Sheikh Niqām Ya'qībī, Dr. ʿAbdallāh ʿUbayd, 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 ʿAqīl 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, and whatever pleases Him is for His Glory alone. I pray that He will accept this work as a sincere effort on His behalf.

The draft of this book has witnessed many revisions, including once in al-Ḥaram ash-Sharīf in Makkah during Ramadān 1420 A.H./December 1999. After the appearance of the first edition in August 2003 it underwent a few more revisions, culminating in a final revision in Riyadh, Ramadān 1429 A.H./September 2008.

M.M. al-ʿAẓāmi

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20 I can only recall the saying of Imām ʿAbdul-Barr (150-204 A.H./767-820 C.E.): ʿAllāh has denied that any book should be free of errors aside from His Own. (A. Shākir, ed., ʿRisālah of ʿAbdul-Barr, p. 73 footnote 8).
Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

“O you who believe! Stand out firmly for Allah, as witnesses to fair dealing, and let not the hatred of others to you make you swerve towards inequity and depart from justice. Be just: that is closer to Piety; and fear Allah. For Allah is well-acquainted with all that you do.”

Guidance, comfort and beauty. For the believing Muslim the Holy Qur’ān is all this and much more: the heartbeat of faith, a remembrance in times of joy and anguish, a fountain of precise scientific reality and the most exquisite lyricism, a treasury of wisdom and supplications. Its verses hang from the walls of shops and living rooms, etched in the minds of young and old, and reverberate through the night from minarets across the globe. Even so, Sir William Muir (1819-1905) adamantly declared it one of “the most stubborn enemies of Civilisation, Liberty, and the Truth which the World has yet known.”

Others have been no more charitable, seeing it to heap abuse or cast suspicion upon it throughout the centuries and up to our present day, among them scholars, missionaries, and now even the occasional politician. Such a dichotomy is aggravating to Muslims and certainly perplexing to the non-Muslim, who would be well justified in supposing that each group was alluding to a different book altogether. What are the facts and what is the evidence? Faced with such an immense and sensitive topic brimming with ideas to consider, I could have begun my explorations anywhere; the starting point, as it finally turned out, was to be an article by someone I had never heard of before.

“What is the Koran?”, the lead article of the January 1999 issue of The Atlantic Monthly, raised many issues concerning the origins and integrity of

1 Qur’ān 5:8.
the Qur’an. The author’s credentials, a certain Toby Lester, are given in the magazine and suggest that he does not have any knowledge of Islam aside from having lived in Yemen and Palestine for a few years, though this hardly seems to hinder him for he delves headlong into controversy. He mentions that:

Western Koranic scholarship has traditionally taken place in the context of an openly declared hostility between Christianity and Islam. The Koran has seemed, for Christian and Jewish scholars particularly, to possess an aura of heresy...

After citing William Muir’s denunciation of the Qur’an he states that even early Soviet scholars subjected Islam to their ideological biases: N.A. Morozov for instance flamboyantly argued that “until the Crusades Islam was indistinguishable from Judaism and ... only then did it receive its independent character, while Muhammad and the first Caliphs are mythical figures.”

Lester strives to portray himself as purely academic: a curious reporter filing an objective report. In an interview with the asb-Sharg al-Awasq Daily he denies any bad intentions, hard feelings or wrongdoing towards Muslims, insisting that he sought only the truth. But there is no doubt that he has taken pains to collect his information strictly from the anti-traditionalist camp, heralding the arrival of secular reinterpretations of the Muslim Holy Book. He extensively quotes Dr. Gerard Joseph Puiu, a bookbinder and mathematician, who has devoted his life to the restoration of old Qur’anic fragments in San’a, Yemen (which I have seen recently, and for which he and his team deserve due gratitude). Now, a bookbinder who completes a magnificent binding of a complex mathematical text will not automatically ascend to the rank of mathematician, but because of his restoration of the pages of old manuscripts, Puiu is fashioned into a world-authority on the Qur’an’s entire history.

“So many Muslims have this belief that everything between the two covers of the Koran is just God’s unadorned word,” [Dr. Puiu] says. “They like to quote the textual work that shows that the Bible has a history and did not fall straight out of the sky, but until now the Koran has been out of this discussion. The only way to break through this wall is to prove that the Koran has a history too. The San’a fragments will help us to do this.”

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3 Cited thereafter as Lester. Also, though his article spells the Qur’an as ‘Koran’, this is technically incorrect and I will utilise the proper spelling whenever I am not directly quoting.
4 Lester, p. 46.
5 Ibid, pp. 46-47.
7 Lester, p. 44. Italics added.
8 Ibid, p. 45. Italics added. It must be noted that all these sweeping judgments have been passed even before anyone has thoroughly studied these manuscripts. Such is often the nature of Orientalist scholarship.
9 Ibid, p. 46.
10 See pp. 50-52.
11 Lester, p. 54.
G.R. Puin strings many words together but provides no examples, which is unfortunate because I have absolutely no idea where this incomprehensible fifth of the Qur'ān happens to be. Lester then states that the unwillingness to accept the conventional understanding of the Qur'ān only began in earnest in the 20th century,12 it references Patricia Crone, quotes R.S. Humphreys,13 and ends up at John Wansbrough. The main thrust of Wansbrough's work is to establish two major points: firstly, that the Qur'ān and hadith were generated by various communities over the course of two centuries; and second, that Islamic doctrine was modeled on Rabbinical Jewish prototypes. Puin is apparently re-reading his works now, for his theories have been germinating slowly in certain circles even though “many Muslims understandably find them deeply offensive”.14 Readers have known Cook, Crone and Wansbrough for a quarter of a century, but the new face to emerge from this piece is Dr. Puin, whose findings form the backbone of Lester's lengthy article. Some of the Yemeni parchments, dating back to the first two centuries of Islam,

[reveal] small but intriguing aberrations from the standard Koranic text. Such aberrations, 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 the perfect, timeless, and unchanging Word of God. The main secular effort to reinterpret the Koran—in part based on textual evidence such as that provided by the Yemeni fragments15—is disturbing and offensive to many Muslims, just as attempts to reinterpret the Bible and the life of Jesus are disturbing and offensive to many conservative Christians... [Such secular reinterpretation] can be nonetheless very powerful and— as the histories of the Renaissance and the Reformation demonstrate—can lead to major social change. The Koran, after all, is currently the world's most ideologically influential text.16

So the entire matter lies before us:

- The Yemeni fragments will help secular efforts to reinterpret the Qur'ān.
- Though offensive to countless Muslims, this reinterpretation can provide the impetus for major social changes that mirror what Christianity experienced centuries ago.
- These changes may be brought about by 'showing' that the Qur'ān was initially a fluid text, one which the Muslim community contributed to and freely rearranged over several centuries, implying that the Qur'ān was not as sacred then as it has now misguided become.

The majority of Lester's references, those quoted or mentioned in his piece, are non-Muslim: Gerold Joseph Puin, von Bothmer, A. Rippin, R. Stephen Humphreys, Gunter Lilling, Yehuda Nevo, Patricia Crone, Michael Cook, James Bellamy, William Muir, Lambton, Tolstoy, Moronov and J. Wansbrough. He also spreads the glad tidings that, within the Islamic world, revisionism is on the move. In this category he names Naṣr Abū Zaid, Tāba Ḥusain, 'Alī Dushtī, Muḥammad Abduh, Ahmad Amīn, Fazlur Rahmān, and finally Muḥammad Arkoun and his fervent advice to battle orthodoxy from within.17 Scholars from the traditional school of Islamic thought are largely cast aside and ignored, with only Muḥammad Abduh's controversial name being included.

But what is the revisionist school? Lester fails to define it clearly, so I will allow Yehuda Nevo, one of the authorities he quotes, to supply the definition:

'The revision' approach is by no means monolithic... but they are united in denying historical validity to accounts based purely on 'facts' derived from the Muslim literary sources... The information they provide must be corroborated by the 'hard facts' of material remains... The written sources should always be checked against external evidence, and where the two conflict, the latter should be preferred.18

Because external evidence must necessarily be found to verify every Muslim account, absence of such corroborations helps to negate the account and implies that the event never took place.

That there is no evidence for it outside of the 'traditional account' that becomes positive evidence in support of the hypothesis that it did not happen. A striking example is the lack of evidence, outside the Muslim literature, for the view that the Arabs were Muslim at the time of the Conquest.19

12 ibid, p. 54.
13 ibid, p. 55.
14 ibid, p. 55.
15 Just for the record: in my assessment the Türk ve İslam İşleri Müzesi (Museum of Islamic Art) in Istanbul may house an even greater collection than that in Yemen. Unfortunately I was denied access to this collection, so this notion must remain speculative, though according to F. Dörrothe it houses about 210,000 folios ["The Qur'ān of Amigius", Manuscripts of the Middle East, Leiden, 1990-91, vol. 5, p. 59].
16 Lester, p. 44. Italics added.
17 ibid, p. 56.
19 ibid, pp. 92.
The outcome of this revisionist approach is a complete erasure of Islamic history, and the fabrication of another in which such events as the pre-Islamic presence of paganism in Makkah, the Jewish settlements near Madinah, and the Muslim victory over the Byzantine Empire in Syria are absolutely denied. In fact, revisionism argues that the paganism which afflicted Makkah prior to Islam is simply a fictitious back-projection of a pagan culture that thrived in southern Palestine.  

The central point, which must be made clear, is that there is a definite motive behind all these ‘discoveries’. Such findings do not exist in a vacuum or fall unexpectedly into the scholar’s lap; they are the brainchild of a particular ideological and political arena, served up in the guise of breakthrough academic research.

Attempts to distort Islam and its sacred texts are in fact as old as the religion itself, though the strategy behind these efforts has fluctuated according to the intended goal. Beginning with the rise of Islam and up until the 13th century A.H. (7th-18th century C.E.), the first objective was to establish a protective fence around Christians to counteract the rapid advance of the new faith in Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Libya etc. Among the notables of this period were John of Damascus (359-133 A.H./655-750 C.E.), Peter the Venerable (1084-1156 C.E.), Robert of Ketton, Raymond Lull (1235-1316 C.E.), Martin Luther (1483-1546 C.E.) and Ludovico Marraci (1612-1700 C.E.), whose pens dipped in unsophisticated yet willful ignorance and falsehood. Spurred by the change in political fortunes and the start of colonialism from the 18th century onwards, the second phase of attack witnessed a shift in posture from defensive to offensive, aspiring to the mass conversion of Muslims or, at the least, of shattering any pride and resistance that emanated from their belief in Allah.

Abraham Geiger (1810-1874) belongs squarely to this second period; his 1833 dissertation, *Was hat Mohammed aus den Judenstum aufgenommen?* (“What did Mohammed take from Judaism?”), inaugurated the search for ulterior influences on the Qur’ān and lead to innumerable books and articles aimed at branding it a poor Biblical counterfeit, replete with mistakes.

Future chapters will bring to light other names which have spearheaded this second phase, including Noldeke (1836-1930), Goldziher (1850-1921), Hugronje (1857-1936), Bergsträser (1886-1933), Tisdall (1859-1928), Jeffery (d. 1952) and Schacht (1902-1969). A third phase, beginning in the mid 20th century on the heels of the founding of Israel, has actively sought to purge all verses that cast an unfavorable light on Jews. Among the followers of this school are Rippin, Crone, Power, Calder and not least of all Wansbrough, whose theory, that the Qur’ān and hadith are community products spanning two centuries which were then fictitiously attributed to an Arabian prophet based on Jewish prototypes, is doubtlessly the most radical approach to outing the Qur’ān from its hallowed status.

The previous decades have witnessed a quickened maturation of these last two phases, swelling in multi-faceted ways; a fairly recent scheme for assailing the Qur’ān has been its reduction to a cultural text, one which is a by-product of a particular era and is therefore obsolete, rather than a Book that is meant for all nations at all times.

Traditional Islam had not been resistant to the notion that the revelation reflected the milieu in which it was revealed... But traditional Islam could never have made the leap from the idea of a scripture which *engages* the society in which it was revealed to the notion of one which is a *product* of it. For most Muslims in the modern world any significant move in this direction is still hardly an option, and it is unlikely to become one in the near foreseeable future.

This was the inspiration for Naṣr Abū Zaid (declared an apostate by Egypt’s highest court and according to Cook, a ‘Muslim secularist”), whose central belief about the Qur’ān was that,

*If the text was a message sent to the Arabs of the seventh century, then of necessity it was formulated in a manner which took for granted historically specific aspects of their language and culture. The Koran thus took shape in a human setting. It was a *cultural product* – a phrase Abu Zayd used several times, and which was highlighted by the Court of Cassation when it determined him to be an unbeliever.*

Approaching the Qur’ān from a textual viewpoint appears benign enough to the uninstructed; how insidious can concepts such as ‘semantics’ and ‘textual linguistics’ be? But the focus is not a study of the text itself so much as it is a study of the *evolution* of the text, of how forms and structures within the Qur’ān can be derived from 7th/8th century Arabic literature. This essentially leads to a thorough secularization and desacralization of the text. Speaking of the Biblical scholar Van Buren, Professor E.L. Mascall states

21. For more on this essential topic, refer to Chapter 19.
that “he finds the guiding principle of the secularization of Christianity in the philosophical school which is commonly known as linguistic analysis.”

26 If such is the aim of linguistic analysis in Biblical studies, what other motive can there be in applying it to the Qur’ān?

This being outside the realm of what is tolerable to Muslims, an alternate strategy is to substitute the holy text with vernacular translations, then inflate their status such that they are held on a par with the original Arabic. In this way Muslim societies, three-quarters of which are non-Arab, can be severed from the actual revelations of Allah.

There is necessarily a mismatch between the Arabic of the Koran and the local language of primary education... The tension is exacerbated by the fact that modernity brings an enhanced concern for the intelligibility of scriptures among the believers at large. As the Turkish nationalist Ziya Gökalp (d. 1924) put it: “A country in whose schools the Koran is read in Turkish is one in which everyone, child and adult, knows God’s commands.”

27 After describing the futile Turkish efforts to displace the actual Qur’ān with a Turkish translation, Michael Cook concludes,

To date, the non-Arab Muslim world shows little sign of adopting the idea of a vernacular scripture in the manner of sixteenth-century Protestantism or twentieth-century Catholicism.

28 If all other stratagems are left in tatters, one last resort remains. As described by Cook:

In a modern Western society it is more or less axiomatic that other people’s religious beliefs (though not, of course, all forms of religiously motivated behaviour) are not to be tolerated, and certainly not respected. Indeed it would be considered ill mannered and parochial to refer to the religious views of others as false and one’s own as true... The very notion of absolute truths in matters of religion sounds hopelessly out of date. It is, however, a notion that was central to traditional Islam, as it was to traditional Christianity; and in recent centuries it has survived better in Islam.


32 Ibid, p. 33. emphasis added. Cook’s words, “that was central to traditional Islam”, seem to imply that it is no longer appropriate for modern Islam.

Cook writes this under the heading “Tolerating the beliefs of others”, but what he expounds instead is universalism. Infused with tolerance, Islam maintains clear and firm injunctions governing the rights of non-Muslims; this is well known. Cook’s thesis here is instead about doubt and relativism: the notion that all religions are equally valid because to think otherwise is to betray oneself as provincial and ignorant. This, sadly, is an easier pitfall for many contemporary, ill-educated Muslims. And as a corollary to this idea, “There is a nearly unanimous rejection of any attempt to distinguish between a non-Muslim and a Muslim scholarship in present-day Qur’ānic studies”.

33 A rising chorus of Western scholars now come forward to assail the traditional tafsīr literature, demanding something altogether new. Arguing for the exclusive right to interpret the holy text, many Orientalists dismiss earlier Muslim writings on this topic “on the grounds that Muslims—being dupes, as it were, of the notion that [the Qur’ān] was Scripture—of course could not understand the text so well as could a Western scholar free from that limitation.” Basetti-Sani and Younus Moubarac both insist that tafsīr be made compatible with “Christian truth”, a sentiment endorsed by W.C. Smith and Kenneth Cragg. This last, an Anglican bishop, urges Muslims to scrap the verses revealed in Madinah (with their emphasis on the political and legal aspects of Islam) in favor of their Makkah counterparts, which are generally more involved with basic issues of monotheism, leaving precious little of the religion intact aside from the verbal pronouncement that there is no god except Allah. All these concepts are meant to shake the faith of imprudent Muslims, to arm them with Orientalist barbs and set them out to question and dismiss the very Book which they have inherited, in the process fueling their susceptibility to Western influences. Toby Lester’s article is just another card in this deck, and the tales behind the Yemeni fragments simply another bait. Puin himself has in fact denied all the findings that Lester ascribes to him, with the exception of occasional differences in the spelling of some

34 Stefan Wild (ed.), *The Qur’ān at Text*, p. x. The original contains ‘was’ instead of ‘is’, but changing the tense seems valid given that nothing else has changed. In fact, Muslim scholarship concerning the Qur’ān is generally relegated to second-class status in Western circles, since the former espouses traditionalism while the latter seeks revisionism.

35 Exegesis of the Qur’ān.


words. Here is a part of Pau's original letter – which he wrote to al-Qadi Isma'il al-Akawi shortly after Lester's article – with its translation.\textsuperscript{35}

Figure 1.1 Part of Dr. Pau's original letter to al-Qadi al-Akawi

The important thing, thank God, is that these Yemeni Qur'anic fragments do not differ from those found in museums and libraries elsewhere, with the exception of details that do not touch the Qur'an itself, but are rather differences in the way words are spelled. This phenomenon is well-known, even in the Qur'an published in Cairo which is written:

İhabsin (İhabsin) next to İhabsin
Qur'an (Qur'an) next to Qara
Simalahum (Simalahum) next to Simalahum etc.

In the oldest Yemeni Qur'anic fragments, for example, the phenomenon of not writing the vowel alif is rather common.

This deflates the entire controversy, dusting away the webs of intrigue that were spun around Pau's discoveries and making them a topic unworthy of further speculation.\textsuperscript{36} But let us suppose for the sake of argument that the findings are indeed true; what then is our response? Here we face three questions:

a) What is the Qur'an?

\textsuperscript{37} i.e. the skeleton of the text which may show some variations in vowel writing, see further Chapters 10, 11 and 12. We must nevertheless take into consideration that there are over 200,000 manuscripts of the Qur'an scattered all over the globe (see footnote 39 p. 347). When comparing them it is always possible to find copying mistakes here and there; this is an example of human fallibility, and has been recognized as such by authors who have written extensively on the subject of "unintentional errors". Such occurrences cannot be used to prove any corruption (ṣābikah) within the Qur'an.

\textsuperscript{38} In fact Ibn Qal'ah has credited saying to other scholars as well, e.g. Abu Hutayfa (d. 748 A.H.), Thalhah an-Nahhasi (d. 366 A.H.), al-Dhahabi b. al-Madzhan (d. circa
Some will charge that Muslims have no sound arguments with which to counteract non-Muslim scholarship, that for them the case is based entirely on faith and not on reason. I will therefore bring forward my arguments against their findings in future chapters, though I will first begin by recounting some passages from early Islamic history as a prelude to an in-depth look at the Qur’an.

CHAPTER TWO

EARLY HISTORY OF ISLAM:
A BRIEF LOOK

1. Pre-Islamic Arabia

i. The Geo-Political Condition

Arabia. Situated near the crossroads of three continents, at the heart of the Old World, the Arabian Peninsula juts out into one of the most recognizable features on the globe. Bordered by the Red Sea to its west, the Persian Gulf to its east, the Indian Ocean to the south and Syria and Mesopotamia to the north, it is famously arid but for the vegetation of the Sarawat Mountains, which anchor the western coastline. Despite the scarcity of liquid there are a few sources of underground water available, and these have produced oases which have long served as the backbone for human settlements and caravans.

The Arabian Peninsula has been populated since the earliest days of recorded history, the inhabitants of the Persian Gulf actually establishing city-states prior to the third millennium B.C. Many scholars consider this region to be the cradle of all Semitic races, though there is by no means a full consensus. Theories on this cradle include: Babylonia (the opinion of Von Kremer, Guede and Hommel); the Arabian Peninsula (Sprenger, Sayce, DeGoeje, Brockelmann, and others); Africa (Noldeke and others); Amurru (A.T. Clay); Armenia (Peeters); the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula (Philby); and Europe (Ungnad).

Phillip Hitti, in his work, History of the Arabs, says:

"Though the term ‘semitic’ has of late come to be used in the West more generally with reference to the Jews because of their concentration in America, it is more appropriately applicable to the inhabitants of Arabia who, more than any other group of

1 Jawid Ali, al-Musjafal fi Tarkib al-‘Arab Qahal al-Islam, i:569.
2 ibid, i:230-31.
3 ibid, i:231-32.
4 ibid, i:235.
5 ibid, i:238.
6 ibid, i:238.
7 ibid, i:232-33.
8 ibid, i:238.