

Islamic Thought and Sources

THE HISTORY OF THE QUR'ĀNIC TEXT FROM REVELATION TO COMPILATION: A COMPARATIVE STUDY WITH THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS. By Muhammad Mustafa Al-A'zami. Leicester: UK Islamic Academy, 2003. Pp. 376. ISBN 1872531660 (HB), ISBN 1872 531652 (PB).

From its very beginning, Islam has been under attack not only physically but academically. Christian demagogues like John of Damascus, Peter the Venerable, Raymundus Lull, and Martin Luther later were followed by infamous Jewish, Christian or secularist Orientalists like Julius Wellhausen, Gustav Flügel, Theodor Nöldeke, Ignaz Goldziher, Alphonse Mingana, Snouck Hurgronje or Joseph Schacht. They all did their best to prove that Islam was a corrupted Jewish-Christian copy, based on forged *ahādīth*, without any originality or saving grace.

This scientific onslaught increasingly focused on the Qur'ān, to be dismantled in the same way the Old Testament (OT) and New Testament (NT) had been already. The latest wave of attacks, as vicious and biased as any before, was and is fuelled by the likes of Arthur Jeffrey, Gotthelf Bergsträsser, Otto Pretzl, John Wansborough, Andrew Rippin, Patricia Crone, Michael Cook, Gerd Puin and "Ibn Warraq". Outrageously they more or less claim that the entire Islamic history is mere fiction and the Qur'ān a late—2nd or 3rd Hijrī century—product, projected backwards by what belatedly came to be called Muslims.

The book under review by an Indian (now Saudi) Deobandi and Azhari *ḥadīth* scholar and King Faisal Award winner (1980), also trained in Cambridge, is the most detailed, well researched and documented refutation of Occidental attacks yet written, and that in excellent English. It was prompted by Toby Lester's scandalous article of 1999, "What is Koran?", that appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Al-A'zami takes Lester's article as a starting point for carrying Edward Said's critique of Orientalism right into the camp of Western Qur'ānic studies, painstakingly revealing its biases, double standards, arrogance, incompetence, and, at times, Zionist motivation. The author's erudition does indeed put the Orientalists to shame. It is the most devastating critique of Western Islamological "scholarship", which is entirely conducted using Orientalism's own premises, methods, literature and lines of argumentation.

Remarkably, after establishing the originality and authenticity of the Qur'ānic text (Part I), the author—conscious of Field Marshall von Schlieffen's dictum that *Angriff ist die beste Verteidigung* (attack is the best form of defence)—demonstrates the near incredible corruption of both the OT (II, pp. 211-261) and the NT (II 265-298) in Part II before launching into a final

appraisal of Orientalism (III, pp. 303-341). All the way through, al-A‘zami uses photographs of scriptural fragments, well reproduced on glazed paper, in order to illustrate his points, letting facts speak for themselves. Thus he lists no less than 64 Companions who, in addition of Zayd b. Thābit, functioned as scribes for the Prophet (*ṣaas*). The author is honest to the point of giving two differing accounts of the procedure followed for establishing the ‘Uthmānī *mushaf*: (i) mere copying the *Ṣuhuf* prepared by Zayd b. Thābit during the lifetime of the Caliph Abū Bakr; (ii) checking a version independently established by ‘Uthmān and the surviving Companions against the *Ṣuhuf* and additional material from ‘Ā’ishah (pp. 89-93). Nor does he blindly accept that the earliest extant Qur’anic manuscripts, in Istanbul and Tashkent, were the ones distributed by ‘Uthmān but leaves open the possibility that these MSS like 27 other ones from the first century Hijrī listed on p. 316f. might be the first copies, from 49 A.H. at the earliest (p. 104).

At the same time, he does demonstrate that Kūfic and cursive Arabic script during the first Hijrī century existed side by side with the original Ḥijāzī script, the oldest Arabic inscription found dating from 328 CE (p. 120). In fact, he proves that Arabic script predated the Nabataean one and that the introduction of dots (both skeletal and diacritical) and that of verse separation predated this development in Bible manuscripts by many centuries.

Al-A‘zami is aware that if the Bible were to be treated the way the Qur’ān is, i.e. discarding all Jewish or Christian evidence for it, the existence of Moses and Jesus would have to be denied and both the OT and NT be rated as comparatively recent, anonymous pieces of constantly changing fiction, i.e. true “cultural products”. It is in fact difficult not to become cynical when comparing Judaism and Christianity with the tradition of Islam, based on no less than 250,000 existing Qur’ān manuscripts and hundreds of thousands of *ḥuffāz* who, authorized by their Prophet from the beginning, recited the Qur’ān in its entirety, without any substantial discrepancies except for some dialectical variations. That the Arabic word [insert characters] if undotted can mean “he said”, “he was killed”, “to kiss”, “before”, “front of body” and “elephant” is immaterial in view of the Muslims’ reliable oral tradition. Compare that to the fact that the Torah had been erased from Jewish memory for some 800 years before miraculously surfacing again, that no authoritative text of it existed until around 100 C.E., and that the first extant complete MS of the OT in Hebrew dates from 1008 of our era.

The author is under no illusion that Orientalists will continue to believe that Muslims, as believers, cannot be trusted with the basics of their own faith. Nor does he expect that people who in principle deny the existence of God (and hence the phenomenon of true revelation) will stop their attacks on the Qur’ān. They will continue to make much of the fact that the Qur’ān was gathered but not written until 15 years after the Prophet’s (*ṣaas*) death, while accepting the Bible with its extremely precarious authenticity. And

they will continue to focus on the inadequacies of the earliest Arabic script while insisting, simultaneously, that the Qur'ān was only orally transmitted for more than a century. In other words, they continue to apply differential standards of historical assessment.

It is to be hoped that this book will be circulated and studied widely among all Muslims engaged in *da'wah*, dialogue, education and research, and seen as a truly essential tool. For Muslims, this is easily the most important book of recent times.

In view of such a monumental piece of deep learning, one hesitates to point out a few corrections that could be made:

- p.15 (third millenium) "C.E." should read "B.C.E."
- p. 19: If 'Abd Manāf was born in 430 his son Hāshim cannot have been born in 442.
- References to the Leningrad Codex should be changed to St. Petersburg Codex (pp. 239f.; 282)
- p. 276: Emperor Constantine did not become Christian in 312 C.E. but, after the Nicene Council of 325 C.E., in 337 C.E., baptized only on his deathbed.
- Ahmad al-Imam ought to have been given credit for his relevant study on *Variant Readings of the Qur'ān* (Herndon: IIIT 1998).

Bonn, Germany

Murad Wilfried Hofmann