

ob Allah selbst den Koran zu schützen vermag.

Juden und Christen sind im Blick auf die biblischen Bücher in einer anderen Situation. Sie können zugeben, dass die Bibel von Menschen und in einem zeitgenössischen kulturellen Kontext geschrieben worden ist. Sie glauben jedoch, dass der Heilige Geist die Schreiber und die Überlieferer geleitet hat (vgl. 2.Timotheus 3,16 und 2.Petrus 1,21) und dass die Bibel deshalb trotz ihrer Geschichtlichkeit ganz Gottes Wort ist. Denn die 66 biblischen Bücher sind das Zeugnis einer langen Geschichte menschlicher Gottesbegegnung und Gotteserfahrung, also ein vielstimmiger Chor von Zeugen für das Reden Gottes. Für die Worte und Taten

Jesu Christi enthält das Neue Testament vier authentische Berichte von Männern, die entweder selbst Augenzeugen waren oder sich aber auf zahlreiche andere Augenzeugenberichte stützen, während der Koran nur auf dem Zeugnis eines einzigen Menschen beruht.

Als Menschenwort ist die Bibel der religionsvergleichenden historischen Forschung zugänglich. Sie muss nicht als uneinnehmbare Festung verteidigt werden. Ihr göttlicher Charakter kann zwar nur im Glauben bezeugt werden, aber dieser Glaube ist gewiss, dass sich die Bibel als wahres Gotteswort erweist, so wahr der lebendige Gott über ihr wacht.

## **Revelation of Allah, or Words of Muhammad? The problem of the historicity of the Quran**

*Eberhard Troeger*

In orthodox Islam, the Quran is held to be the eternal and uncreated word of Allah. "Quran" means, originally, not the book, but the reading out, or "recitation" of the holy words. The text of the Quran is seen merely as an aid in committing to memory and reciting the Quran itself. According to Islamic belief, the Quran is set down in heaven on an "imperishable tablet" and was passed on in coded form to Muhammad through the agency of the Angel Gabriel between 610, and 632 B.C. Tradition says that Muhammad passed on that which he had heard to his fol-

lowers in verse form, so that they could learn it by heart. It is claimed that sections of the Quran were already set down in writing during Muhammad's lifetime, the rest being recorded systematically in written form after his death. In the majority Sunni Islam it is generally held that the Quran text currently in circulation does not differ from the original inspired words that Muhammad received. In a modern book of Islamic teaching, with a wide circulation, the author summarizes: "*A text in the original tongue, writings set down under the guidance of messen-*

*gers of God, a constant preservation through the ages, assisted by the three-fold support of memory, the scriptures and the study thereof, a host of individuals in each generation under one specially schooled teacher, not to mention the complete absence of any deviations in the text – these are some of the remarkable characteristics of the Quran, the holy book of Islam”<sup>1</sup>*

It must be said, however, that this is a very one-sided presentation of the facts. The current Quran text has been through a long period of harmonisation, as confirmed by Quran scholars in the middle ages. At the beginning, various fragments existed, which were harmonised under the direction of the Caliphs, and differing readings of the text exist up to the present day.<sup>2</sup> The theory concerning the undefiled nature of the text sets the process of the revealing, the setting down in written form, and the passing down of the Quran from generation to generation firmly in history, but not, however, its content. The content of the Quran is seen to be far above any question of historicity, is considered to be the eternal word of Allah, and orthodox Islam forbids any critical analysis of the text, any comparison, whether content or syntax, with other texts written by Muhammad, or from implying that Muhammad was in any way influenced by

the religious or political situation during his lifetime. To search for the inspiration for the Quran in this way would, in effect, call into question the status of the text as the eternal word of Allah, and imply that it is simply religious reflections penned by Muhammad, springing from his own thoughts and feelings. This refusal to examine the historicity of the Quran becomes clear also through the fact that neither the Quran, nor the Islamic text traditions name contemporary witnesses to that which Muhammad received. Islamic tradition reports a great deal concerning the accompanying circumstances of that which he saw and heard,<sup>3</sup> but remains silent about whether there were others who also heard the same, and could compare with one another.

One can, of course, apply this same objection to the Biblical prophets, and their visions and revelations. The important difference, however, is that the Biblical prophecies are embedded into a long line of divine experience, and every prophetic utterance can be tested in the context of this historical unfolding – not the case with Muhammad’s proclamations.

The gospels mention witnesses present at the unusual or spectacular events, such as the baptism of Jesus (Matthew 3:17) or the appearance of the prophets on the Mount of transfigu-

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<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Hamidullah: „Islam: History, Religion, Culture“ Paris 1963.

<sup>2</sup> See Theodor Nöldeke: „Geschichte des Korans“ 2nd edition, published by E. Schwally, G. Bergsträsser u.O. Pretzl, 3 Bde. 1909, 1919, 1938 (Hildesheim 1981) and John Gilchrist: „The Koran, the scripture of Islam.“ Mondeor/S.Africa 1995.

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example: „Die Prüfung der Erscheinung Gabriels durch Muhammads’ Frau Khadidja“ at Muhammad Ibn Is-hak. „Das Leben Muhammads“ edited by Abd al – Malik Ibn Hischam, from the Arabic, translated by Gustav Weil, newly edited version by Abd al – Masih Bd I „Der verfolgte Prophet in Mecca“ Villach 1992, p. 62.

ration (Matthew 17:5) and mention also the presence of several hundred witnesses for the truth of the crucifixion and resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:3-8). Interestingly, the Quran itself gives numerous references to its own historicity:

## 1. The Quran as historical source

The Quran text available today can be viewed as a relatively reliable historical source concerning the life of Muhammad<sup>4</sup> even when the text covers long stretches of history. Tor Andrae goes as far to say of the Quran, that it is “Our one authentic source”<sup>5</sup> as many passages in the text are veiled references to situations in Muhammad’s life.<sup>6</sup>

It is admittedly impossible to construct a biography of Muhammad using these veiled references – this is only possible with the help of Islamic text-tradition. These texts (Arabic: “Hadith”) have, however, in their descriptions of Muhammad’s exemplary actions and words (Arabic: “Sunna”) a more or less legendary character. The texts concerning Muhammad can be first identified as having been systematically collected and put in writing 150 years after his death. In any case, the historicity of the

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<sup>4</sup> Also Rudi Paret: „Muhammad und der Koran“ Stuttgart 2001, p. 166.

<sup>5</sup> Tor Andrae: „Muhammad – His life and his faith“ Göttingen 1932/Hildesheim 1977, p. 31.

<sup>6</sup> E.g.: Surah 93:6-8 refers to Muhammad’s modest background, 53:1-18 describes his vision of the angel of revelation, and Surah 8:17 contains references to the battle of Badr. See also section 4.

Quran can be confirmed by the numerous references to the life of Muhammad. This presents a problem, however: how can the eternally valid word of Allah contain so many references to specific periods of time?

## 2. The Quran and literary style

Large sections of the Quranic proclamations are spoken by Allah in the “we” form to Muhammad (“you”). For example in Surah 94:1-4 we read, “*Have we not lifted up your heart and relieved you of the burden which weighed down your back? Have we not given you high renown?*”<sup>7</sup> Allah also frequently reminds Muhammad of the earlier prophets<sup>8</sup>. According to the Quran, Muhammad was not only Allah’s “channel” but also his personal messenger. The content of the Quran is therefore not an abstract timeless proclamation, but very much tied up with the story of an individual person. This is something non-Muslims find difficult to harmonise with the belief that the Quran is the eternal and unchangeable word of Allah.

## 3. Reasons for the revelation of the Quran

It is undeniable that there are verses in the Quran that were revealed to Muhammad in specific situations.<sup>9</sup> For example, Surah 9:13 refers to an incident in which Muhammad, in approximately

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<sup>7</sup> Koran quote from translation by N.J. Dawood. (Penguin Classics ISBN: 0-14-044558-7).

<sup>8</sup> E.g. Surah 19:41-51:54,56.

<sup>9</sup> The so-called „Reasons for the sending down“ (Arabic: asbab al-nuzul).

619 BC, prayed for his uncle, after his death as an “unbeliever”. Proceeding out of this came the text in which this intercession was prohibited.<sup>10</sup> An entire branch of Muslim research has occupied itself with the question of how individual Quran texts can be assigned to the biography of Muhammad. To deal with this question, the biographies and text traditions are employed.<sup>11</sup> The western Islam experts often arrive at different conclusions to the Muslim clerics, as the latter are bound up to the fundamental recognition of the Quran as the word of Allah. Researching the “Reasons for the sending down” of the Quran is a vital admission on the part of Muslim authorities that the Quran is certainly anchored in history. If every Quran text refers to a situation in Muhammad’s life, then this has consequences for its content, which is at least a somewhat remarkable thing for an eternally relevant message.

#### **4. The criticism voiced by the opponents of Muhammad in Mecca**

It is possible to see in the Quran that Muhammad had to deal with critical objections, voiced by opponents in Mecca, who disputed the revelatory nature of the Quran. According to Surah 6, 105, they accused Muhammad of having received his recitations from his

<sup>10</sup> See Ibn Sa’d I, 1, 78 Tor Andrae: “Muhammad – Sein Leben und sein Glaube“ (Göttingen) 1932/Hildesheim 1977, p.32.

<sup>11</sup> The master of the history-related Koran interpretation is considered to be Muhammad Ibn Djarir al –Tabari. (838-923 BC).

own natural mental resources, or that a third person passed the thoughts on to him: “*We know they say ‘A mortal man taught him’*” (16:103) Similarly, in Surah 25,4 we read: “*The unbelievers say: ‘This is but a forgery of his own invention, in which others have helped him’ Unjust is what they say, and false. And they say: ‘Fables of the ancients he has written: they are dictated to him morning and evening’*” Surah 37:36 refers to an accusation, stating that Muhammad received his Quranic recitations with the help of a demonic spirit: “*Are we to renounce our gods for the sake of a possessed poet?*”

The Quran rejects all of these accusations, and emphasises that Muhammad proclaimed divine truth, (17:105) and that the preaching of the earlier messengers confirm this (37:37). The Quran, therefore, contains nothing that is untrue (41:42) – the earlier prophets were also accused of lying, (3:184) and those who criticise will be punished with hell (2:39). The Quran is, however, unable to really objectively disarm the critics, as there were no witnesses for the truth of that which Muhammad heard. It is also important to note, in this context, that the Quran itself admits that prophets can be mistaken, and that Satan is able to slip verses in (“Interjections of Satan”, 22:52). Additionally Allah replaces certain verses through newer ones (16:101), and, with Allah’s permission, Muhammad forgot certain verses (87:6). It seems that the Quran text is not so clear and unchangeable after all, which can feed doubts as to its truth.

## 5. The pattern of Quranic prophets

The Quran teaches that Allah sent “messengers” or “prophets” (The Quran does not make a clear distinction between the expressions “messenger” and “prophet”)<sup>12</sup> at various junctures in history. They were inspired by Allah to send out the same message to various different people-groups (e.g. 2:136). The Quran does not, however, give any clear information concerning the time periods between the individual messengers, and no exact information concerning the language or location of the people-groups in question. A general vagueness covers all of these details, and only a very general pattern is recognisable, in the appearing of the earlier messengers of Allah, who called the people to Islam.

The Quran itself states that Allah’s eternal word came in various differing forms and languages to the various people-groups. Allah’s word was preached into varying historical contexts. The Quran, therefore, gives witness itself, to a certain historicity concerning the external mechanisms of its impartation, as well as certain “contextualising” in the revelations of Allah’s will. Orthodox Muslims can not, however, compare the patterns of the Islamic prophets with the many older biblical accounts of the Fathers of Is-

<sup>12</sup> The tradition makes the „prophets“ to a general category, and the „messengers“ to the deliverer of a revelation. To the “messengers” belong Abraham (received the pages of Abraham) Moses, (the receiver of the Torah), David, (receiver of the “Zabur” – the psalms) “Isa” (Jesus, the receiver of the gospels).

rael, the Biblical prophets, and the Messiah (Jesus). A comparison with these texts, which Muhammad did not know from a Muslim perspective, would have to lead to the conclusion that his inspiration could be traced back to the general pattern of the previous revelations. In other words, Muhammad’s experiences and knowledge were projected into the stories of former prophets and messengers. To the Quran reader who has knowledge of pre-Islamic religious history, the historical pattern of the Islamic prophets can be attributed to Muhammad himself, and is therefore through and through embedded in history. The question is still not cleared up, however, concerning the information on which Muhammad formed his Quranic pattern of the prophets.

## 6. The “sources” of the Quran

The contemporary opponents of Muhammad at Mecca had already accused him of drawing his inspiration from various earthly sources. The study of comparative religion has dealt extensively with the question of the sources of Muhammad’s Quranic proclamations.<sup>13</sup> The term “source” should

<sup>13</sup> W. St. C. Tisdall. “The sources of Islam, a Persian treatise” translated by William Muir, Edinburgh 1901/ND o.J by “The message for Muslims trust” Wilhelm Rudolph: “Die Abhängigkeit des Korans von Judentum und Christentum” Stuttgart 1922; Heinrich Speyer. “Die Biblische Erzählungen im Koran” Gräfenheinhchen oJ/Hildesheim 1961; Christoph Luxenberg; “Die Syro-Aramäische Leseart des Koran, Ein Beitrag zur Entschlüsselung der Koransprache“ Berlin 2000.

not be seen as to be saying that Muhammad assimilated certain information directly, or read things directly himself. The emphasis of Muhammad's illiteracy in the Quran<sup>14</sup> is certainly there to convey the idea of the miraculous nature of the text, and to exclude the possibility that he had relied on foreign sources, and it can indeed be viewed as impossible that Muhammad could have read the various religious texts of the day (in Aramaic, Greek, Egyptian, Ethiopian and Persian languages). He was, however, dependant on oral traditions circulating in the Arabic language, which he then integrated into his general religious views. One can see, indirectly, in the Quran, that Muhammad pondered a great deal over religious questions, as he repeatedly commanded his followers in view of the wonder of creation, to "have understanding": *"It is he who ordains life and death, and he who alternates the night with the day. Can you not understand?"* (23:80).<sup>15</sup> Through this, the Quran gives a further hint concerning its historicity. Muhammad reached his

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<sup>14</sup> It is disputed, what is intended with the expression „Pagan prophet“ (Arabic: al-nabi' al-ummi) in Surah 7:15. Probably not that Muhammad was uneducated or illiterate, but that he came from a pagan people group, and not from Christianity, or the Jewish people. See Rudi Paret on Sure 2:78, in "Der Koran: Kommentar und Konkordanz" Stuttgart 1977 p. 21. In 11:49 the Koran emphasises that Muhammad did not know the story of Noah, but came to know it by direct revelation. See Surah 28:46, and 29:48.

<sup>15</sup> „Thinking“, or „pondering“ is seen in Islam as a central means of attaining knowledge of Allah as creator and Lord.

religious convictions through thinking things through, and assessing the available information, even if the results are presented as direct inspiration. These two aspects do not necessarily exclude one another, but demonstrates the fact of the Quran being firmly rooted in religious history. It is therefore not surprising that a comparison between the Quran and the religious texts available during Muhammad's lifetime, show that the Jews recounted Biblical themes with a Talmudic interpretation, that he heard Christians telling him things about Jesus, contained partly in the non-canonical gospels, and that he also included Arabic legends and pagan myths in his general world view.

## Conclusion

The Quran is a historical book, through and through. Its content can mostly be accounted for from a religious-historical perspective. It is questionable whether one can really claim a direct verbal inspiration, bypassing the will and personality of the receiver. Muhammad's response to his heathen critics in Mecca, and his Jewish opponents in Medina are based on the denial of the accusation that the Quran had purely human origins, and the following claim to its divine source. This causes difficulties for Muslims who wish to study the Quran, approaching it from a neutral and comparative-religious perspective. Through Muhammad, and orthodox theology, the Quran has become a fortress, which may not be attacked without a very vigorous reaction from the Islamic world community. The question is, however, how long this "Fortress

Quran” can continue to defend itself from critical research in a global, open and critical world. In any case, the vehemence with which the Quran is defended by orthodox Muslims, against any form of critical research, demonstrates that one is not really sure whether or not Allah is able to offer protection himself. Jews and Christians are, in relation to their Biblical texts, in a different situation. They can freely admit that the Bible was written in specific contemporary cultural settings. They believe, however, that the Holy Spirit guided the writers and stewards of the Holy Scriptures, (see 2Timothy 3:16, and 2Peter 1:21) and that despite its historicity, the Bible is entirely God’s word. The 66 books of the Bible

are testimony to a long history of encounters between God and man, as well as direct experiences with God – a veritable choir of witnesses for God having spoken. The words and deeds of Jesus are backed up by authentic reports from men who were either eyewitnesses themselves, or were supported by many other eyewitness accounts, whereas the Quran is based entirely on the testimony of a single man.

As written by humans, the Bible is open to religious-comparative research, and does not have to be defended like an impregnable fortress. Its divine character can only be testified to in faith, but this faith is certain – the Bible shows itself to be truly God’s word, as long as God himself watches over it.

## „Sünde“ im Christentum und im Islam – ein Vergleich

*Fritz Goerling*

Bei einem Vergleich des Konzeptes von „Sünde“ im Christentum und im Islam muss auch die Auffassung von „Erlösung“ in beiden Religionen miteinander in Beziehung gesetzt werden, da beide Begriffe eng miteinander verbunden sind. Dies befürworten auch Experten für religionsvergleichende Studien.<sup>1</sup> Ein Vergleich der biblischen

und der koranischen Vorstellung von „Sünde“ zeigt Unterschiede und Gemeinsamkeiten:

a) Nach biblischer Auffassung ist jeder Mensch seit Adam der Erbsünde verfallen, denn „das Dichten und Trachten des menschlichen Herzens ist böse von Jugend auf“ (1Mose 8:21). Im Koran gibt es keine Erbsünde. Allah schuf den Menschen im Zustand der Unschuld und mit einer angeborenen Veranlagung, das Gute zu tun, *fitrah*. Der Mensch ist gut, aber schwach (Sure 4:28; 30:30; 31:13).

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<sup>1</sup> Woodberry, J. Dudley. 1989. “Different diagnoses of the human predicament.” S. 163-176. In: Muslims and Christians on the Emmaus Road. Monrovia, Calif.: MARC.