The Qur'ān reigns supreme in Muslim hearts as the most sacred of texts; a profusion of exalted ideas to raise the mind, noble histories to stir the soul, universal truths to awaken the conscience and precise injunctions for the deliverance of humanity, all distilled into the melodious essence that is the Word of Allah. Through fourteen centuries Muslims have championed the text against corruption and enthusiastically commuted each letter to heart.

This expansive book provides unique insights into the holy text's immaculate preservation, as well as exploring many of the accusations leveled against it. The reception of divine revelations, Prophet Muhammad's role in disseminating and compiling these verses, and the setting of the text's final external shape are scientifically examined alongside such topics as the origins of Arabic, the so-called Musyaf of Ibn Mas'ud, and the strict methodology employed in assembling textual fragments.

By way of comparison the author investigates the histories of the Old and New Testaments, relying entirely on Judeo-Christian sources, and uncovers a startling range of alternations in the biblical Scriptures. Using this as a springboard, he illustrates convincingly that Western research into Islam's Holy Book is motivated by more than mere curiosity, and has no scientific bearing on the Qur'ān's integrity.

This monumental effort, a scholarly work composed in an impassioned tone, provides a welcome foundation for sincere study at a time when assailing the Qur'ān has become all too common.
In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful

The History of the Qur’anic Text
THE HISTORY OF THE QUR'ĀNIC TEXT

From Revelation to Compilation
A Comparative Study with the Old and New Testaments

MUHAMMAD MUSTAFA AL-A'ZAMI
For my dear mother, whose face
I was too young to remember, whose greatest wish for me
(as I was later told) was to memorize the Qur’an, and who
I hope to meet again in the Gardens of Heaven.
May Allah accept from us our best deeds.
Amen.
MUHAMMAD MUSTAFA AL-ÂZAMI, one of the world's premier scholar of Hadith, was born in Mau (U.P.), India in the early 1930s and received his education successively at Dār al-'Ulum Deoband, India (1952), al-Azhar University, Cairo (M.A., 1955), and University of Cambridge (Ph.D., 1966). He is Professor Emeritus at King Sa'ūd University (Riyadh) where he also chaired the department of Islamic Studies; he holds a Saudi citizenship. Al-Âzâmi served as curator of the National Public Library, Qatar; Associate Professor at Umm al-Qurâ University (Makkah); Visiting Scholar at University of Michigan (Ann Arbor); Visiting Fellow at St. Cross College (University of Oxford); King Faisal Visiting Professor for Islamic Studies at Princeton; and Visiting Scholar at University of Colorado (Boulder). He is also an Honorary Professor at University of Wales (Lampeter). His publications include Studies in Early Hadith Literature, Hadith Methodology and Literature, On Schachti Origins of Muhammadan jurisprudence, Dirāsāt fi al-Hadīth an-Nabawi, Kutub an-Nabi, Manhaj an-Naqd 'ind al-Muḥaddithin, and al-Muḥaddithin min al-Yamān. Among his edited works are al-'Ilal of Ibn al-Madini, Kitāb at-Tamyz of Imam Muslim, Maghāzi Rasūlullâh of 'Urwah ibn az-Zubayr, Musawwa' of Imam Malik,Ṣaḥīḥ Ibn Khuzaimah, and Sunan ibn Mājah. Many of his works have been translated internationally, and his forthcoming works include The Ageless Qur'ān through the Ages, and The Imād System: Its Origins and Authenticity. In 1980 he was the recipient of the prestigious King Faisal International Award for Islamic Studies.
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PREFACE

This work comprises a short introduction to the history of the Qur’ān, its recording and its collection. The reader may therefore be perturbed as to why one third of the material in this book tackles the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament (NT), wondering what significance this has on the Qur’ān’s history. This significance shall, I hope, be made clear as the chapters progress, since I have attempted to present only those details which have a direct bearing on the current subject matter.

The idea of authoring a book about the Qur’ān, about its collection and immaculate preservation, had long germinated in my mind, and towards the close of the millennium I finally began working on this book alongside another entitled Islamic Studies: What Methodology? It was journalist Toby Lester’s article in The Atlantic Monthly (January 1999) however, and the chaos it had the potential to sow among Muslims, which prompted a greater concentration on this work. His article suggested that Muslims, despite believing in the Qur’ān as the unadulterated Book of Allah, were thoroughly incapable of defending this view in any scholarly fashion. The gauntlet was thrown, and I felt it necessary to take on this challenge and explain the stringent methodology used by early Muslim scholars in accepting a text as genuine, or rejecting it as fake. This has lead to the unavoidable repetition of some material in both books. As most of the scholars that Lester quotes are of Judeo-Christian background, I also considered it fitting to cover the histories of the Old and New Testaments by way of comparison. This will help the reader to regard the disparity of opinions between Muslim and Orientalist scholars with a fair measure of insight.

With their insistence on a purely oral transmission, most Orientalists reject all reports that relate to the recording and compilation of the Qur’ān during the Prophet Muhammad’s lifetime. Many of them even deny that any final compilation occurred during Abū Bakr’s reign, while some accept the role of the third caliph ‘Uthmān in this regard. Only fifteen years lapsed between the Prophet’s death and ‘Uthmān’s distribution of written copies of the Qur’ān to different provinces of the Muslim world. Viewing this

1 Certain works now designate these as the First and Second Testaments, most likely to eliminate any suggestion of one having superior authority over the other.
interval with serious misgivings, Orientalists have often focused on the possibility of deep-seated corruptions crawling into the text within this time span. Strangely, many biblical scholars deem the text of the Old Testament to be historically viable even though some of the OT books were maintained purely as an oral tradition for up to eight centuries.²

The Orientalist spotlight has also been cast on the Arabic script with discussions of its shortcomings, though it took only half a century from the Prophet’s death for the script to evolve and extinguish its initial ambiguities. They blame this period again for triggering textual distortions, though in doing so they contradict themselves and negate their earlier emphasis on oral transmission (which is a fact, in that people were memorizing the Qur’ān even while they possessed it in written form). Hence their claim that the ‘defective script’ had an impact within that span of fifty years is groundless. By contrast the Hebrew script, transformed during the return of Jews from their captivity in Babylon to Palestine, was thoroughly devoid of vowels and in fact remained so for two thousand years, until contact with the Muslim Arabs spurred them on in this regard. To suppose that the lapse of fifty years proved damaging to the Qur’ānic text whilst the OT, suffering from a severely disjointed oral tradition and a vowel-less text for two millennia, deserves a more hearty benefit of the doubt is totally unjustifiable.

Along similar lines, there exist Mughals in the Hejārī script from the early first century of Hijra (late 7th-early 8th c. A.D.),² as well as dated manuscripts of portions of the Qur’ān belonging to the first century. Discarding the value of these specimens, Orientalists claim that they are still too late to prove that the text is uncontaminated by corruption; some choose to simply regard them as fakes.³ By comparison the oldest complete and dated manuscript of the Hebrew Bible belongs to the beginning of the 11th century c. A.D.,⁴ and the earliest dated Greek manuscripts of the Gospels were written e. the 10th century c. A.D.,⁵ yet these same concerns do not seem to apply here. This discrepancy in attitude towards the Qur’ān on the one hand, and the OT and NT on the other, must be addressed if we are to fully assess the Qur’ān’s integrity.

The established practice at the dawn of Islamic literary history was that any religious text (ḥadīth, taṣfīr, fiṣḥ etc.) had to be transmitted by those who had learned the work directly from its authors, they in turn teaching it to the next generation. Full records of these transmissions were kept, allowing us to peer into the pedigree of every book regarding šarī’ah,⁷ at least in its early stages—a method of authentication unsurpassed in the world even now.⁸ If we were to apply the tenets of Muslim literary transmission to any random book at the local bookstore, proving its authenticity and authorship would in all likelihood be impossible. Despite all the books of the OT and NT having been penned anonymously, however, Western scholarship finds it easier to grant them historical legitimacy than to the Muslim transmission chains, which are often cast under suspicion or found altogether inadequate. After delving into both the Muslim and Western methodologies, I will let the reader decide which of the two is the most reliable.

Judaism and Christianity are undoubtedly religions in history, but where the doubt does arise is on the authorship of the Old and New Testaments. The answer cannot in fact be established. The OT was initially considered a work of revelation but was later deemed the work of Moses; the latest theory is that multiple sources (extending over approximately one thousand years) contributed to the authorship of the five books of Moses.⁹ Who were these shadow writers? How honest and accurate were they? How reliable were their knowledge of the incidents involved? Did they ever participate in any of these incidents? And how did these books eventually reach us? The only known facts are that the OT books appeared on the scene only to disappear for a few hundred years, before abruptly resurfacing.⁰ Again they

² Even the existence of this oral transmission is highly questionable; see Chapter 16.
³ Whichever possible I will use c.e. (common era) as a substitute for a.d. (Anno Domini), the latter of which means ‘year of the Lord’.
⁴ M. Minovī in his article “Outline History of Arabic Writing”, claimed that the earliest Qur’ānic specimens are all either forgeries or suspect. [A. Grabmann, “The Problem of Dating Early Qur’āns”, Der Islam, Band 33, Heft 3, Sep. 1958, p. 217.]
⁵ In the words of A.B. Beck in his introduction to the Leningrad Codex, “The Leningrad Codex is the world’s oldest complete manuscript of the Hebrew Bible … The only other extant manuscript of the ‘complete’ Hebrew Bible from this scribal tradition is the Aleppo Codex, which is about a century older … However, the Aleppo Codex is now fragmentary and undated, while the Leningrad Codex is complete and dated 1008 or 1009 c.e.” [Introduction to the Leningrad Codex, in The Leningrad Codex: A Facsimile Edition, W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1998, pp. ix-x.]; For further detail see pp. 275-77.
⁶ According to B.M. Metzger, “… one of the earliest dated Greek manuscripts of the Gospels … was written by a monk named Michael in the year of the world 6457 (= A.D. 949). It is now in the Vatican Library (no. 3550).” [The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruptions, and Restoration, 3rd enlarged edition, Oxford Univ. Press, 1992, p. 56]. For further detail see pp. 318-20.
⁷ Islamic law.
⁸ See Chapter 13.
⁹ Muslims believe that the Torah and the Zabur were revealed but were subsequently lost or corrupted. A minute portion of the current Old Testament may contain the original revelations, but it is scattered throughout the text. Recognizing it is difficult for the Muslim; the only criterion is that it must agree with the teachings of the Qur’ān and sunna.
⁰ See 2 Kings 14:16-18.
disappeared without trace for many centuries, and were once again suddenly recovered. Compare that with a few thousand honest souls living alongside the Prophet and actively participating with him in war and peace, in jest and misfortune, in hunger and ease, meticulously documenting every verse and every hadith. Their biographies form a poignant chronicle—though Orientalists dismiss much of it as fiction. For the Wansbrough school it is purely an example of an invented 'salvation history', with no bearing on what really happened.

Meanwhile other scholars are actively engaged in expunging their own religious narratives in favor of something new, which I can illustrate briefly here by referring to the tale of Jesus’ crucifixion. The Orthodox Jewish viewpoint states that,

According to the Talmud, Jesus was executed by a proper rabbinical court for idolatry, inciting other Jews to idolatry and consorting with rabbinical authority. All classical Jewish sources which mention his execution are quite happy to take responsibility for it: in the Talmudic account the Romans are not even mentioned.11

In addition to a series of scurrilous sexual allegations against Jesus, the Talmud states that his punishment in hell is to be immersed in boiling excrement.12

Ironically the New Testament and modern Christianity are being cleansed of all such references even though they exist in the Talmud. What is the definition of sacredness if deliberate shifts in wording and tone are being wrought within the Scriptures in this day and age?13 And with such goings-on as a backdrop, how can some intellectuals accept Judaism and Christianity as historical religions while denying the same to Islam?14

At issue here is not what Islam is or what Islamic sources say, but rather how Muslims perceive their own faith and how Orientalist research wants them to perceive it. Several years ago Professor C.E. Bosworth, one of the editors of Brill’s Encyclopedia of Islam, delivered a lecture at the University of Colorado. When asked why Muslim scholars, even those trained in Western institutions, were not invited to contribute to the encyclopedia’s essential articles (such as Qur’ān, hadith, jihād, etc.), he

responded that this work was by the Western pen for Western people. His answer though was only half correct: this work is not intended solely for Western consumption. To quote something which Edward Said uses in his work, Orientalism:

“They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.” — Karl Marx15

Here Marx is discussing the French peasantry, but the idea of muting great swathes of people with a single sentence and casting the burden of representation wholly upon outsiders is by no means a novel one.

One last point before ending this preface. When a certain amount of research finally yields a theory, academia dictates that this theory must face rigorous testing. If it fails then it must be either modified and retested or abandoned altogether. But studies of Islam are unfortunately littered with ill-conceived theories that have almost acquired the status of hard fact, even when they fail on several counts. The next two examples will clarify.

Professor Wensinck comments on the famous hadith regarding the five pillars of Islam:

بِنِي إِسْلَامٍ عَلَى خَمَسَةِ شَاهِدَةٍ أَنِّي لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللّهُ وَإِيَامِالْهَمَامِ، وَإِيَامِالْزِكَاءَةَ، وَيَامِالْقُرُوبِ، وَيَامِالْجُمَهُرِ

Islam has been built on five pillars: testifying that there is no god but Allah, performing the salāt, paying the zakāt, fasting Ramadān, and making the pilgrimage to the House.16

He views this as spurious since it contains the kalima shahāda (شَهَادَة) bearing testimony that there is no god but Allah). According to his view, the Companions of Prophet Muhammad introduced the kalima only after coming across some Christians in Syria who employed a declaration of faith, thus thieving this idea from the Christians to develop one of the core pillars of Islam. Confronted with the problem that the kalima shahāda is also part of the taḥmud (تَخْمُّد) in the daily prayers, Wensinck put forward another theory instead of modifying his earlier one: the prayer was standardized after the Prophet’s death.17 Perhaps a further theory is required, as he does not speculate about the existence of the kalima in the adhān (الَاذْهَان) and the igādha (الأَيْدِّى),18 nor when these two were introduced into Islam.

18. These are the two calls to the Muslim five daily prayers. The adhān is the first and the igādha, just prior to the initiation of prayer, is the second.
My second example is Goldziher, who theorized that the differences in the qur’ān (qur’ān readings) of the Qur’ān are due to the consonantal text used in early copies. Bringing forth a few examples to show the validity of his idea, he avoids alluding to the hundreds of instances where his theory fails—though that has not stopped it from acquiring great popularity in certain circles.19

Considerable effort has been invested in making this work, while worthy of the scholar, accessible to the layman as well. If there are any passages which the former may find repetitious, or the latter esoteric, it is because maintaining a happy medium has not always been possible.

Regarding the rendition of verses into English, no single English translation of the Qur’ān was used uniformly throughout this book, though most of the verse renderings are based either on the efforts of Yusuf ‘Ali or Muhammad Asad. These translations were occasionally modified, and sometimes even rewritten, depending on how clear I found the original rendition to be. This does not constitute tampering since the Qur’ān is in Arabic, and the translator’s duty is to distill some of the shades of meaning in the text; the end product is not Qur’ān but simply a translation (just as a shadow is merely a shadow), and so long as nothing is misquoted or taken out of context, there is no need to follow one particular translation or another.

The reader may perceive that I have generally dispensed with the phrases of glorification or invocation that follow certain names, such as ﷺ (Praiseworthy be His Majesty) after Allah, ﷺ (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) after the Prophet Muhammad, ﷺ (peace be upon him) after the names of other prophets and messengers (e.g. Abraham, Ishmael, Moses, Jesus etc.), or ﷺ (may Allah be pleased with him) after any of the Companions. My purpose was to maintain the text’s flow as much as possible, with the hope that the Muslim reader will mentally insert these phrases into the text as appropriate. Some of Islam’s greatest scholars adhered to this same practice in fact, including no less a figure than Imám Ahmad bin Hanbal, and though subsequent writers saw fit to add all such phrases explicitly into the text, the eye is just as capable of slotting them in by instinct.

And a note of caution. A Muslim’s faith requires firm belief in the purity and righteous conduct of all of Allah’s prophets. I will be quoting from non-Muslim sources however, some of whom feel no hesitation in referring to their own Lord Jesus Christ as an adulterer or a homosexual, to David as an adulterous schemer, or to Solomon as an idolater (O Allah, how horrid are such words). As it is very cumbersome to insert a note whenever I quote such

19 For a detailed discussion see Chapter 12.
Sheikh Niẓām Ya'qūbī, Dr. ‘Abdallāh dī Subayh, Haroon Shirwani, and the many others who participated in proofreading the text and providing valuable feedback. I must also extend tremendous gratitude to my family for their unwavering assistance throughout the many stages of this effort: to my elder son ‘Alī for his continuous help with manuscript preparation, transcription, compiling bibliography and typography, to my daughter Fāṭima for her work with cross-references, to my younger son Anas who receives complete credit for making the manuscript’s English sound and lucid, and to my daughter-in-law Ruqayya Akbar for her work with indexing. And a particular tribute to my wife for tolerating me through fifty years of marriage and suffering through the many sacrifices she has had to bear with extraordinary patience and a loving smile. May Allāh reward all of them for their kindness and generosity.

Finally, my deepest gratitude to Almighty Allāh for providing me with the opportunity and privilege of embarking on this topic; whatever faults are present in this book are entirely my own,20 and whatever pleases Him is for His Glory alone. I pray that He will accept this work as a sincere effort on His behalf.

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M.M. al-A‘zāmī

20 I can only recall the saying of Imām ash-Shāfi‘i (50-204 a.h./767-820 C.E.): ألا أذكرك أبا هل 부 (Allāh has denied that any book should be free of errors aside from His Own)” [A. Shulz (ed.), ar-Risālah of ash-Shāfi‘i, p. 73 footnote 8].