

# THE QUR'AN VS. THE BIBLE

## PART 2: TEXTUAL CRITICISM (Lower Criticism)

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### I. Textual Criticism of the Qur'an and the Bible: A Direct Comparison

#### A. Establishing a Critical Text: Understanding the process

<u><b>What has been done:</b></u>	<u><b>What has not been done:</b></u>
<b>NT CRITICAL TEXT</b>	<b>QUR'AN CRITICAL TEXT</b>
<b>EXISTING MANUSCRIPTS</b>	<b>EXISTING MANUSCRIPTS</b>
<b>COLLATED INTO TEXT FAMILIES:</b> <b>ALEXANDRIAN,</b> <b>WESTERN,</b> <b>BYZANTINE,</b> <b>CAESAREAN</b>	<b>COLLATED INTO FAMILIES BY READING (Qira'at):</b> 10 Qira'at with 8 modes of transmission for each (2 survive: Hafs and Warsh) "Canonical Variants"
<b>EARLY TRANSLATIONS:</b> Latin, Coptic, Syriac, Others	<b>COMPANIONS' COLLECTIONS</b> (records in Kitab al-Masahif books like Ibn Abi Dawud's, and grammars and commentaries)
<b>LECTIONARIES (CHURCH SERVICE BOOKS)</b>	<b>EARLY TRANSLATIONS:</b> Syriac and Persian
<b>QUOTES IN EARLY CHRISTIAN WRITINGS</b>	<b>QUOTES IN EARLY ARABIC WRITINGS</b>
Sermons Letters Commentaries	<b>Hadith Collections</b> <b>Commentaries</b> <b>Grammatical Books</b> <b>Other Books</b>
	<b>INSCRIPTIONS</b>
	<b>Buildings</b> <b>Coins</b>

#### B. Kinds of Variants Encountered

NT: Written variants

QUR'AN: Written and oral variants

*...oral tradition is characterized by variants resulting from words wrongly heard, from words confused with similar sounding words, and from whole episodes being forgotten, misplaced, or reinterpreted. Leaving aside the art of calligraphy, written tradition is characterized by variants resulting from copyists errors, words read wrongly, revised, or left out by a careless eye, and by random passages getting lost, or being added to on the basis of other sources.<sup>1</sup>*

NT Variants: Codex Bezae

This is an early manuscript (400's) with perhaps the most significant textual variants in any single manuscript. Its text is noted for having additional words and phrases that most other MSS do not have.

Qur'an Variants: Paris BN Ms 328, Hijazi Script  
Samarqand Codex: Kufic/Abbasid Script

These are two of the earliest Qur'an manuscripts, dated into the mid to late 700's. They both lack most of the diacritical marks for consonants and the short vowels.

- The Oldest Qur'ans have either no diacritics or some inconsistently applied diacritics.
- Basic words can be pointed with great variety:  
taqabbal ("accept Thou" 14:40) 50 options for pointing the bare consonantal text  
taqabbal ("accept Thou" 14:40) 50 options for pointing the bare consonantal text
  - 42 are possible word forms
  - 20 are actual word forms
  - Only 1 makes any sense in the context

Other variants in old Qur'ans:

- Variant usages of alif and ya
  - Sometimes interchanged
  - Sometimes missing
  - Sometimes alif is present but in later complete texts it is missing and is represented by a dagger alif
- Omission of Hamza
  - Sometimes represented by alif, waw, or ya
  - Sometimes missing completely
- Occasional consonantal variants

Note about Qur'an variants:

- Consonantal ones seem to be either copyist errors or show flexible orthography before the script was phonetically standardized

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<sup>1</sup> Brockett, Adrian Alan, 'The Value of the Hafs and Warsh Transmissions for the Textual History of the Qur'an' in Rippin, Andrew (ed.), *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988, 43-44.

- The effects of diacritical mark variants are lessened by context (though not solved)
- ***There is no evidence of omitted or inserted words or phrases***
- These variants show that the consonantal text has a ***high degree of standardization***
- They are ***evidence of the efficiency of Islam's historical assertion of suppression and destruction*** of variant texts, rather than evidence of a normal textual transmission.

#### **Note about NT Variants**

- They show a normal variety of variants of an unsuppressed or standardized text
- The full range of variants does not materially affect the meaning or message of the text

#### C. Effects of Variants

##### 1) Qur'an variants: Orthography, Words and Phrases, and Suppression

The Qur'an variants demonstrate that the Qur'an's text went through much editing and development as its content was standardized and its script was developed into a fully phonetic script. This editing work was done under the auspices of the government with variant Qur'ans being suppressed or destroyed. This work was done so efficiently, that only manuscripts with the approved consonantal script survive. Though additional words, phrases and portions are mentioned as having once been in the text of the Qur'an, none of these extra parts survive in any existing manuscripts.

##### 2) NT Variants: Orthography, Words and Phrases, No Suppression

The Greek script used for NT manuscripts was already phonetically complete when it was used for the NT. The manuscripts show the kinds of variants that are normally seen in ancient manuscripts. This includes copyist errors (the great majority of variants) and also some additional words and phrases. The only suppression that Greek NT manuscripts have experienced are those times during Roman persecutions when Christian books were destroyed.

## **2. Textual Criticism of the Qur'an and the Bible: A True Comparison**

### A. Sorting Apples from Oranges

- Both Christian and Islamic Traditions recognize the same kinds of textual variants, and that they don't change the basic meaning of their texts.
- The NT MSS still contain a range of variants whereas the Qur'an MSS now contain only minor ones.
- Muslims asserting the Qur'an's text ***has not*** been changed is false and misleading. It had a long early history of editing and development.
- Muslims asserting the Bible's text ***has*** been corrupted is false and misleading. Even with the widest range of variants taken into account the content and meaning of the text is secure.
- Both of these claims are Straw Man Arguments
- The original Qur'an text cannot be discovered from existing Qur'an MSS.

Muslims even acknowledge that Uthman destroyed the original copies of the Qur'an in order to establish his version as the standard.

**We have the Qur'an of Faith, with a very questionable History.**

- The Original NT text can be discovered from existing NT MSS.

**We have the NT of History and it establishes our Faith**

No attempt has been made by Muslims to establish the Arabic text from actual manuscripts, like the Nestle-Aland text that has been done for the NT. There has been no will to do this from Muslim scholars and the suggestion to do it today is often viewed as unnecessary because of Muslim trust in the work done by early Qur'an scholars (600-900's). Such an attempt is also viewed as a potential threat to Islamic dogma concerning the Qur'an and an act of impiety and unbelief. Though this was also the case for English NT scholars in the opposition they faced concerning questioning the Vulgate and the Textus Receptus, NT scholars were able to persevere in the face of the opposition and establish a new consensus that the text ought to be based primarily on manuscripts rather than tradition. Today, the NA27 text is used as a basis for translation by both Protestants and Catholics.<sup>2</sup>

This point is made even more forcefully in that the 1924 Royal Cairo edition, the most common Arabic text in print, was established on principles which did not question the accepted traditional text.<sup>3</sup> Instead, it was produced to uphold the traditional Islamic view of the text.

**B. Double Standards and Objective Standards**

Here are some quotes that put these issues into perspective:

- Concerning one prominent debater's references to NT textual variants as proof of corruption, Bruce Metzger said:<sup>4</sup>

'He makes much of little things.'

- Steven Masood has written:<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Nestle, Eberhard and Erwin and Aland, Barbara and Kurt, *Novum Testamentum Graece*, XXVII edn., Stuttgart, Germany: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2001, 45\*.

<sup>3</sup> Brockett, Adrian Alan, 'Studies in Two Transmissions for the Qur'ân', Doctor of Philosophy thesis, University of St. Andrews University, 1984, 10.

<sup>4</sup> Bruce Metzger, concerning Shabbir Ally, in a telephone conversation in 2003 concerning a debate between Shabbir Ally and Jay Smith.

<sup>5</sup> Masood, Steven, *The Bible and the Qur'an: A Question of Integrity*, Carlisle, Cumbria: OM Publishing, 2001, 206-207.

Documentary evidence shows that whereas the message has indeed been preserved, both books have suffered from editing errors and some variants in the text. Christians are very open about this matter. Information of variations in the biblical text can be found reproduced in most of the modern translations available to us. In contrast we find that the present translations and commentaries of the Qur'an are silent about its variants and omissions. One has to go to the classical writings of Muslim scholars to obtain such information.

- Bishop Michael Nazir-Ali has written:<sup>6</sup>

The attitude of Christian scholars towards the variety of manuscripts available is in striking contrast to the Muslim position that there should be only one recension of the Qur'an available. As is well known, only the recension of the Qur'an made under the Caliph 'Uthman has survived. Therefore, when a modern edition or translation of the Qur'an is prepared, only one line of manuscript evidence is available. When a critical edition or translation of the New Testament is being prepared, scores of more or less variant manuscripts in many different ancient languages are available, and the critical text is established by sustained comparative work on their manuscripts. This takes into account their antiquity, their currency, their use by the Fathers and other Christian writers of the time, their agreement or otherwise with other established authorities, and so on.

The survival of variant manuscripts is regarded as a strength by Christian scholars in establishing a critical text of the New Testament. The variations do not appear to compromise either the historical integrity of the New Testament or its reliability as a canon of Christian doctrine in any substantive way. The existence of a large number of manuscripts in different ancient languages, with their origins in widely separated churches yet in substantial agreement with each other, is an argument in favour of the integrity of the Scriptures.

- Steven Masood has written:<sup>7</sup>

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

### **3. Taking the Issues to Them**

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<sup>6</sup> Nazir-Ali, Michael, *Frontiers in Muslim-Christian Encounter*, Oxford: Regnum Books, 1987, 48.

<sup>7</sup> Masood, *Bible*, xvii.

## A. The Qur'an's Problems as Scripture

### 1. Textual Problems

It does not live up to the claim made for it that it has been preserved perfectly. Even if one holds it has been preserved reliably, this is not good enough to make the claim that it has been preserved from eternity on a guarded tablet.

### 2. Literary Problems

In numerous ways, it does not live up to the claim to be an 'inimitable' book. It has grammatical errors, a good but not divine literary style, it contains contradictions and errors of fact.

- "Chaotic confusion...prosaic...stiff in style...tedious sermonizing...rhetorical...never metrical...and the rhyme on the whole a burdensome yoke...superfluous verbiage...syntax betrays great awkwardness...tiresome effect of its endless iterations...[so that dogma] turns a defective literary production into an unrivalled masterpiece in the eyes of the believers."<sup>8</sup>

Theodore Nöldeke

### 3. Other Problems

The Qur'an also has historical inaccuracies and scientific errors. There are many good books and websites that document these, especially William Campbell's *The Qur'an and the Bible*,<sup>9</sup> the Answering Islam website,<sup>10</sup> and Jay Smith's articles concerning the Qur'an.<sup>11</sup>

## B. The Bible's Credentials as Scripture

To demonstrate the Bible's credentials, there is a wealth of information on the internet and in print. There are too many lines of evidence to pursue in the time allotted here. Permit me to end with a quote concerning NT textual criticism's contribution to supporting the Bible's credentials. It is a personal testimony from one of the most accomplished NT textual critics ever, Dr. Bruce Metzger, professor emeritus of Princeton University:<sup>12</sup>

"All these decades of scholarship, of study, of writing textbooks, of delving into the minutiae of the New Testament text—What has all this done to your personal faith?" I asked.

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<sup>8</sup> Attributed to Theodore Nöldeke, German orientalist scholar.

<sup>9</sup> Campbell, Dr. William, *The Qur'an and the Bible*, Middle East Resources, No Date.

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.Answering\\_Islam.org](http://www.Answering_Islam.org)

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.debate.org.uk>

<sup>12</sup> Strobel, Lee, *The Case For Christ*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998, 71.

“Oh,” he said, sounding happy to discuss the topic, “it has increased the basis of my personal faith to see the firmness with which these materials have come down to us, with a multiplicity of copies, some of which are very, very ancient.”

“So,” I started to say, “scholarship has not diluted your faith. He jumped in before I could finish my sentence. “On the contrary,” he stressed, “it has built it. I’ve asked questions all my life, I’ve dug into the text, I’ve studied this thoroughly, and today I know with confidence that my trust in Jesus has been well placed.”

He paused while his eyes surveyed my face. Then he added, for emphasis, “**Very** well placed.”

- Brockett, Adrian Alan, ‘Studies in Two Transmissions of the Qur’ân’, Doctor of Philosophy thesis, University of St. Andrews University, 1984.
- , ‘The Value of the Hafs and Warsh Transmissions for the Textual History of the Qur’an’ in Rippin, Andrew (ed.), *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur’an*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988, pp. 31-45.
- Campbell, Dr. William, *The Qur’an and the Bible*, Middle East Resources, No Date.
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- Strobel, Lee, *The Case For Christ*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1998.