A Quranic Window onto New Testament Textual History

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Introduction: The Two Goals of Textual Criticism

Traditionally, Textual criticism as applied to the Greek text of the New Testament (NT) has had two goals, 1) recovering as much of the original form of the text as possible, and 2) tracing the historical development of the text as it has been transmitted through manuscripts. In the last two decades, the goal of recovering the original text has been called into question under the influence of post-modern literary theories and also increased understanding of the dynamics of ancient book production. With this, there has been an accompanying call to redirect scholarly efforts toward the second goal of tracing the history of the development of the text. Though it was not the only influence directing this trend, a major voice expressing doubt over the traditional ‘certainties’ of being able to recover the original text has been Dr. Bart Ehrman, with his landmark 1993 book, The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture, and his 2005 popularization of that book, Misquoting Jesus, which made it to the top of the New York Times bestseller list. Both of these books assert that early Christian scholars changed the text of the Gospels for intentional dogmatic reasons to such a degree that we cannot be sure of the text of the NT.

The arguments of these books have been discussed in many other books and articles so I will not critique them here other than to say that all of the examples Ehrman cites can be legitimately explained in terms of normal scribal practices which do not call the basic integrity and reliability of the NT text into question. At the root of the disagreement is not mainly a methodological problem but more a presuppositional one which depends on views one takes at the outset concerning the early history of Christianity. In some ways, what has resulted is a stalemate with increasingly polarised camps: those who think the historical sources support a reliably transmitted text and those who do not.

I think that the Quran manuscript tradition can open a window of potential escape from this stalemate by

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providing a comparative situation for examining issues of intentional dogmatic change to religious texts. The comparison the Quran tradition provides can be best viewed against the backdrop provided by the views of the main exponent of radical intentional change to the NT text, Bart Ehrman. Ehrman has provided plausible examples of sporadic, isolated changes made to individual manuscripts that might be the result of the desire to strengthen particular views of Christ. However, taking his strongest examples of this, together with the testimony of the wider NT manuscript tradition and early Christian literature, there is not clear evidence of widespread and precise editing to establish a precise form of the text of the NT, either before or after it was gathered into a canonical collection and used liturgically as a cult object in Christian worship. Instead, the evidence, including that of intentional textual variants, points to a largely informal process of textual standardization for the NT that was spread over many centuries.

For the Quran, however, from both its manuscript tradition and from within the Islamic historical tradition there is strong evidence of a more centralized hand in the editing of its text from its earliest recorded periods, and a strong case can be made that the editing and shaping was done for a combination of political, dogmatic, and liturgical reasons. The Quran underwent a more formal process of textual standardization which started with a major effort in its first century and was largely finished within four centuries.

I would like to briefly examine some of the evidence for the claims being made mainly for the Quran. The Quran is a text whose history and manuscript tradition supports the development of an intentionally shaped text, different from what at the outset was held to be sacred and used as scripture. The evidence for this comes from four main sources, the Hadith, the form of the text found in the bulk of the Islamic manuscript tradition, corrections in Quran manuscripts, and the very few Quranic palimpsests that exist. After looking at each of these categories, I

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6 (Parts of) manuscripts from which the text has been scraped off and which can be used again.

7 Note the comment by Colin H. Roberts, Manuscript, Society and Belief in Early Christian Egypt, London 1979, p. 15, recorded in Barbara Aland, The Significance of the Chester Beatty Papyri in Early Church History, in: Charles Horton (ed.), The Earliest Gospels, London 2004, pp. 108-121, p. 109, “To judge from their hands, the earliest Christian books were essentially books for use, not, as Jewish Rolls of the Law sometimes were, almost cult objects.” At the outset it should be noted that the Qur’an came to be used liturgically much more quickly than the NT. Part of the reason why might be that the Qur’an came into a milieu that already had established books of scripture among Jews and Christians, so that there was an added impetus for a new revelation to conform to an established pattern of usage among ‘people of the Book’. The written Quran seems to have become a cult object within a century of its initial inscription, whereas for the NT it can be argued that it took two to three centuries for this kind of usage to develop into its normative use as it took on its final canonical form.
will make some brief comparative comments to the NT tradition.

1. The Hadith

The Hadith contain many reports of portions of text that were supposedly revealed to Muhammad as scripture and used as such, but which did not make it into the text of the Qur’an as we know it now. Some of these are:

The story of the collection of the Quran under Uthman which contains the report that variant collections of Quran material collected from Muhammad’s companions were burnt after they were gathered in and an official version was collated. If other literary sources referring to these collections are reliable, than these collections differed over length, content, precise wording, and the internal order of the content.

There are accounts of other significant portions of scripture which did not make it into the Quran. These range from individual verses, to extended portions involving scores of verses, and even to entire surahs.

Comparatively for the NT, the only traditions of substantial portions of the texts of the individual NT books that may be missing or added in later are sections like the long ending of Mark, verses 16:9-20, the pericope of the adulterous woman in John 7:53–8:11, and a few isolated verses, which all appear in actual manuscripts in the NT manuscript tradition.

2. The Form of Text in the Qur’anic Manuscript tradition

The great bulk of the Quranic manuscript tradition contains the same basic form of consonantal text, even in the great majority of the very earliest manuscripts. For instance, aside from early orthography issues, the consonantal text one finds in the oldest Quran in the British Library which dates to the early to mid 700’s is basically the same as the consonantal text in current printed Qurans. One does not find variant phrases, verses, or portions in the great majority of the earliest manuscripts. Only occasionally does one find a variant word. In fact, the degree of the lack of variant readings in these manuscripts is an evidence for a major editing/standardization project taking place within the first Islamic century, as one finds claimed in the Hadith.

This is in contrast to the NT manuscript tradition which has textual variants of words, phrases, verses, and por-

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8 Sahih al-Bukhari vol. 6, book 61, number 5:10.
9 The entire body of secondary citations to these companions collections in early Islamic grammatical and exegetical works and in the Hadith are in view here, as are collected in Arthur Jeffery, Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur’ān, Leiden 1937, and Abd al-Al Salim Makram and Ahmad Muktar Umar, Mujam al-Qiraat al-Quraniyah, Maa Magaddimah fi Qiraat wa Ashhar al-Qurra, Third edn., Cairo 1997.
3. Corrections in Manuscripts

In the NT tradition, there is a range of kinds of corrections found in manuscripts.\(^{16}\) In general, corrections were not made to establish a particular form of the text, but rather were the work of individual scholars to correct what they thought were mostly grammatical, stylistic, and transmission mistakes. They are corrections of what were perceived as transcription errors. There is also the possibility of some intentional changes in isolated manuscripts made for theological reasons. What one does not find are corrections made to fix extended portions of text with a particular wording which enshrines a particular doctrinal position or liturgical practice. These can be found, though, with the Quran.

With the Quran, there are corrections made to fix copyist errors, but there are also corrections to establish a particular, precise, authorized form of the text. This is a text that came to be viewed as the ‘orthodox’ text but which at first was possibly one of many accepted ways of reading the text. Here are some pictures of these kinds of corrections:

- **a) Words and phrases rubbed out and replaced**\(^{17}\)

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\(^{16}\) See the examples of David Parker and Dirk Jongkind in the excellent work they have done isolating the work of individual correctors in Codex Bezae and Codex Sinaiticus respectively. D.C. Parker, Codex Bezae: An Early Christian Manuscript and its Text, Cambridge 1992; Dirk Jongkind, Scribal Habits of Codex Sinaiticus, Text and Studies, Piscataway 2007.

\(^{17}\) The first image is Bibliotheque Nationale de Francais, Manuscrit Arabe 370a, f. 3r. The second is from the UNESCO CD-ROM, “Sanaa Manuscripts”, Memory of the World. UNESCO. Cairo, Egypt: Ritsec Cultureware, CD-ROM, image 045022B.
The first correction on lines two and three of text in this image (lines four and five on the manuscript page, see figure 1 and 2 on page 31) was erased thoroughly and replaced with text from the current reading of Surah 14:39 which translates as ‘Allah, who has given me in my old age,’ referring to Ismail and Ishaq. Then on the bottom line, (line 13) two sections of text are erased and replaced. In Surah 14:44 the first erasure on this line looks to have been over possibly up to three words and was replaced with two, which are translated, ‘those who wronged’. The second reassurance appears to have been over two words which were replaced with one which can be translated, ‘a little while’.

The original line of text was thoroughly erased and replaced with the current reading of text in a smaller and more tightly written hand. This rewritten portion can be translated, ‘those who do not believe in the hereafter are courting a sure agony and steeped in dismal error’ (S. 34:8).

b) Multiple lines rubbed out and replaced

The original line of text was thoroughly erased and replaced with the current reading of text in a much smaller and more tightly written hand which also extends out into the left margin (see figure 3 on page 31). This rewritten portion with portions of Surah 4:89-90, lines twelve and thirteen, can be translated,

“make no friends with them until they emigrate in the cause of Allah. But if they turn back, then capture them and kill them wherever you find them, and do not take anyone of them as a friend or as a helper. (90) Different, however, is the case of those who join a people with whom you have a pact, or of those who come over to you whilst their hearts are constricted from fighting against you or fighting against their people. If Allah has do willed He would have given them power.”

When one examines what remains of the erased or covered underlying text, these corrections can be interpreted as deliberate attempts to ensure that the consonantal text conforms to what has come to be regarded as the standard form of text. The upper corrected portions of text all conform to what is considered now to be the standard text. A similar phenomenon was seen in NT manuscripts in that sometimes the text of a manuscript was corrected to the reading of a text the scribe thought was a better manuscript. The similarity ends, though, in that the corrections in the Quran manuscripts to regularize the text were not isolated incidents according to the judgement of an individual scribe. These were part of a larger ideological campaign to create a completely unified text of the Quran. The manuscripts pictured all had portions of text that were erased where there was a portion of consonantal text that was deemed incorrect. One does not find in the NT tradition such large erasures and rewrites of text to match a standard reading of the text as corrections to manuscripts.

4. Palimpsests

Quranic palimpsests provide an even greater example of these phenomena. There are very few of these manu-

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18 This image is from the UNESCO CD-ROM, ‘Sanaa’, image 133175B.
scripts in existence, especially when compared to the NT. As regards the kinds of textual variants they contain, the underlying text in NT palimpsests contain the same kinds of variants as the rest of the NT tradition. The underlying text in all of the Quran palimpsests that have been studied so far present a very different form of the text compared to the rest of the manuscript tradition. The underlying texts in Quran palimpsests have word variants, phrase variants, added and omitted verses. It can be legitimately suggested that these variations were erased and rewritten with the kind of text now found in the rest of the Quranic manuscript tradition. The underlying text was erased and replaced with the consonantal text now recognised as the standard ‘orthodox’ text which Islamic historical tradition states was established for a combination of political, dogmatic, and liturgical reasons. Also, even the smaller corrections on the inferior and superior texts align the reading more closely to what later became the standard. In the studies done so far on the inferior and superior texts of these palimpsests, there is a clear tendency to correct the text toward what is now considered to be its standard form.

Palimpsests in the NT tradition appear to have been done for primarily economic reasons, to recycle parchment, and were not done to establish a particular form of the text. This is seen primarily in that their underlying texts contain the same kinds of variants as are found in the rest of the NT manuscript tradition. There is no qualitative difference in their variants.

5. Conclusions

These comparative situations demonstrate the importance of the second goal of textual criticism- tracing the historical development of the text. In the case of the Qur’an, it is actually the main goal available to our study. There are not enough primary source materials available to say that the original text can be recovered, especially if the action attributed to Uthman was as effective as the Islamic manuscript tradition seems to present.

The effects of these un-intentioned and well-intentioned textual changes in later textual history, however, can be cumulative and significant. They can obscure the original form and meaning.


20 These studies are: Alba Fedeli, ‘Early Evidences of Variant Readings in Qur’anic
of the text. Consider for the Quran what Ehrman asserts concerning intentional variants in the NT tradition:

“... by physically altering the words, they (the scribes) did something quite different from other exegetes, and this difference is by no means to be minimized. Whereas all readers change a text when they construe it in their minds, the scribes actually changed the text on the page. As a result, they created a new text, a new concatenation of words over which future interpreters would dispute, no longer having access to the words of the original text, the words produced by the author.”

For the NT, the negative impact of this phenomenon is diminished because we have a wider representation of manuscripts available to us than early NT scribes from which we can discern such possible changes and rectify them. With the Quran, however, there is not such a widespread representation in the manuscript tradition. Instead, the kinds of variants one finds in corrected portions, in the palimpsests and in the variety of variants recorded in the secondary literature concerning the Quran differ radically from what one finds in the great majority of manuscripts.

Also, the Quran’s text was precisely standardized more quickly than was the NT text, and with a potentially much higher degree of centralized religious-political influence in the editing process. It is important to note that historical justifications of Uthman’s action usually emphasize not preserving the full and true text of the Quran, but of him authorizing an edited text in the face of the necessity of maintaining Islamic unity and power in the political context of the early Islamic conquests and a budding religious civil war. This context interjects the strong possibility of political and theological motives behind Uthman’s action to foster a single book of divine authority which would help undergird his personal religious and political authority.

Taking these factors into consideration, Ehrman’s observation above becomes more acute for the Quran textual tradition than it is for that of the NT. Whereas one can recover a reliable version of the earliest form of the NT text because of the informal and largely unguided nature of its textual development, for the Quran one cannot recover a distinctive form of text preceding the edited text produced in Islam’s first century. The more original multiple forms of text used during and just after the lifetime of Muhammad cannot be recovered.

This window the Quran opens onto the development of the text of the NT is one of contrast. It is one of a largely formal standardization process carried out with political and religious intention as well as state authority, compared to one that was a more informal process with no centralized authority exercised to precisely establish the text.

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21 Ehrman, Corruption, p. 280.