

Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami. *The History of the Qurʾānic Text from Revelation to Compilation: A Comparative Study with the Old and New Testaments.* Azami Publishing House, 2009. 424pp. ISBN: none.

How do we know that the Qurʾān revered and recited by Muslims around the globe is the same one that the Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, recited to his companions? Can it be that the Book considered by more than a billion people to be the literal word of Allah has been tampered with? It is primarily in answer to this question that Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami first published this monumental work in 2003, now released in its second edition and bearing a handsome new cover.

Answers to such queries were once self-evident to most Muslims, as they considered it self-evident that a Book memorized, recorded, and publicly recited from the time of its revelation until the present by whole communities in each generation could have been changed, whether purposely or by accident. But in an age when recognition of Islamic intellectual tradition itself has been obfuscated, the query has gained import and polemical force—especially as confronted by Orientalist scholarship, which takes as a guiding presupposition that the Qurʾān’s claim to revelation is vacuous. One resurgent trend in such scholarship is the suggestion that the text we now know as “the Qurʾān” was composed hundreds of years after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, based on Jewish prototypes, and was back projected by his followers.

From his introductory remarks, Azami makes no attempt to hide his intent to face such challenges head-on; the book itself, he mentions, was spurred into print by Toby Lester’s provocative article “What is the Qurʾān”, which argued that the Muslim assertion that the Qurʾān is a Divinely revealed text cannot be defended in a scholarly fashion. Rising to the challenge, Azami has estab-

lished with his detailed research and eloquent prose that Lester's claim was completely misguided.

Of course, the author has trodden this path before. In his other works such as *Studies in Early Hadith Methodology* (1968), *Hadith Methodology and Literature* (1977), and *On Schacht's Origins of Muhammadan Literature* (1986), he contributed to the revision and dismantling of classic Orientalist attacks on the field of hadith; his work is distinguished in responding to Goldziher and the like not merely from Islamic sources but also by showing how many of their claims are either based entirely on unfounded speculation or go against the evidence they themselves recognize. Azami is grounded in both traditional Islamic scholarship (having graduated from Deoband in 1952, and taken a Master's from al-Azhar in 1955) as well as the Western academic tradition (Ph.D. Cambridge, 1966), and so is well placed to interrogate this pseudo-historicist assault on the Qur^ʿān.

Though much has been written in Arabic regarding the preservation of the Qur^ʿān, Azami's work is unique in its presentation, style, and holistic approach. He speaks the language of an academic, and is able to present traditional content in that fashion. He begins by contextualizing the event of revelation, describing the early history of Islam (Chapter 1) with a section on pre-Islamic Arab society, then moving to a brief biography of the Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him. His aim, however, is not merely to regurgitate older material but to frame the event of the Qur^ʿān's revelation and to offer a comparative model by which to assess the preservation of the Torah and the Bible (Section II). Azami illustrates that the Prophet Muḥammad, peace be upon him, was the first truly historical prophet, meaning that he lived in the full light of history and we thus have accurate and widespread knowledge of his life and activities, by both Muslim and non-Muslim accounts. He later contrasts this reality with the cases of Moses and Jesus, whose existence, if we are to rely only upon historical evidence and the scant works that document their lives, could be seriously questioned (Part 2; Chapter 17).

After discussing the nature of revelation (Chapter 3), Azami discusses the Prophetic method of Qur^ʿānic instruction (Chapter 4). He dispels the common representation of the Prophet, peace be upon him, and the Companions as being simple folk whose teaching methodology was restricted to sitting in the desert and learning in a random, unorganized fashion. Rather, in this fourth chapter "Teaching the Qur^ʿān" he shows that Prophetic pedagogy was well-organized on both the individual and group levels, and that the method used to transmit and teach the Qur^ʿān was such that its exact recitation, down to the vocalization of the letters, was precisely preserved. This precision was achieved by making a qualified teacher's mentoring conditional for acknowledgement as a reciter or teacher of the Qur^ʿān; even today, though someone

might memorize the Qurʾān in its entirety, the person would not be considered qualified reciter unless certified by a qualified teacher. Azami's brilliance lies in illustrating, through primary sources, that these methods were not dissimilar to the modern system of teaching, for in no serious profession can a student move to the level of independent work without a period of supervised practical training. Such was the case with the numerous branches of Islamic studies from the time of the Prophet, peace be upon him, onwards; the Qurʾān being at the forefront of them.

Azami then moves to the compilation of the various codices (*maṣāḥif*) after the Prophet's death, peace be upon him. He focuses on what he terms "the law of witness", meaning that the compilation of the Qurʾān's took place publicly; in fact, this aspect of the compilation process was a condition for the validity of the effort. Thus, every verse and chapter was transmitted and recorded publicly, in front of numerous witnesses, from Prophetic times even until today; there is not one instance recorded of a single individual claiming to have heard or been taught a verse that no one else knew about. This condition was maintained throughout Muslim history: thus, variant recitations were recognized from the Prophetic era and were meticulously documented, preserved, and studied. The existence of different codices was not cause for alarm. The project of compiling the Qurʾān into a single volume was undertaken by the entire community, and dispensing of other private copies was neither nefarious nor covert but was agreed upon by all involved. All of these matters are dealt with in the first section of the text. The author's academic honesty is clear: in cases where scholarly differences of opinion exist, he lists and explains them, for instance, regarding whether the Prophet, peace be upon him, or the Companions, or both, were responsible for the ordering of the chapters of the Qurʾān (p. 77).

Modern contentions are dealt with thoroughly and in great depth. Azami devotes an entire chapter to discussing the "So-Called Muṣḥaf of Ibn Masʿūd" (Chapter 14), addressing claims that it differs from the Uthmānī codex in arrangement, text, and by omitting some suras. Azami points out that none of those making this claim have ever witnessed a manuscript copy bearing all of these differences; furthermore, these claims have been made without any sourcing (*isnād*) and so lack historical weight; and, finally, that these observations were based on Ibn Masʿūd's recitation, not a written copy of the *muṣḥaf*, meaning he may have been subject to a memory lapse at some point in his life.

To tackle more detailed and fundamental challenges as to whether the Arabic script of the Qurʾān was changed, Azami includes chapters on the evolution of reading aids in the *muṣḥaf* (Chapter 8), and the history of Arabic paleology and orthography and how these were manifest in the Qurʾān (Chapter 9, 10). He then moves on to discuss the Uthmānī codices, their variations, and

how these are explained by traditional Muslim scholarship (Chapter 11). He thoroughly deals with the variant recitations and their historical place in the Qurʾān (Chapter 12), highlighting that far from being a cause for questioning the accuracy of the text, they have always been recognized by Muslims and believed to be from Allah, and are in fact a sign of the Divine origin of the text. Indeed, as he says, how else to explain that none of these variants contradict one another, but rather enrich the text's meaning by elaborating one another?

The author's strong background in Hadith studies is evident in Chapter 13, where he details the traditional pedagogical methods of Islam. Due to the meticulous affirmation and validation of personal contact, chains of transmission, and character witness, Muslims can be confident about both the reliability and ethical condition of acquired knowledge. The Muslim claim to the veracity of the text is thus at once epistemic and ethical. Azami's brief explanation of hadith methodology is important background information for any reader, and especially so if they are to understand the preservation of the Qurʾān through mass-transmission. In many cases, hadith detail not only when, but where and why a verse was revealed and recorded. The narrators of these events are not a mere handful of companions but rather constitute an entire community, from whom hundreds more transmitted this information, and so on; thus, to reject the Qurʾān's early existence, to suggest that it was composed later on by a group of individuals and retrospectively projected and synthesized, is to deny the existence not just of a community but of an entire history and its record—as outrageous as saying, for instance, that the US Constitution was a forged document written in modern times, and that the whole history of the United States was projected backwards by a few senators. While one may be able to garner evidence for such, we would at best consider such a claim a conspiracy theory, not scholarship, and those who uphold it deranged, not qualified scholars.

And yet, as Azami points out in his final section (Section III: “An Appraisal of Orientalist Research”), it is precisely this type of thought and reasoning that is considered not just acceptable but pioneering and respected in the genealogy of modern academic studies of Islam. The author shows that, unable to more honestly assail the Book of Allah, Orientalist researchers have time and time again played with the data to justify their own prejudices. Orientalist scholarship, far from being fair and accurate, began with and continues to attack, rather than study, the Qurʾān: its starting point is the assumption that the Qurʾān is a book made up by later generations of Muslims, and its aim is to prove this self-assumed belief.

The reality, of course, is that double standards persist in the study of the East in general and Islam in particular, which Azami highlights through his survey of the history of the preservation of the Torah and the Bible (Section

II). Some may question the need for including this section, which undermines the historical grounding of these other two faith traditions, but the author's intent is clear: to illustrate the clear difference between academics' treatment of Judaism and Christianity, on the one hand, and Islam, on the other. Based entirely on the former faiths' sources, he illustrates that their central texts come nowhere near the accuracy or historical validity of the Qurʾān; yet, he points out repeatedly, these texts are treated very differently. Muslim scholarship, as well, is disregarded: while Muslims are said to be biased in their writings about the Qurʾān, Jews who write about the Torah are not equally suspect (Chapter 20). There are thus grounds for questioning the very concept of impartiality as it circulates in the self-perception of Western academia.

His epilogue sums up and concludes this line of discourse: no research on the Qurʾān can truly be unbiased. One either believes its veracity as revelation, or not; if not, one must dismiss it as fiction, and any subsequent research will be built around this assumption. Exclusive claims to objectivity on the part of Western academic studies of Islam, then, are deeply problematic, and in fact only reveal the ethnocentric suggestion that non-Western cultures are incapable of accurately depicting themselves. In this regard, Azami quotes the famous saying of Ibn Sīrīn: "This knowledge (of religion) constitutes faith, so be wary from whom you take your knowledge" (373). Thus, he maintains, a Muslim should recognize the biases of Western scholars and their historical aims before giving ear to their claims. In his final chapter he states bluntly that Western scholarship on the Qurʾān is not a mere academic interest but from the very beginning has been rooted in imperialist projects and projections. The modern situation is little different, though perhaps it has become less blatant.

Azami bases his writing on his own original research, and he has brought much source material from Arabic into English himself; because even in the cases where translations have been accurate, they have often not had the holistic understanding of the Arab and Muslim tradition necessary to properly contextualize their work. For this reason, the book is necessarily spread out: he covers everything from Islamic and pre-Islamic history to manuscript preservation and authentication to the development of the Arabic script from the earliest times until the modern day. Despite its readability, style, and relevance to the layperson, its rigor and thoroughness classify it as a thoroughly sourced research monograph; I myself have taken a class based on this book, and have taught from it, and found it to be an excellent resource.

This second edition is now in paperback, and has more aesthetic appeal than the first edition. The 424 glossy pages contain numerous high-quality images of Qurʾānic and Biblical manuscripts from various periods. The author includes his own illustrations, graphics, and maps to provide visual

assistance for key concepts, which is especially useful in reinforcing his discussions on authentication of monographs and in hadith-chain analysis. Of the most important and unique of these is his tabling and color-coding of the differences between the Uthmānī codices (p. 168), which he presents based on information from classical Islamic works to show that Muslim scholars from the earliest times recognized, noted, and explained these minor differences by rules of Arabic script and recitation.

The Arabic fonts used for quoting verses of the Qurʾān are of higher quality and are more aesthetically appealing than the standard Arabic font used for other functions in the book; these latter fonts could be improved. Arabic texts other than the Qurʾānic verses have not been vowelized. The salutation graphics have unfortunately been left out, an editorial decision which the author notes in the introduction was made to preserve the flow of the text (p. xxii).

Azami has produced a work that speaks eloquently to a wide spectrum of readers with different backgrounds and interests. To use terms such as “monumental”, “one-of-a-kind”, and “exceptional” to describe this work is not exaggeration, and I hope sincerely that, just as Azami’s interventions in Hadith studies have changed the nature of scholarship in that field, so too will this book change Western approaches to the Qurʾān. The work certainly has the potential to do so. The question remaining is whether academic culture is reflexive enough to address deep-seated historical prejudices.

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