CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

I

'Ulūm al-Qur'an, or Qur'anic sciences, is a discipline which deals with those aspects of the Qur'an which are not usually discussed in exegeses (*tafsīr*) of the Qur'an. In this discipline, unlike *tafsīr*, the contents of the verses are not discussed, rather general information about the Qur'an and different groups of verses are provided and analysed.

The scholars of *'Ulūm al-Qur'an* differ in the number of topics discussed in this discipline. Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1392) has listed forty-seven related topics,[1] while Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505) has increased this to eighty.[2] The range of titles includes historical discussions on topics such as the nature, duration, chronology and causes of revelation; compilation, the preservation and unification of the Qur'an; consonantal and vocal texts; and different modes of recitation and their origins. They also include theological and conceptual topics such as the immutability of the Qur'an, or the impossibility of its alteration; the inimitability of the text; and types of verses in terms of ambiguity or clarity, abrogation or continuity, and universality or contextuality.

As is manifest, there is no logical or didactic order between most of the above-mentioned topics. Thus the word 'sciences' is in the plural in order to denote the independence of most of these topics from each other. What brings all these together is the fact that they all revolve round the one unifying theme of the Qur'an.

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[1] Badr al-Dīn Muhammad Zarkashī, *al-Burhān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabiyyah, 1957), vol. 1, 9-12.

[2] 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'an* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1996), vol. 1, 27-30.

However, certain classifications have been suggested for organising these sciences in a logical order. One suggestion is that these topics can be divided into three main categories: literal, conceptual and historical. The first category includes topics which deal with literal aspects of the Qur'an, and these include the science of pronunciation (*tajwīd*), recitation (*qirā'ah*), calligraphy (*rasm al-khaṭṭ*), and the number of chapters, verses, words and letters of the Qur'an. The second category includes topics such as exegeses (*tanzīl*) and figurative interpretation (*ta'wīl*), esoteric (*bāṭin*) and exoteric (*ẓāhir*) meanings, abrogation (*naskh*), univocal (*muḥkam*) and equivocal (*mutashābih*), and abstract (*mujmal*) and lucid (*mubayyan*) verses. The third category deals with historical issues such as the history and order of revelation, the history of its writing, collection and compilation, the phases of its preparation and so forth.

An analysis of Islamic traditions and historical records shows that some of the topics included in the sciences of the Qur'an date back to the time of the companions of the Prophet. These records show that not only were some of these topics discussed at that time, but they were also regarded as indispensible for anyone dealing with the Qur'an as a legal, theological or political source. In his *Path of Eloquence* (*Nahj al-Balāghah*), Sharīf al-Raḍī (d. 401/1010) reports from Imam Ali (d. 40/660) that *univocal* and *equivocal* verses of the Qur'an should be clearly distinguished, as well as *abrogating* and *abrogated* verses,[3] in a tone critical of those who disregarded this knowledge. The concepts of equivocality and abrogation are among the most discussed topics in the sciences of the Qur'an. Moreover, Imam Ali used to assert that he had learnt the knowledge of such verses from none other than the Prophet himself: 'No single verse of the Qur'an was revealed to the Prophet without him having me recite it. He dictated it to me and I wrote it in my own hand. He taught me its figurative interpretation (*ta'wīl*) and outer explanation (*tafsīr*), its abrogating and abrogated verses, as well as its univocal and equivocal verses.'[4] He also said: 'By God, there is no single verse in the Book of God of which I do

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[3] Al-Sharīf Muhammad ibn al-Husayn al-Raḍī, *Nahj al-Balāghah* (Qum: Dār al-Dhakhā'ir, 1412 q.), sermon 1, 25.

(Note: In all footnotes q. refers to the Islamic lunar (*qamarī*) calendar and s. refers to the Islamic solar (*shamsī*) calendar)

[4] Abū Ja'far Muhammad ibn Ali ibn al-Husayn ibn Bābawayh al-Ṣadūq, *Kamāl al-dīn wa Tamām al-Ni'mah* (Qum: Mu'assasat al-Nashr al-Islāmi, 1405 q.), 285.

not know whether it was revealed during the night or the day, or if it was revealed on a mountain or a plain,' and 'no verse was revealed that I know not where it was revealed, about what it was revealed, and with whom it was revealed.'[5] All these were topics which were later discussed in books of *'Ulūm al-Qur'an.*

Based on the above reports, it is but logical to find books and epistles written on different topics of these sciences from the early years of Islamic scholarship. However, such epistles, which started to appear early in Muslim history towards the end of the first/seventh century, beginning with *Kitāb al-Qirā'āt* (The Book of Recitations) of Yahyā ibn Ya'mur (d. 89/708), did not deal with all these sciences in one place. Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 385/995) lists 250 such books and epistles in his catalogue up to the year 377/987.[6] The more comprehensive books, with the newly coined title of *'Ulūm al-Qur'an,* started to appear at the beginning of 4th/10th century, notably with such works as *al-Ḥāwī fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'an* of Muhammad ibn Khalaf ibn Marzbān (d. 309/921) and *al-Mukhtazan fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'an* of Abu al-Hasan al-Ash'arī (d. 324/936). This era culminated in the monumental work of al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505), *al-Itqān fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'an,* in the 9th/15th century.

II

Since the early days, Shī'a scholars, showed great dedication to the sciences of the Qur'an, more than any other Islamic subjects. The Shī'a contribution to *'Ulūm al-Qur'an* is usually overlooked, therefore it would be appropriate to mention very briefly some of the work in this field.

Obviously, the initial concern of all Muslim scholars who were experts in the field of the Qur'an was the proper method of recitation and the orthography of the Scripture. Hence, we find books on *qirā'āt* and discussions on variant nuances of recitation to be among the foremost topics appearing in *'Ulūm al-Qur'an*. Great personalities with Shī'ī inclinations were among the first scholars to focus on the different aspects of *qirā'āt* such as grammar, recitation and orthography. These scholars were later followed by others who drew greatly on their expertise.

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[5] Muhammad Ibn Sa'd, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā* (Leiden, 1325 q.), vol. 2, 292.

[6] Muhammad ibn Isḥāq Ibn al-Nadīm, *al-Fihrist* (Cairo: Istiqāmah, n.d.), 37-41.

Despite the availability of other scripts such as Nabataean and Syriac, the early companions chose to transliterate the Qur'an in the Kūfic script. However, as is well known, the Kūfic script lacked dots or diacritics to indicate certain phonetic sounds and to distinguish graphically identical words. The onerous task of creating new signs for this script was first done by Abū al-Aswad al-Du'alī (d. 69/688), who introduced this development in the Kūfic script merely for the correct recitation of the Qur'an.

A close disciple of Imam Ali, al-Du'alī fought for him at the Battle of Ṣiffīn and was appointed by him as governor of Basra after 'Abdullāh ibn 'Abbās, a post held by Abū al-Aswad until his death. According to Shaykh Ṭūsī (d. 460/1068), al-Du'alī was a student of the first four Shī'a Imams.[7] Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276/889) reports that he was the first person to systematise Arabic grammar, a matter of utmost importance for the correct recitation of the Qur'an.[8] Al-Du'alī authored a text on grammar called *al-Ta'līqah* primarily composed of Imam Ali's instructions on grammar and his own annotations.[9] In order to assist the Muslims in reciting the Qur'an in a grammatically correct fashion, al-Du'alī improvised diacritical dots to distinguish different phonetic values.[10]

Abu al-Aswad al-Du'alī trained famous scholars including his Shī'a student, Yaḥyā ibn Ya'mur,[11] and others such as Naṣr ibn 'Āṣim and 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Hurmuz, all of whom became famous grammarians in their own rights and improved on his work. Additionally, two prominent reciters of the Qur'an (*qurrā'*), Abān ibn Taghlib (d. 141/758) and Ḥamrān ibn A'yan (d. 130/747), who were also disciples of the fifth and sixth Imams, are considered to have been his students.

Abu al-Aswad originally invented the system of dots to indicate vowel sounds (*i'rāb*) rather than consonantal sounds (*i'jām*). Dots were later

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[7] Ayatollah Sayyid Abū al-Qāsim Al-Khoī, *Mu'jamu Rijāl al-Hadith* (Qum: Markaz Nashr al-Thaqāfah al-Islāmiyyah, 1413 q.), vol. 10, 187.

[8] Abdullāh ibn Muslim Ibn Qutaybah, *al-Ma'ārif* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-Arabi, 1390 q.), 434.

[9] Ibn al-'Asākir, *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimishq* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1415 q.), vol. 7, 55; Shihāb al-Dīn Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalānī, *Lisān al-Mīzān* (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-A'lamī, 1405 q.) vol. 1, 83.

[10] Shihāb al-Dīn Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalānī, *al-Iṣābah fī Ma'rifat al-Ṣaḥābah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyyah, 1415 q.), vol. 3, 455; Sayyid Muḥsin al-Amīn al-'Āmilī, *A'yān al-Shī'ah*, 5th ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Ta'āruf li al-Maṭbū'āt, 1998), vol. 1, 130.

[11] Ibn Khallikān has regarded him as a Shī'a; see al-Amīn, *A'yān al-Shī'ah*, vol. 1, 163.

specified for *i'jām* and dashes for *i'rāb* by another Shi'a grammarian and lexicographer, Khalīl ibn Aḥmad al-Farāhīdī (d. 173/789), a philologist from what is today Oman who migrated to Basra at an early age. According to al-Suyūṭī, Khalīl invented the *hamzah*, the *tashdīd*, *rawm* and *ishmām*.[12] He is best known for introducing the current system of marking the Arabic consonantal sounds (*ḥarakāt*) in his *Kitāb al-Nuqāṭ wa al-Shakl*; for the invention of Arabic prosody (*al-'arūḍ*); and for *Kitāb al-'Ayn*, considered to be the first Arabic dictionary, which he arranged phonetically rather than alphabetically, following the pattern of pronunciation of the Arabic alphabet from the deepest letter from the throat, (*'ayn*), to the last letter pronounced by the lips, (*mīm*). The renowned Arabic grammarian Sībawayh (d. 180/796) was one of his students.

Grammar flourished in Kūfa through Shi'a students of al-Khalīl, such as Ali ibn Ḥamza al-Kisā'ī (d. 189/805), who was known as 'the leader of the Kufans in grammar' (*imām al-kūfiyyīn fī al-naḥw*), and Abū Ja'far Muhammad ibn al-Ḥasan al-Ru'āsi, a disciple of the fifth and sixth Imams and who, according to Ibn al-Nadīm, was the first Kufan to write about grammar,[13] and also authored a work on Qur'anic recitations known as *Kitāb al-Qirā'ah*,[14] which addressed an urgent need among Muslims in the first and second centuries to ascertain the correct recitation (*qirā'ah*) of the Qur'an, a topic of expertise for Shī'a scholars in Kūfa.

Of the seven famous masters of Qur'anic recitation (*al-qurrā' al-sab'ah*), four are thought to have been Shī'as. The first is 'Āṣim ibn Abi al-Najūd Bahdalah al-Kūfī (d. 128/745), who learned his recitation from the *tābi'ī* Shī'a master of recitation, Abū Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī, who in turn learned it from Imam Ali. 'Āṣim's *qirā'ah*, through Ḥafṣ ibn Sulaymān (d. 180/796), is now the commonest *qirā'ah*, according to which almost all Qur'ans are printed throughout the world. The second is Abū 'Amr ibn al-'Alā' al-Baṣrī (d. 154/771), who took his recitation from Sa'īd ibn Jubayr (d. 94/712), who was one of the closest disciples of Imam Zayn al-'Abidīn (d. 95/713). The third is Ḥamzah ibn Ḥabīb al-Zayyāt al-Kūfī (d. 156/773), who took his *qirā'ah* from Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765)

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[12] Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, vol. 2, 454.

[13] Al-Amīn, *A'yān al-Shī'ah*, vol. 1, 163.

[14] Āghā Buzurg Tehrānī, *al-Dharī'ah ilā Taṣānīf al-Shī'ah* (Tehran: Islāmiyyah, 1398 q.) vol. 17, 53.

and learned from prominent Shī'a Qur'anic scholars such as Ḥamrān ibn A'yan and Sulaymān ibn Mihrān al-A'mash. He authored many books on different aspects of the Qur'an, including *Kitāb al-Qirā'ah* (*The Book of Recitation*), *Kitāb Asbā' al-Qur'an* (*Classification of the Qur'an in Seven Parts*), *Kitāb Ḥudūd Āy al-Qur'ān* (*The Number of the Verses of the Qur'an*), *Kitāb Mutashābih al-Qur'an* (*Equivocal verses of the Qur'an*) and *Kitāb fi Maqtū' al-Qur'ān wa Mawṣūlih* (*Jointed and Disjointed Verses of the Qur'an*).[15] And the fourth is Abu al-Ḥasan Ali ibn Ḥamzah al-Kisā'ī al-Kūfī (d. 189/805), who took his recitation from Abān ibn Taghlib, and from Ḥamzah through Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq. According to Sayyid Muḥsin al-Amīn, Abān ibn Taghlib was the first person to author a book on *qirā'āt*.[16] The remaining three famous reciters were Ibn Kathīr (d. 120/738), Nāfi' (d. circa 170/786) and 'Abdullāh ibn 'Āmir (d. 118/736), from Mecca, Medina and Damascus respectively.

Shī'a scholars were also forerunners of *tafsīr* or Qur'anic exegesis. Kufan study of *tafsīr* can be traced back to Maytham ibn Yaḥyā al-Tammār, who was killed in 60/679 by 'Ubaydullāh ibn Zīyad. Records indicate that a complete book of *tafsīr* was written in Kūfa by Sa'īd ibn Jubayr (killed in 94/712 by al-Ḥajjāj) which, according to Ibn al-Nadīm, was the first book of *tafsīr* ever written in Islam. On mentioning his book, al-Suyūṭī reports from Qatādah that Ibn Jubayr was the most knowledgeable in *tafsīr* of the second generation of companions (*tābi'ūn*).[17] Mention is also made of a *tafsīr* authored by the controversial Shī'a scholar Jābir ibn Yazīd al-Ju'fī (d. 128/745).[18] There is a better known *tafsīr* by a more famous exegete, al-Suddī al-Kabīr (d. 127/744), a *mawlā* from Kūfa whose *tafsīr* is described by al-Suyūṭī as the best of all commentaries (*amthal al-tafāsīr*). He was a companion of the fourth, fifth and sixth Shī'a Imams.[19] According to Ibn 'Adī[20] (d. 365/975), the most sizable *tafsīr* was written by Muhammad ibn al-Sā'ib al-Kalbī (d. 146/763), another renowned Shī'a scholar of Kufa.

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[15] Al-Sayyid Hassan al-Ṣadr, *Ta'sīs al-Shī'ah li 'Ulūm al-Qur'an* (Baghdad: Sharikat al-Ṭab' wa al-Nashr al-'Irāqiyyah, 1370 q.), 346-347.

[16] Al-Amīn, *A'yān al-Shī'ah*, vol. 1, 131.

[17] Ibid. 125.

[18] Abū al-'Abbās Aḥmad ibn Ali al-Najāshī, *Rijāl: Fihris Asmā' Muṣannifī al-Shī'ah* (Beirut: Dār al-Aḍwā', 1408 q.), 128.

[19] Al-Khoī, *Mu'jam Rijāl al-Hadith*, vol. 4, 63.

[20] Al-Amīn, *A'yān al-Shī'ah*, vol. 1, 125.

Since Ibn ʿAdī died in 365/975, it could be assumed that no *tafsīr* was written as large or as famous as al-Kalbī's before the second half of the fourth century, including Ṭabarī's.

This early scholarly output shows the importance early Shīʿa scholarship attached to the sciences of the Qurʾan. Merely to list the names of known Shīʿa Qurʾanic scholars during this period would require numerous pages.

III

Early Muslim scholars had concerns about the translation of the Qurʾan into other languages. The nature of the concern was of two types, and the first was that the Qurʾan was the word of God revealed in Arabic, and so how could man change this revelation by translating it into another language? The second concern was about the beauty, tone and delicate nuances of meaning which would be lost in translation.

The Jewish philosopher, Moses ibn Ezra (d. 530/1135), is quoted as saying that once in his youth a Muslim scholar in Granada had asked him to translate the Ten Commandments into Arabic. In response, he asked the scholar to read for him the first chapter of the Qurʾan in Latin, a language that the latter spoke fluently. The reading turned out to be awkward and unfamiliar, and the scholar realised the significance and did not insist on his request.[21]

This example shows how difficult it is to translate any religious or inspirational text into another language. However, none of these concerns prevented Muslims from translating the Qurʾan from the very early days. During the lifetime of the Prophet those parts of chapter 19 of the Qurʾan which relate the story of Mary were translated into Amharic for the Emperor Negus of Abyssinia. A group of Iranian Muslims had asked Salmān al-Fārisī, the Persian companion of the Prophet, to translate the Qurʾan for them into Farsi, which he did with the Prophet's sanction.[22] Whether Salmān translated the whole Qurʾan or only the first chapter, *fātihat al-kitāb,* is yet to be investigated.

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[21] Kāmrān Fānī, *Bayt al-Ḥikmah wa Dār al-Tarjamah* (Tehran: Markaz-i Nashr-i Dāneshgāhī, 1365 s.), 113.

[22] Shāhfūr ibn Ṭāhir Isfarāyīnī, *Tāj al-Tarājim fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾan li al-Aʿājim* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i ʿIlmī Farhangī, 1375 s.), vol. 8, 8.

It was actually this translation which caused a controversy amongst some of the great jurists. Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767) was of the opinion that, based on this approval, it was permissible to replace the Arabic text by the translation even in formal prayers, while other jurists were of the view that the translation, if at all permissible, was only for conveying the meanings and concepts, and could never replace the original Arabic in any ritual context.[23]

Historically the Iranians were the first nation to translate the whole Qur'an into their own language. This took place some time towards the end of the third/ninth and beginning of the fourth/tenth centuries. It was previously thought that the translation of Ṭabari's *Tafsīr* in 345/956, which naturally included the translation of all the verses, was the first Persian translation of the Qur'an, but the discovery of *Qur'an Quds*, which is dated about a century before that, means that this assumption is now under question.[24] However, the translation of Ṭabari's *Tafsīr* has a more established history. It was undertaken by order of the Sāmānid King, Manṣūr ibn Nūḥ (d. 365/975), after he obtained a *fatwā* from the scholars of Khorāsān and Transoxiana regarding the permissibility of translating the Qur'an.

As for other languages, the oldest extant Turkish translation of the Qur'an dates back to 734/1333, while the first Urdu translation was completed much later in 1190/1775. It is interesting to know that a Malay translation was completed in the 11th/17th century before the Urdu version, by Sheikh Abdur Ra'ūf al-Fansūri of Aceh, in *Tafsīr Tarjumān al-Mustafīḍ*. This translation was in classical Malay, which later evolved into Indonesian and the modern Malaysian languages.

IV

The study of the Qur'an in the West has been marked historically by polemics and prejudice. This process began with the first translation of the Qur'an into a European language in the twelfth century by the English scholar Robertus Ketenensis (Robert of Ketton), and was completed in

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[23] For an elaborate discussion of this subject see, Fakhr al-Dīn Rāzī, *Mafātīḥ al-Ghayb (al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr)* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-Arabi, 1420 q.), vol. 1, 209-213.

[24] Bahā' al-Dīn Khorramshāhī, *Qur'an Shinākht* (Tehran: Nāhīd, 1387 s.), 113-114.

537/1143. He did not entitle his translation 'the Qur'an,' but *Lex Mahumet Pseudoprophete* (The Law of Muhammad the False Prophet). The translation was in Mediaeval Latin and was commissioned by Peter the Venerable (d. 1157), the great abbot of the monastery of Cluny in France.

Although the purpose of this translation was both to study and to refute Islam, it barely resembled the original, due to arbitrary omissions and additions and a preference for improbable and distasteful meanings over likely and appropriate ones. It was stored in the vaults of the church until it was published four centuries later, in 1543, by authorisation of Martin Luther in three editions, all of which were prefaced by Luther himself. This was the only Qur'an translation available to Europeans for more than five centuries, from which Italian, German, Dutch, French and Russian renditions were produced. The Italian translation was derived directly from Ketenensis, and was used to develop the German translation, which was used in turn for the Dutch.[25] It is not hard to imagine how poor and erroneous such translations would be by the time the second and third-hand renditions were produced.

The second Latin translation of the Qur'an was produced in 1698 by Father Ludovico Marracci (d. 1700), and was dedicated to the Holy Roman Emperor Leopold I. The book had an introduction containing *A Refutation of the Qur'an*, and its main purpose, as stated by the author himself, was to discredit Islam by inserting elaborate quotations from Muslim authorities themselves. Many European translations were based on Marracci's work, including the French translation of Savory (1751), which stated on the title page of one of its editions that it was published in Mecca in 1165 AH to give it a better sense of authenticity.[26]

Drawing on this work in attitude, and especially in its 'Preliminary Discourse,' George Sale (d. 1736) later compiled the first English translation of the Qur'an, which professed to have been derived directly from Arabic. Released in 1734, it was 'to expose the imposture' and to have 'the glory of its overthrow.'[27]

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[25] Afnān Fatānī, 'Translation and the Qur'an,' in Oliver Leaman, *The Qur'an: an encyclopedia* (UK: Routledge, 2006), 667.

[26] Ibid.

[27] George Sale, *The Koran* (London: Frederick Warne and Co., 1801), v.

Sale's translation remained in circulation in successive editions. Compared to previous translations it was an impartial rendition, despite the fact that it makes a tedious reading, nothing at all like the original Arabic. It was after reading this translation that Thomas Carlyle (d. 1881) found the Qur'an as tedious a piece of reading as he did ever undertake, which was 'wearisome,' 'confused' and 'crude,' and advised that 'nothing but a sense of duty could carry any European through the Koran.'[28] Edward Gibbon (d. 1794) found it to be an 'endless incoherent rhapsody of fable' which did not excite any sentiment or any idea.[29]

This negative attitude towards the Qur'an did not improve later when polemicists were replaced by Orientalists. Parvez Manzoor, a critic of Orientalism, believes that the Orientalist method for studying the Muslim scripture may be called anything but the 'natural mode of apprehension of the rationalist man.'[30]

This generation includes personalities such as Reverend J. M. Rodwell (d. 1900), who published his English translation in 1861. He claimed that his translation attempted to imitate the 'imperfect style' of the original Arabic. His observation on the literary merit of the Qur'an proves nothing but his insufficient knowledge of Arabic literature, a deficiency which could be found in most members of this brand of translators. Rodwell believed that the Qur'an was the 'most unreadable and incongruous patchwork' of literature, which contained 'fragments of disjointed truth – that is based upon Christianity and Judaism partially understood.'[31] Another member of this group was E. H. Palmer, a Cambridge scholar who published his translation in 1880, and believed that the style of the Qur'an was 'rude and rugged,' and for that reason it had to be translated into colloquial language.[32]

The above statements about the literature of the Qur'an should be left to Arab littérateurs to judge in addition to chapter ten of this book

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[28] James Kritzeck, *Anthology of Islamic Literature* (New York: Penguin Group, 1975), 22.

[29] Arthur J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1981), vol. 1, 11.

[30] Parvez Manzoor, 'Method against Truth: Orientalism and Qur'anic Studies,' in *The Qur'an - Style and Contents*, vol. 24 (ed.) Andrew Rippin (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing, 1999), 382.

[31] J.M. Rodwell, *The Koran* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd. 1909), 2, 13 and 14.

[32] Fatānī, 'Translation and the Qur'an', 668.

where Ayatollah Ma'rifat elaborates on the inimitability of the Qur'an from a literary perspective.

The most notable of this group, however, is the German scholar Theodor Nöldeke (d. 1930), who, with the publication of his award-winning book *Die Geschichte des Qorans* (History of the Qur'an), advanced the first systematic work on the study of the Qur'an in the West based on a historical-critical approach. Unlike Sale, who saw beauty in the language of the Qur'an, Nöldeke views the Qur'an as a text in which 'little care is taken to express all the transitions of thought,' in which indispensable clauses are frequently omitted, and extended narratives are 'vehement and abrupt,' that uses a 'great deal of superfluous verbiage,' and whose syntax even 'betrays great awkwardness.'[33] Such statements are clearly contrary to the unanimous views of all Arabic littérateurs who have considered the Qur'an the most elegant and eloquent example of Arabic literature. It only implies a lack of literary comprehension in a non-Arab who tries to digest a Shakespearean-like text of Arabic literature.

Nöldeke's works, despite their academic value and their insightful analyses of the etymology and grammar of the Qur'an, betray a prejudice driven by religious motivations in an effort to defend Christianity and Judaism against Islam.[34] He is prejudiced against the Prophet of Islam and does not shy away from expressing this in language which is occasionally insulting.

Nöldeke is also critical of the content of the Qur'an, and considers it to be a bad copy of the Bible. This, in his view, is mainly because the Prophet did not read the scriptures, but his knowledge of them was 'by oral communications from the Jews who knew a little and Christians who knew next to nothing' about the scriptures. This knowledge was probably 'picked up in a conversation with any Jew or Christian,' and that is why the deviations from the biblical narratives in the Qur'an are conspicuous.

The eloquence of the text of the Qur'an was better appreciated by the Scottish scholar Richard Bell (d. 1952), who considered the Prophet to

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[33] Theodor Nöldeke, *The Qur'an: An Introductory Essay*, (ed.) N. A. Newman (Hatfield: Interdisciplinary Biblical Research Institute, 1992), 5 and 12.

[34] Ibid. 29-31.

be a poet, 'but not of the ordinary Arab type,' for his themes were hardly touched upon by other poets.[35]

Following in the footsteps of Weil and Nöldeke, Bell's translation in 1937 suggested a rearrangement of the Qur'anic chapters. However, it took the sifting operation as far as reordering the whole text by separating it up into small fragments in order to 'unravel the composition of the separate suras' and 'remove the confusions' from the Qur'an.[36] To this end he undertook a verse by verse examination of the Qur'an, and tried to recast the entire text in a new mould.

Bell's method was based on the assumption that the Qur'anic literature suffered from abrupt changes of rhyme, the intrusion of extraneous subjects into passages otherwise homogeneous, breaks in grammatical structure, sudden changes of the dramatic situation, and other literary-based assertions.[37] Based on this conjecture, he theorised that the parts of the Qur'an he deemed disjointed were due to 'discarded material' being confused with the original text at the time of its collection and compilation. He explains that the Qur'an was revised in Medina by the Prophet, and while this revision was being done the scribes noted down the revised version on the back of the sheets on which the original verses were written. Later, editors inserted the old verses back in the text. It is to these 'scraps' that got into the Qur'an by mistake, Bell says in his preface, 'rather than to textual defects, or to confusion in Muhammad's own thought and style that the dreary welter of the Qur'an' is due.[38]

The reader can find adequate arguments in the second chapter of this book regarding the above which render most such perceived shortcomings to be due to the lack of proper knowledge of 'Shakespearian' Arabic.

In dealing with the Qur'an, Bell allowed himself the liberty of assuming that any perceived unevenness in the style would justify rearrangement of the verses according to his own ideas of stylistic fitness; something that no scholar after him would take up. In essence, Bell is not a translator, but

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[35] Mohammad Khalīfa, *The Sublime Qur'an and Orientalism* (Karachi: International Islamic Publishers, 1989), 20.

[36] Richard Bell, *The Qur'an: Translated, with a critical re-arrangement of the Surahs* (Edinburgh: T. and T. Clark, 1937), vi.

[37] W. Montgomery Watt and Richard Bell, *Introduction to the Qur'an* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), 93.

[38] Bell, *The Qur'an: Translated*, vi.

an author. He not only rearranges the order of the chapters, but actually restructures the order of the verses according to what he believes to be the thematically correct order of the text. On the lexical level, some very common and familiar words in Arabic are mistranslated so as to make the text appear ludicrous. Moreover, in many instances he allows himself to comment on the content of the text he translates in an ostensibly biased way. For example, next to his rendering of the oath at the beginning of *sura* 89, he writes: 'An absurd oath.'[39]

I cannot imagine that anyone would allow himself the liberty of treating any text as Bell did in treating the Qur'an. His theory of unconnected pieces was so extreme that it was criticised by his student William Montgomery Watt (d. 2006). In his revised version of Bell's *Introduction to the Qur'an*, Watt argues that Bell was inconsistent in the application of his theory, and thus little was to be gained by his distinctive hypothesis.[40] However, no scholar has ethically criticised Bell for his adventurous attitude towards an established sacred text. As Fatānī reminds us: 'The fact that Bell took a coherent Arabic text, readily understood by any native speaker of the language, and cut and pasted it into something incoherent and disjointed clearly raises ethical questions that have yet to be addressed.' [41]

Generally speaking, the persistent problem with most Western translations of the Qur'an has been that they were undertaken by Christian missionaries and Orientalists who had hardly any rigorous knowledge of the Arabic language.[42] This problem has been addressed since the 1930s by Muslim translations of the Qur'an in different European languages.

V

The idea that the Qur'an was a distorted version of the Bible or heavily copied from it is not restricted to Nöldeke. It has been a common view among the Orientalists and later academics, and usually labelled as an historical-critical perspective. We can find this view in writings as early as the first half of the 19th century in the works of Abraham Geiger (d. 1874),

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[39] Fatānī, 'Translation and the Qur'an', 659.

[40] Watt, *Introduction to the Qur'an*, 106.

[41] Fatānī, 'Translation and the Qur'an', 659.

[42] Ibid. 658.

the German rabbi and scholar who founded Reform Judaism,[43] and whose book could be regarded as a pioneering work in the historical approach. Although this allegation is as old as the Qur'an itself, and certain verses of the Qur'an speak of disbelievers charging the Prophet with rewriting the old fables of the past as dictated to him by another person (25:5), or being taught to him by a foreigner (16:103), the Orientalists believe that by the critical-historical method they have shed new light on this old allegation.

The nineteenth century is marked by a number of biographies of the Prophet Muhammad by Western Orientalists, notably Gustav Weil (1843), William Muir (1861) and Aloys Sprenger (1861-65). Inevitably these biographical works contained some introductory material related to the study of the Qur'an and its biblical provenance.

The German Orientalist Gustav Weil (d. 1889) believed that Muhammad learnt Jewish stories and concepts from existing Jewish tribes, and incorporated them into Islamic teachings with the help of figures like Waraqah ibn Nawfil, Abdullah ibn Salam, Salmān Fārisī and Baḥīrā, a monk Muhammad met on his way to Boṣrā and who was, according to Weil, a baptised Jew.[44] His references, however, are mainly to legends from biblical sources incorporated into Islamic traditions, commonly called *isrā'īliyyāt*, rather than the Qur'an.

Aloys Sprenger (d. 1893) rejects Muhammad's claim of revealed knowledge about the previous Books, and maintains that he learnt of them from Jewish and Christian sources. He even goes one step further to name his probable teachers in this regard. He believed Muhammad never named his teachers in order to pretend miraculous knowledge, and the fact that all his teachers died in the early days of his career allowed him to cover up for it.

One of the people he names as a secretive teacher of Muhammad is the 'eccentric' *Zayd* from the Addy tribe, who followed the true religion of Abraham. In *The Life of Mohammad, from Original Sources*, published in 1851, he postulates that it was Zayd who 'first instilled purer notions

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[43] Abraham Geiger, *Judaism and Islam*, tr. F. M. Young, 1896, (http://answeringislam. org/Books/Geiger/Judaism/index.htm), xxx.

[44] Gustav Weil, *The Bible, the Koran, and the Talmud; or Biblical Legends of the Mussulmans* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1855), viii-xi.

respecting God into his mind, and induced him to read biblical history.'[45] Then there was Waraqah, who, according to Sprenger, before his death had helped the Prophet to write the Qur'an. Addās, a monk of Nineveh who lived in Mecca and taught Muhammad biblical stories, is another figure, along with Rabbis of the Ḥijāz who taught him their legends.[46]

Learning about biblical history is one thing, but reading it was even more improbable for Muhammad, as he was known to be illiterate and, in any case, no Bible was translated into Arabic at the time. To overcome the first problem, Sprenger rejects the official Islamic view that the Prophet was illiterate, and believes that he pretended to appear illiterate 'in order to raise the elegance of the composition of the Qur'an into a miracle.'[47] To overcome the second issue he conjectures that there should have been Arabic translations of the Bible available at the time.[48]

To prop up his opinion he further argues that some of the closest companions of the Prophet, such as his stepson Zayd ibn Thābit and the Abyssinian ex-slave Bilāl, were former Christians who could have taught the Prophet about the biblical scriptures.[49]

Obviously, none of these claims could be supported by historical data; most of them are based on insignificant stories scattered around the sources which have been blown out proportion by Orientalist scholars. The story of Waraqah is given a good critical examination in the present book.

William Tisdall (d. 1928) is another figure of this ilk. A British historian and philologist who served as the Secretary of the Church of England's Missionary Society in Isfahan, he cites a number of events in the Qur'an that he believes had been copied from the Old Testament.[50] However, since there are certain clear discrepancies between the accounts in the Qur'an and those in the Bible, on these occasions Tisdall, like Nöldeke, concludes that Muhammad's knowledge of the Bible was imperfect and partial.

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[45] Aloys Sprenger, *The Life of Mohammad, from Original Sources* (Oxford: Presbyterian Mission Press, 1851), 95.

[46] Ibid. 96-99.

[47] Ibid. 102.

[48] Ibid. 100 ft.

[49] Ibid. 161-162.

[50] William St Clair Tisdall, *The Sources of Islam*, tr. Sir William Muir (USA: CSPI, LLC, 1902), 9.

But if Muhammad was inspired by the Bible, where did these differences come from? Tisdall answers this question by resorting to the existence of unorthodox Christian sects in Medina and greater Arabia at the time of the Prophet. Muhammad's knowledge of the Bible came from the followers of these sects who did not have a proper knowledge of the Bible and taught Muhammad from their unorthodox sources.[51]

Apart from unorthodox Christian teachings, Tisdall further argues that Mohammad was influenced by other cultures that existed in the region, for example, Zoroastrianism and Hinduism. Muhammad's companions such as Salmān Fārisī informed Muhammad about Persian tales, and Muhammad subsequently introduced them into the Qur'an. Nevertheless, he fails to specify which Persian tales were included in the Qur'an.[52]

Hartwig Hirschfeld (d. 1934) widens the sources of such influences to other lettered communities. In his book, *New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Qur'an*, published in 1902, he argues for a strong biblical influence on Muhammad which did not only come from Jews and Christians of Mecca and Medina, but also from the region of the Dead Sea which Muhammad passed through when he was leading a trading caravan to Syria.[53] However, he admits that these fleeting encounters did not consist of systematic study or regular instruction, and rejects Sprenger's view regarding the role of Baḥīrā as the secret tutor of Muhammad and the author of the *Ṣuḥuf*.

Throughout his work, Hirschfeld points to the similarities between Qur'anic concepts, such as 'human soul,' 'resurrection,' 'miracle' and so forth,[54] and biblical concepts.

It should be pointed out here that Muslims never deny the similarities between the concepts and the stories of the Qur'an and those of the Bible. On the contrary, the Qur'an insists on such a similarity.[55] The difference between Muslim scholars and the Orientalists is the paradigm in which they accommodate this fact. The Muslim paradigm is that the similarities are, and should be, there because both books come from the same source;

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[51] Ibid. 30.

[52] Ibid. 50-61.

[53] Hartwig Hirschfeld, *New Researches into the Composition and Exegesis of the Qoran* (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1902), 28.

[54] Ibid. 41-44.

[55] For example, see the Qur'an 5:48, 35:31, 41:43, 46:12, among many other verses.

they are both revealed books to chosen people. The Qur'an states that it approves of what is in previous books and is a yardstick for its accuracy: *We have sent you down the Book with the Truth, to confirm what was already there from the previous Book, and to safeguard it* (5:48). The Orientalists, on the other hand, by assuming that the Prophet of Islam was an imposter, have tried to find an alternative explanation for this similarity, and it could only be that he had taken it or learnt it from the Jews and Christians of his time. This latter paradigm, however, is lacking in historical fact, and to accept it one must draw on a creative imagination rather than solid data.

Such a creative imagination abounds in Alfred Guillaume's (d. 1966) article, 'The Influence of Judaism on Islam' (1927). According to him, Islam made use of Judaic sources through 'an intermediate legatee,' which was Christianity. He bases his argument on the existence of the Jewish diaspora throughout the Arabian peninsula at the time of the Prophet. These Jews had been present in the peninsula from the time of Solomon for commercial reasons, and by the seventh century they were well established in the various cities, including Khaibar, Medina and Ṭā'if.[56]

He rightly mentions the referential style of some Qur'anic stories, in the sense that certain stories in the Qur'an are unintelligible without referring them back to the Old Testament.[57] This observation is not out of place, since the Qur'an is to act as a safeguard for those stories, and is not in position of retelling them in full. For example, in chapter 38, Surah Ṣād, the accounts of David and Solomon appear as corrections and annotations to the biblical accounts, in order to acquit these two personalities of the faults attributed to them in the Bible. Thus, his conclusion that Muhammad was an unsuccessful 'interpreter of Judaism'[58] could only be acceptable according to the Orientalist paradigm, and not according to the Muslim paradigm.

The speculative venture of Orientalist paradigm reached its climax with Arthur Jeffery (d. 1959) in *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an*, published in 1938. By examining 318 non-Arabic words in the Qur'an and tracing them back to their original roots, Jeffery concludes that the Qur'an was

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[56] Alfred Guillaume, 'The Influence of Judaism on Islam,' in *The Legacy of Israel*, (ed.) Edwyn R. Bevan and Charles Singer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), 129-133.
[57] Ibid. 39.
[58] Ibid. 147.

influenced by both Jewish and Christian sources, since followers of both religions were strongly visible in the Arabian Peninsula during the time of Muhammad, and, according to him, Muhammad was greatly impressed by the higher civilisation surrounding Arabia, 'particularly by the religion of the great Empire of Rome.' His conception of his mission was therefore to provide the Arabs with the benefits of such a civilisation. 'It was therefore natural that the Qur'an should contain a large number of religious and cultural terms borrowed from these surrounding communities.'[59]

It is difficult to imagine how a scholar like Jeffery is able to postulate such a grand theory merely by finding 318 non-Arabic words, most of which were used by Arabs of the time, among 77437 words of the Qur'an.

More strangely, Sir Hamilton Gibbs (d. 1971) believed that Syriac Christianity influenced the formation of the Qur'an, for although concepts such as *tawḥīd* (monotheism) were already known to the Arabs through the *ḥanīf*s, the significant concept of the Day of Judgment was clearly influenced by the works of the fathers and monks of Syriac Christianity. His evidence for this is the ignorance of the Arabs of such concepts as clearly reflected in the Qur'an.[60]

However, probably no one of the Orientalist paradigm has ever made as bold and as unwarranted a claim as Christoph Luxenberg, a pseudonym of the author of *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran*. Luxenberg claims in this book that he attempts to place the text of the Qur'an in its historical context, and to analyse it from a new philological perspective, with the aim of arriving at a more convincing understanding of the text.[61] His main thesis is that the 'Ur-Qur'an' was not written in Arabic, but in Syriac, yet later scholars either 'forgot or attempted to disguise' this fact. He further postulates that until the reign of 'Abd al-Malik the official language of the Islamic territories was Syriac, which he replaced with Arabic. Rejecting the Muslim heritage regarding the history of the Qur'an, he denies that there was any oral tradition of Qur'an transmission, and that the Muslims

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[59] Arthur Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an* (Baroda, India: Oriental Institute, 1938), 30.

[60] Sir Hamilton Alexander Rosskeen Gibb, *Mohammedanism: An Historical Survey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 37-39.

[61] Luxenberg, Christoph, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: a Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran* (New York: Prometheus, 2007), 22.

were left with a text which they knew neither how to read, nor in what language it was written.[62]

Luxenberg uses all types of methods to restore the Qur'anic expressions to their original Aramaic and Syriac roots, and believes that by doing so many expressions of the Qur'an that previously did not make sense would become clear.[63]

I leave the judgment of such sweeping theories to the reader. However, one may question the ethical standards and academic etiquette that would allow a researcher to postulate such theories, which insult the intelligence and the very existence of scholars throughout the history of a great civilisation with 'findings' which indicate that they were so confused and stupid that they did not know what language their forefathers were speaking.

VI

Since Wansbrough, *'Ulūm al-Qur'an* in the Western academic sphere has been more than ever under Goldziher's spell, in the sense that his fabrication theory was extended to the Qur'an and the Qur'anic sciences. Influenced by this theory, Wansbrough and his students regarded *'Ulūm al-Qur'an* as a tool that was invented to give the Qur'an historical value, and to justify the religious edicts of different legal schools. Here the Orientalist's prideful narrow-mindedness reached its apogee, by assuming that all Muslim scholars without exception were either a collection of liars and fabricators, or stupid simpletons incapable of critical thought.

For Wansbrough, all literature regarding *asbāb al-nuzūl* was a fabrication by jurists to incorporate the scripture into the existing legal system. By means of this corpus of fake traditions, Muslim scholars could establish historical order to the text of the Qur'an; it was subjected to the same requirements as legal *ḥadith*s and was produced in much the same way.[64]

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[62] Ibid. 78.

[63] Ibid. 327.

[64] Herbert Berg, 'The Skepticism and Literary Analysis of J. Wansbrough, A. Rippin, Et Al.,' in *The Koran: Translation and Exegesis*, (ed.) Colin Turner (London: Routledge, 2004), 273.

In *The Collection of the Qur'an*, John Burton comes to a completely different conclusion about the compilation of the Qur'an, and believes that it was collected at the time of the Prophet, yet his methodology suffers from the same prejudicial views.

Burton bases his argument on the conjectures of J. Schacht, who, following Goldziher, came to believe that Islamic legal traditions were all forgeries of the Islamic legal systems. There was such fierce rivalry between these legal schools that they were ready to defend their positions at any cost, which meant that each created a corpus of supporting *hadiths*, while disregarding the clear rulings of the scripture.[65] Burton extends this hypothesis to all traditions related to the Qur'an.

The process of fabrication needed a number of tools to give the forged traditions validity and credibility. Above all, they needed to devise a system by which they could establish the credibility of their own corpus of *hadiths*, and undermine those of rival schools. This gave rise to the introduction of the discipline of *hadith* criticism, and the creation of an *isnād* (chain of transmission) for every single tradition forged by any school of law. Traditions were classified according to the historical reliability of each individual who made up the chain of narration of the *hadith*.[66]

According to Burton, the jurists tried to solve the contradiction between the opinions of their legal schools and verses in the Qur'an by devising *asbāb al-nuzūl* ('occasions of revelation'). *Asbāb al-nuzūl* was a body of *hadith* literature which was created to give a 'context' to various Qur'anic verses, in order to bring them in line with the views of the legal schools.[67]

However, *asbāb al-nuzūl* alone was not enough to 'manipulate' the Qur'an. The Qur'an was a powerful source for the provision of legal rulings, and as such posed a serious obstacle for the legal schools to assert their arbitrary rulings. Hence, according to Burton, the method of *al nāsikh wa al mansūkh* ('abrogation and the abrogated') was improvised as a handy tool for the legal schools to offset the effect of certain verses that went against their legal judgments, as well as finding legitimacy for them in the Qur'an.[68]

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[65] John Burton, *The Collection of the Qur'an* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 10.

[66] Burton, *The Collection of the Qur'an*, 14-15.

[67] Ibid. 15.

[68] Ibid. 17.

The concept of abrogation worked well for dealing with most of the problematic verses of the Qur'an; however, an additional method was needed to deal with more 'inflexible' verses. Thus, the technique of variant readings of the Qur'an was devised. Through this technique, the legal schools could easily twist the Arabic grammar of the text to give the desired meaning and bear out their point of view.[69]

Burton tries to show how variant readings of the Qur'anic verses led to different legal rulings, and concludes that the assumption that *fiqh* was derived from the Qur'an is false, but that instead, the variant readings of the Qur'an were derived from *fiqh*. [70]

Most of the above issues, especially the issue of variant readings, are discussed extensively in the present book where the highly speculative nature of all such statements is made clear. Nonetheless, one has to admire such imaginative creativity in the academic circles. A fact that these Orientalists forget to consider is that the scholars about whom they are theorising were not machines, but ordinary human beings who have the right to be given credit for their scholastic knowledge and a degree of conscience and professional integrity; something it seems that many in the West have yet to learn about other people.

VII

As I mentioned above, both Muslim and Western scholarship equally accept certain facts about the Qur'an, yet they are often explained and accommodated by them in different ways. The example examined was about the similarities that exist between stories and concepts in both the Qur'an and the Bible. The dispute between Muslim scholars and Orientalists in this regard is not whether such similarities exist, but the paradigm in which they are accommodated. The Muslim paradigm is that the similarities are and should be there, because the Islamic faith is a continuation of the Jewish and the Christian faiths, and that the Qur'an and the Bible are both revealed from the same source. The overlapping of themes and motifs, and even linguistic expressions, in the Qur'an and other scriptures exhibit the identity of the transcendent Source of

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[69] Ibid. 31-32.

[70] Ibid. 34

these Books, rather than 'borrowings' and 'appropriations.' The Qur'an has come 'to confirm what was already there from the previous Books, and to safeguard it' (5:48).

The Orientalist paradigm, on the other hand, is based on the belief that Muhammad was an imposter who tried to create a new religion for his people by copying and imitating the earlier scriptures, which he did rather poorly and inadequately. It should be clear that both of these paradigms are faith-based, and neither can claim to be more objective than the other, although, at least as a Muslim, I believe that the evidence adduced for the latter paradigm is lacking in strength and logic.

It would be futile to try to make a compromise between these two paradigms, since they diametrically oppose one another. However, this does not mean that the subscribers to either paradigm cannot benefit from the research and the studies of the other group. Despite the resentment and repugnance that the Orientalist view has created among Muslims in general, and Muslim scholars in particular, I still think that by taking a couple of steps back from each other, these two branches of scholarship can reinforce one other in their researches, and push forward our understanding of the content and history of the Islamic faith.

For its part, Western scholars should abandon their condescending and patronising attitude. They have to let go of the idea that they are the only ones free from prejudice by being unattached to the Islamic faith, and should realise that their rejection of Islam and its Prophet may be an equally misleading prejudice. They have to refrain from postulating rushed and unfounded theories based on gross and unwarranted conjectures, such as the 'Hagarian' theory of Cook and Crone or the Syriac literature theory of Luxenburg.

Western students of Islam work on the assumption of there being a total cultural void in pre-Islamic Arabia, and a complete lack of knowledge, discretion, acumen and integrity in the post-Islamic era. They work under the assumption that the traditional Muslim view is always influenced by theological and dogmatic considerations, and must of necessity be discarded. Such a pathological Islamophobic trait would leave no room for symbiotic interaction. Western scholarship should stop ignoring the huge contribution of Muslim scholarship over the centuries, and distrusting everything that is consensual and conformist in the Muslim

tradition. In studying past Muslim scholarship, Orientalists could try to be more realistic, and could portray an appropriate etiquette by refraining from phantasmagorical theories which presume all Muslim scholars to be liars, fabricators and ignorant opportunists; something that could never happen in the real world.

Muslim scholars, on their part, could appreciate the critical studies of the history and content of Islam by scholars who are not attached to it; who can see things from a different angle, and consequently add insight and depth to different aspects of this huge body of knowledge through critical analysis. They should not insist on their traditional opinions if evidence is adduced against it. They could also appreciate that modern scholarship has a much broader knowledge of comparative philology and more sophisticated methods of linguistic analysis, which puts it in a better position to shed light on some 'obscure' words and terminology, provide more plausible explanations, give more solid etymologies and trace more foreign words than was possible for the traditional Muslim scholars.

And finally, they have to accept other people's rights to study Islam within the framework of their own paradigms, for Islam is a vast meta-historical event which has changed the topography of human history, and as such, people of all persuasions have a right to study and analyse it.

VIII

It is for all the aforementioned reasons that the present book makes an indispensible contribution to the field of Qur'anic studies. It is an example of a good academic endeavour which tries to address many critical issues about the Qur'an and its history in an unprejudiced manner. Although, as one should expect, it is set within the Islamic paradigm, its critical approach and cross-dimensional and denominational analyses makes it stand out as an example of a work which can form a bridge between two perspectictives.

The text is an abridged translation of Ayatollah Mohammad Hādī Ma'rifat's magnum opus, *al-Tamhīd fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'an* (Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'an). The original work is in Arabic and is published in ten volumes. Although the book does not address the Orientalist theories directly, the richness of its investigation and the wealth of information

it contains make most of their doubts and speculations irrelevant, for it shows the inadequacy of the information upon which the Orientalists have conjectured.

Ayatollah Ma'rifat (d. 2007) was one of the most prominent contemporary experts in *'Ulūm al-Qur'an*. He was born in Karbala to a family of the clerical tradition. His forefathers were all religious scholars going back to the famous Sheikh Ali ibn Abd al-'Ālī al-Maysī of Jabal 'Āmil (d. 938/1531). Al-Maysī was the author of *al-Risālat al-Maysiyyah*, and migrated to Isfahān at the invitation of the Safavid king along with his teacher al-Muhaqqiq al-Karakī; hence the Isfahāni origin of Ayatollah Ma'rifat.

More information about his personal life, his education and his other works can be found in his autobiography which follows this introduction. What I have to emphasise here are the innovative ideas he has contributed towards elevating our knowledge of the Qur'an to a higher level. His research and analysis clarify many previously vague aspects of *'Ulūm al-Qur'an*, and address many difficult questions in different areas of this discipline. In addition to the rich historical and conceptual information, the reader will find in the chapters of this book original theories and well considered suggestions for solving certain problematic matters related to this science.

An example of such a theory is his contribution regarding the orality of the Qur'an, which can be applied to the criticisms we discussed earlier regarding the abrupt transitions and disconnected nature of some sections of the Qur'an. Although he does not directly refer to Richard Bell or Theodor Nöldeke, and probably had never read their work, his theory is a clear response and the direct antithesis of their claims, and most certainly unravels Bell's theory on this issue.

Ayatollah Ma'rifat stipulates in this relation that the phraseology of the Qur'an is that of the spoken word, rather than that of a written book. One of the distinguishing features of the primarily written word is the coherence of the contents from beginning to end; something usually lacking in speech. Although a speaker should make sense in what is said, speech is not constrained by a strict verbal or conceptual order. In fact, unlike the written text, abrupt transitions are sometimes desirable. A speaker may jump from one subject to another on account of something

which occurs to him while speaking. According to Ayatollah Maʿrifat, this is something we encounter in the Qurʾan on many occasions.

This style involves switching from the third person to the second person or from the second person to the third person. It may also involve the use of different pronouns and demonstrative pronouns without matching the nouns to which they refer, or switching from explicit to implicit and other such features. These sudden shifts from one state to another are permissible and sometimes desirable in the style of spoken as opposed to written word. It is also permissible to use parenthetical remarks in the spoken word but not in the written word. Such instances, according to Ayatollah Maʿrifat, have occurred in the Qurʾan in different forms as follows.

Sudden Switching: One of the unique features of oral communication is that it is permissible to switch suddenly from one subject to another or from one situation to another relying upon contextual indicators provided by the setting. He mentions *Surah al-Qiyāmah* as an example; this surah begins by talking about Man and his state with regard to the coming of the Hour. Then all of a sudden, the discourse turns to address the Prophet by saying: *Move not thy tongue with it to hasten it; Ours it is to gather it, and to recite it. So, when We recite it, follow thou its recitation. Then Ours it is to explain it* (75:16-19). After this interjection the discourse goes back to confront Mankind with an adjunct: *No indeed; but you love the hasty world, and leave the Hereafter* (75:20-21). Drawing on a tradition from Imam Riḍā, Ayatollah Maʿrifat explains that this sudden shift may have been due to the fact that upon revelation of these verses the Messenger hurried to recite them fearing they would get lost. So he was immediately told not to; and then the discourse on the subject continues.

Grammatical Shift for Rhetorical Purposes (*Iltifāt*): According to Ayatollah Maʿrifat such meandering in discourse is not appropriate in the written word while it is regarded as beauty of style in the spoken word. He cites many examples from different verses including *Fātiḥat al-Kitāb* where one begins by praising God in the third person, and then the discourse turns to petitioning Him in the second person, which is a beautiful grammatical shift in the spoken discourse.

Paying attention to rhyme: One of the distinguishing features of rhyming prose is being able to notice the rhyme if it is heard out loud as opposed

to being written down. There is a lot of rhyming prose in the Qur'an – at the expense of articulated speech – which cannot be properly rendered in a mere book.

Among many examples is the verse: *Bal al-insānu 'alā nafsihī basīrah wa law alqā ma'ādhīrah* (75:14-15); the words only rhyme if there is a pause after both *basīrah* and *ma'ādhīrah* when it is uttered and recited with a *yā'*, *rā'* and *hā'* at the end of them; something which cannot be achieved in the written word. Another example is

Wa al-fajri wa layālin 'ashr wa al-shaf'i wa al-watr wa al-layli idhā yasr (89:1-4);

where the *yā'* at the end of *yasrī* has been omitted to preserve the rhyme when it is said aloud. This is how it was recited to the Prophet and how he recited it to the people, and it is always mandatory to copy it in this way. The written form therefore follows that of recitation, since the recitation of the Qur'an is what came first.

Melodies and tunes: An important feature of the Qur'an is its innovative vocal arrangement to melodies and tunes which has a captivating effect on the feelings of its audience. This can only be achieved by reciting it out loud as steered by the tune of the performance, not whispering it under the cover of secrecy. This is a matter overlooked by those who suppose that the formation of the Qur'an was composed in writing as opposed to epic oral performance.

Ayatollah Ma'rifat provides more evidence for his view which you can find in the related chapter in this book. This is not the only innovative view one can find in contributions of Ayatollah Ma'rifat. Unfortunately, some volumes of this huge work do not submit to translation as they discuss the eloquence and semantic aspects of the Qur'anic literature which only make sense in Arabic.

Notwithstanding, I am sure that the students of *'Ulūm al-Qur'an* will find many interesting and thought provoking ideas in this translation which makes this book an indispensible asset for the students of the sciences of the Qur'an.

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I cannot thank enough the people who made the creation of this English abridged edition of *al-Tamhīd fī Ulūm al-Qur'an* possible. First of