

Introduction

Purpose of the Present Work

Muslims and non-Muslims have written extensively on the Qur'ān. The innumerable Muslim commentaries on the Holy Book often take the text verse by verse and explain it. Quite apart from the fact that most of these project tendentious points of view, at great length, by the very nature of their procedure they cannot yield insight into the cohesive outlook on the universe and life which the Qur'ān undoubtedly possesses. More recently, non-Muslims as well as Muslims have produced topical arrangements of the Qur'ānic verses; although these can in varying degree serve the scholar as a source or an index, they are of no help to the student seeking to acquaint himself with what the Qur'ān has to say on God, man, or society. It is therefore hoped that the present work will respond to the urgent need for an introduction to major themes of the Qur'ān.

Except for the treatment of a few important themes like the diversity of religious communities, the possibility and actuality of miracles, and *jihād*, which all show evolution through the Qur'ān, the procedure used for synthesizing themes is logical rather than chronological. In discussing God, for example, the idea of monotheism which is logically imperative—is made the foundation-stone of the entire treatment, and all other Qur'ānic ideas on God are either derived from it or subsumed under it, as seemed best to establish the synthetic concept of God. Apart from this, the Qur'ān has been allowed to speak for itself; interpretation has been used only as necessary for joining together ideas.

I am convinced that this synthetic exposition is the only way to give a reader a genuine taste of the Qur'ān, the Command of God for man. Even if the chronological order could be feasibly reconstructed passage by passage (which I consider a real impossibility—*pace* Richard Bell!), it would only explicate what is germinal in the original, master idea. This is radically different from the "dissective study" approach—chronological or other—whose usefulness for scholarship is obvious but which must disclaim any pretensions to treat the Qur'ān as what it claims to be: God's message to man. The conventional repetition of such usual "information" about the Qur'ān as the "Five Pillars" or the inheritance laws has kept *understanding* of the Qur'ān at the most superficial level. (Note, however, that this work does include detailed references to chapters and verses so that the reader can verify and think further for himself.)

Modern Western Writings on the Qur'ān

After translations of the Qur'ān, of which A. J. Arberry's *The Koran Interpreted* ranks easily as the best in English (followed by two English translations by Muslims, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'ān* by Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall and *The Holy Qur'ān* by 'Abdullah Yūsuf 'Alī), earlier modern Western literature on the Qur'ān falls into three broad categories: (1) works that seek to trace the influence of Jewish or Christian ideas on the Qur'ān; (2) works that attempt to reconstruct the chronological order of the Qur'ān; and (3) works that aim at describing the content of the Qur'ān, either the whole or certain aspects. Though this last might be expected to receive the most attention, it has had the least. Perhaps Western scholars consider it a Muslim responsibility to present the Qur'ān as it would have itself presented, retaining for themselves the work of "objective analysis," either in terms of "sources" or in terms of the development of ideas. Muslim scholarship, on the other hand, has

two problems: (1) lack of a genuine feel for the relevance of the Qur'ān today, which prevents presentation in terms adequate to the needs of contemporary man; but even more (2) a fear that such a presentation might deviate on some points from traditionally received opinions. This last risk is inevitable; I think it must be undertaken, though with both sincerity and perception.

The three broad categories of Qur'ānic studies are all scholarly; although only the third does true justice to the subject, the other two are very useful in achieving this third task. A grasp of the background of the Qur'ānic passages and of the chronological order (to the extent possible) is crucial for correct understanding of the purposes of the Qur'ān.

Unfortunately, the treatment of the Judaeo-Christian antecedents of the Qur'ān has often been contaminated by the far too obvious desire of its proponents to "prove" that the Qur'ān is no more than an echo of Judaism (or Christianity) and Muhammad (PBUH) no more than a Jewish (or Christian) disciple! After two early, and excellent, pieces of scholarship (Abraham Geiger's *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume Aufgenommen* [1883] and Hartwig Hirschfeld's *Jüdische Elemente im Koran* [1878]), there have been a disproportionate number of attempts to "show" that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was literally a disciple of one or another Jewish scholar. Christian scholars have not been quite so immoderate: although one may question many theses in a book like Richard Bell's *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment*, it is recognizably a scholarly work.

The logical end of the line for Jewish apologists is John Wansbrough's *Quranic Studies* (1977), which labors to prove (1) that the Qur'ān is truly a work *a la tradition Juive* because it was produced in an atmosphere of intense Judaeo-Christian sectarian debate and (2) that it is a "composite" work of several traditions (this theory being used to explain certain differences within the Qur'ān, e.g., attitudes towards Abraham); so that (3) as it stands, the Qur'ān is post-Muhammad (PBUH).

There are a number of problems with this. Consider first Wansbrough's second thesis, that the Qur'ān is a composite of several traditions and hence post-Prophetic. I feel that there is a distinct lack of historical data on the origin, character, evaluation, and personalities involved in these "traditions." Moreover, on a number of key issues the Qur'ān can be understood only in terms of chronological and developmental unfolding within a single document. Take the question of how the Qur'ān treats miracles. As I explain below in Chapter IV, while the Qur'ānic attitude toward miracles does evolve, it is always cohesive, affirming at later stages that while miracles are no longer necessary, they are always possible. The development is intelligible only in the context of a unified document gradually unfolding itself. It cannot be understood as a composite of different and contradictory elements. A similar case is the Qur'ānic treatment of the problem of diversity of religious communities (treated below in Chapter VIII and more completely in Appendix II).

I also had difficulty with Wansbrough's treatment of retribution, i.e., judgment in history, for he makes a definite disjunction between "historical" and "eschatological" significance in discussing the Qur'ānic terminology. In the Qur'ān there is no disjunction but the closest possible connection. It appears that Wansbrough wishes to equate the Qur'ānic examples of "destroyed nations and civilizations" with the pessimism of the Wisdom literature motif of the transitoriness of the world. In his discussion, Wansbrough refers to C. H. Becker's *Islamstudien*, yet he seems to ignore Becker's direct statement that "[The stories of] 'Ād and Thamūd [in the Qur'ān] do not illustrate the [themes of the] transitoriness of the world and of the destiny of the

individual," but rather the fates of nations. I think that the Qur'ān itself is the best argument against Wansbrough's thesis (see below, Chapter III), for it repeatedly admonishes nations to profit by the experiences and mistakes of other nations.

Nor do I feel that Wansbrough has dealt well with the phenomenon of substitution of certain verses by certain others which the Qur'ān itself recognizes and calls *naskh*, abrogation or substitution. Clearly for substitution, there must be a later verse to substitute for an earlier one, a chronological necessity which would be difficult to maintain if the Qur'ān were merely an amalgamation of simultaneous traditions. In that case, there might be adjustments, but they could hardly be called *naskh*.

My disagreements with Wansbrough are so numerous that they are probably best understood only by reading both this book and his. (I do, however, concur with at least one of his points: "The kind of analysis undertaken will in no small measure determine the results!" [p. 21]) I do believe that this kind of study can be enormously useful, though we have to return to Geiger and Hirschfeld to see just how useful it can be when done properly.

With regard to the chronological studies of the Qur'ān, the monumental work of Nöldeke-Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorans*, still sets the standard and cries out for an English translation. R. Blâchere's French translation of the Qur'ān and his *Introduction au Koran* both assume Nöldeke's arrangement of the suras; his *Le Probleme de Mahomet* uses a more subjective chronology based on the psychological development of the Prophet, rather than on the German School's principle of development of themes. Richard Bell's translation of the Qur'ān and his companion *Introduction to the Qur'ān* show occasional valuable insights, but develop some rather eccentric themes. He suggests, for instance, that a certain amount of disconnectedness arose in the passages of the Qur'ān because those who copied it could not distinguish between the front and the back of the written materials from which they copied! Montgomery Watt has issued a thoroughly reworked edition of Bell's *Introduction* which I found very useful despite my disagreements with it on several points. Rudi Paret's German translation of the Qur'ān is sober and excellent, as is his *Koran Kommentar*, where under each verse he gives useful cross-references to other verses. Paret believes, rightly, I think, that Bell's type of passage-by-passage chronology is impossible.

The basic work on the history of the Qur'ānic text is again Nöldeke-Schwally. Blâchere and others, notably A. Jeffery in *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'ān*, have made some valuable contributions (though care should be exercised in studying Jeffery). There is, at the opposite pole, along with Wansbrough, John Burton's *The Collection of the Qur'ān* (which takes the doctrine of *naskh* much too far, I think, in speculating that the entire text of the Qur'ān was "edited, checked and promulgated" by the Prophet himself!); while Hagarism by Crone and Cook takes its departure from Wansbrough's thesis as established truth.

The lacunae in Qur'ānic scholarship are most obvious in our third category, works concerned with the content of the Qur'ān. Most deal only with certain aspects of the Qur'ān, and none is rooted in the Qur'ān itself. If they are not purely "scientific," dealing with, say, foreign terms or commercial terms in the Qur'ān, they exhibit a controlling, external point of view. None has presented the Qur'ān on its own terms, as a unity, even those treatments by Muslims themselves, of which the best mirror is Ignaz Goldziher's *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung*. I have attempted to elaborate how the Qur'ān might be studied as a unity in the Introduction to an as-yet-unpublished monograph, *Islamic Education and Modernity*.

A useful though naturally outmoded work is H. Grimme's second volume of *Mohammad* (1895), which presents a general overview of the theology and doctrine of the duties of Muslims as set forth in the Qur'ān. An extraordinarily sensitive response to Islamic scripture by a Christian is Kenneth Cragg's *The Event of the Qur'ān*, and his book of essays *The Mind of the Qur'ān*. Also deserving of notice are Thomas O'Shaughnessy's "The Development of the Meaning of Spirit in the Koran," in *Orientalia Christiana Analecta* (1953) and S. H. Al-Shamma's Ph.D. dissertation, *The Ethical System Underlying the Qur'ān*.

Finally the remarkable work of the Japanese scholar, T. Izutsu, must be noted. His earlier work, *The Structure of the Ethical Terms in the Koran*, was revised into *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Koran* in 1966. Between lies a related work, *God and Man in the Koran*. His approach is semantic. Although the books deal primarily with religious ethics and attitude, a good deal of the general Qur'ānic worldview comes under discussion. Though I occasionally disagree with Professor Izutsu on his analysis of certain key terms like *taqwā*, I recommend his work as highly useful. Qur'ānic bibliographies are collected by William A. Bijjefeld in "Some Recent Contributions to Qur'ānic Studies," *Muslim World*, 64: (1974): 79, n. 1.

Citation of the Qur'ān

In referring to the Qur'ān below, I have followed the verse numbering of the official Egyptian edition rather than that of Flugel's edition. For the most part, I have given my own English rendering of the Qur'ānic verses, though in Chapters I and VI where the quotations are extensive, I have used Pickthall's translation, with some modifications. In general, I take responsibility for all renderings of Qur'ānic passages into English.