

ANALYSIS OF EARLIEST QURAN MANUSCRIPTS

- The earliest Quranic manuscripts have no diacritical marks and are written in style termed 'Hijazi' or 'Ma'il'
- They are dated using 3 main methods:
 - A. Paleographic or based on the script styles
 - B. Codicologically. This looks at the type of writing material, the format of the page, numbering, verses and dividers, inks and colouring, margins and binding. Different aspects were in use at different times.
 - C. Radiocarbon dating. This is more controversial and can only really date the death of the animal. It also doesn't tell us if the parchment was used previously for a non-Quranic material, rubbed off and then overwritten with the Quran.
- Scholars have noted that there is indeed variation in the consonantal text of early Quranic manuscripts. The SIN tries to explain these by saying that the Quran was revealed in 7 Qiraat or dialects, but dialectical differences have nothing to do with consonantal variants. The dialects come from the vowels or diacritical marks, neither of which were present in the 7th century Arabic script.
- Shady Hekmat Nasser has shown that the readings were chosen by Ibn Mujahid in the 10th century based on political and practical reasons not based on whether there was strong evidence that they were traceable back to Muhammad.
- A further complication is the fact that some of the early manuscripts do not reflect a 'single reading' among these Qiraat, but appear to be a combination of different readings. This explains why Dr Tayyar Altikulac, the expert on the Topkapi manuscript to describe these codices in terms of rough percentages when it comes to their adherence to readings.
- Despite this *"many of the thousands corrections I have documented appear to have nothing to do with the readings attested in the secondary literatures. So, corrections must represent in at least some cases another phenomenon, such as perhaps a greater degree of perceived flexibility of the Quran text in its early centuries (the time of first production of these manuscripts) than is documented in the Qiraat literature"* [Brubaker, p9]
- The majority of the corrections result in the manuscript now conforming to the rasm of the 1924 Cairo Hafs text. *'This pattern is important and shows a general movement over time toward conformity, though not immediate complete conformity'*[Brubaker p10]
- The corrections can be classified into different types. They are listed below along with approximate percentages of total represented by each type
 1. Erasure and overwriting 30%
 2. Insertion 24%
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- Why were the changes made? The most obvious reason is that a scribe simply made a mistake and then corrected it. This fits some of the variants but not all. Some of the variants show differing inks, writing styles, nib widths etc and were obviously the work of later scribes.
- Brubaker's book has 20 examples of corrections in manuscripts. Below we will see a few of the best examples with photographs of the correction.

Topkapi

Topkapi Mushaf: early-Mid 8th c.



Investigative book on Topkapi
(out of print, but in some libraries, including Pfander)



Folios of the Topkapi



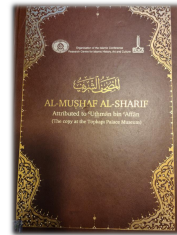
Examples of early short vowels

Conclusions of Muslim Scholars

Dr. Tayyar Altikulaç: Topkapi

Dated to "the second half of the first century A.H. and the first half of the second Century A.H. [due to] 'vowelling and dotting.'" (i.e., 672 AD – 767 AD) (Altikulaç, "Al-Mushaf al-Sharif" 2007:83)

"Even though we would like to publish this sacred text as the Mushaf of Caliph Uthman, our research indicated that it was neither the private Mushaf of Caliph Uthman, nor one of the Mushafs he sent to various centers." (Altikulaç, "Al-Mushaf al-Sharif" 2007:23)

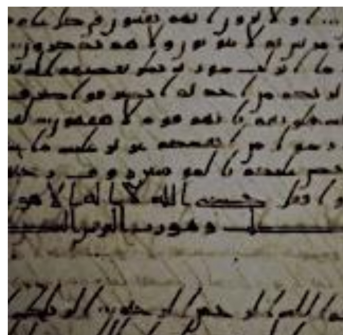


- This manuscript has been attributed to Uthman but scholars believe that it dates from mid 8th century. Renowned scholars Tayyar Altikulaç and Ihsanoglu examined this manuscript and concluded the following
- 'Judging from its illumination, the Topkapi Museum Mushaf dates neither from the period when the Mushafs of the Caliph Uthman were written nor from the time when copies based on these Mushafs were written. Since Mushafs of the early period took those attributed to the Caliph Uthman as a model, they do not have elements of illumination..this Mushaf..does not constitute a sample of the early period of Mushaf writing due to a number of characteristics..[it] most probably belongs to the Umayyad period' ['Al-Mushaf al-Sharif attributed to Uthman bin Affan' (Istanbul, IRCICA, 2007) p10-13]

Codex Parisino-Petropolitanus

- This is a composite manuscript with most of it being in the Bibliotheque Nationale in Paris but parts of it being in National Library of Russia (St Petersburg), the Vatican Library and the Nasser D. Khalil collection of Islamic art in London.
- Francois Deroche dates it to between 671 and 695 and does not believe that it is one of the copies attributed to Uthman.
- Altikulaç dates it to a similar period but believes that it originates from Damascus

Parisino-Petropolitanus: early 8th c.



Rudimentary script (Hijazi)



A different script



Scripts help to date it

Conclusions of Muslim Scholars

Francois Deroche on the Petropolitanus Text

- There are corrections to the text
- It disagrees with the 1924 Caireen Mushaf in **93 places**
- “Five different copyists”
- “Later modified with erasures and additions”
 - Arabe 328 = **26% of the Qur’an**
 - Arabe 330g = 15% of the Qur’an
 - Arabe 614a = 4.2% of the Qur’an



The Fustat Umayyad Codex

- This is a manuscript that has been broken up into sections which are in separate

Conclusions of Muslim Scholars

Dr. Tayyar Altıkulaç: on the al-Husseini manuscript

- “This is not Uthmanic”
- “It is dated from early to mid 8th c.”
- “It was stated that the Cairo copy... might have been written on the order of ‘Abd al-‘Aziz b. Marwan (d.704), the governor of Egypt. However, **the reason for reaching this conclusion has not been explained.** We share the view that this copy is not one of the Mushafs attributed to Caliph ‘Uthman.” (Altıkulaç, ‘Al-Mushaf al-Sharif’

2007:36-footnote 14a)

libraries and museums. The name ‘Fustat Umayyad Codex’ was given to it by Francois Deroche.

- He believes that it is possibly the codex sent by Al-Hajjaj to Abd al-Aziz bin Marwan. This would date it to the end of the 7th to early 8th century.

In this manuscript we see multiple post production insertions of the word ‘Allah’

The Cairo Mushaf

- This is a 'monumental' codex, so described because of its large size. It is housed in the Husayni Mosque in Cairo.
- The SIN states in Al-Bukhari, Vol 6 Hadith 510 that Uthman had copies of the Quran sent to 5 cities: Mecca, Medina, Kufa, Basra and Damascus. The custodians of this manuscript claim that it is one of the 5 Mushafs sent by Uthman before 656.
- Despite this other leading eading scholars, including Altikulac date it to late 8th or early 9th century. Indeed he says the following: *'The comparison we made between the Mushafs attributed to Caliph Uthman in 44 places concerning pronunciation, a superfluous or a missing letter and the structure of words leads us to thing that this Mushaf is not related to any of the Mushafs of Caliph Uthman... This Mushaf differs from the Medina Mushaf in 14 of the 44 places, from the Mecca Mushaf in 15 places and from the Kufa Mushaf in 7 places, from the Basra Mushaf in 9 places, and from the Damascus Mushaf in 28 places. As a result, although the Cairo Mushaf has common points with one or more than any one of these Mushafs in each of the 44 places, it is not exactly the same as any one of them'*

CORRECTIONS IN QURANIC MANUSCRIPTS. **(Daniel Alan Brubaker, 2019)**

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production of these manuscripts) than is documented in the Qiraat literature” [Brubaker, p9]

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Topkapi

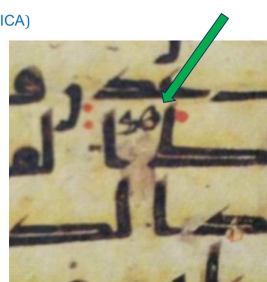
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- Brubaker notes 25 corrections in the 408 folios of the Topkapi manuscripts. Below we can see 3 examples

Insertions of ‘huwa’ 9:72

- Q9:72 has the word ‘huwa’ added in a different hand, nib and style and is therefore clearly an addition. It should be noted that the 1924 Cairo text has this word, so the net effect of the correction is to bring it into conformity with the 1924 text.
- The word means ‘that is’ and the effect of the addition is to turn *‘Allah’s good pleasure is greater, the great triumph’* to *‘Allah’s good pleasure, **that is** the great triumph’*

(Topkapi mushaf al-sharif, fol. 122v. - Image reproduced by permission of IRCICA)
Surah 9:72

- 1924 = “*wa-riḡwānūn min allāhu akbaru dhālika huwa l-fawzu l-‘azīm*”
- Translated: “and Allah’s good pleasure is greater, **that is** the great triumph.”
- The new word is ‘**huwa**’: **هُوَ** “**that (m.) is**” has been added to the text
- It doesn’t change the meaning very much
- It now conforms to the current 1924 ‘**Hafs**’ text
- Because **هُوَ** uses a different hand, nib and style, this suggests post-production at a much later date



- While the addition of the word does not dramatically alter the meaning, it does show that the assertion that the Quran has been PERFECTLY PRESERVED preserved with NO VARIATION AT ALL is false

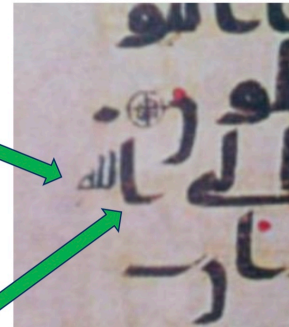
Insertion of Allah

- At Q66:8 we have the addition of the word 'Allah'. This is quite significant as it shows that for whatever reason, the scribe forgot the most important name in all of Islam. Again the effect of this addition is to bring it into conformity with the 1924 edition. The photographs below show the original addition and where it is in the Cairo text.
- Again, the issue is not whether or not the addition makes major changes to doctrine, the issue is that it shows that SIN apologists who have argued that the Quran has been perfectly preserved 'down the the letter' are simply wrong.

(Topkapi codex, fol. 374v.)

Surah 66:8

- **#1**: This insertion of *lām-lām-he* ('Allah') occurs near the beginning of the verse, since originally, the first *allāh* of this verse was not present **#1**
- Original: "Oh you who believe! Turn to a sincere repentance"
- Current: "Oh you who believe! Turn to Allah with sincere repentance"
- **#2**: Notice the original 'alif after the ila uses a larger nib, suggesting an error to the original text
- The change has been made with a very small nib and is probably a modern intervention **#2**
- It now conforms to the 1924 'Hafs' text

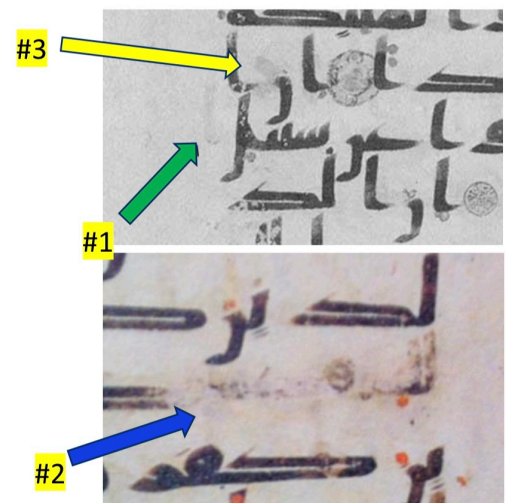


Sura 4:167 there is erasure leaving gaps

(Topkapi codex, fol. 65r)

Surah 4:167

- There has been an erasure of two (and possibly three) words
- **#1**: The first, an erasure of the first letter of Allah (Green arrow)
- **#2**: The second, on the next line, shows the shadow of what was first written, which was *allāhi qad* "Allah has already" (Blue arrow)
- Original: "Surely those who disbelieve and hinder from the way of Allah have strayed far into error"
- Current: "Surely those who disbelieve and hinder from the way have strayed far into error"
- This correction goes away from the 1924 'Hafs' text
- **#3**: Another erasure can be found on line 10 as well (Yellow arrow), but



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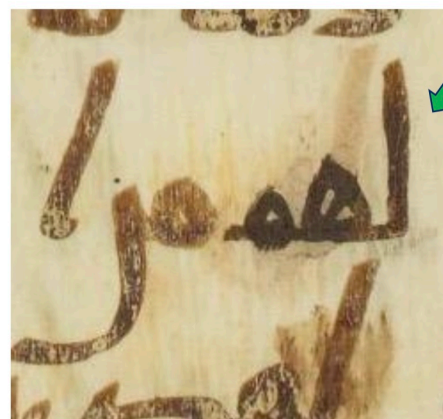
Sura 42:21 there are erasures

(BnF arabe 328, fol. 58v. - By permission of the Bibliothèque nationale de France)

Surah 42:21

The second of three instances of لهم lahum (for them) in this verse

- Original: *lām-he*, that is, the compound Arabic word *lahu* “to him”
- Original: “Or do they have associates who enacted for him”
- Current: replaced by *lām-he-mīm*, that is, *lahum* “for them (m.)”
- Current: “Or do they have associates who enacted for them”
- This now corresponds to the 1924 **Hafs** text

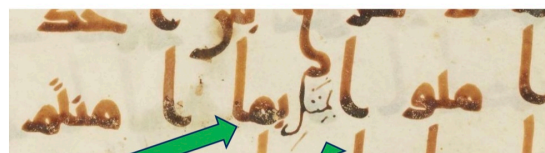


In Sura 2:137 there is insertion of ‘bi mithli’

(BnF arabe 331, fol. iv.)

Surah 2:137

- #1: The word مِثْل *mithli* “as” was **omitted** when first written, and **then** was **added** at a later time, along with the preceding *bi*, using a completely different hand writing, and a much narrower nib
- Note that it **has vowels** and **diacritical marks**, suggesting that it was corrected in **modern** times
- #2: The *bi* which was first written was linked along with the letter *mā*, and has **not been erased**
- So, as it now stands, the portion reads امنوا بمثل بما amanū bi-*mithli bi-mā*, which is an incorrect and **non-viable reading**
- Original: “If they believe in that which you have believed”
- Current: “If they believe similarly to that which you have believed”



#2

#1

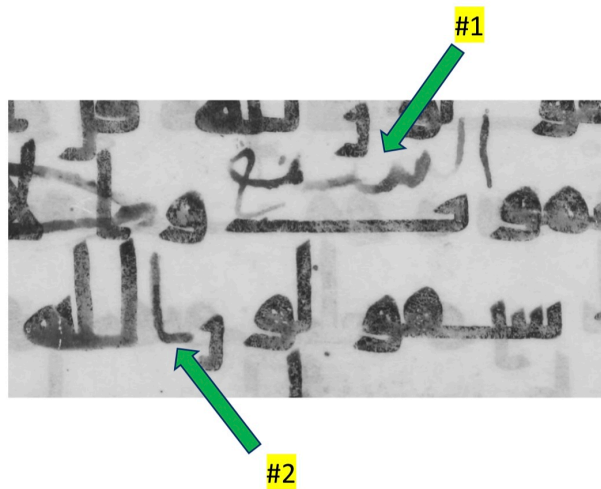


Sura 23:86-87 insertion of 'The Seven'

(BnF arabe 327, fol. ir.)

Surah 23:86-87

- #1: The words السبع *alsab'i* "the seven" were added by a later scribe in Surah 23:86
- It now reads, "Say: 'Who is the Lord of **the seven heavens** and the Lord of the Great Throne?'"
- This now agrees with the 1924 'Hafs' text
- #2: An insertion of the letter 'alif' in front of *lillāhi* "Allah's" was **added** in Surah 23:87
- Note that it was written with a narrower nib, proving it was added later by another scribe
- Yet, this 'alif' is not found with the 1924 'Hafs' text, suggesting that the correction goes against that text

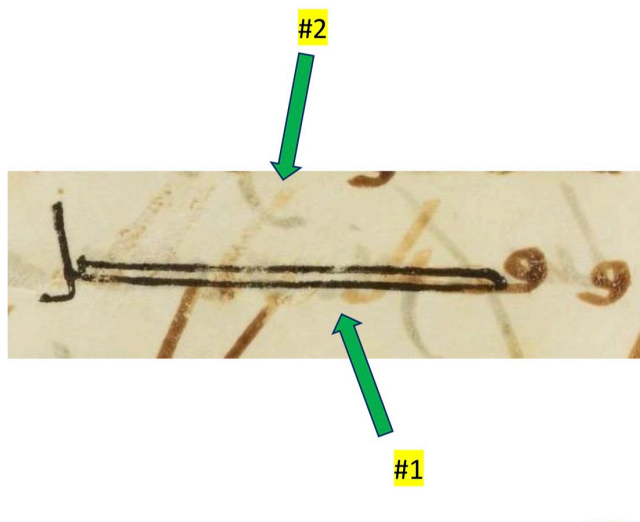


Sura 3:171 there is erasure overwritten

(BNF Arabe 328, fol.8r)

Surah 3:171

- #1: The *ḍad-lām* of فضل *faḍlin* "**bounty**" has been **written over an erasure**
- The corrector has used a **different nib** and **ink** than was used in the original; also the hand and angle of the script is different than the rest of the page
- #2: Erasure marks are clearly seen underneath, including some of the 5-11 original letters
- These include four upward-extending letters, the first of which is preceded by a short tooth letter
- This correction is clearly a much later intervention, and now conforms to the 1924 'Hafs' text



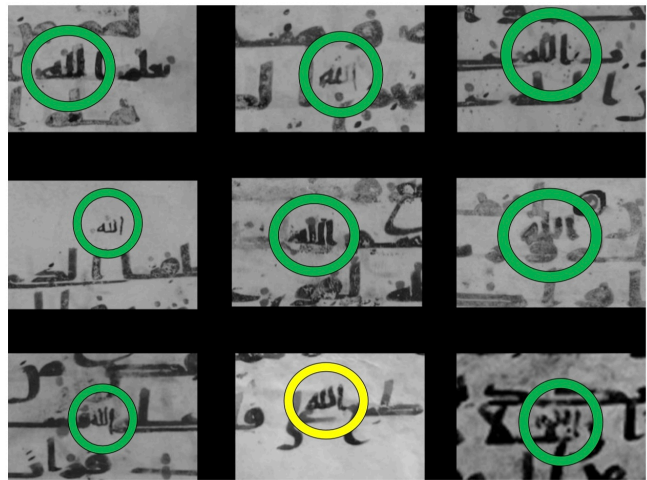
The Fustat Umayyad Codex

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- He believes that it is possibly the codex sent by Al-Hajjaj to Abd al-Aziz bin Marwan. This would date it to the end of the 7th to early 8th century.

In this manuscript we see multiple post production insertions of the word 'Allah'. So the most important person in all of Islam was missing 9 times!

9 insertions of the word 'Allah'

- These are **9 instances**, from a total of twelve Dan discovered, mostly in the Fustat Umayyad Codex
- Why would scribes forget the word for their god?
- Could this suggest flexibility in early manuscripts, then later made uniform?
- Note: 8 of the 9 examples don't need the word Allah there, as it is already assumed
- Only the last one (in yellow) needs it
- All of them now conform to the 1924 'Hafs' text



In Sura 34:35 we see an erasure overwritten from 'Qala' to 'Qalu'

(#1 = NLR Marcel 6; #2 = BNF Arabe 340, fol. 26r.)

Surah 34:35

- **#1:** In the first example, from the NLR **Marcel** manuscript, the final *lām* of قال *qāla* "he said" has been **erased**, and in its place *lām-wāw-alif* have been written. The result is the word قالوا *qālū* "they (m. pl.) said"
- Original: "And **he said**, 'We are more [than you] in wealth and in children'"
- Current: "And **they said**, 'We are more [than you] in wealth and in children'"
- It now conforms to the 1924 'Hafs' text
- **#2:** In the second example, from the BNF Petropolitanus manuscript, we find the exact same change, erasing قال *qāla* "he said", and replacing it with قالوا *qālū* "they (m. pl.) said"
- This also now conforms to the 1924 'Hafs' text



Sura 30:9 erasure with nothing replacing it

(National Library of Russia (NLR), St. Petersburg, folio 30v)

Surah 30:9

- An erasure, yet, with nothing to replace what was erased
- The erasure is **between**: عِقبَةُ *‘āqibatu* “the fate” and الذين *alladhīna* “(of) those”
- The correction now aligns it with the 1924 ‘Hafs’ text
- The size of the erasure suggests a word with **4-6 letters**
- It could have been: *kullu min* “all of” or *kathīran min* “most of”
- Or it could have been: *al-yahūd* “the Jews,” or *al-nās* “the people”



The Cairo Mushaf

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- The SIN states in Al-Bukhari, Vol 6 Hadith 510 that Uthman had copies of the Quran sent to 5 cities: Mecca, Medina, Kufa, Basra and Damascus. The custodians of this manuscript claim that it is one of the 5 Mushafs sent by Uthman before 656.
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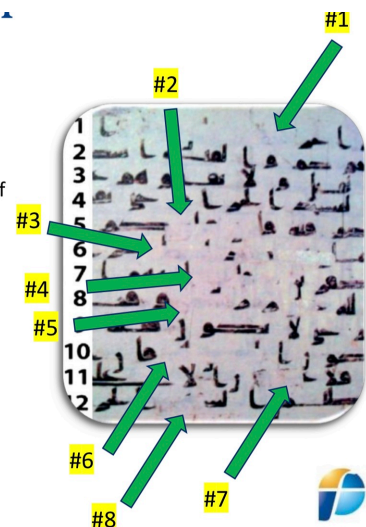
Below are 2 examples of corrections found in this manuscript.

Sura 2:191-193 has many coverings with no overwriting

(Cairo Mushaf al-Sharif, fol.33v.)

Surah 2:191-193

- #1 Line 1 - All but the first three letters of *wa-akhrijuhūm min haythu* "drive them out from wherever" of Q2:191
- #2 Line 5 - All but the first two and last two letters of *fa-in-qatalūhum* "so if you fight to kill them" of Q2:191
- #3 Line 6 - All but the first five letters of *faaqtulūkum kadhālika* "then kill them (imper.), such" of Q2:191
- #4 Line 7 - All but the last five letters of *fa-inintahaū* "and if they desist" of Q2:192
- #5 Line 8 - The first three letters of *ghafūr* "forgiving" and the last three letters of رحيم *rahīm* "merciful" of Q2:192
- #6 Line 10 - All but the first letter of *al-dīn li-llah* "the religion belongs to Allah" of Q2:193
- #7 Line 11 - All but the last letter of *udwān* "enmity" of Q2:193
- #8 Line 12 - The final two letters of *bi-l-shahr* "in the month" of Q2:193



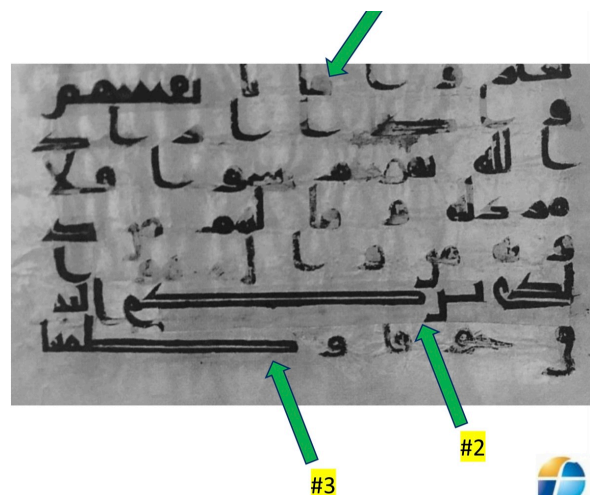
Sura 13 has coverings overwritten

Other variants

(Cairo Mushaf al-Sharif, fol.430r.)

Surah 13:11-12

- #1 • On the first line pictured, all but the first two letters of بانفسهم *bi-anfusihim* "in themselves" of Q13:11 has been written on the top of such a taping.
- #2 • On the second-to-last line pictured, all but the initial 'alif of يركالذى *alladhi yurikum* "he who shows you" of Q13:12 has similarly been written over a taping, and is rather stretched out. The stretching is not unusual in this manuscript, but it is more pronounced in this spot than is standard for the original scribe. It is notable that the way this is written over the tape is missing one letter when compared with the 1924 'Hafs' Cairo edition, which has an additional *ya'* between the *ra'* and the *kaf*. بذلاميكري.
- #3 • On the final line, the *wa-ṭama'ā* "and hope" of Q13:12 has also been written over a taping
- In all three cases we cannot know what was initially written, but we can see that the new corrections over top all correspond with the 'Hafs' Caireen 1924 text

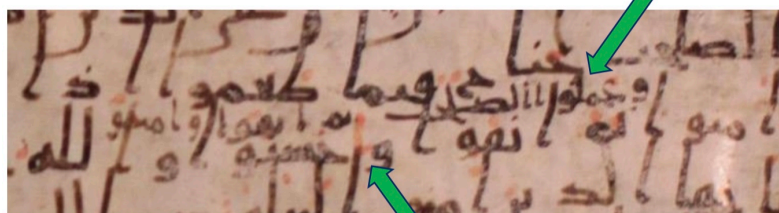


MS.67.2007.1, Museum of Islamic Art, Doha has multiple corrections in Sura 5:93

(Museum of Islamic Art, Doha MS.67.2007.1)

Surah 5:93

- **#1:** Inserted is the phrase *wa-‘amilū al-ṣāliḥāt thumma attaḥū wa āmilū*
- The insertion can be found at **#1**
- Except for the first *wa āmilū* the rest could be a **copyist error**, which then had to be **re-written into the text**, and above the line, at a later date
- **#2:** The initial ‘alif of ‘احسنوا’ *aḥsanū* “do good (imperative, 3rd pl.)” was omitted when it was first written, and was **added later, but in red ink**
- This same red ink was also used for the diacritical dots added at a later date, proving that this ‘**alif** was added at this later date

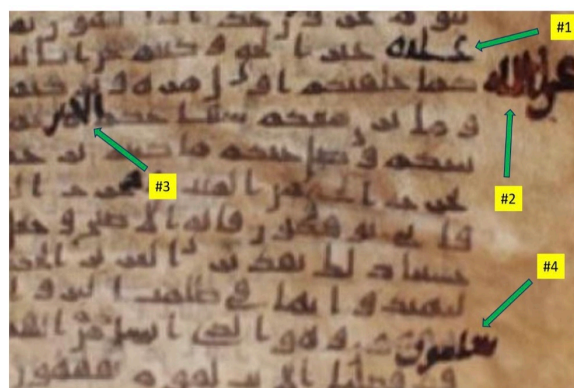


MS.474.2003, fol 9v, MIA, Doha has corrections in Sura 6:91-97

(Museum of Islamic Art, Doha - MS.474.2003, fol. 9v)

Surah 6:91 – 6:97

- **#1:** The word ‘عليه *alayhi* “against him” has been **written over** an erasure in Q6:93 following the words *bimā kuntum taqūlūn* “for what you (pl.) used to say”, yet, *alayhi* is not in the 1924 Hafs text
- **#2:** *alā allāh* “about Allah” has been **written in the margin**, but oddly **without erasing** the ‘*alayhi*’ that it is intended to supplant
- **#3:** The word الذين *alladhīna* “whom” has been **inserted** where it was **at first omitted**
- **#4:** The word يعلمون *ya‘lamūn* “they know” has been **written over** an **erasure**. The shadow of the **original** text can still be seen and appears to be “BHMWN”



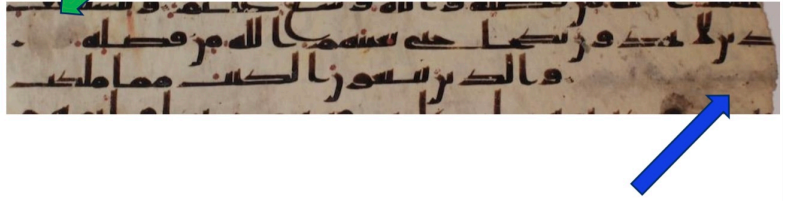
All of these corrections bring the present text in line with the 1924 ‘Hafs’ text

MS 2013.19.2, MIA, Doha has erasures with gaps Sura 24:33

(MIA, Doha, 2013.19.2, verso)

Surah 24:33

- There is an erasure at the end of one line (Green arrow), and the beginning of the next line (Blue arrow)
- It occurs after the word فضله *faḍlihi* "his grace", and before الذين *wa-alladhīna* "and those who"
- There is no way to know what was first written in the spaces erased
- The text now corresponds to the 1924 'Hafs' text

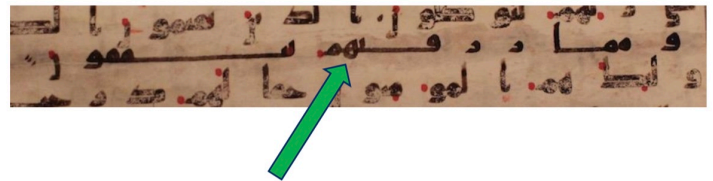


MS 2014.491, MIA, Doha has nearly whole line erased and overwritten at Sura 8:3

(MIA.2014.491, fol.7v.)

Surah 8:3

- Almost an entire line of text has been erased and then overwritten with the word "rizq" 'provision'
- We cannot know what the original phrase that was erased may have been
- Current: "*wa-mimma razaqnahum yunfiqun*", meaning: "And out of what we have provided them (m.) they (m.) spend"
- Notice that the initial 'alif' of the following verse is also added
- It now conforms to the 1924 'Hafs' text



CONCLUSIONS

- While a number of the variants can be explained by scribal errors, many of them cannot. It appears that most of the surviving manuscripts have been produced following a campaign of standardisation consistent with that reported to have been done by Uthman but instead to bring it more in line with the Cairene text.
- The standardisation process was gradual happening over several centuries
- This is likely to be a form of taking what happened centuries later and redacting it back to Uthman.
- In contrast to the SIN which shows that transmission of the Quran was primarily oral for decades, the very existence of manuscripts with variants consistent with scribal errors confirms the existence of a written tradition as well.

THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE QURAN

[From Creating the Quran, Stephen Shoemaker]

- What we know about the Hijaz does not fit very well with the production of a text like the Quran. As shown by Patricia Crone and others it is highly unlikely that Mecca was a major trading centre in 7th century.
- Quran has much to say about Jews. Although there were Jewish settlements in North Arabia and Yemen, they appear to be completely unaware of any Jewish community in Medina or Mecca.
- Quran has much to say about Christians. By 7th century, Christianity literally surrounded the Hijaz but there is no evidence of any Christian community there.
- Shoemaker also discusses how later Muslim exegetes had great difficulty understanding Surat Quraysh. Patricia Crone analysed this Sura and stated that 'the exegetes had no better knowledge of what this Sura meant than we have today.. the original meaning of these verses was unknown to them'.
- She suggests that they represent traditions that predated the Quran and that the uncertainty of the exegetes makes sense 'if at least part of the text was old when Muslims first came across it'.
- The Quran is regularly unintelligible. *"The Koran claims for itself that it is 'mubeen' or 'clear'. But if you look at it, you will notice that every 5th sentence or so simply doesn't make sense. Many Muslims-and Orientalists- will tell you otherwise, but the fact is that a fifth of the Quran is just incomprehensible"* **Gerd Puin**. This is echoed by **Gerald Hawting** also states that the text if taken on its own is completely unintelligible, filled with *'grammatical and logical discontinuities'*

Much of Quran is NOT consistent with production in Hijaz

- The Quran has a great deal of Christian content which would only have made sense to an audience familiar with Christianity.
- There was NO Christian presence in the Hijaz of 7th century so this material must have come from somewhere else: most likely North Arabia or Jordan.
- Quran talks about seafaring in a way that suggests audience is familiar with it yet Mecca and Medina are more than 100km from the Red Sea in the middle of a desert. Chap 7:163-166 talks about people breaking the SABBATH by FISHING. There were no Jew in Mecca so why mention it? Unless the Quran was actually compiled in an area where there were Jews and fishing.
- *"Well over a century ago, Charles Cutler Torrey noted that 'the references to sailing and the sea are both numerous and vivid' to such and extent that one would almost assume Muhammad himself must have been frequently out to sea"* [Shoemaker, p239]

- David Waines and Crone show that Agriculture and vegetation figure prominently in the Quran, revealing how significant they were in the area where it was revealed. It talks about the *mushrikun* or ‘associators’ as cultivating grain and grapes (36:33-34) as well as making offerings from sheep goats, camels and oxen (6:136-45). They raised horses, mules and donkeys as beasts of burden (16:8)
- Crone notes that while it would have been theoretically possible to grow pomegranates, date palms and grapes [in the Hijaz], cultivating grain and olives would have been impossible. She notes that Olives require a winter chill to flower and fruit and this is why they are adapted to Mediterranean lands’
- “In any case, it seems clear that these Qur’anic traditions must have been composed in conditions where the economy and climate were quite different from what they were in Mecca or really anywhere in the central Hijaz. We should expect to find a home for them elsewhere, somewhere by the sea where grain and olives grew in abundance and there was ample pastureland for herds of livestock, in a landscape that could support the cultivation of “diverse produce.” [p241]
- One should add that the Qur’an also refers to the story of Lot and Sodom and Gomorrah in terms that clearly suggest its composition somewhere well outside the Hijaz. In 37:133–38, the Qur’an reminds its audience that day-by-day they pass by these places, Sodom and Gomorrah, in the morning and in the night. So, too, Qur’an 11:89 says that those hearing its words were living not far from where the people of Lot once dwelled. Yet these locations are not anywhere near Mecca or Yathrib: as Crone rightly observes, “One would not have guessed from this remark that the Meccans had to travel some eight hundred miles to see the remains in question.”³⁸ Sodom was widely believed to have been in the vicinity of the Dead Sea, and so this part of the Qur’an was, apparently, composed to address people living near the traditional sites of Sodom and Gomorrah, presumably somewhere in greater Palestine. These passages therefore assume both a location and “landscape of memory” for the Qur’an’s audience that appears focused, at least in these instances, on the Holy Lands of the biblical tradition.³⁹ The lands in question, surrounding Sodom and Gomorrah, for what it is worth, are said by the Bible to be well-watered and fertile, like the Garden of Eden or the land of Egypt (Gen. 13:10).”
- Furthermore, the Qur’an’s regular employ of a large number of foreign terms, more than three hundred, borrowed from dozens of ancient languages, also must inform our search for the Qur’an’s context. The most important catalog of these Qur’anic loan words remains Arthur Jeffery’s *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur’ān*, published in 1938, which is a masterpiece of Semitic philology.⁴² Some of the words identified by Jeffery, to be sure, and especially those taken from South Arabian or Syriac may have already permeated the Arabic vocabulary before Muhammad began his mission. Nevertheless, in any instances where such judgments regarding the history of the Arabic lexicon have been reached on the basis of comparison with “pre-Islamic” poetry, we should certainly set these to the side, since we cannot presume that the verbiage of this corpus accurately reflects the language of pre-Islamic Arabic. The bulk of these foreign terms have been adopted from Aramaic, including especially Syriac, as well as Hebrew, which together account for more than three-quarters of the borrowed words, although a sizable number have also been drawn from Ge’ez (ancient Ethiopic) and South Arabian.⁴³ **As Nicolai Sinai rightly notes, these foreign terms reveal that the Qur’anic corpus—at some point and in some fashion—had “profound linguistic contact with the Fertile Crescent.”⁴⁴ The Qur’an, therefore, developed within a context that was permeated with the languages and cultures of Judeo-Christian Syro-Palestine and Mesopotamia. Is this a good fit with Mecca and Yathrib in the**

early seventh century? Not so much, it would seem, at least judging from the evidence that is presently available.“

- Even more problematic in this regard is the fact that neither Mecca nor Yathrib had any Christian presence at all, as evidenced not only by the Islamic tradition but also by contemporary sources from the Christian tradition itself. How, then, are we to explain the enormous amount of material in the Qur'an that has been drawn from the Christian tradition, borrowings that extend well beyond the mere appropriation of foreign religious terms from Syriac, as significant as these are in their own right? Where did this vast knowledge of Christian lore come from? Without the presence of substantial and well-developed Christian communities in the Hijaz, it is truly unthinkable that the Qur'an, or at least a great deal of it, could possibly have been composed in Mecca and Yathrib.
- Thus Sidney Griffith observes, “the most basic thing one notices about the Qur'ān and its interface with the bible is the Islamic scripture's unspoken and pervasive confidence that its audience is thoroughly familiar with the stories of the biblical patriarchs and prophets, so familiar in fact that there is no need for even the most rudimentary form of introduction.”⁴⁷ And yet, there is no evidence of any Jewish presence at all in Mecca, and a clear absence of Christianity in the central Hijaz altogether. This Christian void is all the more significant since, as we noted in the previous chapter, Joseph Witztum and others have convincingly argued that the Qur'an's presentation of many figures from the Hebrew Bible derives directly from Syriac Christian traditions, and not, as one might expect, from contemporary Jewish traditions.⁴⁸ Moreover, the Qur'an's anti-Jewish rhetoric and its demonology depend on earlier Christian traditions, while a number of passages seem to address Christians directly.⁴⁹ How, then, can we possibly imagine the composition and ritual use of the Qur'an, which requires an audience deeply knowledgeable of Jewish and Christian biblical and extrabiblical traditions, in a context where Judaism was unknown, in Mecca, and from which Christianity was altogether absent, in Mecca, Yathrib, and the entire central Hijaz?⁵⁰
- Accordingly, should we not understand that it was almost certainly in this context, in the Fertile Crescent, that the vast amount of Jewish and—especially—Christian tradition entered the Qur'anic corpus?
- *“Indeed, a great deal hinges on the presence of a sizeable and vibrant Christian community in the Qur'an's immediate milieu, a matter to which we will now turn our focus. In the absence of a strong Christian presence, we really must find another home for much of the Qur'an's content.”* [p245]

A Christ forsaken land

Although Christianity had literally encircled the central Hijaz by Muhammad's lifetime, there is no indication whatsoever of a Christian community in either Mecca or Yathrib, or anywhere in their vicinity for that matter.⁵² Despite the fact that some scholars of early Islam and Near Eastern Christianity will routinely assert that Christianity had penetrated the Hijaz by the seventh century, this is generally assumed as a matter of convenience and does not have any evidentiary foundation.⁵³ And no matter how many times it may continue to be repeated, there is simply no evidence to support the existence of any significant Christian presence in the Qur'an's traditional Hijazi milieu, from either the Islamic or the Christian tradition. It is true that the early biographies of Muhammad will occasionally refer to individual Christians living within Muhammad's orbit, such as his first wife's cousin Waraqa, whom the tradition remembers as having been a Christian convert.⁵⁴ Nevertheless, Waraqa and his Christian faith in particular seem to have been introduced to the traditions about the onset of Muhammad's revelations, the only occasion when Waraqa appears, to serve an apologetic function. When Muhammad is confused by these awesome experiences, Waraqa explains to him that he has begun

receiving a revelation (nāmūs) like the one received before by Moses. Yet one should note that Waraqa is entirely absent from the earliest versions of this episode, which merely relate Muhammad's receipt of "visions, resembling the brightness of daybreak, which were shown to him in his sleep" and caused him to crave solitude.⁵⁵ Waraqa was no doubt contrived and added to later accounts of the onset of revelation in order to provide Christian validation for the veracity of Muhammad's teaching.⁵⁶ Accordingly, there is no reason to believe that Muhammad actually had such a Christian relative in Mecca, not only in light of the fabulous unreliability of the early biographies of Muhammad in general, but also given the clear apologetic intent of introducing a Christian witness to this scene in its later versions.

- Indeed, it is rather telling that, as John Wansbrough observes, any Christian characters appearing in the narratives of Islamic origins are "always from outside the Ḥijāz" and their introduction "is always gratuitous, and their alleged place of origin suspicious."⁵⁸ The Islamic tradition is thus quite unambiguous and consistent in presenting the central Hijaz of Muhammad's lifetime as devoid of any meaningful Christian presence.
- Indeed, given the very small size of these settlements and their very limited cultural and economic significance, it is hardly surprising to find that neither Mecca nor Yathrib had any Christian population worth mentioning. And a handful of isolated converts, even in the unlikely chance that these existed in the first place, does not provide anything near the level of Christianization required to account for the many passages of the Qur'an that invoke various Christian traditions. The knowledge of Christian tradition that the Qur'an expects of its audience well exceeds the sort of casual, piecemeal knowledge that might come from conversations with one's neighbor or in the marketplace. Even if we were to assume that some missionaries had previously visited Mecca and Yathrib—to little avail—this would not suffice to account for the depth of knowledge that the Qur'an assumes of its audience. It is certainly possible that cultural diffusion from Syro-Palestine and Mesopotamia to the Hijaz can account for the spread of big ideas and major ideological trends, such as imperial eschatology or the idea of a Promised Land belonging to the descendants of Abraham, from the world of late antiquity to that region. Nevertheless, only a sizable and well-established Christian community in the Qur'an's immediate milieu can effectively explain its detailed engagement with more specific elements of the Christian tradition.⁵⁹ Anything less would not supply an audience with the innate knowledge of the breadth and depth of Christian culture required for these passages to connect.
- *The Qur'an's Christian content is effectively incomprehensible in Mecca and Yathrib without the presence of a large and highly literate Christian community, such as we find in Syro-Palestine and Mesopotamia—something along the order of Edessa, Nisibis, or Antioch, as Guillaume Dye rightly notes. From what we have seen regarding the nature of Mecca and Yathrib in the lifetime of the prophet...it is quite clear that neither settlement can provide anything remotely approaching such a context" [p247]...[the evidence indicates that there was] no meaningful Christian presence anywhere near Mecca and Yathrib. For instance, as we have already noted, the Islamic historical tradition is unwavering in its blanket identification of Mecca's inhabitants—at least, those who did not follow Muhammad—as polytheist "associators." There is no mention of any Christian community or anything Christian at all, other than, as we have noted, a few stray individual converts, whose Christianity is of dubious historicity.⁶³ The same pattern holds true for Yathrib, where, we are told, there was some sort of a Jewish community that was initially a part of Muhammad's new religious movement, but there is no indication of any Christian presence at all. But since much of the Qur'an's "Jewish" material appears to derive, as noted, from Christian rather than Jewish traditions, the*

Jews of Yathrib also cannot explain the Jewish and Christian lore that the Qur'an so regularly—and tersely—echoes.” [p247]

One must also consider the fact that we have ample evidence for the presence of significant Christian communities elsewhere in the Arabian Peninsula. It is abundantly clear that there were Christians in Yemen, at the southern tip of the peninsula, a region that was closely connected with Christian Ethiopia across the Red Sea, and also all along the Persian Gulf, where the Christian communities were a vital part of the (Nestorian) Church of the East in the Sasanian Empire, as were the Christian Arabs of Hira in southern Mesopotamia. In these places, a broad range of evidence converges to indicate a Christian presence: inscriptions; the remains of churches and monasteries; mentions of bishops from these areas in synodal acts; and hagiographical accounts of figures from these regions.⁶⁸ Likewise, in the far north of the Hijaz on the Roman frontier, the remains of a Christian monastery have been found at Kilwa, and near Tabuk, there are pre-Islamic inscriptions that bear witness to generic monotheist belief—although these are not specifically Christian.⁶⁹ Yet one must note, Tabuk is more than five hundred kilometers (more than three hundred miles) north of Yathrib, and Kilwa is over six hundred kilometers (almost four hundred miles) away: indeed, both are solidly within the orbit of the Roman Empire and the Nabatean kingdom and quite far removed from Mecca and Yathrib. Likewise, Yemen was not only nearly seven hundred kilometers from Mecca (over four hundred miles), but, as we already noted, this region was culturally, socially, and linguistically quite distinct from the rest of the Arabian Peninsula, and its inhabitants “did not view themselves as Arabs before the coming of Islam and neither should the modern scholarship call them that.”⁷⁰ The Persian Gulf is, of course, farther still and separated by a vast and punishing desert.

“Indeed, many scholars have desperately sought any evidence that could possibly reconcile the Qur'an's immense Christian content with its traditional origins in the Hijaz to no avail. At best they can appeal to the evidence for Christianity hundreds of miles away elsewhere in Arabia, pleading that on this basis we should assume that Christianity must have similarly established itself solidly in the central Hijaz, despite the complete absence of any evidence for this and also the enormous distances involved.⁷⁵ Or, better yet, as one very senior scholar once insisted to me, “the Qur'an itself is the unmistakable evidence” of a Christian presence in Mecca and Yathrib. But of course, such logic begs the question completely and avoids entirely the tricky matter of trying to discern where the Qur'an took shape as the text that we now have. There is no mention in any literary source of a bishop in the central Hijaz; nor is there any reference to any other Christians there, beyond the handful of individuals briefly identified in the much later Islamic tradition. We have the acts of numerous synods and councils for the various churches of the late ancient Near East, and while bishops are regularly identified for those areas in which we otherwise have evidence of a Christian community, there is never any mention of Mecca, Yathrib, or any other location in the central Hijaz. There are no archaeological remains of any Christian church, monastery, or monument in this region, although, admittedly, it has not been possible to excavate in and around Mecca and Medina. The fact remains, to quote François Villeneuve, that “to the south of a line passing noticeably at the latitude of Aqaba, there is quite simply almost no trace of Christianity—from any era, for that matter.” The recent epigraphic surveys of western Arabia further bear this out: among thousands of graffiti to have emerged lately from this region, there are “neither Christian texts nor crosses.” The only exceptions to be found are “four to six short Greek graffiti with or without cross, lost among thousands of other graffiti, on cliffs at caravan crossing points, north of Hegra [Madā'in Šālīh]. Statistically it is practically nothing, and these reflect people who were in passing, not people fixed in place.”⁷⁶ This profound dearth of

evidence cannot be owing to chance, Villeneuve observes; nor should we imagine that the Saudi Arabian government has somehow covered up any traces of a Christian presence. By contrast, north of the line between Aqaba and Kilwa, there is plenty of evidence for Christianity, from the fifth century on.”[p250]

This Christian void in the Qur'an's traditional birthplace certainly makes it difficult to accept the standard narrative of the Qur'an's origins entirely in Mecca and Yathrib during the lifetime of Muhammad. The cultural deprivations of the central Hijaz make it effectively impossible for a text so rich in Christian content, like the Qur'an, to arise strictly within the confines of this evidently Christ-barren milieu. In the absence of a vibrant and literate Christian community, it is difficult to imagine where Muhammad, or anyone else in Mecca or Yathrib, would have acquired such a vast knowledge of Christian lore. Likewise, without an audience steeped in Christian traditions, one wonders who would have been able to understand these parts of the Qur'an.

Even if Muhammad's hypothetical travels may have brought him some acquaintance with the Christian tradition, one would hardly expect him to have acquired more than a very superficial knowledge during any business trips he took to Christian lands. As Dye rightly notes, “nothing allows us to imagine Muhammad as a travelling polymath, who would have studied in the academies or monasteries of Syro-Palestine, Hīra, or Beth Qaṭrayē.”

79

“Not only does the absence of literacy make this effectively impossible, but so too does the absence of any Jewish and Christian communities in Mecca. Indeed, if there had been, one would need to presume, as we have suggested before, that Mecca must have been highly Christianized at the beginning of the seventh century. One might also add the stark reality that bibles were in general very expensive and extremely rare in any context before the sixteenth century, let alone one as barren and remote as late ancient Mecca. Even most Christians of this era would have never laid their eyes on a complete Bible; nor would they have ever even been in the same room with a book containing the scriptural canon. Bibles were scarce because books were scarce, and expensive. The simple fact is that most churches in late antiquity and the Middle Ages would not have owned a Bible, so that it seems really farfetched to imagine a copy of the biblical text in Mecca (in Arabic?) that would have been available to Muhammad and his followers.⁸¹ If there was no sizeable Christian or Jewish community in Mecca, how can we possibly expect a copy of the Bible to have been there?” [p252]

The absence of Christianity and Christian culture in the central Hijaz effectively leaves us with only two real options for understanding the composition of the Qur'an. One possibility is to remove Muhammad and his prophetic mission from this isolated region, which does not seem to have had significant interaction with the world of Christian late antiquity, and to locate the origins of Islam instead in some other more fecund cultural matrix with a significant Christian presence. Such was the solution advanced by Wansbrough, for instance, and in a slightly different fashion by Cook and Crone in Hagarism and—somewhat more cautiously—by Hawting. [p252]

According to Wansbrough, Muhammad's followers chose this region to be their land of origins only after their faith had emerged within the sectarian milieu of Mesopotamia. The Hijaz afforded them with what amounted to a blank slate, onto which they could inscribe a memory of the origins of their community unimpeded by any preexisting traditions. The relative cultural isolation of the Hijaz further allowed them to insist that their religious faith

*had not been formed primarily in the crucible of late ancient Judaism and Christianity but came instead directly from on high.*⁸³

The case of the Kathisma church and the Qur'anic Nativity tradition in 19:22–28, which I have discussed elsewhere in some detail, leaves little question that we must approach the Qur'anic text as a corpus of traditions that remained open even beyond Muhammad's lifetime and was continuing to absorb Jewish and Christian traditions in the decades after the Believers conquered and occupied the Near East.⁸⁶ In these seven verses, the Qur'an gives a highly compressed account of the birth of Jesus that depends on a distinctive combination of Christian Nativity traditions that is uniquely found—outside the Qur'an—only in the liturgical practices of a particular Marian shrine just outside Jerusalem, the Kathisma church. In the vast world of late ancient Christianity, it is only at this church that we find combined the two early Christian traditions that appear in the Qur'an's account of the Nativity: Christ's birth in a remote location (rather than in Bethlehem) and Mary's refreshment by a miraculous palm tree and spring. For good measure, one must add, the liturgical traditions of this same shrine also explicitly name Mary as the sister of Aaron, just as in the Qur'an's Nativity account, at last providing a clear solution to this “well-known puzzle” of the Qur'an.⁸⁷ The correspondence between this Qur'anic passage and the traditions and liturgical practices of the Kathisma church is simply too close to be mere coincidence: clearly the Qur'an knows, and expects its audience to know, this particular configuration of Christian Nativity traditions.

Nevertheless, there is no evidence that this peculiar fusion of traditions was known even among Christians who lived outside Jerusalem and Bethlehem. It is therefore hard to believe, if not entirely unthinkable, that this unique combination of traditions achieved at the church of the Kathisma would somehow have been widely known among Muhammad's nonliterate followers in the central Hijaz, so that they could have had any chance of understanding the compressed and elliptic reference to them in Qur'an 19:22–28. Indeed, it boggles the mind to imagine that somehow this distinctively Jerusalemite combination of Nativity traditions could have been widely known and understood by the hundred or so illiterate herdsmen in the remote desert village of Mecca (since this is alleged to be an early Meccan sura), particularly when we find no evidence of any knowledge of this particular configuration of traditions anywhere else in late ancient Christianity—other than the Kathisma.⁸⁸ The suggestion that somehow this distinctive mixture of traditions could have reached Muhammad and the citizens of Mecca, and them alone, in their barren, isolated hamlet strains credibility in the extreme.

The easiest and most probable explanation is instead that the traditions of the Kathisma inspired the Qur'an's Nativity traditions, which were added to the corpus only after Muhammad's followers took control of the Holy Land. The fact that the early Believers turned this Christian shrine into a mosque with decorations referencing the Qur'anic Nativity story soon after their conquest and also modeled the Dome of the Rock after it seems to verify the connection between this shrine and the Qur'an.

The Qur'an therefore has many different sources, as indicated no less by the literary character of the Qur'an itself. As Cook and Crone rightly observe of the text that has come down to us, “The book is strikingly lacking in overall structure, frequently obscure and inconsequential in both language and content, perfunctory in its linking of disparate materials, and given to the repetition of whole passages in variant versions. On this basis it can plausibly be argued that the book is the product of the belated and imperfect editing of materials from a plurality of traditions.”⁹¹

“The Qur’an,” Dye writes, is not a book, but a corpus, namely the gathering of texts: 1) which were not originally intended to be put together in a codex, nor composed with this goal in mind, 2) which are heterogeneous: they belong to a variety of literary genres, and sometimes express divergent ideas (even if there are also ideas and concerns that come up throughout the corpus in a coherent and systematic way), 3) which are, in some cases, independent, and in others, dependent on one another: there are thus numerous parallel passages in the Qur’an—certain passages reuse other passages, often rewriting them, correcting them, or responding to them. . . . The Qur’an appears therefore as a work that is both composite and composed. Composite because it brings together texts that are partly independent and heterogeneous; composed because they have been put together using techniques of composition that generally come from a scribal, literate context, and not just oral spontaneity or haphazard collection, even if these elements can also often be found...

This final layer of literary polish came only after decades of oral transmission and constant adoption and adaptation of traditions and it was ultimately achieved in the final composition of the canonical text of the Qur’an, under the supervision and coordination of ‘Abd al-Malik. This is the Qur’an that we have today: an imperially produced and enforced version that brought uniformity and order to the muddled and diverse history of the Qur’anic text that preceded it. Thanks to this effective exercise of raw political power, much that we would like to know about the complexity of Qur’an’s prior history is shrouded in mystery, requiring us to proceed cautiously and skeptically, guided always by the hermeneutics of suspicion, historical criticism, and the historical study of religions.

“ [p256-257