

The Compilation of the Text of the Qur'an and the Sunni-Shia Dispute

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1. Introduction

In recent years, in various countries, there have been public disputations between Christians and Muslims about the veracity of their respective holy books. At the time of writing there is an ongoing heated dispute taking place on the inter-net on this subject, and one issue being raised by some Christians is the question of the compilation of the *Qur'an*. A cursory examination on the literature on both sides demonstrates that the issue raises intense emotions, and sometimes both sides can express themselves in terms which do not promote good communal relations, or useful academic dialogue. It is not my purpose in this paper to raise questions about the veracity or otherwise of the contemporary edition of the *Qur'an*. Neither is it my intention to provoke or intensify hostilities between the Sunni and Shia about the integrity of the 'Uthmanic edition of the *Qur'an*. Rather, I hope to show how the different Muslim hypotheses about the compilation of the *Qur'an*, and the Sunni-Shia dispute therein, help to explain the attitudes of Muslims to the Christian concept of inspiration, text and canon. After examining the history and nature of Qur'anic compilation and the sectarian controversy thereof, we can see that to some extent the accusations of Muslim polemicists about the Bible reflect an internal dispute within Islam about its own sacred Scripture. With this in mind, I have largely ignored the positions of Orientalist and other scholars who have engaged in 'The Quest for the Historical *Qur'an*' and have questioned the veracity of the 'Uthmanic edition of the text. Instead, I have been guided by what Muslims themselves say about its compilation.

This brings us back to the point I made in my previous paper, [The Attitude of the Qur'an and Sunnah to the Christian Scriptures](#), that Muslims view the Bible through the lens of the *Qur'an*, and in their estimation the holy book of Islam sets the pattern for the form and content of an inspired Scripture. Insofar as the average Muslim is familiar with the concept of canonicity, he naturally assumes that what was true of the compilation of his own scripture is equally true of other sacred writings, at least those mentioned in the *Qur'an*. Nor is this a mere personal prejudice. If the 'previous Books' are true revelations from God, sent down from 'the Mother of the Book', a Muslim will believe that given the collegiality of the prophets and thus their Scriptures, the process which marked the compilation of the *Qur'an* must be a reflection of that procedure which characterised the collation of the Books of Moses, David and Jesus. If this is not the case, then, naturally, Muslim suspicions are aroused. Ironically, as we shall see, the actions Caliph 'Uthman took to canonise the text assembled by Zaid ibn Thabit have influenced Muslim opinion on the corruption of the Biblical text and canon. It can be seen that on this issue, textual history and psychology

meet. On the other hand, the position that oral tradition played in preserving the Qur'anic text presents us with an opportunity to explain to our Muslim friends the similar role it performed in the Biblical revelation.

2. Origins and Structure of the *Qur'an*

2.1 The Commencement of Revelation

The *Qur'an* celebrates the event of the commencement of revelation in its reference to *Laylat al-Qadr*, 'the Night of Power', during the month of Ramadan when the portion of the Tablet descended to the 'House of Protection' in the lowest of the seven heavens. The *Qur'an* claims to have been supernaturally revealed by angelic spirits on this night. Throughout history, as necessity arose, aspects of the eternal Tablet were revealed to the Prophets through Gabriel; the *Qur'an* is the culmination of these revelations. In the same fashion, it was revealed to Muhammad in Arabic by the angel Gabriel over a period of twenty-two to twenty-three years. The fact that the *Qur'an* as a whole was not revealed immediately demonstrates that in many cases it is responding to historical events in the career of Muhammad, and helps to explain the phenomenon of abrogated verses.

The *hadith* literature records the advent of revelation to Muhammad, and his reaction of terror, the result of fearing that he had become mad or possessed. Insanity was often associated with possession by the jinn, and so it is interesting to note Surahs 15:6 and 68:2 in this respect which answer the accusations of the pagans as to his condition. There is nothing comparable in Christian concepts of inspiration to the physical grip of the angel in imparting revelation to Muhammad, and this again points to the passive character of revelation in Islam. It is interesting to note that there was an early Christian association with Muhammad at this point, and that the role that the Christian believer played was crucial in confirming to Muhammad the truth of his revelation. After this, revelation ceased for a period, and when it resumed, it was once again through the agency of the Archangel Gabriel. At first, the reaction of Muhammad to the angelic visitation was once again to be afraid. Inspiration thereafter continued throughout the remainder of his life, and a large number of revelations came to Muhammad just before his death. The last revelation was 2:281 (although some say it was v282, v278, or all three). Others say it was 5:4. The *Hadith* literature offer support to either Surah Tawbah or Surah Nasr.

2.2 The Place of Oral Tradition

We can see from this that there was not a simple, single event which disclosed the entire Muslim holy book, and that given that most revelation came not long before his passing, it follows that there was not an entire, completed document of the *Qur'an* at the death of Muhammad. However, as Muslims often protest, this does not necessarily mean that the *Qur'an* as it stands is unreliable. Oral tradition and memorization have long been adequately practised by Oriental peoples of all faiths, and has been frequently demonstrated to be dependable. Muslims have long placed great emphasis on memorization of their sacred text, and many mullahs today are able to recite the *Qur'an* without mistake. The earliest claim for the public recitation of the *Qur'an* is found in respect to Abdullah bin Mas'ud, who proclaimed it at the pagan sanctuary in Mecca, in the early

period of Muhammad's ministry. Of course, there would have been only a restricted portion of the *Qur'an* to express at this time, and what bin Mas'ud recited according to the *sira* was clearly Surah 55 Rahman Ayah 1ff. This points to an early period of oral transmission, to which should be added the testimony of the *hadith* on the subject which encouraged memorization. Zayd ibn Thabit records that when he began his collection of the Qur'anic text it existed as writings on '... **palmed stalks, thin white stones and also from the men who knew it by heart...** '.

2.3 The Structure of the *Qur'an*

The chapters of the *Qur'an* are called *surahs*, meaning 'fences'. They are arranged in order of length rather than chronology. It is often difficult for a Christian reader coming to the *Qur'an* for the first time to understand the nature of what he is reading, since its form is so different from the Biblical structure of books and verses. The themes within each *surah* are not all sequential, but rather purportedly reflect the order established by Muhammad. Agreement with this proposition, however, depends upon whether one is a Sunni or a Shi'i. Further, it should be remembered that since revelation was effected over a period of twenty years, compilation was necessarily piecemeal. As stated earlier, for the most part, the *Qur'an* was preserved through oral tradition; necessarily so since most of the Prophet's Companions were illiterate.

2.3.1 Abrogated Verses

A major issue in Qur'anic interpretation is that of abrogation – *Naskh*. Within the *Qur'an* itself are statements which offset others, but according to the doctrine of abrogation the later texts supersede the earlier whenever there are inconsistencies. The Muslim argument is that the abrogated verses were only meant for specific, temporary situations. We have seen that the revelation of the *Qur'an* is grounded in the historical circumstances of the life and career of Muhammad, and so there is a progressive element in doctrine of Islam's holy book. Situations change and develop, and since the *Qur'an* reflects this, its teachings changed with the circumstance at hand. At the most obvious level we can see this in the fact that in the early years of Islam, Muhammad was a minority preacher in Mecca, concerning himself with almost solely theological and moral/social issues, but when he moved to Medina, he became the Governmental Executive, and so his revelations began to address legal, political and economic matters. The *Qur'an* explains the practice of abrogation by referring to the sovereignty of God. Yusuf Ali says:

For: 2.106

The word which I have translated by the word ‘revelations’ is Ayat... It is not only used for verses of the Quran, but in a general sense for God’s revelations, as in ii. 39 and for other Signs of God in history or nature, or miracles, as in ii. 61. It has even been used for human signs and tokens of wonder, as, for example, monuments or landmarks built by the ancient people of AD (xxvi. 128). What is the meaning here? If we take it in a general sense, it means tht God’s Message from age to age is always the same, but that its Form may differ according to the needs and exigencies of the time. That form was different as given to Moses and then to Jesus and then to Muhammad. Some commentators apply it also to the Ayat of the Quran. There is nothing derogatory in this if we believe in progressive revelation. In iii. 7 we are told distinctly about the Quran, that some of its verses are basic or fundamental, and others are allegorical, and it is mischievous to treat the allegorical verses and follow them (literally). On the other hand, it is absurd to treat such a verse as ii. 115 as if it were abrogated by ii. 144 about the Qibla. We turn to the Qibla, but we do not believe that God is only in one place. He is everywhere.

As can be seen, some Muslims believe that this verse refers to Jewish and Christian Scriptures. However, it is not the only verse that impinges on this subject, and these others indicate that what is involved is abrogation of the *Qur’an*.

For: 16.101

... The doctrine of progressive revelation from age to age and time to time does not mean that Allah’s fundamental Law changes. It is not fair to charge a Prophet of Allah with forgery because the Message as revealed to him is in a different form from that revealed before, when the core of the Truth is the same, for it comes from Allah.

In the *Hadith*, we find reference to abrogation which specifically relates this practice to the *Qur’an*. Another text concerns Surah 2:106; a Qur’anic reciter was supposed to have memorised every revelation from Muhammad, so what was under consideration in this text was whether he should have deleted those verses which had been cancelled. Finally, there are *Hadith* texts which settle the issue that abrogation relates to the *Qur’an* itself, rather than to the holy scriptures of the Jews and Christians (or anyone else for that matter). The *Hadith* illustrates our earlier point about the progressive character of Qur’anic revelation, and how an aspect of this related to the changed conditions of Muhammad after the *Hegira*. The classic example often used by Muslim exegetes to explain the mechanics of abrogation is found with respect to the widow’s bequest.

To understand what this involves, we can examine the fact that Islam makes a great point in portraying itself as a ‘mercy’ to Mankind, and part of this is that it does not burden believers with too much ritual obligation. For example, Surah 73 begins in vs. 2 – 4, by commanding Believers to spend a considerable portion of the night in prayer, but ayah 20 abrogates this. S. 43:89 orders that polytheists be let alone, however, S. 2:190-191 commands that they be slaughtered.

However, it is not only the case that the *Qur’an* abrogates itself; the *Sunnah* also abrogates parts of the *Qur’an*. This can be seen in the *Mut’ah* practice of temporary marriage. According to Sunnis, this was later abrogated, and the *hadith* refers to this. Ahmad von

Denffer records three types of abrogation with respect to the *Qur'an*, which he evidences by quoting from *ayat* and *ahadith*:

i. *Abrogation of the recited verse together with the legal ruling:*

Aisha

SAHIH MUSLIM

It had been revealed in the *Qur'an* that ten clear sucklings make the marriage unlawful, then it was abrogated (and substituted) by five sucklings and Allah's Apostle (peace be upon him) died and it was before that time (found) in the *Qur'an* (and recited by the Muslims).

ii. *Abrogation of the legal ruling without the recited verse:*

Surah: 33. Ahzab Ayah: 50

50. O prophet! We have made lawful to thee thy wives to whom thou hast paid their dowers; and those whom thy right hand possesses out of the prisoners of war whom Allah has assigned to thee; and daughters of thy paternal uncles and aunts and daughters of thy maternal uncles and aunts who migrated (from Mecca) with thee; and any believing woman who dedicates her soul to the Prophet if the Prophet wishes to wed her this only for thee and not for the Believers (at large); We know what We have appointed for them as to their wives and the captives whom their right hands possess in order that there should be no difficulty for Thee. And Allah is Oft-Forgiving Most Merciful.

52. It is not lawful for thee (to marry more) women after this nor to change them for (other) wives even though their beauty attract thee except any thy right hand should possess (as handmaidens): and Allah doth watch over all things.

iii. *Abrogation of the recited verse without with the legal ruling:*

Abdullah ibn Abbas

SAHIH AL-BUKHARI

... Umar sat on the pulpit and when the summoners for the prayer had finished their announcement, Umar stood up, and having glorified and praised Allah as He deserved, he said, 'Now then, I am going to tell you something which (Allah) has written for me to say... Allah sent Muhammad (peace be upon him) with the Truth and revealed the Holy Book to him. Among that which Allah revealed, was the Verse of the Rajam (the stoning of a married person (male or female) who commits illegal sexual intercourse, and we recited this Verse and understood and memorized it. Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) did carry out the punishment of stoning and so did we after him.

I am afraid that after a long time has passed, somebody will say, 'By Allah, we do not find the Verse of the Rajam in Allah's Book.' and thus they will go astray by abandoning an obligation which Allah has revealed. The punishment of the Rajam is to be inflicted on any married person (male or female) who commits illegal sexual intercourse provided the required evidence is available or there is conception or confession...

von Denffer notes that the punishment of stoning for adultery has been retained in the *Sunnah*, whilst it is not present in the *Qur'an*. According to Ibn Salama, an authority on the subject, there are:

43 surahs with neither *nasikh* (abrogating verses) or *mansakh* (abrogated verses)

6 surahs with *nasikh* but no *mansakh*.

40 surahs with *mansakh* but no *nasikh*.

25 surahs with both *nasikh* and *mansakh*.

According to Jalauddin us-Suyuti there are 21 abrogated verses, and according to Shah Waliullah there are five:

Mansakh 2:180 *Nasikh* 4:11, 12

Mansakh 2:240 *Nasikh* 2:234

Mansakh 8:65 *Nasikh* 8:62

Mansakh 30:50 *Nasikh* 33:52

Mansakh 58:12 *Nasikh* 58:13

The problem for Christians as they read the *Qur'an*, is that its structure is unlike that of the Bible in this regard. The New Testament, because of the Sacrifice of Christ, 'abrogates' the Old Testament rulings on animal sacrifices, since the latter had a prophetic character which is now fulfilled; to a large extent, this is the message of Hebrews, e.g. 10:1ff. On a similar basis, the *kosher* laws of the Old Testament are superseded by the declaration of Jesus in Mark 7:19 that all foods were now 'clean'. In these cases, however, abrogation occurs because of prophetic fulfilment. This ending of food legislation and other aspects of the Law often seems so arbitrary to Muslims, and encourages them to believe that the Christians have tampered with their Scriptures. They do not understand the eschatological element involved. The structure of the Christian Scriptures, whereby the books that celebrated the fulfilment of the Messianic prophecies of the *Tenak*, i.e. what we call the New Testament, in temporal terms obviously came later than the Old Testament texts, and the present Biblical structure, though arbitrary in terms of denoting the books as 'Old Testament' and 'New Testament', reflect the theological fact of the change that the Advent of Christ has wrought. Moreover, we are dealing with later *books* that abrogate aspects of the former books.

With the *Qur'an*, however, this is not the case. There is no element of realized eschatology involved. Nor is it simply a case that the *Qur'an* abrogates elements of the previous books. Rather, *verses* abrogate others in the same book, and the structure of the *Qur'an* does not reveal this, as the abrogated texts are not removed. Hence the need for instruction in the science of Qur'anic interpretation and the impact of the *Sunnah*. The fact that Christian 'abrogation' is of a different character to that of Islam is confusing to Muslims, and adds to the belief that the New Testament is fraudulent. This is especially true when we consider the role that the Sunni-Shia dispute has played in this. The Shia deny that the rule on temporary marriage has been abrogated, and naturally consider the Sunni *hadith* abolishing the practice as being untrue. The Sunnis, on the other hand, regard the Shia as sinning by continuing the practice. It is not surprising that when Muslims accuse each other of

corruption in issues of text and canon on issues affecting doctrine and practice, that they naturally accuse 'the nations before them' of similar actions when they discover differences with Islam.

2.4 Variant Readings

One interesting feature about Islamic dogma concerning the *Qur'an* is that the holy book is held to have been revealed in seven different ways. There are various opinions about what this means. For example, one tradition linked it to seven different reciters of the text. This however, is generally not accepted. Another possibility is that it refers to pages expressed in different Arab dialects. For example, a recent Muslim contributor to the Internet stated the following:

At the time of the Prophet... Arabs use [*sic*] to speak many different accents. Many of them did not know how to read or write. So Allah (SWT), allowed for them to read it in different ways. For example the tribe of Quraish do not pronounce the 'hamza' while the tribe of Tamim... pronounce it... When it comes to writing there have to be some differences in spelling, those who pronounce the 'hamza' wrote it down as the prophet taught them, others did not write it. Other differences in tone 'harakat', grammar or using a different word for the same meaning...

To this agrees the modern Muslim scholar von Denffer, as one of several possibilities. He points out that tribes like the ones mentioned above pronounced words differently, for example *al-tabuh* and *al-tabut* (2:248). Other differences include variant readings of words such as 'trusts' in 23:8, which can be read as either singular or plural in the unvowelled text, or in different wordings of a particular passage, such as 9:100, where adding *min* ('from') to the text gives a minor variant reading. Again, synonyms are used, such as in 101:5 which reads as '*Ka-l-ihni-l-manfush*', but another reading is '*Ka-s-sufi-l-manfush*', both meaning 'like carded wool'. von Denffer also points out variant readings in the texts of the Companions, such as the omission of *qul* ('Say') in the texts of ibn Mas'ud, 'Ubad and 'Umar with respect to S. 112:1, with ibn Mas'ud's text replacing *al-ahad* ('unique') with *al-wahid* ('one'), omitting 112:2, and replacing *lam yalid wa lam yulad* ('he begets not') for *lam yulad wa lam yulid* ('he is not begotten'). The Muslim scholar Tabataba'i points out that '... the script used at the time was the kufic style and had no diacritical points; each word could be read in various ways.' It should be noted that the *Hadith* implies that there were different dialectic readings of the *Qur'an*.

This difference in recitation was later to lead to conflict between Syrians and Iraqis, and this led 'Uthman to standardise the *Qur'anic* text.

3. Collation of the *Qur'an*

3.1 Fragmentary Existence

Whilst Muhammad was alive, certain of his companions began the compilation of the *Qur'an*, and this is recorded in the *Hadith* literature, an indication of how important it was to establish the claims of the *Qur'an* and especially to assert its purity of text. Amongst these, a major figure in the redaction of the *Qur'an* was Zayd ibn Thabit. There are clear

evidences of different versions of the *Qur'an* in the early period, at least in regard to order. Four reciters had memorized it before the death of Muhammad. However, Muhammad said that he had left 'the Book of Allah' for his people, and there is evidence that parts were written down during Muhammad's lifetime by some of his followers. Yusuf Ali says the following about Surah 80:13ff:

For: 80. 13

At the time this Sura was revealed, there were perhaps only about 42 or 45 Suras in the hands of the Muslims. But it was a sufficient body of Revelation of high spiritual value, to which the description give here could be applied. It was held in the highest honor; its place in the hearts of Muslims was more exalted than that of anything else; as Allah's Word, it was pure and sacred; and those who transcribed it were men who were honorable, just and pious. The legend that the early Suras were not carefully written down and preserved in books is a pure invention. The recensions made later in the time of the first and the third Khalifas were merely to preserve the purity and safeguard the arrangement of the text at a time when the expansion of Islam among non Arabic-speaking people made such precautions necessary.

The written existence of some parts of the *Qur'an* at least is also implied by the fact that people were forbidden to touch it unless they were in a state of ritual purity. However, what was written down tended to be fragmentary. The Muslim scholar Mahmoud Ayoub, says that when Muhammad died, the *Qur'an*

... consisted of scattered fragments either privately collected or preserved in human memory. It was the Muslim community which in the end gave the *Qur'an* its final form and reduced it to a single standard version which remains unchanged to this day. The community has, moreover, guaranteed the authenticity and truthfulness of the *Qur'an* through its universal and unbroken process of transmission. Thus it is the community consensus on the shape and authenticity of the Divine Word which ultimately shaped the *Qur'an*.

3.2 The Role of Consensus

It is worth noting the role *ijma* played in the process of collation. There is a tradition in the *Hadith* that it is impossible for the united *Ummah* to err, so *ijma* on this issue is a divine seal on the ordering of the text. However, the Sunni-Shia divide on the text of the *Qur'an* raises questions about this authority, since the obvious point is the *lack* of consensus as to the true form of Islam's holy book. We see evidence of this lack of consensus in the traditions, for some *surahs* were not named at first. It is also implied by the fact that Gabriel checked the recitation of the *Qur'an* once a year, presumably because the majority of the revelation was preserved orally, and thus was subject to the infirmity of the human memory. There would be little point in checking it if it were all set down in writing. The alternative explanation, that he would come to confirm that the text had not been corrupted by someone, would not commend itself to Muslims.

3.3 Collation Under the Caliphs

The complete compilation was the work of the Muslim leadership under Abu Bakr and 'Uthman. The first compilation occurred after the Battle of Yamama in 633 during which some *Qurra* had been killed. Obviously, if the entire text, as recognized by every Muslim,

had been already collated, there would not have been the sense of urgency that accompanied the death of these men. The event was recorded by Zayd ibn Thabit, and the narrative reveals that not even the Prophet of Islam himself had previously collected the *Qur'an*:

Narrated Zaid bin Thabit:

SAHIH AL-BUKHARI

Abu Bakr As-Siddiq sent for me when the people of Yamama had been killed (i.e., a number of the Prophet's Companions who fought against Musailama). (I went to him) and found 'Umar bin Al-Khattab sitting with him. Abu Bakr then said (to me), 'Umar has come to me and said: 'Casualties were heavy among the Qurra' of the! Qur'an (i.e. those who knew the Quran by heart) on the day of the Battle of Yalmama, and I am afraid that more heavy casualties may take place among the Qurra' on other battlefields, whereby a large part of the Qur'an may be lost. Therefore I suggest, you (Abu Bakr) order that the Qur'an be collected.' I said to 'Umar, 'How can you do something which Allah's Apostle did not do?' 'Umar said, 'By Allah, that is a good project.

'Umar kept on urging me to accept his proposal till Allah opened my chest for it and I began to realize the good in the idea which 'Umar had realized.' Then Abu Bakr said (to me). 'You are a wise young man and we do not have any suspicion about you, and you used to write the Divine Inspiration for Allah's Apostle. So you should search for (the fragmentary scripts of) 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.' Abu Bakr kept on urging me to accept his idea until Allah opened my chest for what He had opened the chests of Abu Bakr and 'Umar. So I started looking for the Qur'an and collecting it from (what was written on) palmed stalks, thin white stones and also from the men who knew it by heart, till I found the last Verse of Surat At-Tauba (Repentance) with Abi Khuzaima Al-Ansari, and I did not find it with anybody other than him. The Verse is:

'Verily there has come unto you an Apostle (Muhammad) from amongst yourselves. It grieves him that you should receive any injury or difficulty..(till the end of Surat-Baraa' (At-Tauba) (9.128-129)

Then the complete manuscripts (copy) of the Qur'an remained with Abu Bakr till he died, then with 'Umar till the end of his life, and then with Hafsa, the daughter of 'Umar.

The edition given to Hafsa was not copied nor presented as the 'Authorised Version' of the Islamic holy book, but rather appears to have been a private copy in the hands of the Caliph to safeguard against the loss of the text through incidents such as the battle in question. Other people kept their own codices, or relied on their own memorization of the text. This explains the trouble during the rule of 'Uthman arise about variant copies. As we shall see, the Shia claimed that Ali already had both a written copy and appendices of the *Qur'an*.

These texts reveal the central role of Zayd ibn Thabit in the collation of the *Qur'an*, and that this occurred under Governmental mandate. However, it is clear that Zayd ibn Thabit's

collation did not fully resolve the matter, as we see later under the caliphate of 'Uthman in 653, which indicates that variant readings remained a problem for the early Muslim community. In fact, so distinct were the variant readings of the *Qur'an* that there was trouble between the Muslims of Syria and Iraq at the time of 'Uthman. The Christian apologist Campbell states that the differences arose from the Syrians using the collection of Ubayy bin Ka'b whereas the Iraqis used that of Ibn Mas'ud. von Denffer points out that the collection of Ibn Mas'ud differed from the 'Uthmanic recension by excluding Surahs 1, 113, and 114, and also in terms of order, pronunciation, spelling and the use of synonyms. Likewise, the collection of bin Ka'b differs in order and variant readings from that of 'Uthman and also that of Ibn Mas'ud. Not all 114 surahs are present in his collation, and he purportedly adds two extra ones, as well as an additional verse. Doi states that the Syrian-Iraqi conflict was over textual order, an issue that arises again when we examine the Sunni-Shia dispute. Maududi, in his Introduction to Yusuf Ali's translation and commentary, holds that the dispute was over dialect readings. Tabataba'i states that the problem arose because

... differences and inconsistencies were appearing in the copying down of the *Qur'an*; some calligraphers lacked precision in their writing and some reciters were not accurate in their recitation.

Ahmad von Denffer claims that the differences were largely a matter of pronunciation and spelling, and this is the common Islamic view. It is amazing that such minor distinctions could have caused so much controversy, and that insignificant differences could have compelled 'Uthman to take the drastic action he did:

SAHIH AL-BUKHARI

Hudhayfah ibn al-Yaman came to Uthman at the time when the people of Sham and the people of Iraq were waging war to conquer Armenia and Azerbaijan. Hudhayfah was afraid of their (the people of Sham and Iraq) differences in the recitation of the Qur'an, so he said to Uthman, 'O chief of the believers! Save this nation before they differ about the Book (Qur'an) as Jews and the Christians did before.'

So Uthman sent a message to Hafsah saying, 'Send us the manuscripts of the Qur'an so that we may compile the Qur'anic materials in perfect copies and return the manuscripts to you.' Hafsah sent it to Uthman.

Uthman then ordered Zayd ibn Thabit, Abdullah ibn az-Zubayr, Sa'id ibn al-'As, and AbdurRahman ibn Harith to rewrite the manuscripts in perfect copies.

Uthman said to the three Qurayshi men, 'In case you disagree with Zayd ibn Thabit on any point in the Qur'an, then write it in the dialect of Quraysh as the Qur'an was revealed in their tongue.'

They did so, and when they had written many copies, Uthman returned the original manuscripts to Hafsah.

Uthman sent to every Muslim province one set of what they had copied, and ordered that all the other Qur'anic materials, whether written in fragmentary manuscripts or whole copies, be burnt.

Zayd ibn Thabit added, 'A verse from surat al-Ahzab was missed by me when we copied the Qur'an and I used to hear Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) reciting it. So we searched for it and found it with Khuzaymah ibn Thabit al-Ansari.

(That verse was): –

'Among the believers are men who have been true in their covenant with Allah.'(33:23)

We learn from this that the collation of Zayd ibn Thabit ordered under Abu Bakr and held by Hafsa became the canonical *Qur'an* at the time of 'Uthman by virtue of it being chosen by the political authority and by all other copies of the *Qur'an* being destroyed. It is noteworthy that the text did *not* become canonical under Abu Bakr. When one considers the reverence given to the *Qur'an* by Muslims, this destructive action on the part of the Caliph may imply how distinct many of the copies might have been from the chosen version, at least in regard to the kind of variants von Denffer proposes. Moreover, it is instructive that Zayd did not rely upon his memory of the text, but rather investigated various readings. However, the existence of variant copies, such as that of Ali, suggests that some *Qurra* under 'Uthman had memorized different readings. It is also noteworthy that 'Uthman's action, restricting the recitation of the *Qur'an* to the Quraish dialect, overturned the permission of the Prophet to recite the text in different dialects. This in itself demonstrates the seriousness of the event; the Caliph would not have lightly acted in this way unless he faced a genuine emergency.

In the light of many Muslim jibes that Christians do not have the autographs of the Bible it is interesting to note that a Muslim scholar such as Ahmad von Denffer states that

Most of the early original Qur'an manuscripts, complete or in sizeable fragments, that are still available to us now, are not earlier than the second century after the Hijra. The earliest copy... dated from the late second century. However, there are also a number of odd fragments of Qur'anic papyri available, which date from the first century.

There is a copy of the Qur'an in the Egyptian National Library on parchment made from gazelle skin, which has been dated 68 Hijra (688 A.D.), i.e. 58 years after the Prophet's death.

He goes on to say that 'Uthman kept a copy for himself, and five were sent to major cities. What is extraordinary is the action 'Uthman took in establishing an authorised text. Try as one might, it is impossible to get any true Muslim to write in, tear or burn any copy of the *Qur'an*. In fact, riots have often started in Muslim countries when it has been reported that someone has defiled the holy book in this way. The *Hadith* literature speaks about the miraculous qualities of the *Qur'an*, which include its being inflammable. It is therefore all the more astonishing that Islam records that 'Uthman was successful in his *auto da fe* of existing copies. To understand the urgency of his action, we must recognise the emphasis Islam places on *ijma* and Muslim unity. Whenever a Muslim meeting is held, the issue of the unity of the Islamic world is at the top of the agenda. 'Unity is strength' is a genuine Muslim attitude. Muslims frequently blame their depressed political condition on their disunity. After all, the Gulf War would have been impossible if the Muslim *Umma* had been united, and America's attitude to the Palestinian issue would doubtless be different if it had to take into consideration the opinion of a single, Islamic mega-state. Likewise, we can understand that 'Uthman, given that Islam was still a young religion, and one that was in political-military conflict with its neighbours, would be concerned at anything which would weaken the unity of the nascent community, especially when internal conflict arose in the course of a military campaign. One should also remember that in Islam, there is no separation between religion and politics. Muhammad was a Ruler as well as a Prophet. The first Caliph, Abu Bakr, had to engage in *jihad* against rebels who refused to pay their *Zakat* religious tax. Taxation is a political activity, but here it referred to religion. Further, these uprisings are called the *Riddah* rebellions, a term used also to describe religious apostasy. The Sunni-Shia divide was originally a dispute about political succession. Malise Ruthven states:

The divisions of Islam, in contrast to those of Christianity, have their origins in politics rather than dogma. This is not to say that dogmatic and theological questions do not form part of these divisions. However, the questions over which they first crystallised were political to the extent that they were primarily concerned with leadership of the community. Having a religious ideology built on the social foundations of tribalism, the Muslims expressed their aspirations first in terms of group loyalty, and only afterwards in terms of the doctrinal and theological accretions surrounding these loyalties.

If the Muslim community split, not only would there have been a number of sects comparable to the divisions of Christianity, but by definition, Secular and Holy being synonymous, there would have been at least the danger of the emergence of separate Muslim states. The Sunni-Shia divide, for example, helped to preserve Shi'i Iran's

independence from the Sunni Ottoman caliphate. Had there been separate editions of Islam's holy book, even if the differences were comparatively minor, the obligation to have a single Islamic state could not have been fulfilled, since the basis for state law in Islam is essentially the *Qur'an* and the *Sunnah*. If there is no unity as to the sacred text of Islam, there could not have been a united hermeneutic and thus *ijtihad* – legal/theological study seeking to establish a policy.

Moreover, it should be remembered that in Islam, the *Qur'an* is equivalent in position to Jesus in Christianity. Christianity centres on the Person and Work of Christ. We know from the history of the early Church the painful disputes that ensued over Christology, with various heresies such as Arianism, Monarchianism, Monothelism, etc., all threatening the unity of the Church and the purity of its doctrine. The conflicts and councils that ensued from these challenges all testify to how crucial for the Church is the question 'What think ye of Christ?' Not for nothing was Hudhayfah so urgent in his cry to 'Uthman to save the Muslims from the divisions suffered by Jews and Christians. If I may say advisedly, even if the Church did not have the Bible, it would still exist, because it has the Risen, reigning Christ. The role of the Bible is secondary to that of Christ. It witnesses to Him and His activity. Although oral tradition preserved the words and actions of Jesus intervening period, it is obvious that years passed before the complete New Testament was extant. The central act for Christianity is not the revelation of the Bible, but the Incarnation, Death and Resurrection of Christ, and the impartation of the Holy Spirit. The Christian emphasis on a personal relationship with Jesus and His supernatural intervention in the life of a believer witnesses to the Christocentric nature of Christian faith and experience.

Islam, by contrast, centres on the *Qur'an*. The *Qur'an* is the revelation that establishes Islam, that instructs men how to live according to the will of God. Without it, Islam does not exist. One cannot have Christianity without Christ, and one cannot have Islam without the *Qur'an*. Christian initiation, based on Romans 10:9, involves a confession that implies a supernatural experience of the Spirit of Christ, as is indicated by 8:9-11. The Muslim credal affirmation, the *Shahada*, states '*La ilaha illa Allah Muhammadur rasulu Allah*' – 'there is no God but God and Muhammad is the Messenger of God'. The Divine message Muhammad brought was the *Qur'an*, so if there is a dispute about its actual text, the effect is the same as conflict concerning the Person of Christ, since His Work is inextricably linked to, and flows from His Person. If I may borrow from 1 Corinthians 15:17, if the *Qur'an* is not revealed, Islamic faith is futile and Muslims are still in their sins. For the *Qur'an* to be revealed, its text must be pure. The Muslim scholar Bucaille makes this point in his polemical book; 'It was absolutely necessary to ensure the spread of a text that retained its original purity: Uthman's recension had this as its objective.'

In the light of this, we can understand what a desperate situation 'Uthman faced, and why he took the extraordinary action of burning copies of Islam's holy book. The doctrine of *Ijma* consecrated the action of the Caliph – the agreement of the *Sahabah* represented the voice of God, since the united Muslim community cannot err. What is so pertinent for our concern as Christians is the effect this has had in Islam's view of Biblical canonicity. Given that the *Qur'an* is the paradigmatic Scripture for Muslims, it is natural for them to assume that the Muslim canonical process mirrors Christian historical experience. The Muslim polemicist ur-Rahim writes about the Council of Nicaea:

In 325 A.D., the famous Council of Nicea was held... out of the three hundred or so Gospels extant at the time, four were chosen as the official Gospels of the Church... It was also decided that all Gospels written in Hebrew should be destroyed. An edict was issued stating that anyone found in possession of an unauthorised Gospel would be put to death.

He goes on to allege:

According to one source, there were at least 270 versions of the Gospel at this time, while another states there were as many as 4,000 different Gospels... It was decided that all the Gospels remaining under the table should be burned... It became a capital offence to possess an unauthorised Gospel. As a result, over a million Christians were killed in the years following the Council's decisions. This was how Athanasius tried to achieve unity among the Christians.

It need hardly be said that all this is pure fantasy, bearing no resemblance to actual events or decisions at the Council of Nicaea, which at any rate was not concerned with textual issues. It is noteworthy that the author gives no sources for his preposterous assertions. Yet this is the common Muslim idea of Christian canonical history, especially with regard to Nicaea. The trouble is that Muslim polemicists are not only convinced of a Christian conspiracy to pervert the Scriptures, and must find a convenient scapegoat such as the Council of Nicaea, which purportedly destroyed the 'Islamic' Gospel. They are governed by the presuppositions of their own canonical history to imagine that like 'Uthman's commission, the Christians needed such an official event to decide upon their authoritative text. Given that consensus is so important to Muslims, it is natural for them to assume that the same must be true of Christians – note ur-Rahim's comments about Athanasius. Following from this, it can be understood why Muslim polemicists would write what they do about the burning and destruction of variant New Testament texts: they are looking at Nicaea anachronistically in the light of 'Uthman's action to establish a single, authorised text. Like the *Sunnah* of the Prophet, the policy of the first four Caliphs of Islam – the Righteous Caliphs – is an obligated model for Sunni Muslims. It follows that their actions that should be the paradigm to be followed after them, and must have been the appropriate action to take in the years of the earlier Abrahamic faiths. Further, since the procedure for Islamic canonical orthodoxy was State-enforced, it is natural for Muslims to assume the same was true with regard to the Christian Scriptures, and likewise the penalty for disobedience. It does not seem to occur to Muslim polemicists that even if what they say about Nicaea were true, how could Constantine have enforced this decision outside his own borders, for example, among the Christians of Persia and Ethiopia? Moreover, since there are minor variants as to isolated verses, and Bible-translations – like Qur'anic translations, such as those of Yusuf Ali and Pickthall – are not identical in every way in their choice of words, although they have the same content, it is mystifying that the Christians in recent years have not resorted to such heavy-handed tactics as they purportedly did at Nicaea according to Islamic polemicists.

4. The Impact of the Sunnah

4.1 Classification of Hadith

The *Sunnah*, or the 'path, way, manner of life' records the sayings and doings of Muhammad, whose way of life became a norm for the entire Muslim community. Muhammad provided a pattern by the example of his life for others to follow as the *Qur'an* itself testifies. The life of Muhammad was the display of the teachings of the *Qur'an*, and thus was itself hermeneutical. On this basis, the words and acts of Muhammad were themselves revelatory as the practical outworking of the Prophetic Message. Moreover, many issues were not addressed in the *Qur'an*, and the *Sunnah* deals with these. This was especially pertinent before the collation of the *Qur'an*, when it was still fragmentary. Hence, Muhammad's actions, his judgments, policies, words and silences are the norm of conduct and ethics for all Muslims. Muslims are prone to say of Muhammad that 'his life was the *Qur'an*' or vice versa. As one Islamic scholar states

The *Qur'an* is both the foundation and fountain of Faith and, among the fundamentals of Divine Law, the *Sharee'ah*, its place is unique. Its purpose however is only to lay down the principles. Its elaboration and interpretation are left to the *Sunnah* and *Hadeeth*.

The *Sunnah*, the example of the Prophet in his words and deeds, is transmitted through the *Hadith*. A *Hadith* is divided into two parts:

- i. ***Isnad***: This word means 'supporting'. It records the names of the persons handing down the tradition (the transmissional chain)
- ii. ***Matn***: the actual information

We can see from the following text an example of this:

Abdullah ibn Umar

SAHIH AL-BUKHARI

Safwan ibn Muhriz al-Mazini narrated that while I was walking with ibn Umar holding his hand, a man came in front of us and asked, 'What have you heard from Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) about an-Najwa?'

Ibn Umar said, 'I heard Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) saying, 'Allah will bring a believer near Him and shelter him with His Screen and ask him, 'Did you commit such-and-such sins?' ...

We see the chain of narration from ibn Muhriz to ibn Umar to Muhammad himself is the *Isnad*; the *Matn* refers to God's discourse with a believer about sin. The *Isnad* became the testing point for the authenticity of a *hadith*. There were several criteria for a genuine tradition:

- i. The narration must distinctly state something said or done by the Prophet.
- ii. The traditional chain must be able to be traced back to the original reporters and thus to Muhammad himself.
- iii. All the transmitters had to be men of excellent character and piety.
- iv. The tradition must not contradict the *Qur'an* or any other sound tradition.

The principal criteria for classification were:

- a. Perfection or otherwise of the chain of transmission.
- b. Freedom of the text from defect.
- c. Acceptance of the text by the *Sahabah* (in the case of Sunnis), the *Tabi'un* (their followers) and the *Tab' Tabi'un* (their successors). Obviously, with the Shia, the integrity of traditions depends upon their acceptance by the Imams.

There are three classes of *hadith*:

- i. *Sahih*: This means a 'sound' or genuine tradition, with a reliable chain of transmission with no weaknesses.
- ii. *Hasan*: This is a 'fair' text, but not wholly reliable, since the narrators were not the best.
- iii. *Da'if*: A 'weak' tradition, because of internal defects and unreliable transmission.

Within this category are several sub-divisions:

- a. *Mu'allaq*: Where a text omits one or two transmitters in the beginning of the *Isnad*.
- b. *Maqtu'*: Reported by a *Tab'i*.
- c. *Munqati'*: Broken traditions.
- d. *Mursal*: Incomplete texts omitting *Sahabah* from the chain of *Tab'i* to Prophet.
- e. *Musahhaf*: Texts with a mistake in words or letters of *Isnad* or *Matn*.
- f. *Shadh*: Texts with reliable chains, but with meanings contrary to majority attested traditions.
- g. *Maudu'*: Fabricated texts.

Other divisions, used especially by Tirmidhi, include the idea that *Gharib* can refer either to the *isnad* or the *matn*. It refers to a certain weakness in some respect.

It may refer to the only tradition known by a certain line of transmission, although the same tradition may be known by other line, this type being *gharib* regarding the *isnad*. It may refer to a tradition whose *matn* has only one transmitter, this type being *gharib* regarding both *isnad* and *matn*. It may refer to a tradition which comes only from a man who is considered reliable, or in which some addition to what is found in other lines of the same tradition is made by a man of this quality, such a tradition being called *gharib sahih*.

Gharib can also refer to the use of rare words in a text, although it is not so-employed in the *Mishkat al-Masabih*, an important *hadith* collection. The terms *gharib hasan* and *hasan gharib* are descriptions of texts which are recognised as *hasan* in terms of transmission and which does not contradict other transmissions, but has itself only one line of transmission, and is thus simultaneously considered *gharib*. *Hasan gharib sahih* and *hasan sahih gharib* are also found in the *Mishkat*, and seem to refer to a *hasan sahih* tradition which has some feature that is *gharib*. *Hasan sahih* describes a *hadith* whose *isnad* is *hasan*, but which is supported by another whose *isnad* is *sahih*.

4.2 Collection of Hadith

As time passed, more and more of these sayings were recorded, including undoubtedly a number of forgeries. In order to collect, sift and systematize this massive product, scholars started travelling all across the Muslim world.. For this reason, the dating for the collections is somewhat late. Strict rules were laid down to separate true *ahadith* from false. It should be noted that we have evidence from the *Hadith* literature itself that the transmission in some cases must have been oral at the beginning, rather than written. Although oral tradition was usually considered reliable, there was some reticence with regard to confidence on this issue among the narrators. Sunni Muslims have ever since regarded a particular six of these collections as authoritative:

Sahih Bukhari (d. 870)

Sahih Muslim (d. 875)

Abu Dawud (d. 888)

Al-Tirmidhi (d. 892)

An-Nasai (d. 915)

Ibn Madja (d. 886)

The most important collector of *ahadith* was undoubtedly Imam al-Bukhari of Bukhara in central Asia, 810-870 A.D. All of Bukhari's collection is recognized as sound. His collection is called *Jami' al Sahih*, divided into ninety-seven books with 3,450 chapters. He examined 600,000 purported examples of *Hadith*, memorised 200,000 but rendered all save 7295 as spurious. Many of the remaining are parallel traditions, e.g. the traditions by different narrators referring to the dread consequences of lying against the Prophet. It is significant that Muslims apologists often attack the veracity of the Gospels because of their different nuances, yet they can accept parallel *hadiths* which are often less similar than are the Gospels to each other.

Shia Muslims adhere to their own collections and regard many of the Sunnia*hadith* as forged. The most important Shia collections are the two collations of Mohammad Ibne Yaqoob Abu Jafar Kulaini (d. 939), *Usool al Kafi* and *Forroh al Kafi*. Others include *Man la yahduruhu al-Faqih*, by Muhammad ibn Babuya (d. 991); *Tahdhib al-Akhkam*, by Sheikh Muhammad at-Tusi, Shaykhu't-Ta'ifa (d.1067); *Al-Istibsar*, by the same author. Many Shia texts specifically attack Sunni distinctives, particularly with regard to the purported vicegerency of Ali. It follows from this that the Shia could not accept the authenticity of any traditions narrated by the *Sahabah* or showing them in a good light. Neither will the Shia accept any tradition which contradicts Shi'i theology, such as temporary marriage, even if the purported narrator had been Ali. For Shi'is, *ahadith* are usually transmitted through their Twelve Imams, the true successors of the Prophet, as opposed to the Sunni Caliphs. Even among Shi'ites themselves, there were fabricated traditions.

It can be seen that Islam had an early problem with the question of the authenticity of texts. Granted, we are dealing here with *Hadith*, rather than *Qur'an*, but as we have seen, the *Sunnah* interprets the *Qur'an*, and acts as a secondary source of authority. Invariably, Muslims refer to their authority as the *Qur'an* **and** the *Sunnah*. Hence, it is openly

confessed that in their history they had problems with those who engaged in corruption of text, especially when we consider the mutual accusations of Sunnis and Shia on this issue. Given the correlation of the Books of God, it is not surprising that they assume the same is true of the Christian holy texts. Consider the problem of *isnad*. The Gospels are not written by Jesus Himself, but by others. This is not so insurmountable, since the authors were involved with Jesus and His 'Companions', but Muslims have encountered liberal Biblical scholarship which questions the authenticity of the traditional authorship of the gospels. Hence the chain of transmission is questioned. This is even more true with respect to the epistles of Paul, who was not at all associated with the earthly ministry of Jesus, and who did not write *gospels*, but *epistles* on his apostolic authority. Muslims do not take seriously his Damascus Road experience. Secondly, the issue of *matn* arises. We saw earlier with respect to criteria for soundness that the tradition must not contradict the *Qur'an* or any other sound tradition. This is true for both Sunnis, and Shia. As I stated in my earlier paper, *The Attitude of the Qur'an and Sunnah to the Christian Scriptures*, the Gospels appear to Muslims to be of the characteristics of *Hadith* literature. In this case, the Christian '*hadiths*' (as Muslims would see them) do not agree with the *Qur'an*. The New Testament is therefore judged unreliable.

5. Shi'ism and the Qur'an

5.1 Shi'ism – Origins and Politics

The essential distinction between Sunnis and Shia is their concept of the Imamate and its restriction to the *Alids*, the House of Ali. Shi'is claim their Imams, being the descendants of Muhammad through his daughter Fatima, to be the true successors of the Prophet. Ali is held to be the only genuine successor of Muhammad. After the death of Muhammad, Medinese Muslims assembled to appoint one of their number to the succession, but Abu Bakr arrived and successfully argued for a Meccan member of the Quraysh tribe as Caliph, and he himself duly received this honour. Shi'is argue that since so much of Abu Bakr's claims relied upon the issue of kinship, the person with the strongest claim was Ali. It follows from this that later Sunni caliphs like Muwaiya and Yazid were guilty of sin in attacking the House of Ali. The implication is that Ali was to be both the chief aide of Muhammad and his successor. Another text echoes this, and it is important since it reflects the actions of Muhammad after the Farewell Pilgrimage of Muhammad in 632 which in Shi'i eyes designated Ali as the successor of Muhammad, and by implication, indicates that those who appointed or took the position of authority were guilty of rebellion against the Prophet and thus apostasy.

The word translated 'patron' in the *hadith* is *Mawla*, a strong term which is better rendered as 'lord' or 'guardian'; it is used of God Himself. As with the previous text, this *hadith* is accepted by both Sunnis and Shia alike, and implies, in the eyes of Shia, that Ali was his designated successor and was recognized in this by Umar, the Caliph preceding Ali. Because the succession went someone other than Ali, it naturally follows that Abu Bakr, Umar and 'Uthman were guilty of rebellion against Islam, since the faith is partly defined as obedience to the Apostle. Shi'is have an intense and emotional love for Ali and his two immediate successors Hasan and Hussain. All Muslims revere the memory of Muhammad's grandsons. The implication is that those who oppose the House of Ali are

guilty of opposing Muhammad, and thus God Himself. The text is so-employed by Shi'is. Moreover, what was said about the relationship of Ali to Muhammad is also stated about Hussain, the son of Ali, and the same is said of his brother Hasan. It follows that those who martyred Hussain were guilty of opposing Islam.

5.2 Sunni-Shia Conflict and Political Resolution

Since politics and religion are coterminous in Islam, it should not surprise us that throughout Islamic history, there have been frequent conflicts between Sunnis and Shia. In contemporary Pakistan, there have been terrible riots with much loss of life between the two confessions. The militant Sunni group *Sipah-i-Sahabah* have declared their hatred for the Shia, and the issue of Shia attitude to the Companions and the 'Uthmanic edition of the *Qur'an* plays its part in this. One of the difficulties Iran has faced in exporting the Islamic revolution is the fact that it is a primarily Shi'i country. Saudi Arabia, being controlled by the militantly anti-Shia Wahhabi sect of Sunnis has used this in its propaganda against Iran, although the real reason for their mutual hostility is that Saudi Arabia is a conservative regime, widely seen as an American client state, whilst Iran is a radical, anti-imperialist Government. The largely Sunni but pro-Iranian Muslim Parliament of Great Britain, has prided itself on uniting Sunni and Shia. Its late leader, Dr. Kalim Siddiqi, had a reputation as an outspoken advocate of uncompromising Islamic radicalism, notably on the Rushdie issue. This impression tended to obscure that he was actually one of the finest Islamic political theorists of the twentieth century, and certainly one of the most acute Muslim minds to have arisen in the West to date. A major advantage is that he writes in English, and being a Western-educated political scientist and journalist, his works are easy for Occidental minds to understand. As with Ali Shariati of Iran, and Malcolm X in the USA, his influence in death is likely to exceed that he exercised in life. One area in particular that he made a significant contribution is his understanding of Khomeini's concept of the Guardianship of the Jurisconsult. The idea that in the absence of the Mahdi, for whose manifestation both Sunni and Shia wait, the ruler of the Islamic State inherits all the political power of the Prophet, as practised by the revolutionary Government in Iran, means that '... for all practical purposes, on issues of Leadership, State and politics, there is no longer any difference between the Sunni and Shi'i positions.'

5.3 Sunni Polemics

Since the Sunni-Shia divide was primarily political in origin, the contribution of Khomeini and Siddiqi might indicate that a major bone of contention has been healed, and we can only pray that the peaceful relations the two Islamic sects have enjoyed in Britain and the West will continue. However, the divide encompasses more than political considerations. A relatively minor problem is that Shi'is do not believe the *Qur'an* is uncreated. The Shia, because they hold that the *active* attributes of God, such as speaking, are not eternal, believe that the *Qur'an*, as the 'speech' of God, is created. To Shia, the Sunni view borders on polytheism. A major difficulty is that Sunni and Shi'i polemicists accuse each other of corrupting the *Qur'an*. Saudi Arabia has printed a number of anti-Shia booklets in English in recent years which allege that the Shi'is make this claim about the Sunnis – that the latter have tampered with the text by excising verses. For example, the Jamaican-Canadian Muslim convert, Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips, one of the most respected Islamic scholars in

the West, has translated anti-Shia works which make this assertion, especially about the 'missing' *Surah* concerning Ali, *Surah Wilaya*, that the Shi'is are supposed to allege was excised from the *Qur'an*. A further claim is that Shi'is believe that yet another chapter *Surah Nurain* (forty-one verses), the 'Chapter of the Two Lights' (i.e. Muhammad and Ali) was removed. Sunnis allege that Shi'is believe that the authentic copy of the *Qur'an*, compiled by Ali, is in the hands of the Twelfth Imam and will be presented by him when he returns as Mahdi. In the meantime, Shi'is use the 'Uthmanic *Qur'an*', but they interpret it in the light of their *Hadith* collections, which reinterpret texts in the Sunni edition of the *Qur'an* after a Shia fashion. According to Sunni polemicists, a Shi'i *hadith* purportedly states:

Jabir says, 'I heard Imam Baqar... saying: One who says that he has collected the whole Quran is a big liar'.

It goes on to state:

'Only Ali and the Imams collected it all and preserved it.'

It is noteworthy that even a respected Orientalist scholar such as Montgomery Watt echoes this belief.

The Shi'a, it is true, has always held that the *Qur'an* was mutilated by the suppression of much which referred to 'Ali and the Prophet's family. This charge... is not specially directed against 'Uthman, but just as much against the first two caliphs, under whose auspices the first collection is assumed to have been made.

Shi'is deny these accusations, and state that they uphold the veracity of the present edition. The great Shi'i scholar Shaykh Saduq, (919-991 A. D.), stated (and with this agree the Shi'i scholars Allama Ridha Mudhaffar and Sayyid al-Murtadha)

Our belief is that the *Qur'an*, which God revealed to His Prophet Muhammad (is the same as) the one between the boards (daffatayn).

Jafri comments:

... the text of the *Qur'an* as it is to be found in the *textus receptus*,... is accepted wholly by the Shi'is, just as it is by the Sunnis. Thus the assertion that the Shi'is believe that a part of the *Qur'an* is not included in the *textus receptus* is erroneous.

5.4 Shi'i Qur'anic Beliefs

5.4.1 Emendations?

However, it appears that at times, whilst Shi'is agree that nothing has been added, some have indeed felt references to Ali have been excised. In Majlisi's *Hadith* collection, S. 3:33' adds '*family of Muhammad*' to the text. *Surah* 25:28 is apparently changed to read in Ali's copy of the *Qur'an*, which will one day be revealed, '*O would that I have not chosen the second as a friend*', 'the second' referring to Abu Bakr, who was the second in the cave after Muhammad's emigration from Mecca.. S. 3:110 is purportedly emended to read '*You are the best of Imams*', substituting '*imma*' ('imams') for '*umma*', ('peoples'). Hence, even if Shi'is use the 'Uthmanic recension of the *Qur'an*, their *hadiths* essentially emend it.

5.4.2 Allegorical verses

Linked to this is the issue of allegorical verses. S. 3:7 speaks of such verses, and the issue is specifically addressed in the *Hadith*. The division of these verses is called *explicit* or *clear* – in Arabic, *mukham*. The other kind are called *mutashabih* – *implicit* or *allegorical*. The first are held to be incapable of misinterpretation, whilst the second are not. The *mukham* verses have only one dimension, and are clear in meaning, the *mutashabih* are known only to God (in the eyes of Sunni scholars), have more than one dimension and require further explanation. The former include issues such as *halal* and *haram*, punishments, etc., whereas the latter deal with the divine nature, life after death, and similar concerns. Shi'is believe that the *mutashabih* verses actually have a deeper, mystical meaning, and that only the infallible Imams, recipients of divine guidance, had true knowledge of the latter kind. Since only Shi'i *hadiths* reveal this information, it could be argued that, in effect, Shi'is and Sunnis read something different from each other when they study the Qur'anic text, even if it is the 'Uthmanic recension.

5.4.3 Textual Order

What *does* seem to be the case, is that Sunnis and Shia differ over the order of verses in the *Qur'an*. No-one denies that the present edition of the *Qur'an* is not in the same order as it was revealed. However, Sunnis believe that

Both the order of the *ayat* within each *sura* and the arrangement of the *surat* were finally determined by the Prophet under guidance from the Angel Gabriel in the year of his death, when Gabriel twice came to revise the text with him.

It is noteworthy, however, that von Denffer offers as the determining evidence for this assertion the statement of 'Uthman that

... in later days, the Prophet used to, when something was revealed to him, call someone from among those who used to write for him and said: Place these ayats in the sura, in which this and this is mentioned...

Another Sunni scholar states of Muhammad with respect to textual order:

It is logical to suppose that there must have been a certain order in which he read all the verses. The Prophet also used to direct scribes as to the positioning of verses and Surahs in the Qur'an.

He goes on to refer to traditions mentioning the positioning of the last verse in the *Qur'an*, concerning usury. Hence, the question of textual order is crucial for Islam. According to Sunnis, the actual order is the result of divine inspiration – it is part and parcel of the *Qur'an* itself. Shi'is, however, deny that the 'Uthmanic edition is true as regards its sequential order. We noted earlier the Sunni accusation about the Shi'i views of the compilation of the present text. However, Shi'is state that what their *hadith* actually says is the following:

I heard Abu Jafar (AS) saying: 'No one (among ordinary people) claimed that he gathered the Quran completely in the order that was revealed by Allah except a liar; (since) no one has gathered it and memorized it completely in the order that was revealed by Allah, except ali ibn Abi Talib (AS) and the Imams after him (AS)' (Usul al-Kafi, Tradition 607)

Hence, Shi'is utter the obvious truism

... the Quran that we use which was compiled by the companions is not in the sequence that has been revealed. In fact, the Sunni scholars confirm that the first Chapter... was Chapter al-Iqra' (al-Alaq, Ch. 96)... Muslims agree that the verse (5:3) was among one of the last revealed... yet it is not toward the end of the present Quran. This proves that although the Quran that we have available is complete, it is not in the order that has been revealed.

The *Qur'an* which *is* in the correct order according to Shi'is is that of Ali, the first Imam and son-in-law of Muhammad. They hold that he was the first to compile the *Qur'an*. The Sunni polemicist Salamah agrees that Ali was one of the scribes, but only of the later, Medinan revelations. The Shi'is retort by claiming that the changed order of the *Qur'an* was the result of either deliberate purpose or ignorance on the part of the Companions. It is significant that von Denffer records the words of 'Uthman as regards the question of order. Regarding 'Uthman as they do, it is clear that they cannot accept the veracity of his statement, and they would be naturally suspicious of his edition. It is significant that a Sunni scholar such as von Denffer states that Ali wrote a copy of the *Qur'an*, which is held in Najaf, Iraq. Another Sunni writer, Suhaib Hasan, states

Ali had his own personal copy of the Qur'an in which he recorded Surahs in their chronological order. This was only one individual copy, and the accepted text of the Qur'an was that prepared by the first two Caliphs.

It is thus clear that Sunni and Shia agree that the Alid Qur'anic text is distinct from that of 'Uthman at least as to order, and since textual order is an issue of revelation, we can recognize the seriousness of this division in Muslim minds. However, Ali's text also included commentary and hermeneutical information from Muhammad

... some of which had been sent down as revelation but NOT as part of the text of Quran. A small amount of such texts can be found in some traditions in Usul al-Kafi... Thus the commentary verses and Quranic verses could sum up to 17000 verses.

This is crucial with respect to the issue of interpretation. Shia believe that Imams are the infallible interpreters of the *Qur'an*. According to this belief, they alone have the divinely-revealed hermeneutic and commentary on the text, as well as the proper order of the text. The transcript remains hidden in the possession of the Twelfth Imam until his manifestation. The concept is strange to Christian minds. The nearest parallel is in Apocalyptic literature, e.g. Rev. 17:7, where an angel explains the meaning of a vision. Obviously, if the Alid Qur'anic appendices are part of the inspiration accompanying the text, if the Sunnis do not possess this, they are lacking the fullness of revelation, and if the revelations are rejected, it could be argued that the Sunni Caliphs are somewhat less than faithful Muslims. Indeed, Shi'is claim Ali presented this transcript to the caliphs, but they rejected it. Tabataba'i echoes this, and appeals to the need for Muslim unity as the reason for his acquiescence. Ali then quoted S. 3:187 against them. On this basis, Shia accuse Sunnis of *tahrif* in the sense of displacing a verse or corrupting its meaning in the same way as the Jews did.

This, however, is not the end of the matter. The extra revelation Ali possessed disclosed the identity of the abrogated and abrogating verses, and also revealed the *Mutashabih* verses. Inevitably, this means that whilst the text of the 'Uthmanic recension is complete,

not only its order but the knowledge of the genre of each verse, as well as the scholarship of Sunni theologians as to these vital issues is somewhat off-beam. It is not hard to see why the issue raises the passions it does. Essentially, Sunnis see Shi'i claims as heretical fantasy, and both accuse each other of distortion.

A further point to consider in this regard is that the Shia claim that their assertions on the question of order are supported by some Sunni references on the issue. As we have previously seen, Aisha, one of Muhammad's wives, narrated an incident in which reference was made to this. In particular, the collection of Abdullah ibn Mas'ud, one of the Prophet's acknowledged reciters indicates variance of order, which is significant because he claimed to know the exact order of verses. His collection was distinct, as we have seen previously. However, the Shia use this to berate ibn Mas'ud since they claim that he asserted that the last two chapters of the *Qur'an* were not true Surahs, but merely prayers! Similarly, Shi'is point to Sunni *ahadith* which assert the incompleteness of the *Qur'an*. It should be noticed that the references to the 'two valleys' in *Sahih Muslim* are not in the *Qur'an* but there are further references in the *Hadith*. Likewise, Shi'is point to a sound Sunni tradition which relates Caliph Umar speaking of a verse of stoning in the *Qur'an*, despite the fact that there is no such verse in the present edition. Further, Shi'is assert that 'Uthman, the Caliph who ordered the definitive collation of the *Qur'an*, was also guilty of mentioning the existence of Qur'anic verses which do not exist.

This is one reason Shi'is regard the Companions as perverters of the faith. Shi'is attack them anyway for engaging in *innovation* – departing from the path of the Prophet, which is essentially heresy. For example, 'Uthman extended the journey prayer which Muhammad had shortened, and he changed the rules for pilgrimage. As a consequence of this, they necessarily are suspicious of the collections under Abu Bakr and 'Uthman, especially since the Caliphs rejected the transcript of Ali, and in the case of 'Uthman, burnt variant readings. This helps to explain the psychology of Muslim attacks on the Christian Scriptures. They emanate from a milieu in which accusations and counter-claims concerning textual corruption in some form or another have been advanced *within* the Muslim community against each other. It is not surprising that Christians are likewise targeted, because Shi'is see the actions of Sunni caliphs as both parallel to the historical practices of the People of the Book, and fulfilment of prophecy in this regard:

AbuSa'id al-Khudri

SAHIH AL-BUKHARI

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said, 'You will follow the ways of those nations who were before you, span by span and cubit by cubit (i.e. inch by inch) so much so that even if they entered a hole of a mastigure, you would follow them.'

We said, 'O Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him)! *Do you mean the Jews and the Christians?*' He said, 'Whom else?' (Emphasis mine)

Conclusion

What was said earlier about the relationship between theology, history and psychology needs to be reiterated. As can be seen from the often harsh words Sunnis and Shia sometimes use against each other in regard to their respective *hadith* collections and the collation of the *Qur'an*, the attacks on the text and canon of the Bible to a large extent reflect an internal dispute between Muslims on similar issues. Family disputes are often the most bitter, and since Christians are part of the 'Abrahamic' prophetic family, along with Sunnis, Shia, and Jews in the eyes of Muslims, it is unsurprising that the terrible hostility that has characterized internal Islamic conflicts spills over to us as well.

Of course, this is not the only reason for Christian-Muslim difficulties with respect to the Bible. The political conflicts of the Middle Ages, especially the Crusades, the colonialism of the nineteenth century, and Western domination of the current Muslim world have all intensified passions, especially since the Gulf War and the Bosnian conflict. Muslims see no difference between religion and politics, so they are inclined to see the actions of the Belgrade or the Tel Aviv regimes as evidence of the corruption of Christian and Jewish holy texts. In this respect, they tend to see Christian evangelistic work in the same light as the massacres at Srebrenica or Qana – as acts of aggression, intended to destroy the Muslims. People who are prepared to commit genocide are quite likely to be capable of anything, and certainly would not shirk to engage in deceit. It is in this light we should understand why they can imagine that the ridiculous stories Muslim polemicists publish about the Council of Nicaea and the canon of the New Testament are true.

The main reason, however, is that Muslims see themselves, or more especially Muhammad, as the eschatological fulfilment of the predictions of the previous scriptures. They affirm the unity of the Abrahamic prophets. Since, however, the Jewish-Christian holy texts differ from that of Islam, it follows that Jews and Christians must be the black sheep of the Abrahamic family. They must have distorted their scriptures, and done so in a parody of the action of 'Uthman to establish confessional unity. In order to answer them, we must 'speak the truth in love', explaining what actually occurred in the realm of canonicity. To do so effectively, we must understand their own textual and canonical history, and how it affects their perceptions of Christian canonicity.

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