

To what extent did western orientalists break with the Islamic orthodox tradition in Quranic studies?

The past thirty years have seen increasingly numerous criticisms being directed at the historical authenticity of the Quran. ‘Researchers with a variety of academic and theological interests are proposing controversial theories about the Koran and Islamic history, and are striving to reinterpret Islam for the modern world’.¹ That a substantial body of this scholarly interest exists is manifested in a series of critiques directed towards the traditional Islamic view of the Quran as a divine revelation. It is becoming increasingly difficult to ignore the role of oriental scholarship in the field of Quranic studies. Undeniably, Orientalists have many excellent works on the Quran to their credit. This is not surprising because ‘the Quran is the foundation of Islam’.² The Quran as a remarkable and unique monument and an integral part of Muslim historical and cultural heritage is a point of departure as far as the study of Islam is concerned. Almost one-sixth of the world’s population regard the Quran as the supreme spiritual and religious text. It has been a primary object of reverence and intense study over the years. The Quran is ‘the prime inspiration of a religious movement which gave a rise to a civilisation of wide extent, vast power, and profound vitality’.³

‘Its influence on the course of history’, Arberry acknowledges, ‘has obviously been immense, and will as obviously continue to be extremely great’.⁴ ‘The Quran lies in the heart of Islam,’ therefore, it is no exaggeration to say that ‘Islam is the Quran’.⁵ In Islamic orthodoxy the Quran is believed to be God’s revelation transmitted to Muhammad who ‘was the only man in history who was supremely successful on both the religious and secular level’.⁶ In the orientalist tradition, however, the entire historical framework of the revelation is challenged. The first section of this paper will examine the arguments raised by the orientalists on the subject of the historical origin of the Quranic text, and the type of evidence they

¹ Toby Lester, ‘What is the Koran’, *Atlantic Monthly*, 283 (1998), 43-56.

² Theodor Nöldeke, ‘The Quran: An Introduction’ in *The Origins of the Koran: Classic Essays on Islam’s Holy Book*, ed. by Ibn Warraq (New York: Prometheus Books, 1998), pp. 36-63.

³ A.J. Arberry, *The Holy Koran: An Introduction with Selections* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1953), p. 33.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Jacques Jomier, *The Great Themes of the Qur’an*, trans. by Zoe Hersov (London: SCM Press Ltd, 1997), p. ix.

⁶ Michael H. Hart, *The 100: A Ranking of the Most Influential Persons in History* (New York: Hart Publishing Company, 1978), p. 33.

provide to corroborate their theories in refuting its historical authenticity. The history of the orientalist enterprise in condemning the Arabic sources on Islam is quite peculiar. Some western professionals in ancient languages have taken a new look at the book of Islam. Having undertaken a systematic study of the Quran from a historical-linguistic point of view, they conclude that it was created by a non-Arab source. This paper assesses their hypothesis in the light of the historical development of early Arabic epigraphy. One of the most significant current discussions in modern oriental scholarship is the charge of borrowing ancient materials and composing them as the Qur'an (the 'Bible borrowing' theory). Does the existence of similarities between new and old texts necessarily mean borrowing or plagiarism? This essay critically examines divergent comments of the orientalists regarding the influence of foreign sources in the Quran and the historical conclusions they have drawn from their critical analysis.

The issue of the translatability of the Quran has been a controversial and much disputed subject within the field of oriental enterprise in Quranic studies. In the Muslim view, the Quran is God's direct words revealed in Arabic to the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad. Opinions of both western and Islamic scholars are sharply divided as to whether or not the Quran is translatable. Some scholars argue that it is, while others maintain that any translation can be no more than an approximate interpretation of the original Arabic text. This paper seeks to address the question of whether it is possible to translate the Quran into any language. Finally, it offers a discussion of the problems regarding different translations, especially those promoted by the nineteenth-century Orientalists. Each of the above scholarly arguments is briefly reviewed on the basis of historical evidence and textual analysis.

The fact that the Quran has remained virtually intact since its revelation continues to be a matter of debate. In recent years, there has been an increasing interest among western scholars in tracing the historicity of the Quran to challenge the authenticity and supremacy of the Quran over the Bible, which, according to Muslim scholars, has suffered tampering and textual corruption over the last centuries.⁷ Western orientalists, however, are more or less sceptical about the existence of a

⁷ M.S.M. Saifullah and Elias Karim, 'Burton, Wansbrough and The Logic Of Christian Missionaries', *Islamic awareness*, (1999) <http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Q_Studies/> [accessed 20 November 2006].

comprehensive copy of the Quran in the early Islamic era, and consequently challenge the entire traditional Muslim account of its compilation.

According to the Islamic orthodoxy, the Quran was transmitted to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel over a period of twenty-three years (609 CE-632 CE). As each portion of the Quran was revealed, Muhammad would immediately order his scribes to write down the latest verses on pieces of cloth, leather, bones and stones. Despite the fact that the Quran was not compiled as a single volume at that time, all its text must have been fixed. Later, after the prophet's death in 632 CE, an official copy was compiled under the instruction of Abu-Bakr in the aftermath of the battle of Yamamah, where many memorizers were killed. Later, the Caliph Uthman, being alarmed by the influence of dialectal irregularities and divergence in the mode of recitation, formally canonized a standard text of the Quran.⁸

In his reaction to the above account, Arthur Jeffery observes that 'very little examination is needed to reveal the fact that this account is largely fictitious.'⁹ He draws this conclusion from the fact that the prophet died without leaving a compiled copy of the Quran. Moreover, he cites the report of Zuhri, which indicates the possibility of a considerable number of Quranic verses having been lost, as there were some portions which were known only by those Qurra'a (readers) and which, with their death, became irretrievably lost.¹⁰ Jeffery goes so far as to accuse the prophet of concealing some portions of revelation from his Sahabah: 'He [Abu Bakr] may possibly have inherited material that the Prophet had stored away in preparation of the Kitâb'.¹¹ In the same way, the committee set up by Abu Bakr to monitor the collection of the Quran is far from being formal, he asserts: 'His [Abu-Bakr's] collection would have been a purely private affair, just as quite a number of Companions of the Prophet had made personal collections as private affairs'.¹² Certainly, by challenging the official character of the collection, Jeffery shares the opinion of Richard Bell, who condemns Abu-Bakr's collection on similar grounds.¹³

⁸ Muhammad b. Isma'il al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari, with the Commentary of Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani*, ed. by Fuad Abdul Baqi, 13 vols (Cairo: al-Matba'ah as-Salafiyyah, 1960 [all the hadith serial numbers from this edition]), *Jam' I al-Quran*, hadith no. 4986.

⁹ Arthur Jeffery, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Quran: The Old Codices*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1937), pp. 3-4.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid, p. 6-7.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Richard Bell, *Introduction to the Qur'an* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), pp. 41-42.

In response to this, it is obvious that Abu Bakr's decision was informed by the heavy casualties of memorisers recorded in the battle of Yamamah. Abu Bakr, in his capacity as the Caliph, addressed the situation by preserving the Quran from the irretrievable loss which he envisaged, so it is not a private affair. Moreover, it must be remembered that Abu Bakr directed that the final master copy should be preserved in the 'state archive' after the submission of the report.¹⁴ The idea that the prophet died concealing any portion of revelation is improper in the Islamic worldview; the relevant verse of the Quran reads:

O Messenger! Make known that which hath been revealed unto thee from thy Lord, for if thou do it not, thou wilt not have conveyed His message. Allah will protect thee from mankind. Lo! Allah guideth not the disbelieving folk. 5:67

The above verse clearly shows that if Muhammad had dared to conceal any segment of the Quran whatsoever, he would have been disqualified and consequently punished.

Following closely in the footsteps of Jeffery and Richard Bell, Ibn Warraq condemns this tradition on the basis of inconsistency in the reports.¹⁵ He fails to understand why, despite all the discrepancies of the narrations, 'so many scholars have accepted totally uncritically the traditional account of the compilation of the Koran'. He further points out that since 'so much of the Koran remains incomprehensible despite hundreds of commentaries', something has to be done 'to look for some more plausible historical mechanism by which the Koran came to be the Koran', so as to maintain its originality.¹⁶ He further argues that the real identity of the first person to propose the idea of this compilation remains obscure and that a complex task of this nature needs a lengthy period of time. Again, the claim that the compilation was over in less than three years is enough to question the authenticity of the whole story. According to Ibn Warraq, most of the casualties died shortly after accepting Islam, so it is highly unlikely that they had memorized the Quran.¹⁷ Moreover, memory should not be taken as a source of compiling an important and official book of that nature. He maintains that 'there is a notable lack of critical

¹⁴ Al-Bukhari, *Fada'il al-Quran*: hadith no 3.

¹⁵ *The Origins of the Koran: Classic Essays on Islam's Holy Book*, ed. by Ibn Warraq (New York, 1998), p. 11.

¹⁶ *What the Koran Really Says: Language, Text and Commentary*, ed. by Ibn Warraq (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), p. 76.

¹⁷ Ibn Warraq, *The Origins of the Koran*, p. 11.

scholarship on the Koran'. The channel of transmission and its reliability, the editor and the exact time of its compilation require critical analysis. For this reason, Ibn Warraq concludes that what Muslims now have is not 'the Koran' but 'a Koran.'¹⁸

In the same vein, Richard Bell challenges the authenticity and the completeness of the Quran, observing:

Whatever view is taken of the collection and compilation of the Quran, the possibility remains that part of it may have been lost. If, as tradition states, Zaid in collection of the Quran was dependent on chance writings and human memories, parts may easily have been forgotten.¹⁹

The arguments of Ibn Warraq have some flaws from a scholarly perspective. He is somewhat polemical and inconsistent. Abu Bakr, before assigning this task to Zaid, had to consider his intelligence, his proximity to the prophet, his past recording experience and his morale, among other factors. As Abu-Bakr puts it,

Zaid, [I have decided to assign you this responsibility because] you are young, brilliant, and you have had the experience of recording the revelation for the prophet, and we do not in any way question your credibility. So pursue the Quran and collect it together.²⁰

Therefore, it was 'the breadth of these credentials' that 'made him an outstanding choice for this task.'²¹ In these circumstances, Muslim scholars point out that despite the fact that various measures were taken to preserve the Quran in the lifetime of the prophet, it was not bound into one master copy. This is corroborated by Zaid's acknowledgement that 'the prophet died whilst the Quran had not yet been gathered into a book.'²² It is to be noted that the word 'gathered' was used instead of 'written' to indicate the lack of a 'specific book with specific traits. The Quran had indeed been written down in its entirety during the prophet's lifetime, but had not been collected together nor were the surahs arranged.'²³

For his part, Zaid applied a variety of strict criteria to ensure the production of a reliable and high-quality transcript. Having considered that human memory is liable to forgetfulness, he did not accept any verse without matching it with what he had

¹⁸ Ibn Warraq, *What the Koran Really Says*, p. 92.

¹⁹ Bell, p. 56.

²⁰ Al-Bukhari, *Jam'i al-Quran*, hadith no. 4986.

²¹ Muhammad Mustafa al-A'zami, *The History of the Quranic Text from Revelation to Compilation: a Comparative Study with the Old and New Testaments* (Leicester: UK Islamic Academy, 2003), p. 78.

²² Al-Bukhari, *Ibid*.

²³ Jalal ad-Din Abdur-Rahman b. Abi Bakr as-Suyudi, *al-Itqan, fi Uhum al-Quran*, ed. by M. Abu al-Fadl Ibrahim, 4 vols (Cairo, 1967), I, 164.

already learnt. That verse must have been originally confirmed and not subsequently abrogated by the prophet in his lifetime. Umar, as a memoriser and a member of the verification committee, also had to be in attendance. Finally, the verse had to be confirmed by two witnesses as having been written verbatim in the presence of the prophet. It is to be noted that Zaid is not unaware of the fact that most of the sahabah obtained access to the verses they were reading through a second-hand source, as in most cases the parchments were widely circulated through friends. In the light of the above, therefore, Zaid rejected any verse not endorsed by the prophet in order to ensure that 'all of the material he was examining was of equal status', so that a copy of 'highest attainable accuracy' would be produced.

The next step was to compare it with what was 'in the chest of the men [sahabah]'.²⁴ From this it is clear that the portions received from those parchments were not unquestioningly taken to be the only source. 'Such are the underpinnings of textual criticism and editing as established by orientalist in the 20th century',²⁵ as Mustafa al-A'zami puts it. Al-Azami made this comment after going through a series of critiques raised by orientalist regarding the issue under review.

In Theodor Noldeke's view, the Quran had not been memorized by anyone in the lifetime of Muhammad. He insists: 'After the death of Muhammad no one knew the entire Koran by heart.'²⁶ His assumption is that if the Quran was already in the heart of Muhammad's companions, then gathering it from various parchments and pieces of bone, leaves and stones would have been uncalled for. Az-Zarakhshi provides an answer to this objection:

This [Zaid's] statement has led a few to suppose that no one had memorized the Quran in its entirety during the prophet's lifetime, and that claims of Zaid and Ubayy bn Ka'b having done so are unfounded. But this is erroneous. What Zaid means in fact is that he sought out verses from scattered sources, to collect them against the collection of huffaz [memorizers]. In this way everyone participated in the collection process...²⁷

Another important issue which attracted orientalist criticism is the issue of 'forgotten witness'. Zaid was reported to have confirmed receiving two missing verses of *Surat*

²⁴ Ibid, p. 83.

²⁵ Al-A'zami, p. 82.

²⁶ Nöldeke, Ibid.

²⁷ Badruddin az-Zarakhshi, *al-Burhan fi Ulum al Quran*, ed. by Muhammad Abu al-Fadl Ibrahim, 4 vols (Cairo: 1957), I, 238-239.

at-Tawbah from Khuzaimah before inclusion into his work. For orientalists, this fact undermines any effort to show that the Quran had been perfectly preserved through memorization; otherwise Khuzaimah would not have been asked to bring forward the verses at his disposal for inclusion. Does this mean that he is the only person who had memorised these verses? Does this actually confirm that not everyone learnt the Quran by heart in its entirety, since only one person among the companions could even recollect these verses? If that is the case, then the Quran is conceivably far from being complete, as there is a high probability that many verses might have been lost in one way or another.²⁸

According to Ibn Hajar Asqalani, this traditional account actually reveals clearly the level of Zaid's excellence and caution in discharging his duty. Zaid was under instruction not to include any verse in his project even if he had known it already, unless it had previously existed in written form. It was for this reason that he felt reluctant to include those verses until they were eventually confirmed by Khuzaimah, despite the fact that they were not new to the companions, including Zaid.²⁹ Accordingly, it is not surprising that 'the unanimity of the sources on hand, relatively meagre though they were, provided enough grounds for certainty.'³⁰ In *An Introduction to the Quran*, Gustav Weil contends that this collection was not properly assembled, because these portions were gathered and 'all written down without any investigation'.³¹ Muhammad tactically decided not to produce a standard copy of the Quran in his lifetime to avoid the embarrassment and confusion that would soon have arisen as a result of subsequent abrogations of some verses. Had he mistakenly introduced a standard and complete copy of the Quran, he would have probably been in a dilemma. Weil writes:

It is certainly a striking fact that Muhammad did not during his lifetime have a complete collection of his message made, either in chronological order or with reference to their contents, since, as he himself frequently said, they were to be for all time the light and guidance of believers.³²

²⁸ Shamoun, *Ibid*.

²⁹ Ahmad b. Ali b. Hajar al-Asqalani, *Fathul Bari*, ed. by Fuad Abd al- Baqi, 13 vols (Cairo: al-Matba'ah as-Salafiyyah, 1960), ix, 13.

³⁰ Al-A'zami, p. 84.

³¹ Gustav Weil, 'An Introduction to the Quran III', *Biblical World*, 5 (1895), 343-359.

³² *Ibid*, p. 334.

So, according to Weil, the theory of abrogation was introduced more or less to justify the weakness of Muhammad. Muslims, however, have always taken the issue of compilation for granted, due to their high degree of confidence in their prophet.³³

In response to this, Islamic scholars maintain that a 'master volume' of the Quran was not bound in the lifetime of the prophet in anticipation of subsequent verses and legal rulings for appropriate inclusion. To avoid constant interruptions of abrogation, interpolation and transposition, a standard copy was not to be made until after the death of the prophet, when the revelation had terminated.³⁴

The compilation theory has been vigorously challenged in recent years by Lester, who claims that the Quran is not a divine message, but was written by human beings and hence has no authority. He reached this conclusion based on the ancient fragmented codices of the Quran discovered in Yemen. He further contends that this finding undoubtedly reveals the identity of 'the oldest Koran in existence'.³⁵ He refutes traditional Muslim belief regarding the divinity and historical documentation of the Quran and its legitimacy as a religious authority. For instance, he quotes Humphrey's opinion that 'if the Koran is a historical document, then the whole struggle of fourteen centuries is effectively meaningless' and the implication of this is the deligitimization of 'the whole historical experience of the Muslim community.' He further supports his argument by making references to some influential thinkers like Muhammad Abduh, who he says share the same line of thinking. An article of this nature may offend the sensibilities of Muslims, inasmuch as the authority and integrity of their divine book is challenged, so it is not surprising to see Muslim scholars from various academic circles responding critically to this article.

In his response to the article, Lang writes, 'I think it extremely irresponsible and unprofessional of the Atlantic Monthly to assign such a weighty project to a young, unqualified writer.' This is due to the fact that 'Toby Lester [the writer of the article] has virtually no education in Islamic studies.'³⁶ Lester's conclusion is supported by Gerd R. Puin, a professional Arabic calligrapher, who according to Jeffery is not an authority, having lacked Islamic qualification. He further contends that Islamic

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Al-A'zami, p. 77.

³⁵ Lester, Ibid.

³⁶ Jeffrey Lang, 'Response on the article "What is the Koran" Atlantic Monthly's', <<http://web.archive.org/web/20010301210648/http://amconline.org/publish/op/op-lang.html>> [accessed 21 November 2006].

modernism does not contradict medieval Islamic ideology to the extent of questioning the credibility of the Quran.³⁷

Azizah Y. al-Hibri of the University of Richmond criticizes this article as presenting ‘highly speculative arguments based on remarkably selective data supporting a point of view hostile to Islam’. The discovery is based on ‘stereotypical assumptions about Islam, rooted in a biased perspective deeply offensive to Muslims’. This, however, is not surprising, since ‘Islam and Muslims have been regarded in the West negatively and suspiciously.’³⁸ Actually, Azizah made the mistake of attributing the first collection of the Quran to Uthman instead of Abu-Bakr; the authentic historical narration reveals that Abu Bakr was the person under whose regime the first collection was made, while Uthman has the credit of being a pioneer of the standardization of the Quran. However, she made a point by indicating that those fragmented codices may well have been among the copies which survived the standardization in Yemen or elsewhere. Moreover, the discovery of these manuscripts could have been interpreted positively to support the Muslim tradition of the divine origin of the Quran.³⁹

Returning to the hypothesis posed at the beginning of this study, it is now possible to state that the traditional Islamic account of the historicity of the Quran and its compilation is reliable, since most of the arguments raised to challenge it are unconvincing. This study has also shown that even though the prophet in his lifetime took all possible measures to ensure the preservation of the Quran, he did not authorise a standard copy. Abu Bakr’s rudimentary efforts to compile the Quran exhibited the high sense of concern and sincerity of a leader of the Muslim Ummah in addressing their problems.

Another major theoretical issue that has dominated the orientalist enterprise for many years concerns tracing the original language of the Quran. In the traditional Islamic view, the Quran is held to reflect pure Arabic language of great eloquence and clarity. Orientalists of the first half of the nineteenth century, including Theodor Noldeke, did not challenge the view of Islamic scholars regarding the Arabic origin of the Quran.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Azizah al-Hibri, ‘Statement on the recent article in the Atlantic Monthly about the Quran’, (1999) <<http://www.alhewar.com/AzizahAtlantic.htm>> [22 November 2006].

³⁹ Ibid.

Nevertheless, the theory attracted criticism from some modern scholars, who view the Quran as nothing but ‘a compilation of stolen liturgical material from the mass of Judeo-Christian and Zoroastrian traditions.’⁴⁰ In his *Syriac Influences on the Style of the Kur'an*, Alphonse Mingana distances the Quran from its Arabic origin.⁴¹ He insists that the presence of some foreign words in the Quran confirms that it is more or less a product of a Syriac linguistic revolution.⁴² This means that the vocabulary of the Quran, its philosophical and theological theories are all greatly influenced by Syro-Aramaic literature. To support his contention, Mingana claims absolute ignorance about the origin of the Arabic language, asserting that ‘our ignorance of the Arabic language in the early period of its evolution is such that we cannot even know with certainty whether it had any [alphabet] of its own in Mecca and Medina...’⁴³ It is also surprising to see Mingana contradicting himself: while claiming ignorance of the origin of Arabic and its vowels, he fails to accept the conclusion of Arab authors who confirm the existence of Arabic scripts at the advent of Islam. Mingana rejects their hypothesis because they are ‘too worthless to be quoted’ and instead depends on Aramaic authors to advance his opinion.⁴⁴

Mingana’s hypothesis was further supported by Christoph Luxenberg, a German scholar of ancient languages who emphasizes that Syro-Aramaic is the root of the Quran. He argues that ‘when the Koran was composed, Arabic did not exist as a written language’; therefore it has become necessary to ‘take into consideration, above all, Aramaic’, since ‘between the fourth and seventh centuries’, Aramaic ‘was not only the language of written communication, but also the lingua franca of that area of Western Asia.’⁴⁵ He even goes so far as to declare that ‘anyone who wants to make a thorough study of the Koran must have a background in the Syro-Aramaic grammar...’ Luxenberg concludes: ‘In its origin, the Koran is a Syro-Aramaic

⁴⁰ M.S.M. Saifullah, Mohammad Ghoniem and Shibli Zaman, ‘From Alphonse Mingana To Christoph Luxenberg: Arabic Script and The Alleged Syriac Origins Of The Qur'an’, <<http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Text/M>> [20 December 2004].

⁴¹ Alphonse Mingana, ‘Syriac Influences on the Style of the Kur'an’, *Bulletin of the John Ryland's Library Manchester*, 2 (1927), 77–98; Also see Alphonse Mingana, ‘An Ancient Syriac Translation of the Kur'an Exhibiting New Verses and Variants’, *Bulletin of the John Ryland's Library Manchester*, 9 (1925), 188–235.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ Alphonse Mingana, ‘Transmission of the Kuran’, *Journal of the Manchester Egyptian and Oriental Society*, 6 (1916), 25–47.

⁴⁴ Alphonse Mingana and Agnes Smith Lewis, *Leaves from Three Ancient Qur'âns Possibly Pre-Othmânic with a List of their Variants* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914), p. xxxi.

⁴⁵ Jusfiq Hadjar, ‘An interview with "Christoph Luxenberg" by Alfred Hackensberger’, *Proletar*, 14 Apr 2005.

liturgical book, with hymns and extracts from Scriptures which might have been used in sacred Christian services.⁴⁶ It is interesting to note that while Mingana is reluctant to accept the opinion of Arab authors, Luxenberg uses their conclusions to form the basis of his Syriac origin hypothesis.

Recently, Gabriel Sawma, following in their footsteps, has asserted that unless a Muslim is sufficiently acquainted with Syriac-Aramaic he will never understand the actual meaning of the Quran.⁴⁷ However, this presumption has been rejected on the basis that Syriac, Aramaic and Arabic are all Semitic languages that had been in existence long before the Quran came to be written.⁴⁸ ‘Semitic languages were among the earliest to attain a written form, with Akkadian writing beginning in the middle of the third millennium BC.’ Syriac had a considerable influence in the region; however, this was soon replaced by Arabic after the advent of Islam. ‘With the patronage of the Caliphs and the prestige of its liturgical status’, Arabic became the most widely spoken Semitic language.⁴⁹

According to Ibrahim Jum‘a, Arabs in the pre-Islamic era relied on Nabataean texts in the formation of their palaeography.⁵⁰ This is because the Nabataeans spoke Arabic, even though it was not as rich and eloquent as that of Quraish.⁵¹ Al-Mustapha Azami confirms that ‘the Arabic language and script, in their primitive forms, gave birth to the Nabataean and most probably predated the Syriac.’⁵² This contention is further supported by the historical presence of pre-Islamic inscriptions in the Arabian Peninsula in various languages including Arabic. For example, the Jabal Ramm inscription is believed to be ‘the oldest so far discovered in the Arabic alphabet.’⁵³ Bellamy, on deep critical examination of Jabal Ramm and Umm Al-Jimal, accepts their accuracy as straightforward classical Arabic.⁵⁴

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Gabriel Sawma, *The Qur'an: Misinterpreted, Mistranslated, and Misread: The Aramaic Language of the Qur'an* ([n.p.]: Adibooks, 2006), p.14.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p .24.

⁴⁹ “ Semetic Languages”, in *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*,

< http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Semitic_languages> [accessed 28 November 2006].

⁵⁰ Ibrahim Jum‘a, *Dirasatun fi Tatawwur al-Kitabat al-Kufiyya*, (Cairo:[n.pub.], 1969), p. 17.

⁵¹ Al-A‘zami, p. 120.

⁵² Ibid, p. 121.

⁵³ James A. Bellamy, ‘Two Pre-Islamic Arabic Inscriptions Revised: Jabal Ramm And Umm Al-Jimal’, *Journal Of The American Oriental Society*, 108 (1988), 369-372.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

One striking feature to be found in the Quranic verses is *saj* ('rhymed prose'). Goldziher points out that *saj* reflects the oldest type of eloquent speech in pre-Islamic Arabia and plays an important role in convincing Arabs to accept that the Quran is from God.⁵⁵ Mingana's hypothesis is further refuted by the historical evidence that confirms the sending of some letters (written in Arabic) by Muhammad to neighbouring emperors and leaders, inviting them to adopt Islam. Above all, the Quran defends itself:

Lo! We have revealed it, a Lecture in Arabic, that ye may understand.
12: 2.

And We know well that they say: Only a man teacheth him. The speech of him at whom they falsely hint is outlandish, and this is clear Arabic speech. 16:103.

It is encouraging to compare the above evidence with that of Boullata, professor of Arabic literature and Islamic studies, who declares:

Whereas the scholars of Arabic are largely agreed that the Qur'an represents the standards by which other literary productions in Arabic are measured, believing Muslims maintain that the Qur'an is inimitable with respect to both content and style.⁵⁶

The language of the Quran is

universally acknowledged to be the most perfect form of Arab speech, and soon became the standard by which other Arabic literary compositions had to be judged, grammarians, lexicographers, and rhetoricians presuming that the Koran, being the word of God, could not be wrong or imperfect.⁵⁷

Logically, if the people to whom Muhammad was sent were Arabs, then the message must also be in Arabic for proper comprehension. The Quran reads:

And We never sent a messenger save with the language of his folk, that he might make (the message) clear for them. Then Allah sendeth whom He will astray, and guideth whom He will. He is the Mighty, the Wise. 14: 4.

⁵⁵ Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic theology and law*, trans. by Andras and Ruth Hamori/with an introduction and additional notes by Bernard Lewis (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p.11.

⁵⁶ Issa Boullata, 'Literary Structure of the Qur'an', in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, ed. by Jane Dammen McAuliffe, 4 vols (Leiden: Brill, 2002), III, 192-204.

⁵⁷ 'Koran', in *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*, < <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/08692a.htm> > [accessed 28 November 2006].

The evidence from this study suggests that the Quran is a divine scripture with a pure Arabic origin which has nothing to do Syro-Aramaic literature. The grammar of its language, its phonetic system and its phraseology have remained virtually intact since the time of its revelation. It has also been shown that the Arabic scripts are the product of the Nabataen script, contrary to Luxenberg's hypothesis. Moreover, the Arabic alphabet predated Islam, as clearly reflected in the discovery of pre-Islamic inscriptions.

The influence of external sources like the Bible on the Quran has also been a matter of debate among orientalists. In his book *Islam in East Africa*, Harries argues that 'Muhammad himself borrowed from the Bible, and Muslims today consciously or not, borrow much from the Christian ideology even in matters which the Qur'an does not support.'⁵⁸ In the same way, Richard Bell asserts that '...much of the Qur'an is directly dependent on the Bible, and stories associated with the Bible.'⁵⁹ The *New Catholic Encyclopaedia* also insists that 'Very probably Muhammad had improvised translations of the Jewish and Christian scriptures.'⁶⁰ Diametrically opposed to this view is the hypothesis of Cragg, who observes:

'The Biblical narratives reproduced in the Qur'ân differ considerably and suggest oral, not direct acquaintance. There is almost complete absence of what could be claimed as direct quotation from the Bible.'⁶¹

Here, Cragg admits that the Bible as a source has no direct influence on the Quran.

Although Noldeke does not challenge the traditional Islamic view regarding the origin of the Quran, he fails to admit that the Quran is purely an original scripture. For Noldeke, 'The Koran contains many Biblical characters, but the stories are mixed up.'⁶² It is to be noted that these arguments stem from the fact that the Quran and the Bible bear a close resemblance, notably on historical narrations. Muhammad's contact with Jews and Christians has also been a source of suspicion as to whether or not he benefited from them in composing the Quran. Moreover, this presumption is

⁵⁸ Lyndon P. Harries, *Islam in East Africa* (London: Universities' Mission To Central Africa, 1954), p. 57.

⁵⁹ Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment* (The Gunning Lectures Edinburgh University and London: Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1968), p. 100.

⁶⁰ *The New Catholic Encyclopaedia*, ed. by an editorial staff at the Catholic University of America, Washington, District of Columbia, 15vols (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), VII, p. 677.

⁶¹ Kenneth Cragg, *The Call of the Minaret* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1956), pp. 66, 263.

⁶² Nöldeke, *Ibid.*

further supported by the traditional belief that the Arabian peninsula was Christianized before the emergence of Islam, a theory with which Rawandi sharply disagrees. In his review of Gunter Lulling's work, Rawandi argues that the appearance of some 'architectural features' of Jesus and his mother in the Ka'aba is not sufficient to establish the existence of Christianity in the region before the advent of Islam.⁶³ This notion is also shared by Richard Bell, who emphasizes that

'...in spite of traditions to the effect that the picture of Jesus was found on one of the pillars of Ka'aba, there is no good evidence of any seats of Christianity in the Hijaz or in the near neighbourhood of Mecca or even of Medina.'⁶⁴

Trimingham goes so far as to assert that all theories that indicate the surfacing of Christianity in Hijaz in the pre-Islamic era are unreliable.⁶⁵ This is because it has been confirmed historically that Christianity existed only in Najran and Yemen. Abraha, the leader of Yemen, tried to extend his influence by converting Meccans to Christianity. Had Meccans been Christians, then his attempt would have been unnecessary.⁶⁶ Further evidence is that Warqah bin Nawfal was among those Meccans who converted to Christianity after leaving his pagan community in search of new religion.⁶⁷ His journey would not have been necessary if Mecca was a Christian society. Moreover, it is to be noted that a majority of the Quranic chapters were revealed in Mecca, which was never known to be a base for Christianity. In the Islamic view, Muhammad was illiterate and there is no record from pagan Arabs which proves otherwise, so how could he have plagiarised what he could not read? This is inconceivable. Even if it is assumed that he was literate, then the first Arabic version of the Bible was produced some two hundred years after his death.⁶⁸ To combine these two arguments, it is clear that Muhammad had had no direct connection with the Bible in terms of benefiting from it to compose the Quran. However, given the considerable influence in the Arabian Peninsula of the then

⁶³ Ibn Rawandi, 'On Pre-Islamic Christian Strophic Poetical Tests in the Koran; A Critical Look at the Work of Gunter Lulling' in *What the Koran Really Says: Language, Text and Commentary*, ed. by Ibn Warraq (New York: Prometheus Books, 2002), pp. 653-710 (p. 689).

⁶⁴ Bell, *The Origin of Islam*. p. 42.

⁶⁵ J.S. Trimingham, *Christianity among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Time* (London: Longman, 1979), pp. 249-258.

⁶⁶ Abi Muhammad ibn Abd al-Malik Ibn Hisham, *al-Sirah al-Nabawiyyah : al-marufah bi-Sirat Ibn Hisham / li-Abi Muhammad Abd al-Malik ibn Hisham al-Ma'afiri* (Beirut: Mousasat 'Ulum al-Qur'an, [n.d.]), p. 43.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 222.

⁶⁸ Ernst Würthwein, *The Text of the New Testament* (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, Grand Rapids, 1988), p. 104.

predominant languages like Aramaic, one cannot totally rule out the possibility of borrowings and benefiting from some external sources of any kind. In most cases, the exact interpretation of some non-Arabic names like Ibrahim could only be found in the Bible.⁶⁹ This is why Philip K. Hitti points out that the similarity that exists between the verses of the Quran and the Bible could have been given another interpretation.⁷⁰

The hypothesis of some orientalists regarding this issue seems incomprehensible, as they are confused in tracing the specific origin of the Koran. For example, Gibb, in *Muhammadism: A Historical Survey*, writes that, given the 'close commercial relation' that existed between Mecca and Yemen, 'it would be natural to assume that some religious ideas were carried to Mecca with the caravans...' and this is highly probable, since there are 'details of vocabulary in the Qur'an which give colour to this assumption.'⁷¹ Rodwell, who concludes that Muhammad relied heavily on other doctrines such as that of the Ebionites, yet fails to establish Muhammad's direct debt to the Bible, remarks:

We have no evidence that Muhammad had access to the Christian scriptures, though it is just possible that fragments of the Old Testament may have reached him through Chadijah or Waraka, or other Meccan Christians, possessing MSS. of the sacred volume.⁷²

On the other hand, George Sale rejects the hypothesis that Muhammad is the author of the Quran: '...and I am apt to believe that few or none of the relations or circumstances in the Quran were invented by Muhammad, as is generally supposed', because it is 'easy to trace the greatest part of them much higher, as the rest might be, were more of those books extant, and it was worthwhile to make the inquiry.'⁷³

Having said that, it is indeed surprising to read this conclusion from Sale:

That Muhammad was really the author and chief contriver of the Koran is beyond dispute; though it be highly probable that he had no small assistance in his design from others, as his countrymen fail not to object

⁶⁹ Gabriel Sawma, *Ibid*, p. 110.

⁷⁰ Philip K. Hitti, *Islam and the West: A Historical Cultural Survey* (New York: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1979), p. 15.

⁷¹ H.A.R. Gibb, *Mohammadanism: A Historical Survey* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1949), pp. 37-38.

⁷² J.M. Rodwell, *The Koran: Translated from the Arabic, the Surahs Arranged in Chronological Order, with Notes and Index* (London: Williams and Norgate, [n.d.]), p. xviii.

⁷³ George Sale, *The Koran: Commonly Called the Alkoran of Muhammed, Translated into English from the Original Arabic, with Explanatory Notes Taken from the Most Approved Commentators, to which is Prefixed a Preliminary Discourse* (London and New York: Frederick Warne, [n.d.]), p. 49.

him; however, they differed so much in their conjectures as to the particular persons who gave him such assistance, that they were not able, it seems, to prove the charge; Muhammad, it is to be presumed, having taken his measures too well to be discovered.⁷⁴

This clearly reveals the discrepancy that exists in this scholarship. In this circumstance, the *New Catholic Encyclopaedia* confirms that before the advent of Islam ‘The Hijaz [Arabian peninsula] had not been touched by Christian preaching. Hence organisation of the Christian church was neither to be expected nor found.’⁷⁵ It is indeed surprising to see that some modern orientalists agree with Muhammad to some extent in his claim of prophethood, even though the question of whether the message was actually from ‘his unconscious’ or ‘some divine source’ remains unanswered.⁷⁶ For Welch, ‘the mysterious seizures’ that cover Muhammad’s appearance at the moment of receiving revelation are clear proof of ‘the superhuman origin’ of his inspiration.⁷⁷ This is contrary to the *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, which asserts: ‘It is generally admitted that the Koran is substantially the work of Mohammed.’⁷⁸

William Montgomery is one of the leading figures of modern Islamic scholarship who always respects Muslim sensibilities. Despite the fact that he refuses to admit ‘that either the Bible or the Qur’an is infallibly true in the sense that all their commands are valid for all time’, he still believes ‘that Muhammad, like the earlier prophets, had genuine religious experiences’. He further acknowledges:

... I believe that he [Muhammad] really did receive something directly from God. As such, I believe that the Qur’an came from God, that it is divinely inspired. Muhammad could not have caused the great upsurge in religion that he did without God’s blessing.⁷⁹

⁷⁴ Ibid, p. 50.

⁷⁵ *The Catholic Encyclopaedia*, Vol. 1, pp. 721-722.

⁷⁶ *The Cambridge History of Islam*, ed. by Bernard Lewis and others, 2 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), p. 30.

⁷⁷ *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, ed. by C.E. Bosworth and others, 10 vols (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), VII, 360-388.

⁷⁸ *The New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Ibid.

⁷⁹ Bashir Maan and Alastair McIntosh, ‘“The Whole House of Islam, and we Christians with them...”’, An Interview with “The Last Orientalist” - the Rev. Prof. William Montgomery Watt’, *The Coracle: The Iona Community*, Summer 2000, pp. 8-11.

Montgomery had already made a similar declaration in his book *Muhammad's Mecca; History in the Quran*: 'I consider that Muhammad was truly a prophet ... If he is a prophet... the Quran may be accepted as of divine origin'.⁸⁰

In the end, however, it seems that the above arguments fail to establish any convincing proof that will challenge the originality of the Muslim sacred text; consequently, the hypothesis of the orientalists regarding the alleged Jewish and Christian sources of the Qur'an is so devoid of depth and substance as to be incomprehensible. Contrary to the widespread conception in the west that Muhammad was the author of the Quran, it is proved that the Quran is indeed the pure word of God, having no human author and not being borrowed from the Bible.

The translatability of the Quran has been a controversial and much disputed topic within the field of Quranic studies. Investigation reveals that the Quran has been translated into more than ten European languages. It is highly interesting that most of these translations were undertaken by either orientalists or missionaries.⁸¹ However, the question that remains unanswered is whether these translations reflect the original meaning of the Quran as it is in Arabic, or just a rough approximation. Although the debate has a historical origin dating back to the early period of Muslim conquest, some religio-socio-political factors played a key role in its revitalization in the early twentieth century. Abu Hanifah is considered to be the Muslim scholar who originally created the controversy by encouraging the reading of a Persian translation in prayer.⁸² Although he later rescinded his permission, his fatwa continued to gain currency.

Some Jurists, like Imam ash-Shafi'i, argue that the Quran cannot be translated precisely into any language, due to its inimitability. He insists that the exact equivalents of some Arabic terms are missing from the target languages and consequently the meaning will be affected in one way or another.⁸³ Imam al-Gazali supports this hypothesis by pointing out that a translator will at times end fail to find

⁸⁰ W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad's Mecca: History in the Quran* (Edinburgh University Press, 1988), p. 1.

⁸¹ Samuel M. Zwemer, 'Translations of the Koran', *Moslem World*, 5 (1915), 244-261.

⁸² A.L. Tibawi, 'Is the Quran Translatable? Early Muslim Opinion', *Muslim World*, 52 (1962), 1-16.

⁸³ Muhammad B. Idris ash-Shafi'i, *Ar-Risalah Fi Usul al-Fiqh*, ed. by Ahmad Muhammad Shakir (Cairo, 1940), pp. 8-9.

the precise equivalents of some Arabic terms.⁸⁴ This view is shared by some modern thinkers, including Rashid Rida, who strongly condemns translation. In his fatwa, Rida argues that a literal translation of the Qur'an which is identical to the original text is impossible.⁸⁵ The inimitability of the Quran, which lies in its style and composition, makes precise translation practically impossible. Its rhythmic style has baffled the talent of translators. This is because the Quran is unique in its style, language and beauty. Its spiritual impact, grandeur and emotional effects on the minds of listeners stirred by the beauty of its recitation can never be conveyed by means of translation. As Sale points out:

The style of the Quran is generally beautiful and fluent... sublime and magnificent; of which the reader cannot but observe several instances, though he must not imagine the translation comes up to the original, notwithstanding my endeavours to do it justice.⁸⁶

Translation does not reflect the original meaning of the Arabic version; it only represents the idea of the translator, which is by no means reliable. That is to say, the reader is given second-rate information. Rida also maintains that Muslims are encouraged to use the power of their knowledge and thinking to directly engage in 'ijtihad (personal reasoning) in providing solutions to some complex legal issues, by means of Quranic texts. Translation always denies them the opportunity to apply their thinking critically and analytically, an issue which is strongly enjoined in many verses of the Quran. For Rida, depending on translation cultivates the habit of *taqlid* (imitative reasoning), which is highly discouraged in Islam.

Rida disagrees with the objection that translation is the only alternative available, stressing that learning Arabic is far from being easy. He goes on to show that imposing translation on the Muslim ummah is another version of intellectual imperialism. For Rida, the Quran is by no means safe, as at times corruption of meaning occurs in the course of translation. He asserts that if translation is allowed to go unchallenged it will supersede and completely replace the original.⁸⁷ It is for this reason that Muslim scholars fail to equate a translated Quran with the original. As Jeffrey Lang points out:

⁸⁴ Abu Hamid al- Ghazali, *Ijam al-'Awam 'an 'Ilm al-Kalam*, ed. by Muhammad al-Mu'tasim bi-llah al-Baghdadi, 1st ed., (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi, 1985), pp. 64-65.

⁸⁵ Muhammad Rashid Rida, *Fatawa al-Imam Muhammad Rashid Rida*, ed. by Salah al-Din al-Munajjid and Khuri Yusuf, 6 vols (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Jadid, 1970), II, pp. 642-650.

⁸⁶ Sale, p. 48.

⁸⁷ Rida, *Ibid*.

The Muslim position is that the Quran is the original revelation received by Prophet Mohammed in his native Arabic and that any rendition of it in another language is not, technically speaking, the Quran, but merely an interpretation of it, since it does not equate the original revelation and because something is inevitably lost in translation, no matter how well done.⁸⁸

The conclusion is that the Quran is miraculously perfect when it is in its original Arabic form, so it is improper to translate it, from this perspective.

On the other hand, Rida's judgment has been criticised by those who note that the Quran was revealed in Arabic to guide the lives of Muslims and mould their thoughts; this is by no means possible without comprehending the original meaning of the message. The universality of the Islamic message makes translation inevitable, because Arabic, the formal language of Islam everywhere, is nevertheless a dead language to almost two-third of the Muslim polyglot nation. Some scholars argue that translation can even become compulsory; we have an instance where Salman al-Farisi was reported to have recommended reciting the translated version of Fatihah in Persian, because Fatihah is an integral part of the prayer. In the early period of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad used to send to the rulers and emperors only those whom he knew to have the capability to communicate effectively. The first historical instance of translation could be traced to Ja'far bin Abi Talib, who translated some verses to Negus. At this point, translation was used as a tool for persuading non-Muslims to accept Islam.⁸⁹

Examining the two arguments together shows that both schools have their points and supporting evidence which are more or less reasonable. The fact that Arabic is a difficult language is indisputable; as Bernard Lewis puts it, 'to learn Arabic even adequately, let alone well, can take as much time and effort as to learn several European languages.'⁹⁰ However, this does not mean that we should be discouraged from learning it. Learning Arabic should be encouraged, as it strengthens and consolidates the relationship of the entire Muslim ummah. It is to be noted that Arabic terms, technically speaking, can be analysed from two different perspectives: they express or represent either conclusive meanings (*ma'anin mutlaqah*) or supplementary meanings (*ma'anin khadimah*). Absolute translation of the former is

⁸⁸ Lang, Ibid.

⁸⁹ Tibawi, Ibid.

⁹⁰ Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 114.

easy in all languages including Arabic, so that translating the Quran will not be difficult from this angle. However, the latter meanings are peculiar to Arabic. Thus, from this second perspective, it can be said that it is not possible to translate, in any way, Arabic into foreign tongues, still less to translate the Qur'an.⁹¹

That is to say, the Quran is untranslatable, but the general meaning of the text could still be conveyed to English speakers. It is for this reason that some scholars like Arberry observe that the Qur'an cannot be translated, but only interpreted.⁹² Moreover, there is no sufficient proof of Salman's tradition, as it is condemned by hadith scholars on technical grounds.⁹³ However, this does not mean that translation is not permissible in any way. It is permissible if the need arises. Under necessity we have seen how Abu Hanifah recommended the translation of prayers, because Persians were not sufficiently acquainted with Arabic at that time.

Rida's fatwa should not be used as a basis for rejecting translation. There are several religio-socio-political factors which led to its issuance. First, it came as a response to the request made by the Muslim community of Smarkand to combat the existing controversy over the issue. Rida does not consider translation in itself to be illegal, as long as it does not jeopardise the original or substitute for it.⁹⁴ A Turkish translation of the Quran published after the secularization of Turkey led some scholars like Rida to reject translation as being part of the Turkish government's effort to completely substitute anything Islamic.⁹⁵ For the first time, Azan was rendered into Turkish, to replace the traditional Arabic call to prayer.

The emergence of the Qadiani sect was another factor. Abul Ala al-Maudoodi points out that the Qadiani movement was one of the dangerous sects that emerged to destabilise the unity of the Muslim ummah and make it vulnerable to colonialists.⁹⁶ They even identified themselves 'as the agents of the British.'⁹⁷ In the first half of the 20th century Qadianis attracted criticism and condemnation from all angles. To

⁹¹ Ibrahim ibn Musa as-Shatibi, *Al-Muwafaqaat fi 'Usul al-Shari'ah*, ed. by Abd Allah Daraz, rev. by Muhammad Abd Allah Daraz, 4 vols (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Tijariyah al-Kubrah, 1975), II, 66-68.

⁹² Arberry, p. 24.

⁹³ Tibawi, *Ibid*.

⁹⁴ Abou Sheishaa, Mohamed Ali Mohamed, 'A Study of the Fatwa by Rashid Rida on the Translation of the Qur'an', *Journal of the Society for Qur'anic Studies*, 1 (2001)

⁹⁵ Henry E. Allen, 'The Outlook for Islam in Turkey', *Moslem World*, 24 (1934), 115-125

⁹⁶ Abul Ala Maudoodi, *The Qadiani Problem*, 2nd ed., (Karachi: [n. pub.], 1956), pp. 24-27.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 29.

exonerate themselves, they tactically used Muhammad Ali's translation to redeem their image.⁹⁸

The active involvement of missionaries and orientalists in Quranic translation was another major factor underlying the issuance of the fatwa. The first half of the twelfth century was a milestone in the history of the oriental enterprise in Quranic studies. In medieval times, systematic study of the Quran became necessary for Christian clerics in order to combat the Islamic threat.⁹⁹ According to Bernard Lewis, the Renaissance was one of the factors which motivated this scholarship.¹⁰⁰ He remarks:

Medieval Christendom did, however, study Islam, for the double purpose of protecting Christians from Muslim blandishments and converting Muslims to Christianity, and Christian scholars, most of them priests or monks, created a body of literature concerning the faith, its prophet, and his book, polemic in purpose and often scurrilous in tone, designed to protect and discourage rather than to inform'.¹⁰¹

The first effort in that direction was made by Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny (died 1157 A.D.), when he assigned Robert of Ketton to translate the Quran into Latin (published in 1543), a work which proved unsuccessful afterwards, as it failed to alleviate their panic and apprehension towards 'the great enemy'.¹⁰² Thereafter, the first English translation of the Quran, made by Alexander Ross, appeared in 1649. However, it has many inaccuracies which are believed to be as a result of Ross's imperfect command of Arabic.¹⁰³ A direct translation from Arabic was made by Ludovici Maracci in 1698, followed by George Sale in 1734.¹⁰⁴ Sale's *The Koran, commonly called The Alcoran of Mohammed* (London, 1734), as Bernard Lewis comments, 'is a major step in the progress of knowledge of Islam in Europe and was for a long time by far the most widely read and best known'.¹⁰⁵ Sale's work was remarkable; despite his weak background in Islam, he made a beautiful contribution by providing a comprehensive critique of the earlier translations. Moreover, his fluency and good command of Arabic made his work successful, as it 'served as the basis for virtually all other translations into European languages until the nineteenth

⁹⁸ Bosworth, "Ahmadiyya" in *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 10 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1991), I, 301.

⁹⁹ Fazlur Rahman, 'Some Recent Books on the Qur'an by Western Authors', *Journal of Religion*, 64 (1984), 73-95.

¹⁰⁰ Bernard Lewis, *Islam and the West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 63.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86.

¹⁰² W. Montgomery Watt, *Bell's Introduction to the Quran* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970; repr. 1990, 1991), p. 173.

¹⁰³ Zwemer, *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Montgomery, pp. 173-174

¹⁰⁵ Lewis, p. 88.

century'.¹⁰⁶ However, his work remains incomprehensible because of his failure to insert verse numbers, footnotes and other useful commentaries.

Theodor Noldeke's work on the origin and composition of the Quran emerged in 1856, passing through many editions and eventually forming the basis for subsequent Quranic studies in the West.¹⁰⁷ In 1861, J.M. Rodwell introduced his new translation with a new chronological order of the Surah. Richard Bell later adopted the same approach in his *The Quran translated, with critical re-arrangement of the surahs* (two vols., Edinburgh, 1937,1939). Bell's *Introduction to the Quran* is believed to be the most comprehensive survey of the Quran by a non-Muslim scholar. It is to be noted that most of the translations of eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were made by authors without a strong background in Islam.

In 1930, Marmaduke Pickthall's *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran, an explanatory translation* (London, 1930) was the first meticulous contribution of its kind by a European Muslim, which subsequently received recognition in the Islamic world. Two decades later, Arthur J. Arberry introduced his new English translation, *The Holy Koran, an Introduction with Selections* (London, 1953) and *The Koran Interpreted* (two vols., London).¹⁰⁸ His work earned the admiration of intellectuals worldwide. His acquaintance with Arabic probably made his translation the best available; it seems to be the translation of choice for most academics.

Whatever their linguistic virtues, the bias and polemical motives which are clearly visible in most of these translations made Muslim scholars suspicious of accepting them. Ross, in his translation, writes, 'I thought good to bring it to their colours, that so viewing thine enemies in their full body, thou must the better prepare to encounter... his Alcoran.'¹⁰⁹ For Sale, his declared purpose is to arm the reader to 'attack the Korân with success' and to ensure 'the glory of its overthrow' and the ultimate 'conversion of the Mohammedans'.¹¹⁰ These quotations provide direct evidence of the incorporation of doctrinal bias into some translations. Moreover, the instances of interpolation, transpositions and omissions evident in these translations led to their rejection. For example, most of them, like Sale's translation, are paraphrases and summaries.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Montgomery, p. 175.

¹⁰⁸ Mofakhkhar Hussain Khan, 'English Translations of the Holy Qur'an: A Bio-Bibliographical Study,' *Islamic Quarterly*, 30 (1986) 82-108

¹⁰⁹ Alexander Ross, *The Alcoran of Mahomet*, trans. by Sieur Du Ryer (London: [no. pub.], 1649), p. 3.

¹¹⁰ Sale, p. v.

In the Islamic view, the arrangement of the contents of the Quran is in line with divine instruction. Rodwell, however, tried to rearrange not only the surahs but also the verses of the Quran to the extent that Alfred Guillaume declares, 'I cannot use his translation.'¹¹¹ At the same time, some orientalist, like Gerd Puin, argue that the incomprehensibility of the Quran is the secret behind Muslim's failure to produce a standard comprehensive translation of the Quran.¹¹² For Puin, the Quran is a collection of a 'cocktail of texts' that is difficult to understand. He further asserts that:

...if you look at it [the Quran] you will notice that every fifth sentence or so simply does not make sense. Many Muslims -and orientalist- will tell you otherwise, of course, but the fact is that the fifth of the Koranic text is just incomprehensible.¹¹³

Ibn Warraq shares the same view, insisting that 'despite all the thousands of pages devoted to clarifying the text, the Koran still remains incomprehensible, even for those western scholars [like Ignaz Goldziher] who accept the traditional, specially chronological Muslim framework for the kuran.'¹¹⁴ Conclusively, there is inconsistency in this argument; otherwise the debate over the interpretation of the Quran could not have been an issue, since 'there are many respected jurists, past and present, who have engaged successfully in Quranic interpretation.'¹¹⁵ Pickthall's and Yusuf Ali's translations are clear manifestations of Muslim contributions in this field. As Lang writes, 'Although Puin is an expert in Arabic calligraphy and text preservation; he is by no means a scholar of Islam.'¹¹⁶ Puin is, of course, inconsistent in his argument, as he admits that there are both Muslim and non-Muslim scholars who do not believe in the incomprehensibility of the Quran.

The assumption that Muslim scholars appear incapable of producing a comprehensive translation of the Quran is something that could be rejected on logical grounds: Muslims have contributed a great deal to this field, even though their efforts may leave much to be desired. For example, Pickthall was determined to introduce unbiased translation when he realised that 'some of the translations include commentation offensive to Muslims, and almost all employ a style of language which

¹¹¹ Alfred Guillaume, 'The Koran Interpreted: Review', *Muslim World*, 48 (1957), p. 248.

¹¹² Lester, *Ibid*.

¹¹³ *Ibid*.

¹¹⁴ Ibn Warraq, *What the Quran Really Says*, p. 59.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*.

¹¹⁶ Jeffery, *Ibid*.

Muslims at once recognize as unworthy.’¹¹⁷ *The Holy Qur'an: Translation and Commentary* by Abdullah Yusuf ‘Ali, is well known for its ‘richness of the Arabic with poetic English versification’. *The Noble Qur'an in the English Language*, by Muhammad Taqi al-Din al-Hilali and Muhammad Muhsin Khan, is recognised to be ‘the most widely disseminated... throughout the English speaking world’¹¹⁸. *The Message of the Qur'an*, by Muhammad Asad and *The Qur'an, A New Translation*, by M.A.S. Abdel-Haleem of the School of Oriental and African Studies, are also major contributions to the field from Muslims scholars.¹¹⁹ This clearly shows that interpretations of the Quran have been undertaken by Muslim scholars in all major languages, hence the Quran is comprehensible. ‘Therefore, to follow Puin's logic’, as Lang puts it, ‘we would conclude that Muslims are reluctant to translate the Quran because of its incomprehensibility, of which they are completely unaware.’¹²⁰

The evidence from this study suggests that to translate the Quran is not only possible but also permissible. However, the process of translation involves dealing with some orthographical and technical difficulties to avoid misrepresentation of the holy text. This survey clearly reveals how Muslim scholars have responded to the needs of their society by providing solutions to the problems and making significant contributions in various fields. However, the field remains open for more contributions. It follows that, due to these varying views of orientalists concerning the authenticity of the Qur'an, Muslim scholars reject their scholarship as a mixture of prejudice and speculation. Similarly, Muslims feel that all these assaults on their holy text are tactically created to remove the problem of Islam from the West.

Critiques of this type seriously undermine the efforts of those scholars who are truly interested in sustaining good relationships with the adherents of other religions. ‘Islam and Christianity’ as Bernard Lewis puts it, ‘are sister religions, with an immense shared heritage and with a shared or more often distributed domain.’¹²¹ Admittedly, Islam has been cruelly distorted through biased translations which are intended to mislead the reader rather than enlighten him.

¹¹⁷ Marmaduke Pickthall, *The meaning of the Glorious Quran, Text and Explanatory Translation* (Hyderabad- Deccan: Government Central Press, 1938), p. i.

¹¹⁸ Khaleel Mohammed, ‘Assessing English Translation of the Quran’, *Middle East Quarterly*, 11(2005)

¹¹⁹ Ibid.

¹²⁰ Jeffery, Ibid.

¹²¹ Lewis, p. vii.

A reasonable approach to tackle this issue could be to embark on extensive study to produce a comprehensive and unbiased translation of the Quran. Muslims should therefore endeavour to produce a reliable translation with exhaustive comments and comprehensive explanatory notes to meet the religious challenges of our time. Learning Arabic should be encouraged so as to create the opportunity to obtain first-hand and first-rate information.

This paper has given an account of the historical origin of the Quran and demonstrated that it was not written by Muhammad. However, it was preserved in a written form in his lifetime, even though it was not compiled in a standard text. The evidence cited here leads to the conclusion that the Islamic tradition is reliable, at least in confirming the originality of the Quran. Moreover, the study suggests that the Quran is an independent text and that all the arguments of the orientalists in challenging its origin are at best confusing. The debate concerning the integrity of the Quranic text cannot be separated from questions about the authenticity of other sources of Islam, like the hadith; hence, challenging the textual integrity of the Quran is an indirect assault on Islam.

It was also shown that the Quran is translatable, even though the process of translation entails addressing some technical and orthographical difficulties to avoid interpolation and misrepresentation of the actual meaning of the Quran. To further indicate to what extent western orientalists break with the Islamic tradition in Quranic studies, a survey of background information to orientalists' efforts at Quranic translation has been incorporated. An in-depth analysis of these translations, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.

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