

The Alleged Divine Origin of the Qur'an—Part 1

by Dr. Norman Geisler

Orthodox Islam and historic Christianity cannot both be true. Either religion claims that its scriptures alone are the inspired Word of God. They also contain mutually exclusive claims: God is three persons. God is only one person. The Bible says Christ died on the cross and rose from the dead three days later. The *Qur'an* says that he did not. Thus, it is necessary for the Christian apologist to challenge the divine authority claims of the *Qur'an*.

Origin of the Qur'an

The Islamic claim for the *Qur'an* is unparalleled by that in any other major religion. Is the *Qur'an* a miracle? Muhammad claimed it was—indeed it was the only miracle he offered as proof of his claims to be a prophet (sura 17:88). The evidence Muslims give for this claim includes the following points.

Argument from Unique Literary Style

Eloquence is highly questionable as a test for divine inspiration, yet a foundation stone of the Islamic position is that the *Qur'an* possesses a literary quality and style that could only have come directly from God. At best the *Qur'an's* literary qualifications prove that Muhammad was a gifted person. But amazing artistic and intellectual gifts are hardly supernatural. Mozart wrote his first symphony at the age of six and produced his entire music corpus before age 35 when he died. Muhammad did not begin to write until age 40. But what Muslim would say that Mozart's works are miraculous? If eloquence were the test, a case could be made for the divine authority of many literary classics, from Homers *Iliad* and *Odyssey* to Shakespeare.

Further, even some early Muslim scholars admitted that the *Qur'an* was not perfect in its literary form. The Iranian Shiite scholar Ali Dashti notes that “among the Moslem scholars of the early period, before bigotry and hyperbole prevailed, were some such as Ebrahim on-Nassam who openly acknowledged that the arrangement and syntax of the Qoran are not miraculous and that works of equal or greater value could be produced by other God-fearing persons.” Although some condemned this view (based on their interpretation of sura 17:90), on-Nassam had many defenders, among them several leading exponents of the Motazelite school.¹

The *Qur'an* is not unrivaled, even among works in Arabic. Islamic scholar, C. G. Pfander, points out that “it is by no means the universal opinion of unprejudiced Arabic scholars that the literary style of the *Qur'an* is superior to that of all other books in the Arabic language.” For example, “some doubt whether in eloquence and poetry it surpasses the Mu'allaqat, or the Magamat or Hariri, though in Muslim lands few people are courageous enough to express such an opinion.”² Dashti, contends, however, that the *Qur'an* contains numerous grammatical irregularities. He notes that:

The Qoran contains sentences which are incomplete and not fully intelligible without the air of commentaries; foreign words, unfamiliar Arabic words, and words used with other than the normal meaning; adjectives and verbs inflected without observance of the concord of gender and number; illogical and ungrammatically applied pronouns which sometimes have no referent; and predicates which in rhymed passages are often remote from the subjects.

He adds, “these and other such aberrations in the language have given scope to critics who deny the Quran’s eloquence.”³ He lists numerous examples (suras 74:1; 4:160; 20:66; 2:172, etc.), one of which is “In verse 9 of *Sura 49 (ol-Hojorat)*, ‘If two parties of believers have started to fight each other, make peace between them.’ The verb for “have started to fight” is in the plural, whereas it ought to be in the dual like its subject, “two parties.” Anis A. Shorrosh lists other literary flaws in the *Qur’an*. For example, in sura 2:177 he points out that the word *Sabireen* in Arabic should have been *Sabiroon* because of its position in the sentence. Likewise, *Sabieen* in sura 5:69 is more correct Arabic than *Sabioon*. Also, Shorrosh notes that there is “a gross error in Arabic” in sura 3:59.⁴ Dashti counts more than 100 aberrations from normal rules and structures of Arabic.⁵ With such problems, the *Qur’an* may be eloquent, but it is neither perfect nor unparalleled.

As Pfander observed, “even were it proved beyond the possibility of doubt that the *Qur’an* far surpassed all other books in eloquence, elegance, and poetry, that would no more prove its inspiration than a man’s strength would demonstrate his wisdom or a woman’s beauty her virtue.”⁶ There is no logical connection between literary eloquence and divine authority. The sovereign God (whom Muslims accept) could chose to speak in plain everyday language, if he wished. At best one might attempt to argue that if God said it, he would say it most eloquently. Even so, it would be a logical fallacy to argue that simply because it is eloquent God must have said it. Humans can speak eloquently, and God can speak in common language.

Other religions have used the beautiful literary style of their work as a sign of its divine origin. Would Muslims accept the inspiration of these works? For example, the Persian founder of the Manichaeans, Mani, “is said to have claimed that men should believe in him as the Paraclete [“Helper” Jesus promised in John 14] because he produced a book called *Artand*, full of beautiful pictures.” Further, “he said that the book had been given him by God, that no living man could paint pictures equal in beauty to those contained in it, and that therefore it had evidently come from God himself.⁷ Yet no Muslim will accept this claim. Why then should non-Muslims accept literary beauty as a valid test for the divine authority of the *Qur’an*?

Argument from Muhammad’s Illiteracy

In addition to its style, the human source and content of the *Qur’an* is proof of its divine origin. They insist that no book with its message could have come from an illiterate prophet, as was Muhammad.

It is questionable that Muhammad was actually illiterate. As one authority noted, the Arabic words *al umni*, translated “the unlettered” prophet in the *Qur’an* (sura 7:157), “may be [rendered] ‘heathen’ rather than ‘illiterate.’” Pfander prefers the translation, “the Gentile Prophet,” agreeing that the term does not imply illiteracy.⁸ The same word is rendered “gentiles” in sura 62:2: “He it is Who hath sent among gentiles (*al umni*),” and in suras 2:73; 3:19, 69; 7:156.

The evidence suggests that Muhammad was not illiterate. For example, “when the Treaty of Hudaibah was being signed, Muhammad took the pen from Ali, struck out the words in which Ali had designated him “the apostle of God” and wrote instead with his own hand the words, “son of Abdu’llah.” And “tradition tells us too that, when he was dying, Muhammad called for pen and ink, to write a command appointing his successor, but his strength failed him before writing-materials were brought.”⁹

W. Montgomery Watts informs us that “many Meccans were able to read and write, and there is therefore a presumption that an efficient merchant, as Muhammad was, knew something of the arts.”¹⁰ Even Muslim scholars refer to Muhammad as being “perfect in intellect.”¹¹ If

Muhammad lacked formal training in earlier years, there is no reason why such an intelligent person could not have caught up on his own later.

Third, even if it were granted that Muhammad was illiterate, it does not follow that the *Qur'an* was dictated to him by God. There are other possible explanations. Even if he was not formally trained, Muhammad was a bright person possessing great skills. His scribe could have made up for deficiencies by stylizing the work. This was a common practice. Homer was blind, and so he probably did not write his epics himself. Some critics argue that it is possible that Muhammad's first impression was right, that he received the information from an evil spirit, who might have aided his ability.

Argument from the Preservation of the Qur'an

Does perfect preservation prove divine inspiration? Muslims imply that the *Qur'an* is identical to the original, and this sets the book above the Bible. *Qur'an* critics dispute this. First, there is often a serious over-claim as to the preservation of the *Qur'an*. While it is true that the present *Qur'an* is a nearly perfect copy of its seventh-century original, it is not true that this is exactly the way it came from Muhammad.

The *Qur'an* was originally given orally by Muhammad and memorized by devout followers, most of whom were killed shortly after Muhammad's death. According to early tradition, Muhammad's scribes wrote on pieces of paper, stones, palm-leaves, shoulder-blades, ribs, and bits of leather. Muslims believe that during the lifetime of Muhammad the *Qur'an* was written down. But, according to the testimony of Zayd, a contemporary and follower of Muhammad, he was requested by Abu Bakr to "search out the [various chapters and verses of] the *Qur'an* and gather it together." He responded, "accordingly, I sought out the *Qur'an*: I gathered it together from leafless palm branches and thin white stones and men's breasts...."¹² In the 650s, during the reign of Uthman ibn Affan, the third Muslim Caliph, it was reported that several Muslim communities were using different versions of the *Qur'an*. Once again, Zayd was called in to prepare the official revised version. It is this version that has remained uniform and intact, not any original version that came directly from Muhammad.

In his book *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'an*, European archaeologist, Arthur Jeffry, revealed his discovery of one of three known copies of some early Islamic works called *Masahif*. These books related the state of the *Qur'an* text prior to its standardization under Uthman. It reveals, contrary to Muslims' claim, that there were several differing texts prior to Uthman's revision. In fact, as Dashti points out, some *Qur'anic* verses were changed due to the scribes' suggestions to Muhammad and others by the influence of Umar I, second caliph of the Muslim Empire, on Muhammad.

Jeffry concludes that Uthman's recension "was a necessary stroke of policy to establish a standard text for the whole empire." Since there were wide divergences between the *Qur'ans* of Medina, Mecca, Basra, Kufa, and Damascus, "Uthman's solution was to canonize the Medinan Codex and order all others to be destroyed." Therefore, he concludes, "there can be little doubt that the text canonized by Uthman was only one among several types of text in existence at the time."¹³

Not all Muslims today accept the same version of the *Qur'an*. The Sunnite Muslims accept the Sahih tradition of Masud as authoritative. Masud was one of the few people authorized by Muhammad to teach the *Qur'an*. Yet the Ibn Masud Codex of the *Qur'an* has a multitude of variations from the Uthmanic recension. In the second sura alone there are nearly 150 variations. It takes Jeffry some ninety-four pages to show the variations between the two. He also

demonstrates that the variant readings are not just a matter of dialect, as many Muslims claim. Some variations involved a whole clause and others omitted complete sentences. Jeffry concludes that the Uthman text that was canonized was only one out of many, and “there is grave suspicion that Uthman may have seriously edited the text he canonized.”¹⁴

Islamic tradition reveals certain things not found in the present *Qur’an*. One tells us that Ayishah, one of Muhammad’s wives, said: “Among what was sent down of the *Qur’an* were ten well known (verses) about—Suckling, which prohibited: then they were annulled by five well known ones. Then the Apostle of God deceased, and they are what is recited of the *Qur’an*.”¹⁵ Another example of something not found in today’s *Qur’an* is what Umar said: “Verily God sent Muhammad with the truth, and He sent down upon him the Book, accordingly the Verse of Stoning was part of what God Most High sent Down: the Apostle of God stoned, and we stoned after him, and in the Book of God stoning is the adulterer’s due.”¹⁶ This original revelation was apparently changed and one hundred stripes replaced stoning as the punishment for adultery (sura 24:2).

The so-called “satanic verses” illustrate another change in the original text. According to one version of these verses Muhammad had an early revelation in Mecca, which allowed intercession to certain idols, which said:

Did you consider al-hat and al-Uzza
And al-Manat, the third, the other?
Those are the swans exalted;
Their intercession is expected;
Their likes are not neglected.¹⁷

Sometime after this Muhammad received another revelation canceling the last three lines (verses) and substituting what we now find in sura 53 verses 21-23 which omit the part about interceding to these gods. According to Watt, both versions had been recited publicly. Muhammad’s explanation was that Satan had deceived him and inserted the false verses without his knowing it!

W. St. Clair-Tisdall, who long worked among Muslims, pointed out that even in the present *Qur’an* there are some variations.

Among various readings may be mentioned: (1) in Surah XXVIII, 48, some read “Sahirani” for “sihrani”: (2) in Surah XXXII, 6, after “ummahatuhum” one reading adds the words “wa hua abun lahum”: (3) in Surah XXXIV, 18, for “rabbana ba’id” some read “rabuna ba’ada”: (4) in Surah XXXVIII, 22, for “tis’un” another reading is “tis’atun”: (5) in Surah XIX, 35, for “tantaruna” some read “yamtaruna”.¹⁸

Although Shi’ite Muslims are in the minority, they are the second largest Islamic sect in the world, with more than 100 million followers. They claim that Caliph Uthman intentionally eliminated many verses from the *Qur’an* which spoke of Ali.

L. Bevan Jones summed up the matter well in his book. *The People of the Mosque*, when he said: “while it may be true that no other work has remained for twelve centuries with so pure a text, it is probably equally true that no other has suffered so drastic a purging.”¹⁹

Even were the *Qur’an* a perfect word-for-word copy of the original as given by Muhammad, it would not prove the original was inspired of God. All it would demonstrate is that today’s *Qur’an* is a carbon copy of whatever Muhammad said. It would say or prove nothing about the truth of what he said. The Muslim claim that they have the true religion, because they have the only

perfectly copied holy book, is as logically fallacious as someone preferring a perfectly printed counterfeit \$ 1000 bill over a slightly imperfect genuine one. The crucial question, which Muslim apologists beg by this argument, is whether the original is God's Word, not whether they possess a perfect copy of it.

(to be continued)

Notes:

- ¹ A Dashti, *Twenty-Three Years: A Study of the Prophetic Career of Mohammad* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985), p. 48.
- ² C. G. Pfander, *The Mizanu'l Haqq: The Balance of Truth* (Austria: Light of Life, 1986), p. 264.
- ³ Dashti, pp. 48-49.
- ⁴ Anis Shorrosh, *Islam Revealed: A Christian Arab's View of Islam* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1988), pp. 199-200.
- ⁵ Dashti, p. 50.
- ⁶ Pfander, p. 267.
- ⁷ Ibid., p. 264.
- ⁸ Ibid., p. 254.
- ⁹ Ibid., p. 255.
- ¹⁰ W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman*, reprint ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 40.
- ¹¹ Joseph P. Gudel, *To Every Muslim an Answer: Islamic Apologetics Compared and Contrasted with Christian Apologetics* (Unpublished thesis at Simon Greenleaf School of Law, 1982), p. 72.
- ¹² Pfander, pp. 258-259.
- ¹³ Arthur Jeffry, ed., *Islam: Muhammad and His Religion* (Indianapolis/New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1958), pp. 7-8.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., pp. ix-x.
- ¹⁵ Pfander, p. 256.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Watt, p. 60.
- ¹⁸ W. St. Clair-Tisdall, *A Manual of the Leading Muhammedan Objections to Christianity* (London: S.P.C.K., 1904), p. 60.
- ¹⁹ L. B. Jones, *The People of the Mosque* (London: Student Christian Movement Press, 1932), p. 62.