The Traditional Narrative of the Qur'an's Origins

A Scholarly Sunnism

If one were to peruse the scholarly literature on the Qur'an from the last century and a half, it would be hard to escape the conclusion that the circumstances of the Qur'an's origins are in fact well known with great certainty, resting on a basis of rock-solid historical evidence. Almost everywhere in these writings one would meet with firm conviction that the Qur'an as it has come down to us today (at least in its consonantal structure) was established by the caliph ʿUthmān around 650, within about two decades of Muhammad's death. At this time, the Qur'an was immutably fixed into its now canonical form and did not undergo any significant changes at all from then on. Therefore, modern scholars regularly assure us that we can place great confidence in the fact that the words found in the Qur'an today bear witness directly to the very words spoken by Muhammad himself in Mecca and Medina in the early seventh century. The Qur'an is thus held forth in effect as a highly accurate transcript of the revelations that Muhammad spoke to his followers, allowing us to encounter, transparently and unmediated, the teaching of Islam's founding prophet. We can be assured of this because the words he taught were meticulously and carefully recorded soon after his death under the supervision of those who knew him well—most notably the caliph ʿUthmān, but also Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, and others as well.

The truth of the matter, however, is that the evidence for the Qur'an's collection and composition is a convoluted tangle of traditions, and the uncomplicated confidence that most modern scholarship has invested in this particular narrative of its origins is undeserved. In actual fact, Islamic tradition relates not a single, regularly attested account of the Qur'an's formation, but instead a bewildering muddle of rival and contradictory reports scattered across a range of much

later sources, all of them dating to around two hundred years or more after the death of Muhammad. Although it is certainly understandable that the Islamic tradition would eventually settle on a particular narrative of the Qur'an's origins chosen from among these various accounts, the sheer diversity of information coming from the early tradition regarding the Qur'an's production should doubt-less occasion less certainty from modern Qur'anic scholarship. In this chapter, we will lay out the complexity and contradictions of these accounts without trying to resolve them. Instead, our aim will be to demonstrate that their variation and discontinuity undermine the widespread scholarly acquiescence to the traditional Sunni tradition of the Qur'an's formation, primarily in the form articulated by Theodor Nöldeke and his successors.

The canonical narrative of the Qur'an's collection sanctioned by the Sunni tra-dition is itself largely the handiwork of al-Bukhārī, the Sunni tradition's foremost and most esteemed collector of hadith—that is, teachings ascribed to Muham-mad and his companions. Al-Bukhārī fashioned this canonical narrative out of what were originally several competing traditions that ascribed this task in various ways to the first three caliphs: Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, and ʿUthmān. From this array of discordant early memories, al-Bukhārī formed a congruous narrative of the Qur'an's origins, and by giving his new harmony pride of place in his collection of *Ṣaḥīḥ*—that is, "sound" hadith—he secured its reception by the subsequent Sunni tradition and, oddly enough, modern Qur'anic scholarship. This canonical Sunni account—which is sharply different from the earliest Shi'i memories, one should note—is as follows.[1]

THE CANONICAL SUNNI NARRATIVE

While Muhammad was still alive, the Qur'an seems to have been primarily an oral tradition. Some of his followers had presumably attempted to memorize impor-tant parts of his revelations, and the later Islamic historical tradition suggests that some bits and pieces of it had even been committed to writing in some fashion. Yet when Muhammad died, the bulk of his revelations had not yet been written down or compiled into the Qur'an. Not long thereafter, during the reign of the first caliph, Abū Bakr (632–34), his future successor ʿUmar (634–44) came to him with a concern that many of the Qur'an's "reciters" (*qurrāʾ*) had died in battle, tak-ing with them their knowledge of Muhammad's revelations. ʿUmar therefore pro-posed that a complete written version of the Qur'an should be produced. Initially, Abū Bakr refused, saying to ʿUmar, "How can you do something that the messen-ger of God did not do!?" Yet ʿUmar persisted, and eventually Abū Bakr yielded. Abū Bakr then charged a certain Zayd b. Thābit, whom the tradition identifies as one of Muhammad's scribes, with collecting and transcribing as much of the Qur'an that he could find. Nevertheless, Zayd initially responded as Abū Bakr had done, saying, "How can you do something that the messenger of God did not do!?" The account then relates Abū Bakr's persuasion of Zayd using language identical

to the previous exchange in which ʿUmar similarly persuaded Abū Bakr. Thereupon, Zayd set out to collect what he could find of Muhammad's revelations, acquiring the various fragments as they were preserved on a range of media, including palm branches, stones, camel bones, and "in the hearts of men." He wrote down what he had been able to gather on "sheets" (ṣuḥuf) and gave these to Abū Bakr, who passed them on to ʿUmar at his death. When ʿUmar died, he left them with his daughter Ḥafṣa, who had been one of Muhammad's wives.

Some twenty years after Zayd's collection—still sticking with the traditional Sunni account—the caliph ʿUthmān (644–56) became concerned during the latter half of his reign that differing versions of the Qur'an were in circulation among the "Believers," by which name Muhammad and his early followers seem to have called themselves. One of his most important generals, Ḥudhayfa ibn al-Yamān, reported to him that significantly divergent versions of the Qur'an were in use in Syria and Iraq. Ḥudhayfa was afraid that divisions would arise among the faithful as to which version should be recognized as the authoritative form of Muhammad's revelations. ʿUthmān apparently shared his fear, and he decided to intervene by establishing an official version of the Qur'an for his empire. As Angelika Neuwirth observes of ʿUthmān's response, the differences must have been significant, such that "the varying forms of reading thus seem to have presented a danger for the early Islamic state that could only be averted through the standardization of the text."[2] ʿUthmān, we are told, obtained the "sheets" that had been entrusted to Ḥafṣa and appointed a committee of scribes under the direction of, once again, Zayd b. Thābit to establish an official codex (muṣḥaf) of the Qur'an, using Ḥafṣa's sheets as their basis. ʿUthmān then authorized their text as the official version of the Qur'an, imposing it by his imperial authority. He sent copies of the text from Medina to the main centers of the caliphate—Damascus, Kufa, Basra, and Mecca—and he ordered that all other copies should be rounded up by the imperial authorities and destroyed. From this point on, so we are told, the Qur'an as we have it today was widely established and received among Muhammad's followers.

Nevertheless, as Alfred-Louis de Prémare observes, al-Bukhārī's canonical version has synthesized what appear to be at least five earlier traditions: one attributing the Qur'an's collection to Abū Bakr; another assigning it to ʿUmar; and a third identifying ʿUthmān as the original collector of the Qur'an.[3] Likewise, de Prémare notes that the successive objections by Abū Bakr and Zayd to collecting the Qur'an in writing because Muhammad himself had not done so also reflect a fusion of what were originally two separate traditions. The direct repetition of their protests and their identical resolutions indicate that two originally independent traditions attributing this objection to Abū Bakr and Zayd separately have here been merged.[4] Thus, al-Bukhārī renders what was originally a discordant and contested range of traditions into one harmonious and ordered process in which each of the three first caliphs plays a crucial role in concert with the others. Yet, in so doing, al-Bukhārī flattens the complexity and diversity of the earlier tradition, effacing it with a seamless narrative of persistent and coordinated care taken by

the first three caliphs to preserve faithfully Muhammad's revelations, in a chain reaching back almost to the moment of Muhammad's death. Clearly the intention is to secure the accuracy of the Qur'an as a precise record of what Muhammad had taught his followers. Moreover, this narrative amalgam is the only account of the Qur'an's formation that al-Bukhārī included in his authoritative collection of Muhammad's religious teaching, and as a collection of hadith, rather than a history or some other sort of treatise, al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ* carried a special kind of theological authority that other types of writings did not. It is not at all surprising, therefore, to find that his homogenization of the early tradition's collage of memories quickly emerged as the canonical version—for the Sunni tradition, at least.

THE NÖLDEKEAN-SCHWALLIAN PARADIGM

In 1860, Theodor Nöldeke enshrined this canonical Sunni account of the Qur'an's formation as a pillar of modern Islamic studies, along with defining an internal chronology of the Qur'an's contents that was similarly derived from the Islamic tradition in the publication of his *Geschichte des Qorâns*.[5] Although true credit for developing this paradigm actually belongs to Gustav Weil, whose ideas Nöldeke adopted and adapted in his own work, the influence of Nöldeke's views on subsequent study of the Qur'an has been pervasive, particularly in German- and English-language scholarship, such that Neuwirth, for instance, has pronounced his work "the rock of our church."[6] As a result, this Nöldekean paradigm has become a fundamental tenet of much contemporary scholarship on the Qur'an, which continues to be largely governed by a conceptual framework that was frozen in the later nineteenth century on the basis of traditional Islamic beliefs about the Qur'an from the ninth century.[7] The deleterious effects of Nöldeke's wholehearted embrace of the Sunni tradition continue to linger in Qur'anic studies and to forestall progress in this field comparable to other areas of religious studies. For this reason, Patricia Crone rightly lamented that when it comes to study of the Qur'an,

> Western Islamicists frequently sound like Muslims, usually of the Sunni variety, not only in the sense that they accept Sunni information, but also in that they revere it in a manner incompatible with the question mark to which they have in principle committed themselves. This is a compliment to the strength of Sunnism, but it does not do the modern study of its origins and development any good.[8]

Several of Nöldeke's successors—Friedrich Schwally, Gotthelf Bergsträsser, and Otto Pretzl—continued to refine his work and also to extend its influence with a new edition of *Geschichte des Qorâns*. Schwally was the first to take up the task, and his labors resulted in an updated version of Nöldeke's earlier study, published as volume 1 of the new edition. Schwally's second volume, however, which focuses on the collection of the Qur'an, revises Nöldeke's initial work so significantly that the final product must be understood, according to its preface, as "Schwally's own

contribution."[9] In this volume, Schwally notably parts ways with Nöldeke regarding the reports of an initial collection of the Qur'an under Abū Bakr. Schwally argues that this tradition is not reliable and should be discounted, even as he simultaneously maintained absolute confidence in the account of the ʿUthmānic collection and standardization.[10]

Schwally also made significant changes to Nöldeke's earlier work on another matter relevant to the collection of the Qur'an—namely, the question of just how much, if any, of the Qur'an had been committed to writing before Muhammad's death. Indeed, it would appear that Schwally was the first scholar to propose that much of the Qur'an had been written down already while Muhammad was still alive.[11] Nöldeke, in his original study of the Qur'an and its collection, concluded that "an unambiguous tradition informs us that the Qur'an had not yet been collected during the Prophet's lifetime, which acquires certainty from the information concerning Zayd's collection" under Abū Bakr (which Nöldeke, in accord with Sunni tradition, regarded as accurate).[12] If large parts of the Qur'an had already been gathered, he remarks, either in writing or even in memorization, there would be no need to take such great effort to bring it all together later under Abū Bakr and ʿUthmān. This is seemingly all that Nöldeke had to say on the matter, and he proceeds immediately to consider the tradition of Zayd's collection of the Qur'an from fragments written on palm branches, stones, camel bones, and in the hearts of men.[13]

Schwally, by contrast, begins his volume on the collection of the Qur'an with several pages devoted to considering the evidence for written collections made during Muhammad's lifetime. Departing from his mentor's views, Schwally maintains the existence of compelling evidence that a significant portion of the Qur'an had already been written down before Muhammad's death. This conviction, one should note, provides an important basis for Schwally's rejection of the Abū Bakr tradition. There would be no need to worry about the death of so many Qur'an reciters or to gather the Qur'an out of many fragmentary pieces, as the Abū Bakr tradition relates, since, Schwally maintains, "we know that Muḥammad himself had arranged for a written copy of the revelations."[14] Nevertheless, the actual evidence given in this section is shockingly modest, and on the whole the argument seems to be based more on conviction and assertion than on proof and argument.[15] Indeed, this declaration affords a perfect example of what John Burton rightly identifies as a prevalence of "investigation by intuition" in this storied collaborative work on the history of the Qur'an.[16]

Nevertheless, the belief that significant portions of the Qur'an had been written down already while Muhammad was still alive seems to have become a cornerstone of the now reigning Nöldekean paradigm. It certainly is not impossible, to be sure, that much of the Qur'an had been written down before Muhammad's death. Nevertheless, I have yet to see any convincing evidence at all that could validate the claim that significant parts of the Qur'an had been written down while

Muhammad was still alive. Schwally's assertion demands a great deal of confidence in much later reports in the Islamic tradition about Muhammad and his use of scribes, even though the historical unreliability and general untrustworthiness of Muhammad's traditional biographies is widely conceded by most scholars.[17] While one is welcome to believe such a thing in the absence of much evidence, there is no compelling reason that we should assume this, particularly given the fundamentally oral nature of the Qur'an itself and the extremely marginal presence of writing in western Arabia at this time, as we shall see in chapter 5.[18]

One meets with similar claims in the writings of some Christian evangelical scholars, whose works on the New Testament effectively amount to apologies for the historical accuracy of the gospels—a common point of faith among evangelical Christians. The gospels, they propose, were written on the basis of notebooks written by Jesus's disciples as they were following him. Although the proponents of such notebooks look to reports from the later tradition suggesting that such written materials may have been produced by Jesus's followers during his lifetime as memory aids as evidence for their position, this hypothesis has been roundly rejected in New Testament scholarship. As Chris Keith rightly notes in this case, "one cannot skip from the second and fourth centuries to the first century quite this easily, especially when class considerations and literate education are determinative factors in who even could own or write in notebooks."[19] Such reasoning seems only more apt in the case of Muhammad's followers and the Qur'an, particularly given that the traditions about the Qur'an from the second through fourth Islamic centuries on which these claims are based are extremely unreliable and were written down only after at least a century of oral transmission. Likewise, again as we will see in chapter 5, the issues concerning lack of literacy are even more acute in Muhammad's historical context than they were in Jesus's Galilee. Indeed, one suspects that the persistence of this presumption about scribes writing down Muhammad's words during his lifetime is largely a matter of scholarly inertia: it certainly does not stand on very solid evidence.

Since the publication of Schwally's second volume in 1919, his revised version of the Nöldekean paradigm has effectively dominated Western study of the Qur'an, with relatively few notable exceptions.[20] On the eve of its appearance, Alphonse Mingana already noted the outsize influence of this paradigm on the field in an excellent but often ignored article on the Qur'an's formation: "In England, where the views of Nöldeke had gathered considerable weight, no serious attempt was made for some years to study the subject afresh."[21] Nor was the situation much different in the German academy, where Nöldeke's influence was, not surprisingly, even greater. So dominant has this paradigm been that even as late as 1977 Burton could rightly observe that "Since the publication of [Schwally's second edition] no new suggestions on the history of the Qur'an texts have been advanced."[22] Yet 1977 was truly a pivotal year in Qur'anic studies, for alongside Burton's study of the

Qur'an's collection, John Wansbrough published his *Quranic Studies*, and Patricia Crone and Michael Cook published their *Hagarism*, both brilliant and seminal (and likewise flawed) works that broke the mold and opened up new horizons for study of the Qur'an. All of a sudden, in one year, this handful scholars brought the Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm into serious question from several different angles. Subsequent decades have seen a rise in studies of the Qur'an's early history that are not beholden to this marginally critical version of the received Sunni tradition. Although there was a slight stall in the 1980s and 1990s, presumably owing to the controversial and often extremely hostile reception that these works received (particularly those of Wansbrough and Crone and Cook), the first two decades of the twenty-first century have witnessed new vitality and ingenuity beginning to take hold in this long-stalled area of research.

PROBLEMS WITH THE NÖLDEKEAN-SCHWALLIAN PARADIGM

In actual fact, it turns out that the tradition of ʿUthmān's standardization of text, which lies at the heart of the Nöldekean-Schwallian model, stands no better in the face of critical scrutiny than the Abū Bakr tradition that Schwally rejected. For example, Alford Welch's article on the Qur'an in the second edition of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, published in 1986, reflects the continued ascendancy of the Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm in twentieth-century scholarship—and yet at the same time it also betrays its tenuous underpinnings. In this article, Welch, following Schwally's lead, rejects the tradition of the Qur'an's collection under Abū Bakr, since "there are serious problems with this account," most notably that "most of the key points in this story are contradicted by alternative accounts in the canonical hadith collections and other early Muslim sources."[23] Instead, he concludes that this tradition was invented "to obscure Muḥammad's role in the preparation of a written Ḳurʾān, to reduce ʿUthmān's role in establishing an official text, and to attempt to establish the priority of the ʿUthmānic text over those of the (pre-ʿUthmānic) Companion codices." Implicit in Welch's assessment, one should note, is the assumption, inherited from Schwally, that much of the Qur'an had been written down under Muhammad's supervision.

Welch next considers the tradition of the Qur'an's compilation under ʿUthmān, which, as one can also see from his evaluation of the Abū Bakr tradition, has already been prejudged as authentic. Yet, when one reads Welch's evaluation of this tradition, one sees that such a conclusion is simply astonishing and unwarranted. Indeed, Welch himself observes that "this second collection story stands up to critical analysis no better than the first [i.e., Abū Bakr's collection] . . . .We thus have before us another story whose particulars cannot be accepted." Nevertheless, staying true to the Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm, Welch remarks that

the unanimity with which an official text is attributed to ʿUthmān, in the face of a lack of convincing evidence to the contrary leads most western scholars to accept that the Ḳurʾān we have today, at least in terms of the number and arrangement of the *sūra*s and the basic structure of the consonantal text, goes back to the time of ʿUthmān, under whose authority the official text was produced.

How Welch, and so many other scholars, can recognize the historical problems of the Abū Bakr tradition and rightly dismiss it, while continuing to assent to an alternative tradition involving ʿUthmān that is clearly no less problematic is utterly baffling.

Moreover, Welch's claims about the unanimity of the ʿUthmānic tradition are simply not true, and demonstrably so. This assertion is a useful fiction for scholars committed to the Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm, but in reality, despite its frequent repetition, this alleged unanimity is a red herring.[24] There is, in fact, substantial and unmistakable evidence to the contrary. Despite Welch's misleading assertion, there is significant dissension within the Islamic tradition itself regarding the historical circumstances in which the Qur'an, as the text that has come down to us today, was produced. For instance, as Schwally himself notes, there are at least three other accounts in the Islamic tradition of Abū Bakr or ʿUmar's involvement in the Qur'an's collection that differ from the official version. According to one such report, it was instead ʿUmar alone, without any involvement by Abū Bakr, who was the first to collect the Qur'an. Yet another tradition relates that Abū Bakr commissioned Zayd to write down Muhammad's revelations in fragments on bits of leather, shoulder bones, and palm branches, without any mention of ʿUmar's participation. Then, after Abū Bakr's death, ʿUmar later commissioned Zayd to copy these fragments together on a "single sheet." Finally, in another account, ʿUmar comes to Abū Bakr with concerns for the preservation of the Qur'an, asking that it should be written down. In this instance, Abū Bakr refuses and persists in his objection that he would not do so since this was something that Muhammad himself had not done. And so, ʿUmar decides to undertake the task himself after Abū Bakr's death, and has the Qur'an copied on leaves.[25] There is also a tradition, related in both Sunni and Shi'i sources, that it was Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, who was the first to collect the Qur'an. And yet another tradition ascribes the Qur'an's collection to Sālim b. Maʿqil, who reportedly compiled the text immediately after Muhammad's death.[26]

Other traditions identify a copy of the Qur'an, a *muṣḥaf* or codex, in the possession of Muhammad's wife Aisha.[27] Moreover, the canonical tradition itself identifies the existence of several competing recensions of the Qur'an that were in circulation prior to ʿUthmān's actions. These rival versions of the Qur'an that were already in existence are in fact explicitly identified as the impetus for ʿUthmān's production of a standard edition to be authorized and promulgated by order of imperial authority. Other versions of the ʿUthmānic story, besides al-Bukhārī's canonical version, name the four different versions of the Qur'an that were

already in use, either in written or oral form, whose disparities were causing dissension among the faithful. These four versions, known collectively as the "companion codices," were attributed to the following early followers of Muhammad: Ubayy b. Kaʿb (whose Qur'an was in use in Syria); ʿAbd Allāh ibn Masʿūd (in use in Kufa); Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī (in use in Basra); and Miqdād b. al-Aswad (in use in Ḥimṣ). Thus, we have in effect four additional claims to collection of the Qur'an by each of these individuals. Nevertheless, at ʿUthmān's order, as indicated above, all these versions were purportedly hunted down by the imperial authorities, who destroyed all the copies they could find.[28] I hardly think that this range of competing claims and opinions concerning the Qur'an's collection can be considered to reflect anything approaching unanimity.

COLLECTION OF THE QUR'AN IN THE EARLY ISLAMIC HISTORICAL TRADITION

As we move beyond the realm of hadith collections and leave behind the theological aura and agenda of these compendia, we find that several of the earliest Islamic historical sources transmit a range of even more diverse and discordant memories regarding the Qur'an's collection. Indeed, in contrast to the hadith collectors, whose goal it is to determine which traditions are "sound," these historical sources aim to collect as much information as they can about a given subject, without concern for establishing theological norms.[29] For instance, the ninth-century *History of Medina* by Ibn Shabba (d. 876) conveys a great deal more information about the Qur'an's early history than al-Bukhārī's roughly contemporary hadith collection. Perhaps the most shocking aspect of Ibn Shabba's assemblage of reports concerning the Qur'an's production is the complete absence of any memory of Abū Bakr's involvement in the process. As for ʿUmar, one tradition relates that he began work on collecting the Qur'an but was murdered before he could complete the task. Yet, according to another tradition, ʿUmar himself owned a codex (*muṣḥaf*) of the Qur'an. Other anecdotes report ʿUmar's disagreements with the version of the text collected by Ubayy b. Kaʿb, and sometimes with Ubayy himself over the contents of the Qur'an. In one such account, ʿUmar and Zayd together proof a version of Ubayy's Qur'an and regularly make changes according to Zayd's authority.[30]

Ultimately, toward the end of Ibn Shabba's notices of ʿUmar's involvement in the Qur'an's collection, we learn that what he was actually engaged in was not so much the initial compilation of the Qur'an as he was trying to establish the authority of one among several already collected versions. According to Ibn Shabba, by the time of ʿUmar's reign the Qur'an had already been collected in multiple independent versions, each enjoying individual favor in different regions, and ʿUmar was attempting to assert the authority of the particular version of the Qur'an known in Medina against the rival codices of Syria and Iraq. Ibn Shabba then later devotes a lengthy chapter to traditions of ʿUthmān's collection of the Qur'an.[31] There, in

addition to the canonical version of ʿUthmān's role known from al-Bukhārī, he brings a number of other reports concerning ʿUthmān's involvement in standardizing the Qur'anic text. Yet here, even more than with ʿUmar, the focus is not so much on collecting the Qur'an as it is on efforts to correct the dissimilar versions of the text already in circulation to make them conform to the caliphate's desired standard.[32]

A little earlier than Ibn Shabba and al-Bukhārī is the enormous collection of biographies of Muhammad and his early followers compiled by Ibn Saʿd (d. 845), his *Kitāb al-ṭabaqāt al-kabīr* (The book of the major classes). In the biographies of the early caliphs and of Muhammad himself, Ibn Saʿd provides a wealth of information concerning the Qur'an's early history, which, it turns out, is again far from unanimous. As de Prémare observes, for Ibn Saʿd, who was writing in the early ninth century, "the real history of the Qur'anic corpus seemed blurry, and the identity of its architects uncertain."[33] Ibn Saʿd initially raises the question of the Qur'an's origins at the end of his biography of Muhammad, where he relates numerous traditions concerning "those who collected/memorized the Qur'an during the lifetime of the messenger of God."[34] As reflected in my translation, a key ambiguity underlies all these reports concerning the collection of the Qur'an, in that the word used in Arabic, *jamaʿa*, can mean both "to collect" and "to memorize." Therefore, we cannot be entirely certain what exactly the role of these individuals was in the production of the Qur'an: perhaps they were believed to have written parts of it down, or perhaps they merely memorized parts of Muhammad's revelations.

Two individuals figure most prominently in these reports, both of whom have already met: Zayd b. Thābit and Ubayy b. Kaʿb. According to later tradition, both men served Muhammad as scribes, and, as we have seen, both are often attributed significant roles in the collection of the Qur'an: Zayd is said to have played an important role in the various reports of collections by Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, and ʿUthmān, while an early version of the Qur'an circulated under Ubayy's authority. With these reports, Ibn Saʿd raises the possibility that some believed that the Qur'an had already been collected, at least in part, during Muhammad's lifetime, which, as noted above, seems to be the reigning assumption of those who still follow the Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm. Nevertheless, it remains unclear as to whether or not this was the case, and it could be that the individuals named here are simply remembered for their memories of what Muhammad had taught. Of course, there may have been some limited efforts at notetaking while Muhammad was alive, and it would appear that there were in fact some written documents in the early movement, such as the so-called *Constitution of Medina*. Yet in view of the very minimal presence of writing in the Qur'an's traditional milieu of the Hijaz and the profoundly oral nature of culture there, it seems highly improbable that the Qur'an was written down while Muhammad was still alive.[35]

When we consider Ibn Saʿd's biographies of the early caliphs, we find—once again, as in Ibn Shabba—no tradition at all relating Abū Bakr's efforts to collect the Qur'an.[36] Yet what is far more remarkable, is the absence of any tradition in ʿUthmān's biography identifying him with the establishment of the Qur'anic text. So much, one should note, for unanimity: the lack of any mention of ʿUthmān's interest in establishing the text of the Qur'an in his biography is truly extraordinary and must be significant.[37] Indeed, if the tradition of ʿUthmān's collection were a historical reality that was widely acknowledged in the early community, it is hard to imagine that Ibn Saʿd would not have known about this and likewise reported it in his biography. The only possible exception to ʿUthmān's complete absence comes in Ubayy's biography, where there is confusion about the timing of his death, so that some said that he died while ʿUmar was caliph. Yet according to other sources, we are told, he must have died in the caliphate of ʿUthmān, since it was said that ʿUthmān commanded him—instead of Zayd, one should note—to compile the Qur'an.[38] Another peculiar tradition, cited among "those who collected/memorized the Qur'an during the lifetime of the messenger of God," reports that ʿUthmān himself collected/memorized the Qur'an while ʿUmar was still caliph.[39] These are the only references to ʿUthmān's involvement with the Qur'an's collection, and again, the complete absence of any mention of his efforts to standardize the Qur'an in his own extensive biography in this collection remains very telling and significantly undermines claims of unanimity on this front.[40] It is also worth noting that, in contrast to the canonical tradition, Ibn Saʿd stands in a tradition in which Ubayy takes clear precedence over Zayd in various efforts to collect the Qur'an. In Zayd's biography there is, as with ʿUthmān, no mention of any involvement in the compilation of the Qur'an. No less striking is Ibn Saʿd's failure to make any mention of the supposed "sheets" of Ḥafṣa, which are central to the canonical account of ʿUthmān's collection. These sheets do not appear either in her biography or anywhere else in this massive compendium. It is yet another troubling silence.[41]

According to Ibn Saʿd, it was ʿUmar who was the first to collect the Qur'an on "sheets" (ṣuḥuf). Yet at the same time, he elsewhere reports a contradictory tradition that ʿUmar was assassinated before he could collect the Qur'an.[42] Unfortunately, Ibn Saʿd gives no specifics regarding ʿUmar's alleged activities in composing the Qur'an, although elsewhere he does report an intervention in the text of the Qur'an by ʿUmar. According to this tradition, at the request of Yazīd, the emir of Palestine and Syria, ʿUmar sent several experts on the Qur'an who could teach it to the many Believers who had settled in this region.[43] But that is it. And so, one must conclude, on the basis of Ibn Saʿd's apparent ignorance of the canonical account that Zayd compiled the Qur'an in a definitive codex at the order of ʿUthmān and on the basis of Ḥafṣa's "sheets," that this tradition was not yet, in fact, a widely accepted and definitive "fact" about the Qur'an's origins at the beginning of

the ninth century. For those scholars who would imagine it as such, "the silences of Ibn Sa'd pose a serious problem," as de Prémare observes, "for those who would like to stick, in the field of history, to a uniform version of the facts. To speak the euphemistic language of exegetes, the silences of Ibn Sa'd are 'disturbing.'"[44] Clearly, then, Ibn Saʿd's *Ṭabaqāt* belies any misplaced claims to unanimity.

An even earlier account of the Qur'an's formative history survives in the *Book of the Conquests*, one of the earliest Islamic historical sources, written by Sayf ibn ʿUmar (d. 796–97) in Kufa during the later eighth century.[45] Sayf considers the history of the Qur'an in his section on the "Emirate of ʿUthmān," a coincidence that could seem to bode well for the canonical narrative. Sayf identifies the source of his information in two different transmitters from the beginning of the eighth century, and so with his account we come plausibly within a century of the end of Muhammad's life. This, then, would appear to be the earliest surviving Islamic account of the Qur'an's formation.[46] Unlike many of the others that we have seen, however, the focus in Sayf's account is on resolving the differences of the early "companion" codices that were already in circulation, rather than the collection and promulgation of an authoritative new version. The report begins, as in the canonical account, with Ḥudhayfa on the front lines of conquest, where he was preparing his army in Azerbaijan for an invasion of the Caucasus. As he passed through the various centers where the Believers had settled in Syria and Iraq, including Damascus, Kufa, and Basra in particular, he discovered that different versions of the Qur'an were in use in each of these places. Still more troubling was the fact that the Believers in these different centers were contending with one another over whose version preserved the true words that Muhammad had taught them, while denouncing the codices of their rivals. Ḥudhayfa, again mirroring the canonical account, was greatly distressed at the divisions that the disparities in these Qur'anic codices were causing in the community. Therefore, he sent his lieutenant ahead with the army and reported immediately to ʿUthmān in Medina to seek a resolution.

The Syrians favored a version by Miqdād b. al-Aswad (and apparently Sālim), while the Kufans used ʿAbd Allāh ibn Masʿūd's codex and the Basrans that of Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī, although strangely there is no mention at all of a codex by Ubayy b. Kaʿb. The Basrans even had a title for Abū Mūsā's version of the Qur'an, *Lubāb al-fuʾād* (Purity of the heart), which certainly raises some intriguing questions about the precise nature of this text. Once Ḥudhayfa arrived in Medina and informed ʿUthmān of the problem, the latter summoned representatives from these centers to appear before him there in order to explain the nature of their various Qur'ans. Each then describes the origins of their version with the respective companion, and there is no question that we are dealing with written collections as related in this account, since it specifically identifies them as rival "codices." We see here, then, a circumstance in which the members of Muhammad's new religious movement have become dispersed and have settled into Syria and the garrisons

in Iraq. In these conquered lands, the Believers undertook multiple, independent efforts to put Muhammad's revelations into written form, with significant differences among these first codices. Thus, the first Qur'ans were produced independently of Medina and the first caliphs, in milieux beyond their immediate control that were populated largely by Christians, Jews, and other religious communities. ʿUthmān's response to this circumstance was not to initiate a new collection of the Qur'an. Rather, he had certain unspecified codices copied in Medina, presumably on the basis of yet another version of the text in use there, and he then sent these to the various garrisons with instructions that all the other versions should be rounded up and destroyed. Beyond that, we do not learn whether ʿUthmān's efforts met with any success or if his codex was received in these centers as a replacement for their local versions.

ASSESSING THE DIVERSE MEMORIES OF THE QUR'AN' ORIGINS

Sayf's report provides the earliest information that we have from the Islamic tradition concerning the origins of the Qur'an, in an account transmitted in a historical collection from the later eighth century on the basis of a tradition from the beginning of the eighth century. In it, there is no ʿUthmānic collection at all, only several competing versions already in existence at the time of ʿUthmān's reign, among which he adjudicates by authorizing a Medinan version(?) and attempting to purge all the others. It is true that Harald Motzki has made a strong argument for assigning the tradition of ʿUthmān's collection more or less in its canonical form to Ibn Shihab al-Zuhrī (d. 741–42), on the basis of its patterns of transmission, a dating method that is highly useful but not always completely reliable.[47] This would mean that at best some basic form of this tradition may be roughly contemporary with what Sayf relates. Yet the tradition of ʿUthmān's collection of the Qur'an itself is not particularly stable, and it occurs with numerous variations in early Islamic collections, as Schwally himself observes, so that one must wonder what any sort of "original" version might have looked like.[48]

It is significant that Motzki does not give similar consideration to any of the other alternative accounts of the Qur'an's formation, although he does identify several sources from around the end of the eighth century that attest to the disfavored tradition of a collection under Abū Bakr. Nevertheless, the majority of these accounts do not actually describe a collection of the Qur'an by Abū Bakr; instead they conclude simply with Zayd's refusal to do what Muhammad himself had not done. This fact certainly raises significant questions regarding the nature of the earliest version of the Abū Bakr tradition: did it conclude without a collection being made? As for the tradition of an ʿUthmānic collection, there is no surviving source before the ninth century that relates it, and only Motzki's dating according to the chains of transmission, the *isnād*s, can plausibly locate it any earlier.[49]

Perhaps the memory of ʿUthmān's attempt to introduce a local Medinan version of the Qur'an as a universal standard, as reported by Sayf, eventually inspired a tradition that he was singularly responsible for establishing the canonical version of the Qur'an. It could even be that ʿUthmān himself may have led the initiative to produce this local Medinan version of the Qur'an, adding further basis for the development of this legend. Nonetheless, despite these potential sparks for the imagination, the tale of ʿUthmān's collection remains just one among several conflicting and historically improbable narratives of the Qur'an's origins that seek to pin this task on one of the first three caliphs.

One should also note that there are various early traditions indicating the lack of a clear distinction between the divine revelations transmitted through Muhammad and Muhammad's own teaching. This amounts to a certain amount of early confusion between materials that the later tradition would clearly separate into the Qur'an (divine revelation) and the hadith (Muhammad's teaching). For instance, according to some early traditions, the term *qur'an*, "recitation" or "proclamation," is used to refer to everything that was said by Muhammad, both divine revelations and his own teaching. As Ali Amir-Moezzi observes, "a clear distinction between *hadith* and Qur'an—the former indicating the Prophet's statements and the latter the words of God—seems to be late."[50] For instance, Ibn Saʿd transmits a claim by Salima b. Jarmī that he had collected "many qur'ans," from Muhammad, presumably meaning by this many of what the later tradition would regard as hadith.[51] Likewise, an early letter attributed to Zayd ibn ʿĀlī (695–740), the first in the line of Zaydi imams, relates two hadith from Muhammad that are almost identical to passages from the Qur'an (5:56 and 21:24).[52] De Prémare also observes that certain sentences from Muhammad's famous "farewell sermon" in his traditional biographies are almost identical to certain passages from the Qur'an.[53] Still more complicated are the so-called *ḥadīth qudsī*—literally, "sacred hadith" or "Divine Sayings." This special category of hadith consists of sayings placed in the mouth of Muhammad that he identifies as direct words of God. Just how are these things spoken by God, although they are classed among the hadith, different from the divine revelations eventually codified in the Qur'an? William Graham has studied these traditions extensively, coming to the conclusion that there was "an essentially unitive understanding of divine and prophetic authority [i.e., Qur'an and hadith] in the early Muslim community, an understanding that differed significantly from the interpretation that Sunni Muslim scholarship was to develop by at least the third century of Islam."[54] So it is not at all clear what sort of distinctions would or even could have been made at the time of Abū Bakr or ʿUmar or ʿUthmān as to what should be collected and authorized as the divine revelation of the Qur'an, on the one hand, and the teachings of Muhammad, the hadith, on the other.

By now I hope it is sufficiently clear that the pretense of unanimity regarding ʿUthmān's collection of the Qur'an is not only deceptive but false. The Islamic tradition instead reports a tangle of conflicting and disjointed memories about

the origins of the Qur'an rather than anything remotely approaching unanimity. In effect, the Qur'an's production is seemingly assigned, almost at random, to one of the first three caliphs. The purpose of such attributions, in the Islamic collective memory, is to validate the Qur'an as an accurate record of Muhammad's revelation, as preserved and authorized by a close follower and early authority in the community. It is particularly important, in this regard, that the collection should have been accomplished by such a figure as close in time to Muhammad's death as possible, in order to offer a guarantee of the written text's verbal fidelity to what Muhammad taught. Thus Burton rightly concludes of the data from the Islamic tradition,

> The reports are a mass of confusions, contradictions and inconsistencies. By their nature, they represent the product of a lengthy process of evolution, accretion and "improvement." They were framed in response to a wide variety of progressing needs. . . . The existence of such reports makes it clear that the Muslims were confused. The earliest stage of the traditions on the collection of the Qur'an did consist in incompatible attributions of the first collection to Abū Bakr, to ʿUmar, to ʿUthmān.[55]

Likewise, de Prémare similarly judges that the information coming from the Islamic tradition exhibits "such variation among the reports that each one seems to reflect later circumstances rather than the fact that it is alleged to relate."[56] What we find, then, in the reigning Nöldekean-Schwallian paradigm ultimately amounts to nothing more than the endorsement of one particular Sunni view of the Qur'an's origins from the ninth century, at the expense of these other traditions and without sufficient critical engagement with the complexity and contradictions of these reports. Thus, we can only agree with Claude Gilliot's sound assessment that

> because the misadventures detailed about the transmission and codification of the Qurʾān—as both orally delivered and transmitted in writing—are so great, the ancient Muslim narratives on these subjects offer no real clarity about what "ʿUthmānic codex" means. Secondly, even if Muslims believe that the Qurʾān we have now is the "ʿUthmānic codex," our analysis of Muslim narratives on the matter does not leave us with the same certainty.[57]

Therefore, despite the easy consensus on these issues imagined by most scholars of early Islam, the traditional Sunni version of the Qur'an's origins does not merit the scholarly assent it has habitually garnered.

As is very often the case, comparison with the formation of the early Christian gospel traditions can shed some useful light on the complexity and incongruity of these reports. It is widely acknowledged in critical scholarship on the New Testament that we do not know the names, or really anything at all, about the four individuals (and their communities) that produced the now canonical Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These Gospels were progressively compiled over a period of roughly fifty years, starting around twenty years after the death of Jesus (ca. 50 for Q) until the end of the first century. It seems there was no effort in this

early process to remember when, where, and by whom these Gospels were written, presumably because what was important about them was their witness to Jesus Christ and the divine message that he bore: Christ himself gave the texts their authority, not the one who collected them in writing. Into the second century, these Gospels were still circulating among the Christian communities without any indications of authorship: the respective authors were only assigned toward the end of the second century.[58] One would certainly imagine that a similar set of circumstances must have applied to the Qur'an during the first several decades of its history. As it was being progressively remembered, revised, and written down during the first century, the Qur'an did not initially require an authority to validate its contents. For the early Believers of the seventh century, the content of their Qur'an(s) was undoubtedly self-authenticating: it was directly received as the divine word of God passed into human speech through Muhammad. Only later, it would seem, was it necessary to provide the Qur'an with a birth certificate and a pedigree.

The catalyst for producing various collective memories of the Qur'an's origins was clearly the emergence of multiple, divergent versions of the Qur'an as it was remembered, revised, and written down independently in various locations of the Believers' extensive and rapidly expanding polity. It is altogether expected, from a historical perspective, that something like this would occur. As Muhammad's followers were blitzing across western Asia and into North Africa during these early decades, we can imagine that they would have had little concern for meticulously preserving the words of their founder. Here we must fully agree with Nicolai Sinai that

> Although the Islamic tradition is generally concerned to depict the early Muslims as meticulously passing on detailed historical and exegetical remembrances of the Prophet's companions, it seems rather more probable that during the age of the conquests the majority of converts were not sufficiently preoccupied with the interpretation of the Quran in order for the community's prophetic understanding of it to be fully preserved. As a result, later Muslims needed to rediscover and hermeneutically reinvent their scripture.[59]

Eventually, the Believers ended up scattered among several garrisons dispersed throughout their new polity, where they found themselves a religious minority suddenly in dialogue with the Christians, Jews, and members of other faith communities that surrounded them. In relative isolation, then, from one another and in conversation with other similar faith traditions, not surprisingly the Believers' memories of Muhammad's revelations shifted, adapted, and multiplied. Indeed, in such conditions even written traditions are readily subject to significant changes.[60]

These circumstances, it should be noted, are not merely hypothetical. Rather, the earliest traditions about the origins of the Qur'an from the early eighth century, whether from Sayf's account or the canonical Sunni tradition possibly going

back to al-Zuhrī, consistently relate that it was an initial diversity and divergence that necessitated the eventual standardization of the Qur'anic text. Although such reports about the variations of these codices that have come down to us suggest only relatively minor differences from the canonical text, there is no reason to assume that this was in fact the case.[61] To the contrary, the urgency and fear ascribed to Ḥudhayfa concerning the divisions that these competing versions were breeding among Muhammad's followers suggest something more, as does a sacred text titled *Lubāb al-fuʾād* (Purity of the heart). As de Prémare rightly observes, the variants that have been preserved from these early versions represent only "what survived from such collections after a selection that was more drastic than has been acknowledged."[62] One of the most important collector of such variants, Abū Ḥayyān al-Gharnāṭī, even stated explicitly that he had deliberately omitted "those variants where there is too wide a divergence from' the standard text of ʿUthmān."[63] The variants that have come down to us have clearly passed through a filter of censorship that has removed the most divergent qualities of these competing codices.

Given the circumstances in which these early codices were produced, one would certainly expect that their memories of Muhammad's revelations differed significantly from one another. And as Muhammad's religious community swiftly expanded its domain, direct control over such matters from the weak and remote authorities of this nascent polity in Medina would have been extremely limited, if not altogether nonexistent. There is very little evidence to suggest the existence of any sort of effective Islamic state prior to ʿAbd al-Malik, or perhaps Muʿāwiya. But before the rise of the Umayyads, we find little evidence of anything more than a military command structure, while Damascus and Basra were more than one thousand kilometers distant from the caliphs in Medina.[64] Any communications between Medina and Syria or Iraq would have taken twenty days to travel in each direction, so that an exchange including a message and a response would have taken at least forty days.[65] Accordingly, the thought that the authorities in Medina could somehow directly police the contours of religious discourse in these faraway places seems preposterous, and as a result, differing memories of Muhammad's revelations were initially collected independently in these various centers during the seventh century.

Nevertheless, it certainly is not entirely out of the question that ʿUthmān may have directed some action toward standardizing the Qur'an, making the first initiative toward this end, perhaps only locally in the Hijaz, or perhaps with a greater scope in view. Yet in the latter case, I find it implausible that his efforts would have had any significant effect beyond Medina and perhaps Mecca: as we see even in the reports from the early Islamic tradition, and particularly from Sayf, the early Believers were extremely resistant to efforts to displace the sacred texts that had become established in their communities. Indeed, we hear reports from the Islamic tradition that these regional versions survived into the ninth and even the tenth

century. Accordingly, even if ʿUthmān or one of the other first three caliphs may have taken some interest in collecting the Qur'an, I think it is extremely improbable that their efforts could have resulted in the establishment of the unvarying consonantal structure of the text that has come down to us. They simply were not in a position to accomplish this. The highly confused and contradictory reports about the origins of the Qur'anic text in the early Islamic tradition themselves verify that there was no such decisive event in these early decades that left a lasting imprint in the collective memory. Instead, we find disorganized efforts to assign the text of the Qur'an to the authority of one of these early leaders and to secure its fixation close to the life of Muhammad. One has the sense that the Sunni traditionists of the eighth century were haphazardly identifying one or another of these figures to serve as the Qur'an's guarantor.[66] It fell to Bukhārī in the ninth century to knit all these memories into a coherent account involving a collective action by all three of the first caliphs that could serve as the canonical narrative of the Qur'an's composition for the Sunni tradition going forward.

It is certainly no surprise to find that the Islamic collective memory would settle on these three figures, either individually or jointly, in the absence of an established tradition. If we look again to the early Christian gospels for comparison, it is no wonder that later Christians eventually ascribed the composition of these texts to Matthew, one of Jesus's twelve disciples; Mark, who, according to tradition, was Peter's scribe; Luke, a companion and disciple of Paul; and the "Beloved Disciple" of Jesus, whom the tradition later identifies specifically as John—again one of the twelve disciples. Undoubtedly for similar reasons, the later Islamic tradition ascribed the establishment of the Qur'an to the immediate successors of their founder, much as the Christians did. One does not need any underlying historical reality at all, then, to understand how the job of fixing the Qur'an came to be assigned to these individuals in the Islamic collective memory. It is also worth underlining that in the case of the Christian gospels, the tradition actually is fully unanimous in ascribing these writings to the figures in question— something that the Islamic tradition did not successfully achieve. And yet despite such unanimity in subsequent Christian tradition, we know better than to trust these attributions simply on this basis, particularly since, thanks to far better evidence for the formation of early Christianity, we can see that the texts were not originally assigned to the authors in question.[67] Therefore, it strikes me as entirely unwarranted to conclude that ʿUthmān compiled the Qur'anic text that has come down to us even if there were some degree of unanimity to this effect starting around seventy years later. The comparative evidence from the Christian tradition should caution strongly against such an assumption, clearly indicating that unanimity in the collective memory of a religious community regarding its formative history offers no guarantee that such a memory is accurate. And since the Islamic tradition is not in fact unanimous on this point, well into the eighth

and ninth centuries and beyond, as we have just seen, such an argument is ultimately vacuous.

Then there is of course the very different collective memory concerning the Qur'an's formation that survives in the early Shi'i tradition, an alternative account that is unfortunately regularly ignored or dismissed in most modern studies of the Qur'an. Although the later Shi'i tradition, and particularly the Twelver tradition, would eventually find it necessary to adjust its memory to be more in line with Sunni traditions concerning the Qur'an, Shi'i writers from the first three centuries of Islam tell a very different story about the Qur'an's early history. Although there were other voices, even from the Sunni tradition, that questioned the nature and authority of the so-called ʿUthmānic text, it was the partisans of Ali especially who were the most vocal in their opposition to this version of the Qur'an and the process that led to its formation. According to a strong consensus in the early Shi'i historical tradition, it was Ali—and not Abū Bakr or ʿUmar or ʿUthmān—who first collected the Qur'an shortly after Muhammad's death, a tradition that, as noted above, also survives in Sunni sources as well. Yet, according to early Shi'i memory, Ali's version of the Qur'an, which was purportedly much longer than the ʿUthmānic version, was twisted and falsified by these first three caliphs, especially because, among other things, it explicitly named Ali as Muhammad's rightful successor. Thus, the ʿUthmānic text revered by the Sunni authorities was not in fact the actual Qur'an but a distorted version of it designed to suit the political and religious aims of the Sunni caliphs during the seventh century. Beginning in the later tenth century, however, scholars in the Twelver Shi'i tradition began to turn away from this older memory and embrace instead the Sunni orthodoxy of an ʿUthmānic text and its authority. It was a move, one must note, that seems to have been made more out of political necessity rather than religious conviction, since by this time "it became extremely dangerous to cast doubt on [the Qur'an's] integrity."[68]

The extent to which these Shi'i reports have been completely marginalized from most historical studies of the Qur'an is, frankly, absurd if not even scandalous. For instance, Nöldeke and Schwally's regnant tome devotes only a few pages to curtly dismissing the "Reproach [*Verläumdung*] of Muslim Sectarians, Particularly the Shīʿites, against ʿUthmān," a topic that shares equal space in the second edition with an equally sharp dismissal of the "Reproach of Christian Scholars of the West."[69] According to Schwally's account in the second edition, these doubts about the integrity of the Qur'an "are not based on scholarly facts of historical criticism but on dogmatic or ethnic prejudices," and as for the Shi'i in particular, they

"suspected everywhere nothing but bias and malice."[70] Therefore, all Shi'i reports concerning the formation of the Qur'an are disdained as "untenable" and "far-fetched" and dismissed with great prejudice: "What an accumulation of impossibilities!" Schwally writes. The Shi'i, according to most scholars, are the ones who are in fact guilty of what they accuse the Sunni caliphs of doing: it is they who have falsified the nature of the Qur'an.[71] Sadly, such partiality and willful ignorance can regularly pass for good scholarship in Qur'anic studies.

It is true, of course, that the Shi'i sources reflect a strong ideological imprint from the distinctive beliefs that define this community, and largely for this reason most scholars have considered it justified to cast off these reports as historically irrelevant. Yet, as Amir-Moezzi rightly observes, this is truly

an astonishing attitude on the part of scientific researchers reputed to be impartial, especially since it has been established, and in no uncertain terms, that from Ignaz Goldziher to Michael Cook and throughout the relevant studies, stretching over more than a century, the Sunni sources themselves might also be deemed historically of dubious credibility, at the very least in their explicit pronouncements, strongly oriented as they are in the quest to establish proofs of Sunni orthodoxy and orthopraxy.[72]

Moreover, the Shi'i traditions about the formation of the Qur'an, by contrast, "offer the advantage of being the voice of a minority that was ultimately defeated, and in this respect they appear to be all the more valuable in that they frequently report details that have been censored or distorted by the victors."[73] Such reasoning closely mirrors similar principles that operate in the study of formative Christianity, where minority or deliberately marginalized traditions are afforded special value for reconstructing the contentious debates over the nature of Christianity, its orthodoxies, and its scriptures during its early history.[74] Such obscured and stifled voices often preserve an invaluable witness to the diversity of the early tradition, revealing traces of primitive convictions that the censorious filters of later orthodoxies have tried to conceal. A comparable approach would be desirable in the study of early Islam as well.

These dissonant Shi'i memories likewise bring into high relief the political and religious power dynamics that were directly at work in the actions of the Sunni imperial authorities to impose a standard version of the Qur'an. This was done in the immediate context of concerted efforts, often extremely violent, to eliminate resistance to the authority of the caliphal state, as directed most frequently at the supporters of Ali and his descendants who were insisting on their right to lead the community. As a result, in the words of Amir-Moezzi,

religious, ascetic, and local Islam had been swiftly defeated or, at the least, had been supplanted by an Islam that was political, opportunistic, and imperial. Hence Umayyad rule had every reason to obscure or distort this past in an effort to justify the present and consolidate it. It accomplished this through violence and

censorship. . . . In an attempt to justify these measures, caliphal power set up a complex system of propaganda, censorship, and historical falsification. First it altered the text of the Qur'an and forged an entire body of traditions falsely ascribed to the Prophet, drawing great scholars, judges, jurists, preachers, and historians into its service—all this within a policy of repression that was as savage as it was methodical, aimed at its opponents at large, but at Alids in particular.[75]

These remarks admittedly bear clear traces of a Shi'i bias, but in large part they seem correct, and offer a welcome antidote to the tacit embrace and authorization of the Sunni position, along with its own clear biases, in most Western scholarship on the Qur'an and the rise of Islam. In any case, these comments accurately reflect the memory of these events in the early Shi'i tradition.

With this in mind, then, we should consider an argument that is often raised in favor of the Qur'an's standardization into its canonical form under ʿUthmān. For instance, Nicolai Sinai, echoing an earlier work by Fred Donner (who no longer advocates the tradition of an ʿUthmānic standardization), asks, "If the final redaction of the Quran had only taken place around 700 or later, rather than under ʿUthmān, should we not expect some echo of this to survive at least in Shii or Khārijī sources, which are not beholden to the mainstream Sunni view of early Islamic history?"[76] Moreover, Sinai argues, the fact that the Shi'i tradition uses the same version of the Qur'an and ascribes its collection to ʿUthmān similarly should validate this tradition. Yet such reasoning, in effect, merely presupposes the outcome that we have, the establishment of an invariable text of the Qur'an, as a result of a neutral, indifferent process. Nevertheless, as we have just seen, that does not, in fact, seem to have been the case. On the contrary, the standardized text seems to have been established by brute force, in a context where the imperial authorities responded violently to political and religious dissent (since the two went hand in hand) and were aggressively persecuting the groups in question. In this regard, Michael Cook helpfully states the obvious: "The fact that for all practical purposes we have only a single recension of the Koran is thus a remarkable testimony to the authority of the early Islamic state."[77] Indeed, as Omar Hamdan notes, these efforts of the state to purge any deviant Qur'ans were particularly aimed at the proto-Shi'i of southern Iraq, and their effect was so decisive and extensive "that one could only wonder in disbelief . . . if any remnant of a differing recension [of the Qur'an] were to come to light."[78] Accordingly, is it any wonder that we should fail to find any evidence of Shi'i dissent within a text, the Qur'an, whose standardization went hand in hand with efforts to marginalize and eradicate the threat of Ali's supporters? The collection was established and enforced by the opponents of Ali and his partisans, and they therefore had firm control over its contents. Undoubtedly, they ensured that it clearly advanced their religious and political agenda, with no trace of dissent. Would we expect anything else? Likewise, the fact that the Twelver Shi'i hierarchy would eventually assent to the traditional Sunni Qur'an and the canonical tradition of its origin is readily

understandable: simply to survive they had to assent to the Sunni view of the Qur'an, and so they did.

CODICES, CONTRADICTIONS, AND CONFUSION

In his carefully argued defense of the tradition that ʿUthmān bears singular responsibility for the Qur'anic text that has come down to us today, Sinai attempts to pose a final clinching argument by shifting the burden of proof to any who would disagree with the veracity of the ʿUthmānic collection. He maintains as a baseline that a dating of the invariable consonantal text "to 650 or earlier ought to be our default view."[79] Unless one can "prove" that changes were introduced to the text beyond this point, then one must accept this traditional Sunni position more or less at face value. "Prove" is of course a very loaded term. Historians are rarely able to prove absolutely that something did or did not happen, particularly for matters of great antiquity or when dealing with the formative history of a particular community, which is often a very active site of shifting memories. Instead, historians seek to identify reconstructions of the past that seem to be more or less probable, using various critical methods of analysis and logical reasoning. Proof of something almost always escapes us. So what we are seeking in this case is not so much definitive proof one way or the other as the ability to determine whether it is more plausible that the final text was established by ʿUthmān and has since remained completely unchanged, or, alternatively, whether the establishment and enforcement of an officially authorized and unvarying text is something that more likely took place later and over a period of some time.

   In order to make his point, Sinai presents the analogue of a black swan. As he argues, "if the only swans we have ever encountered are white ones, it is the proponent of the existence of black swans whom we may legitimately expect to argue his case."[80] As far as swans are concerned, I think his point is valid. In terms of the Qur'an, however, I think things are a bit mixed up here. For Sinai, the black swan represents, it would seem, any doubts that might be voiced regarding the accuracy of ʿUthmān's creation and establishment of the canonical text. Yet the true black swan in this case is in fact the ʿUthmānic Qur'an itself. When Sinai and others insist on the veracity of the Sunni tradition, they are asking us to believe in something that the history of religions repeatedly informs us is an extremely unlikely set of events. Chase Robinson, for instance, gives an apt and well-informed assessment of the inherent historical improbability of the ʿUthmānic tradition:

> The complicated and protracted processes that generated monotheist scriptures in antiquity and late antiquity are generally measured in centuries or at least several decades; the tradition would have us believe that in the case of Islam they were telescoped into about twenty years. Are we really to think that within a single generation God's word moved from individual lines and chapters scribbled on camel

shoulder-blades and rocks to complete, single, fixed and authoritative text on papyrus or vellum? It would be virtually unprecedented. It is furthermore unlikely in the light of what we know of early Arabic: the nature of early Arabic script, which only imperfectly described vowels and consonants, and conventions of memorizing and reading, which often privileged memory over written text, would militate against the very rapid production of the fixed and authoritative text that the tradition describes.[81]

Indeed, as Neuwirth also acknowledges, the canonical Sunni narrative "seems to deviate from what is usual in the history of religions."[82] This traditional narrative of the Qur'an's composition is, therefore, the black swan, at least for the historian of religions. Accordingly, we should expect proponents of the Qur'an's canonization prior to the middle of the seventh century to bear the burden of proof.

Likewise, the history of religions teaches us that, as a general rule, a religious community's memory of its period of origins is usually highly suspect from a historical point of view. It is the norm, rather than the exception, that collective memories of the period of origins and the formation of a sacred text and doctrine have been altered significantly to accord with the beliefs and practices of the later community. Communities tend to remember these events from their past as having occurred in the way that they "should" have happened rather than meticulously seeking to preserve a detailed and accurate memory of what actually happened. This is normal and is in no way consequent to any sort of conspiracy to disguise the community's formative history. But it means that as a rule, we tend to distrust a religious community's memories about the events of its origins. Why, then, in the case of this religious community alone, should we believe that there is in fact a black swan—that is, a fully accurate remembrance of its origins unaffected the concerns of the later community? I think those who would suggest as much need to provide us with better arguments than we have seen so far. For our part, the chapters to follow will provide evidence and argument showing, to the contrary, that such early fixation of the canonical form of the text is comparatively unlikely, for a host of reasons. From what we have seen thus far, however, the complexity of the earliest evidence from the Islamic tradition itself does not appear to warrant such complacent acquiescence to the canonical Sunni narrative. As Viviane Comerro rightly concludes in her comprehensive study of the traditions concerning ʿUthmān, we should not look to these narratives as reporting what "really" happened. Instead, each of these accounts was produced and transmitted in order to advance a particular set of religious and doctrinal interests, rather than simply to report a set of facts from the past.[83]

Yet despite all their diversity and confusion, one thing emerges quite clearly and consistently from the disorder of these traditions about the Qur'an's codification: the process of establishing a new sacred writing had begun already before the caliphal authorities stepped in in order to compel and enforce the standardization of this new sacred text across their demesne. The first versions of the Qur'an

were produced, according to these reports, as the result of multiple, independent initiatives undertaken in the various centers where the Believers had settled into the newly conquered Near East—in Syria, Kufa, and Basra. The earliest efforts to remember and collect Muhammad's words, then, came not from a Medinan caliph, but in the distant locales of Syria and Iraq, regions that were rich with Jewish and Christian believers and traditions. The early versions were disturbingly different from one another, so much so that the imperial authorities saw it as essential to get involved and to eliminate these conflicting memories of Muhammad with a standard version. Such a circumstance, as related in our earliest account from Sayf, seems altogether plausible given the early history of this new religious community, which was a religious minority scattered in pockets across the Near East without a strong central state or religious authority. It is worth mentioning that two of these early rival versions were produced in southern Iraq, where the partisans of Ali were at their strongest: Kufa was, after all, the capital of his brief caliphate. It is certainly possible that these early codices may well have been alternative Shi'i recollections of Muhammad's revelations, something that the later tradition may have been keen to forget. The tantalizing title of the Basra version, *Lubāb al-fuʾād* (Purity of the heart), certainly suggests something along the lines of the esotericism often favored by the Shi'i tradition.

In such conditions, it would perhaps not be surprising if ʿUthmān attempted to take some sort of action. It is understandable that the leader of this new religious polity would have sought to ameliorate the troubling differences that had already arisen in the community by the middle of the seventh century over the content of Muhammad's revelations. Nevertheless, there is at the same time clear indication that for the first fifty years after the death of Muhammad, his followers did not look primarily either to him or his words for authority. As Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds have persuasively demonstrated, the early caliphs were esteemed not merely as successors to Muhammad but instead as deputies of God on earth, with religious authority over the community, including the ability to define its faith and practice.[84] The caliphs themselves determined and dispensed divine law for the Believers, covering the full range of relevant topics.[85] With such a living, inspired representative of God leading the community, there would have been little need to record Muhammad's words for posterity: the word of God's reigning deputy (*khalīfāt Allāh*) held ultimate authority. Often the Umayyad caliphs were regarded as equal to and even superior to Muhammad and the prophet: "salvation was perceived as coming through the caliph," and only through allegiance to his direction could one hope to attain redemption.[86] Only gradually were the scholars of this new religious community, the ʿulamāʾ, able to successfully challenge the spiritual authority of the caliphs, displacing it by investing complete authority instead in the words and teachings of Muhammad, of which they were the custodians.

Presumably, it is in the process of this transition that Muhammad's teachings, the Qur'an, were elevated to holding supreme authority within the community, prompting the need produce and authorize a standard written version of these teachings. This dynamic of a gradual shift from the caliphs' direct authority as deputies of God to recognizing instead the authority of Muhammad's teachings as remembered by the members of the ʿulamāʾ also goes a long way toward explaining the Qur'an's apparent absence from the Believers' faith until the end of the seventh century, as evidenced by both the Islamic tradition itself and the various contemporary reports from writers outside of the community of the Believers.[87] It is also noteworthy in this regard that prior to the enthronement of ʿAbd al-Malik's father, Marwān I (684–85), Muhammad himself receives no mention at all in the documentary evidence from the early Islamic polity: he is not named by any one of the papyri, inscriptions, or coins from this period. We are thus left wondering what his importance was for the Believers during their first half century. Yet the ascension of the Marwānids marks a dramatic change in this regard, and suddenly Muhammad is prominently invoked in public media, as is the Qur'an. Moreover, this shift toward public proclamation of the authority of Muhammad and the Qur'an is most marked during the reign of ʿAbd al-Malik. This clear move to identify Muhammad and his teachings unambiguously as the basis for the faith of the Believers adds further reason for identifying this period as the time when the canonical text of the Qur'an was produced and proclaimed as the authoritative word of God for the community of the Believers.[88]

Yet even if ʿUthmān may have made some attempt to introduce a standard text of the Qur'an, it must have been an entirely futile effort. It is difficult to believe that any such actions would have had much, if any, effect during his reign, let alone succeed in achieving the establishment of the final unvarying version of the Qur'an that has come down to us today. The conditions in which ʿUthmān ruled make for an extremely low probability that he could have successfully established any standard form of the Qur'anic text that he might have had produced, even by employing the full force of the caliphate to do so. As Robinson succinctly points out, ʿUthmān was simply in no position to have credibly accomplished what the tradition has ascribes to him.

> ʿUthmān was deeply unpopular in many quarters; his reign was short and contentious. His successor's was longer, and one can imagine that the task of enforcing an ʿUthmānic version would have fallen in practice to Muʿāwiya. But in a polity that lacked many rudimentary instruments of coercion and made no systematic attempt to project images of its own transcendent authority—no coins, little public building or inscriptions—the very idea of "official" is problematic.[89]

Although there is currently some debate as to whether or not Muʿāwiya may have succeeded in establishing an effective state, there is a broad consensus that

even the most basic elements of a functioning government were not yet in place under ʿUthmān. The tumult and disruption of another civil war would follow Muʿāwiya's reign, yet, in its aftermath, ʿAbd al-Malik would emerge as the leader of a potent and well-organized state that would be fully capable of achieving what the tradition improbably ascribes instead to ʿUthmān. And ʿAbd al-Malik's central involvement in this process is, to return to Sinai's analogy, clearly a white swan: there is near universal agreement from every quarter that ʿAbd al-Malik was instrumental in establishing and enforcing the canonical version of the Qur'an. By comparison, the traditions regarding various earlier collections appear to be much more darkly hued.