

THE QUR'AN - A CLOSER LOOK

PART 5

CHALLENGE TO AND FROM THE QUR'AN

In the second part of our examination, we shall break very different ground. Let us introduce this by drawing attention to a remarkable phenomenon. Libraries in the West are full of books examining religion, or at least Christianity, with a “no holds barred” approach. These vary from more eccentric works like those of Eric Von Daniken with his theme, “Is ‘God’ an alien from space?”, through the fashionable but fictional “Da Vinci Code” and “Gospel of Judas”, to objective scholarly questioning of the historical accuracy or moral teachings of various religions.

There are virtually no such books on Islam in the libraries of Muslim countries. Even here in the West, to my knowledge, no resident scholar of Muslim background has ever published anything investigating the credentials of the Qur'an by Western analytical methods. This applies even to Western-educated academics like Fazlur Rahman, Akbar S. Ahmed, Seyyed Hossein Nasr, and Shabbir Akhtar, who have all produced helpful but limited studies on the challenge posed to Islam by “modernity”, and now, “post-modern” thinking.

Is this not strange? And does it not give non-Muslims the right to attempt this investigation, at least to satisfy their own need to know? A Book that is truly God's Word surely need fear no fair investigation? So, at the risk of being dismissed by Muslims with the popular but rather misunderstood epithet, “Orientalist”, we shall proceed to even more searching, though we hope not arrogant, investigation.

Having give at least a synopsis of the Qur'an's teachings, it is time to examine it from a different angle. The Book itself said that Al'lah could bring new revelations within it, which improved on or even cancelled existing ones. This is acknowledged by nearly all

Muslims, and called the doctrine of “abrogation”. It is referred to in Surah 2, verse 106, and in 13:39, 16:101 and 22:52. Some of the abrogated teachings are much less important; others cast very significant light indeed on developments in Muhammad’s life. The Qur’an’s revelation is claimed to be “progressive”, but the progress often seems very closely related to Muhammad’s own circumstances.

If the Qur’an is indeed purely the eternal Word of Al’lah, then the details of Muhammad’s own life should, one would think, not be at all important in its revelation. Muhammad would be nothing but a channel. Yet, insofar as we can reconstruct the order of the surahs as they were received originally, we see a rather different picture emerging. Later surahs, particularly after Muhammad’s first military victories, transform him from a simple “**warn**er” into a monarch. More and more his authority is asserted, his actions justified. See 3:32, 4:64,65,80,15, 49:2-3, and most obviously, Surah 33, verse 36. Other surahs appear, giving him the right to marry his adopted son’s divorced wife, or to allow extra conjugal rights to a favourite.

Surah 111 consists entirely of a curse on a relative who had consistently mocked and resisted him. Several years before that, Muhammad had become a military general. Holy War and the promise of booty had been revealed. These developments are not inevitable ones, but suggest a change in motivation or at least purpose.

It is obvious too, once the original surah order is at least partially known, that the Qur’an’s attitude to Jews and Christians changed considerably. Some verses from earlier times show a quite favourable attitude. Muhammad is even urged to ask believers in the earlier Scriptures about things he was in doubt about, and told they would confirm his faith and revelation. Later, when this didn’t happen, the tone changes markedly. Surah 2 verse 62 is a notable exception to that, but it seems more than cancelled out by verses 87-91 of the very same surah! Later, we look more at such strange inconsistencies.

In the Ahadeeth, the transformations are taken to even greater lengths. Again, we do

not intend to examine the Traditions in detail, but will simply say that the superhuman Prophet of some of these, seems quite different from the man of the earlier Qur'an. For example, the Qur'an's early surahs replied to those who asked Muhammad for miracles, by saying the Book itself was his authenticating miracle and sign (29:52-51: compare 6:109, 10:20, 21:5-6). Some translations make 54:1-2 into a miracle by Muhammad: this is an extremely doubtful interpretation. The (much later) Traditions, by contrast, report several miracles, from crudely literal interpretations of 17:1 or 54:1. Contrast 13:31, or 17:59, 90-93; all of which seem clear denials of the need for more miracles.

The Qur'an calls itself (in 25:1; also the name of that Surah) "**Al Furqan**"- the Criterion, which judges between right and wrong. The title may imply that it was sent to judge other opinions or ideas, and this is probably how many Muslims understand it. The Qur'an does use this term in referring to other Scriptures too. But no judge, except God Himself, is ever self-appointed. Is the Qur'an really His final Word?

MUSLIM APOLOGETICS

This then introduces our next line of study. Muslim writers and other advocates of their religion, who live and have been educated in the West, understand that it is not enough to try to convince us just by repetition or quotation, that the Qur'an is the final Word of God. They have realised that they now live in a much more questioning age and place, and must adjust their arguments accordingly. They have learned to adopt at least the language (if not all the disciplines) of reason and of religious apologetic. Their attempt to prove "objectively" that the Qur'an is indeed a miracle, takes three main lines of approach. These are:

1. To show that it is scientifically accurate, and contains statements of scientific fact that could not have been known in that age except by Divine revelation;
2. To show that the Qur'an confirms, corrects and fulfils the older Scriptures. More particularly, that the Bible prophesies the coming of a later Prophet, Muhammad;

3. To show, by the long preservation of the Qur'an completely unaltered, that it has been both revealed and guarded by Al'lah. Here, the opportunity is taken to make comparisons with the Scriptures of other religions, unfavourable to them.

Before looking at the three lines of approach, we should notice briefly another argument often used by Muslims. The Qur'an forcibly replied to an accusation that Muhammad was making it all up as he went along. It asked the sceptics (2:23,19:38, etc.) to produce even one chapter to equal it. Now although the Qur'an as a whole is thought to be the greatest book in the Arabic language, the challenge is much too general to be valid. Does it mean, equal in literary terms? Or, in the profundity of its religious truth? It is also far too subjective. After all, if anyone were to attempt such a thing, who would Muslims allow to be the judge? And would they ever accept a contrary verdict?

Another subsidiary argument is, that the social system found at least in embryo in the Qur'an, is far better than Western secularist governments have been able to produce. Economically too, that the Islamic system is able to deliver a world without want or injustice, which neither Communism nor Capitalism have done. As one pamphlet puts it; "Islam is in fact an ideology, establishing a way of life which is neither capitalistic nor socialistic but contains the best of both".

We have already seen in **Man and Society**, how the Qur'anic system of politics and economics is basically that which applied to what was, by today's standards, the rather primitive tribal society of Arabia. This seems unsuited to our much more sophisticated and interlinked world. Yet there is a persistent dream of creating a commonwealth of truly Islamic states, which would be economically independent of, as well as a moral example to, other blocs.

Many writers have pointed out that the Muslim community, expecting to be triumphant in the earth, has in fact been treated with contempt and injustice by the West over hundreds of years. Instance our quick military involvement in Kuwait or Iraq, where oil

supplies were under threat, versus great delay in Bosnia or Sudan, where we had no interests to protect. Just two examples of enmity-fuelling, beginning with the Crusades. Muslims are perhaps wrong to see a specifically anti-Islam campaign by Western powers nowadays; but there IS without doubt plenty of crude exploitation.

Yes, Muslims have, in all conscience, many good reasons to hate the influence of the West, and to want to free themselves from its harmful effects, economically, militarily and morally. But several factors seem to unite powerfully against an Islamic commonwealth ever becoming much more than a dream:

1. The Qur'an itself, and Shari'ah, give no permission for the realistic recognition of other systems that are necessary for international relations today. This has often been used by the ulama to place practical politicians in an impossible strait-jacket (Note 1). On some details of the Shari'ah, there is disunity among even "Fundamentalist" groups. The Soonee and She'ah systems certainly do not seem capable of uniting.
2. The decline of Communism proved not merely that militant atheism is harmful to socio/economic progress. It also proves that any system of economics which is based on the individual subjecting his or her personal needs and wishes to the "common good", cannot work in the longer term. Even with the help of religion, human nature, which is selfish, will surface. It has done so throughout Muslim history, including its history before and after Western colonialism. It still does today, even under the strictest Islamic governments. It will continue to do so.
3. The desire that Islamic states must have, to spread their ideology over others, would and does bring them into conflict with other countries, or groups within their own countries. The attempt to introduce Islamic government is unacceptable to the non-Muslim citizens, whether in minority, or as sometimes even happens, in numerical majority. They realize they would become second-class citizens. This is a sure recipe for both civil and international wars.

However, that is not unacceptable to those who strictly follow the Qur'an. It intends Islam to triumph over all other systems, regardless, apparently, of the cost in human lives and other suffering.

Our conclusions here need to be carefully examined, to ensure we are not confusing two things. It is perfectly legitimate for Muslims to argue the case that a religion which is entirely 'spiritual' and privatised will have no influence on society, especially on modern industrialised and secularised societies. In that sense, we cannot criticize Islam's (because the Qur'an's) decision to engage politically. What we CAN certainly question is the ambiguity of the Qur'an's license to Muslims to use force in this; since such permission can be, and so often is, misused. And it is misused, partly because of the human nature which the Holy Book seems to diagnose inadequately, in its potential for partiality and corruption. See our previous remarks on the false users of the concept of "jihad".

Footnotes:

1. As we noticed earlier, the question of whether Islam can be both "modern" and faithful to its foundations, is a crucial one. Can mere men, even religious ones, rule in the Name of God? Does not the whole history of religions, including Islam, indicate they cannot? The rise of secular democracy in the West was partly at least the result of abuses of political power by the established Church. Yet these abusers had no authority for their actions in the New Testament., for Jesus and his apostles never tried to form a government. By contrast, the exercise of political power is of the very essence of Qur'anic Islam.

THE CHALLENGE OF SCIENCE

Now to the three main claims for the Qur'an. First, is this Book so accurate, when it refers to scientific matters, that its miraculous character must be assumed? The Qur'an quite obviously was never intended as a scientific text book. But if it does have scientific truth in it, this should be clear to, and undeniable by, sincere non-Muslims. Attempts by Muslims (as by some Christians with the Bible) to read into the text far more than is there, will be greeted by unbiased scientists and others with great scepticism. This unfortunate approach is well illustrated in the little book by French Muslim and medical doctor, Maurice Bucaille, *"The Bible, the Qur'an and Science"*.

Dr. Bucaille is not content merely to justify the Qur'an in itself, but does so partly by using the first half of his book to discredit the Bible. He pours scorn on the idea that the life-forms we see were created in their present state, and in particular, embraces the evolution of man. He claims this is supported by the Qur'an, but not by the "unscientific" Bible.

THE EVOLUTION OF EVOLUTION (Note 1)

Bucaille's book was published in 1976. Long before that some scientists were having second thoughts about Darwin's belief that evolution was gradual, uniform, radical. Darwin himself wrote: "...the distinctness of the specific forms, and their not being blended together by innumerable transitional links, is a very obvious difficulty". Almost 150 years later, there still remains a serious lack, in fossil remains, of intermediate forms only marginally different from each other. This has by now led many scientists to re-draw the 'slope' of the evolutionary model into a kind of staircase, with sudden large and so far unexplained jumps from one life-form to the next 'higher'. This is the theory of 'punctuated equilibrium', which has largely taken over from gradualism. Some few are even beginning to reconsider the whole theory. The idea of separate creations, or at least external interventions, now appears much less unlikely than in the heady days of 'gradualist' evolution.

Actually, many Muslims would disagree with Bucaille's interpretation anyway. The

Qur'an does clearly say (just like the Bible) that the universe was directly created by God, and in six “**days**” (7:54, 32:4, 57:4). (But in another place, the Qur'anic statements seem to yield a total of eight days -see 41:9-12).

Even more dogmatic than Bucaille, Yusuf Ali says in his commentary on 7:54: “The Creation in six days is of course metaphorical”, and “In the history of our material earth, we may reckon six great epochs of evolution”. In support, he refers to a verse which says that in Al'lah's eyes, a day is like a thousand years of our reckoning (22:47). Or in another verse, 70:4, like 50,000 of our years. But there is nothing in the context of these other verses to link them to Creation. On the contrary; 70:4, when compared with 32:5, clearly refers to the length people will feel the Judgement Day lasts. And certainly there is nothing to indicate that the Qur'an intends “days” to mean the several billion, rather than merely thousands of years, envisaged by evolutionists for earth's age.

Other verses taken as proof that the Qur'an supports present scientific orthodoxy, include 10:4, 27:64 and 29:19-20. Attention is drawn to mention here of repeated creation. Then this is interpreted to allude in some way to a continuing process of ‘creative evolution’. As against, for example, the Bible's apparent assumption that creation was finished in one go. But ‘creative evolution’ is hardly what most modern scientists believe! In any case, the verses actually refer to the bodies of men being reconstituted or ‘recreated’ in the Judgement Day, not to any kind of evolution.

Surah 24, verse 45 is also mentioned by Bucaille. It says: “**Allah has created every animal from water: of them are some that creep on their bellies; some that walk on two legs, and some that walk on four. Allah creates what He wills; for verily Allah has power over all things**”. Compare 21:30, 25:54. Bucaille takes such verses as referring to the “primeval soup” of popular evolution, in which life-forms somehow originated and from which they eventually crawled, changing (it would have to be suddenly!) from a water-breathing existence to an air-breathing one. To support this interpretation, he renders the phrase “**from water**” in 21:30 as “**out of the water**” . Yusuf Ali is not quite so imaginative

in his commentary. He simply says that water is a main constituent of protoplasm, the basic substance of life. That is much more sober and sensible. But neither man explains how he reconciles this verse with other statements in the Qur'an, that man, at least, was created from clay. See 6:2, and 15:26.

Another miracle, as claimed by Bucaille, is also covered by a sophisticated video made in the Gulf States, and featuring many commendatory comments by non-Muslim scientists. This is the statement of human ante-natal development, found in the Qur'an at Surah 23, verses 12-14:

“Man We did create from a quintessence (of clay); then We placed him as (a drop of) sperm in a place of rest, firmly fixed; then We made the sperm into a clot of congealed blood; then of that clot We made a (foetus) lump; then We made out of that lump bones and clothed the bones with flesh; then We developed out of it another creature. So blessed be Allah, the best to create!” (See further discussion on this verse in Chapter 15. There is a much later verse, 22:5, which is basically similar).

Now, even when we discount the modern scientific terms added by the translator, such as 'sperm' and 'foetus', this is a reasonably accurate and beautifully expressed account of human development before birth. Does it display miraculous knowledge? Surely there is nothing here that even 1400 years ago might not be realized by a mixture of intelligent observation and guesswork? Note too that the Qur'an does appear everywhere to be implying that it is the sperm which develops into the foetus; whereas it is of course the egg (ovum) after it has been fertilised by the sperm. And the place of the sperm's origin is said to be **“between the spine and the ribs”**, which is very inaccurate too (86:6; see Yusuf Ali's attempt to “explain” this).

In 22:5 and 40:67, the description of the foetus as a **“leech-like clot”** is suggestive of one stage of development; but again, does not necessarily display miraculous knowledge. The same surely applies, when it is compared to **“chewed flesh”**. Even primitive physicians or midwives studying the results of miscarriages, would quite possibly notice these details.

Other statements in the Qur'an do seem rather less scientific. Take for instance Surah

65, verse 12. Yusuf Ali's translation cleverly conceals the fact (it is clearer in Pickthall's translation and others), that the Qur'an speaks of seven earths created by God (not just 'geological strata', as Yusuf Ali claims.. Other references to the seven 'heavens' or 'firmaments' (2:29, 17:44, 23: 86, 67:3; 71:15-16) clarify these as physical, not spiritual divisions. But so far, scientists have detected only three or four layers above the earth!

SCIENCE - OR PROPAGANDA?

Another argument by Bucaille illustrates his lack of scholarly caution. He says dogmatically, "Moses was born during the reign of Rameses II", and the Exodus took place under his successor, Merneptah. This Pharaoh's remains have apparently been found, and bear no sign of long exposure to water. Therefore, claims Bucaille, archaeology supports the Qur'an, which says Pharaoh's body was recovered from the Red Sea. The Qur'an actually says, "**This day shall We save thee in thy body**"; which is an ambiguous statement.

The following contrary factor should also be pointed out. Many scholars consider that the Exodus occurred much earlier, in the reign of Thutmose II. Dates of ancient Egyptian history are by no means fixed yet (Note 2).

Several other examples of "miracles" are given in yet another video, "*The Book of Signs*", produced in Malaysia, and narrated by actor Robert Powell. This 1986 video speaks of the Qur'an's references to scientific facts as being "stunning in their clarity and precision". What is equally stunning, is how many verses are taken out of their context, and made into pretexts for a great deal of imaginative commentary. For example, having rightly said that "more than a century of research has failed to prove this thesis" (that man is descended from apes), it then reviews now extinct sub-human relics, and assigns each one a verse from the Qur'an! But in context, 6:133, 7:28 or 95:4-6 cannot refer to prehistoric hominids, who could hardly have been morally accountable to God.

"Do not the unbelievers see that the Heavens and Earth were joined together, then We clove them asunder?" (Surah 21:30). The present author at least is far from certain that this

verse refers beyond question to the 'Big Bang' theory of the universe's origin. Does it not rather seem to be saying (as the Bible again does) that at the beginning, there as no clear division between land, water and atmosphere? Again, a scientist would not necessarily see in verses like 24:43 or 30:48, a specific and miraculous reference to the 'laws of hydrology'; the cycle of evaporation, clouds and rainfall.

Much is made of verses like 13:4 and (possibly) 20:53, which say that Al'lah created fruit and plants "**in pairs**". It would probably have been discernable even in those times that plants propagated themselves in some way similar to sex in animals.

One quite impressive verse is 25:61, which MAY distinguish in the original Arabic between the sun, a "**lamp**" or torch, and the moon, giving reflected light. For the age in which the Qur'an appeared, this may have been uncommon knowledge. Whether it is miraculous, is a rather different matter. Eclipses could be seen even then. Bucaille himself calls this distinction "normal".

In 39:5, the sun, like the moon, is said to "**follow a course**". This seems to imply that both move. The same unscientific thought appears even more clearly in 21:33, which speaks of a "**rounded course**" (orbit), or in 55:5. The sun is of course stationary in relation to its planetary system. The French writer labours hard to convince us that the Qur'an is actually referring to the sun's motion in relation to the whole (Milky Way) galaxy, not to the earth. His explanation is clearly shown to be wrong by references, in verses like 21:33 or 36:38-40, to "**the Night and the Day**", in relation to movement of the sun as well as the moon.

It would be far better if such apologists admitted that ancient Holy Books speak in popular, unscientific terms, rather than trying to squeeze miraculous knowledge from them. Readers would need to read Bucaille's book for themselves to understand how much he gets out of the Qur'an - or puts into it (Note 3).

Another fine example of the imaginative lengths Muslim writers go to, comes from

Ahmad Von Denffer. Despite his statement, “The Qur'an is a book of guidance for mankind and not a mine of cryptic notes on scientific facts”, he had just insisted on the previous page, “...the Qur'an contains information on scientific facts which are in perfect agreement with the findings of man's scientific pursuits”. Among things he then proceeds to list, is this, “that each human being has permanent individual finger-prints” (75:4). We suggest readers look up this verse and see if they detect any such statement. (Von Denffer, “*Ulum Al Qur'an*”, pages 154-155).

PROPHECIES?

Under the heading of miracles, we might look at the subject of fulfilled prophecies. There are of course many places where the Judgement Day is spoken of, but by and large, the Qur'an does not contain prophecies about future events. One very interesting and rather impressive exception is found in the Surah called Al Rum (The Romans), number 10. Verses 1-4 read:

“Alif, Lam, Meem” (These are three letters of the Arabic alphabet, equivalent to our ‘A’, ‘L’, and ‘M’. They or others are placed at the beginning of some surahs; for what reason, no-one is very sure.; see below). **“The Roman Empire has been defeated - in a land close by; but they, (even) after this defeat of theirs, will soon be victorious - within a few years. With Allah is the decision in the past, and in the future; and on that Day shall the believers rejoice...”**

Some historical background, not entirely accurate, is given by Yusuf Ali in a long Appendix.

The Roman Empire proper, centred on the city of Rome, had long before fallen to the Visigoth, Alaric. Nevertheless, it is true that a remnant, centred on Constantinople, still remained. And its citizens did still call themselves “Romans”, though it was rather Greek in character, being more commonly known to scholars as the Byzantine Empire. It was nominally Christian, whereas the Persians were Zoroastrians, fire-worshippers. A lengthy war had been going on between them. During Muhammad's early ministry, the Persians appeared to be on the brink of defeating the Byzantines. The pagans of Arabia, who were persecuting the early Muslims, sided with Persia, and no doubt taunted them that worship of the One God would soon be put down by the victorious Persians. The Qur'an had a different

view, and subsequent events proved it right. The Byzantines under Heraclius threw off the Persian threat, and after some years, forced them to sign a peace treaty.

The famous Qur'anic commentator, Al Baidhawi, claims Abu Bakr and another man had a wager on how soon this prophecy would be fulfilled. Muhammad intervened to say it would be “between three to nine years”. In fact, it seems to have taken twelve (till A.D. 627 - despite Yusuf Ali's attempt to make in 622). There is a tradition from Muhammad's youngest wife A'ishah (Bukhari, Vol. 6, No. 249) in which she was asked whether Muhammad could predict the future. Her answer was very clear: “Whoever tells you that the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) knows what is going to happen tomorrow, is a liar“. She then recited, “**No soul can know what it will earn tomorrow**”. (Qur'an, 31:34). In fairness, this refers only to the Prophet (or anyone else) as a person; not to the Qur'an's ability to forecast the future.

Some Muslim apologists insist that the Qur'an also predicts the early victories of Badr and the Trench (or Clans), and the Peace of Hudaibiah, not to mention the triumphant return of Muhammad to Mecca. These assertions relate to passages like Surah 3:13, 8:9 and 12, 33:9 and 22, 48:1 and 27. Now, it is possible these were indeed intended as “prophecies”. But there are at least two factors which make our ascribing them to Divine inspiration problematical. First, the exact timing of some of these verses (that is, whether they appeared BEFORE the events) is not beyond grave doubt. (Most are expressed in the past tense). Also, even if they were in the “prophetic past”, still to come, they could be thought self-fulfilling, in that they inspired the Muslims to fight on till they won.

THOSE LETTERS

Just a word on the mysterious letters preceding the 30th, as well as the 2nd, and several other surahs. Yusuf Asli has an Appendix No. 1, which reviews occurrences but is cagey about their meaning. Among various suggestions that exist, one seems most plausible. As we shall see in detail later, there is much evidence in the Qur'an of similarities with Judaism. Isidore

Epstein, in his Pelican book on that religion, mentions that the Jewish mysticism known as Kabbalah ascribed “cosmic significance to certain letters” (including **alif** and **meem**, as used here). This originated in the Talmud, but may have been imported into it from pagan religions. Such letters are certainly not unique to the Qur'an.

SEEING STARS

In Surah 37, note how Yusuf Ali neglects the probable identification of “**those ranged in ranks**” as the stars. These verses refer to stars not only as physical features, but may indicate spiritual influence is being ascribed to them. His term “zodiacal signs” in Surah 15, verse 16, may even indicate astrological influence is being credited to heavenly bodies. However, the Arabic literally means “large houses”, and could equally well be translated simply “**constellations**”, as Arberry does.

In the same chapter, 15:18, and also in 67:5, we have the statement that meteorites or shooting stars have the task of driving away evil spirits or jinns. The following are two contrasting commentaries on these verses, the first, by our “modernist” Yusuf Ali, the other by strict Wahhabee, Abu Ameenah Bilal Philips:

“Taking the physical heavens, we can imagine the supreme melody or harmony - the ‘Music of the Spheres’ - guarded from every disturbing force. If by any chance any rebellious force of evil seeks to obtain, by stealth, a sound of that harmony to which all who make themselves consonant are freely invited, it is pursued by a shooting star, for there can be no consonance between good and evil”. This is Yusuf Ali’s sophisticated, poetic attempt to re-interpret Muhammad’s own explanation. Contrast this:

“The Prophet (P.,B.U.H.) explained that the Jinn would sometimes journey up to the lower skies and eavesdrop on the Angels as they discussed among themselves various events that were to happen in the world. The Jinn would later return to the earth and inform those involved in predicting the future. He also explained that Alah uses the falling stars (meteorites) as a way of driving away the Jinn and preventing most of them from

eavesdropping except on rare occasions”.

This very different commentary is a straightforward summary of the Traditions, as found in Bukhari, Vol. 7, page 439, and Muslim, Vol. 4, pages 1209 and 1210. These illustrate clearly how parts at least of the Qur'an are not very “scientific” in the modern sense. Since jinns are normally without body and made of fire (55:15), the approach of a meteorite would hardly be likely to make them flee.

“SEEK KNOWLEDGE, THOUGH IT BE IN CHINA”

To conclude, a few remarks on the general Qur'anic attitude to knowledge and scientific investigation. The title of this section is another very popular (but not well authenticated) saying of Muhammad. Undoubtedly there are in the Qur'an many references to features of Creation, and even to man's use of the earth's physical resources. Examples are in Surah 55: 1-25; or 37: verses 1-11 (compare 15:16-17.). The Qur'an again and again points to Creation as proof of the Creator, and His worthiness of exclusive worship.

A verse in Surah 6(59) is often held to be the charter of Muslim scientific research:

“With Him are the keys of the unseen, the treasures that none knoweth but He. He knoweth whatever there is on the earth and in the sea. Not a leaf doth fall but with His knowledge: There is not a grain in the darkness (or depths) of the earth, nor anything fresh or dry (green or withered), but is inscribed in a Record clear (to those who can read)”. Whatever direct or indirect influence the Qur'an had on their studies, it is certainly

true that Muslims have made valuable contributions to many branches of knowledge. They (Note 4) translated the foundational Greek, Persian and even Sanskrit writings on science into Arabic, preserving and greatly improving on them, while Europe was going through its Dark and Middle Ages. Not till the Renaissance did European science begin to make any significant progress again. Though the work of Muslim scientists was in the main derivative, they made original discoveries in quite a few fields of knowledge, not adequately appreciated today. They were particularly prominent and innovative in medicine, astronomy and mathematics. Today, many are Ph.D. or post-doctoral students in Western universities, still

avidly pursuing knowledge, as their Book and Prophet (perhaps) exhorted them.

Footnotes:

1. The history of the theory of evolution is an instructive one for those with naïve faith in scientists' impartiality. It is at last becoming rather clear that 'gradualist' evolution has little evidence to support it. 'Catastrophism' is now being quite widely put forward as a plausible account of physiological developments. Yet in 1950, when Immanuel Velikovsky first published his (catastrophist) book, "*Worlds in Collision*", he was scorned and pilloried by the scientific establishment. The same kind of reception greeted Richard Milton's 1992 book, "*The Facts of Life*" (Corgi). Milton, interestingly a religious agnostic, went further than Velikovsky, even daring to challenge the whole theory of evolution, as presently taught. His evidences need humble, careful consideration. More and more religiously uncommitted scientists, especially in the U.S.A., are publishing books critical of neo-Darwinism. More recently, a few Muslim writers too have begun to question evolution forcibly. The prolific Turkish author, "Harun Yahya" entitles one of his books, "*Evolution Deceit*" (1998)
2. A fairly recent study of Egyptian history is by David M. Rohl, entitled "*A Test of Time*", and published by Century and Channel Four in the U.K., where it originated as a television series. From the most recent archaeological discoveries and calculations, Rohl concludes that the Exodus did in fact happen in the fifteenth century B.C., not under Merneptah in the thirteenth.
3. There is one great problem with attempting to show that the Qur'an (or any other Holy Book) is scientifically infallible, or contains miraculous knowledge of science. This can be demonstrated, only if every single reference to physical realities is "accurate" in the modern scientific sense. By this criterion, even one inaccurate statement destroys completely the idea that it is miraculously revealed by God. And, as we have seen, the Qur'an appears to have far more than one. It is a measure of the determination of Muslim apologists in the West, that

they continue to put so much effort into propagating the idea that “Science proves the Qur'an”.

4. One of the main translators was a Nestorian Christian, employed by the Khaleefah of the day as a physician. The training for his profession had introduced him to the Greek language. Jewish scholars, protected in Islamic Spain, were also involved. One standard book on Islamic achievements in science and philosophy is by Seyyed Hossein Nasr, entitled, “*Science and Civilization in Islam*” (Islamic Texts Society, 1987).

THE CHALLENGE OF OTHER FAITHS

The second alleged proof of the Qur'an being a miracle Book is that it confirms, corrects and completes the Scriptures that were “**revealed before it**”. By this the Qur'an means only those given to the Jews and Christians, for no other Revealed Books are recognised by the Muslim Scripture.

To examine this claim will bring readers into a large subject with which most of us are unfamiliar. I have been obliged to consult both Muslim and Christian writers on the matter. In keeping with my aim of preserving objectivity, I have accepted only the provable facts they point to, not necessarily their use or interpretation of those facts. I have tried to simplify the whole issue without losing either accuracy or balance.

First, we need to see how the Qur'an describes the previous Books, and compare this with the Books understood today to be Scripture by Jews and Christians. Then we need to compare the teachings of these Books with the Qur'an, so as to be able to decide if there is logical or theological progress to be seen. Does the Qur'an really finish the job the others started?

The Qur'an refers to four (Note 1) revealed Books; the **Tauraah** (given to Moses), the **Zaboor** (given to David), the **Injeel**, given to Jesus, and the **Qur'an** (given to Muhammad). It envisages at least three of these as being of a similar character; that is, Books mainly of God's laws for men, revealed directly and word for word to these Prophets, and not in any way the products of their own minds. References; 4:163, 5:44 to 46, 17:55, 21:105. David's Zaboor is taken by Yusuf Ali (on what grounds?) to be different from the others, not so much laws but “song and music” (his Note 2241). “**Injeel**” seems to be an Arabacised version of the New Testament Greek's “Evangelos” (Gospel).

But when we examine the Scriptures held and believed in by Jews and Christians today, we discover they are very different from those described in the Qur'an. Firstly, the Jewish Tanakh (known to Christians as the Old Testament) took centuries to appear, and

came not only through Moses and David, but written by many authors. Both this and the New Testament are not only or mainly Law books. The first contains, like the Qur'an, accounts of past events (a feature we shall examine more closely later). It also has exhortations, prayers, proverbs, love poetry, and detailed prophecies of near and distant future. These features are not found in the Qur'an (except perhaps the prophecy on "Rome").

Though both Old and New Testaments do claim to contain direct speech by God, they are not like the Qur'an, where Al'lah is represented almost throughout as speaking "in His own words". To Muslims, this is the only way God does speak. Muhammad's claim to Prophet-hood is to them based on the fact that God's very words were dictated to him. The idea that God could also speak indirectly, by inspiring the thoughts of holy men, is to Muslims completely foreign and unacceptable.

We had better investigate this a little more deeply. Despite Islam's claim to be the original and natural religion of mankind, the Qur'an itself appeared 600 years or so after Christ, and much longer after the Old Testament/Tanakh. Now, it is possible from a purely logical viewpoint, that the message of the older religions, and even their Books, could have been changed significantly in that time. But any claim that this actually did happen, and that the Qur'an restores and completes God's message, must be based on solid evidence. It must not be simply assumed to be the case, as many Muslims tend to do.

WHAT IS IT SAYING?

First, let us ask the Qur'an this question: is it saying that the Jews and Christians physically destroyed or altered God's whole Word to them, and substituted something quite different? My own studied conclusion is, that no verse makes this accusation; though many Muslims try to do so. What the Qur'an does say is that some Jews deliberately misinterpreted what was spoken to them (probably the Qur'an, rather than their own Book). See 2:75. Or, that they twisted words of acquiescence by altering a letter to turn them into an insult ((See

Surah 4:46, with Yusuf Ali's comments).

This may also help us to interpret 5:12-14, which says that the Jews “**change things from their right places...**” and accuses both them and the Christians of forgetting “**a good part of the Message that was sent them...**”. Both these verses, and others too, are expressed in strikingly vague terms. The reason for this we shall try to suggest later. For the moment, let us merely point out another absolutely vital fact. Many Qur'anic verses undoubtedly imply the Jews and Christians still had their Scriptures, and could confirm Muhammad's claims from them; (2:44, 3:93, 7:157, 10:94; and 5:43, 47 and 68. Many Muslims, incidentally, consider this Surah 5, or parts of it, to be the last one revealed).

2:101 says that some of the People of the Book “**threw away the Book of Allah behind their back**”. Yusuf Ali's conclusion that this refers to their own Book(s) is unlikely to be correct. It probably refers to the Qur'an itself; and presumably means that they rejected its message, rather than literally throwing it away.

The most serious charge is brought in 2:79. This says: “**Then woe to those who write the Book with their own hands and then say; this is from God; to traffic in it for a miserable price. Woe to them for what their hands do write, and for the gain they make thereby**”. This is actually the only verse in the Qur'an that

speaks of written falsification, as distinct from spoken. But to which book is it referring?

There are no capitals in the Arabic Qur'an, and some translators prefer to translate the words “**al kitab**” less definitely as “Scripture”, rather than “the Book”, referring to the Qur'an itself. For it is unlikely the Jews would have had any occasion to write the Qur'an!

The verse may refer to selling, for profit, hand-written copies of the Tanakh. Or, to what some Jews (and Christians) HAD produced; books of tradition and legend. Can verse 79 be a condemnation of giving such books the authority of revealed Scripture (compare v. 78).

2:146 and 3:72 and 78 again accuse the Jews and Christians of concealing or distorting the truth; but it is the truth they still have in their possession, and know. Making it

still more unlikely the Qur'an is accusing the other religionists of physically changing their Bible, some verses in the Qur'an say that the Words of Al'lah cannot be changed. For instance, 6:115 (though this refers to the Qur'an itself); or 6:34 and 10:64, more general statements. Incidentally, how this relates to the principle of "abrogation" within the Qur'an itself (see **Challenge to and from the Qur'an**), is not at all clear.

There is indeed a certain vagueness in all these criticisms of the Jews and Christians. In Surahs 2 and 4 (both later), the expressions "**a party of them**", or "**some of them**" are used to preface accusations of this sort. See our discussion in **Telling it like it was**, on the Trinity. Can these expressions be another example of how the Qur'an was obliged to moderate its tone, once Muhammad had talked to orthodox and educated Christians from Najran? The unanswered question remains; which people among Jews and Christians make up the "**party of them**" condemned?

If the Qur'an is probably not accusing people of the older religions of physically altering their Books, what IS it saying? Apparently, that they had so neglected and misunderstood their Scriptures as to need a new Prophet and revelation. His teachings would be in a Divinely-ordained series: basically the same as those given to Moses David and Jesus Christ, but fuller, indeed complete and final. Muhammad is to be the Seal of the Prophets (33:40).

Muslim advertisements, such as one on a wall of the Central Mosque, Birmingham, U.K., urge passers-by to "Read the Qur'an, the Last Testament". The intention is clearly to claim that it is the final in a series of Testaments. But what is a Testament? It is a formal covenant between God and man, and the main feature of both Jewish and Christian belief. God voluntarily commits Himself to doing something for man, in return for man's obedience and faith.

Now in the Qur'an, God's providence and mercy are often mentioned, and in at least two places His promises are said to be true (4:122 and 14.47). But the idea of His ever being

formally committed is unknown. Al'lah is so great that no-one has any claim on Him, nor can hold Him to account for promises. It is always “**Insha Al'lah**” - if God wills it. So technically and accurately speaking, the Qur'an is not the Last Testament, nor indeed a Testament at all. 16:91 is only a “covenant” of Muslim loyalty to Al'lah, entirely one-sided. However, as noted earlier, Al'lah does promise Paradise to those slain in His cause (9:111). This, and this alone, could be described as a testament or covenant.

THREE THEMES - FULFILLED?

Next, let us consider some other prominent themes of Old and New Testaments, to see if they are contained and completed in the Qur'an. The first theme of the Tanakh/Old Testament, is the Law of God. This, it is claimed, was revealed to and through Moses at Mount Sinai. It was partly specific to the Jews as a Chosen People, but the ‘Ten Commandments’ are apparently intended to be of universal and eternal significance. These moral laws were reinforced by a series of prophets who called the people back to repentance at various eras of their chequered history.

At the same time, these prophets pointed to a coming Deliverer, the Messiah., who would suffer to free or “redeem” the Israelites (and in some prophecies, all other nations too), from bondage of body and soul. In the meantime, the Jews had to ‘cover’ their sins with an elaborate system of animal sacrifices revealed by God.

We have, then, three main themes of the Jewish Bible; Law, Redemption, and Sacrificial System.. The New Testament claims that all three are fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth.. This Book teaches:

a) that he is a Lawgiver greater even than Moses; b) that he is the final Redeemer from sin who fulfils both Law and Messianic prophecies, and c) that he fulfilled the sacrificial system by offering himself ‘once for all’ (and rising to life again). Jews of course reject these claims for Jesus, but might well admit at least that there is some logical progression here.

Is this progression continued in the Qur'an? Definitely not. The point of having a 'New' Testament was that the old had been broken, on man's side. Even the most privileged nation could not fulfil God's Law, and needed forgiveness, atonement, and 'new hearts' (all of which, incidentally, are themes not only of the New, but also of the Old Testament). How then can another Book, coming six hundred years later, go back to simply giving new laws, and deny the need for these Divine provisions? For that is one main thing the Qur'an does. It looks more like a regression, rather than a progression, from the New Testament especially. It reintroduces the idea that people must and can earn approval from God, by keeping His Law perfectly. Jewish history had shown they couldn't, and therefore need to cast themselves on God for mercy (and through Jesus, the New Testament claims).

In this part of my assessment, I may have strayed slightly from an objective treatment, and adopted the interpretations of especially Christian writers, rather than restricting myself to the bare facts alone. Readers will just have to study the other Holy Books for themselves, and judge whether my summary of their implications and teachings is correct or not.

IS MUHAMMAD IN THE BIBLE?

The final thing to decide in this chapter of comparisons is, whether the Bible prophesies the coming of Muhammad. This is an article of faith for Muslims, since they believe the Qur'an itself clearly states it to be so:

“And remember, Jesus, the son of Mary, said: O children of Israel! I am the messenger of Allah (sent) to you, confirming the Law (which came) before me, and giving glad tidings of a Messenger to come after me, whose name shall be Ahmad” (Surah 61, verse 6). “Ahmad” is, Muslims claim, an alternative name for Muhammad, and means “**praised**”.

(Importantly, the Arabic Qur'an has no capital on “**messenger**”, whether applied to Jesus or Muhammad. Neither has it a capital on “**ahmad**”). Yet here, in 7:157, and other places, it us claimed that the earlier Scriptures prophesy Muhammad's later coming.

The writer feels no need to report fully on the large amount of written controversy

this has caused between Muslims, and Jews and Christians. Any readers particularly interested in the finer details can find books covering the issue in all Islamic bookshops, and some Christian ones. Certain features might be pointed out, however. The first thing that strikes one, is the lengths to which Muslim controversialists have gone to prove their point here. Given the great discontinuity in themes we have just noticed, and the 550 years gap before Muhammad appeared as prophet, that is certainly rather necessary.

For example, on being faced with the fact that in the New Testament Jesus promised, not another Prophet after him, but rather “the Spirit of truth”, Muslims have insisted that Muhammad IS this Holy Spirit. Let us see if that is possible. In the Gospel of John, chapter 14, verses 16-17, Jesus promises:

“I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever - the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives in you and will be with you”.

Readers, whatever their religious faith or lack of it, will perhaps agree that three things in this passage seem to rule out Muhammad as its subject: a) the Qur'an does not recognise we can call God ‘Father’, so Muslims should not use this as a genuine saying of Jesus Christ!; b) This other Counsellor is to be with the disciples “for ever”, whereas Muhammad died like any other man; c) The Spirit of truth would be “in” them, whereas a man could not be. And indeed, a later passage of the New Testament, Acts chapter 2, relates the coming with power of this Holy Spirit into the disciples on the day of Pentecost.

Despite this seemingly clear-cut case against the Promised One being Muhammad, Muslims have come up with a very complex argument about the Greek word rendered “Counsellor” in the passage; which is *parakletos*. No, they claim, it should be *periklutos*. The latter word happens to mean “praised” or “celebrated”, which they then identify with the Qur'anic word “**ahmad**” (see discussion above on Surahs 61:6 and 17: 157). But there is absolutely no manuscript (out of hundreds, of the Greek New Testament), that supports this reading.. The New Testament has two other words which mean “praised”. Nor would

perikhutos make much sense., while *parakletos* does. It would say "...he will give you another praised (one) to be with you for ever". Even on that very far-fetched reading, Muhammad still doesn't seem to fit the bill. He was not even born for nearly five and a half centuries after the words of promise were spoken. Nor is he still alive. Muslims might reply that his teachings ARE still alive; but the promise seems clearly for the immediate future, and moreover relates to an eternal and Divine Person, not a mere prophet who would die.

Another important fact seems to finally put out of court the above claims by Muslims. This is, that the Qur'an itself uses this very term "**the Holy Spirit**" ("**Ruh-ul-Quds**"), but mainly referring to the angel Gabriel, in his bringing the Qur'an to Muhammad; and never to Muhammad. See 16:102, and compare also 26:192-199. Yusuf Ali, again oddly, gives capitals to the Holy Spirit in 2:87, but not in verse 253 of the very same surah!

THE PROPHET LIKE MOSES

An even more complicated argument has been devised to show that another prophecy, this time by Moses, of a Prophet like him to come, refers to Muhammad. The reference in question is found in the Bible at Deuteronomy 18:18. It uses the phrase, "from among your own brothers". Muslim apologists do seem to be stretching accuracy in claiming the Arabs were, even in Moses' day, thought of by the Jews as "brothers". It was several hundred years since Abraham's two sons, Isaac, ancestor of the Jews, and his half-brother Ishmael, ancestor of the Arabs, had parted on bad terms. The enmity had continued.

In any case, the previous chapter, Deuteronomy 17:14-15, referring to the appointment of a king over Israel, employs precisely the same Hebrew phrase. Then it enlarges by saying he is not to be a foreigner, but "a brother Israelite". This clearly defines the meaning of "brother" in 18:18 too, ruling out Muhammad as "the prophet like Moses". (The New Testament claims that Jesus, an Israelite, is the prophet; Acts 3:22).

It is not a necessary part of my task to expound fully all these involved controversies,

and as I am anxious not to be tarred with a partisan brush, will again leave the reader to follow them up if he or she thinks it important enough. My own advice is simply to always read writers on both sides. Ahmad Deedat has a still more ingenious case for Muhammad being referred to by name in the Old Testament/Tanakh's "Song of Solomon", while Zakir Naik even ventures into the Hindu Scriptures for support!

All this ingenuity might seem to outsiders like a desire to find Muhammad in the Bible, rather like the proverbial needle in the haystack. Islam's advocates are of course obliged to do this by the Qur'an's clear statement he is there, somewhere. Ironically enough, the New Testament ends with a curse on anyone adding to its prophecies.

My own conclusion is, the rather vaguely expressed accusations in the Qur'an that the Bible has been changed or misunderstood, were largely prompted by Muhammad's claim to be in the line of great prophets; versus the local Jews' and Christians' rejection of that claim, on the grounds that no further prophet was to come. All the accusations too are in the later surahs. This fact seems extremely significant. At first, it seems, Muhammad expected the Jews and Christians to recognise his prophet-hood. It was only when they didn't, that the Qur'an began to accuse them of some unclear form of jiggery-pokery with their given message.

The rejection of Muhammad's claim by the great majority of the local Jews and Christians, may also have had another, more specific, cause. Since they did still have their own Scriptures, they could readily see, and would no doubt point out forcibly, that the Qur'an's reconstruction of historical events did not agree with their own Books. Is it then so surprising that in later surahs, the Qur'an claims to be giving the full and correct accounts, dismissing those of the older Scriptures? We shall examine this whole issue in much more detail later.

Footnotes:

1. 53:37-38 and 87:19 mention Books or “Writings” of Abraham; but probably not as Scriptures in the sense of the other four.