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What If Muhammad Didn't Write the Qur'an?

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Who wrote the Qur'an? You may think the answer to this is obvious: Muhammad wrote the Qur'an. And the crucial difference between Muslims and non-Muslims is whether they believe he was inspired by God to do it. But if you did give that answer, you'd be completely wrong.

For one thing, not even Muslims think that Muhammad wrote the Qur'an. They [believe \(https://www.dailysabah.com/feature/2017/06/02/history-of-the-compilation-of-quran\)](https://www.dailysabah.com/feature/2017/06/02/history-of-the-compilation-of-quran) that God wrote it and then revealed it to Muhammad. A technicality you might think. But actually, they don't even believe that Muhammad, once it had been revealed to him, wrote it down either. He spoke it, preached it, recited it (*qur'an* literally translates as 'recitation'). And those around him, his followers, then memorized it, and some noted it down on anything to hand, like palm leaves and stones. So how did it become a book? According to Islamic tradition, not until after Muhammad had died (in AD 632), under the first caliph Abu Bakr, were these parts all [gathered together \(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Quran\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/History_of_the_Quran) and arranged into a book. The scribe Zaid was charged with the job of locating all the parts and compiling them into one volume. And around 20 years later, under the third caliph Uthman, the same scribe was charged with gathering all the variant versions that still existed, determining the correct one and burning the rest. You might think this haphazard process is not one that would have inspired confidence that the final product contained the authentic words, and only the authentic words, of Muhammad. But this is the official story, and Muslims seem happy enough with it.

What do modern scholars think of this story? Not very [much \(https://www.opendemocracy.net/faith-europe_islam/mohammed_3866.jsp\)](https://www.opendemocracy.net/faith-europe_islam/mohammed_3866.jsp), as it happens. There are all sorts of potential issues with the traditional Islamic account, which is



derived from sources only compiled centuries after Muhammad. Perhaps the most significant, and worth leading with here, is that there is [mounting evidence](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3216627/Koran-Birmingham-thought-oldest-world-predate-Prophet-Muhammad-scholars-say.html) (<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-3216627/Koran-Birmingham-thought-oldest-world-predate-Prophet-Muhammad-scholars-say.html>), that the Qur'an, or at least the bulk of it, predates Muhammad. A number of manuscript fragments have been found which can be dated (by carbon dating of parchment) to well before the time Muhammad was active. It is also packed with agricultural and geographical references which are out of place in the arid Arabian Peninsula, and written in a dialect of Arabic which even early Muslim scholars agreed was not the dialect of Muhammad's tribe in Mecca. Current thinking is still far from settled, but some evidence suggests it may have originated in the southern Levant or northern Arabia.

So how did it come to be associated with the prophetic vocation of Muhammad of Mecca? That is a question that scholars are really only just beginning to [explore](https://www.opendemocracy.net/faith-europe_islam/mohammed_3866.jsp) (https://www.opendemocracy.net/faith-europe_islam/mohammed_3866.jsp), and it is still much too early to give answers with any kind of certainty. An important dimension of the problem is that the [Qur'an](https://www.clearquran.com/downloads/quran-english-translation-clearquran-edition-allah.pdf) (<https://www.clearquran.com/downloads/quran-english-translation-clearquran-edition-allah.pdf>) consists of two distinct layers, one earlier and one later. Muslim tradition accounts for this in terms of Muhammad's migration from Mecca to Medina in 622 (the *Hijra*), when his emphasis shifted markedly from peaceable coexistence with those of other beliefs to a violent intolerance and imperial ambition. However, the two layers, A and B, are of so completely different a character that it seems difficult to attribute them to the same author or authors. They make use of a very different vocabulary and style, are worlds apart in their rhetorical quality, and evince some very different priorities.

Layer A (which approximates to the 86 suras [chapters] "revealed before Hijra," though there is some mixing up) is a finely written theological work of high rhetorical skill. It is general in scope, with much of it devoted to recounting biblical (and apocryphal) stories



(especially those of Adam, Noah, Abraham, and Moses) as encouragements and warnings, and referring to the events in them as Signs and those involved in bringing God's word as Messengers. It shows an intense interest in reconciling biblical traditions with its own theological narrative, and contains very few detailed ethical prescriptions.

Layer B (approximating to the 28 "after Hijra" suras) is completely different: it has a much clunkier rhetorical style (on the most part, though with some finer passages), longer verses, and has many fewer biblical references, makes heavy use of the second person (addressing the hearer directly) and includes many references to the Messenger (singular) who is reciting the Qur'an as a Prophet, emphasizing the need to obey him. It includes various specific local references to Muhammad, Mecca, the Mosque, and Yathrib (Medina), a host of detailed moral and legal prescriptions, some personal guidance for the Prophet and special dispensations for him (especially about his wives), numerous anti-Christian and anti-Jewish polemics, and many exhortations to fight against the enemy and unbeliever.

Scholars are still investigating explanations for the origin of these two layers. One of the more likely possibilities is that the first layer somehow came into the possession of Muhammad's community in Mecca, where they began their monotheistic Qur'anic sect, and where they subsequently recognized a prophetic vocation for Muhammad in the Qur'anic tradition. The second layer was then added later by Muhammad (and possibly those around him) following the move to Medina, where the Qur'anic religion and Muhammad's prophetic vocation quickly became tools for gaining power and building empire. This is not to say that Muhammad and his companions did not sincerely believe in his prophetic vocation—they may well have done. But those who were aware of the true origin of the Qur'an may have been quite happy to allow Muhammad, seen as the last and greatest of the Messengers and Prophets, to co-opt it to his vocation and incorporate it as he deemed fit.

Alternatively there may be a quite different explanation, such as one in which Muhammad is not involved in the production of the Qur'an at all (such ideas have certainly been entertained by some scholars, referred to as "revisionists"). Whatever the truth though, one thing is looking increasingly likely: that most of the Qur'an originated somewhere quite different with someone quite other than Muhammad of Mecca. And that alone threatens some fundamental Islamic claims about the origins of their religion.

If this information was more widely known amongst Muslims, it would surely have the potential to steer some away from a devotion to the life and example of Muhammad. For how could it not moderate the appeal of the Prophet of Islam, if it became accepted that he could not have been the original messenger of most of Islam's most sacred text?

For too long have Muslims been cossetted from exposure to the bracing winds of [historical-critical scholarship \(https://www.amazon.co.uk/Quran-Historical-Critical-Introduction-Edinburgh-Islamic/dp/074869577X\)](https://www.amazon.co.uk/Quran-Historical-Critical-Introduction-Edinburgh-Islamic/dp/074869577X), and the result has been that Islam's origin mythology has been able to maintain a hold over the minds of Muslims. So many of the radical groups who have waged jihad against the world in the name of their Prophet have looked to his example as a model and inspiration in their struggle. In our time, when many Muslims are already questioning Islam because of the violent and destructive fruit born of the global Islamic awakening, modern scholarship can play a part in guiding hearts towards a more peaceful path.

(Photo credit: Kuffi Quran from 12th century; A Gude / Wikimedia.)



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