

INTRODUCTION

The work before you, some twenty chapters of excerpts from Jalal ‘l-Din ‘l-Suyuti’s *‘l-Itqan fi ‘Ulum al-Qur’an*, is a translation of what this celebrated polymath considered indispensable linguistic and stylistic tools for comprehending the meanings of the Koran. Whilst the translation itself is to my knowledge unprecedented, the use of Itqan material as such in modern studies of the Koran is not, the most significant being that of Theodore Noldeke’s still invaluable, *Geschichte des Qoran*.¹ And whilst the Itqan is rightly described both as an invaluable “introduction to the critical study of the Koran”², as well as “a monumental synthesis of the quranic sciences”³ its greater value would seem to lie in the as yet fledgling area of higher critical studies of the Koran. Arkoun might well have had just this in mind when he complained of an “epistemological myopia” common to both western as well as Islamic scholars who hesitate in applying modern linguistic tools such as narrative analysis or semiology to the Koran.⁴ To this category, I would suggest, belong those traditionalists, for whom Koranic studies ventures not beyond the search for even greater literary clarity and thematic coherence in the Koran; this includes those Arabists, who—when not involved in some translation—perpetuate their convention of trying to isolate and define Islamic society, or the Arab mind, or

¹ Theodor Noldeke *Geschichte des Qorans* (Hildesheim, 1961) 3 vols. This is particularly true of the second half of the first volume which rearranges the chapters chronologically, the second volume in its entirety, which examines the historicity of the collected material itself, and much of the third volume, which examines its variant readings, its paleography, and its aesthetics.

² Nicholson, Reynold, *A Literary History of the Arabs* New Delhi 2004. p.45

³ McAuliffe, Jane Dammen p.6 Some have outlined both its strengths as well as its weaknesses: Arthur Jeffrey, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Koran* in *The Koran: Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies* ed. Colin Turner New York 2004. s’ .156 for instance, writing on the textual history of the Koran calls the *Itqan* a “great compendium of Muslim Koranic Sciences” but one that nonetheless, contains little information on textual history. Jeffrey, Arthur *Materials for the History of the Text of the Koran* in *The Koran: Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies* ed. Colin Turner New York 2004. .156

⁴ Mohammed Arkoun *Lecture du Coran (L’Islam d’hier et d’aujourd’hui)* xxxiii, 175 pp. Paris, 1982. Also see, *Pour une critique de la raison islamique*, Paris, 1984

the oriental temperament; and of late, it has come to include revisionists, who, having cast grave doubts on the authenticity of the traditional texts and even on the canonization of the Koran itself then turn around and selectively use those very texts to make their point!

Inasmuch as western studies of the Koran differ in their approach to traditional source materials, and in the methodologies they each bring to bear on the study of such materials, they nonetheless share one feature which sets them apart from traditional approaches: they all ask questions which go beyond the Koran itself to the very *Sitz im Leben* of the faith itself. So, in seeking answers to questions about the origins of the sacred text, for instance, they implicitly ask not just when canonization occurred, or how outside religious strains are entwined in the Koranic narrative, but also which milieu most influenced its overall message. Muslim scholars accept as their working principle the Koran's ontological claims whereas non Muslims reject the claim itself as being outside the purview of academic inquiry. For secular academics this poses a dilemma because their only bridge to Islam's past is through material collected by early Muslim scholars who made no distinction between material that was purely historical and that which was salvific. The historiographical material of traditional Muslim scholarship has served as source material for both the standard Muslim narrative as well as the bulk of secular western studies on Islam and Muslims but with differences in approach. For traditional Islamic research, in their details the six authentic works on apostolic traditions (the *sihah sitta*) are authentic and more than adequate; for what they lack in historiographical rigor is more than provided by the comparatively less authentic historical works of Ibn Ishaq (d. 767 c.e.) and Tabari. As for western historians, for whom such material was largely evidentiary, what the texts said about the milieu in which early Islam developed was more important than the scrutiny to which their transmission was put. More important to them, therefore, were questions that asked, to what

extent did Muhammad borrow Judeo-Christian leitmotifs, biblical personalities and mosaic rites and rituals? The only time alternate sources to Tabari et.al. were given serious consideration was when they differed substantively from the Biblical sources.⁵

In the 19th century Abraham Geiger⁶ and Julius Wellhausen⁷ tried to show that much of the Koran was actually borrowed, in the case of Geiger from rabbinic literature and in the case of Wellhausen, from Christian. This search for Islam's origins in biblical literature was continued in the 20th century by Charles Torrey and Richard Bell. Montgomery Watt was one of the first to break from this tradition with his focus on the sociological and ideological backdrop of 7th century Arabia as the impetus for Muhammad's teachings.⁸ It was Watt who first suggested that the very demand for luxury goods in areas north and south of Mecca that so enriched its economy also plunged its citizens into a spiritual and moral crisis that helped launch Mohammed's monotheistic assault on idol worship.⁹ But Watt came in for much criticism by Patricia Crone, following John Wansbrough, for hewing too closely to the traditional sources if not to their narrative, and for trying "to say nothing that would be the rejection of any of the

⁵ So for example, Richard Bell in his *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment* London 1926, argues, without evidence, I might add, that the sources of the Koran, and by extension, those of Islam, were the many Christians who lived in Mecca. C.C. Torrey in his *The Jewish Foundations of Islam* New York 1933, argues in similar vein—and with even less evidence—that the Koran's antecedents lie in Judaism, not Christianity. Both Montgomery Watt in *Muhammad in Mecca*, Oxford 1953, as well as Bell in his *The Origins of Islam* concede however, that no substantial Jewish or Christian population dwelled in Mecca during the formative period of Islam.

⁶ *Was hat Mohammed aus dem Judenthume aufgenommen* (Bonn, 1833) was translated by F. Young as *Judaism and Islam* (1896) was actually part of Geiger's bigger project, that of showing Judaism's influence on both Christianity and Islam

⁷ *Reste Arabischen Heidentums* (Berlin, 1887). For almost two decades Wellhausen preoccupied himself with reconstructing early Islamic history. In addition to a translation of al-Waqidi's *Maghazi*, he also wrote works on early Arabic poetry, Arab paganism and the early political conflicts in Islam.

⁸ Watt in *Muhammad, Prophet and Statesman*, Oxford 1961, p. 192, explains his approach in the following way: "Though I have held that material factors created the situation in which Islam was born, I have also maintained that the social malaise they produce does not become a social movement until it has ideas to focus it."

⁹ See, in this regard, Watt's entry, "Makka," in *Encyclopedia of Islam*, VI, pp. 145-6. Patricia Crone however, failed to find evidence of trade in the luxury goods that Watt speaks of. John Jandora takes issue with the methodology of both Watt and Crone. The economic growth did take place, he suggests. During the period 572 c.e. to 616 war engulfed Mecca's neighbors to the north and their demand for leather and other animal by products turned Mecca into a conduit through which products passed from Africa to the fertile crescent.

fundamental doctrines of Islam”.¹⁰ Ever since the publication of Wansbrough’s four articles that together comprise his *Quranic Studies* a small but not insignificant cadre of scholars have tried to develop alternate theories to the origins of Islam. For such scholars the origins of Islam, the canonization of its holy book, and the authentication of its apostolic traditions lie somewhere between the 7th and the 9th centuries of the common era.

To summarize, the most significant bone of contention in all of the foregoing approaches, therefore, is the historiographical. For traditional Muslim scholarship, only the factual minutiae of the traditional accounts are open to question; for most western scholars, the problem lies in traditional historical literature not being distinguishable from salvation literature; and for the radical revisionists such as Wansbrough, Crone, et.al., there is, in addition to the questionable authenticity of the historical logia, the greater problem pertaining to the very methods, theories, and principles used by modern historians. But in all such efforts the material found in the Itqan, if its almost ubiquitous appearance in so many texts is anything to go by, has proven both reliable and indispensable to the study of the Koran. All serious efforts at either plumbing the traditional depths of Muslim scholarship even deeper, or those given to probing alternate explanations further, have shown need for the material that Suyuti painstakingly put together. When complete, therefore, the translated Itqan will undoubtedly allow a far broader cross section of modern scholarship to engage the source material in this very important debate directly and accurately.

As for the sections chosen here, they reiterate the somewhat neglected fact that whilst theological reservations may have prevented comment on God’s “word” (*kalam Allah*) the text’s many

¹⁰ Montgomery Watt *Muhammad in Mecca* Oxford 1953. p. x. For Patricia Crones critique of the ‘trade’ argument to explain the genesis of Islam see: *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* Princeton, 1988.

linguistic and stylistic oddities made substantial editing of the Koran inevitable, even for early Muslims. Some such oddities Bell and Watt have described thus:

“abrupt changes of rhyme; repetition of the same rhyme word or rhyme phrase in adjoining verses; the intrusion of an extraneous subject into a passage otherwise homogenous; a differing treatment of the same subject in neighboring verses, often with repetition of words and phrases; breaks in grammatical construction which raise difficulties in exegesis; abrupt changes in length of verse; sudden changes of the dramatic situation, with changes of pronoun from singular to plural, from second to third, and so on; the juxtaposition of apparently contrary statements; the juxtaposition of passages of different dates. . . .”¹¹

To this, one may add: a lack of sequence or chronology in the arrangement of the chapters; a lack of uniformity of the chapters in order or content; virtual duplications of entire passages with minor lexical changes; a lack of coherence and uniformity of its legal precepts, and a literary style that is preponderantly allusive and referential rather than expository. But whilst such lexical lacunae, such stylistic oddities may well have disturbed Arthur Jeffrey’s “sense of coherence”¹², or provided incontrovertible need for revision of its contents for Watt, and Bell, for the early exegetes all of this was unmistakable evidence of that very inimitability which so exemplified its divine origins.¹³ But these exegetes, their theological persuasions notwithstanding, still faced the onerous task of streamlining such oddities as to make the Koran’s performative and juridical injunctions practicable to a community, which to quote Arkoun, was required “to consume the Qur’an in their daily lives”¹⁴

¹¹ A. Jeffery *Materials for the History of the Text of the Quran* (Leiden, 1937) p. 1.

¹² A. Rippin “Reading the Qur’an with Richard Bell” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 112, no. 4 (1992) p.646. R. Bell and W.M. Watt *Introduction to the Qur’an* (Edinburgh, 1970) It must be said that this charge of linguistic incoherence is not new: ‘I-Kindi writing in the 9th century, called the history therein, jumbled and incomprehensible. This he too, argued was evidence that the Koran is the product of not one, divine source, but of many human minds.

¹³ Not everyone saw this as peculiar to the Koran however. G.E. von Grunebaum for example, argued in “The Spirit of Islam as seen in its Literature” *studies Islamica* no.1, 1953, p.102, that Arabic literature, in general, pays more attention “to the individual verse, paragraph, at the expense of the consistent lay-out of the whole.” The Arab literati, he goes on to say. “demonstrated that the value of a poem to them would depend on the perfection of its individual lines.”

¹⁴ M. Arkoun p.41

To do so however, they had to do the following: one, to start viewing the sacred text as literary text rather than as liturgy; two, to seamlessly append their human deliberations side by side with the divine text so as to make the former as dogmatically acceptable, almost, as the latter; and three, to subtly extend the sanctity ascribed to the Koran itself, to these quite human interpretations. The solution which evolved gradually to become a veritable ‘science of interpretation’ or *ilm ‘l-tafsir* was rather unique in that it called, not for a recalibrated text following theme or chronology, as such, but for the composition of a set of hermeneutical tools which, together would remain clearly subordinate to the letter of the text, whilst becoming at the same time indispensable to its practical application. The tools of tafsir helped the exegete undertake the very thematic rearrangements, chronological sequencing, and stylistic editing that modern scholarship has so strongly advocated and which Muslim scholarship has equally strongly resisted. An excellent example in this regard is 2:158: “Behold, (the hills in Mecca) ‘l-Safa and ‘l-Marwa are of the symbols of God; and thus, one who performs the hajj of the House or the ‘umrah would do no wrong in circling them”. Like many other verses in the Koran that feature prominently in ritual or dogma this one is terse to the point of inscrutability. For instance, those outside Mecca would find it impossible to determine the objects to which the names referred, whether such circling is obligatory or optional, and of course the point of the matter itself! In other words, the lack of context and subtext to this verse made it a prime candidate for textual emendation; and yet no early exegete whether affiliated to the Sunni, the Shiite or any other sect even suggested that the text itself be emended to better present its purport. Instead of tampering with the text proper exegetes worked around it, imputing juridical glosses to the first part of the verse only, deeming it the cause célèbre of the walking between the two hills ritual of the hajj; and to the second they imputed a historical gloss, claiming that it explained how an

overtly pagan ritual was incorporated into the hajj ritual. James Bellamy, in his article suggesting emendations to what he considers textual errors in the Koran, cites various examples of early Muslim scholarship conceding his kind of errors but ruling out categorically emendations to the sacred text. We have for example, the case of `Ali, the fourth caliph, refusing to change the word *talh* (bananas) in 56:29 for *tal`* (blossoms) even though he believed a scribal error had occurred.¹⁵ Other prominent scholars of the first Islamic generation made similar comments about scribal errors in the text but all steered clear of emendations. This in my opinion, was because the text by then had indeed, already been canonized, and this text based on the `Uthmanic codex came to be accepted as the inerrant word of God.¹⁶

This early transformation of sacred scripture to canon had the consequence of not just putting the sacred text beyond question but also beyond reach; henceforth, guidance would have to be sought in local practices or the ever burgeoning apostolic traditions. The absence of the Koran from the legislative process of the early legists and theologians was underscored by both Schacht and Wensinck, in their respective studies of the early development of Islamic law and Muslim Creed. And this was the evidence that Wansbrough cited, amongst others, to support his own theory of canonization occurring over “more than a single generation”.¹⁷ I would suggest, however, that contra Wansbrough, it was not the absence of a canonized text that explains the lack of reference to the Koran in early Muslim thinking but rather its canonized presence in the

¹⁵ James Bellamy: “Some Proposed Emendations to the Text of the Qur’an” in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* vol.113, no.4, (Oct. 1993) Pp.562-563. Also see Ignaz Goldziher: *Die Richtungen der islamische Koranauslegung* Leiden, 1952.

¹⁶ According to Muslim tradition canonization occurred when Gabriel who for twenty three served as the angel of revelation made one final review which then established the present text as the ipsissima verba of God. For more on the process of revelation becoming canon see: Suyuti, *al-Itqan* I, 164-83.

¹⁷ John Wansbrough *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation* New York, 2004.P.44. For Schacht’s views on the development of Islamic Law see: Josef Schacht: *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* Oxford, 1950. For the development of the Islamic creed, see: Jan Wensinck *The Muslim Creed, Its Genesis and Historical Development* New York 1965

way described by Watt and Bell, that all but precluded reference to its verses in law and theology.

Assuming the aforementioned is more accurate an explanation for the absence of scripture from early legal discourse, the traditional account of how scriptural logia transformed into standardized codex, thence to canonized text, and thence to the explicative process known as tafsir could be said to at least follow the broad strokes of the traditional narrative.¹⁸ This may well explain why modern scholarship still clings to the Koran being revealed to Muhammad over a period of twenty three years until his death in 632 ce.; of Abu Bakr his successor, commissioning the first authorized written copy thereof; of this copy being vouchsafed to his successor, `Umar, and then to his daughter, Hafsa; and finally, of `Uthman, the third caliph, authorizing the Hafsa codex to be copied and widely distributed as the only official version of the Koran.

To pursue the traditional account, the period that followed has been described as one in which all authority was being contested, with intellectual giants like Ja`far al-Sadiq, the Shiite imam, claiming sole authority not just over Muslim society, but also over the interpretation of the holy writ—and in particular, its allegorical verses. Because no explicit texts legitimized Shiite claims to leadership Ja`far was forced to rely heavily on the interpretive latitude the allegorical verses offered to make just such claims. Thus: the signs of God refer to the imams; the Straight Path is that which the Imams followed; and the Light of God refers ‘not just to the imams but also their quasi-divine character’.¹⁹ Sunnis meanwhile, with de facto political authority, had little need for allegorical interpretations; instead, they looked to the Koran to hold on to power gained

¹⁸ Wansbrough, not unexpectedly, disagrees, arguing instead that “Quranic exegesis. . . is not likely to have been articulated before the third/ninth century. See his “Majaz al-Qur’an: Periphrastic Exegesis” in *Bulletin of the School of African and Oriental Studies* No.2, 1970, p.247

militarily, and to use the authority of the sacred text to consolidate such ill gained authority or to regulate civil society in ways that privileged their respective constituencies over those of their opponents. In the case of Sunni scholars therefore, the point of entry into exegesis was language, not allegory, but interestingly enough, even there, those scholars who initially did no more than clarify the obscurities of the sacred text ultimately graduated to become its de facto gatekeepers; so, as in some other religions, so too in Sunni Islam, philology and linguistics not only privileged the clergy over the laity, but also helped circumvent theological divides that otherwise separated the inerrant divine word from fallible exegetical opinion.²⁰

To avoid the pitfalls of literalism Sunni hermeneutics developed into a complex system of caveats, that required, for instance, that texts be interpreted in light of varying contexts (*maqam*), and that laws derived as such, include not just one, but all verses pertaining to any given topic. (*'l-Qur`an yafissuru ba`duhu ba`dan*).²¹ The need for context is succinctly explained by 'l-Khatib 'l-Qazwini, the celebrated linguist, as follows:

That context which demands the definite, the generalization, or the advancement of parts of a discourse, or the inclusion (of particular words) differs from that context which demands the indefinite specification, the postponement or the omission. Also, the context of separation differs from that of joining; the situation that requires brevity differs from that which requires prolixity. And discourse with an intelligent person differs from discourse with an obtuse one.²²

¹⁹ Bruce Lawrence *The Qur'an: A Biography* New York, 2006 p. 81.

²⁰ Valentin Voloshinov *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* (Cambridge, 1986). The standard work for the textual history of the Koran remains Theodor Noldeke and Freidrich Schwally *Geschichte des Qorans* (Hildesheim, 1961) For an overview of the genesis of philological exegesis see Claude Gilliot "The Beginnings of Qur'anic Exegesis" in Andrew Rippin ed. *The Qur'an: Formative interpretation* (ALdershot, 1999) pp.1-27. The precursor to the formal exegesis of the Koran was the development of the Arabic language, its stylistics and its lexicography. In this regard see: Johannn Fuck *Arabiya: Untersuchungen zur arabischen Sprach-und Stilgeschichte*. (Berlin: 1950) On the development of Arabic orthography see: Khalil Semaan *Linguistics in the Middle Ages: Phonetic Studies in Early Islam* (Lediem, 1968)

²¹ See M. A.S. Abdel Haleem "Contextg and Internal Relationships: Keys to Quranic Exegesis. A Study of Surat 'l-Rahman (QURan chapter 55)" in *Approaches to the Qur'an* G.R. Hawting and Abdul-KAder Shareef eds. (London, 1993) pp. 71-99

²² Muhammad b. Abd 'l-Rahman 'l-Qazwini *Sharh 'l-Talkhis* (Damascus, 1970) p. 14

This was followed by the publication of works such as those of al-Jurjani (d. 474) which Aziz ‘l-Azmeh, describes as "one of the most sustained, refined, rigorous and durable attempts to construct a theory of the production of meaning in discourse analysis in any language and at any time."²³ Jurjani’s was an incredibly complex understanding of rhetoric, eloquence, and tropes, which says Edward Said. “seem startlingly modern but which in fact are deeply rooted in the Koran.”²⁴ These hermeneutical tools developed slowly mainly because of the general aversion in early Islam to commentaries on the Koran.²⁵ But the spread of the faith to the more sophisticated north and its entanglement with older and more complex religious systems such as Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism put enormous pressure on the relatively straightforward dogma of the Arabian peninsula to nuance its theological underpinnings. Add to that the shifting demographics within Islam itself, the addition of converts from the aforementioned religions, and the infusion of their disparate social customs into Arab social practice and the demand for scriptural recalibration becomes unavoidable. Later, ‘l-Shatibi would further refine this rule by stressing the need to know, not just physical contexts, or social conditions, but also what he termed special conditions because, as he put it, “the same statement can be understood in different ways in relation to two different addressees or more.”²⁶ And it was none other than the celebrated polemicist Ibn Taymiyah himself, who reemphasized the rule to consider all verses for legislative purposes for: “what is given briefly in one place is expanded in another.”²⁷ Taken together, the exegetical devices and the accompanying rules that Jurjani and others compiled did

²³ Aziz ‘l-`Azmeh *Arabic Thought and Islamic Societies* (London, 1986) p. 120. And Margaret Larkin in *The Theology of Meaning: `Abd ‘l-Qahir ‘l-Jurjani’s Theory of Discourse* (New Haven, 1995) clearly shows how the doctrine of inimitability influenced the linguistic and rhetorical elements of the Arabic language.

²⁴ E. W. Said: “Living in Arabic” *Raritan* 21 no.4 pp. 220-36 Spring 2002

²⁵ For a history and analysis of the exegetical devices see: Herbert Berg *The Development of Exegesis in Early Islam: The Authenticity of Muslim Literature from the Formative Period* (London, 2000)

²⁶ Abu Ishaq ‘l-Shatibi, *‘l-Muwafaqat fi Usul ‘l-Ahkam* (Cairo, 141h) p.202

²⁷ Ahmed, Ibn Taymiyah *muqaddimat fi Usul ‘l-Tafsir* (Kuwait, 1971) p. 93.

the following: set limits on the probative value of the literal text itself, gave sacerdotal authority to exegetical interpretations, but also established an abiding distinction between the infallible divine text, and its fallible, human interpretations—the former may not be touched or retouched through textual redaction whereas the latter is the only determinant of sacred meaning.

For a millennium almost, hermeneutical tools randomly increased in size and sophistication, kept in tight tandem between the need to expand the immanence of the text to cover the vagaries of human life but without compromising its ontological status. and to maintain its driven primarily by the governed the interpretive process, unchallenged. This delicately crafted balance between religious authority and Sacred text changed after colonialism however, when `ulama authority was challenged by new power brokers, the military, the ruling western educated elite, and the Islamic Movement, among them. All three, in particular, saw need for a new approach to the text, with the military and the ruling elite hoping thereby, to create a secular civil society imbued with only so much Islam as to define collective identity, and the fundamentalists hoping, more optimistically, for an Islam with pervasive influence over both public policy and private opinion. The ruling elite, together with the military, wielded control over those societal institutions such as law and education which critics charged had also been thoroughly colonized, and in whose reaction in fact the genesis of movements such as the Jamate Islami in South Asia and the 'I-Ikhwan 'l-Muslimun in Egypt may be traced. But whilst liberals and secularists controlled government, education and the judiciary of the new nation states, the individual Muslim in his private capacity turned once again to the `ulama and the mystics for moral and spiritual guidance. The latter may well have lost the pecuniary largess they so enjoyed under the caliphs and sultans of imperial Islam, but thanks to the colonial experience, they gained instead, a newfound credibility for opposing colonialism in places, or for blocking what Richard Bulliet

calls the “emerging tyranny”²⁸ of those in power hell bent on “eviscerating the oppositional potential represented by the sharia and the `ulama.”²⁹ And the great irony of that moment in Koranic hermeneutics is the fact that of the two competing factions it was the ruling elite and the Islamic Movement rather than the traditional `ulama who turned exclusively to the Koran for validation. And with good reason: to seek validation in any other sphere of Islamic law would require a certain deference to the very `ulama, whose public prestige is what impeded total elitist control of Muslim society in the first place! Outright rejection of the `ulama and of their legal authority as was done in Turkey, however, would certainly have earned the ire of even those otherwise not indisposed to such changes.³⁰ Instead, a process of scriptural attenuation was adopted in favor of the Koran and against the coded legal opinions, the *fatawa*, of the `ulama and more importantly, against apostolic traditions (*hadith*) the primary evidentiary source for traditional authority. Reliance on these sources was reduced gradually until only the Koran remained as the sole source of guidance to Muslim society. Surprisingly, help arrived from within, from Muhammad `Abduh in Egypt, for instance, and his acolytes elsewhere, who for quite different reasons more effectively undermined traditional authority (*taqlid*) by referring to it disparagingly as blind imitation, or irrational obeisance. The critics of *taqlid* said, for instance, that, “it is better to follow a beast than an imitator; and the opinion of the scholars and the

²⁸ In *The Case for the Islamo-Christian Civilization* (New York, 2004) Bulliet argues that the `Ulama were pivotal in opposing tyranny. As examples, he brings attention to: the 1891-93 `ulama led revolt known as the Iranian Tobacco Rebellion; Sharif Hussain’s leadership of the Arab rebellion against Ottoman tyranny; The Mahdi’s opposition to the Anglo-Egyptian control over the Sudan; and Shamil’s resistance to Russian expansion in the Caucasus.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 73

³⁰ Some in fact, trace the beginnings of the end of `ulama scriptural authority to the Ottomanization of Islamic law. Whilst the codification of Islamic law in 1839 may well have been to redefine Ottoman identity, it at the same time took authority away from the `ulama and vested it in the state legislature. Roger Owen *State, Power and Politics in the Making of the Middle East* 2nd edition, (London, 2000) has on the other hand, stressed the army’s role in establishing social institutions and in pushing these newly independent states into the modern world.

devotees, because they are unsubstantiated and mimetic, are often contradictory.”³¹ Or worse still, that, “Imitating religious leaders who pretentiously offer their views as authentic true religion is tantamount to obeying tyrants; both are idolatrous.”³² The alternative to *taqlid* was *ijtihad* or individual interpretations based solely on selective reference to the Koran: the new elite’s *ijtihad* was to arm itself with the Arabic text alone, or with an annotated translation of the original, and to use that against tradition, but ironically also against each other, to legitimize agendas that were clearly at odds with each other—some were liberal, others conservative, and others still, militant.³³ The principles of *tafsir* were dispensed with either because of their irrelevance or because of their conflict with modern agendas. In sum therefore, whilst the Koran has since the beginnings of Islam been considered no less than the very *ipsissima verba* of God its interpretation and application was anything but literal. To early exegetes already, it was patently clear that the word of God was in dire need of the mind of man to make comprehensible the Koran’s disparate ideas. And yet this vital area of Koranic studies remains largely ignored in contemporary academic circles.

³¹ `Abd ‘l-Qadir ‘l-Jaza’iri *Dhikra ‘l-‘Aqil wa tanbih ‘l-Ghafil* (Beirut, 1966) p.34.

³² Muhammad Na`ini *Tanbih ‘l-Ummat wa Tanzih ‘l-Millat Ya Hukumat az Nazr-e-Islam* (Tehran 1960)

³³ Khaled Abou el-Fadl in his *The Authoritative and the Authoritarian in Islamic Discourse: A Contemporary Case Study* (Austin 1997) brings attention to the legal power struggle this access to the text has now initiated. Whilst the thrust of his arguments is valid, it is weakened I believe by its narrow focus on fundamentalist abuse of the Koran only, whereas the actual problem is one of interpretive abuse, both liberal and fundamentalist. Textual reductionism is often undertaken by liberals such as Asma Barlas in *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur’an* (Austin, Texas, University of Texas Press, 2001) who strive to preserve the status of the Koran. This however, is countered by critics of the Koran itself such as Neelam Hussain, ‘Women as Objects and Women as Subjects within Fundamentalist Discourse.’ In *Locating the Self: Perspectives on Women and Multiple identities* eds. Nighat Khan, Rubina Saigol and Afiya Zia. (Lahore: ASR, 1994) and Fatima Mernissi, *Women’s Rebellion and Islamic Memory* (London: Zed. 1996) who argue that it is indeed Islam’s sacred document that privileges men over women, and thus entrenches patriarchy and the abuse of women on theological grounds. For creative re-readings of clearly patriarchal verses such as 2:228 which puts husbands one notch above wives, see Riffat Hassan, ‘An Islamic Perspective.’ In *Sexuality: A Reader* ed. Karen Lebacqz (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1999) and Amina Wadud. *Qur’an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman’s Perspective* (Oxford: University Press, 1999). For an overview of the rights women in early Islam enjoyed and subsequently lost, see: Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of Modern Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992)

And this may well be because the study of the Koran is still driven by the trajectory if not the sentiment of early inter faith rivalries. To early Christians looking to curb the growth of Islam at Christianity's expense, the focus had to be on the Koran: given Muslim belief in its inerrancy, any subversion thereof, they believed, would at the very least, staunch Christian conversions to Islam.³⁴ Peter, the Abbott of Cluny, seems to have been driven by this very fervor when he commissioned Robertus Ketensis, in 1143 c.e. to translate the Koran into Latin³⁵; the same spirit prompted Andre du Ryer's French translation of 1647, as well as Savary's better known translation which appeared later, in 1783.³⁶ Renewed interest in the Koran today stems, not from religious polemics but rather from civic proximity, from the fact that the sound of the Koran now resonates all the way from the Banlieue's of Paris to the apartment complexes of Buffalo, New York. For the millions of Muslims who now call Western Europe and the United States home their religion and culture has as much right to be in their adopted homelands as does any other; for their uneasy neighbors, on the other hand, that right is undermining the very principles of western civilization. And for historian Paul Johnson, the problem lies squarely with the Koran and its interpretation: Muslim animosity to Jews, he thinks, finds inspiration in the verse: "Strongest among men in enmity to the Believers wilt thou find the Jews and Pagans" (5:85); and their propensity to violence, in another verse, 9:5: "Then fight and slay the pagans wherever

³⁴ Thus, the introductory volume to Maracci's Latin translation—upon which George Sale's English translation is based—is revealingly titled: *A Refutation of the Koran*.

³⁵ For more on this prodigious translators life and contributions see: Charles Burnett "A Group of Arabic Latin Translators Working in northern Spain in the Mid 12th Century" in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1977) pp.62-70; and Marie Therese d'Alverny, "Translators and Translations" in *Renaissance and Renewal in the Twelfth Century* ed. Robert Benson and Giles Constable Cambridge, 1982. pp. 449.

³⁶ The Koran was not all that Peter commissioned: he had fragments of Muhammad's biography along with his teachings translated as well; together these formed what came to be known as the *Corpus Toletantum*. In time, Martin Luther himself had this collection sent to Basle, to be published and disseminated to those engaged in refuting Muslim belief and dogma. The "Basle Koran" as the translation came to be known, actually comprised of three separate sections: the first section was dedicated wholly to the *Corpus Toletantum*, the second, to refutations penned by Nicolas Cusanus, Ricoldo da Monte Croce, and others, and the third to the history of the Saracens and the

you find them. And seize them, beleaguer them and lie in wait for them, in every strategem of war. . .until they embrace Islam.” (9:5)³⁷ Nor can such strictures be glossed over through scriptural interpretation, he believes, because Islam, unlike other faiths, has not gone beyond scriptural literalism. “Unlike Christianity” he says, “which, since the Reformation and Counter Reformation, has continually updated itself and adapted to changed conditions, and unlike Judaism, which has experienced what is called the 18th-century Jewish enlightenment, Islam remains a religion of the Dark Ages. The 7th-century Koran is still taught as the immutable word of God, any teaching of which is literally true.”³⁸

This charge of scriptural literalism against the Koran is widespread even though its origins lie not with Islam but with European Christianity. When Martin Luther made his *sola scriptura* (scripture alone) argument against the Pope’s claims to infallibility, he presented biblical literalism as a substitute to both papal authority as well as church councils.³⁹ Whilst this temporarily empowered Protestants against papal authority and gave their religious dicta an equal sense of infallibility, in time it attenuated the church’s historical role of interpreting scripture in accordance with changed circumstances. And later, in reaction to the scientific revolution, the doctrine of biblical inerrancy was first developed by Archibald Alexander,

Turks. See, in this regard: J. Kritzeck, *Peter, the Venerable and Islam* (Princeton, 1964); H. Bobzin, *Der Koran im Zeitalter der Reformation* (Stuttgart, 2005)

³⁷ Paul Johnson *Relentlessly and Thoroughly: The Only Way to Respond* in [National Review Online](#) October 15th 2001. The Reverend Franklin Graham also charges the Koran with inciting attacks on non-Muslims: “You can read it for yourself. And these verses from the Qur’an are not taken out of context, it’s there. So we just don’t want to admit [it], in this country. We would like that everything was in a bubble and everybody’s nice and everybody’s happy. I’m sorry, we don’t live in that kind of world.” See, *Franklin Graham on Islam* [Religion and Ethics Weekly](#) August 9th, 2002

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Around the turn of the last century Hilton S. Terry, a Methodist Episcopalian writing in *Biblical Hermeneutics* 2nd edition (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, n.d.) P.205, turned this very idea into a hermeneutical precept thus: “A fundamental principle in grammatico-historical exposition is that the words and sentences can have but one significance in one and the same connection. The moment we neglect this principle we drift out upon a sea of uncertainty and conjecture.”

Princeton's Theological Seminary's first president. Alexander's stated goal was to defend orthodox Calvinism "against, on the one hand, the more subjective and individualistic interpretations coming from the revivals of the Second Great Awakening and, on the other hand, the naturalistic assumptions of Deism."⁴⁰ In response to the former he privileged biblical authoritativeness over experience, and to the latter, the notion "that everything in the Bible was in accord with scientifically verifiable truth . . . The reader rightly led by the Spirit and the scientist rightly led by reason were bound to arrive at the same conclusions."⁴¹ His successor, Charles Hodge argued further that one need not go beyond the literal word of the Bible, which alone embodies the truth; all readings of Scripture when done with sincerity necessarily yield the same meanings. This interpretive revolution, known variously as the doctrine of Biblical Inerrancy, the Single Meaning principle, or the Grammatical-Historical approach to hermeneutics, describes western Christianity's literalist approach to the Bible; as such, it has no parallel in Islam, or in any other religious tradition for that matter.⁴²

For Islam, the impetus to develop a Koranic hermeneutic stemmed directly from the dogma that developed around the revelatory event itself. Whilst it is true that revelation as construed within an Islamic framework is more direct and more intense than is the case in the Judeo-Christian tradition, it is equally true that its culmination is also more abrupt and more definitive. In Islam, God delivered verbatim, His final message to Muhammad through the agency of the angel Gabriel; and thereafter, all revelation came to an abrupt halt. Henceforth, all glosses on the canonized corpus designed to remove lexical and syntactical opacities or to provide contextual

⁴⁰ Nancy T. Ammerman, "North American Protestant Fundamentalism" in *Fundamentalisms Observed* ed. Martin Marty and R. Scott Appleby. (Chicago 1991) p.15

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 15

recalibrations were precluded, as a matter of dogma, from being considered divine or inerrant; only the text of the Koran as determined by Muhammad prior to his death was considered revelation. For Jews, on the other hand, new revelations legitimately authenticated new situations, as was the case when, for instance, after the destruction of the second temple in 586 b.c.e. Jeremiah was solicited to provide fresh revelatory guidance; such solicitations are considered blasphemous in Islam, and playing Jeremiah, as some in Islamic history have discovered is a capital crime.⁴³

And to the extent that scriptural literalism does exist in the interpretive process of the Koran today, this ironically is the preoccupation, almost, of the post colonial Muslim psyche that is on the one hand largely ignorant of Islam's hermeneutical heritage, and on the other, thoroughly schooled in the inerrancies of modern scientific thought; as such, it is more symptomatic of minds schooled in medicine and in engineering, let's say, than in the traditional Islamic sciences. The Muslim cleric is as perturbed by the carnage and mayhem of religiously inspired social disorder as is the average Muslim; but perhaps more ominous for him is the fact that its rationale is scripture whose exegesis until modern times was strictly his forte. Throughout history parts of the Koran for the average Muslim were within reach, and parts outside: within

⁴² Article VII, "Articles of Affirmation and Denial," adopted by the International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, November 10-13, 1982, reads: "We affirm that the meaning expressed in each biblical text is single, definite and fixed. We deny that the recognition of this single meaning eliminates the variety of its application."

⁴³ The terms used to distinguish between apostolic and non apostolic revelation is *wahy* and *ilham*. Whilst the Koran uses the term *wahy* generically to refer to all forms of inspiration including God inspiring bees (16:68), and the devil inspiring humans (6:121), Muslim theology distinguished prophets from other human beings by designating non apostolic forms of inspiration as *ilham*. Arthur Jeffrey in "The Quran as Scripture" in *Muslim World* vol. 40 (1950) 190-2 suggests that the word *wahy* combines both a generic inspiration that is internal as well as the external yield of that inspiration. The former implied a poetic impulse in Muhammad, not unlike that experienced by the Arab poets, whereas the latter conjured notions of a separate scripture with material quite unlike that which the poetic impulse produced. On the conceptual framework of revelation, see: S. Wild *We Have sent down to thee the book with the truth. . . Spatial and temporal implications of the Quranic Concept of Nuzul, Tanzil, and Inzal in The Qur'an as Text* (Leiden: 1996) 137-53. The non apostolic term *ilham* appears once in 8: 91: *fa alhamaha fujuraha wa taqwaha* in reference to souls that are inspired towards immorality and virtue. Also see: F. Jadaane "Revelation et Inspiration en Islam" in *Studia Islamica* no.26 (1967), 23-47

reach were its aesthetics, both visual and auricular, as etched on the wall hangings of his surroundings, for instance, or as chanted for comfort or devotion during times of joy or sorrow. And out of reach was its interpretation when used as dogma, ritual or law; the latter was controlled by the religious hierarchy, the `ulama who themselves were controlled by the academic guilds to which they belonged.⁴⁴ As such, no individual other than a scholar could engage in socially disruptive hermeneutics; but no scholar could likewise, engage in such hermeneutics given his affiliation to the scholarly guild. This system prevented the ideas of maverick exegetes from subverting the carefully regulated social balance maintained between the authority of the `ulama and that of the political authority on the one hand, and the potentially disruptive tendencies of zealots on the other. By contrast, both fundamentalists as well as liberals now employ a hermeneutics that, far from being literal, is if anything, cavalier and eclectic, with a *ratio decidendi* that aims not at finding some preexistent divine authorial intent or at maintaining social order, but rather at legitimating a decidedly parochial social agenda in which textual authority serves as no more than *obiter dicta*.⁴⁵ This selective use of the Koran to push

⁴⁴ For a thoroughgoing history and analysis of this intellectual development in Islam, see: G. Makdisi *The Rise of Colleges: Institutions of Learning in Islam and the West* (Edinburgh, 1981) and *The Rise of Humanism in Islam and the West, with Special Reference to Scholasticism* (Edinburgh, 1990). For a description of the juridical workings of this guild system see: S. Jackson *Islamic Law and the State: The Constitutional Jurisprudence of Shihab al-Din al-Qarafi* (Leiden, 1996)

⁴⁵ Secular nationalists may well be added to this category as is clear from the research of Frisch, Hillel “Nationalizing a Universal Text: The Quran in Arafat's Rhetoric” *Middle Eastern Studies*, 2005, 41, 3, May, 321-350. Frisch looks at how Yasser Arafat transforms Koranic parables into a Palestinian nationalistic story to legitimize the struggle against Israel. Somewhat more scholarly is the Iranian `ulama's use of the Koran as explained by Amirpur, Katajun “The Changing Approach to the Text: Iranian Scholars and the Quran” *Middle Eastern Studies*, 2005, 41, 3, May, 337-350. The Shiite scholars of Iran, Katajun explains, have since 1979, put the sacred text to various uses including the endorsement of science and modernity. Militant Islamists also use the sacred text selectively, rather than literally. For Bin Laden's selective use of Koranic material in support of his vision of a global war against infidels, see: Christopher Dickey, “Bin Laden's Twisted Mission: a bloody misinterpretation of the Qur'an's calls to arms” in *Newsweek* v. 139 no.6 (February 11 2002) p. 56-7. And for an overview of this selective

ideology, rectify typecasts or even broaden academic inquiry almost always fails to meet its objectives. This last is best exemplified by the recent controversy over the University of North Carolina's decision to make Michael Sell's abbreviated Koran required reading for its incoming first year students.⁴⁶ Clearly, the verses omitted, as critics rightly pointed out, are as integral to the overall argument about the Koran's propensity to incite violence as are Sells' selection of its unwarlike ones. Exposing students only to the latter gave many the impression of an apologetic cover up designed to redeem through omission a semblance of the humanitarian to a text that for them was anything but.⁴⁷ So much for the origins and functions of exegetical tools; we turn now to the book in question, its author, Jalal 'l-Din 'l-Suyuti, and the era to which he belonged. Suyuti's biography reflects all of the intellectual and political sediments of the end period of Mamluke rule, when Egypt's attempts at currency devaluations, price fixings, and excise taxes did little to repair an economy badly damaged by the wanton profligacy of its political elite.⁴⁸

approach to the sacred text, see: Bernard Lewis "License to Kill: Usama bin Ladin's Declaration of Jihad" in *Foreign Affairs* 77 no.6 (N/D '98) 14-19. For the history and development of modern terror groups among Muslims, see: Gilles Kepel *The War for Muslim Minds: Islam and the West* (Harvard: Harvard University press, 2004); Olivier Roy, "The Radicalization of Sunni Conservative Fundamentalism," *ISIM* (International Institute for the Study of Islam in the Modern World) Newsletter no. 2 (March, 1999); and Johannes Jansen, *The Neglected Duty*, (New York: Macmillan, 1986).

⁴⁶ Michael Sells *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations* (Ashland, 1999)

⁴⁷ It was thus not surprising that critics such as James Yacovelli of the Family Policy Network (FPN) would complain that Sell's book did not correctly portray Islam, whose real "culture is to kill the infidels and drive planes into us, and blow us up." Or that Bill O'Reilly would compare the Koran as being as complicit in the murderous acts of its devotees as was Hitler's *Mein Kampf* in the Holocaust.

⁴⁸ Much of the material used in this biographical sketch of Suyuti is taken from E.M. Sartain's excellent 2 volume study titled, *Jalal 'l-din 'l-Suyuti: biography and background* New York 1975. The most important source for Suyuti's biography is an incomplete manuscript of his autobiography, *'l-Taḥadduth bi ni'mat Allāh* (MS) preserved in the Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz in Tübingen, which Sartain has eloquently translated, and which he refers to in his work as the Text. Another noteworthy study is *Al-Suyuti and his works: their place in Islamic scholarship from Mamluk times to the present* in, Mamluk Studies Review [1086-170X] Saleh yr: 2001 iss: 5 pg: 73. Ignaz Goldziher also looked at Suyuti's contribution to literature in the article "Zur Charakteristik Gelāl ud-Dīn us-Sujūtī's und seiner literarischen Thätigkeit" which was first published in German in Sitzungsberichte der Philosophisch-Historischen Klasse der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften (Wien), LXIX (1871), 7-28 and later translated and published as: *Ignaz Goldziher on al-Suyuti :a translation of his article of 1871, with additional notes*, in Muslim World 68 Ap 1978, p 79-99

Those who suffered most because of such reforms were Egyptian peasants, whereas the class to which Suyuti belonged, the *arbab* 'l-aqlam or the "bearers of the pen", were largely insulated from economic hardships by the positions they held in the state treasury, the judiciary and, education; Suyuti enjoyed the added protection of his family the 'l-Khudairis, who held high positions in government as judges, comptrollers, and academics. His education, proper, began with the Koran, which he committed to memory at the age of eight, and continued thereafter, to include all the core subjects in classical Islamic studies, the Arabic language, tafsir, and hadith studies; he then received his all important *ijaza* or "teaching certification" when he was just sixteen.⁴⁹ He also studied logic, philosophy and mathematics, but openly admitted a less than adequate comprehension of its complexities; he could so admit without losing credibility, it would seem, because scholarship generally, during his era was quite dismissive of those with mastery over the rational sciences.⁵⁰

Suyuti's prodigious learning was to some extent compromised by his irascible personality: thus whilst many respected his knowledge of virtually every topic related to Islam, others reviled his arrogance and conceit. That he often gloated over his nonpareil academic training, his rapid success, and an almost uncanny ability to solve age old theological and legal conundrums hardly endeared him even to those close to him.⁵¹ There is for example, that notorious clash with 'l-Sakhawi: what began as a simple disagreement over legal opinions ultimately became a

⁴⁹ 'l-Dawudi, fol. 10v.

⁵⁰ He thus writes in his biography, Text 138, of his love for grammar and fiqh, describing them as his best subjects. For rhetoric, prose writing and the science of hadith evaluation he shows less love, and even less so for the laws of inheritance. He admits knowing very little about arithmetic and prosody, and as for logic and the philosophical sciences, he says: "I do not occupy myself with them because they are forbidden (*haram*), as 'l-Nawawi and others have stated, and, even if they were permissible, I would not prefer them to the religious sciences."

⁵¹ Suyuti, Marshall Hodgson tells us, "prided himself on how many subjects he had treated which no one before him had dealt with." See his *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* vol. 2, Chicago 1994. P.437

personality slugfest between Suyuti and an erstwhile admirer.⁵² The relationship was further complicated by his claims to being a mujtahid, or a juridical savant with the intellectual acumen needed to make substantial changes to the sacred law; this function, known as *ijtihad*, had by common consent, come to a halt in the 9th century.⁵³ That Suyuti would lay claim to this office betrayed not just the level of his conceit, but also a cavalier disregard for the unanimous opinion of his predecessors. This was particularly irksome to a scholarly community whose authority devolved more from completing a successful internship than from producing original ideas.⁵⁴ His relationship to Sufism was also complicated, and this because he was, after all, a scholar and not a mystic, with loyalties to the scholarly discipline, as such, and not to the pursuit of ultimate spiritual verities. But in deference to the era in which he lived—and it was one wherein sufism reigned supreme in Egypt as in almost every other part of Islamdom—he conscientiously, avoided criticizing the faith and practice of those who trod the sufi way. Whilst it is true that in

⁵² Muhammad b. `Abd `l-Rahman `l-Sakhawi's (d.1497) reputation flows, not so much from his teaching or publishing records, but from him having been a student of the renowned scholar Ibn Hajar `l-`Asqalani, author of the highly celebrated commentary on the hadith collection of Muhammad b. Isma`il `l-Bukhari. His resentment towards Suyuti and others, some say, stemmed from the fact that, unlike them, he was never able to procure a prestigious teaching position. His biographical dictionary in which he so impugns Suyuti, does however, provide useful information pertinent to hadith transmitters. See, in this regard: Muhammad Mustapha Ziyadah *Al-Mu`rrikhun fi Misr fi `l-Qarn `l-Khamis `Ashar `l-Miladi* (Cairo 1949) For `l-Sakhawi's version of this incident, see: Muhammad b. `Abd `l-Rahman `l-Sakhawi *`l-Dau` `l-Lami` li Ahl `l-Qarn `l-Tas`i* 12vols. (Cairo 1973). In it he speaks derisively of Suyuti, both as a person and as a scholar. Suyuti returns the favor with an equally contemptuous riposte titled: *`l-Kawi li dimagh `l-Sakhawi*. A full account of this personality clash is to be found in Suyuti's *Tadrib `l-Rawi fi Sharh Taqrib `l-Nawawi* Riyadh, 1994. Also see, `Abd `l-Wahhab `l-Hammudah *Safahat min Tarikh Misr fi `Asr `l-Suyuti* (1965)

⁵³ In one place he is quoted as saying, for instance: "God has established us in the post of Ijtihad, so that we may explain our legal thoughts that will serve to revive the faith". As a result, Ibn Hajar `l-Haithami says, scholars banded together to attack him by drawing questionnaires meant to test his juristic aptitude; Suyuti, for the most dismissed such challenges, insisting instead, that no living scholar equaled him in learning and intelligence. See, in this regard: `l-Manawi *Faid `l-Qadir: Sharh `l-Jami` `l-Saghar* Beirut 1971. The earliest discussion on the qualifications of the mujtahid appears in Abu Husain `l-Basri's *`l-Mu`tamad fi Usul `l-Fiqh* (Damascus, 1964). Also see, Joseph Schacht *An Introduction to Islamic Law* (Oxford 1964) pp.70-71; J.N. Anderson *Law Reform in the Muslim World* (London 1976), p.7. For an alternative to these views, see: Wael Hallaq *Was the Gate of Ijtihad Closed* in [The International Journal of Middle East Studies](#) 16 (1984), 3-41

⁵⁴ Except for a few periods in Muslim history when innovative thinking was highly prized, for the most part academic tutelage, oral transmissions, and dictations remained the standard by which credentials were vetted. Suyuti, for instance, was criticized for writing about the modes of Quranic recitation (*`l-qira`a*) because he had not

discussing the credentials of the exegete he does indeed, critique sufi commentaries, and in particular, the emphasis they place on allegorical interpretations, he takes pains to show that he disapproves only of those interpretations which negate entirely the more obvious meanings given to any particular verse. Personally, Suyuti it seems distinguished between his academic pursuits which he willingly discussed, and his mystical pursuits which he considered private. We know from a manuscript lodged in the Egyptian National Library that whilst in Mecca, Ibn Imam ‘l-Kamiliyyah initiated him into the sufi orders of Abu ‘l-Qasim ‘l-Junaid, Ahmad ‘l-Rifa‘i and ‘Abd ‘l-Qadir ‘l-Jilani.⁵⁵ His ambivalence may also have been driven by his ambitions and particularly, his claims to being the promised reformer (*mujaddid*) of the 9th Muslim century, sent at the turn of each century to revive Islam’s pristine teachings. But the ‘ulama’s uneasy relationship with Sufism starts well before Suyuti, in the 8th century in fact, when scholars and mystics went their separate ways in response to the imperial authority of the caliphs. Thanks mainly to the synthesizing efforts of Abu Hamid ‘l-Ghazali—himself an accomplished theologian, jurist, and mystic—that gulf was considerably narrowed, enhancing the standing of the ‘ulama amongst the laity, and bringing Sufism “out of its isolation from the dominant conception of religion and established it as a standard element in the Muslim believer’s life.”⁵⁶ In the end Suyuti himself provides reason for his qualified endorsement of Sufism: “It seems” he says: “that the reason for my dedicating myself at the end. . .to the Sufi path and to constant association with the people” (i.e. the Sufis) is a tendency inherited from my ancestors.”⁵⁷

been formally inducted into the reading fraternity. See, in this regard Muhammad b. ‘Abd ‘l-Rahman ‘l-Sakhawi ‘l-Dau’ ‘l-Lami` li Ahl ‘l-Qarn ‘l-Tasi` 12 vols. (Cairo 1934)

⁵⁵ I refer here to the work, *Lubs ‘l-Khirqah wa talqin ‘l-dhikr wa ‘l-suhbah* (MS) ENL, Majami` Qawalah, 25.

⁵⁶ Ignaz Goldziher, *Introduction to Islamic Theology and Law* Princeton, 1981 p. 160

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 37

A word about the compilation of the Itqan: by today's standards, Suyuti's method of compiling the Itqan would, at best, be considered slipshod, and at worst, blatant plagiarism. To a culture such as ours which extols creativity and ingenuity over tradition and continuity plagiarism, or literary theft is perhaps the only contemptible infraction towards which we as academics and scholars show little sympathy. It would therefore strike us as odd, if not downright duplicitous, that someone with the academic credentials of Suyuti would build his credentials on works filled with material improperly appropriated. It must however be remembered that the convention of quoting sources precisely, and citing references, which scholars today consider natural, almost instinctive one may say is, to quote Jacques Barzun and Henry Graff, no more than "a very sophisticated act, peculiar to a civilization that uses printed books, believes in evidence, and makes a point of assigning credit or blame in a detailed and a verifiable way."⁵⁸ Transposing entire chapters without acknowledgment, or grafting one text on to some other, whilst unacceptable by modern standards, was however, not inappropriate to the literary ethics of 16th century Egypt. In the tradition of Islamic scholarship, the value of any work was determined, not by its originality and creative impulse, but by its connection, in form and content, to the "Golden Age" of Islam, and to its pious ancestry. By transmitting words and ideas first uttered by the pious ancestors (the '*l-Salaf 'l-Salih*) or threading them into one's own material gave such material instant recognition. Not that Muslim scholarship took plagiarism lightly: as elsewhere it was roundly condemned. But the practice was perceived differently and in a slightly different context: more was said about plagiarism in poetry than in prose, and particularly with borrowing motifs (*ma'ani*), intimating narratives indirectly, or inserting stanzas (*tadmin*) without acknowledgement. Also, more attention was paid to the word than to meaning, to form than to

⁵⁸ See, in this regard: Jacques Barzun and Henry F. Graff, *The Modern Researcher*, 3rd edition (New York, 1977),

content, and to the classical than to the innovative; this last, which Lovejoy calls chronological primitivism, and which is emblematic of the Hellenistic concept of linear time as well, was the consequence of the perception that civilizations become increasingly nihilistic through time, that faith and morality decreases from generation to generation, and that evil ultimately trumps good.⁵⁹ Such perspectives, von Grunebaum rightly points out, “cannot but establish the authority of the earlier generations and depreciate whatever achievement the contemporaries may have to offer”.⁶⁰ But this in no way devalues the overall contributions of both the book as well as its author: the *Itqan*, remains an indispensable reference for those involved in traditional exegesis (tafsir) as well as in modern criticism. And along with such luminaries as Bukhari in hadith literature, and Tabari in history, it establishes Suyuti as the authority in the study of the Koran. As for the structure of the work itself, it must be said that the *Itqan* is a compilation quite unlike any other, even by traditional standards. Kenneth Nolin, in his study of its sources, shows that close on sixty percent of the material used in the *Itqan* may be traced to some four hundred authors, and well over four hundred and fifty different works.⁶¹ To introduce and identify these disparate sources Suyuti uses formulaic prefixes, such as: “It is said” (*qala*), or “some of them have said” (*qala ba’duhum*), or “someone else has said” (*qala ghairuhu*). More specifically, when introducing material from the apostolic traditions (hadith) he uses formulas such as “extracted” (*akhrāja*), “related” (*haka*) and “narrated” (*rawa*); and when introducing the opinions of later scholars he more commonly uses “he said” (*qala*). And in transmitting such traditions Suyuti closely follows classical conventions such as transmission chains, authenticated

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⁵⁹ A.O. Lovejoy and G. Boas, *Primitivism and Related ideas in Antiquity* (1935); cf. Esp. Pp 2-3

⁶⁰ Gustave E. Von Grunebaum “The Concept of Plagiarism in Arabic Theory” in *Journal of Near Easter Studies* vol.3, no.4 (Oct., 1944) 253

traditions, and complete citations. But such standards are not applied to other sources, which explain why such material is often omitted, emended, or abbreviated. Another peculiarity worth mentioning is the fact that secondary sources by prominent scholars are sometimes preferred to primary sources from scholars such as: Ibn ‘l-Anbari⁶², Ibn ‘l-Jazari⁶³, ‘l-Tabari⁶⁴, ‘l-Zarkashi⁶⁵, ‘l-Baihaqi⁶⁶, and ‘l-Bukhari⁶⁷. Of these, perhaps the most quoted would be the *Burhan* of Badr ‘l-Din ‘l-Zarkashi, without which by Suyuti’s own admission, his own *Itqan* would not have been produced. And whilst it is only credited some forty times, actual use of *Burhan* material occurs far more frequently in various forms. It is mentioned by name only if it enjoys some qualitative advantage over other sources, or when the borrowing is literal, or when Suyuti takes exception to it; *Burhan* material may also appear in places as no more than a selective patchwork of original words and phrases. (52) In what Nolin calls “parallel dependency” the *Itqan* also combines *Burhan* material with “many other, more specific books, or sometimes a sequence of different ones on the same subject.” (55) But identifying such combinations are complicated by their frequency and by Suyuti’s own embarrassment at the extent of the borrowings. The *Itqan*’s semantical and lexical oddities, its truncated names and titles, and its unvoveled letters, all

⁶¹ Much of the material that follows is based on Nolin’s unpublished dissertation, titled *The Itqan and its Sources: A Study of Al-Itqan Fi ‘Ulum Al-Quran By Jalal Al-Din Al-Suyuti With Special Reference to Al-Burhan Fi ‘Ulum Al-Qur’an By Badr Al-Din Al-Zarkashi* (Hartford, 1968)

⁶² Ibn al-Anbari, Abu al-Hasan Muhammad b. ‘Umar b. Ya‘qub is otherwise famous for having composed an elegy for Ibn Baqiya, ‘Izz al-Dawla’s minister. See ‘Asrar al-Balagha of ‘Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani ed. Helmut Ritter (Istanbul 1954) pp. 321-322

⁶³ This is the famous author of *Ghayat al-Nihaya fi Tabaqat al-Qurra’* ed. G. Bergstrasser and O. Pretzl (Cairo 1932) a biographical dictionary of the most prominent Qur’an reciters.

⁶⁴ Muhammad b. Jarir al-Tabari (839-923 c.e.) is more renowned in scholarly circles both Muslim and western for his *Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk*, a universal history that begins with creation and ends with the author’s era. See Montgomery Watt’s introduction in *The history of al-Tabari* vol. 6 (Albany 1988)

⁶⁵ Badr al-Din al-Zarkashi’s work *al-Burhan fi ‘Ulum al-Qur’an* features prominently in Suyuti’s *Itqan*

⁶⁶ Abu Bakr Ahmed b. al-Hussain al-Baihaqi (994c.e.) a student of Hakim al-Nishapuri was actually born in Khasrajand in the district of Baihaq

⁶⁷ Muhammad b. Ismail b. Ibrahim al-Bukhari (810-) the famous hadith scholar and author of the *al-Sihah* was born in the city of Bukhara in what is today Uzbekistan.

further complicate its comprehension. As Nolin points out, a verb which is active or passive may well indicate the source and quality of the material cited, a literal transposition of some other source, or the first words of a new quotation. Distinguishing between direct and indirect borrowing admittedly alleviates the problem somewhat: in the former case the material is borrowed verbatim, whilst in the latter, it forms part of Suyuti's critique of such material. At times he bypasses 'I-Zarkashi, to quote directly from the primary sources, whilst in others he quotes the original Burhan material in full. To determine such additions one looks for certain formulae: verbs such as "extracted" or "derived" generally allude to material taken from hadith literature, whereas words such as "he said" allude to material taken from other writers on the topic.

Another of Suyuti's oddities is his tendency to introduce outside sources without warning: in ii, 58:10, for instance, Ibn Hisham is first quoted, followed by 'I-Zamakhshari, and a few lines later, by 'Izz b. Abd 'I-Salam. Then Ibn Hisham is again quoted together with excerpts from a section of the Burhan in which 'Izz b. 'Abd 'I-Salam along with the title of his book is mentioned. In the same section Ibn Jami' is mentioned, as part of a quotation taken from the Burhan, only to be quoted again, not from the Burhan this time, but from the original; one possible reason for this is that Suyuti may have used both texts simultaneously for this section. The Burhan appears most prominently in the special sections, and in places, it is set off parenthetically from the main text, whilst at others it is put under separate headings; such headings themselves are sometimes replaced by synonyms. As for the differences between these two texts, and there are many, these have been ascribed to inadequate editing and printing standards. Centuries of reprints have in places caused significant changes to the script, and this is particularly problematic with Arabic

where dropping even a single dot may change the gender, or the form of the verb. For instance, Koranic verses that are identical except for a single dot are cited in both texts to illustrate the same point, but the citation itself at times appears identical and at others different; (SEE 73, note 17 & 18) needless to say; this causes considerable angst among the faithful who believe in the inerrancy of the sacred text. Some of the other changes reflect Suyuti's own preferences: he, for instance almost always prefers masculine verb forms over the feminine. (See p 75, note 25) He also seems to prefer certain names, places and even book titles over others. When combining sources Suyuti is most likely to use introductory terms such as: "I say" (qultu), "meaning" (ya'ni), and "that is" (ayy). But it is when he uses "in my opinion" ('indi) that one is able to distinguish between Suyuti, the editor, and Suyuti, the analyst. This usually occurs when he is about to choose from amongst several opinions which he has cited, as in, for example, the debate on the first complete chapter to be revealed in its entirety. (P.98, note 42) The other formulae he uses to express his personal opinion include: "the correct view" ('l-sawab), "The preferred view" ('l-mukhtar) and "The most correct view" ('l-asahh) His comments, it must be said, are generally terse, and to the point, and where appropriate, he refers readers to his other works on the same topic. Thus, in the section on the causes of revelation he points readers to his separate, and more exhaustive study on this very topic titled *Lubab 'l-Nuqul fi Asbab 'l-Nuzul*⁶⁸

Lest one criticise Suyuti too harshly for his scholarly integrity or a lack thereof, one must remember that his was an era fraught with the orthographic difficulties unknown to us today. Access to primary sources which we might take for granted, for instance, was a privilege enjoyed only by the affluent or by those with social standing. Even Cairo's relatively large collection of ancient manuscripts, for instance, was mainly in private hands with owners insisting that they

⁶⁸ Suyuti *Lubab 'l-Nuqul fi Asbab 'l-Nuzul* (Cairo, n.d.)

remain in the library and be perused only in their presence. Scholars with limited resources like Suyuti would often take recourse to stealthily transcribing sources in book stores to their private notebooks; in so doing they obviously increased the likelihood of errors creeping in. All in all therefore, the compilation of the Itqan, notwithstanding Suyuti's questionable methodology, is a remarkable achievement, which still serves those engaged in serious exegetical and literary analysis. This was no cut and paste project: it took tremendous skill to find, edit and assimilate its disparate sources into what is undoubtedly a quite coherent, readable reference work on the Qur'an.