

THE QUR'AN - A CLOSER LOOK

PART 6

GOD'S WORD PRESERVED?

The third claim of Muslims we should look at carefully, is that the Qur'an's long preservation and unchangeable text prove it is Al'lah's own Book. This is unfortunately again a rather technical subject, which we shall try to reduce to its basics. Zafrulla Khan, in his "*Islam, its meaning for Modern Man*" says, "It is a truly marvellous fact that the text of the Qur'an has been preserved absolutely pure and entire, down to the last vowel point". There were no vowel points in the original Qur'an; but it is certainly a remarkable and admirable fact, that the Book has been so carefully preserved down the centuries. Enormous care has been taken to ensure that every copy is exactly the same, without errors of calligraphy, or nowadays of printing. No faulty copy is ever allowed to circulate, if it can be stopped.

This fact, as so often, has a polemic usefulness. It supports an attempt to get around the apparent lack of references to Muhammad in the Bible. Muslims claim that Christians and Jews, in contrast with those who have preserved the Qur'an, have been extremely careless, and even sinister, in their handling of God's message to them. Muslim scholars and controversialists, still trying to prove in this way that the whole message has been altered, point to variants in the manuscripts of the Old and particularly the New Testament. From these they confidently assert that neither book can be relied upon, and that Islam is therefore the truth for today.

Yusuf Ali certainly leaves caution behind, in his Appendices to Surah 5. Here he quite clearly says the Jewish Torah was radically altered, indeed rewritten, in the fifth century B.C., after being lost! This raises two questions. Did God allow His Word to be out of circulation for some centuries? And was Jesus, a great Prophet according to the Qur'an,

deceived in accepting the Old Testament/Tanakh as God's unchanged Word (see Matthew 5:17-19, etc.)? When we read Yusuf Ali condemning the radical scholar Renan for unbelief in one place, and quoting him approvingly in another, we should hear an alarm bell ringing. Perhaps we should at least check whether he has accurately conveyed the conclusions of mainstream scholars in 1934, when he first published his translation/commentary; never mind those of today.

So, in an attempt to achieve some balance in this matter, I have again had to refer to committed Jewish and Christian scholars. But since most of them were not even thinking about Muslim arguments, we have somewhat less reason to doubt the factual accuracy of their statements. Firstly, it is admitted by all that copying errors, and even additions and subtractions by scribes, have taken place. These are thought to have occurred either by accident, or with the mistaken intention of 'improvement'. Some have calculated that they amount to less than 0.5% of the total text of the Bible, and about 0.01% are of any significance: "hardly more than a thousandth part of the entire text" (F.J.A. Hort). In some New Testament manuscripts, three fairly short passages are assessed by many scholars to be later insertions. By themselves, it is stated, these variants neither undermine, not establish, any doctrine of either Judaism or Christianity.

Short of doing our own research from scratch, we may have to accept this. What are its implications for Muslim claims to have the only reliable message from God in existence? Well, it does appear to dispose of the Muslim accusation that the Jewish and Christian Scriptures are hopelessly compromised. Instead, we must judge the issues between the Books on content, rather than on how faithfully they have been preserved. Much more of this in our final sections.

In any case, we have already concluded the Qur'an never says that a wholesale alteration of the Bible occurred. That would have been impossible, for the following additional reasons:

1. Before the Qur'an appeared, there were already thousands of copies, in various languages, of the Christian Scriptures, and in Hebrew, of the Jewish, in many countries. Very unfriendly relations existed between the two communities, and the Jews had no strong central authority. The idea of all copies of the Old and New Testaments having been altered, is therefore a ludicrous one. Yet that would need to have been done - to remove for instance all references to Muhammad. But why would they have wanted to do this anyway, since he had not yet been born? Neither could it have been done AFTER the Qur'an appeared, for:
2. Ancient manuscripts of these other Scriptures are still in existence in museums, known to date from up to 300 years before the Qur'an in the case of the New Testament. It is now several hundred years more, for the Tanakh/Old Testament. Yusuf Ali's statement, "There is no Hebrew manuscript which can be dated certainly earlier than 916 A.D.", was made before the Old Testament Dead Sea Scrolls were found from 1947 onwards. Apparently because it suits their polemic purpose, the revisers of Yusuf Ali have let this now inaccurate statement stand. These Dead Sea Scrolls strongly confirm the texts used today.

There seems to be no written evidence of any scholar claiming the Bible had been tampered with, till more than 100 years after Muhammad's time. Though Muslim scholars were faced with the issue when they encountered well-instructed Christians, after their armies conquered what is now Iraq, Syria and Egypt, it seems the first written accounts of such accusations were in the late 8th century, C.E. Ranged against this theory of change, appear to be scholars like Al Mas'udi, Al Tabari, Qasim ibn Ibrahim, Ibn Khaldun, Al Khasani, Al Ghakhiz, Ibn Sina the philosopher, Fakhr-ud-Deen Al Razi, Shah Waliullah, and the "*Saheeh*" of Al Bukhari (Vol. 6, no. 79, pp. 64-65, and Vol. 8, no. 825 - some Jews were told by Muhammad himself to bring forward a copy of the Torah to settle a legal point, after they had tried to conceal what it said). Yet nearly all today's Muslim scholars seem to have adopted the idea the Bible has been changed. Is their motive to stop Muslims from reading it?

As with the Qur'an's claim that Muhammad is prophesied in the Bible, Muslims are obliged to find some reason why the two books differ. For the Qur'an not only mentions, but commends to their attention, the "Tauraah, Zaboor and Injeel".

TEXTUAL HISTORY OF THE QUR'AN

On the Qur'an itself, even its uniformity today may not be quite as significant as is asserted. Even in a uniform text proved anything about its truth (which, alone, it can't), this uniformity was produced, not by God himself, but by men.

Here is the story of the Qur'an text, from the Traditions. Mainly, it seems, because of the deaths of some who had spent much time with the Prophet since his earlier years, his first (administrative) successor, Abu Bakr, decided a written record of the Qur'an needed to be produced. This task he entrusted to Zaid ibn Thabit, a young man very well versed in the Qur'an, but who had not been a Muslim right from the beginning. Until then, parts had been written on various temporary surfaces, or in men's memories. From these, Zaid was asked to produce what scholars call a redaction.

He took them from "the leafless stalks of the date palm tree and from the pieces of leather and hides and from the stones, and from the chests of men" (who had memorized the Qur'an). Zaid gave his work to Abu Bakr, who had it stored, but not then make it the official version. In fact this was not done until the time of the third khaleefah, Uthman.

Word had come to him that different versions were being recited in outlying parts of Muslim territory (already extensive). Uthman then asked Zaid, with three other men, to rewrite his codex in the Quraishi dialect (possibly at this stage inserting a verse previously missed, 33:23 - see below). Then, to ensure uniformity, he arranged for copies of Zaid ibn Thabit's version to be sent to each province, and ordered that all others should be burned. This happened about eighteen years after the death of Muhammad (Bukhari, Vol. 6).

In this volume, (Vol. 6, no.521), the same Traditionist records the earlier words of Muhammad as to who had the best knowledge of the Qur'an. First among four men named

was one Abdullah ibn Mas'ud. Al Bukhari and another recognised chronicler, Ibn Sa'd, tell how Mas'ud wanted to keep his own version of the Qur'an, saying he preferred it to that of Zaid ibn Thabit. In fact, some of Mas'ud's supporters preserved a long list of his textual differences, and these, another slightly different codex by Ubayy ibn Ka'b, and others, were resurrected as now historical curiosities, about 350 years later, by Ibn Al Nadeem in his "*Fihrist*" (List, or Index). Ibn Mas'ud, and others, were thought to favour the succession through Ali, and have therefore been rejected by mainstream Soonee scholars. But political loyalties can explain neither the many variants, nor the reported omission of whole surahs.

It is most interesting that Ibn Mas'ud's version is reported by Ibn Al Nadeem, not to have included Surahs 1, 113 and 114. See previous remarks on the background of these last two, and the final page of our study, significantly, on Surah 1.

Many scholars think that the revolt in which Uthman was killed was not unconnected with his arbitrary actions on the Qur'an. The historian Al Tabari records that people said to Uthman, "The Qur'an was in many books, and you have now discredited them all but one". However, we know there were also political rivalries involved, between Uthman's now predominant Umayyad family, and earlier supporters from Medina.

WHAT THE TRADITIONS SAY; AND WHAT THEY IMPLY

"Narrated Zaid ibn Thabit: Abu Bakr sent for me when the people of Yamamah had been killed... Then Abu Bakr said: 'You are a wise young man and we do not have any suspicion about you, and you used to write (down) the Divine inspiration for Al'lah's Apostle (S.A.W.). So you should search for the (fragmentary scripts) the Qur'an and collect it (in one book)'. By Allah! If they had ordered me to shift one of the mountains, it would not have been heavier for me than this ordering me to collect the Qur'an. Then I said to Abu Bakr, 'How will you do something which Allah's Apostle did not do?' Abu Bakr replied, 'By Allah, it is a good project'". (Bukhari, Vol. 6, no. 509, page 477; and similar accounts in

other collections of Traditions).

Note well: there is no mention at this stage of producing an 'authorized' version as such; the purpose was, it seems, mainly to get the Qur'an collected in a written form, before some of the older, most reliable 'reciters' passed away or were killed.

This quotation helps clarify two other issues. First, it is common for Muslims to claim that before Zaid ibn Thabit began his work, Muhammad himself had put the Qur'an into its final form and confirmed the exact text. This claim is shown impossible to substantiate. It would make inexplicable Zaid's hesitation, stated here, about taking on such an extremely demanding task as the gathering of a reliable compilation.

It is also claimed by Muslim scholars that Zaid was present when Gabriel (Jibreel) recited the whole Qur'an through to Muhammad, near to his death. This angelic visit is Tradition from Fatima, the Prophet's daughter, as recorded by Bukhari in his Volume 6, Intro. to no. 519, page 485. She claimed Muhammad had told her secretly about the visit of Gabriel; the clear implication is, that no-one else was present to confirm it. But even if Zaid HAD been present, and even if he had a brilliant memory, it is most unlikely he could confirm such a long recitation exactly word for word, some years later. (In this, his three helpers could not have aided him, since THEY were certainly not there to hear Gabriel reminding the Prophet).

“Many (of the passages of the) Qur'an that were sent down were known by those who died on the day of Yamamah” {a battle}”...”but they were not known (by those who survived them, nor were they written down, nor had Abu Bakr, Umar or Uthman (by that time) collected the Qur'an, nor were they found with even one person after them”. (Ibn Abi Da'ud, “*Kitab al Masahif*” page 23). This among other textual histories quite clearly implies that certain passages could not be recovered by Zaid and his later colleagues...

Even that is not quite the end of the story. The same scholar and historian of the text,

Ibn Abi Da'ud, tells us that some years after Uthman's action, Al Hajjaj ibn Yusuf, Governor of Iraq, made eleven further amendments to the text, restoring readings formerly excluded by Zaid ibn Thabit. These amendments may or may not be part of today's Qur'an.

A DIFFERENT EXPLANATION ENTIRELY

Dr. John Burton, a British academic, has written a very erudite study on this subject (*"The Collection of the Qur'an"*, Cambridge University Press, 1977). It is much too scholarly and specialised to examine in detail here. His basic contention however is that Muhammad had indeed finalised both the text and internal arrangement of the Qur'an before his death. He concludes that all or most of the events described above from Traditions, never happened, but the whole account was invented. This was done, he says, either to counter rebellion against the Khaleefah Uthman, or, later, by biased Shari'ah lawyers and Traditionists, determined to find textual justification in the Qur'an for various legal rulings they had adopted. In advancing this theory, Dr. Burton seems to be rubbishing the testimony of Saheeh Al Bukhari and other widely accepted Traditionists, who are revered by the Soonees at least. We venture the opinion that Dr. Burton's conclusions, despite all his careful (and very revealing) examination, reads in the end more like some kind of confession of faith, than an objective academic proof. (Note 1.)

How could a standard edition have existed, collated and finalized by Muhammad himself, and not been available to the first two Khaleefahs to finally settle all disputes on the text, before serious textual/political divisions arose, under Uthman?

An Ahmadee scholar, Muhammad Ali, in the Preface to his translation and commentary on the Qur'an, devotes much space to reviewing this issue. He seems more aware of its importance than are most of the 'orthodox', and has read the non-Muslim Orientalists carefully, in order to refute them. He dismisses the idea that the Qur'an had not been put in order before the passing of Muhammad, and claims that many Muslims were already reciting the whole Book through. Therefore, he claims, the work of Zaid and his

colleagues was merely a matter of collecting the written fragments together, as a (strictly unnecessary) double check. There was already, he asserts, a standardised Qur'an, known to many Companions and impossible to change. It was in hearts and memories. But since those hearts would one day stop, it was thought advisable to write it all down in a codex. He also points out that not even people like Ibn Mas'ud objected to the surah and verse arrangement; of Uthman's Qur'an, only to his destruction of "holy leaves" (the variant versions).

His arguments may have some weight; but the following may be brought against them. If the Qur'an existed in its final form, even if only in the memories of the Companions, why did Zaid ibn Thabit say, "How will you do a thing which the Holy Prophet has never done?" What was the ground of his hesitation? Surely he did not think the Prophet would disapprove writing it down or collecting it into a Book? Why also Zaid's statement about his task being an almost impossible one?

Now, it is true that a different collection of Traditions makes Zaid ibn Thabit say; "We organised the Qur'an in the presence of the Prophet". But that statement is most satisfactorily explained in what was related by Uthman, (stated in Al Suyuti's "*Al Itqan*"):

"(As each section was revealed)...the Prophet would summon one of the scribes and say, 'Place these verses in the Surah in which such and such a topic is mentioned'" (This was Zaid's job, as one of the secretaries to the Prophet). It does NOT necessarily mean that the text or shape of the whole Qur'an had been finalised by Muhammad before his death. For the same famous textual historian, Al Suyuti, in his "*Al Itqan fi 'ulum al-Qur'an*" (p.40, 1980 reprint, Biblio Verlag, Germany) also describes Uthman's later actions like this:

"He transcribed the texts into a single codex, he arranged the surahs, and he restricted the dialect to the vernacular of the Quraish on the plea that it (the Qur'an) had been sent down in that tongue".

Note that this early scholar again clearly implies that Muhammad himself had not

finalised the Qur'an. He also emphasises that the collation and enthroneing of "a single codex" (involving the destruction of all other copies) was a quite separate work from standardising the dialect. Many Muslim writers on this subject (such as Rafiq Zakaria in his "*Muhammad and the Qur'an*", Penguin, page 68), try to tell us all variants were merely in dialect or styles of reading. This, as we have now clearly demonstrated, is simply not true. Muslim scholar Ahmad Von Denffer also admits the existence of textual variants even after Uthman's decree ("*Ulum Al Qur'an*", page 46f).

Summing up the above evidence, we must conclude that while the Qur'an may have been basically arranged by the Prophet, there was no "official" unique text till after Uthman's decree that variant texts should be destroyed. And only differences of at least some significance could have made him issue such an order. Furthermore, if Zaid's version had always been the standard one, why was it again slightly revised in Uthman's reign to make it more authentically Meccan? (Zaid was given helpers from Quraish, Muhammad's own tribe, he himself being a Medinan, not expert in the dialect of the Quraish Meccans). Al Bukhari implies it was at this later stage that a new verse (33:23) was found, only in the possession of Abu Khuzaima al Ansari (cp. Al Suyuti, "*Al Itqan*", page 138). Al Bukhari (cp. "*Mishkaat*", Vol. 3, pp. 706-707) claims two more verses, from a different surah (9:128-129) were discovered by Zaid ibn Thabit during his original editing, with the same person. Most confusing!

Saheeh Muslim (Vol. 2, page 501), and Al Suyuti (page 526) also mention yet more passages that were once recited, but are no longer part of the Qur'an. We need not quote from these highly reputable scholars in detail, except to say they both refer to whole surahs. The She'ah denomination, as mentioned earlier, also claim that two whole surahs have been left out. Not wishing to extend this technical discussion to the point of boredom, we will not deal with other sources, but mention briefly by way of mere examples that a She'ah scholar, Imam Jaf'ar, claimed the "original Qur'an had 10,764 verses, whereas it has now only 6236

(though his first figure may include verses later abrogated?) (Note 2). And there are Traditions from both Hafsa and A'ishah, the Prophet's wives, that Surah 2:238 originally mentioned the "Asr" prayer by name, not the present vaguer "**middle prayer**". Their private copies of the Qur'an contained the reference to Asr, according to Ibn Abi Da'ud..

Muslims often counter by saying omitted words or passages must have been "abrogated". But this could have been done only while Muhammad was alive. Later changes or withdrawals cannot be Divinely authorized. And prominent contemporaries of Muhammad including his wives, seem to have known nothing of these words, verses and even chapters having been withdrawn before his death. Also, the Asr prayer is still practiced.

In attempting to explain the problem of the "Stoning Verse", to be mentioned in our Chapter 15, John Burton writes strange and unconsciously compromising words about the Qur'an's text:

"If there can be a Qur'anic revelation which is recited, but not practiced, there can be a Qur'an revelation which is practiced but not recited"(page 96). Dr. Burton's work is worth reading, if only because it exposes the gross over-simplification, and misrepresentation, of the textual history of the Qur'an, by Muslim apologists.

Some of these apologists also claim that the Topkapi (Istanbul) and Samarkand (kept at Tashkent, Uzbekistan) manuscripts, are Uthmanic in dating. If not, some even claim, "autograph" originals, from the four produced by Zaid ibn Thabit himself, and distributed to various centres by order of Uthman. Analysis of the scripts used, and other factors, make this bold assertion unacceptable. The scientific evidence suggests the earliest surviving Qur'anic manuscript is 8th Century C.E., perhaps one hundred and fifty years after Muhammad's death. (But see Footnote 1).

The original Arabic Qur'an had no vowels. It was some time later that marks were added, indicating what the vowels were likely to be, and therefore the pronunciation, or even

in a few places, the meaning. For many years even after the death of Muhammad, his permission for seven slightly different ways of reading aloud parts of the Qur'an (Bukhari, Vol. 6, no. 514, p. 482; Muslim, Vol. 2, p.290), was made use of. Not till 322 A.H. (rather late!) was any official attempt made to identify which (among others) these seven were. Only very gradually did that of Hafs from Asim come to dominate, as it does in most places today. Earlier, before distinguishing marks were introduced, various centres used different vowels in their readings. Vowels can occasionally determine for instance in which voice a verb is read; active or passive.

This human element can be appreciated by comparing the Qur'an's transmission with that of the Tanakh/Old Testament. A somewhat similar situation about vowels applied to the Hebrew Bible; though it could not be protected by memorizers to the same extent, being nearly four times as long as the Qur'an. Also, of course, it was not completed till centuries after it was begun; unlike the Qur'an. All modern translations of the Bible therefore give footnotes where there are alternative readings from the many existing manuscripts. The Qur'an, to preserve the impression of absolute certainty about the correct text right from the start, gives no variants; they have been destroyed.

Let us sum up our findings after venturing in search of truth into this rather scholarly area . Certainly, the text of the Qur'an seems (but see Footnote 1) to be unchanged since those early differences between Companions/Reciters were resolved by Uthman; and is more uniform than that of the Bible. But in neither case does there seem to be any compelling reason to doubt the essential authenticity or integrity of what each Book contains today. The big question, of Divine inspiration and trustworthiness, must be settled in other ways.

Footnotes:

1. Like Dr. Burton, Western scholars such as Crone and Cook, and Wansbrough (Burton's teacher!), writing in the late '70s, refused to accept the account in the Traditions; but for

rather different reasons. Wansbrough, Cook and Crone claimed the “official” history of early Islam is inadmissible, because not based on “primary”, that is, near contemporary, sources. But they also produce much evidence from more contemporary non-Muslim sources, to show that it is in fact untrue. Their very radical conclusion is, that the Qur'an was not finalized till much later. Their case has so far not been accepted by most other Western scholars; and certainly not by any Muslim ones! That being so, I prefer to base my own conclusions on sources already known to, and accepted by, Muslims themselves.

But the more recent release of photocopies of what seems to be a seventh century C.E. palimpsest version of the Qur'an, found some time ago in Yemen, and different from the present version, may force non-Muslim scholars at least to re-examine the case put forward by Wansbrough and his colleagues, since it seems to support their contention that the Qur'an was still being standardised, much later than the time of Uthman.

2. Another source says there are 6616 verses. I have not taken the trouble to count them. The main point is unaffected.

TELLING IT LIKE IT WAS

A further discussion of the almost universal Muslim belief that all prophets were sinless, will lead us inevitably into another comparison of the Qur'an with the Bible. In order not to unduly impose my personal conclusions, these next chapters will mainly set out Relevant 'historical' passages from the Muslim and the Judaeo/Christian Scriptures, letting differences become clearly visible.

Not only does the Qur'an say, as we saw earlier (Chapter 5), that Muhammad was a sinner, but it also says it about Abraham in Surah 26:82, Moses in 28:16, David in 38:24-25, and Solomon in 38:34-35. Surahs 11:47 and 21:87 show that Noah and Jonah too were conscious of needing God's pardon. In the first reference, 26:82, the Arabic word used, **khati'ati**, is the same noun as for example in 71:25, a description of the sins of the ungodly people in Noah's day. Though usually it has the less serious meaning of 'faults' or 'mistakes', it could mean sins (i.e. serious disobediences to God) in 26:82, too.

The Qur'an does however take some pains to ensure that prophets are at least SEEN to be faultless by others. One's public reputation is always important in non-Western culture. Take the story of Joseph, in Surah Yusuf, number 12. A careful examination of verse 32 will show that despite being confessed innocent by his master's wife of trying to seduce or rape her, Joseph is still imprisoned on her demand. This does not seem to make sense. The Bible's account (Genesis chapter 39), says Potiphar's wife did NOT acknowledge his innocence.

Or consider the story in Surah Mariam, number 19, about Mary the mother of Jesus. On bringing her baby to the people, she is suspected of being immoral, since she has no husband. The baby Jesus then speaks from the cradle to vindicate her (verses 27-33). Just in case we may have misunderstood, this same occurrence is also mentioned in 3:46. There is no such public justification recorded by the New Testament. But it IS, apparently, found in the "*Gospel of the Infancy*", a much later work. This was probably written about the time of the Qur'an, originally in Arabic, and is not accepted as Scripture by anyone.

THE QUR'AN'S OWN CHALLENGE

We seem to be approaching a crunch point, where we need to face up to the question, “Is God alone the Author of the Qur'an, and did Muhammad have no part in it?” The Book itself challenges:

“Do they not consider the Qur'an (with care)? Had it been from other than Allah, they would surely have found therein much discrepancy” (4:82)

We have already noticed what do appear to be inconsistencies within the Qur'an itself. In comparing its accounts of the prophets' lives more fully with those in the other Scriptures, what may certainly be called “discrepancies” begin appearing. Before we turn to particular passages, a more general comment. The social laws of the Qur'an were outlined previously (Chapter 6). It is most interesting to read these again, along with the Bible book of Deuteronomy. Let us assume for a moment that the Qur'an's teaching of how society should be organised, was directly revealed by Al'lah. Many might consider some laws that came through Moses, about two thousand years earlier, to be more advanced, and perhaps more humane too. But if we agree with this assessment, what does it say about the “progressive revelation” claimed for the Qur'an?

One example will suffice, since we do not need to enter into a detailed analysis here. The provision mentioned earlier, by which (2:230) a woman may be remarried to the same man only after she has been married and divorced by someone else, is presumably meant as an obstacle to casual changes of attachment by men. The law given in Deuteronomy is exactly opposite to this (Deut. 24:1-4). Here, the underlying reason seems to be the sanctity of marriage, as something intended by God to be lifelong. We might ask: which concept is the more ‘advanced’, religiously?

There are however many points of similarity between Qur'anic and Jewish laws. So much so, that another question must arise in inquiring minds. Did Muhammad, the illiterate or at least unlearned man of Arabia, have any knowledge of Judaism? Or did the Qur'an

reflect many Jewish laws, purely by being as God-revealed as (Jews or Christians might believe), Deuteronomy was? In other words; are the similarities Divine; or are they human?

If the Qur'an had come out of the blue; if Muhammad had never had any knowledge of the Jewish and Christian religions, then the Book's Divine origin would be much harder to question. But there were in fact several tribes of Jews living in the area of Mecca. Also, Muslim historians tell us Muhammad had Christian friends, and a cousin-in-law, Waraqa, a convert to Christianity with whom he had many conversations. One of Muhammad's sons (who all died in infancy) was born of a Coptic Christian woman, Mariah. At one stage, some persecuted Muslims (though not Muhammad himself) emigrated to Abyssinia, where they were treated kindly by the Christian king. This may by the way help to explain the strangely equivocal attitude of the Qur'an towards Christians.

Despite all this, and even if Muhammad was not in fact illiterate, he certainly had no direct access to the Bible in his own language. There is no evidence any part of the Bible had yet been translated into Arabic (Note 1). His knowledge was of necessity second-hand. He never read a copy of the Jewish or Christian Scriptures, and would have had to rely, for his personal knowledge, on what was told him by others (Note 2).

HOW THINGS WERE, THEN

Next, as another part of the essential background to our comparison of the different Scriptures, we need to see what the state of the Jews and Christians was in Arabia at that time. The Jews had long been scattered from their Promised Land. While they kept their Scriptures carefully preserved, these did not have the pre-eminent part in their religious life. The Talmud, a compilation of ethical and other material, edifying in parts, but based rather loosely on the Tanakh, influenced their day-to-day existence at least as much. (In this, its relation to the Jewish Bible is in one way similar to that of the Hadeeth (Traditions) to the Qur'an). Then, as we shall see, there were also other books, even less Divine in origin. Arab Jews followed various tribal leaders and laws. Many were traders, rich and influential, but

not always noted for integrity. Some even practiced sorcery.

The Christians were not in much better state. The Church was also divided, over important but abstruse questions. A bishop called Nestorius had formed a theology which was eventually judged heretical. He was opposed, as champion of the “Catholic” Church, by a Bishop Cyril of Alexandria. Normally, these kinds of dispute are of interest only to historians and theologians. But I suggest we need to look more carefully at this one at least, because it may shed considerable light on the Qur'an. It is called the “Theotokos” controversy. This Greek word means “God-bearer”. It was applied by the ‘orthodox’ Catholics to Mary, the mother of Jesus. Nestorius objected. No, he said: Mary did not bear God. She gave birth only to the human Jesus, not to whatever Godward part of him there was. The phrase “God-bearer” is therefore not legitimate, he argued.

Cyril insisted it was; the Catholic Church was already well committed to invoking the intercession of the ‘Blessed Virgin’. Nestorius was thought to have questionable views on the Deity of Christ. So he was condemned as a heretic and banished. But many of his followers lived on in Arabia. It is probable that Muhammad heard something of this dispute. He may even have known that the official Church had rejected Nestorius; though whether his informants had got all the details right, is another matter. Some scholars say Waraqah, Muhammad's relative by marriage, was himself a Nestorian. Also, that the monk, Bahira, whom Muhammad met on his childhood travels, was of this sect.

Now, to the Qur'an. Several times it roundly condemns the idea that Al'lah is “**one of three**” (e.g. in 4:1721, , 5:72-73). Jesus, called in Qur'anic Arabic **Eesa-ibn-ul** (son of **Mariam**, is shown in the Last Day vehemently denying the blasphemy that he and his mother are equal to Al'lah, or “gods” with Him (5:116). But, here is the problem. It seems clear, by implication at least, that the Trinity condemned by the Qur'an is not the kind of Trinity found in the New Testament (Matthew 28:19, 2 Corinthians 13:14, etc.). The verses in the Qur'an

imply the “three gods” are related physically; that Al'lah is being thought of as fathering a child by Mary, just as we humans father children.

“**And exalted is the Majesty of our Lord; He has taken neither a wife nor a son**” (72:3; see also 2:116, 6:101, 23:91, 112:3). These are only the clearest references from many.

But who actually believed that Jesus was in this physical way the ‘Son of God’? Or that Mary was a god, one of three gods? I have been unable to trace any Christian writing which does. Certainly it has never been the official teaching of any branch of the Christian Church. Even Cyril did not go that far!

Muslims of course reject not only a physical relationship, but calling Jesus the ‘Son of God’ in any sense, even a spiritual one. But that is not the immediate issue. The issue is rather this: how did the Qur'an, if it from God the All-knowing, manage to misunderstand what the Bible is really saying?

An English scholar of Arabic, Jeremy Hinds, has written helpfully on an important word used in Surahs 5:18 and 9:30. Firstly, he points out that these are two of the later chapters of the Qur'an (Surah 5 may be the last of all). They appeared after Muhammad's dialogue with the only learned, orthodox Christians he apparently ever met, from Najran. Both verses, and only here in the Qur'an, once in relation to Jesus, and once to the claims of Jews and Christians, use the Arabic word, “**ibn**”. But in all earlier places where the Qur'an denies that Jesus is the Son of God, the word used is “**walad**”.

Hinds writes, “The word ‘**ibn**’ has a wider meaning than ‘**walad**’. ‘Walad’ denotes human procreation from which a child is born. ‘Ibn’ has a wider meaning. So Jesus is ‘Ibn Maryam’ without the natural process of procreation, and the word can be used figuratively”.

Could it be that the Qur'an discovered rather late that its accusations about Christian belief were misconceived, and changed from “walad” to “ibn”?

Arabia had the title, ‘Arabia of heresies’. Epiphanius, an early Christian writer, reports there was a small sect names Kollyridians, which had originated in Thrace, now on

the borders of Greece and Turkey, and spread to Arabia. These people, mainly women, did claim that Mary was a god, and offered cakes (in Greek, “kollyris”) to her. Nothing is known of this obscure group except what Epiphanius writes. The Qur'an's condemnation can hardly be addressed to only them. But who else does it fit?

Surah 9:30 also contains a most confusing reference to someone it calls “**Uzayr**”, who must be the Biblical “Ezra”. It is true that the Tanakh several times calls people “sons of God” by creation, or else by spiritual adoption. But the specific accusation about Uzayr in 9.30 implies the Jews regarded his relationship with God in some different and unique way. Yusuf Ali quotes Al Baidhawi, the eminent Muslim commentary writer, as claiming there was a sect of Jews who revered Ezra..

Yet there is no historical evidence whatever that the Jews ever did exalt Ezra to any such semi-Divine status. *The Encyclopaedia Judaica* rather mildly says of this reference in the Qur'an, “These words are an enigma, because no such opinion is to be found among the Jews”. Presumably a Jewish encyclopaedia is more likely to know than a Muslim writer?

The pagan Arabs did believe that God had physical daughters (16:57).

THE CRUCIFIXION THAT NEVER WAS?

“They said (in boast), ‘We killed Christ Jesus, the son of Mary, the Messenger of Allah’ -but they killed him not, nor crucified him, but so it was made to appear to them, and those who differ therein are full of doubts, with no certain knowledge, but only conjecture to follow; for of a surety, they killed him not - nay, Allah raised him up unto Himself; and Allah is exalted in power, Wise”. (Surah 4:157-158).

This is one of the most startling statements in the Qur'an! Most Muslim commentators have a straightforward interpretation of the passage. This is, that Jesus was not put on the cross, but raised alive to Paradise. And among these scholars, most think someone else was mistakenly crucified in his place, with various suggestions as to who that was. One name mentioned is Judas, who betrayed Jesus - poetic justice! Yusuf Ali is wisely cautious about such speculations, but does accept the vast majority's view, that Jesus was taken alive

into Paradise. A small minority, but including one famous writer, think the verse may be stating only that it was not the proud Jews, but Al'lah Himself, Who planned everything that happened to Jesus - his capture, trial and condemnation. This is a much less likely interpretation, for the following reasons:

Firstly, that section of the Surah, beginning in verse 153, is a criticism of the Jews. It includes in verse 156 a rebuttal of the Jews' slander of Mary. So, the main purpose is to preserve the reputation of great prophets. Secondly, Yusuf Ali rightly says that the crucifixion "...is necessary for the theological doctrine of blood sacrifice and vicarious atonement for sins, which is rejected by Islam". These are surely keys to the verses' true meaning.

However, another complication arises. A second passage about Jesus makes him say, 19:33; **"Peace is on me the day I was born, the day that I die, and the Day that I shall be raised up to life (again)"**. Almost exactly the same words are used of **Yahya** (John the Baptist, in the New Testament) a few verses earlier, in 19:15. John/Yahya certainly did die, in fact, was executed, according to the Gospels. So the Muslim Traditions explain this awkward verse by postulating a second earthly life for Jesus, near the Last Day, but terminated by ordinary death. According to this, he will appear near Damascus, marry, have children, kill all pigs and the Anti-Christ (Djaal), destroy crosses, attend the prayers but give up to the Mahdi, (a kind of supernatural, latter-day Khaleefah) his right to lead them, then die, and be buried next to Muhammad in Medina (Bukhari, Vol. 3). Muslims claim this is also hinted at in the Qur'an, in 4:159 and 43: 61; but neither verse is clear, both can be interpreted quite differently.

Referring to 4:157's **"doubts"** and **"conjecture"** among non-Muslims, Yusuf Ali mentions several Christian sects. But these were defunct long before the time of the Qur'an. If there are "doubts" and "conjectures" today, they seem to be found among fringe Muslim groups, but relating rather to the real meaning and implications of this passage in the

Qur'an...

Ahmad Deedat, in his booklet/video, “*Crucifixion - or CruciFICTION?*”, decided the idea of Jesus not being put on the cross at all was just too difficult to defend, historically. Instead, he adopted another reconstruction, (as does also the heretical Ahmadee or Qadiani sect). This says that Jesus was indeed nailed to the cross for some time, but somehow survived the experience, recovered in the tomb (the Ahmadees at least bring in a miraculous ointment to help here), and escaped, to ascend to Paradise later (Deedat), or to travel to Kashmir in India, and die much later.(Ahmadee). Later, Deedat abandoned this radical re-interpretation. Perhaps he was pressured by the orthodox, both for following the despised Ahmadees, and for denying the traditional and majority view.

Then take Surah 3, verse 55: “**Behold, Allah said: ‘O Jesus! I will take thee and raise thee to myself...’**” The word cleverly translated by Yusuf Ali, “take thee”, is from a root, ‘tawaffi’. (The same applies in another place, Surah 5;117, which significantly is in the past tense). In most other occurrences in the Qur’an, words based on this root refer to death. Hence, no doubt, Dawood’s translation of 3:55: “**I will cause you to die, and lift you up to me...**” Muhammad Asad and other translators give a similar rendering. However most then insist it refers to the second earthly life of Jesus! Here is yet another controversy where the author feels no need to report his conclusions, but will leave the reader to judge. May I simply convey my own impression that the accounts in the Gospels are much more straightforward and less confusing than the Qur’an, on this subject?

Footnotes:

1. See B.M. Metzger, “*The Early Versions of the New Testament*”, Oxford Univ. Press. 1977.
2. One of the Traditionists, Abu Huraira, says that the Jews of Mecca used to read the Tauraah/Torah aloud in Hebrew or Aramaic, then translate it into Arabic for the benefit of their neighbours. This may be part of the background for some of the criticisms of them in

the Qur'an. If, by doing this, they were trying to show the Qur'an's inconsistencies with their own Book, and discredit Muhammad, the attempt rather backfired.