



Foreign Words in the Quran

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*“And if We had made this a foreign Qur’ān, they would have said,
‘Why are its verses not clarified?
What! A foreign [book] and an Arab [prophet]?!”*

Al-Qur’ān 41:44

* * *

Q. It is an indisputable fact that the Qur’ān uses ‘foreign vocabulary’, that is to say, vocabulary that was adopted into the Arabic language of the Qur’ān as loanwords derived from Aramaic, Syriac, Ethiopian, Hebrew, Greek, and other languages, but already understood in the Meccan and Medinan environment of Muḥammad’s time. Many of these loanwords are taken from their liturgical usage in the Jewish-Christian tradition. It is equally indisputable that the Qur’ān includes many passages that have their parallels in biblical or extra-biblical narratives. How do you critically assess these phenomena of the Qur’ān in view of the claim that the Qur’ān is divine revelation, word for word?

The Arabic Qur'ān and Foreign Words

Due to the multi-layered question, this response will be divided into three parts.¹

The Issue of Foreign Words

The controversy regarding the presence of foreign words in the Qur'ān is an ancient one, and although modern scholarship can claim that this fact is indisputable, it was certainly not so in the eyes of some early Muslims.

The famous Andalusian exegete, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Qurtubī (d. 671/1272), summarized the controversy in the introduction to his *Tafsīr*. He stated that the scholars of Islam have unanimously agreed that there are no non-Arabic sentences or phrases in the Qur'ān, and they have also agreed that there are non-Arabic proper names such as 'Jesus' ('Īsā), Gabriel (*Jibrīl*) and 'Noah' (*Nūh*). However, they differed into two groups regarding the presence of solitary foreign words in the Qur'ān.²

The controversy, of course, pre-dates al-Qurtubī by a few centuries. On the one hand were those who claimed that there were no foreign words in the Qur'ān, the most prominent amongst them being the jurist al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204/819), and also the exegete al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/922). They claimed that any word found in another language did not necessitate its origination in that language, for it could be the case that the other language took it from Arabic, or that both languages used those words simultaneously.³ The former, in his famous *al-Risālah*, has some harsh words for the followers of this opinion, and considered those who claimed that the Qur'ān has foreign words in it as being ignorant, bereft of wisdom and knowledge.⁴ Their concern, as they quite clearly

¹ I must point out that it is not even remotely possible to do justice to this question in the space allotted; however the goal is to show as wide a grasp of the sources and issues as possible, and that is what I intend to accomplish.

² Al-Qurtubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li Aḥkām al-Qur’ān*, v. 1, p. 104.

³ Al-Tabari, *Tafsīr*, v. 1, p. 8.

⁴ Al-Shāfi‘ī, *al-Risālah*, p. 41

delineate, was that the Qur'ān describes itself, in almost a dozen verses (e.g. Q. 16:103, 12:2, and 42:7) as being in pure Arabic, hence how could it be claimed that it contained foreign words? They also felt that, in accordance with the Qur'ānic principle that all prophets are sent speaking their native tongues, an Arab prophet would have to speak in Arabic to them. A third reason why such great consternation was felt, as the grammarian Ibn Fāris (d. 395/1004) stated, was due to the fact that if there were non-Arabic words in it, it would be unfair to challenge the Arabs to produce a work similar to it, as the Qur'ān does.⁵

It is poignant to note that there does not seem to be any indication in the writings of these early and even medieval scholars that admitting the existence of foreign vocabulary in the Qur'ān might somehow challenge its claim of Divine origin or expose it to allegations of ‘foreign’ influence. Rather, for them, it was a matter of reconciling specific verses that they presumed contradicted the assertion that foreign words existed in it.

On the other hand, quite a few early authorities seemed to have no problem acknowledging the foreign vocabulary of the Qur'ān. In particular the Companion Ibn 'Abbās has much narrated from him in this regard (whether it can be deemed authentic or not is another question). The prolific al-Suyūtī (d. 911/1505) wrote the largest work of its kind in Arabic, entitled *al-Muhadhab fī ma waqa'a fī al-Qur'ān min al-mu'arrab*, in which he compiled around five dozen such examples. For al-Suyūtī, the few examples of non-Arabic words found in the Qur'ān did not negate its overall Arabic nature, hence there was no conflict with this and the verses describing it as being an Arabic revelation.

A third group of scholars tried to reconcile the two positions by claiming that there was an element of truth in both of them. The early linguist Abū 'Ubayd al-Qāsim

⁵ Ibn Fāris, *al-Šāhībī*, p. 28.

b. Sallām (d. 224/838) is the first that I know of who claimed that both of these groups were correct; he stated that the origin of some Qur’ānic words is indeed foreign, but they were introduced into Arabic, as is the case with any language, and were Arabicised by replacing their letters with Arabic letters, and eventually were incorporated into Arabic poetry and culture, such that for all practical purposes they could be considered Arabic.⁶ Al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1391), whose work *al-Burhān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān* is almost universally acknowledged as the greatest mediaeval work on the sciences of the Qur’ān, also leaned towards this position, as did al-Suyūtī in his other work, *al-Itqān fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān*. Some proponents of this camp quoted the ‘father’ of Arabic grammar, Ṣibawayh (d. 180/796) himself, who wrote in his *al-Kitāb* that non-Arabic words could become Arabic if one substituted Arabic letters for the foreign ones, and then appended it to a known morphological form (*wazn*).⁷ The exegete Ibn ‘Aṭiyyah (d. 541/1147), in his *al-Muḥarrar* summarized his position regarding this issue when he stated that there is no doubt that Arabs interacted with other civilizations, through trade and other journeys, and in the process they took some of their words and introduced them into the common vernacular of the Arabs, such that they began to be used in their lectures and poetry, and this was the state of affairs when the Qur’ān was revealed with these words. It is this third opinion which is now almost universally acknowledged as valid by Muslim specialists in the field, and all the modern works that are written in the field of ‘ulūm al-Qur’ān’ reflect this.

As a final point, the fact that words of non-Arab origin are undeniably found in pre-Islamic poetry (in particular, the ‘Seven Hanging Odes’) clearly shows that Arabs, like all cultures, took specific phrases from other languages and incorporated them into their own.

⁶ Ibn Fāris, *al-Ṣāḥibī*, p. 29.

⁷ Ṣibawayh, *al-Kitāb*, v. 4, p. 304.

Mention must be made here of the seminal work on this field in Western scholarship, and that is Arthur Jeffery's *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān* (Brill, 2007). There is no doubt that this masterpiece of scholarship outshines anything else written on the subject, however, at the same time, it cannot be taken as the final authority on each and every word that it lists. Rather, it serves as an indispensable index to see which words *might possibly qualify* as being non-Arabic in origin. What sets Jefferey's work head and shoulders above all other works is that he specifically links each alleged foreign word back to its original language, be it Aramaic, Syriac, Hebrew, Greek, or other.⁸

The Issue of Judaeo-Christian Influence on the Qur'ān

It is a given fundamental amongst non-Muslims, be they Christian, Jew, or secular, that Muḥammad composed the Qur'ān from whatever sources were available to him, in particular Judaeo-Christian sources. And it is just as much a fundamental amongst Muslims (by definition!) that the Qur'ān was a revelation from God.

The earliest modern researcher who sought to methodologically prove this claim was Abraham Geiger, who published his *Was had Mohammed aus dem Judenthem aufgenommen* in 1833 (translated as *Judaism and Islam*). This was followed by a flood of writings on the topic, such as those of Wilhelm Rudolph, Tor Andrae, Richard Bell, and C. C. Torrey. In particular, the Scottish Orientalist William Muir (d. 1905) did much to lay the foundations of this viewpoint.

⁸ There is one minor reservation that I have about the work, and I say this fully recognizing and appreciating the level of scholarship it displays (apart from the fact that it includes proper nouns such as Ilyās, Sabi'ūn, and Majūs - this is a matter that even the likes of al-Shafi'i would not have had an issue with!) Jeffery shows that many common nouns and verbs (such as *khubz*, p. 121, *kataba*, p. 248 and *sajada*, p. 162) have 'originated' from a foreign language; this might very well be the case, but their use and understanding amongst the Arabs, perhaps for centuries before the coming of the Prophet, had made them as 'Arabic' as could possibly be. My point here is that the case cannot be made with such common nouns and verbs that the Prophet himself had anything to do with them or that he somehow introduced them into the language of the Arabs (whereas the case may indeed be made with other words). Hence their inclusion on a list of 'foreign' vocabulary of the Qur'ān (as opposed to a list of foreign vocabulary of the Arabic language), seems, to me at least, foreign.

Muir maintained that the Prophet had obtained his knowledge of Judaism and Christianity via the followers of those religions who lived in the Hijaz, and who visited the ‘Ukādh fairs, as well as having learnt about them via his own journeys to Syria. Claims Muir, “We may be certain that Mahomet lost no opportunity of enquiring into the practices and tenets of the Syrian Christians or of conversing with the monks and clergy who fell in his way.” Muir laments that the Prophet was exposed to a distorted and faulty view of Christianity, for had he been given the correct understanding of the religion instead of ‘...the misnamed catholicism of the Empire,’ he would have instead converted to it rather than misleading others through a new faith.⁹

W. Montgomery Watt, taking the ideas of Muir a step further, claimed that one of the theses of his book *Muhammad at Mecca* is that the greatness of Islam is largely due to a fusion of some Arab elements with certain Judaeo-Christian conceptions. He also posits (p. 27), based upon Q. 16:103, that there was a ‘monotheist informant’ of the Prophet. For Watt, the Prophet intentionally launched a new monotheistic religion in order to avoid the political implications of adopting Judaism or Christianity (p. 38).

H. A. R. Gibb, in his *Muhammadanism: A Historical Survey*, puts forward another possibility concerning the sources of the Qur‘ān. In view of the close commercial relation between Mecca and Yemen, he states, it would be natural to assume that some religious ideas were carried to Mecca with the caravans of spices and woven stuffs, and there are details of vocabulary in the Qur‘ān which give color to this assumption.¹⁰ The Lebanese Philip K. Hitti wrote that the sources of the Qur‘ān are unmistakably Christian, Jewish and Arab heathen, and that what Muhammad did was to Islamise, Arabicise and nationalize the material.¹¹ Richard Bell, in his *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment*, opines that much of the Qur‘ān is directly dependent on the Bible

⁹ Muir, *The Life of Mahomet*, (Edinburgh, 1923) v. 2, p. 20-21.

¹⁰ *Muhammadanism: A Historical Survey* (London, 1961) p. 37.

¹¹ Hitti, *Islam and the West: A Historical Cultural Survey* (New York, 1979), p. 15.

(p. 42), yet also admitted that there was no evidence of any seats of Christianity in the Ḥijāz, and especially in Mecca and Medina (p. 100). The more modern Kenneth Cragg, while conceding the Christian influence on the Qur’ān, opines: “The Biblical narratives reproduced in the Qur’ān differ considerably and suggest oral, not direct acquaintance. There is almost complete absence of what could be claimed as direct quotation from the Bible.”¹²

And the quotes go on and on. The New Catholic Encyclopedia states quite correctly, regarding the divine origins of the Qur’ān:¹³

Non-Moslem scholarship has taken a different view of the matter. It has nearly always held that the major influences on Mohammed must have been principally, but not exclusively, Jewish and Christian, and that those influences were colored by Mohammed’s own character and made over to conform to aspects and need of the pre-Islamic Arabian mind.

It later goes on to claim that it was highly likely that the Prophet had access to the Scriptures of Judaism and Christianity.

The connection between the foreign vocabulary of the Qur’ān and its alleged foreign sources is obvious, as the quotation from Gibb above hints at. Arthur Jefferey’s work, mentioned above as well, is a perfect illustration of this frame of mind. He states factually that “...it is plain that Muḥammad drew his inspiration...from the great monotheistic religions which were pressing down into Arabia of his day.”¹⁴ Based on this premise, he then asserts that researching the foreign vocabulary of the Qur’ān will allow us to understand the influences and sources that Muḥammad used to come up with his religion.¹⁵ Jefferey then proceeds to lay out how Muḥammad might have had possible access to Ethiopic, Persian, Greek, Syrian, Hebrew, Nabataean and Indian

¹² *The Call Of The Minaret*, p. 66

¹³ New Catholic Encyclopaedia (1967), Vol. VII, p.677.

¹⁴ Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, p. 1.

¹⁵ Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, p. 2.

sources, how he had ‘...close contact with the Syrian Church,’ how he attempted to purchase information from the Jews, was possibly taught Coptic legends from his slave-girl, and was inspired by the success and might of the Byzantine and Persian Empires to lead the Arabs to higher levels of civilization.¹⁶

The View From Within: Muslim Responses

For Muslims, such a view as expressed by Jefferey and others is inherently biased. Many of the earlier generation of Orientalists were quite staunch Christians who made no qualms about their religious views on Islam. For later scholars, who worked in a time when, even if such a bias existed, its admittance would be looked upon disapprovingly, the general paradigm from which academic research was (and is) undertaken is that of a secular one, where there is no God who communicates with man and who sends different prophets with the same message to different peoples. Of course, this paradigm is applied to the same standards by most modern researchers to *all* faiths, and not just Islam. To do otherwise would automatically constitute an unacceptable bias that modern academia would not allow. Thus, the ‘The Great Flood’ that is mentioned in the Bible (and the Qur’ān) is viewed as a universal myth that has its origins in a plethora of sources, such as the Hindu Puranas, Greek mythology, and even the Epic of Gilgamesh. The mythology of Christianity is seen as having been derived from previous parallels, some of which are indeed quite striking, such as the stories of the Egyptian Sun god Horus and the Hellenistic cult of Mithra.

Hence, some of the problems that religiously devout Muslim academics will have when dealing with such research into the origins of the Qur’ān are very similar to the problems that members of other faiths will have when dealing with their respective traditions.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 22, 28-9, 38.

But this is not the only line of defense that Muslim academics draw. They point out the social and intellectual milieu that the Prophet found himself in and ask whether the portrayal of him tallies with historical facts and realities. One cannot be blamed for getting the distinct impression that some Western authors attribute to Muḥammad a type of encyclopedic knowledge that no one else of his time or era reputedly had, or could even come close to. The impression is given that either he knew or had access to a library that included Christian, Jewish, Zoroastrian, and ancient Arab beliefs, and was cognizant of many different languages and dialects, before ‘writing’ the Qur’ān. Yet, modern research has failed to show any significant center of Jewish or Christian learning in Arabia, or translation of the Holy Scriptures into Arabic. In fact, some specialists have shown that the first known translation of the Gospels into Arabic occurred in the third century after the *hijra*.¹⁷

Again, for Muslims, such claims seem to ignore simple historical realities of the time, some of which even the Qur’ān alludes to. Of them is that Muḥammad was an illiterate man raised in an uneducated Bedouin society. Both Q. 10:16 and 29:48-9 remind listeners that the Prophet had spent an entire lifetime (i.e., forty years) in their midst, during which he showed absolutely no inclination for any sort of literary activity or flair for writing skills – had he done so, the Qur’ān explicitly states, there would indeed be a legitimate reason to be skeptical.

Another issue that must be kept in mind is that any ‘parallels’ found between Qur’ānic and Biblical stories or materials are seen as *proving*, rather than *disproving*, the Qur’ān’s claim that it, along with the previous revelations, are Divinely revealed. A number of verses (e.g., 12:3, 12:102 and 28:44-6) plainly link the mentioning of such stories as proof that these revelations are not from mortal sources, but from God, “...for

¹⁷ Sidney H Griffith, “The Gospel In Arabic: An Enquiry Into Its Appearance In The First Abbasid Century” *Oriens Christianus*, Volume 69, p. 131-132.

neither you, nor your people, knew of them before this” (Q 11: 49). Believing Muslims point out that even at the revelation of this Meccan verse, there are no recorded instances of anyone challenging the veracity of this claim, and state, “Actually, I was aware of these particular stories before the revelation.” Hence, far from looking at such stories and any similarities between them and other literature as proof *against* his prophethood, believers take them to be proofs *for* his claims!¹⁸ The same applies for any theological or moral similarity between Islam and Judaism or Christianity, or even ancient Arab customs, for they are taken to be of the common rubric given to Moses, Jesus and Abraham respectively. Hence this type of ‘back-projecting’ of ideas is not as much of a problem for Muslims as it is, say, for Christians when confronted with clear parallels between Christian theology and pagan beliefs (since, for them, there should be no Divine connection between the pagan cult of Mithra and the image of Jesus Christ, for example). For Muslims, the continuity of theology between prophets is a clear Qur’ānic principle and a proof *for* prophethood (as in Q. 46:9). In fact, in more than one verse the Qur’ān quite explicitly and unabashedly states that God has given the same message to the previous prophets in their respective Scriptures. In Q. 21:105, the Qur’ān states that God had already written, in the Psalms, that the righteous shall inherit the Earth (*‘anna al-arḍa yarithuhā ‘ibadiy al-ṣāliḥūn’*). This is almost an exact parallel of Psalm 37:29 “The righteous shall inherit the land and dwell therein for ever.”¹⁹ Other verses also give quotations from Biblical Scripture (see, for example, Q. 49:29).

It is also interesting to note that while the classical works related to the sciences of the Qur’ān discussed a multitude of issues, and strived to ‘defend’ the purity of the Revelation by tackling, head on, the claims of those who opposed it, it is rare to find in

¹⁸ For the above paragraphs, see, *inter alia*: Mohammad Khalifa, *The sublime Qur’ān and Orientalism* (London; Longman, 1983), Hamza Njozi, *The Sources of the Qur’ān: A Critical Review of Authorship Theories*, (WAMY Press, 1995); Mohar Ali, *Sirat al-Nabi and the Orientalists* (Madina, 1997); my own comments in Qadhi, *An Introduction*, p. 274-6. Also see Watt’s comments on this verse in *Mohammed at Mecca*, p. 45.

¹⁹ Although I am not knowledgeable of Hebrew, I am told that the parallel in the original is even more profound.

their works, or even in the treatises that responded to Christian polemics against Islam, a detailed defense of the accusation that the Qur'ān is taken from Judaeo-Christian sources because of parallels between them. Again, this returns to the psychological frame of mind that Muslims have, in which they see such parallels as being an indication of the continuity of the same chain of prophets and the same message, revealed from the same God. In other words, such parallels are simply not as ‘troubling’ to them as they are to a secular, Christian or Jewish observer, since each of these three groups will explain such parallels from within his or her own paradigm.²⁰

In conclusion, and on a personal note, I accept as a given that, as a believer in a particular faith, there are certain areas where academic scholarship and religious belief will simply have to agree to disagree. I find claims of neutrality and objectivity to be purely relative; secular researchers into any field of religion will have their biases (although they would probably not label them as being ‘biases’), believing adherents to one tradition will have other biases when they examine other faiths, and they will have yet another set of biases when they examine their own faith.

That does not mean that research in any religious field is doomed to be bound by one’s own religious views. Rather, it is precisely *because* of such alternate viewpoints that academics and researchers will continue to enrich and engage with one another and provide fertile ground for ideas to be tossed around and explored; eventually, some will germinate and be nurtured, while others will fail to take root. And even of those that are nurtured, the fruits produced by such ideas will always be sweet to some, and bitter to others.

²⁰ I am not implying that such defense does not exist in the classical sources, for it does; what I am saying is that when one compares the quantity of material on this specific issue, versus other issues (for example, proving the *i'jāz* of the Qur'ān), it is quite clear that this issue was not of as great a concern to them as other issues.