

The Development of Early Islam According to the Neo-Revisionists

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Synopsis

The evidence emerging from a new group of scholars of Islam, whom I have termed Neo-Revisionists, seems to reveal a slow development of the Qur’an from non-Muslim sources, primarily Syriac, that were adopted and incorporated into an intermediate monotheism that was neither Christian nor Jewish, but which was influenced by beliefs from both. At first it was the religion of the elite, but as the Arabs became more successful and began to settle in their conquered cities, the leaders recognized that they would need to fortify their hegemony by establishing their religious beliefs, authorizing their own scriptures and supporting their own prophet. For many Christians at that time, like John of Damascus, this new religion was considered as a heresy of Christianity with anti-Christian beliefs and a false prophet. As time went on, however, written Arabic, as well as the scripture written in Arabic, became standardized and Muhammad became established in a religion that would soon rival Christendom.

In light of the scarcity of primary sources for the 7th century, and therefore piecing together the events according to the “media” available to us from that time, Jonathan Berkey concludes that Islam emerged slowly and probably did not begin as anything more than a monotheistic religion of the Arabs shaped through a process of dialogue with Judaism and Christianity.¹ Patricia Crone also argues for a gradual evolution of Islamic institutions as the early Arab community carried out an “exodus” (*hijra*) from their homeland to the newly established garrison cities in the conquered lands.² This *hijra* may have been fueled by the promise of a new Arab state based on “conquest, rape and pillage,”³ or it may have been a people movement aided by the withdrawal of the Byzantine forces and the discontinuation of subsidies to the *foederati* for guarding the borders.⁴ Hoyland notes that papyri and inscriptions refer to a certain date given for the *hijra*, AD 622, but they do not explain the nature of the inauguration of this movement.⁵ Crone believes that this *hijra* was an exodus taken by the “muhajirun,” or those who were on the exodus to a promised land, but she also concludes that this *hijra* was not from

¹ Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600-1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) pp.7, 57.

² see Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), p. 9, and Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it: a Survey and Evaluation of Christianity Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, N.J: Darwin Press, 1997) pp. 547-8.

³ Martin Bright, "The Great Koran Con Trick," *The New Statesman*, December 10, 2001p. 3, referring to Patricia Crone's assessment in *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*.

⁴ Yehuda Nevo and Judith Koren, *Crossroads to Islam: The Origins of the Arab Religion and the Arab State* (Amherst, New York: Prometheus, 2003), pp. 89-98. The *foederati* were Arab allies of the Byzantine forces who were paid a subsidy to guard the border lands. When the subsidies were paid, they acted as protectors of the empire. However, when the subsidies stopped, the disgruntled soldiers often took out their frustrations by attacking their former employers.

⁵ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it*, pp. 547-548. In fact, the attachment of the *hijra* to Muhammad and his escape to Medina is part of the late 8th century traditional literary account.

Mecca to Medina, as in the Traditional Account, but rather from Medina to the promised land of Israel.⁶ She bases her conclusions on the fact that the term “muhajirun” corresponds to the Syriac term “Mahgraye,” or those who take part in a hijra, or exodus. The corresponding Greek term, “Magaritai” appears in a papyrus as early as 642, and the Syriac term, “Mahgraye,” also appears around that time. Crone writes that there are two notions involved in the use of the term, one linking the Arabs to the “Mahgraye” as descendents of Abraham and Hagar, and therefore also called “Hagarenes,” but also ascribing to these same Arabs a term describing their participation in an “exodus” or “hijra,” and therefore known as the “muhajirun,” or those who take part in the hijra.⁷ The significance of this use of the term is to demonstrate that the Islamic religion did not rise “full blown” until much later, perhaps in the time of Abd al-Malik. Therefore, the use of the terms “Muslim,” “Islamic,” or “Islam” would be inappropriate in the mid-7th century. Indeed, the first recorded use of the term “Islam” is the inscription in the Dome of the Rock, dated around 691-692,⁸ while the first recorded use of the term “Muslim” by a believer is AD 741,⁹ and AD 775 for a non-Muslim.¹⁰ The preferred term used by the early Muslims was “*mu'minun*,” or believer, and is found 32 times in the Constitution of Medina,¹¹ though most of the 7th century non-Muslim witnesses of the Arabic conquests would not attribute any religious appellations to the “godless Saracens” that they encountered.¹² At this point some may want to point out that the term “Moslem” is used 98 times in the chronicle of John of Nikiu, for example, which is said to have been written around 690. However, the earliest copy of John’s chronicle is from a 1602 Ethiopic translation of an earlier Arabic translation which, like the original Greek and Coptic manuscript, is lost.¹³ Therefore, it would have been very easy to have replaced the original terms like “Ishmaelite,” or “Saracen,” or “Mahgraye” with the term “Muslim,” even though the latter term probably had not come into common usage until the late 8th century.¹⁴ This practice of substitution was apparently often used,¹⁵ and is quite natural, for we also tend to refer to the “Muslims” in the time of Muhammad when the historical data tells us that the term was probably not used until 140 years later.

⁶ Crone, *Hagarism*, p. 9.

⁷ Crone, *Hagarism*, pp. 8-9. Also see Ibn Warraq, "Introduction," in *The Origins of the Koran: Classic Essays on Islam's Holy Book*, Saadi, Abdul-Massih. "Nascent Islam in the Seventh Century Syriac Sources." Chap. in *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), pp. 29-30, and Abdul-Massih Saadi, "Nascent Islam in the Seventh Century Syriac Sources," chap. in *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context*, Routledge Studies in the Qur'an (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 218. Saadi even says, “The unprecedented name, Mhaggraye, is provocative because it provides the greatest evidence for their self-identification as immigrants (muhajirun in Arabic). In other words, the name Immigrants (muhajirun) implies that the Arabs had arrived to stake a claim on, occupy, and then inherit the land. The Syriac writers, reporting and repeating what they were hearing rather than inventing a historical event, merely Syriacized this native Arabic name.”

⁸ Crone, *Hagarism*, pp. 8-9.

⁹ Hoyland, "The Content and Context of Early Arabic," p. 78.

¹⁰ Nevo, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 235, n.82. Also Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it*, p. 156. John of Damascus only used the terms “Ishmaelite,” “Hagarene,” or “Saracen,” and this was in the middle of the 8th century.

¹¹ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it*, p. 548. It should be noted that the existence of the Constitution of Medina cannot be verified until the 9th century, since it is first mentioned in Ibn Ishaq’s *Sirat*.

¹² Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it*, p. 71. This quote is from Sophronius, who wrote around AD 634.

¹³ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw it*, p. 152.

¹⁴ see Nevo, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 134, especially note 118, where Nevo says that "Hoyland (1997) consistently translates mhaggare as "Muslim" in order to differentiate it from tayyaye, which he translates "Arab."

¹⁵ Nevo, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 7.

The Early Formation of Islam according to the Neo-Revisionists

What can we say, then, about the early development of Islam? On the one hand, the earlier skeptics led by Wansbrough and Crone, want to postulate, in the absence of documentary evidence, that “Mecca was not Muhammad’s birthplace or the Hijaz Islam’s home, that the Quran was not compiled in the seventh century or written in Arabic, and even that Muhammad and the Arab conquests were a later invention.”¹⁶ On the other hand, Hoyland argues that Islamic practices, which can be traced through the early non-Muslim sources and documentary evidence, are present early on. There is a new calendar dated from AD 622, the Muhajirun appear, written Arabic is used and their ruler is called the commander of the believers and serves a god named “Allah.”¹⁷ Jeremy Johns adds that coins, building inscriptions, tombstones and traveler’s graffiti can be used to trace out the early growth and development of a new religious community.¹⁸ Hoyland concludes that there is enough evidence to “infer that the newcomers did possess a distinctive cult.”¹⁹ Indeed, it is significant that the Christians in the 7th and early 8th century did not consider the religious beliefs of the Arabs to be a different religion altogether, but rather they viewed it as more of a cult or a heresy of Christianity. This is exactly what John of Damascus (c.675-c.750) concludes in the middle of the 8th century.²⁰ His portrayal of Islam is that of an outgrowth of the pernicious Christian heresy, Arianism, and his apologetic approach is designed to help Christians deal with Muhammad as a “false prophet” and the false beliefs of the Ishmaelites whom he says will usher in the “anti-Christ.”²¹

Muhammad and the “Full Light of History”

Was knowledge of the prophet Muhammad (570-632) present from the mid-7th century, or did it gradually evolve along with the religion? A British Muslim writer, Ziauddin Sardar, proudly pronounced that “The Life of Mohammad is known as the Sira and was lived in the full light of history.”²² Even in John’s time, however, the first *sira* by Ibn Ishaq had not yet been written. It is possible, since Ibn Ishaq died in 767, that some other written stories were already circulating about Muhammad during John’s life time. These were later collected by writers like Ibn Hisham (d. 833), who states that he incorporated a recension of Ibn Ishaq’s biography in his own book. These are, however, all over 130 years after the death of Muhammad. Also, if Muhammad lived in the “full light of history,” why do we have virtually nothing from Muslim sources pertaining to Muhammad before the time of Caliph Abd al-Malik (r. 685-705), nearly 70 years after the death of Muhammad? This is one of the central problem areas raised by the Neo-Revisionists.

Some Neo-Revisionists, like Yehuda Nevo, even doubt whether Muhammad was an actual historic figure, for he can only be traced back historically to around 72/691 when his name appears on a coin minted by Abd al-Malik.²³ Nevo also believes that the “very few passing

¹⁶ Robert Hoyland, "New Documentary Texts and the Early Islamic State," *Bulletin of SOAS*, 3 vols., 69, 395-416 (UK: School of Oriental and African Studies, 2006), pp. 403-4.

¹⁷ Hoyland, "New Documentary Texts and the Early Islamic State," p. 396.

¹⁸ Jeremy Johns, "Archaeology and the History of Early Islam: The First Seventy Years," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* (Brill Academic Publishers) 46, 4 (2003), p. 414.

¹⁹ Hoyland, "New Documentary Texts and the Early Islamic State," p. 404.

²⁰ Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam*, pp. 74, 93.

²¹ Daniel Sahas, *John of Damascus on Islam* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1972), p. 133.

²² Bright, "The Great Koran Con Trick," pp. 1-2.

²³ Nevo, as well as Hoyland, believe the earlier numismatic reference to a Muhammad as prophet, in 687, probably refers to the governor of Azerbaijan, Muhammad ibn Marwan, or to a religious prophet at that time, Muhammad Ibn

references to him in earlier literary sources should be regarded as later interpolations by copiers who knew the Traditional Account.”²⁴ In other words, it is difficult to explain how the central figure in a wildly successful religious conquest could avoid the “full light of history” until the time he is needed as a focal point in a religion that is also the basis for the government.

On the other hand, Michael Cook concludes that the non-Muslim sources give enough of a picture of the first 70 years to indicate that Muhammad not only existed, but that he was a leader in a movement that started around AD 622.²⁵ Even Patricia Crone, who once said that Muhammad did not exist as an historical figure, has changed her mind enough to say that “Mohammad is clearly an individual who changed the course of history,” but she also points out that “we do not know how much of the Islamic tradition about him is true.”²⁶ Part of the problem is that the biographies, as well as the other literary material written about Muhammad by Muslims in the late 8th and 9th centuries, were mostly constructed from the only literary source that may have existed, at least in part, before the end of the 7th century, which was the Qur’an. In the next section we will consider the development of the Qur’an, but suffice it to say at this point, that if the earliest biographical literature on Muhammad were derived from exegetical explanations of the obscure narratives in the Qur’an, and then parts of the Qur’an were written in order to give a “history” to a new religious movement, then how do we get at any “kernel of truth,” much less an understanding of which events were played out under the “full light of history”?

Hoyland also finds it very curious that, aside from the early non-Muslim sources, “before AH 72 the archaeological record is strangely silent about Islam,” as well as Muhammad and the Qur’an.²⁷ In fact, it really is not until 691 that we have a firm archaeological attestation to Muhammad on a coin minted by Abd al-Malik, as well as the inscription bearing Muhammad’s name in the Dome of the Rock. Hoyland offers that “it is of course true that only with the passage of time does a man become a hero and a book authoritative,”²⁸ but that does not account for the abrupt way that Muhammad suddenly “appears” on the Arab scene. Is it possible, then, that Abd al-Malik utilized Muhammad as a “propaganda weapon”²⁹ in his bid to make his new government more legitimate through an appeal to a religion, a prophet and a scripture?

John of Damascus considered Muhammad to be an historical figure when he was writing about him in the 730’s,³⁰ but how much of his image of Muhammad had been created by the narratives that were probably circulating at that time³¹ as well as the strong propaganda that had

al-Hanafiyyah, who was also known as the “*mahdi*.” Nevo also points out that Bashear argues that “many events in the life of the Prophet reported in the Muslim sources are in fact retrojections into the past of later incidents, e.g., some from the life of the mid -to late 7th century “prophet” Muhammad ibn al-Hanafiyyah.” See Nevo, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 6 and Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as others saw it*, p. 550, n. 24.

²⁴ Nevo, *Crossroads to Islam*, pp. 10-11.

²⁵ Warraq, “Introduction,” p. 27.

²⁶ Francis Robinson and Ira Lapidus, *The Cambridge Illustrated History of the Islamic World* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 10. See also Patricia Crone, “What do we actually know about Muhammad?” published on Open Democracy News Analysis (<http://www.opendemocracy.net>), June 10, 2008 (first published August 31, 2006).

²⁷ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as others saw it*, pp. 549-550.

²⁸ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as others saw it*, pp. 549-550.

²⁹ Hoyland, “New Documentary Texts and the Early Islamic State,” pp. 396-7.

³⁰ Ibn Warraq, “Koranic Criticism: 700 C.E. to 825 C.E.,” *New English Review* (World Encounter Institute, Nashville, TN) http://www.newenglishreview.org/custpage.cfm/frm/11036/sec_id/11036 (October 2007).

³¹ Hoyland mentions a papyrus from the late Umayyad period that contains some biographical material on the prophet. See Hoyland, *Seeing Islam as others saw it*, p. 545. He also says that the earliest theological writing is not documented before AD 718 (p. 546).

been in place at least from the time of Abd al-Malik? John called Muhammad a “false prophet” and he called the religion of his followers a “heresy.” He also ridiculed the so-called writings that came down to Muhammad from heaven, which were later called the Qur’an. It is to these documents that we now turn.

The Development of the Qur’an

What if the Qur’an is not divine? R. Stephen Humphreys emphasizes that the Qur’an is the document that gives Islam its *raison d’etre*. If the Qur’an is not directly from God, then it is a human document; and since it claims a perfect, divine source, human authorship would undercut its authority. In fact, Humphreys states boldly that “if the Qur’an is a historical document, then the whole Islamic struggle of fourteen centuries is effectively meaningless.”³²

The Traditional Account says that the oral revelation given to Muhammad over a 23 year period was crystallized in the written Qur’an in the time of Uthman, 20 years after Muhammad’s death. The early Revisionists and later Neo-Revisionists,³³ however, interpret the development very differently. Andrew Rippin, in the preface to Wansbrough’s book, *Quranic Studies*, argues that “the emergence of a fixed and explicit script for the Arabic language suggests a considerably longer time frame than the community’s account, on its surface, seems to allow.”³⁴ In other words, the development of the Arabic script itself was still too indeterminate for a fixed text to be present in the time of Uthman, barely 20 years after Muhammad’s death. Rippin contends that there is far too much evidence showing that, while Arabic as a written language was in limited use in the 7th century, as a consonantal language it was still too much in flux with too many variant readings for it to be considered fixed and authoritative until later in the 8th century after vowels and diacritical marks used to identify otherwise identical letters came into existence. By the end of the 8th century, with the standardization of Classical Arabic, the collection of material could finally be put together in a cohesive whole with a fixed text. However, some of the Neo-Revisionists contend that by that time a number of the original words, some of them possibly transliterations from Syriac words, were no longer understood by those compiling the Qur’an.³⁵ In other words, if the Qur’an could not have been written in Arabic in the 7th century, and indeed,

³² Toby Lester, “What is the Koran?,” chap. in *What the Koran Really Says: Language, Text, and Commentary* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), p. 110.

³³ Revisionists, like John Wansbrough, Patricia Crone, Michael Cook, Andrew Rippin and G.W. Hawting, were prominent in the 1970s and 1980s and tried to construct a more feasible understanding of early Islam through a textual-critical approach which viewed history as something that could be “scientifically” studied. Those whom I call Neo-Revisionists, like Robert Hoyland, Yehuda Nevo, Jeremy Johns, Sidney Griffith, Reuven Firestone, Christoph Luxenberg, Gerd-R Puin, Karl-Heinz Ohlig, and Kevin Van Bladel, have corrected some of the shortcomings of the Revisionists and bring to bear a much more scientifically accurate interpretation of the first two centuries of Islam based on a higher level of investigative research using a type of historical forensics, which involves the study of archaeological sites, epigraphic and numismatic material and 7th century non-Muslim eyewitness written accounts.

³⁴ John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2004), p. xv.

³⁵ Toby Lester, “What Is the Koran?,” chap. in *What the Koran Really Says: Language, Text, and Commentary* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), p. 110. Rippin even contends that to this day about 20% of the Qur’an is still considered “unreadable,” even by Muslim scholars themselves. Christoph Luxenberg also comes to the same conclusion: “In spite of all these efforts one would not be far from the truth if one were to estimate the proportion of the Koran that is still considered unexplained today at about a quarter of the text.” See Christoph Luxenberg, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran* (Berlin: Verlag Hans Schiler, 2007, p. 108).

if some of it came from other religious sources, then it could not have been divine, or God's perfect book from heaven.

Rippin goes on to point out that even in the traditions of the Muslims there are "elements such as the fixing of the Arabic script, the establishment of written formats of manuscripts, and the codification of the variant readings."³⁶ However, the Traditional Account compresses all of these things within the time frame of Muhammad's death to the finalization of the Qur'an under Uthman's direction twenty years later. Rippin regards this compressed time scale as "quite anachronistic" since it would not account for the steps that would be necessary for a "full meaning" of the "Qur'an" to be fulfilled. In other words, the creation of a written text under Uthman is considered an "anachronistic element" because, for one thing, the "form of the Arabic script in early manuscripts is far too ambiguous to have accomplished the purpose of unifying the reading of the text."³⁷ Among other things, this would indicate that the fragments or "Qur'anic material" dated to the end of the 7th century and into the first half of the 8th century may simply be religious passages that later made their way into the final Qur'an. After all, a number of these fragmentary writings and inscriptions left on rocks merely give testimony to a monotheistic faith, which could easily fit a Jewish or Christian framework. It was not until the time of Abd al-Malik that an intentional pattern of scriptural material appears which distinguishes the beliefs as being neither Jewish nor Christian, yet somehow related to the two.³⁸

Like many Revisionists and Neo-Revisionists,³⁹ Yehuda Nevo concludes that the Qur'an is a late compilation of a number of assorted literary and scriptural sources, and therefore the canonization could not have taken place before the end of the 2nd century AH or early in the 3rd. "This conclusion," he says, "is supported by an analysis of extant rock inscriptions and an examination of the references to the Arab religion in the works of the peoples with whom they came in contact."⁴⁰ John Wansbrough also believes that the Qur'an and supporting literature seems to have grown out of sectarian controversies in the late 8th to early 9th centuries, almost 200 years after the fact, and then "projected back" onto an invented Arabian point of origin.⁴¹ He indicates that the process may have been more "educative rather than merely communicative" and concludes that

a concomitant homogeneity of subject-matter is reflected in the overlapping of genres: poetry placed within a narrative frame, prose relieved by poetic insertions both as exegesis and ornatus, juridical and lexical problems solved by reference to scripture, scriptural problems solved by reference to jurisprudence and lexicography, all with approximately the same end in view: historical description of a situation two centuries earlier.⁴²

In other words, according to Wansbrough, the Qur'an is used to explain the sira literature and the hadith, and the sira literature and the hadith are used in order to make sense of the Qur'an. This close correlation indicates that both genres developed at the same time. Wansbrough also

³⁶ Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, p. xv.

³⁷ Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, p. xv.

³⁸ Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, p. xv.

³⁹ Nevo mentions Schacht and Wansbrough specifically, but Crone, Cook, Mingana, Rippin, Hawting and others could be added to the list.

⁴⁰ Nevo, *Crossroads to Islam*, p. 11.

⁴¹ see Warraq, "Introduction," p. 24. Ibn Warraq also states that Wansbrough argued that "Islam emerged only when it came into contact with and under the influence of Rabbinic Judaism."

⁴² Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, p. 90.

seems to indicate that the earlier chancery language, used for communication, politics and business, was quite different from what became Classical Arabic in the late 8th century. Thus, he concludes that the chancery Arabic developed first and got its real boost under Abd al-Malik when he promoted Arabic as the language of the empire. In time it would be developed poetically and scripturally, with the culmination being the Qur'an at the end of the 8th century or early 9th century.⁴³ Toby Lester, in his article called "What is the Koran?" writes that Wansbrough's conclusion as to why no Islamic source material from the first century survived is that "it never existed."⁴⁴

Patricia Crone also says that there is no hard evidence for the existence of the Qur'an "in any form before the last decade of the seventh century."⁴⁵ Even the verses found inscribed in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (AD 691) attest only to the presence of material similar to verses found in the Qur'an. However, they display minor variations from the standard text, and Crone says that the existence of these verses "does not of course give any indication of the literary form in which these materials normally appeared at the time."⁴⁶ In other words, the inscriptions could very well be indications of an early attempt to express the developing beliefs of the Ishmaelites. After all, as Crone points out, the earliest reference to a book called the "Qur'an," outside the Islamic literary tradition, is from a dialogue between an Arab and the monk at Bet Hale in the late Umayyad period.⁴⁷

On the other hand, if the Qur'an was not fully canonized until at least the end of the 8th century, almost 165 years after Muhammad's death, what do we do about these earlier inscriptions and textual fragments of the "Qur'an"? Do they not prove that the Qur'an was present in the 7th century? Rippin believes that the fragments are inconclusive and states that "the simple existence of written portions of the Qur'an in manuscript form, for example, does not tell us the full picture of the history of the text any more than the traditional collection stories or the language and structure of the text itself do."⁴⁸ In other words, the earlier fragments may have been gathered later into the final canonized Qur'an, but that does not mean that the Qur'an as we know it today first existed as a perfect, completed form in the days of Muhammad. Rippin also points out that the evidence does not support a "canonized closed text" in the first 50 years after Muhammad's death. First of all, he says that there were too many contradictory texts floating around in the late 7th and early 8th centuries. It is not until the end of the 8th century that a consistent text can be accounted for.⁴⁹ What are the other fragments and variants, then? Some of them may be from earlier Christian liturgy translated into an early Arabic script by Christian missionaries trying to reach their Arabic neighbors. Some may have been translations of the Jewish Psalms and commentaries into Arabic from a Syriac text. Some may have been early poetry to the monotheistic God who would shortly be known as the Allah of Islam. Claude

⁴³ Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, pp. 85-91.

⁴⁴ Toby Lester, "What Is the Koran?," chap. in *What the Koran Really Says: Language, Text, and Commentary* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), p. 122.

⁴⁵ Crone, *Hagarism*, p. 3.

⁴⁶ Crone, *Hagarism*, p. 18.

⁴⁷ Crone, *Hagarism*, p. 18. It is important to note that the Islamic literary tradition dates to the late 8th century, **after** the dialogue of the Arab and the monk at Bet Hale.

⁴⁸ Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, xvii

⁴⁹ Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, p. xvi. See also, Toby Lester, "What is the Koran?" p. 110. See also Gilchrist's conclusion on the Samarqand and the Topkapi manuscripts in *Jam' al-Qur'an*, where he dates both manuscripts no earlier than the end of the 8th century.

Gilliot even believes that parts of the Qur'an may have come from a Syriac form of the Diatessaron, an early Greek compilation of a harmony of the gospels.⁵⁰

Robert Hoyland is not comfortable with this assessment and says that it is not necessary to believe that because there are variants in the inscriptions that the Qur'an was not necessarily standardized before the end of the 7th century. He goes on to say that

Much has been made of these adaptations or deviations from the standard text of the Qur'an, often regarded as confirmation that the latter had not yet stabilized. But though we cannot exclude the possibility that it reflects the fact that different versions of the Qur'an circulated in early times, there are many other possible, and arguably more plausible, explanations for such divergences. Sometimes they may be to serve the interests of clarity.⁵¹

According to Hoyland, the religious devotional vocabulary found on early inscriptions attests to the presence of a body of religious ideas circulating in the time before Abd al-Malik and the Dome of the Rock. For example, he mentions that "the three most common wishes of these texts, particularly the graffiti, are to ask for forgiveness (*ghfr*), seek compassion (*rh*) and to make a declaration of faith (*'mn*), each of these a prominent theme and root in the Quran (*ghfr* 234 times; *rh* 339 times; *amma*: 537 times; *mu'min*: 230 times)."⁵² He also notes that Qur'anic material tended to dominate early Islamic political discussions and theological disputes. However, the religious vocabulary found etched on rocks throughout the region could also attest to Christian and Jewish presence or the development of an intermediate monotheistic faith that was developing which combined some features from both religions. For example, the phrase *bismillah*, "in the name of Allah," which is found at the beginning of all but one of the suras in the Qur'an, is very similar to the Christian Syriac phrase, *besmillah*, which was used for centuries before Muhammad.⁵³ Could it be that the Arabic expression came from the Syriac? It is very possible that the canonization of the Qur'an as well as the formation of Islamic theology were both still in the developmental phases in the middle of the 8th century.

Two Early Qur'anic Manuscripts

Another argument raised by Muslims in defense of an early Qur'an is that they believe two of the most famous manuscripts, the Samarqand and the Topkapi,⁵⁴ are original Uthmanic

⁵⁰ Claude Gilliot, "Reconsidering the Authorship of the Qur'an: Is the Qur'an Partly the Fruit of a Progressive and Collective Work?," chap. in *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context*, Routledge Studies in the Qur'an (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 99. For example, part of Q. 48:29 resembles the combined pericope in Mark 4:26-7 and Matthew 12:23 found in the Diatessaron.

⁵¹ Hoyland, "New documentary texts and the early Islamic State," p. 407.

⁵² Hoyland, "New documentary texts and the early Islamic State," p. 406.

⁵³ Isaac Adams states that the phrase "Bi'smi 'llahi 'r rahmani 'r-rahmin" is of Jewish origin and would have been known by the Quraish tribe and by Muhammad through a contemporary poet named Umayyah of Taif. See Isaac Adams, *Persia by a Persian: Being, Personal Experiences, Manners, Customs, Habits* (London: E. Stock, 1906), p. 299.

⁵⁴ The *Samarqand* manuscript is housed in the library of the Telyashayakh Mosque in Tashkent, Uzbekistan. It is written in the Kufic script, which became popular in the 8th century, and includes only Sura 2.7 through Sura 43.10. The *Topkapi* manuscript is kept in the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul, Turkey. It is also written in the Kufic script without vowel or consonant markings. It is evident that they did not originate as copies from the same place since the Topkapi codex has eighteen lines to a page and the Samarqand varies from eight to twelve lines per page. It is evident that they are two of the earliest Qur'anic manuscripts that we have, but they cannot be dated earlier than 150 years after Muhammad's death. See John Gilchrist, *The Qur'an: The Scripture of Islam*, Chapter 5: The Compilation of the Text of the Qur'an, Muslim Evangelicalism Resource Centre, South Africa, 1995. Arthur Jeffrey, after a

recensions dating from the mid 7th century.⁵⁵ On the other hand, John Gilchrist argues that the Samarqand manuscript cannot be an Uthmanic original, or even a copy. He reasons that

It is precisely the appearance of the script itself that would seem to negate such a claim. It is clearly written in Kufic script and, as we have seen, it is asking too much of an objective scholar to believe that a Qur'an manuscript written at Medina as early as the caliphate of Uthman could ever have been written in this script. Medinan Qur'ans were written in the al-Ma'il and Mashq scripts for many decades before the Kufic script became the common denominator of all the early texts throughout the Muslim world and, in any event, Kufic only came into regular use at Kufa and elsewhere in the Iraqi province in the generations following Uthman's demise.⁵⁶

Gilchrist concludes, then, that the Kufic script reached its perfection during the late 8th century when Classical Arabic was standardized, and since both the Samarqand and the Topkapi Qur'ans are written in the Kufic script, they cannot be dated any earlier than the end of the 8th century, more than 150 years after Muhammad's death.⁵⁷ In fact, he says that none of the surviving Qur'an manuscripts, "whether in whole codices or sizeable fragments, can be dated earlier than the late eighth century" since they all use scripts that were not developed until that time.⁵⁸

Sidney Griffith reminds us, however, that the late 7th century inscriptions of Quranic verses around the base of the dome in the Dome of the Rock shrine in Jerusalem are written in "beautiful Kufic" script.⁵⁹ Was this an earlier form of Kufic script than what we have in the Topkapi and Samarqand, or could these manuscripts also be dated to the end of the 7th century? It is, of course, possible that the Kufic script developed earlier. Andrew Rippin argues, however, that a 7th century Kufic script would still not make a difference. His reasoning is based on the idea that a "proto-Qur'an," even if written in a Kufic script, would still not reach a "point of authority, acceptance, and stability" which would be required for final canonization, until the end of the 8th century.⁶⁰

Variations at San'a'

One of the most fascinating recent archaeological finds that sheds light on the development of the Qur'an is the 1972 discovery of thousands of fragments of old Qur'ans in the attic of a mosque in San'a', Yemen. A few scholars, like Gerd Puin, believe that some of the fragments may even date back to the late 7th century.⁶¹ This veritable scriptural "gold mine" should have been lauded in the Muslim press, except that many of these old texts contain variations from the standard text of the Qur'an. Toby Lester comments that "such aberrations,

thorough comparison of the script with other early Qur'ans, assigns the Samarqand codex to the early third Islamic century (early 800s). See Arthur Jeffery, "The Orthography of the Samarqand Qur'an Codex," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, V. 62, pp. 175-195, 1942.

⁵⁵ Muhammad Hamidullah, *The Emergence of Islam: Lectures on the development of Islamic world-view, intellectual tradition and polity*, Publication no. 90, Islamic Research Institute, Islamabad, 1993.

⁵⁶ John Gilchrist, *Jam' Al-Qur'an -- The Codification of the Qur'an Text: A Comprehensive Study of the Original Collection of the Qur'an Text and the Early Surviving Qur'an Manuscripts* (Mondeor, South Africa: Muslim Evangelism Resource Center of Southern Africa, 1989), p. 147.

⁵⁷ Gilchrist, *Jam' Al-Qur'an -- The Codification of the Qur'an*, p. 147.

⁵⁸ Gilchrist, *Jam' Al-Qur'an -- The Codification of the Qur'an*, p. 147.

⁵⁹ Sidney Griffith, *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), p. 33.

⁶⁰ Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies*, p. xvii. In fact, the Dome of the Rock verses could be part of a proto-Qur'an.

⁶¹ Lester, "What Is the Koran?" p.108.

though not surprising to textual historians, are troublingly at odds with the orthodox Muslim belief that the Koran as it has reached us today is quite simply the perfect, timeless, and unchanging Word of God."⁶² The man behind much of the controversy is Gerd Puin, a "specialist in Arabic calligraphy and Koranic paleography," who was sent by the German government to help unravel the mass of decaying documents. As he studied the crumbling manuscripts and the 35,000 pictures of the texts he noticed many minor variations as well as the presence of palimpsests, even earlier versions that had been washed off so that the parchment could be used again. From his study Puin concluded that "the Koran is a kind of cocktail of texts that were not all understood even at the time of Muhammad ... *Many of them may even be a hundred years older than Islam itself.* Even within the Islamic traditions there is a huge body of contradictory information, including a significant Christian substrate" (my emphasis).⁶³ In other words, it would not necessarily be a problem to find an early fragment, say mid-7th century, with Qur'anic-like verses on it because it may indeed be from a pre-Islamic source, even from the gospel of Jesus or Psalms.

The best evidence we have today seems to reveal a slow development of the Qur'an from non-Muslim sources, primarily Syriac, that were adopted and incorporated into an intermediate monotheism that was neither Christian nor Jewish, but which was influenced by beliefs from both. At first it was the religion of the elite, but as the Arabs became more successful and began to settle in their conquered cities, the leaders recognized that they would need to fortify their hegemony by establishing their religious beliefs, authorizing their own scriptures and supporting their own prophet. For many Christians at that time, like John of Damascus, this new religion was understood as just a heresy of Christianity with anti-Christian beliefs and a false prophet. As time went on, however, written Arabic, as well as the scripture written in Arabic, became standardized and Muhammad became established in a religion that would soon rival Christendom.

In the end, the Revisionists and Neo-Revisionists may not agree whether the first 100 years of Islam can be reconstructed or not, but through the use of philological tools in conjunction with historical, archaeological, numismatic, epigraphical and non-Muslim documentary accounts, they are all helping to assemble pieces of the puzzle and, hopefully, will provide a more accurate picture in time.

⁶² Lester, "What is the Koran?," p. 108.

⁶³ Lester, "What is the Koran?," p. 112. See also Ibn Warraq, *What the Koran Really Says: Language, Text, and Commentary* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), p. 67: "The Hijazi fragments seem to suggest that, even in the eighth century C.E., the text of the Koran was yet to be defined, and the "reading" options that the meagre *rasm* allowed had to be limited by officially recognizing only a part of them as admissible *qira'at*."

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