000 hadith **592,603** of them were false, and had to be scrapped! Thus nearly 99% were considered spurious! This beggars belief!

Ironically it is just this sort of scenario which creates doubt about the authenticity of any of the hadith. Where did these 600,000 sayings come from in the first place if so many were considered to be spurious? Were any of them written down? Do we have any evidence of their existence before this time? None at all!

The fact that they suddenly materialized at this period (in the ninth century, or 250 years after the event to which they refer), and just as suddenly were rejected, seems to suggest that they were created or adopted at this time, and not at an earlier date. This echoes the statement made earlier by Schacht concerning the need by compilers of the ninth century to authenticate borrowed laws and traditions by finding a link with the Prophet. In their haste they borrowed much too liberally, which in turn, forced the *Ulama* to step in and canonize those hadith which they considered supported their agenda.

That still leaves us with the problem of how they decided which hadith were authentic and which were not.

### **(7) ISNAD:**

To answer this problem, Muslim scholars maintain that the primary means for choosing between the authentic and the spurious hadith was a process of oral transmission called in Arabic *Isnad*. This, Muslims contend, was the science which was used by Bukhari, Tabari and other ninth and tenth century compilers to authenticate their compilations. In order to know who was the original author of the numerous hadith at their disposal, the compilers provided a list of names which supposedly traced back the authorship through time to the prophet himself. Because of its importance for our discussion, this science of *Isnad* needs to be explained in greater detail:

In order to give credibility to a hadith, or a narrative, a list of names was attached to each document supposedly designating through whom the hadith had been passed down. It was a chain of names of transmitters, stating, 'I received this from \_\_\_\_ who obtained it from \_\_\_\_ who got it from a companion of the prophet.' (Rippin 1990:37-39)

While we in the West find oral transmission suspect, it was well developed within the Arab world, and the vehicle for passing down much of their history. The problem with oral transmission is that by its very nature, it can be open to corruption as it has no written formula or documentation to corroborate it. Thus, it can easily be manipulated according to the agenda of the orator (much like a child's game of "Chinese Whispers").

For the early Muslim, however, an Isnad was considered essential, as it gave the signature of those from whom the document came. Our concern is how we can know whether the names were authentic? Did the person to whom the Isnad is credited really say what he is credited as saying?

A compiler, in order to gain credibility for his writings, would list historically well-known individuals in his Isnad, similar to the custom we use today of requesting noteworthy individuals to write forwards in our books. The larger the list within the chain the greater its credibility. But unlike those who write forwards today, the ninth century compilers had no documentation to prove that their sources were authentic. Those individuals whose names they borrowed were long dead, and could not vouch for what they had allegedly said.

Curiously, "isnads had a tendency to 'grow backwards.'" In certain early texts a statement will be found attributed to a caliph of the Umayyad dynasty, for example, or will even be unattributed, as in the case of certain legal maxims; elsewhere, the same statements will be found in the form of hadith reports with fully documented isnads going back to Muhammad or one of his companions." (Rippin 1990:38)

It therefore seems likely that isnads were used to give authority to certain hadith which "clearly are concerned with matters of interest to the community in generations after Muhammad but which have been framed as predictions made by him." (Rippin 1990:38) These isnads and the hadith which they supposedly authenticate merely testify to what the exegetes chose to believe rather than to what can be deemed as historical facts, which in turn weakens that which they sought to communicate (Crone 1987:214).

It is rather obvious, therefore, that the isnads rather than corroborating and substantiating the material which we find in the Muslim traditions, present instead an even greater problem. We are left with the realisation that without any continuous transmission between the seventh and eighth centuries, the traditions can only be considered a snapshot of the later ninth and tenth centuries and nothing more (Crone 1987:226).

What is more, the science of Isnad, which set about to authenticate those very Isnads only began in the tenth century, long after the Isnads in question had already been compiled (Humphreys 1991:81), and so have little relevance for our discussion. Consequently, because it is such an inexact science, the 'rule of thumb' for most historians today is: 'the larger the list, which includes the best known historical names, the more suspect its authenticity.' We will never know, therefore, whether the names listed in the Isnads ever gave or received the information with which they are credited.

### **(8) STORYTELLING:**

Possibly the greatest argument against the use of Muslim Tradition as a source is the problem of transmission. To better understand the argument we need to delve into the hundred or so years prior to Ibn Ishaq (765A.D.), and after the death of Muhammad in (632 A.D.), since,

“the Muslim ‘rabbis’ to whom we owe [Muhammad’s] biography were not the original memory banks of the Prophet’s tradition.” (Crone 1980:5)

According to Patricia Crone, a Danish researcher in this field of source criticism, we know little about the original material, as the traditions have been reshaped by a progression of storytellers over a period of a century and a half (Crone 1980:3). These storytellers were called *Kussas*. It is believed that they compiled their stories using the model of the Biblical legends which were quite popular in and around the Byzantine world at that time, as well as stories of Iranian origin. From their stories there grew up a literature which belonged to the historical novel rather than to history (Levi Della Vida 1934:441).

Within these stories were examples of material which were transmitted by oral tradition for generations before they were written down. They were of two kinds: Mutawatir (material handed down successively) and Mashhur (material which was well-known or widely known) (Welch 1991:361). Patricia Crone, in her book: Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam, maintains that most of what the later compilers received came from these story-tellers (*Kussas*) who were traditionally the real repositories of history:

...it was the storytellers who created the [Muslim] tradition. The sound historical tradition to which they are supposed to have added their fables simply did not exist. It is because the storytellers played such a crucial role in the formation of the tradition that there is so little historicity to it. As storyteller followed upon storyteller, the recollection of the past was reduced to a common stock of stories, themes, and motifs that could be combined and recombined in a profusion of apparently factual accounts. Each combination and recombination would generate new details, and as spurious information accumulated, genuine information would be lost. In the absence of an alternative tradition, early scholars were forced to rely on the tales of storytellers, as did Ibn Ishaq, Waqidi, and other historians. It is because they relied on the same repertoire of tales that they all said such similar things. (Crone 1987:225)

Because the earliest written accounts of Muhammad’s life were not written until the late Umayyid period (around 750 A.D.), “the religious tradition of Islam,” Crone believes, “is thus a monument to the destruction rather than the preservation of the past,” (Crone 1980:7) and “it is [this] tradition where information means nothing and leads nowhere.” (Crone 1980:12) Therefore, it stands to reason that Muslim Tradition is simply not trustworthy as it has had too much development during the course of its transmission from one generation to the next. In fact, we might as well repeat what we have already stated: the traditions are relevant only when they speak on the period in which they were written, and nothing more.

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These materials, consequently, create immense problems for the historian who may only consider them authentic if there is observable data which can be objectively assessed to be derived from outside the secondary sources themselves, such as the primary sources from which these traditions were obtained. Yet we have few if any to refer to. The question, therefore, must be asked, ‘Did the primary sources ever exist, and if so would we be able to recognize them, using the secondary material at our disposal?’

There are so many difficulties in the traditions: the late dates for the earliest manuscripts, the loss of credibility due to a later agenda, and the contradictions which are evident when one



reads them, as well as the proliferation due to aggressive redaction by the storytellers, and the inexact science of *Isnad* used for corroboration. Is it any wonder that historians, while obliged to refer to the material presented by Muslim Tradition (because of its size and scope), prefer to find alternative explanations to the traditionally accepted ideas and theories, while looking elsewhere for further source material? Having referred earlier to the Qur'an, it makes sense, therefore, to return to it, as there are many Muslim scholars who claim that it is the Qur'an itself which affords us the best source for its own authority, and not the traditions.

## **[B] AN INTERNAL CRITIQUE OF THE QUR'AN**

While Muslims hold a high view for all Scriptures, including the Old and New Testaments, they demand a unique and supreme position for the Qur'an, claiming its ascendancy over all other scriptures, because, according to them, initially, it was never written down by men and so was never tainted with men's thoughts or styles. For reasons such as this it is often referred to as the "Mother of Books" (taken from sura 43:3-4).

### **(1) THE QUR'AN'S MAKEUP:**

Muslims claim that the superiority of the Qur'an over all other revelations is due to its sophisticated structure and eloquent literary style. They quote from suras 10:37-38, 2:23, or 17:88, which say:

Will they say 'Muhammad hath forged it?' Answer: '**Bring therefore a chapter like unto it**, and call whom ye may to your assistance, besides Allah, if ye speak truth.'

This boast is echoed in the *Hadith* (*Mishkat* III, pg.664), which says:

The Qur'an is the greatest wonder among the wonders of the world... This book is second to none in the world according to the unanimous decision of the learned men in points of diction, style, rhetoric, thoughts and soundness of laws and regulations to shape the destinies of mankind.

#### **a) Inimitability**

Muslims conclude that since there is no literary equivalent in existence, this proves that the Qur'an is a miracle sent down from God, and not simply written by any one man. It is this inimitability (uniqueness), termed *i'jaz* in Arabic, which Muslims believe proves its divine authorship and thus its status as a miracle, and confirms Muhammad's role as well as the veracity of Islam (Rippin 1990:26).

Yet, the Qur'an itself presents doubts as to its early formulation, and certainly creates suspicion concerning its inimitability. In fact we know that it wasn't until the end of the tenth century that the idea of inimitability took its fullest expression, mainly in response to the Christian polemical writings of that time (Rippin 1990:26).

There are certain Muslims who wonder whether the question of inimitability is at all appropriate for the Qur'an. C.G. Pfander, the scholar on Islam, pointed out in 1835 that, "It is by no means the universal opinion of unprejudiced Arabic scholars that the literary style of the Qur'an is superior to that of all other books in the Arabic language. Some doubt whether in eloquence and poetry it surpasses the *Mu'allaqat* of Imraul Quais, or the *Maqamat* of Hariri, though in Muslim lands few people are courageous enough to express such an opinion." (Pfander 1835:264)

Pfander elaborates by comparing the Qur'an with the Bible. He states, "When we read the Old Testament in the original Hebrew, many scholars hold that the eloquence of Isaiah, Deuteronomy, and many of the Psalms, for instance, is greater than that of any part of the Qur'an. Hardly anyone but a Muslim would deny this, and probably no Muslim who knew both Arabic and Hebrew well would be able to deny it." (Pfander 1835:266)

### **b) Structural weaknesses**

A comparison with the Bible brings other problems to light. When anyone familiar with the Bible begins to read the Qur'an it is immediately apparent that the Qur'an is an entirely different kind of literature, whatever its poetic merits.

Whereas the Bible contains much historical narrative, the Qur'an contains very little. Whereas the Bible goes out of its way to explain unfamiliar terminology or territory, the Qur'an remains silent. In fact, the very structure of the Bible, consisting of a library of 66 books, written over a period of 1,500 years reveals that it is ordered according to chronology, subject and theme.

The Qur'an, on the other hand, reads more like a jumbled and confused collection of statements and ideas, many of which bear little relationship to preceding chapters and verses. Many scholars admit that the Qur'an is so haphazard in its make-up that it requires the utmost sense of duty for anyone to plough through it!

The German secular scholar Salomon Reinach in his rather harsh analysis states that:

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 in absorbing it." (Reinach 1932:176)

In a similar vein, McClintock and Strong's encyclopedia maintains that:

The matter of the [Koran] is exceedingly incoherent and sententious, the book evidently being without any logical order of thought either as a whole or in its parts. This agrees with the desultory and incidental manner in which it is said to have been delivered." (McClintock and Strong 1981:151)

### **c) Literary defects**

Even the former Muslim scholar *Dashti* laments the literary defects of the Qur'an, saying, "Unfortunately the Qur'an was badly edited and its contents are very obtusely arranged." He concludes that, "All students of the Qur'an wonder why the editors did not use the natural and logical method of ordering by date of revelation, as in 'Ali ibn Taleb's lost copy of the text." (Dashti 1985:28)

Upon reading the suras of the Qur'an one soon realizes that it is not chronological. According to tradition the longest chapters which are at the beginning are those which were delivered later, and the shortest chapters found at the end are considered to be the oldest. Yet these same traditions tell us that there are certain suras which contain both early and late revelations. Thus it is difficult to know whether any statement in the Qur'an is early or late.

Another problem is that of repetition. The Qur'an, we are told, was intended to be memorized by those who were illiterate and uneducated. It therefore engages in the principle of endless repetition of the same material (Morey 1992:113). This all leads to a good bit of confusion for the novice reader, and seems to point to a style reminiscent of the storytellers mentioned earlier.

The Qur'an has other literary difficulties. "The subject matter within individual chapters

jumps from one topic to the next, with duplications and apparent inconsistencies in grammar, law and theology also abound” (Rippin 1990:23). The language is semi-poetical, while its grammar, due to omission, is so elliptical as to be often obscure and ambiguous. There is grammatical discord (such as the use of plural verbs with singular subjects), and variations in the treatment of the gender nouns (for examples, see suras 2:177; 3:59; 4:162; 5:69; 7:160; and 63:10) (Rippin 1990:28). Many times the sentences leave verbs out, and it assumes the reader is well informed. It has few explanations and consequently it is difficult to read.

These aren't the only structural problems. Patricia Crone points out that, “within blocks of verses trivial dislocations are surprisingly frequent. God may appear in the first and third persons in one and the same sentence. There may be omissions, which if not made good by interpretation, render the sense unintelligible.” (Cook 1983:68)

In response to these accusations, the theologian-grammarian *al-Rummani* (d.996 A.D.) argued that the ellipses and grammatical irregularities were really positive rhetorical devices rather than evidence of rushed or sloppy writing (Rippin 1990:27). This sort of argument is almost impossible to evaluate, however, due to the lack of any contemporaneous secular literature with which to compare. It leaves the “argument a dogmatic one...but one which operates (like many other religious arguments) within the presupposition of Islam alone.” (Rippin 1990:27)

None the less there have been attempts by non-Muslims to rebut the above contention by exposing the true reason for these irregularities. *Al-Kindi*, a Christian polemicist employed in the Caliphal court, had discussions with Muslims as early as 830 A.D. (thus soon after what I believe was the Qur'an's canonization). He seemed to understand the agenda of the Muslims at that time. Anticipating the claim by Muslims that the Qur'an itself was proof for its divine inspiration he responded by saying:

The result of all of this [process by which the Qur'an came into being] is patent to you who have read the scriptures and see how, in your book, histories are all jumbled together and intermingled; an evidence that many different hands have been at work therein, and caused discrepancies, adding or cutting out whatever they liked or disliked. Are such, now, the conditions of a revelation sent down from heaven?” (Muir 1882:18-19,28)

Interestingly, Al-Kindi's pronouncement as early as the ninth century agrees with the conclusion of Wansbrough over eleven hundred years later; both maintaining that the Qur'an is the result of a haphazard compilation by later redactors a century or more after the event (Wansbrough 1977:51).

#### **d) Universality**

Another difficulty with the Qur'an is its scope. Some verses state that it is a book only for the Arabs (Suras 14:4; 42:7; 43:3 and 46:12), while other verses imply it is a revelation for all people and all time (Suras 34:28; 33:40). Did this universal application come later on, appended after the expansion of Islam into foreign lands, and among foreign peoples? If so, it then puts added doubt upon its reliability as an early source.

#### **e) Interpolation**

In the Qur'an there are also clear cases of interpolation. An example which Michael Cook points to can be found in the fifty-third sura, where “the basic text consists of uniformly short verses in an inspired style, but in two places it is interrupted by a prosaic [unimaginative] and prolix [verbose, boring] amplification which is stylistically quite out of place.” (Cook 1983:69) Did these come from the same source, and do they even belong in this sura?

Another significant feature is the frequency with which we find alternative versions of the

same passage in different parts of the Qur'an. The same story can be found repeated with small variations in different suras. When placed side by side these various versions often show the same sort of variation that one would find between parallel versions of oral traditions (Cook 1983:69). Again we are faced with another example of a book not written by a single author, but a book compiled later by a number of individuals.

This problem becomes clearer when we look at some of the supposed "Biblical" data which we find in the Qur'an.

## **(2) TALMUDIC SOURCES IN THE QUR'AN:**

Possibly the greatest puzzlement for Christians who pick up the Qur'an and read it are the numerous seeming Biblical stories which bear little similarity to the Biblical accounts. The Qur'anic stories include many distortions, amendments, and some bizarre additions to the familiar stories we have known and learned. So, where did these stories come from, if not from the previous scriptures?

Fortunately, we do have much Jewish apocryphal literature (much of it from the *Talmud*), dating from the second century A.D. with which we can compare many of these stories. It is when we do so, that we find remarkable similarities between these fables or folk tales, and the stories which are recounted in the Qur'an (note:Talmudic material taken from Feinburg 1993:1162-1163).

The *Talmudic* writings were compiled in the second century A.D., from oral laws (*Mishnah*) and traditions of those laws (*Gemara*). These laws and traditions were created to adapt the law of Moses (the *Torah*) to the changing times. They also included interpretations and discussions of the laws (the *Halakhah* and *Haggadah* etc.). Many Jews do not consider the Talmudic writings authoritative, but they read them nonetheless with interest for the light they cast on the times in which they were written.

So how did these non-authoritative Jewish Talmudic writings come to be included in the Qur'an? Between the seventh and ninth centuries many Jewish communities could be found in the Arabian Peninsula (known as the *Hijaz*). They were part of the diaspora who had fled Palestine after the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 A.D. A large number of these Jews were guided by these Talmudic writings which had been passed down orally from father to son for generations. Each generation embellished the accounts, or at times incorporated local folklore, so that it was difficult to know what the original stories contained. There were even those amongst the Jews who believed that these Talmudic writings had been added to the "preserved tablets" (i.e. the Ten Commandments, and the Torah which were kept in the Ark of the Covenant), and were believed to be replicas of the heavenly book (Feinburg 1993:1163).

Some scholars believe that when later Islamic compilers came onto the scene, in the eighth to ninth centuries, they merely added this body of literature to the nascent Qur'anic material. It is therefore, not surprising that a number of these traditions from Judaism were inadvertently accepted by later redactors, and incorporated into the 'holy writings' of Islam.

There are quite a few stories which have their root in second century Jewish apocryphal literature. I will look at only three here, and then mention others at the end of this section:

### **a) The story of Cain and Abel:**

The story (found in sura5:30-32) begins much as it does in the Biblical account with Cain killing his brother Abel (though they are not named in the Qur'anic account). Yet in aya 31, after Cain slays Abel, the story changes and no longer follows the Biblical account. Where could this Qur'anic account have come from? Is this an historical record which was unknown to the Biblical writers?

Indeed it was, as the source for this account was drafted long after the Old Testament had been canonized, and after the New Testament was written. In fact there are three sources from which this account could have been taken: the Targum of Jonathan-ben-Uzziah, The Targum of Jerusalem, and a book called The Pirke-Rabbi Eleazar (Shorosh 1988:144). All these three documents are Jewish writings from the Talmud, which were oral traditions from between 150-200 A.D. These stories comment on the Laws of the Bible, yet are known to contain nothing more than Hebrew myths and fables.

As we read this particular story from the Qur'an (on the left) we find a striking parallel to the three Talmudic sources (on the right):

### **Qur'an- sura 5:31**

*Then Allah sent a raven, who scratched the ground, to show him how to hide the shame of his brother. 'Woe is me!' said he; 'Was I not even able to be as this raven, and to hide the shame of my brother?' Then he became full of regrets.*

### **Targum of Jonathan-ben-Uzziah**

*Adam and Eve, sitting by the corpse, wept not knowing what to do, for they had as yet no knowledge of burial. A raven came up, took the dead body of its fellow, and having scratched at the earth, buried it thus before their eyes. Adam said, 'Let us follow the example of the raven,' so taking up Abel's body, buried it at once.*

Apart from the contrast between who buried who, the two stories are otherwise uncannily similar. We can only conclude that it was from here that Muhammad, or a later compiler obtained his story. Thus we find that a Jewish fable, a myth, is repeated as historical fact in the Qur'an.

Yet that is not all, for when we continue in our reading of sura 5, in the following aya 32 (on the left), we find a further proof of plagiarism from apocryphal Jewish literature; this time the Jewish Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5 (on the right).

### **Qur'an- sura 5:32**

*On that account: We ordained for the Children of Israel that if anyone slew a person-unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land-it would be as if he slew the whole people: and if anyone saved a life, it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people...*

### **Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5**

*We find it said in the case of Cain who murdered his brother, 'the voice of thy brother's blood crieth out' [this latter is a quote from the Bible, Genesis 4:10], and he says, 'it does not sayeth he hath blood in the singular, but bloods in the plural.' Thou was created single in order to show that to him who kills a single individual, it should be reckoned that he has slain the whole race. But to him who has preserved the life of a single individual, it is counted that he has preserved the whole race.*

There is no connection between the previous verse (aya 31) and that which we find in aya 32 (above). What does the murder of Abel by Cain have to do with the slaying or saving of the whole people? Nothing. Ironically, this aya 32, in fact, supports the basis of the Old

Testament hope for the finished work of Jesus, who was to take away the sins of the world (see John 1:29). Yet, it doesn't flow from the verse which preceded it. So why is it here?

If we were to turn to the Jewish Talmud again, this time to the Mishnah Sanhedrin, chapter 4, verse 5, we will find where the author obtained his material, and why he included it here.

In this account we read a Rabbi's comments, where he interprets the word 'blood' to mean, "his own blood and the blood of his seed." Remember, this is nothing but the comment of a Rabbi. It is his own interpretation, and a highly speculative one at that.

Therefore, it is rather interesting that he then goes on to comment on the plural word for 'blood.' Yet this Rabbi's comments are repeated almost word-for-word in the Qur'an, in aya 32 of sura 5! How is it that a Rabbi's comments on the Biblical text, the muses of a mere human become the Qur'anic holy writ, and attributed to God?

The only conclusion is that the later compilers learned this admonition from this Rabbi's writings, because there is no connection between the narrative concerning the killing of Cain in the Qur'an (aya 31), and the subsequent verse about the whole race (aya 32).

It is only when we read the Mishnah Sanhedrin 4:5 that we find the connection between these two stories: a Rabbi's exposition of a biblical verse and a core word. The reason why this connection is lacking in the Qur'an is now quite easy to understand. The author of sura 5 simply did not know the context in which the Rabbi was talking, and therefore was not aware that these were merely comments on the Biblical text and not from the Bible itself. He simply added them to the Qur'an, repeating what he had heard without understanding the implication.

#### **b) The story of Abraham**

In sura 21:51-71, we find the story of Abraham. In the Qur'anic account Abraham confronts his people and his father because of the many idols which they worship. After an argument between Abraham and the people, they depart and Abraham breaks the smaller idols, leaving the larger ones intact. When the people see this they call Abraham and ask if he is responsible, to which he replies that it must have been the larger idols which did the destruction. He challenges them to ask the larger idols to find out, to which they reply, "Thou knowest full well that these (idols) do not speak!" (aya 65). He gives a taunting retort, and they then throw him into a fire. But in aya 69 Allah commands the fire to be cool, making it safe for Abraham, and he miraculously walks out unscathed.

There are no parallels to this story in our Bible. There is a parallel, however, in a second century book of Jewish folktales called The Midrash Rabbah. In this account Abraham breaks all the idols except the biggest one. His father and the others challenged him on this, and with a humour removed from the Qur'anic account, Abraham replies that he had given the biggest idol an ox for all the idols to eat, but because the smaller idols went ahead and ate, showing no respect, the bigger idol smashed the smaller ones. The enraged father did not believe Abraham's account, and so took him to a man named Nimrod, who simply threw him into a fire. But God made it cool for him and he walked out unscathed.

The similarity between these two stories is unmistakable. A second century Jewish fable, a folklore, and myth is repeated in the "holy Qur'an." It is quite evident that the compiler of this account heard snatches of the Biblical narratives from visiting Jews and assuming they came from the same source unwittingly wrote Jewish folklore into the Qur'an.

Some Muslims claim that this myth, and not the Biblical account, is in reality the true Word of God. They maintain that the Jews simply expunged it so as not to correspond with the later Qur'anic account. Without attempting to explain how the Jews would have known to expunge this particular story, since the Qur'an was not to appear until centuries later, we

nonetheless must ask where this folklore comes from?

The Bible itself gives us the answer. In Genesis 15:7, the Lord tells Abraham that it was He who brought Abraham out of **Ur** of the Chaldeans. Ur is a place, also mentioned in Genesis 11:31. We have evidence that a Jewish scribe named Jonathan Ben Uziel mistook the Hebrew word "Ur" for the Hebrew word which means "fire." Thus in his commentary of this verse he writes, "I am the Lord who brought you out of the **fire** of the Chaldeans."

Consequently, because of this misunderstanding, and because of a misreading of the Biblical verse a fable became popular around this era, which stated that God had brought Abraham out of the fire.

With this information in hand, we can, therefore, discern where the Jewish fable originated: from a misunderstanding of one word in a Biblical verse by one errant scribe. Yet, somehow this errant understanding found its way into the Qur'an.

It is obvious from these examples that the compiler of the Qur'an simply repeated what he had heard, and not being able to distinguish between that which he heard and that which was Biblical truth, he simply introduced them side-by-side in the Qur'an.

### **c) The Story of Solomon and Sheba**

In sura 27:17-44 we read the story concerning Solomon, a Hoopoo bird and the Queen of Sheba. After reading the Qur'anic account of Solomon in sura 27 (on the left), it would be helpful to compare it with the account (on the right) taken from a Jewish folklore, the II Targum of Esther, which was written in the second Century A.D., nearly five hundred years before the creation of the Qur'an (Tisdall 1904:80-88; Shorrosh 1988:146-150):

#### **Qur'an- sura 27:17-44**

*(aya 17) And before Solomon were marshalled his hosts-of Jinns and men, and birds, and they were all kept in order and ranks.*

*(aya 20) And he took a muster of the Birds; and he said: `Why is it I see not the Hoopoe? Or is he among the absentees?*

*(aya 21) I will certainly punish him with a severe penalty, or execute him, unless he bring me a clear reason (for absence).*

*(aya 22) But the Hoopoe tarried not far: he (came up and) said: `I have compassed (territory) which thou hast not compassed, and I have come to thee from Saba with tidings true.*

*(aya 23) I found (there) a woman ruling over them and provided with every requisite; and she has a magnificent throne...*

*(aya 27) (Solomon) said: `Soon shall we see whether thou hast told the truth or lied!*

*(aya 28) Go thou, with this letter of mine, and deliver it to them: then draw back from them, and (wait to) see what answer they*

#### **II Targum of Esther**

*"Solomon...gave orders...I will send King and armies against thee...(of) Genii [jinn] beasts of the land the birds of the air.*

*Just then the Red-cock (a bird), enjoying itself, could not be found; King Solomon said that they should seize it and bring it by force, and indeed he sought to kill it.*

*But just then, the cock appeared in the presence of the King and said, "I had seen the whole world (and) know the city and kingdom (of Sheba) which is not subject to thee, My Lord King. They are ruled by a woman called the Queen of Sheba. Then I found the fortified city in the Eastlands (Sheba) and around it are stones of gold and silver in the streets." By chance the Queen of Sheba was out in the morning worshipping the sea, the scribes prepared a letter, which was placed under the bird's wing and away it flew and (it) reached the Fort of Sheba. Seeing the letter under its wing (Sheba) opened it and read it.*

*"King Solomon sends to you his Salaams.*

return."

(aya 29) *(The queen) said: "Ye chiefs! Here is delivered to me-a letter worthy of respect.*

(aya 30) *It is from Solomon, and is (as follows 'In the name of Allah, most Gracious, Most Merciful: Be ye not arrogant against me, but come to me in submission (to the true Religion).'"*

(aya 32) *She said: "Ye chiefs! Advise me in (this) my affair: no affair have I decided except in your presence."*

(aya 33) *They said: "We are endued with strength, and given to vehement war: but the command is with thee; so consider what thou wilt command."*

(aya 35) *She said..."But I am going to send him a present, and (wait) to see with what (answer) return (my) ambassadors."*

(aya 42) *So when she arrived, (aya 44) she was asked to enter the lofty Palace: but when she saw it, she thought it was a lake of water, and she (tucked up her skirts), uncovering her legs. He said: "This is but a palace paved smooth with slabs of glass."*

*Now if it please thee to come and ask after my welfare, I will set thee high above all. But if it please thee not, I will send kings and armies against thee."*

*The Queen of Sheba heard it, she tore her garments, and sending for her Nobles asked their advice. They knew not Solomon, but advised her to send vessels by the sea, full of beautiful ornaments and gems...also to send a letter to him.*

*When at last she came, Solomon sent a messenger...to meet her...Solomon, hearing she had come, arose and sat down in the palace of glass. When the Queen of Sheba saw it, she thought the glass floor was water, and so in crossing over lifted up her garments. When Solomon seeing the hair about her legs, (He) cried out to her..."*

It is rather obvious, once you have read the two accounts above, where the compiler of the story of Solomon and Sheba in the Qur'an obtained his data. In content and style the Qur'anic story is almost identical with the account taken from the Jewish Targum, written in the second Century A.D., nearly five hundred years before the creation of the Qur'an. The two stories are uncannily similar; the jinns, the birds, and in particular the messenger bird, which Solomon initially could not find, but then used as a liaison between himself and the Queen of Sheba, along with the letter and the glass floor, are unique to these two accounts. One will not find these parallels in the Biblical passages at all. Once again we must ask how a Jewish folklore from the second century A.D. found its way into the Qur'an?

There are other instances where we find both apocryphal Jewish and Christian literatures within the Qur'anic text. The account of Mt. Sinai being lifted up and held over the heads of the Jews as a threat for rejecting the law (sura 7:171) comes from the second century Jewish apocryphal book, The Abodah Sarah. The odd accounts of the early childhood of Jesus in the Qur'an can be traced to a number of Christian apocryphal writings: the Palm tree which provides for the anguish of Mary after Jesus's birth (sura 19:22-26) comes from The Lost Books of the Bible; while the account of the infant Jesus creating birds from clay (sura 3:49) comes from Thomas' Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus Christ. The story of the baby Jesus talking (sura 19:29-33) can be traced to Arabic apocryphal fable from Egypt named The first Gospel of the Infancy of Jesus Christ.

In sura 17:1 we have the report of Muhammad's journey by night from the 'sacred mosque to the farthest mosque.' From later traditions we know this aya is referring to Muhammad ascending up to the seventh heaven, after a miraculous night journey (the *Mi'raj*)



from Mecca to Jerusalem, on a “horse” called *Buraq*. More detail is furnished us in the Mishkat al Masabih. We can trace the story back to a fictitious book called The Testament of Abraham, written around 200 B.C., in Egypt, and then translated into Greek and Arabic. Another analogous account is that of The Secrets of Enoch (chapter 1:4-10 and 2:1), which predates the Qur’an by four centuries. Yet a further similar account is largely modelled on the story contained in the old Persian book entitled Arta-i Viraf Namak, telling how a pious young Zoroastrian ascended to the skies, and, on his return, related what he had seen, or professed to have seen (Pfander 1835:295-296).

The Qur’anic description of Hell resembles the descriptions of hell in the Homilies of Ephraim, a Nestorian preacher of the sixth century (Glubb 1971:36)

The author of the Qur’an in suras 42:17 and 101:6-9 possibly utilized The Testament of Abraham to teach that a scale or balance will be used on the day of judgment to weigh good and bad deeds in order to determine whether one goes to heaven or to hell.

The description of Paradise in suras 55:56-58 and 56:22-24,35-37, which speak of the righteous being rewarded with wide-eyed *houris* who have eyes like pearls has interesting parallels in the Zoroastrian religion of Persia, where the name for the maidens is not *houris*, but *Paaris*.

It is important to remember that the Talmudic accounts were not considered by the orthodox Jews of that period as authentic for one very good reason: they were not in existence at the council of Jamnia in 80 A.D. when the Old Testament was canonized. Neither were the Christian apocryphal material considered canonical, as they were not attested as authoritative both prior to and after the council of Nicea in 325 A.D. Thus these accounts have always been understood as heretical by both the Jewish and Christian orthodox believers and the literate. It is for this reason that we find it deeply suspicious that the apocryphal accounts should have made their way into a book claiming to be the final revelation from the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

### **(3) SCIENTIFIC PECULIARITIES IN THE QUR’AN:**

We now come to the final area of difficulty which we observe when we read the Qur’an; that is the scientific peculiarities. From the vantage point of modern science we can now observe what look like “gross scientific flaws” within the Qur’anic text (Cook 1983:68). Some of these are mere contradictions with the earlier Biblical accounts, such as: (a) the story of Moses’ adoption by Pharaoh’s wife in the Qur’an (sura 28:9), whereas the Bible states it was Pharaoh’s daughter (Exodus 2:10); or (b) the claim that the name of Yahya is unique to the first century John the Baptist in sura 19:7, whereas this name is mentioned much earlier in 2 Kings 25:23; or (c) the inclusion in the definition of the Christian trinity the person of Mary in sura 5:116, which contradicts not only the Biblical account but the belief held by almost the entire Christian population for the last 2,000 years.

Interestingly, an insignificant and heretical sect called the *Cholloridians* held this view, and lived in the Middle East at the time of the Qur’an’s compilation. Could this be the source for such a gross error? Certainly an all-knowing God would have known such a basic tenet of the Christian faith.

There are internal contradictions as well, such as the confusion of Mary, recorded as the sister of Aaron and the daughter of Imran (Biblical Amran) as well as the mother of Jesus, though the two Mary’s lived 1,570 years apart (suras 18:28; 66:12; and 20:25-30).

Another difficult yet well known passage is that concerning Haman. In the Qur’an Haman is referred to as a servant of Pharaoh, who built a high tower to ascend up to the God

of Moses (sura 28:38; 29:38; 40:25,38). Yet the Babel tower occurs 750 years earlier (Genesis 11), and the name Haman is correctly found in the story of Esther in Babylon, 1,100 years after Pharaoh. Yusuf Ali believes that the reference here is simply to another Haman, yet the name Haman is not Egyptian, but uniquely Babylonian (Pfander 1835:283-284).

While these examples do not necessarily bring into question any scientific findings, they point out an ignorance of the earlier scriptures. This speaks of a certain isolationism, which one would expect if the stories had been transmitted orally in an environment distant from that in which they originated.

A more serious difficulty is evidenced by those suras which contradict observable secular and scientific data. There are quite a number to be found in the Qur'an, but for sake of brevity I will refer to just a few.

According to the Qur'an (sura 20:85-87, 95-97) it is a Samaritan who molded the calf at mount Horeb, though the term Samaritan was not coined until several hundred years later, in 722 B.C. (Pfander 1835:284). The name *Issa* is erroneously applied to Jesus, when the correct Arabic name for Jesus should be *Yesuwa*. Of particular interest are the rather odd statements in suras 16:15; 21:31 31:10; 78:6-7; 88:19 claiming that mountains are used as tent pegs to keep the earth from shaking. We now know from the study of geology that mountains are the result either of volcanic activity or of two tectonic plates colliding against the other (Campbell 1989:170-173). Ironically, both these reasons prove that the existence of mountains is evidence of instability in the earth's crust and not vice-versa.

In sura 7:124 Pharaoh admonishes his sorcerers by threatening them with death on a cross. In sura 12:41, the baker in the story of Joseph is told he would be crucified. However, there were no crosses in those days (not to be confused with the Egyptian *ankh* which was an object for fertility and life, and not an instrument of death). Crucifixion was first practised by the Phoenicians and the Carthaginians and then borrowed extensively by the Romans close to the time of Christ, 1700 years after Pharaoh!

There are other observable scientific inconsistencies, such as the contention in Sura 41:9-11 that the heavens were created from smoke (the Arabic word used is *Dukhan*), versus the Biblical portrayal of creation coming about by water (Genesis 1:1-2). Neuman and Eckelmann, two eminent physicists maintain that smoke, which is made up of organic particles could not have existed in a primordial state, whereas water (the Hebrew word used is *mayim*) most likely was present as new research on evolving nebulas show us the need for the presence of hydrogen and oxygen (or H<sub>2</sub>O) in a primordial state (Neuman/Eckelmann 1977:71-72 and Campbell 1989:22-25). Ironically it is the Bible and not the Qur'an which is closer to modern scientific findings.

Meteors, and even stars, according to the Qur'an are said to be missiles fired at eavesdropping satans and jinn who seek to listen to the reading of the Qur'an in heaven, and then pass on what they hear to men (suras 15:16-18; **37:6-10**; 55:33-35; 67:5; **72:6-9** & 86:2-3). How are we to understand these suras? Are we to believe that Allah throws meteors (material matter) made up of carbon dioxide or iron-nickel, at non-material devils who steal a hearing at the heavenly council? And how are we to explain the fact that many of earth's meteors come in showers which subsequently travel in parallel paths? Are we to understand that these parallel paths imply that the devils are all lined up in rows at the same moment (Campbell 1989:175-177)?

Another favourite of modern-day Muslims concerns the stages in the formation of the fetus (see suras **2:259**; 22:5; **23:12-14**; 40:67; 75:37-39; and 96:1-2). According to these suras the fetus passes through four stages, starting with the sperm which becomes the *Alaqa*. Though

no-one seems to know what this word exactly means, many have tried, contending that it is anything from something which clings, to a clot, or an adhesion, an embryonic lump, and even chewed flesh etc... The *Alaqa* then becomes bones that are finally covered by the flesh (Rahman 1979:13).

There are a number of difficulties with these suras, however. First of all there is no clotting stage during the formation of a fetus (Campbell 1989:185). Furthermore, the sperm does not become an “adhesion” or fertilized ovum without an unfertilized ovum. One needs the other. Secondly, “the thing which clings” does not stop clinging to become “chewed meat,” but remains clinging for 8.5 months! And finally the skeleton is not formed before the flesh (or muscles), as the muscles and the cartilage precursors of the bones start forming simultaneously (Campbell 1989:188). In fact, according to Dr. T.W. Sadler Phd., the author of Langman’s Medical Embryology, from a personal letter to Dr. Campbell in 1987, it has been proved that the muscles form several weeks **before** there are calcified bones, rather than arriving later as the Qur’an implies (Campbell 1989:188).

It is ironic to hear the above accounts cited as proof by modern day apologists of the Qur’an’s inviability, when in fact, once the truth be known it is the very science which they hope to harness for their cause which proves to be their undoing.

#### **(4) A POSSIBLE SOLUTION (“Salvation History”):**

Islam tells us that the revelations for the Qur’an were received by Muhammad and compiled into a final written form by Zaid ibn Thabit, between 646-650 A.D., under the auspices of the third caliph, Uthman (Glasse 1991:230). Historians take two positions in response to this assertion by Muslim Tradition.

The first group, supported best by the historian John Burton, agree somewhat with Muslim Tradition, contending that the Qur’an was collated during or soon after Muhammad’s lifetime. Burton, in his defence uses legal texts to date the Qur’an around the prophet’s life. There are few in the west, however, who agree with Burton. Many find his theory quite illogical as there is so little written text on which to base any firm conclusions (Rippin 1985:154).

The second position flies in the face of Muslim Tradition, and is best supported by John Wansbrough, from SOAS (University of London). He uses an historical analysis similar to that of biblical criticism to arrive at his conclusions (Wansbrough 1977:9). Wansbrough maintains that the Qur’an, as we know it with all its literal and structural problems, could not have come into existence until 800 A.D. (Wansbrough 1977:160-163). The Qur’an, he suggests, is not a text which was handed to the world via one individual, but involved the work of various writers from about the ninth century (Wansbrough 1977:51).

Wansbrough expands on this claim by maintaining that the entire corpus of early Islamic documentation must be viewed as “Salvation History,” a history which “is not an historical account of saving events open to the study of the historian, since salvation history did not happen, as it is a literary form which has its own historical context.” (Thompson 1974:328) In other words it was written with an agenda in mind. Thus, literary records of salvation history, although they present themselves as being contemporary with the events they describe, as we have mentioned earlier, actually belong to a period well after such events, which suggests that they have been written according to a later interpretation in order to fit the ethos of that later time. The actual “history” in the sense of “what really happened” has, therefore, become subsumed within later interpretation and is virtually, if not completely, inextricable from it (Crone 1987:213-215; Rippin 1985:156).

The question of whether there is an underlying “grain of historical truth” is of some concern here. Even if we admit that there exists a “kernel” of historical truth, it becomes almost impossible to identify it.

Wansbrough contends that the Qur'an, the Tafsir, and Sira are all components of Islamic salvation history, which he suggests were written to point to God's role in directing the worldly affairs of humanity, especially during the time of Muhammad's life (Rippin 1985:154).

He argues that we do not know, and probably will never know what really happened. All we can know is what later people believed happened, as has been recorded in salvation history. The point of Islamic salvation history, he suggests, was to formulate a specifically Arab religious identity. This was accomplished by adopting and adapting ideas and stories from a well-established pool of Judeo-Christian religious themes, the inception of which could then be placed in seventh-century Arabia. Wansbrough refers to evidences within the Qur'an which point to their extrapolation from a Judeo-Christian context: for example, the prophetic line ending in the Seal of the prophets, the sequence of scriptures, the notion of the destroyed communities, and the common narrative motifs (Rippin 1985:157).

If Wansbrough's analysis is correct, it becomes increasingly difficult to maintain the Qur'an as an accurate source for Islam, or as a source for Muslim Tradition, especially in light of the fact that it could possibly post-date the traditions themselves. While the dating of the Qur'an is a substantial deterrent for its authenticity, it is by no means the only one.

In response, there are many Muslim scholars who contend that the continual presence of a number of men who had memorized the Qur'an in its entirety maintained its credibility. These men were called *Hafiz*. They were the repositories of the Qur'an to whom later compilers could refer if any questions arose (Glasse 1991:143,230).

Today we have quite a number of *Hafiz* living within the Middle East and Asia (there is even one studying at SOAS). We know whether they have memorized the Qur'an correctly, as we can refer to the written text in our hands and ascertain if what they relate follows it. What did earlier compilers refer to in order to ascertain the correctness of the *Hafiz* of their day? Where are their documents?

Essentially we come back to the same problem that we discussed in the previous section. The early *Hafiz*' must have had documents from which to memorize, as the credibility for any *Hafiz* is derived from the resemblance of his recitation to the document he claims to know; not the other way around. Did these documents ever exist? If the *Hafiz* simply memorized that which they heard from other individuals as a sort of oral tradition then their recitations become even more suspect since oral tradition, particularly religious oral tradition, is by its very nature prone to exaggeration, embellishment and consequently, corruption.

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What then should we do with the internal problems which we find in the Qu'ran? How are we to explain the structural and literary problems, as well as the spurious accounts and scientific peculiarities which have found their way into its pages? These difficulties do seem to point away from a divine authorship and point towards a more plausible scenario, that the Qur'an is nothing more than a collection of disparate sources borrowed from surrounding pieces of literature, folk tales, or oral traditions 'making the rounds' at that time, and accidentally grafted in by unsuspecting later compilers.

Because of the doubtful dating of the Qur'an, the fact that there is no substantial documentation prior to 750 A.D., and the disparate sources from which it derives, as well as its specific Arab application, it behooves us not to use it as a source in ascertaining its own authenticity. Essentially we are left with very little early Islamic material from which we may

delineate any authority for the Qur'an, or for the origins of Islam.

Where then must we go to find the true origins of Islam if both the traditions and the Qur'an are suspect?

## **[C] AN EXTERNAL CRITIQUE OF THE QUR'AN**

Fortunately we are not totally dependent on the late Muslim sources or the Qur'an itself for our data on the origins of the Qur'an, and Islam. There were other people in existence at that time, who lived close by and have left us material which we can use. Non-Muslim evidence is found in a body of material in Greek, Syriac, Armenian, Hebrew, Aramaic, and Coptic literatures from the time of the conquests (seventh century) onwards (Crone 1980:15). We also have a large body of Arabic inscriptions, which pre-date the Muslim traditions (Nevo 1994:109). Yet, these materials all seem to contradict much of what the traditions and the Qur'an say. It is this material which has proved most helpful in assessing whether the Qur'an is the true and final Word of God. It is this material which Muslims will need to pay attention to, and against which they will need to come up with a ready defence. Let us then look at what it has to say.

### **[1] HIJRA:**

A papyrus dated 643 A.D. has been discovered which speaks of the 'year twenty two,' suggesting that something happened in 622 A.D. among the Arabs which coincides with the year of the hijra (Cook 1983:74). What it was that happened we are not sure as the papyrus does not tell us. Could this be the date that Muhammad moved from Mecca to Medina, and nothing more, or is it the date when the Arab conquest commenced? While Islamic tradition attributes this Hijra from Mecca to Medina, they can provide no early source (in other words a seventh century source) which will attest to the historicity of this exodus (Crone-Cook 1977:160). The earliest manuscript we have is an inner Arabian biography of the prophet attested in a papyrus of the late Umayyad period, which places it around 750 A.D., over 100 years later (Grohmann 1963:71).

The Arabic material in our possession (coins, papyri, inscriptions) all omit to name the era (the tombstone which dates the 'year twenty nine of the hijra,' cited by many Muslims, is known only from a late literary source). Greek and Syriac materials refer to the era as that of the Arabs, but it is two Nestorian ecclesiastical documents from 676 A.D. and 680 A.D. which give us the starting point as the emigration of the Ishmaelites from not within Arabia, but from Arabia to the 'promised land,' possibly outside of Arabia (Crone-Cook 1977:9,160-161).

And where is this promised land? It should be simple to hypothesize where the promised land was for the Nestorians who wrote the above-mentioned document, but an Islamic tradition compiled later by Abu Dawud gives us a further clue. It says, "there will be 'hijra' after 'hijra,' but the best of men are to follow the 'hijra' of Abraham." (Abu Dawud 1348:388) While some Muslims maintain this must be understood theologically to imply Abraham's movement from idolatry to monotheism, I think it best to retain the Biblical and Jewish understanding of Abraham's exodus which was from Ur of the Chaldeans to the land of Canaan, via Haran (Genesis 11:31-12:5). Thus it would seem more likely that the 'promised land' to which the Arabs are emigrating is none other than the Syro-Palestinian coastline: from Sidon to Gaza and inland to the Dead Sea cities of Sodom and Gomorrah (Kitchen 1993:164). Patricia Crone, in her new article entitled 'The First Century Concept of Higura', finds

interesting support for a Hijra outside Arabia. In her article on the Hijra she lists 57 attestations which come from within and without the Muslim tradition which point to a Hijra, or exodus, not from Mecca to Medina, but from Arabia to the north, or to surrounding garrison cities (Crone 1994:355-363). This is indeed interesting, as much of what we will learn from here on will parallel and thus possibly corroborate these findings as well.

This information on the Hijra gives us the first potential evidence which suggests that much of the data found in the Qur'an and the Islamic traditions simply does not correspond with existing external sources, and that perhaps there is another agenda at work here. Let us therefore move on to find what that agenda is.

## **[2] QIBLA:**

According to the Qur'an, the direction of prayer (the *Qibla*), was canonized (or finalized) towards Mecca for all Muslims soon after the Hijra. The date 624 A.D. is an educated guess for this occurrence (see Sura 2:144, 149-150).

Yet, the earliest evidence from outside Muslim tradition regarding the direction in which Muslims prayed, and by implication the location of their sanctuary, points to an area much further north than Mecca, in fact somewhere in north-west Arabia (Crone-Cook 1977:23). Consider the archaeological evidence which has been and is continuing to be uncovered from the first mosques built in the seventh century:

According to archaeological research carried out by Creswell and Fehervari on ancient mosques in the Middle East, two floor-plans from two Umayyad mosques in Iraq, one built by the governor Hajjaj in *Wasit* (noted by Creswell as, "the oldest mosque in Islam of which remains have come down to us" - Creswell 1989:41), and the other attributed to roughly the same period near *Baghdad*, have *Qiblas* (the direction which these mosques are facing) which do not face Mecca, but are oriented too far north (Creswell 1969:137ff & 1989:40; Fehervari 1961:89; Crone-Cook 1977:23,173). The Wasit mosque is off by 33 degrees, and the Baghdad mosque is off by 30 degrees (Creswell 1969:137ff; Fehervari 1961:89).

This agrees with Baladhuri's testimony (called the *Futuh*) that the *Qibla* of the first mosque in *Kufa*, Iraq, supposedly constructed in 670 A.D. (Creswell 1989:41), also lay to the west, when it should have pointed almost directly south (al-Baladhuri's *Futuh*, ed. by de Goeje 1866:276; Crone 1980:12; Crone-Cook 1977:23,173).

The original ground-plan of the mosque of 'Amr b. al 'As, located in *Fustat*, the garrison town outside Cairo, Egypt shows that the *Qibla* again pointed too far north and had to be corrected later under the governorship of Qurra b. Sharik (Creswell 1969:37,150). Interestingly this agrees with the later Islamic tradition compiled by Ahmad b. al-Maqrizi that 'Amr prayed facing slightly south of east, and not towards the south (al-Maqrizi 1326:6; Crone-Cook 1977:24,173).

If you take a map you will find where it is that these mosques were pointing. All four of the above instances position the *Qibla* not towards Mecca, but much further north, in fact closer to the vicinity of Jerusalem. If, as some Muslims now say, one should not take these findings too seriously as many mosques even today have misdirected Qiblas, then one must wonder why, if the Muslims back then were so incapable of ascertaining directions, they should all happen to be pointing to a singular location; to somewhere in northern Arabia, or possibly Jerusalem?

We find further corroboration for this direction of prayer by the Christian writer and traveller Jacob of Edessa, who, writing as late as 705 A.D. was a contemporary eye-witness in Egypt. He maintained that the 'Mahgraye' in Egypt prayed facing east which was towards the

*Ka'ba* (Crone-Cook 1977:24). His letter (which can be found in the British Museum) is indeed revealing. Writing in Syriac, he refers to the '*Mahgraye*,' saying, "So from all this it is clear that it is not to the south that the Jews and the *Mahgraye* here in the regions of Syria pray, but towards Jerusalem or the *Ka'ba*, the patriarchal places of their races." (Wright 1870:604)

Note: The mention of a *Ka'ba* does not necessarily infer Mecca (as so many Muslims have been quick to point out), since there were other *Ka'bas* in existence during that time, usually in market-towns (Crone-Cook 1977:25,175). Creswell, in the notes of his book on 'Early Muslim Architecture' (page 17) refers to Finster's article Kunst des Orients, stating that Finster "draws attention to other cube-shaped buildings in Arabia mentioned in early Arabic literature, and suggests that the *Ka'ba* could therefore have been part of an Arabian building tradition" (Creswell 1969:17; Finster 1973:88-98). It was profitable to build a *Ka'ba* in these market towns so that the people coming to market could also do their pilgrimage or penitence to the idols contained within. The *Ka'ba* Jacob of Edessa was referring to was situated at "the patriarchal places of their races," which he also maintains was not in the south. Both the Jews and Arabs ('*Mahgraye*') maintained a common descent from Abraham who was known to have lived and died in Palestine, as has been corroborated by recent archaeological discoveries (see the discussion on the Ebla, Mari and Nuzi tablets, as well as extra-Biblical 10th century references to Abraham in McDowell 1991:98-104). This common descent from Abraham is also corroborated by an Armenian Chronicler as early as 660 A.D. (Sebeos 1904:94-96; Crone-Cook 1977:8; Cook 1983:75).

Therefore, according to Jacob of Edessa, as late as 705 A.D. the direction of prayer towards Mecca had not yet been canonized. Dr. Crone in her 1994 article entitled "The First-Century concept of Hagra" adds another finding which could imply a Jerusalem direction for the early *Qibla*. New research carried out by Patricia Carlier on the Umayyad Caliphal summer palaces notes that the mosques at these desert palaces had *Qiblas* pointing towards Jerusalem as well (Carlier 1989:118f, 134; Crone 1994:387).

According to Dr. Hawting, who teaches on the sources of Islam at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS, a part of the University of London) no mosques have been found from this period (the seventh century) which face towards Mecca (noted from his class lectures in 1995). Hawting cautions, however, that not all of the *Qiblas* face towards Jerusalem. Some Jordanian mosques have been uncovered which face north, while there are certain North African mosques which face south, implying that there was some confusion as to where the early sanctuary was placed. Yet, the Qur'an tells us (in sura 2) that the direction of the *Qibla* was fixed towards Mecca by approximately two years after the Hijra, or around 624 A.D., and has remained in that direction until the present!

Thus, according to Crone, Cook, Carlier and Hawting, the combination of the archaeological evidence from Iraq and Syria, along with the literary evidence from Egypt points unambiguously to a sanctuary [and thus direction of prayer] not in the south, but somewhere in north-west Arabia (or even further north, possibly Jerusalem) at least till the end of the seventh century (Crone-Cook 1977:24; Crone 1994:387). What is happening here? Why are the *Qiblas* of these early mosques not facing towards Mecca? Why the discrepancy between the Qur'an and that which archaeology as well as documents reveal as late as 705 A.D.?

Some Muslims argue that perhaps the early Muslims did not know the direction of Mecca. Yet these were desert traders, caravaneers! Their livelihood was dependant on travelling the desert, which has few landmarks, and, because of the sandstorms, no roads. They, above all, knew how to follow the stars. Their lives depended on it. Certainly they knew

the difference between the north and the south.

Furthermore, the mosques in Iraq and Egypt were built in civilized urban areas, amongst a sophisticated people who were well adept at finding directions. It is highly unlikely that they would miscalculate their qiblas by so many degrees. How else did they perform the obligatory *Hajj*, which we are told was also canonized at this time? And why are so many of the mosques facing in the direction of northern Arabia, or possibly Jerusalem? The answer may lie elsewhere. I would contend that there are possibly two reasons for this discrepancy:

1) that there was still a good relationship between the Muslims (referred to as *Haggarenes*, *Saracens* or *Mahgrayes*) and the Jews, and, consequently, there was no need to change the *Qibla* (which even the Qur'an admits was originally towards Jerusalem: sura 2); and

2) that Mecca was not yet well-known. Consider:

### **[3] THE JEWS:**

The Qur'an implies that Muhammad severed his relationship with the Jews in 624 A.D. (or soon after the *Hijra* in 622 A.D.), and thus moved the *Qibla* at that time (Sura 2:144, 149-150). The early non-Muslim sources, however, depict a good relationship between the Muslims and Jews at the time of the first conquests (late 620s A.D.), and even later.

#### Doctrina Iacobi:

Take for example the earliest testimony of Muhammad and of his "movement" available to us outside Islamic tradition; a Greek anti-Jewish tract called the Doctrina Iacobi which was written in Palestine between 634 and 640 A.D. (Brock 1982:9; Crone-Cook 1977:3). The Doctrina warns of the 'Jews who mix with the *Saracens*,' and the danger to 'life and limb of falling into the hands of these Jews and *Saracens*.' (Bonwetsch 1910:88; Cook 1983:75) In fact, this relationship seems to carry right on into the conquest as an early Armenian source mentions that the governor of Jerusalem in the aftermath of the conquest was a Jew (Patkanian 1879:111; Sebeos 1904:103).

What is significant here is the possibility that Jews and Arabs (*Saracens*) seem to be allied together during the time of the conquest of Palestine and even for a short time after (Crone-Cook 1977:6).

In the Doctrina the Judeo-Arab intimacy is again evidenced by indications of a marked hostility towards Christianity on the part of the co-invaders. According to Bonwetsch, it mentions a converted Jew who protests that he will not deny Christ as the son of God even if the 'Jews and *Saracens* catch him and cut him to pieces.' (Bonwetsch 1910:88) It is apparent that the author believed the Arabs and Jews were in alliance together well into the conquests.

The authenticity of this account is confirmed by the great compiler of the *Sira* of Muhammad, Muhammad ibn Ishaq, in the document known as the 'Constitution of Medina.' In this document the Jews appear as forming one community (*umma*) with the believers despite the retention of their own religion and are distributed nameless among a number of Arab tribes (Gottingen 1859:342; Guillaume 1955:233; Crone-Cook 1977:7). Since, according to both Crone and Cook, this document is plausibly one of the most archaic elements of the Islamic tradition, its agreement with the earliest external accounts of the origins of Islam is highly significant (Crone-Cook 1977:7).

If these witnesses are correct than one must ask how it is that the Jews and *Saracens* (Arabs) are allies as late as 640 A.D., when, according to the Qur'an, Muhammad severed his ties with the Jews as early as 624 A.D., more than 15 years earlier?

#### Armenian Chronicler of 660 A.D.:

To answer that we need to refer to the earliest connected account of the career of the



‘prophet,’ that given in an Armenian chronicle from around 660 A.D., which is ascribed by some to Bishop Sebeos (Sebeos 1904:94-96; Crone-Cook 1977:6). The chronicler describes how Muhammad established a community which comprised both *Ishmaelites* (i.e. Arabs) and Jews, and that their common platform was their common descent from Abraham; the Arabs via Ishmael, and the Jews via Isaac (Sebeos 1904:94-96; Crone-Cook 1977:8; Cook 1983:75). The chronicler believed Muhammad had endowed both communities with a birthright to the Holy Land, while simultaneously providing them with a monotheist genealogy (Crone-Cook 1977:8). This is not without precedent as the idea of an *Ishmaelite* birthright to the Holy Land was earlier discussed and rejected in the Genesis Rabbah (61:7), in the Babylonian Talmud and in the Book of Jubilees (Crone-Cook 1977:159).

Thus Muhammad's vision was not merely Arabia, but was oriented towards Palestine, along with the Jews (Crone-Cook 1977:8), a feature, according to work done by J.B. Chabot independently attested in Jacobite historical traditions (Chabot 1910:405).

Interestingly, according to research done by Crone and Cook, the Palestinian orientation survives even in later Islamic traditions, with Palestine disguised as Syria (Crone-Cook 1977:158). We need only refer to the writings of Abu Dawud Sulayman b. al-Ash'ath al-Sijistani, and Ahmad b. Muhammad ibn Hanbal to find that the prophet recommended Syria as the land chosen by God for the elect of his servants (Abu Dawud... 1348:388; Ahmad b. Muhammad ibn Hanbal 1313:33f; Munajjid 1951:47-74). These inferences would also fit in well with the assertion mentioned earlier by Crone of an Arab *Hijra* or Exodus from Arabia to the north, and not simply between cities within Arabia.

The break between the Jews and Arabs, according to the Armenian chronicler of 660 A.D., came soon after the conquest of Jerusalem of 640 A.D. (Sebeos 1904:98).

Again we find a number of non-Muslim sources contradicting the Qur'an, maintaining that there was a good relationship between the Arabs and Jews for at least a further 15 years beyond that which the Qur'an asserts.

If Palestine was the focus for the Arabs, then the city of Mecca needs to be questioned.

#### **[4] MECCA:**

Muslims maintain that “Mecca is the centre of Islam, and the centre of history.” According to the Qur'an, “The first sanctuary appointed for mankind was that at *Bakkah* (or Mecca), a blessed place, a guidance for the peoples.” (Sura 3:96) In Sura 6:92 and 42:5 we find that Mecca is the “mother of all settlements.”

According to Muslim tradition, Adam placed the black stone in the original *Ka'ba* there, while according to the Qur'an (Sura 2:125-127) it was Abraham and Ishmael who rebuilt the *Ka'ba* many years later. Thus, by implication, Mecca is considered by Muslims to be the first and most important city in the world!

Apart from the obvious difficulty in finding any documentary or archaeological evidence that Abraham ever went to or lived in Mecca, the overriding problem rests in finding any reference to the city before the creation of Islam. From research carried out by both Crone and Cook, the supposed first and only pre-Islamic reference to Mecca is an inference to a city called “*Makoraba*” by the Greco-Egyptian geographer Ptolemy in the mid-2nd century A.D., though we are not even sure whether this allusion by Ptolemy referred to Mecca, as he only mentioned the name in passing. Furthermore, according to Dr. Crone, the three Arabic root letters for Mecca (MKK) do not at all correspond with the three Arabic root letters for Makoraba (KRB), (as the letters ‘ma-’, which precede ‘koraba’, signify ‘the place of’). Thus, there is absolutely no other report of Mecca or its Ka'ba in any authenticated ancient document; that is until the

late seventh century (Cook-74; Crone-Cook 1977:22). In fact, they maintain, “the earliest references are those found in one Syriac version of the Apocalypse of pseudo-Methodius” (Crone-Cook 1977:22,171).

However, although the Apocalypse itself dates from the late seventh century, the references to Mecca are only found in later copies, and are not present in the European or later Syrian traditions, and make no appearance in the ‘Vatican Codex,’ which is considered by etymologists to be the earliest text (refer to the discussion on this problem between Nau and Kmosko in note “7,” p. 171, in Crone & Cook's Hagarism:1977).

The next reference to Mecca, according to Crone and Cook, occurs in the Continuatio Byzantia Arabica, which is a source dating from early in the reign of the caliph Hisham, who ruled between 724-743 A.D. (Crone-Cook 1977:22,171).

Therefore, the earliest corroborative evidence we have for the existence of Mecca is fully 100 years after the date when Islamic tradition and the Qur'an place it. Why? Certainly, if it was so important a city, someone, somewhere would have mentioned it; yet we find nothing outside of the small inference by Ptolemy 500 years earlier, and these initial statements in the latter seventh to early eighth century.

And that is not all, for Muslims maintain that Mecca was not only an ancient and great city, but it was also the centre of the trading routes for Arabia in the seventh century and before (Cook 1983:74; Crone 1987:3-6). Yet, according to extensive research by Bulliet on the history of trade in the ancient Middle-East, these claims by Muslims are quite wrong, as Mecca simply was not on the major trading routes. The reason for this, he contends, is that, “Mecca is tucked away at the edge of the peninsula. Only by the most tortured map reading can it be described as a natural crossroads between a north-south route and an east-west one.” (Bulliet 1975:105)

This is corroborated by further research carried out by Groom and Muller, who contend that Mecca simply could not have been on the trading route, as it would have entailed a detour from the natural route. In fact, they maintain the trade route must have bypassed Mecca by some one-hundred miles (Groom 1981:193; Muller 1978:723).

Patricia Crone, in her work on Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam adds a practical reason which is too often overlooked by earlier historians. She points out that, “Mecca was a barren place, and barren places do not make natural halts, and least of all when they are found at a short distance from famously green environments. Why should caravans have made a steep descent to the barren valley of Mecca when they could have stopped at *Ta'if*. Mecca did, of course, have both a well and a sanctuary, but so did *Ta'if*, which had food supplies, too” (Crone 1987:6-7; Crone-Cook 1977:22).

Furthermore, Patricia Crone asks, “what commodity was available in Arabia that could be transported such a distance, through such an inhospitable environment, and still be sold at a profit large enough to support the growth of a city in a peripheral site bereft of natural resources?” (Crone 1987:7) It wasn't incense, spices, and other exotic goods, as many notoriously unreliable earlier writers have intimated (see Crone's discussion on the problem of historical accuracy, particularly between Lammens, Watts and Kister, in Meccan Trade 1987:3).

In her study on the Meccan Trade, Dr. Crone points out that of the fifteen spices attributed to Mecca: six went out of fashion before the sixth century; two were imported by sea; two were exclusively from East Africa; two were inferior and thus never traded; one was of a problematic identity; and two cannot be identified at all (Crone 1987:51-83). Consequently, not one of the fifteen spices can be attributed to Mecca. So what was the trade for which Mecca was famous? Some Muslims maintain it was banking or perhaps camel herding; yet in

such a barren environment? According to the latest and much more reliable research by Kister and Sprenger, the Arabs engaged in a trade of a considerably humbler kind, that of leather and clothing; hardly items which could have founded a commercial empire of international dimensions (Kister 1965:116; Sprenger 1869:94).

The real problem with Mecca, however, is that there simply was no international trade taking place in Arabia, let alone in Mecca in the centuries immediately prior to Muhammad's birth. It seems that much of our data in this area has been spurious from the outset, due to sloppy research of the original sources, carried out by Lammens, "an unreliable scholar," and repeated by the great orientalists such as Watts, Shaban, Rodinson, Hitti, Lewis and Shahid (Crone 1987:3,6). Lammens, using first century sources (such as Periplus - 50 A.D., and Pliny - 79 A.D.) should have used the later sixth century Greek, Byzantine and Egyptian historians who were closer to the events (such as Cosmas, Procopius and Theodoretus). Because they were not only merchants, travellers, geographers but historians they knew the area and the period and therefore would have given a more accurate picture (Crone 1987:3,19-22,44).

Had he referred to these later historians he would have found that the Greek trade between India and the Mediterranean was entirely maritime after the first century A.D. (Crone 1987:29). One need only look at a map to understand why. It made no sense to ship goods across such distances by land when a water-way was available close by. Patricia Crone points out that in Diocletian's Rome it was cheaper to ship wheat 1,250 miles by sea than to transport it fifty miles by land (Crone 1987:7). The distance from *Najran*, Yemen in the south, to *Gaza* in the north was roughly 1,250 miles. Why would the traders ship their goods from India by sea, and unload it at Aden where it would be put on the backs of much slower and more expensive camels to trudge across the inhospitable Arabian desert to Gaza, when they could simply have left it on the ships and followed the Red Sea route up the west coast of Arabia?

There were other problems as well. Had Lammens researched his sources correctly he would have also found that the Greco-Roman trade collapsed by the third century A.D., so that by Muhammad's time there was not only no overland route, but no Roman market to which the trade was destined (Crone 1987:29). He would have similarly found that what trade remained, was controlled by the Ethiopians and not the Arabs, and that *Adulis* on the Ethiopian coast of the Red Sea and not Mecca was the trading centre of that region (Crone 1987:11,41-42).

Of even more significance, had Lammens taken the time to study the early Greek sources, he would have discovered that the Greeks to whom the trade went had never even heard of a place called Mecca (Crone 1987:11,41-42). If, according to the Muslim traditions, and recent orientalists, Mecca was so important, certainly those to whom the trade was going would have noted its existence. Yet, we find nothing. Crone in her work points out that the Greek trading documents refer to the towns of *Ta'if* (which is close to present-day Mecca), and to *Yathrib* (later Medina), as well as *Kaybar* in the north, but no mention is made of Mecca (Crone 1987:11). Even the Persian Sassanids, who had incursions into Arabia between 309 and 570 A.D. mentioned the towns of *Yathrib* (Medina) and *Tihama*, but not Mecca (Crone 1987:46-50). That indeed is troubling.

Had the later orientalists bothered to check out Lammens' sources, they too would have realized that since the overland route was not used after the first century A.D., it certainly was not in use in the fifth or sixth centuries (Crone 1987:42), and much of what has been written concerning Mecca would have been corrected long before now.

Finally, the problem of locating Mecca in the early secular sources is not unique, for there is even some confusion within Islamic tradition as to where exactly Mecca was initially situated (see the discussion on the evolution of the Meccan site in Crone & Cook's Hagarism

1977:23,173). According to research carried out by J.van Ess, in both the first and second civil wars, there are accounts of people proceeding from Medina to Iraq via Mecca (van Ess 1971:16; see also Muhammad b. Ahmad al-Dhahabi 1369:343). Yet Mecca is south-west of Medina, and Iraq is north-east. Thus the sanctuary for Islam, according to these traditions was at one time north of Medina, which is the opposite direction from where Mecca is today!

We are left in a quandary. If Mecca was not the great commercial centre the Muslim traditions would have us believe, if it was not known by the people who lived and wrote from that period, and, if it could not even qualify as a viable city during the time of Muhammad, it certainly could not have been the centre of the Muslim world at that time. What city, therefore, was? The answer is not that difficult to guess, as has been intimated already. It seems that Jerusalem and not Mecca was the centre and sanctuary of the *Haggarenes*, or *Maghrayes* (early names given to the Arabs) until around 700 A.D..

The earlier discussions concerning the *Hijra*, the *Qibla*, and the Jews pointed out that it was towards the north, possibly Palestine that the *Hijra* was directed, that it was somewhere in the north-west of Arabia that the *Hagarenes* turned to pray, and that it was alongside the Jews that the conquests were carried out (Crone-Cook 1977:9,160-161,23-24,6-9). Add to that another fact which may help us bring this all together:

#### **[5] DOME OF THE ROCK:**

In the centre of Jerusalem sits an imposing structure (even today) called the Dome of the Rock, built by ‘Abd al-Malik in 691 A.D. One will note, however, that the Dome of the Rock is not a mosque, as it has no *Qibla* (no direction for prayer). It is built as an octagon with eight pillars (Nevo 1994:113), suggesting it was used for circumambulation (to walk around). Thus, it seems to have been built as a sanctuary (Glasse 1991:102). Today it is considered to be the third most holy site in Islam, after Mecca and Medina. Muslims contend that it was built to commemorate the night when Muhammad went up to heaven to speak with Moses and Allah concerning the number of prayers required of the believers (known as the *Mi'raj* in Arabic) (Glasse 1991:102).

Yet, according to the research carried out on the inscriptions by Van Berchem and Nevo, the earliest dated inscriptions in the edifice of the building say nothing of the *Mi'raj*, but relate merely polemical quotations which are Qur'anic, though they are aimed primarily at Christians.

Many Muslims are quick to point out that both suras 17:1 and 2:143-145, which speak of the ‘inviolable place’ and the ‘change of the Qibla’, can be found on the inscriptions on the drum of the dome and the doorway facing south. They would do well to read the history of those inscriptions. What they will find is that neither of these inscriptions are original, nor are they old. The entire dome was rebuilt by al Zahir Li-L'zaz in 1022 A.D. due to an earthquake in 1016 A.D. (Duncan 1972:46). The drum was rebuilt in 1318 A.D. (Creswell 1969:30), but the inscriptions (both the lower sura 36 and the upper sura 17) were not added until 1876 A.D. by Abdul Hamid II (Duncan 1972:66). The present doors (where sura 2:144 is found) were not erected until 1545 A.D. (Creswell 1969:26). The southern portical where sura 2:143-145 is written was not built until 1817 A.D. by the Sultan Mahmud (Duncan 1972:64). Thus, once we read the history of the dome, we find that neither of these two ‘incriminating’ suras belonged to the original dome when it was constructed by ‘abd al-Malik in 691 A.D.

The earliest inscriptions which we can attest to speak of the messianic status of Jesus, the acceptance of the prophets, Muhammad's receipt of revelation, and the use of the terms “islam” and “muslim” (Van Berchem 1927:nos.215,217; Nevo 1994:113). It must be noted,

however, that even their early dates are in doubt due to a different design attributed to the supporting pillars from an account by the Persian Nasir i Khusran in 1047 A.D. (see Duncan 1972: 44-46).

If, according to Islam, the sanctuary was built to commemorate such an important event in the history of the prophet's life (the *mi'raj*), why do none of the earliest inscriptions refer to it? Nowhere in the earliest inscriptions is there any mention of his night journey to heaven, on the back of the winged horse *Buraq*, nor is there any mention of the dialogue Muhammad had between first Moses and Allah, nor the required five prayers, which was the purpose of the event!

How can this be explained? A possible explanation could be that the story of the *Mi'raj* simply did not exist at this time, but was redacted later on during the Abbasid period (after 750 A.D.). This is not hard to understand when one realizes that the idea of five prayers also seems to have been redacted later as well. The only references to prayer in the Qur'an occur in suras 11:114; 17:78-79; 20:130; and 30:17-18 (though there is doubt whether they all speak of prayer [*salat*], or whether they speak of praise [*sabaha*]). What we find in these references are three required prayers. They say nothing of five prayers (albeit many Muslim commentators have tried desperately to add, by means of a tortured reading, the two missing prayers either in the morning or in the evening).

This story of the *Mi'raj* supposedly took place while Muhammad was living in Medina (most likely around 624 A.D.). Yet we are obliged to refer to the *Hadith*, compiled 200-250 years later to find not only that five daily prayers are stipulated, but what they are called. If the Qur'an is the quintessence of God, why does it not refer to the correct number of prayers a Muslim is required to pray? And furthermore, why, if the Dome of the Rock were built to commemorate that momentous event, does it say nothing about it until over 1,000 years later? It seems obvious that this building was originally built for other purposes than that of commemorating the *Mi'raj*. The fact that such an imposing structure was built so early suggests that this became the sanctuary and the centre of a nascent Islam up until at least the late seventh century, and not Mecca (Van Berchem 1927:217)!

From what we read earlier of Muhammad's intention to fulfill his and the Hagarene's birthright, by taking back the land of Abraham, or Palestine, it makes sense that 'Abd al-Malik would build this structure as the centre-piece of that fulfilment. Is it no wonder then, that when 'Abd al-Malik built the dome in which he proclaimed the prophetic mission of Muhammad, he placed it over the temple rock itself (Van Berchem 1927:217).

According to Islamic tradition, the caliph Suleyman, who reigned as late as 715-717 A.D., went to Mecca to ask about the *Hajj*. He was not satisfied with the response he received there, and so chose to follow 'abd al-Malik (i.e. travelling to the Dome of the Rock) (note: not to be confused with the Imam, Malik b. Anas who, because he was born in 712 A.D. would have been only three years old at the time). This fact alone, according to Dr. Hawting at SOAS, points out that there was still some confusion as to where the sanctuary was to be located as late as the early eighth century. It seems that Mecca was only now taking on the role as the religious centre of Islam. One can therefore understand why, according to tradition, Walid I, who reigned as Caliph between 705 and 715 A.D., wrote to all the regions ordering the demolition and enlargement of the mosques (refer to 'Kitab al-'uyun wa'l-hada'iq,' edited by M. de Goeje and P. de Jong 1869:4). Could it be that at this time the Qiblas were then aligned towards Mecca? If so it points to yet another contradiction with the Qur'an which established Mecca as the sanctuary and thus direction for prayer during the lifetime of Muhammad some eighty to ninety years earlier (see Sura 2:144-150).

And that is not all, for we have other archaeological and manuscript evidence which point up differences with that which we read in the Qur'an:

**[6] MUHAMMAD:**

The writings by the Armenian chronicler from around 660 A.D. (referred to earlier) give us the earliest narrative account of Muhammad's career to survive in any language, attesting that Muhammad was a merchant who spoke much about Abraham, thus providing us with early historical evidence for the existence of Muhammad (Cook 1983:73). Yet this chronicler says nothing of Muhammad's universal prophethood, intimating he was only a local prophet.

Even the earliest Islamic documents, according to Dr. John Wansbrough, say nothing of his universal prophethood. The Maghazi, which Wansbrough points out are stories of the prophet's battles and campaigns, are the earliest Islamic documents which we possess (Wansbrough 1978:119). They should give us the best snapshot of that time, yet they tell us little concerning Muhammad's life or teachings. In fact, nowhere in these documents is there a veneration of Muhammad as a prophet! If, according to the Qur'an, Muhammad is known primarily as the "seal of all prophets" (Sura 33:40), then why would these documents be silent on this very important point?

Nevo's Rock inscriptions:

In order to know who Muhammad was, and what he did, we must, therefore, go back to the time when he lived, and look at the evidence which existed then, and still exists, to see what it can tell us about this very important figure. Wansbrough, who has done so much research on the early traditions and the Qur'an believes that, because the Islamic sources are all very late, from 150 years for the *Sira-Maghazi* documents, as well as the earliest Qur'an, it behoves us not to consider them authoritative (Wansbrough 1977:160-163; Rippin 1985:154-155). It is when we look at the non-Muslim sources that we find some rather interesting observances as to who this man Muhammad was.

The best non-Muslim sources on seventh century Arabia which we have are those provided by the Arabic rock inscriptions scattered all over the Syro-Jordanian deserts and the Peninsula, and especially the Negev desert (Nevo 1994:109). The man who has done the greatest research on these rock inscriptions is Yehuda Nevo, of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. It is to his research, which is titled Towards a Prehistory of Islam, published in 1994, that I will refer.

Nevo has found in the Arab religious texts, dating from the first century and a half of Arab rule (seventh to eighth century A.D.), a monotheistic creed. However, he contends that this creed "is demonstrably not Islam, but [a creed] from which Islam could have developed." (Nevo 1994:109)

Nevo also found that "in all the Arab religious institutions during the *Sufyani* period [661-684 A.D.] there is a complete absence of any reference to Muhammad." (Nevo 1994:109) In fact neither the name Muhammad itself nor any Muhammadan formulae (that he is the prophet of God) appears in any inscription dated before the year 691 A.D.. This is true whether the main purpose of the inscription is religious, such as in supplications, or whether it was used as a commemorative inscription, though including a religious emphasis, such as the inscription at the dam near the town of *Ta'if*, built by the Caliph Mu'awiya in the 660s A.D. (Nevo 1994:109).

The fact that Muhammad's name is absent on all of the early inscriptions, especially the religious ones is significant. Many of the later traditions (i.e. the *Sira* and the *Hadith*, which are the earliest **Muslim** literature that we possess) are made up almost entirely of narratives

on the prophet's life. He is the example which all Muslims are to follow. Why then do we not find this same emphasis in these much earlier Arabic inscriptions which are closer to the time he lived? Even more troubling, why is there no mention of him at all? His name is only found on the Arab inscriptions after 690 A.D. (Nevo 1994:109-110).

And what's more, the first dated occurrence of the phrase *Muhammad rasul Allah* (Muhammad is the prophet of God) is found on an Arab-Sassanian coin of Xalid b. 'Abdallah from the year 690 A.D., which was struck in Damascus (Nevo 1994:110).

Of greater significance, the first occurrence of what Nevo calls the "Triple Confession of Faith," including the *Tawhid* (that God is one), the phrase, *Muhammad rasul Allah* (that Muhammad is his prophet), and the human nature of Jesus (*rasul Allah wa- 'abduhu*), is found in 'Abd al-Malik's inscription in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, dated 691 A.D. (Nevo 1994:110)! Before this inscription the Muslim confession of faith cannot be attested at all. It must be noted, however, that the date for this inscription could itself be much later, possibly added by al Zaher Li-L'zaz when he rebuilt the inner and outer ambulatories, above which the inscription is situated, in 1022 A.D. (Duncan 1972:46).

As a rule, after 691 A.D. and on through the *Marwanid* dynasty (until 750 A.D.), Muhammad's name usually occurs whenever religious formulae are used, such as on coins, milestones, and papyrus "*protocols*" (Nevo 1994:110).

One could probably argue that perhaps these late dates are due to the fact that any religious notions took time to penetrate the Arabic inscriptions. Yet, according to Nevo, the first Arabic papyrus, an Egyptian *entaqion*, which was a receipt for taxes paid, dated 642 A.D. and written in both Greek and Arabic is headed by the "*Basmala*," yet it is neither Christian nor Muslim in character (Nevo 1994:110).

The religious content within the rock inscriptions does not become pronounced until after 661 A.D. However, though they bear religious texts, they never mention the prophet or the Muhammadan formulae (Nevo 1994:110). "This means," according to Nevo, "that the official Arab religious confession did not include Muhammad or Muhammadan formulae in its repertoire of set phrases at this time," a full 60 years and more after the death of Muhammad (Nevo 1994:110). What they did contain was a monotheistic form of belief, belonging to a certain body of sectarian literature with developed Judaeo-Christian conceptions in a particular literary style, but one which contained no features specific to any known monotheistic religion (Nevo 1994:110,112).

Of even greater significance, these inscriptions show that when the Muhammadan formulae is introduced, during the *Marwanid* period (after 684 A.D.), it is carried out "almost overnight" (Nevo 1994:110). Suddenly it became the state's only form of official religious declaration, and was used exclusively in formal documents and inscriptions, such as the papyrus "*protocols*" (Nevo 1994:110).

Yet even after the Muhammadan texts became official, they were not accepted by the public quite so promptly. For years after their appearance in state declarations, people continued to include non-Muhammadan legends in personal inscriptions, as well as routine chancery writings (Nevo 1994:114). Thus, for instance, Nevo has found a certain scribe who does not use the Muhammadan formulae in his Arabic and Greek correspondence, though he does on papyrus "*protocols*" bearing his name and title (Nevo 1994:114).

In fact, according to Nevo, Muhammadan formulae only began to be used in the popular rock inscriptions of the central Negev around 30 years (or one generation) after its introduction by 'Abd al-Malik, sometime during the reign of Caliph Hisham (between 724-743 A.D.). And even these, according to Nevo, though they are Muhammadan, are not Muslim. The Muslim

texts, he believes, only begin to appear at the beginning of the ninth century (around 822 A.D.), coinciding with the first written Qur'ans, as well as the first written traditional Muslim accounts (Nevo 1994:115).

Consequently, it seems from these inscriptions that it was during the *Marwanid* dynasty (after 684 A.D.), and not during the life of Muhammad that he was elevated to the position of a universal prophet, and that even then, the Muhammadan formula which was introduced was still not equivalent with that which we have today. For further discussion on the six classifications or periods of the rock inscriptions, and their content, I would recommend Nevo's article (pages 111-112).

#### **[7] “MUSLIM” & “ISLAM”:**

We now come to the words “*Muslim*” and “*Islam*.” Muhammad's adherence to the Abrahamic line could explain why no mention is made of the name *Muslim* until the latter years of the seventh century (Cook 1983:74; Crone-Cook 1977:8). In fact the earliest datable occurrence of this term is not found until the inscriptions on the walls of the Dome of the Rock which we know was constructed in 691 A.D., 60 years after the death of Muhammad (van Berchem 1927:217; Crone-Cook 1977:8).

Prior to that time the Arabs were referred to as *Magaritai*, the term we find in Greek papyri of 642 A.D. (called PERF 564 and PERF 558; Grohmann 1957:28f,157). In the Syriac letters of the Bishop Isho'yahb III from as early as the 640s A.D. they were called *Mahgre* or *Mahgraye* (Duval 1904:97). The appearance of these terms is not unique, however, but are found as far afield as Egypt and Iraq, which is significant (Crone-Cook 1977:159).

The corresponding Arabic term is *Muhajirun*, which is both genealogical as they are the descendants of Abraham and Hagar, and historical, as they are those who take part in a *hijra*, or exodus. The earlier discussion on the significance of the *hijra* pointed out that this was (according to external sources) possibly towards Palestine and not simply to Medina.

Athanasius in 684 A.D., writing in Syriac used the name *Maghrayes* to refer to the Arabs. Jacob of Edessa in 705 A.D. mentions them as *Hagarenes*. The Doctrina Iacobi refers to them as *Saracens* (Bonwetsch 1910:88; Cook 1983:75). Thus, contrary to what the Qur'an says in Sura 33:35, it seems that the term *Muslim* was not used until the late seventh century (Crone-Cook 1977:8). So where did the name originate?

According to Crone and Cook the term *Islam* (and the corresponding word *Muslim*) in the sense of “submission to God” was borrowed from the Samaritans (Crone-Cook 1977:19-20). Crone and Cook maintain that “the verb *aslama* has cognates in Hebrew, Aramaic and Syriac, but whereas neither Jewish nor Christian literature provides satisfactory precedent for the Islamic usage, we find exact parallels to *Islam* in [the Memar Marqah], which is the most important Samaritan text of the pre-Islamic period.” (Crone-Cook 1977:19,169; Macdonald 1963:85) They go on to say that, “the plausible sense of the root to invoke here is that of ‘peace’ and the sense of ‘to make peace.’ The reinterpretation of this conception in terms of the ultimately dominant sense of ‘submission’ can readily be seen as intended to differentiate the *Hagarene* covenant from that of Judaism.” (Crone-Cook 1977:20)

Though the Qur'an uses this term (Sura 33:35), it seems, from the seventh century documents which we do possess, that it was not known during the life of Muhammad, which consequently adds more credence to the possibility of an evolution in the Qur'anic text.

#### **[8] QUR'AN:**

We now come to the Qur'an itself. As was stated earlier, it seems evident that the



Qur'an underwent a transformation during the 100 years following the prophet's death. We have now uncovered coins with supposed Qur'anic writings on them which date from 685 A.D., coined during the reign of 'Abd al-Malik (Nevo 1994:110). Furthermore, the Dome of the Rock sanctuary built by 'Abd al-Malik in Jerusalem in 691 A.D. "does attest to the existence, at the end of the seventh century, of materials immediately recognizable as Koranic." (Crone-Cook 1977:18) Yet, the quotations from the Qur'an on both the coins and the Dome of the Rock differ in details from that which we find in the Qur'an today (Cook 1983:74). Van Berchem and Grohmann, two etymologists who have done extensive research on the Dome of the Rock inscriptions, maintain that the earliest inscriptions contain "variant verbal forms, extensive deviances, as well as omissions from the text which we have today." (Cook 1983:74; Crone-Cook 1977:167-168; see Van Berchem part two, vol.ii, nos.1927:215-217 and Grohmann's Arabic Papyri from Hirbet el-Mird, no.72 to delineate where these variances are)

If these inscriptions had been derived from the Qur'an, with the variants which they contain, then how could the Qur'an have been canonized prior to this time (late seventh century)? One can only conclude that there must have been an evolution in the transmission of the Qur'an through the years (if indeed they were originally taken from the Qur'an).

The sources also seem to suggest that the Qur'an was put together rather hurriedly (as we mentioned in the previous section, on the internal critique of the Qur'an). This is underlined by Dr. John Wansbrough who maintains that, "the book 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 the belated and imperfect editing of materials from a plurality of traditions." (quoted in Hagarism, Crone-Cook 1977:18,167) Thus Crone and Cook believe that because of the imperfection of the editing, the emergence of the Qur'an must have been a sudden and late event (Crone-Cook 1977:18,167).

As to when that event took place we are not altogether sure, but we can make an educated guess. From the earlier discussion concerning the dating of the earliest manuscripts we can conclude that there was no Qur'anic documentation in existence in the mid-late seventh century. The earliest reference from outside Islamic literary traditions to the book called the "Qur'an" occurs in the mid-eighth century between an Arab and a monk of *Bet Hale* (Nau 1915:6f), but no-one knows whether it may have differed considerably in content from the Qur'an which we have today. Both Crone and Cook conclude that except for this small reference there is no indication of the existence of the Qur'an before the end of the seventh century (Crone-Cook 1977:18).

Crone and Cook in their research go on to maintain that it was under the governor *Hajjaj* of Iraq in 705 A.D. that we have a logical historical context in which the "Qur'an" (or a nascent body of literature which would later become the Qur'an) was first compiled as Muhammad's scripture (Crone-Cook 1977:18). In an account attributed to Leo by Levond, the governor *Hajjaj* is shown to have collected all the old Hagarene writings and replaced them with others "according to his own taste, and disseminated them everywhere among [his] nation." (Jeffrey 1944:298) The natural conclusion is that it was during this period that the Qur'an began its evolution, possibly beginning to be written down, until it was finally canonized in the mid to late eighth century as the Qur'an which we now know.

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All these findings give us good reason to question the true authority of the current Qur'an as the word of God. Archaeology, as well as documentary and manuscript evidence indicates that much of what the Qur'an maintains does not coincide with the data at our

disposal. From the material amassed from external sources in the seventh and eighth centuries, we can conclude:

- 1) that the **Hijra** was more-than-likely not towards Medina, but towards Palestine;
- 2) that the **Qibla** was not fixed towards Mecca until the eighth century, but to an area much further north, and possibly Jerusalem;
- 3) that the **Jews** still retained a relationship with the Arabs until at least 640 A.D.;
- 4) that Jerusalem and not Mecca was more-than-likely the city which contained the original **sanctuary** for Islam, as **Mecca** was not only unknown as a viable city until the end of the seventh century, but it was not even on the trade route;
- 5) that the **Dome of the Rock** was the likely position of the first sanctuary;
- 6) that **Muhammad** was not known as God's universal prophet until the late 7th century;
- 7) that the terms '**Muslim**'/'**Islam**' were not used until the end of the seventh century;
- 8) that five daily **prayers** as well as the **Hajj** were not standardized until after 717 A.D.;
- 9) that the earliest we even hear of any **Qur'an** is not until the mid-eighth century;
- 10) that the earliest Qur'anic **writings** do not coincide with the current Qur'anic text.

All of this data contradicts the Qur'an which is in our possession, and adds to the suspicion that the Qur'an which we now read is NOT the same as that which was supposedly collated and canonized in 650 A.D. under Uthman, as Muslims contend (if indeed it even existed at that time). One can only assume that there must have been an evolution in the Qur'anic text. Consequently, that which we can say with any certainty is that only the documents which have been dated from 790 A.D. onwards are identical to those which are in our hands today, written not 16 years after Muhammad's death but 160 years later, and thus not 1,400 years ago, but a mere 1,200 years. The ramifications of this assertion are astounding indeed.

## [D] CAN WE USE THESE NON-MUSLIM SOURCES?:

All the while that modern Islamic historians have been struggling with the Muslim tradition, they have had available to them the Greek, Armenian, Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac and Coptic literatures of non-Muslim neighbours, some of whom were subjects of the Arab conquerors (Crone 1980:15). To a large extent these sources were edited and translated at the end of the last century (1800s) and the beginning of the present. Yet, they were left to collect dust in the libraries ever since. The question we must ask is, Why?

The answer that Muslims give is that these sources were hostile, which possibly is true. However, given the wide geographical and social distribution from which they originate, they could scarcely have vented their anti-Muslim feelings with such uniform results (Crone 1980:16). It is because there is agreement between the independent and contemporary witnesses of the non-Muslim world that their testimony must be considered. Whichever way one chooses to interpret them, they leave no doubt that the Qur'an was the product of an evolving revelation, more than likely canonized during the early Abbasid period towards the mid to end of the eighth century, and in or around, what is today Iraq and Iran (see Crone 1980:3-17).

## **CONCLUSION**

What, therefore can we say concerning the Qur'an? Is it the quintessential Word of God? Muslims contend that we can only understand the origins of the Qur'an through the eyes of Muslim Tradition, which tells us that Allah revealed his truth through the Qur'an which was sent down to Muhammad. We, however, suspect the authenticity for this claim, as the primary sources for the later traditions simply do not exist prior to the eighth century. In fact the Muslim sources which we do possess are of a relatively later date, compiled between 200-300 years after the fact, and are dependant on oral traditions passed down by storytellers whose narratives not only cannot be corroborated, but suddenly seem to proliferate towards the end of the eighth century.

Wansbrough takes the position that the Qur'an was compiled even later than the traditions, and was used as an authoritative stamp to authenticate later beliefs and laws by those who were responsible for canonizing the Muslim Tradition. If he is correct, then one would wonder whether Muhammad would even recognize the Qur'an which we possess today.

Nonetheless, the Qur'an itself has been suggested as a source for Islam, and its own best authority. Yet it too suffers from many of the same problems mentioned above. When we open the Qur'an and read it we are faced immediately with many structural and literary difficulties which bode ill for a document claiming to be the final and perfect Word of God. We are presented with spurious "Biblical accounts" which parallel known second century heretical Talmudic and Christian Apocryphal documents. And while we wonder how these very human documents found their way into a supposedly non-human scripture, we are introduced to scientific peculiarities which have also found their way into its pages. These difficulties do seem to point away from a divine authorship and point towards a more plausible explanation; that the Qur'an is simply a collection of disparate sources borrowed from surrounding pieces of literature, folk tales, and oral traditions present during the seventh and eighth centuries, and accidentally grafted in by unsuspecting later compilers of the Abbasid period.

Non-Muslim sources which we possess from a variety of surrounding societies also corroborate the evidence above. Much of what we find in these external seventh and eighth century sources contradict what the Muslim Tradition and the Qur'an tell us, causing us to suspect the latter's authenticity.

In the end we are left with little on which to hold. Muslim sources are found to be questionable, while non-Muslim sources point to a dearth of any real evidence for the accurateness of the Qur'an. There is indeed, much disturbing material here with which the Muslim apologist must now contend. Yet, I do find solace in the fact that the next time I see a Muslim holding his Qur'an aloft as evidence of Allah's blueprint for humanity, I can ask him one simple question, the same question historians are now asking, "Where, indeed is the evidence for that which they believe?"

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### **The Caliphs:**

- 632-634.....Abu Bakr,**  
**634-644.....Umar I**  
**644-656.....Uthman**  
**656-661.....Ali**  
 (Sufyanid Period)  
**661-680.....Mu'awiyah I**  
**680-683.....Yazid I**  
**683-684.....Mu'awiyah II**  
 (Marwanid Period)  
**684-685.....Marwan I**  
**685-705.....'Abd al-Malik**  
**705-715.....al-Walid**  
**715-717.....Suleyman**  
**717-720.....Umar II**  
**720-743.....Hisham**  
**744-750.....Marwan II**  
 (Abbasid Period)