

The Formation Of The Qur'an: A Christian Perspective

Freed from the necessity of having to work for a living by his marriage to the wealthy widow Khadijah, Muhammad found himself overcome by the corrupt and idolatrous lifestyle of the people amongst whom he lived.(1) This concern drove him out into the desert around Mecca to seek solitude. It was here, in a cave in Mt. Hira,(2) while he was spending several days praying and meditating that he received revelation from Allah.(3)

These visions took the form of ecstatic seizures or trances(4) [though some modern Muslims claim that he was completely conscious] during which he received messages from a glorious being whom he first took to be God Himself, then later a superior type of angel called the Spirit. He finally identified it as the angel Gabriel (Jibra'il).(5) "When inspiration came to him he felt as if it were the painful sounding of a bell" accompanied by a feverish sweat.(6) When he regained his faculties (or woke from sleep - as sometimes revelation came to him while he was unconscious)(7) he would find the words of the revelation 'written on his heart' so that he could remember them and recite them to others.(8)

Muhammad's reaction on receiving his first 'revelation' was somewhat bizarre. Convinced that he was possessed by an evil spirit he considered throwing himself from a precipice until assured by his wife that a spirit could not possess such a just and kind man.(9) In spite of this it was a full two years from his first vision (in AD 610) that the visions recommenced, and continued intermittently over a period of 23 years until his death in 632.(10) The Qur'an was received piecemeal, with most of the longer Suras (chapters) being made up of material given to Muhammed on different occasions.(11) "As time went on Muhammed used to say, 'Put this in the passage in which so-and-so is mentioned' or 'Put it in such-and-such a place...'"(12)

The arrangement of the text followed no chronological sequence, the longest chapters are put first; the shortest last. Scholars still argue as to which Sura was given when, but there does seem to have been a development that followed events in the Prophet's life.(13) Muhammed recited the Qur'an to his followers as he received it and these revelations were committed to memory(14) and recorded on "pieces of parchment or papyrus, flat stones, palm leaves, shoulder blades, ribs of animals, pieces of leather and wooden boards."(15) In short, any material that was to hand.

Sarvar states confidently that; "The Qur'an was recorded as soon as it was revealed under the personal supervision of the Prophet Muhammed..."(16) However, Gilchrist points out that there is no evidence that the whole text of the Qur'an was compiled into a single manuscript until after his death. The Haddith records that the angel Gabriel checked the recitation of the Qur'an every Ramadan with Muhammed and checked it twice in his final year(17) - a tradition that owes more to pious fancy than to fact. It is debated whether or not Muhammed could actually read until late in life.

Many experts on the life of Muhammad believe he was illiterate. However, such a claim is not true. The claim may be an attempt to magnify the work of Muhammad in producing the Qur'an, thus substantiating the so-called miraculous nature of the book.(18)

Shorosh goes on to cite six recorded instances when Muhammed wrote something, and points out the high level of literacy among the Bedouins, among whom Muhammed lived

until he was five years old (52-53). Nevertheless Muhammed certainly did not write any of the Qur'an himself, but was dependent on his secretaries.(19)

Following Muhammad's death a number of the more distant tribes on the Arabian Peninsula rebelled and Muhammad's successor Abu Bakr was forced to send a force to subdue them. During the ensuing battle of Yamama, according to tradition, many of Muhammad's closest companions - who knew the Qur'an by heart - were killed.(20) This incident is often cited as the motivating force behind the desire to compile and codify the Qur'an, however there are a number of other explanations why this took place.

Generally it is said to have been 'Umar, but sometimes Abu Bakr is said to have commissioned the 'collection' on his own initiative. On the other hand there is a tradition which says 'Umar was the first to 'collect' the Qur'an and completely excludes Abu Bakr. Again the reason given for the step, namely the death of a large number of 'readers' in the Battle of Yamama has also been questioned. In the lists of those who fell in that campaign, very few are mentioned who were likely to have had much of the Qur'an by heart. Those killed were mostly recent converts. Besides, according to the tradition itself, much of the Qur'an was already written in some form or other, so that the death of some of those who could recite it from memory need not have given rise to the fear that parts of the Qur'an would be lost.(21)

Gilchrist cites a tradition that states clearly that some passages of the Qur'an were lost at the Battle of Yamama, and were unknown to anyone after that time.(22)

According to the most generally accepted tradition Abu Bakr commissioned one of Muhammad's secretaries Zayd-ibn-Thabit to collect the Qur'an.(23) Zayd accepted reluctantly, according to the tradition, because of the enormity of the task. The older traditions indicate that his search was thorough and wide-ranging. "The action of a man conscious of the wide dispersal of the text who would assemble as much of it as he could to produce as complete and authentic a text as was humanly possible."(24) Later traditions, however, tend to suggest that Zayd found all the material "in Muhammad's own household, bound together to ensure their preservation."(25)

At the time of compilation Zayd had to be reminded of at least two verses by Abu Khuzaima,(26) so he could hardly have believed that his text was infallible. On completion of his work the manuscript passed into the hands of 'Umar, and then into the keeping of 'Umar's daughter Hafsa. She was one of the Prophet's widows,(27) and was very much a recluse after Muhammad's death.(28) The fact that the text lay hidden for many years before it was accepted as the official text is rather odd. The evidence is that other 'collections' of the Qur'an seem to have been regarded as authoritative in different provinces.(29) "If Zayd's collection was an official one it is hardly probable that it would pass out of official keeping, even into the hands of the Caliph's daughter."(30)

Far from being motivated by a concern to unify the text of the Qur'an for all time for its own sake(31) it was the unity of Muslims that motivated the third Caliph Uthman to want to standardise the text. In order to strengthen his control on his Empire it was necessary to produce one text, without being seen to favour any one of the four versions in use by his subjects more than the others. Zayd's text, conveniently located nearby and untouched for years provided the perfect solution. So in one simple move he was able not only to strengthen his own position, but also to cut the ground from under the feet of the other reciters in areas where his rule had become unpopular.(32)

Uthman ordered a committee of four to oversee a revision of Zayd's text, and it was at this point that Zayd found another verse that he had omitted earlier.(33) Once the work was completed copies were made and sent out to the major cities of the Empire (probably to Kufa, Basra, and Damascus and possibly Mecca), accompanied by a reader. One copy remained in Medina.(34) All variant copies were destroyed and despite some opposition during the rest of Uthman's reign it was accepted as the standard text.(35)

Ghulam Sarwar writes: "No other book in the world can match the Qur'an in respect of its recording and preservation... The Qur'an exists today in its original form unaltered and undistorted."(36) Yet even Guillaume admits that its consonantal text leads to difficulty in interpretation and translation.(37)

John Gilchrist concludes:

...the doctrine of the Qur'an's perfect preservation arises not from a scholarly study of the history of the text, but from a popular sentiment that is imposed upon it, a presupposition that has to be maintained at all costs.(38)

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- (2) Bruce, 23
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- (4) *Encyclopedia Britannica Macropedia*. (London: William Benton, 1974) 343; Alfred Guillaume *Islam*. (Aylesbury: Penguin, 1979), 56
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- (6) Guillaume, 56; Anis Shorrosh, *Islam Revealed*. (Nashville: Nelson, 1988), 53

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- (8) Bruce, 22; *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 343.
- (9) Bruce, 22
- (10) Anne Cooper, ed., *Ishmael My Brother*. (Bromley: STL, 1985) 51; Ghulam Sarwar, *Islam: Beliefs & Teachings*. (London: Muslim Educational Trust, 1987), 33.
- (11) John Gilchrist, *Jam' Al-Qur'an: The Codification of the Text*. (Benoni, S. Africa: Jesus to The Muslims, 1989), 17.
- (12) Gilchrist, 17.
- (13) *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 343; Guillaume, 58.
- (14) Sarwar, 34
- (15) Cooper, 55
- (16) Sarwar, 33
- (17) Gilchrist, 19.
- (18) Shorrosh, 52.
- (19) Gilchrist, 57.
- (20) Cooper, 55; Gilchrist, 22.
- (21) Watt, *Qur'an*, 41
- (22) Gilchrist, 28.
- (23) Cooper, 55; Bernard Lewis, ed., & translator. *Islam From The Prophet Muhammad To The Capture Of Constantinople*, Vol. 2. (Oxford: OUP, 1987), 1-2; Sarwar, 34.
- (24) Gilchrist, 24.
- (25) Gilchrist, 24.
- (26) Gilchrist, 41
- (27) Guillaume, 57; Sarwar, 34.
- (28) Gilchrist, 41.
- (29) Gilchrist, 41; Watt, *Qur'an*, 41.
- (30) Watt, *Qur'an*, 41
- (31) Sarwar, 35.
- (32) Gilchrist, 45.
- (33) Gilchrist, 53
- (34) Sarwar, 35; Watt, *Qur'an*, 42.
- (35) Guillaume, 57; Gilchrist, 56; Watt, 42
- (36) Sarwar, 33.
- (37) Guillaume, 58.
- (38) Gilchrist, 124.