# The Qur'anic Codex as Process

*Writing Sacred Tradition in Late Antiquity*

Eventually, of course, the Qur'an left orality behind and became a written text and ultimately a published, standardized, and canonized book. Although it remains true that to this day the Qur'an is regarded by Muslims as a fundamentally oral text, whose written version serves merely to aid its recitation, the transition to writing necessarily brought significant changes to the Qur'anic text and traditions in the process. Yet this change in medium profoundly affected not only how the memory of Muhammad's teachings would be transmitted going forward; it also introduced substantial changes in how Muhammad's followers encountered and interpreted this emerging compendium of sacred traditions. Among other things, the move to writing obviously brings a new level of stability to a textual tradition, at least in comparison with the regular vacillations inherent in relying on memory and oral transmission alone. The effect of a transition to writing generally serves to narrow the scope of the existing oral tradition and to ensure the longevity of a particular version of this living tradition in a way that orality alone simply could not.

Nevertheless, the move to writing did not mean that orality simply disappeared as a medium in which the faithful experienced the Qur'an. The vast majority of Muhammad's early followers were almost certainly illiterate, as were the masses in the territories that they had come to occupy. Thus, even the early Believers could not, by and large, read the Qur'an for themselves but remained dependent on hearing its traditions orally, whether from someone who could read from a written version or among themselves according to their own memories of what they had previously heard. Moreover, despite its capacity for improved control and stability, the shift to writing alone does not bring an end to changes in the text. On the contrary, studies of ancient book culture, as well as the formation and transmission of the biblical traditions, make clear that significant changes to a text, including additions and subtractions, continue to be made even after a tradition enters the

written state. Indeed, only concerted institutional surveillance and control can limit the alteration of a written text in ways both major and minor as it continues to be used, interpreted, and transmitted in a variety of different contexts. Not coincidentally, then, such policing of the canonical text is exactly what we find in the early Islamic tradition, and only thanks to determined enforcement by the imperial authorities was the Qur'anic text eventually stabilized into the ne varietur form that comes down to us today. Again, as Michael Cook rightly observes, "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."[1] Without direct and sustained intervention by the state in this instance, this degree of uniformity simply does not seem possible, based on what we find in other comparable circumstances.

In the last forty years, scholarship on the New Testament and early Judaism has grown increasingly attentive to understanding the significance of orality for understanding the formation of the biblical tradition. We may consider ourselves fortunate, then, that these numerous studies provide excellent models for investigating the fundamental role that orality played in the very similar formation of the Qur'anic traditions and text as they came to be written down. Still more recently, a number of scholars have brought important attention to understanding the process of how a text gradually transitions into writing over time, alerting us to the fact that the final, standard version of such a document is generally not a result of the first attempt(s) to commit it to writing. So it must have been also in the case of the Qur'an. Likewise, the simple act of writing a text down does not bring an end to changes in its content, often substantial in nature. Accordingly, scholars in biblical studies have recently underscored the necessity of understanding ancient writings not as fixed, published, authored texts, in the manner that we have become accustomed to think of books in our post-Gutenberg culture. Rather, ancient writings, including even, if not especially, sacred writings, cannot be understood as stable, finalized documents; instead we must recognize that these texts very much remained open in their contents prior to their official publication and canonization, as a number of scholars have now demonstrated. An ancient text, therefore, should not be misunderstood as the static monument of an author's work; rather, it must be approached as itself an ongoing process of composition over many years and in various settings.

It seems quite obvious that we should consider the formation of the canonical Qur'anic text in light of these same dynamics, so that even after the move to writing the Qur'an remained a text in process.[2] Admittedly, the formation of the Qur'an is not in every way identical to the production of the New Testament gospels or the emergence of a biblical canon in late ancient Judaism. Nevertheless, the similarities, particularly in the case of the former, as we have already noted, are significant and sufficient to warrant the application of methods and perspectives from the study of the gospels to an understanding of the early history of the

Qur'an. Moreover, if we wish to introduce more critical and comparative methods to the study of the Qur'an in order to integrate it and place it on par with the study of other scriptural traditions—which seems to be a major desideratum of the field, then we absolutely must allow the application of such methods to its study.

The text that eventually resulted from these efforts to collect various memories of Muhammad's teachings and commit them to writing would ultimately become revered by his followers as a distinctive new scripture for their religious community. Of course, if we leave it simply at that, then we have failed to understand the Qur'an as a literary product of the broader cultural and religious context that produced it. Here we must be careful, as David Brakke warns, as religious historians not to approach the process of the Qur'an's emergence as a canonical scripture by continuing "to tell a story with a single plot line, leading to the seemingly inevitable τέλος of the closed canon" of Islamic scripture that the Qur'an would eventually become.[3] In similar fashion, Jan Assmann explains that in contrast to textual criticism, which seeks to move from the latest form to reconstruct a text's "primeval" form, "the critique of canon works in the opposite direction: it uncovers the forces that motivate the development, growth, coming together, and sanctification of the texts" before they were edited into their final authorized form. Once the text reaches this final state, Assmann observes, "the historical development of the text is forgotten"; or in the words of Wansbrough, "By the very achievement of canonicity the document of revelation was assured a kind of independence, both of historical traditions commonly adduced to explain its existence and of external criteria recruited to facilitate its understanding," the latter referring, it would seem, to the traditions of the late ancient religious cultures from which the Qur'an emerged.[4] Thus, it falls to the religious historian to recover as much of this process as possible. What, then, should we make of the "Qur'an" in this intermediate state, as it was beginning to be written down and in the process of becoming an Islamic scripture? Indeed, only by stepping back from understanding the Qur'an according to this predetermined historical outcome can we see this text, its traditions, and its formation in a very different perspective.

## FROM ORAL TRADITION TO WRITTEN TEXT

The move from orality to writing was for the Qur'an, as it is for any other oral text, transformative, and this process seemingly came to a close only as a key part of ʿAbd al-Malik's larger program of cultural and religious self-definition. One must be careful, of course, not to overemphasize the divide between the oral and the written, particularly in pre-Gutenberg cultures. Nevertheless, at the same time, as Walter Ong has painstakingly articulated, the move from orality to writing brings with it enormous changes both for the group making the change and for the cultural traditions committed to this new format.[5] For one thing, from this point onward, the text of the Qur'an began to become much more stable and

difficult to alter. Since ʿAbd al-Malik's establishment of a canonical written version of the Qur'an at the turn of the eighth century, the Qur'an's consonantal skeleton has shown extraordinary constancy over time. To be sure, the vocalization of the Qur'an was still in dispute for centuries after its canonization, but the fixation of its consonantal structure brought to an end the tremendous fluidity that memories of Muhammad's revelations must have experienced during their oral transmission in the early community.

The most sustained consideration of how a sacred tradition passes from orality to canonical scripture over a period of decades after the death of its founder remains Werner Kelber's *The Oral and the Written Gospel*. As one might expect, Kelber's book offers much comparative insight for understanding the impact of this same transformation on the traditions of Muhammad's teachings. As Kelber notes, following the insights of anthropological study as we saw in the previous chapter, so long as a tradition remains primarily oral, informants will adapt traditions significantly to suit the audience and the circumstances of their delivery. Such fluidity and alteration will persist, he notes, even if some limited written notes and textual aids have begun to appear.[6] Moreover, the survival of oral traditions, as we have already observed, depends entirely on their social relevance and acceptability. Kelber therefore reminds us that "Not all the words of Jesus will have met with understanding, let alone full enthusiasm. There must have been a multitude of words, sayings, and stories that never appeared in the gospels."[7] This is because the oral tradition "will control the data to be selected, the values to be preserved, and therefore the kind of Jesus to be transmitted. Lest he be forgotten, he must comply with oral requirements."[8] Yet it is also possible that on occasion "the group retained words precisely because they were alien or even offensive to its experience."[9] The same, no doubt, is true of Muhammad and the Qur'an (as well as Muhammad's traditional biographies for that matter). Like Jesus, then, Muhammad "risked his message on the oral medium. . . . The thesis that he taught with a concern for posthumous *literary* longevity is very unlikely and smacks of modern projection"—all the more so given that Muhammad and his followers were from a nonliterate culture, were highly skeptical of writing, and clearly seem to have expected the end of the world in the immediate future.[10]

By committing these traditions to writing, however, their form and their content were no longer subject to the whims of individual performers and audiences. The particular words on the page now "acquire a new authority, pathos even, unobtainable in oral life. . . . Whatever their interpretation, they are guaranteed longevity if not perpetuity. Oral fragility has been overcome by the 'secret of making the word immortal.'"[11] Indeed, for comparison one should note Goody's observation that once he published a written version of the Bagre, members of the LoDagaa began to look to this written text as authoritative and to ascribe to it a "truth value that no single oral tradition possesses."[12] The textual closure of the Qur'an through writing it down thus eventually brought to an end the early diversity with which

Muhammad's revelations would have been remembered and expressed in the oral tradition. By displacing the complexity and fluidity of the primitive oral tradition in favor of a single, canonical form, the codification and standardization of the Qur'an serve, in effect, to obscure our knowledge of Muhammad's teaching and its memories in the early community even more severely. The purpose of producing a standard written version is, as Kelber notes, to "implode" the heterogeneity of the oral tradition. Committing the text to a standard, authorized version in writing is meant to control and limit the diversity of the preexisting tradition, in its constantly varying oral forms as well as in any rival written forms. The aim of canonization is thus "ultimately not the preservation of the remembrances per se but the preservation of the group, its social identity and self-image"—that is to say, it serves to establish and shore up the group's collective memory.[13]

It is surely no accident that the move to a standard written version of the Qur'an coincides with the emergence of the community's collective memory around the same time. Writing the text down leads to canonizing its authority within—and over—the community. As Assmann writes, "The canon, then, is the principle underlying the establishment and stabilization of a collective identity."[14] Canonization is a process that also relies on the actions of a more or less centralized authority that is sufficiently powerful and recognized in the community to officially elevate a text—which may already be viewed as sacred by members of group—as normative and authoritative. Ordinarily, for a text to achieve this status, it must be written down so that it can serve as an objective authority for the entire community to consult in (again, more or less) the same version.[15] The establishment of a written text also effects "a subversion of the *homeostatic balance*" that previously enabled continuous adaptation of the oral traditions to meet the immediate needs of the audience and the larger group. The written form is removed from the give-and-take of the oral exchange, and likewise, as a linguistic artifact, it moves beyond the control of the informant(s) who first committed it to writing, leaving it "open to an infinite range of readers and interpretations."[16]

Assmann comments at some length on the results of transforming an oral "sacred" text into a canonical written version in terms that are extremely helpful for understanding the early history of the Qur'an. As he explains,

> A sacred text is a kind of speech-temple, a presentification of the holy through the medium of the voice. It does not require any interpretation, but simply a ritually guaranteed recitation that scrupulously observes all of the prescriptions relating to time, place, and accuracy. A canonical text, however, embodies the normative and formative values of a community. It is the absolute truth. These texts must be taken to heart, obeyed, and translated into real life. That is why they need interpretation rather than recitation. They appeal to the heart, not to the mouth or ear. But such texts do not speak directly to the heart. The route from the listening ear and the reading eye to the understanding heart is as long as that from the graphic or phonetic surface to the formative, normative meaning. And so the canonical text requires

the presence of a third party—the interpreter—to mediate between the text and the reader/listener, and to clarify the meaning hidden within the words. That meaning can only emerge through the threeway relationship between text, interpreter, and listener.[17]

Therefore, as Guillaume Dye also notes, when a text becomes canonical, not only does its status change, but the way in which it is read also changes dramatically: in the transition, a canonized text becomes at the same time both more than and less than it was in its precanonical state.[18]

Nevertheless, committing a sacred text to writing does not fully close off or even eclipse its enduring oral vitality within the community. With widespread illiteracy for many centuries after the Qur'an's canonization, the overwhelming majority of the faithful would have continued to experience the Qur'an primarily as an oral text. Much of the Qur'an's interpretation, necessitated now by its commitment to writing, would also remain predominantly oral for most individuals. The written and the oral are able to interpenetrate one another, even after the establishment of a canonical scripture and in a context where writing is privileged. Indeed, in the Christian tradition, for much of the second century, at which point the four canonical gospels had been written down, early Christian writers only rarely cited from these "scriptures" in their literal, written form. Instead, the tendency seems to have been to continue to use relatively free transmissions, maintaining the vibrancy of oral tradition even after the establishment of written texts.[19] One suspects that something similar was at work in the Islamic tradition in the century or so after ʿAbd al-Malik established the authoritative, canonical version of the Qur'an. Presumably, this is how we should understand the "thousands of textual variants" in the text of the Qur'an encountered in classical Islamic literature and on early coinage.[20] As in the early Christian tradition, these variants are undoubtedly a sign that oral traditions and transmissions of the Qur'an's content persisted for some time even after the establishment of an invariable consonantal skeleton for the text, continuing to introduce textual variants even in the face of a written version.

As transformative as the shift to writing may have been for the Qur'an and its traditions, recent scholarship on the Christian gospels and early Judaism warns us against oversimplifying this process and exaggerating its impact. The comparative models that emerge from this scholarship alert us that the move from orality to writing almost certainly was neither sudden nor singular. Instead, we should expect that over time various collections of Muhammad's teachings began to be written down independently in different places. In this regard, one must always bear in mind just how dispersed and separated Muhammad's followers were across the expanse of their vast new empire. It bears repeating that Muhammad's followers constituted a small minority—albeit a ruling minority—among the far greater numbers of Jews, Christians, and others in the Near Eastern lands they had so swiftly subdued. These Believers were scattered in various small pockets as they

had begun to settle in across the expanse of the emerging caliphate. Accordingly, as Muhammad's early followers sought to remember and transmit his teachings, they did so separately and in different locations. Moreover, we must also keep in mind that the number of Muhammad's followers who actually heard his teachings in Mecca and Medina must have been very few at this stage.

One imagines, given these conditions, that Muhammad's followers would have recalled his teachings with significant regional and local variation. Jonathan Brockopp captures this fragmentation well when he reminds us that in this early period "Muhammad's followers would consist of concentric circles of individuals, from a few close insiders to a large group of hangers-on, with many people in between," and that "devotion of these small groups to the now dead founder would be oral, ephemeral, and emotional," not to say, one would expect, highly varied and variable. And so, "Islam(s) are far more likely to have originated out of competing interpretations of the salient historical events, arising from several centers of political and intellectual activity. Further, in most cases these expressions of authority gained their force as much from new applications of local usages as they do from anything specifically Islamic."[21] We must therefore recognize, as Brockopp puts it in the context of describing the Qur'an's formation, "that small communities of believers formed soon after Muhammad's death, spreading throughout the territories of the former Byzantine and Persian Empires, husbanding collections of Prophetic words (logia). These were cobbled together . . . after Muhammad's death into what we now know as the Qur'an."[22] Although it is certainly not entirely impossible that there may have been some limited exchange and interaction among these centers as the Believers began to write down some of their memories, given the conditions in which Muhammad's followers produced these early collections, we should expect that there must have been some significant variety among them.

We also must recognize again that the transition to writing does not preclude continued change within the tradition; nor does the use of this new medium erase the primacy of orality and its continued influence on the written. Even after the Qur'an was fully written, standardized, and canonized, the number of individuals who could read the Qur'an and had access to a written copy would have been extremely few. Everyone else would have been completely dependent on hearing the text read aloud and would have continued to share it among themselves, one imagines, orally from memory. Most of this will be fairly obvious, I think, to most readers. Much less obvious, I suspect, is the degree to which many, if not most, written texts in antiquity remained relatively open—open to various kinds of alteration, including addition and subtraction, not only but especially during the early stages of their transcription.

## FROM MEMORANDA TO REGIONAL CODICES

Recent studies of book culture, both ancient and modern, inform us that we must understand the production of books as an ongoing process, one that involves

frequent changes in the text.[23] Often this process comes to an end at some point, with the authorization, publication, and replication of a final standard version, whose stability and ubiquity are enabled only by the actions of certain influential institutions and authorities. Yet in the case of some written texts, such closure never arrives. One of the most salient examples of such open literature are the various biblical apocrypha of the Jewish and Christian traditions. Indeed, we continue to find innumerable examples of such open sacred writings well into the Middle Ages. These apocryphal writings represent a kind "living" biblical literature, whose contents remained open to ongoing modifications and additions by the communities that used them.[24] And the Qur'an itself, in the early decades of its existence, seems to have been something very much like such a biblical apocryphon, as I have previously explained elsewhere. Ultimately, the main difference between this particular late ancient Arabic apocryphon and so many other such compositions is that, like the Book of Mormon, for example, a religious group eventually elevated it to a new scriptural authority.[25]

Yet with regard to the formation of scriptural traditions in the late ancient Near East, we are particularly well served by a trio of recent monographs adopting the approach of open textuality and texts as processes in seeking to understand how the Jews and Christians at the beginning of this era produced their sacred writings. The patterns that emerge from these studies, by Eva Mroczek, Matt Larsen, and Chris Keith, seem to offer the best and most applicable models for understanding how Muhammad's teachings moved along a similar path from sacred protoplasm to canonical scripture. Mroczek's work engages the literature of Second Temple Period Judaism, and, as such, it addresses a very different context from ours, one in which there is a surplus of sacred writing rather than the sprouting of a scriptural germ. Nevertheless, Mroczek's monograph on *The Literary Imagination in Jewish Antiquity* deserves much credit for helping to inspire this processual turn in the study of early religious writings. Mroczek draws our attention in particular to the numerous conceptual obstacles that modern scholars face when they try to understand the very different conditions in which texts were produced, circulated, and utilized in the late ancient Near East. As she notes, modern categories of text, authorship, and publication persistently stand in the way. All these things had different meanings and functions in antiquity, so that we should not expect to find closed, stable texts with unique authorship that have been uniformly distributed in this format to a broad audience. Instead, texts generally remained open and changeable, with complex and often anonymous authorship and variation in presence and presentation according to location. These variables were resolved and removed not at the moment of production, but only, again, through a diachronic process of standardization, canonization, and promulgation by some effective authority, an authority that ultimately serves in essence as the text's author. Accordingly, we must, Mroczek explains, develop a model "for describing the textual production of ancient scribes as 'projects'—open-ended and multigenerational—rather than 'books.'"[26]

More immediately relevant for our task of understanding the formation of the written Qur'an are the recent studies by Keith and Larsen, the latter in particular, on the formation of the written gospel traditions during the early decades of the Jesus movement.[27] Both these scholars brilliantly build on the work of Mroczek and others to develop a paradigm for understanding the complex process of a sacred tradition's transition from orality to an open written tradition to a—more or less—fixed version of scripture. "Rather than viewing texts as static," as Keith explains, "scholars should view texts as free-flowing, open tradition processes," in which there is no "original text"; rather, following Brennan Breed, the earliest versions of a sacred text must be conceived as "nomads," with no clear origin or endpoint.[28] Echoing Brakke, Keith likewise cautions that "the ingrained assumption that what did happen was what inevitably had to happen, can lead us to underappreciate developments in that sequence that were far from pedestrian."[29] Larsen and Keith both expand and refine the attention to orality introduced to New Testament studies by Kelber, correcting and adding needed subtlety to some of the broad strokes with which his work introduced the importance of the oral/written divide in the history of the gospels. Among their most important contributions is to diminish the notion of an abrupt and qualitative distinction between written and oral traditions: Kelber, as Keith notes, "consistently referred to the differences between 'fluid' oral tradition and 'fixed' written tradition, offering negative qualitative assessments of the media transition," which, in relation to the original oral tradition, Kelber considered "disruptive," "disjunctive," "destructive," and a "disorientation."[30]

Keith and Larsen instead propose a more gradual continuum between the two in which writing does not simply displace the oral, which remains highly active and influential in tandem with this new medium. Likewise, they discover that the introduction of writing does not completely eliminate the instabilities and variations that pervade oral tradition, even as it contributes significantly greater stability and uniformity in comparison with orality. "The written texts were simultaneously aural texts," as Ruben Zimmerman observes, "that did not finalize memory culture so much as set it in motion."[31] The function of writing such traditions down is not to bring orality to an end but rather to extend its memory capacity.[32] Accordingly, these written reminders of the oral tradition remained subject to revision and adaptation into new written versions of the same traditions, a process that effectively explains both the similarities and differences of the early gospel traditions, as well as their reception and use by later Christian readers and scribes. Mark's first written gospel, therefore, "enabled an open-ended reception history for the Jesus tradition when he shifted it into the written medium," such that we find in early Christian studies a "growing recognition that manuscript tradition often functioned similarly to oral tradition."[33] Even some New Testament text critics, whose discipline has shown conservative and positivist tendencies in the past, have moved to embrace an understanding that the search for an original

version is pointless, and that the textual tradition must be understood as a "living text."[34]

Larsen advances Mroczek's observations on the problematic nature of authorship and publication as well as the open and processual nature of ancient texts to apply them more specifically to circumstances in which a particular scriptural tradition, that of the gospels, was first taking written form out of an earlier oral tradition: precisely the conditions that we face in seeking to understand the origins of the Qur'an. Larsen's model of the early gospel traditions, which has influenced Keith significantly, views the first written texts, including the Gospel of Mark specifically, effectively as drafts, open texts that were not regarded as closed by their producers or users. Larsen carefully and convincingly mines late classical, early Jewish, and early Christian literature to bring before us the particular genre of *hypomnēmata*, or *hypomnēma* in the singular, a type of writing that proves to be extremely helpful for understanding the process of moving an oral tradition to written form. Literally, *hypomnēma* means "reminder," or perhaps better, "memorandum," terms that give a fairly apt sense of what this written genre was.

*Hypomnēmata* were notes written to serve as memory aids, and very often specifically to help individuals remember things that had been heard orally in order to aid with their reproduction on a later occasion.[35] These memoranda recorded things that had been heard, so that the hearer could better remember them later on for his or her own benefit or to share them orally with someone else. They served as "physical extensions" of memory, assisting the survival of the living voice of oral tradition after the speaker was finished and no longer present.[36] We also find some instances where the term is used to describe notes or drafts for a work in progress, compiled by someone with the intent of seeing the notes turned into a more formal literary document at some later point, perhaps even by another person. Thus, we have here a common kind of writing that is used primarily to write things down that were learned orally, in order that they might be more faithfully recalled at some later point. Likewise, this type of reminder document was understood as being by definition an open text, whose composition remained ongoing process, so that its contents could be adjusted—things changed, added, deleted—as additional memories were inventoried or older ones corrected in light of more recent developments.

There was, then, in late antiquity a familiar type of writing ready at hand to serve the process of gradually committing an oral tradition to written form. Initially these writings were subordinate to the oral tradition itself, and they served primarily as memory aids for what had been heard and would later be taught. "*Hypomnēmata* were textual objects with a specific purpose. At their root, they are about remembering the already known, not informing about the not yet known. They seek to capture the already said, to collect what has already been heard."[37] They were flexible, and it was expected that their content would change over time as the written record was steadily improved. The format was ideal for

beginning to transfer memory of the oral Jesus tradition to the first written records, not with the intent of displacing oral tradition, but in order to better preserve it. And so, as Larsen explains, the Gospel of Mark was written down in a context "when the gospel is still primarily a speech genre" and is "still oral, still pliable, still open."[38]

This established format of making written memoranda was equally ideal for progressively writing down the oral traditions that Muhammad's followers had accumulated on the basis of their memories of his teachings and other sacred traditions that they had acquired in the interim. Eventually, in the case of both earliest Christianity and Islam, as memories of oral tradition grew ever frailer and dimmer, these memoranda emerged ascendant, as the most reliable source for knowledge of these older traditions. Orality did not suddenly cease to be an important and in many cases primary medium, but over time the gravity slowly began to shift toward the written word. In the Christian tradition, the now-canonical gospels would develop out of these early memoranda, while in the Islamic tradition, one imagines that various early written memoranda grew into the regional collections known in the tradition as the "companion codices." Moreover, it is typical of such memoranda that as they develop, "the movement is from rough, unordered, unfinished literary raw material toward a more finished and polished text, and an important part of that movement is adding order to the rough draft," a quality that maintains consistency with our understanding that the Qur'an's literary qualities were introduced only at later stages in its history.[39] ʿAbd al-Malik and al- Ḥajjāj presumably had such *hypomnēmata* of the early oral tradition at their disposal when they initiated their project to produce a new standard written version of the Qur'an, which they then imposed as the canonical sacred text for all of Muhammad's followers by imperial authority.

This model is extremely useful, and it helps us to understand a number of things about the Qur'an and its formation. In the most basic sense, we find here a culturally and contextually relevant format and process for the writing down of oral tradition, the inherent flexibility of these early memoranda, and likewise their use in producing more formal and finished types of writing over time. Having established that the earliest written records of the early Jesus tradition seem to fall within this tradition of producing *hypomnēmata*, Larsen then proceeds to consider how the mutability of such writings and their revision to produce new more polished texts can illuminate the Synoptic Problem—that is, the clear evidence of literary dependences among the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Larsen's deft analysis of these textual relations on the basis of this model provides a well-grounded and extremely useful example for investigating the somewhat similar "synoptic problem" in the Qur'an: namely, how we can account for and understand the numerous instances where the Qur'an repeats, often on multiple occasions, the same tradition in different form, sometimes with only minor differences, but often with significant contradictory elements.[40]

Larsen follows the most accepted position in study of the Synoptic Problem in identifying the Gospel of Mark as the first written collection made from the oral Jesus tradition. Yet, as he understands this gospel, it was not produced as a book to be circulated and read but was instead something much more "like a teacher's script for teaching or preaching the good news, with a set of notes for each unit of teaching."[41] Larsen then seeks to understand the Gospel of Matthew's revision of this earlier text in light of the phenomenon of the production and use of *hypomnēmata*. "What does it mean," he asks, "to talk about the 'Synoptic Problem' without recourse to ideas like books, authors, and textual finality?" First, he rightly notes that we should recognize that "a first- or second-century reader of the texts we now call the Gospel according to Matthew and the Gospel according to Mark would not have thought of them as two separate books by two different authors. Rather, they would have regarded them as the same open-ended, unfinished, and living work: the gospel—textualized."[42] Ancient readers would not have recognized one as the "original" version and the other as something more "final": the very notion of identifying an "original" version is a "chimera," and the "initial text may not be a text at all, but a moving, growing constellation of textual traditions."[43]

In this sense, then, the Gospel of Matthew's revisions and additions to the Gospel of Mark do not amount to a new text but are instead best understood as "an act of macrolevel revision of an open textual tradition."[44] The Gospel of Matthew includes something on the order of 90 percent of the Gospel of Mark, which itself accounts for about 60 percent of the former's content. It is well known that the Gospel of Matthew appears to correct and improve many of the rough edges in the Gospel of Mark, introducing more narrative and structure to the more "draft-like" nature of its source. It also adds a number of new traditions, including the appearances of the risen Lord, which were absent from earlier versions of the Gospel of Mark, although various endings of this sort were eventually supplied for Mark by the later tradition. In general, the Gospel of Matthew "aims to narrow ambiguities in the Gospel according to Mark . . . , supplying essential yet previously unspecified information," a phenomenon that also belongs to the process of revising and adapting *hypomnēmata*.[45] The Gospel of Matthew thus simply continues "the same unfinished textual tradition of 'the gospel' more broadly understood, adding stories to a textual tradition that help that tradition conform better to ancient readers' expectations about what should be in a story about an individual."[46] Accordingly, "when considered in a first- or second-century context, the textual difference and overlap between the two textual constellations fit comfortably within the framework of finishing, continuing, or otherwise altering the same unfinished and still fluid textual tradition."[47]

The early efforts by Muhammad's followers to record their memories of his teachings in writing similarly seem to fit the category that most inhabitants of the late ancient Near East would have recognized as *hypomnēmata*. They were memoranda from a primarily oral tradition, inscribed as a memory aid on palm

branches, stones, camel bones, that were made by individuals who were attempting to preserve their recollections of sacred tradition against the limitations and ravages of increasingly failing memory. Based on what appears to be some of the most reliable information from the Islamic tradition's memory of the Qur'an's formation, then, we can assume that such written reminders of the oral tradition were produced separately in Medina as well as in the main centers where the Believers had settled in the occupied territories. These independent early collections, as we have suggested, would eventually yield the competing textual traditions that the later tradition would name the "companion codices," and it is primarily in the context of this process of compiling memoranda of the sacred tradition that we can find explanations for the parallel traditions of the Qur'an's "synoptic problem." Therefore, by joining some of the most probable data from early Islamic memories about the Qur'an's origins with this well-documented late ancient practice of gradually committing oral tradition to writing through continued revision, we identify a productive approach, grounded in the relevant sources, for investigating the early history of the Qur'an's formation as a written document. It is a method that many specialists in Qur'anic studies may initially see as an unwelcome "foreign" import, but it is grounded in both late ancient literary culture and evidence from the early Islamic tradition. And of course, if we wish to better integrate study of the Qur'an with biblical and religious studies, this transition will, of methodological necessity, demand the development and deployment of models capable of studying many different kinds of material, including the basic toolkit of historical criticism and the range of methods and theories available for the historical study of religion.

## ORALITY, MEMORANDA, AND THE QUR'AN'S "SYNOPTIC PROBLEM"

One possible explanation for the recurrence of many closely parallel traditions in the Qur'an is that these were a product of the diversity of oral transmission, in which their minor differences arose through the constant retelling and recomposition of these traditions. Such is the view, for instance, favored by John Wansbrough. According to Wansbrough, these divergent parallels should be understood, in conjunction with ideological differences within the early community, as "independent, possibly regional, traditions" that arose as a result of the Believers' abrupt expansion across western Asia and North Africa, which left the community of the Believers scattered across a vast expanse. The similarities and differences of these passages, he concludes, suggest "not the carefully executed project of one or of many men, but rather the product of an organic development from originally independent traditions during a long period of transmission."[48]

Another explanation, favored particularly by Neuwirth and others of her coterie, finds the solution in a manner similar to the Islamic tradition, while also

maintaining the integrity of the Qur'an as a writing produced by Muhammad himself, together with the members of the earliest community. According to this view, the differences in these traditions reflect the shifting concerns of the emergent community and were introduced to meet changing circumstances during the lifetime of Muhammad. Nevertheless, when properly understood from this perspective, one finds that they harmoniously advance the same basic message that Muhammad taught his followers across the traditions of the Qur'an. Accordingly, this approach adopts a number of the same strategies already deployed by the Islamic tradition: it seeks to account for these variants within the Qur'anic text by harmonizing their differences and explaining them according to specific contexts that Muhammad and his followers encountered.[49] It is a bit like a modern version of the traditional *asbāb al-nuzūl*, the "occasions of revelation" identified in the later Islamic tradition. Thus, this approach does not in effect depart greatly from the solutions afforded by the Islamic tradition, which it also mirrors in insisting that the entire Qur'an, including all these variants, must find its origin within the span of Muhammad's lifetime.

A third alternative understands these variants as the result of written revisions that were undertaken by Muhammad's followers after his death. Karl-Friedrich Pohlmann has made the most systematic use of this approach in his *Die Entstehung des Korans*, which convincingly argues that some of the variants evident among these passages seem to demand revisions to an already existing written text.[50] More recently, this approach has been extended by Dye in several recent studies, which make similar arguments for a written medium in the case of various other Qur'anic parallels. Dye also develops some earlier observations by Frank van der Velden regarding the apparent efforts reflected in certain Qur'anic passages to find theological convergence with contemporary Christians.[51] These revisions similarly could seem to imply changes made to an already written text.

Nevertheless, we should also note that many of the traditions considered by Dye and Pohlmann are Christian traditions; and, given the complete lack of any evidence for a Christian presence in the central Hijaz, we are left to conclude that these traditions almost certainly were adopted by Muhammad's followers after they began their occupation of the Roman and Sasanian Near East. The same can also be said more or less about the parallel traditions concerning Noah, Moses, and Iblis/Satan, since, as Joseph Witztum and others have convincingly argued, even traditions concerning figures and events from the Hebrew Bible seem to have reached the Qur'an through Christian, rather than Jewish, sources.[52] Accordingly, given the content of these synoptic elements of the Qur'an, we should expect that they belong in all their variations to a later stage in the Qur'an's history, after Muhammad's followers encountered and engaged with the Christian communities of Syro-Palestine and Mesopotamia and their cultural heritage.

In light of all these factors, the best approach for investigating these Qur'anic parallels would seem to be a combination of the first and the final options.

TABLE 5. Side by Side Comparison of Parallels in in Qur'an 55.46–76

| | |
|---|---|
| (55:46) But such as fears the Station of his Lord, for them shall be two gardens | (55:62) And besides these shall be two gardens |
| (55:48) abounding in branches | (55:64) green, green pastures |
| (55:50) therein two fountains of running water | (55:66) therein two fountains of gushing water |
| (55:52) therein of every fruit two kinds | (55:68) therein fruits, and palm-trees, and pomegranates |
| (55:54) reclining upon couches lined with brocade, the fruits of the gardens nigh to gather | (55:70) therein maidens good and comely |
| (55:56) therein maidens restraining their glances, untouched before them by any man or jinn | (55:72) houris, cloistered in cool pavilions |
| (55:58) lovely as rubies, beautiful as coral | (55:74) untouched before them by any man or jinn |
| (55:60) Shall the recompense of goodness be other than goodness? | (55:76) reclining upon green cushions and lovely druggets. |

Witztum, in his thoughtful article on the problems and opportunities posed by these inner-Qur'anic variants, himself recommends that some combination of the available approaches seems to offer the best avenue forward, and in this we would agree. Witztum himself draws on elements of what he names "contextual and diachronic readings," but in reality these appear to be two sides of the same coin, mirroring the Berlin school's attention to context and diachrony within Muhammad's lifetime.[53] Yet, if we take the model for understanding the New Testament's Synoptic Problem developed by Larsen, and apply it to the Qur'anic synoptic problem, we find ourselves well positioned to account for and understand these variant passages both in terms of oral tradition and written revisions. Some of these variants, particularly in their earliest forms, may well have entered the written tradition independently after having formed already during oral transmission in different locations. Accordingly, some of these competing variants may have been present already in the earliest written reminders of the sacred tradition, reflecting the diversity of the oral tradition that these collections were produced to bolster.

A prime example of a variant produced in the oral tradition occurs in Qur'an 55:46–76, where two versions of the same tradition are juxtaposed one after the other. We give them side by side for easier comparison (see table 5 above).[54] I see little reason to doubt, as Wansbrough similarly concludes, that these are two variants of the same tradition whose differences are the result of recurrent oral reproduction.[55] A written model is neither necessary nor all that helpful in seeking to understand the relations and differences between these two versions. Clearly, we have here alternate versions of a single tradition that were produced in the process of oral tradition and then were recorded in writing independently—originally in separate collections one imagines, before being joined together one after the

other, following very conservative editorial principles. One assumes, moreover, that these early collections would continue to be expanded and altered in light of the enduring oral tradition, as well as the changing experiences of the community and its expanding knowledge of the traditions of Abrahamic monotheism. Additional variants may have continued to develop alongside the written text in the oral tradition, possibly entering and/or influencing the written tradition as it was still developing.

Presumably, these written reminders of the sacred tradition did not remain completely siloed within the contexts that initially produced them. Undoubtedly, some of these early collections were merged together to form larger documents, particularly as writing was increasingly seen as the more reliable reservoir of memories and began to assert is prominence against the oral tradition. New editions of these regional collections were made, in the same manner that the Gospel of Matthew's memorandum of the oral Jesus tradition adopted and adapted the earlier memorandum that now goes under the name of the Gospel of Mark. Such growth and development of the Believers' written sacred tradition in a manner analogous to the formation of the early Christian gospels is only to be expected in the parallel formation of the Qur'anic text. Just as Matthew rewrote certain traditions from Mark even as Mark's original version remained a part of the sacred tradition, we should expect similar developments within the Qur'anic text. Indeed, many of the Qur'an's variant traditions do seem to be best explained according to a process of revision to a written text, as Pohlmann and Dye have proposed. One should note, however, that not all their arguments to this effect are equally persuasive. In some cases, the patterns of word-for-word agreement between the passages in question are substantial and seem to require a written context. Nevertheless, in other instances, only a few stock phrases are shared, and while these may have been drawn from some common written fragment, a written medium does not seem necessary to clarify the relations between the two versions, many of which are better explained as deriving from an oral context.[56] From these early collections, again, would eventually emerge the regional codices recalled by the early Islamic tradition, which themselves likely already contained some parallel versions of the same tradition, produced in the process of gradually committing the oral tradition to writing and continuing to revise and expand these written collections.

We may take as an example illustrating the need to combine both oral and written approaches the various Qur'anic traditions concerning the pre-Islamic prophet Shuʿayb. As one can see through a comparison of the parallel traditions in the following table, some of the differences are most readily understandable as reflecting the process of oral tradition while others seems to require a written model.[57] The two reports in the first column, cited one after the other from Qur'an 26:176–90 and 29:36–37, have every appearance of variants written down directly out of the oral tradition: there is no need for any recourse to a written text to explain the differences in these two passages or their relations with those of suras 7 and 11.

TABLE 6. Side by Side Comparison of Parallels in Qur'an 7:85–93, 11:84–93, 26.176–90, and 29.36–37

| Q 26:176–90 and 29.36–37 | Q 7:85–93 | Q 11:84–93 |
|---|---|---|
| (26:176) The men of the Thicket cried lies to the Envoys<br>(26:177) when Shuaib said to them, Will you not be godfearing?<br>(26:178) I am for you a faithful Messenger, so fear you God, and obey you me.<br>(26:179) I ask of you no wage for this;<br>(26:180) my wage falls only upon the Lord of all Being.<br>(26:181) Fill up the measure, and be not cheaters,<br>(26:182) and weigh with the straight balance,<br>(26:183) and diminish not the goods of the people, and do not mischief in the earth, working corruption.<br>(26:184) Fear Him who created you, and the generations of the ancients.<br>(26:185) They said, Thou art merely one of those that are bewitched;<br>(26:186) thou art naught but a mortal, like us; indeed, we think that thou art one of the liars.<br>(26:187) Then drop down on us lumps from heaven, if thou art one of the truthful.<br>(26:188) He said, My Lord knows very well what you are doing.<br>(26:189) But they cried him lies; then there seized them the chastisement of the Day of Shadow; assuredly it was the chastisement of a dreadful day. | (7:85) And to Midian their brother Shuaib; he said, O my people, serve God! You have no god other than He; there has now come to you a clear sign from your Lord. So fill up the measure and the balance, and diminish not the goods of the people; and do not corruption in the land, after it has been set right; that is better for you, if you are believers.<br>(7:86) And do not sit in every path, threatening and barring from Gods way those who believe in Him, desiring to make it crooked. And remember when you were few, and He multiplied you; and behold, how was the end of the workers of corruption.<br>(7:87) And if there is a party of you who believe in the Message I have been sent with, and a party who believe not, be patient till God shall judge between us; He is the best of judges.<br>(7:88) Said the Council of those of his people who waxed proud, We will surely expel thee, O Shuaib, and those who believe with thee, from our city, unless you return into our creed. He said, What, even though we detest it?<br>(7:89) We should have forged against God a lie if we returned into your creed; after God delivered us from it. It is not for us to return into it, unless God our Lord so will. Our Lord embraces all things in His knowledge. In God we have put our trust. Our Lord, give true deliverance between us and our people; Thou art the best of deliverers. | (11:84) And to Midian their brother Shuaib; he said, O my people, serve God! You have no god other than He. And diminish not the measure and the balance. I see you are prospering; and I fear for you the chastisement of an encompassing day.<br>(11:85) O my people, fill up the measure and the balance justly, and do not diminish the goods of the people, and do not mischief in the land, working corruption.<br>(11:86) Gods remainder is better for you, if you are believers. And I am not a guardian over you.<br>(11:87) They said, Shuaib, does thy prayer command thee that we should leave that our fathers served, or to do as we will with our goods? Thou art the clement one, the right-minded.<br>(11:88) He said, O my people, what think you? If I stand upon a clear sign from my Lord, and He has provided me with fair provision from Him – and I desire not to come behind you, betaking me to that I forbid you; I desire only to set things right, so far as I am able. My succour is only with God; in Him I have put my trust, and to Him I turn, penitent.<br>(11:89) O my people, let not the breach with me move you, so that there smite you the like of what smote the people of Noah, or the people of Hood, or the people of Salih; and the people of Lot are not far away from you.<br>(11:90) And ask forgiveness of your Lord, then repent to Him; surely my Lord is All-compassionate, All-loving.<br>(11:91) They said, Shuaib, we do not understand much of what thou sayest. Truly we see thee weak among us; but for thy tribe we would have stoned thee; for thou art not strong against us. |

| Q 26:176–90 and 29:36–37 | Q 7:85–93 | Q 11:84–93 |
|---|---|---|
| (26:190) Surely in that is a sign, yet most of them are not believers.<br><br><br>(29:36) And to Midian their brother Shuaib; he said, O my people, serve God, and look you for the Last Day; and do not mischief in the land, working corruption. (29:37) But they cried lies to him; so the earthquake seized them, and morning found them in their habitation fallen prostrate. | (7:90) Said the Council of those of his people who disbelieved, Now, if you follow Shuaib, assuredly in that case you will be losers.<br>(7:91) So the earthquake seized them, and morning found them in their habitation fallen prostrate,<br>(7:92) those who cried lies to Shuaib, as if never they dwelt there; those who cried lies to Shuaib, they were the losers.<br>(7:93) So he turned his back on them, and said, O my people, I have delivered to you the Messages of my Lord, and advised you sincerely; how should I grieve for a people of unbelievers? | (11:92) He said, O my people, is my tribe stronger against you than God? And Him—have you taken Him as something to be thrust behind you? My Lord encompasses the things you do.<br>(11:93) O my people, act according to your station; I am acting; and certainly you will know to whom will come the chastisement degrading him, and who is a liar. And be upon the watch; I shall be with you, watching. |

Nevertheless, the stories of Shuʿayb in the two latter suras clearly show a degree of dependence that requires a written model, as does their arrangement within a block of larger material concerning the pre-Islamic prophets that was clearly a written composition.[58] Nevertheless, the form of Shuʿayb's story that was used to produce that written document was undoubtedly also drawn directly from the oral tradition: there is no reason to assume that it made use of the material in either sura 26 or 29. The improved structure, detail, clarity, and style of this longer version are all symptoms of the move to writing, which allows greater stability for this more complex version. Nevertheless, it is not at all obvious that one of the versions in either sura 7 or 11 served as the immediate source of the other. Instead, it is entirely possible that both versions depend on a no longer extant, earlier written model shared by both that has been independently altered even after the transfer to writing, perhaps with some continuing influence from oral traditions in each case.[59] Any efforts to understand the history of these traditions and their development within earliest Islam should proceed on such a basis, viewing them as resulting from a mixture of oral and written transmissions.

Such an understanding of the Qur'an's formation as an ongoing process, starting with oral traditions and moving increasingly to written versions provides a model and a basis grounded in both the relevant source material and the history of religion for understanding how the traditions of the Qur'an continued to develop after the death of Muhammad and across much, if not most, of the

seventh century. From such a vantage, for instance, we are much better positioned to comprehend the clear interpolation of Qur'an 3:144, which the Islamic tradition itself unmistakably identifies as a later addition to the Qur'anic traditions.[60] Likewise, the fluidity of this model of the Qur'an as a text in process, continuing to be shaped by orality, clarifies what appear to be minor alterations to a number of eschatological pronouncements to make them comport with the unexpected and lengthy delay of the eschaton's arrival.[61] Another sort of example can be found in certain passages of the Qur'an offering moral instruction: 23:1–11 and 70:22–35.[62] Only three verses from these parallel passages agree word for word, whereas the remaining verses exhibit significant variation. Any similarities in these other verses are limited to the occurrence of a demonstrative adjective, a relative pronoun, or a form of the verb "to be": such commonly used words cannot establish dependence. Thus, we have here a circumstance where perhaps two traditions found their spark in a brief three-line text that had been written down at an early stage. But the traditions themselves, and their differences, are just as likely to be the result of oral transmission based on this short early document, yielding two rather different traditions that eventually came to be written down themselves and that were preserved separately within the canonical version of the Qur'anic text.

## THE MAKING OF A NEW CANONICAL SCRIPTURE

Conceiving of the origins of the written Qur'an along the model of the *hypomnēmata* of late antiquity also positions us to better comprehend the peculiar arrangement—or the distinct lack thereof—of the Qur'an's contents. The organizational principles of such an open collection of notes are of course different from that of a finished, published literary work or a narrative. Its structure is guided above all by practical principles that will aid the leaders in using its contents in guiding the community: "As a narrative is expected to have a particular literary arrangement (*taxis, suntaxis*), an unfinished note collection would also be expected have its own type of order or organization."[63] Attention to use of the Qur'an's precursors as memoranda of the oral tradition for use by the community's leaders may help us to better understand the nature of its present organization. Obviously, more detailed studies of both the Qur'an as a whole, as well as of individual passages, from this new perspective are certainly to be desired, but inasmuch as our purposes here are primarily to articulate theoretical and methodological principles for studying the Qur'an, now is not the occasion, unfortunately, for such an in-depth analysis. For the moment, Richard Bell's idiosyncratic analysis and translation of the Qur'an afford the best example of how such an approach to the text would operate, even if we may not agree in every instance with all Bell's ideas concerning the antecedent fragments that ultimately were brought into unity in the final version of the Qur'an.[64]

There is another analogue from Larsen's study that is particularly illuminating for understanding this stage of the Qur'an's history. As he notes, the production of *hypomnēmata* was not unique to early Christianity and the late classical tradition, but such open written memoranda of sacred traditions are also known in early Judaism as well, even if they are not called by this Greek term. In particular, Larsen draws our attention to the library from Qumran and one of the most important documents discovered there, known as the *Rule of the Community*.[65] Two different versions of this community charter were found at Qumran, and despite the authoritative nature of the writing, these two versions differ in significant ways. In the most general terms, one is longer and seemingly older, while the apparently more recent copy is shorter and more fragmentary. Scholars of the Dead Sea Scrolls have debated which of the two copies best reflects the earliest, "original" tradition, without reaching any sort of consensus. Larsen, however, proposes that such a linear approach to the problem is misguided and unlikely to yield a meaningful solution, Instead, he proposes, we are much better served by dispensing with any notion of either an original or final version and instead viewing the *Rule of the Community* as a writing that is by its very nature open and in process. Likewise, despite its authority over the affairs of the community, we must recognize that the *Rule of the Community* is a text without an author in the sense that we are accustomed to think of the term. Instead, it was authorized in a different manner.

According to the *Rule* itself, it is "a text 'for the instructor' (*lemaskil*) of the community, which could mean that the book belongs to an instructor or that it is intended for his use as leader of the community, or . . . both."[66] It is not inconceivable that other members of the community may have had access to the document, but given the severe limitations of literacy and material costs, it is unlikely that this text was widely known beyond the handful of literate elites within the community, according to the most generous interpretation. Furthermore, as Larsen additionally notes, "what is striking about the *Rule of the Community* is how much it demands of its reader or user. A good deal of prior knowledge is assumed, without which it is surprisingly unhelpful, and perhaps even frustrating. . . . The community rules serve more as reminding field guides than an instructional how-to manual for new or anonymous readers."[67] These allusive, skeletal qualities are certainly reminiscent of the Qur'an's similarly elliptic style, and they suggest the *Rule*'s use more as a script for extemporizing than as a text to be read verbatim before the community: might this have been how the early written reminders of the Qur'anic traditions were also used? In both cases, we should imagine that these memory aids, despite their written form, are still not completely removed from the authority of oral tradition.[68] For this reason, as Sarianna Metso concludes, "the existence of contradictory regulations in compilations like the Community Rule is not so surprising."[69] Again, could this also be so in the case of the Qur'an?

It is certainly possible that the differences in the two versions of the *Rule of the Community* from Qumran reflect changes introduced by the leadership of the

community to a living, open text that defined the nature of the community. Yet John Collins has alternatively proposed that perhaps we should understand the different versions of the *Rule* as products of different groups within the network of a larger religious "community" to which the Qumranites belonged.[70] On this basis, Larsen concludes that we should think "not of one location with a 'final' version of the *Rule of the Community* (even if final was only final, until it was updated again), or of an 'original' version from which others deviate or are contaminated, but, rather, of many locations each with its own modified and provisionally 'final' instantiation of a community Rule, which would differ in big and small ways from the Rules of other local units of the organization." As he continues to explain,

> Rather, there were local iterations of the Rule, subject to alteration by the local authority, being authorized both by their connection to the larger community and by the local leadership of the community. Each local iteration of the Rule would likely have contained older material, which had been brought into a new and different spatial and geographical context, along with their own additions reflecting local traditions and experiences. No one version would have been more authentic than another. Likewise, it would be something of a fool's errand to try to trace the origin and its contaminations.

Instead, what we have are

> different, equally authorized versions or performances of the rules of various local communities. Likely some knew of other versions out there, but the one in their local community for all practical intents and purposes was *the Rule* for that community. . . . From place to place, textual difference is to be expected; in fact, a lack thereof would be surprising. The more they are used, the more they evolve and develop—and the only way to stop evolving is to fall out of use or be destroyed. . . . And if new and better information, or new ways of dealing with issues, comes to their attention, it is the local leaders' prerogative and perhaps even their bound duty to modify it.[71]

We have quoted Larsen here at some length because his conclusions regarding the variations of the *Rule of the Community* seem perfectly apt for thinking about how the Qur'an was developing in its earliest stages as a written document. Like those of its Qumran counterpart, many of the Qur'an's traditions are directed toward establishing the order of the community and defining proper behavior and ritual action, even though, as we noted in chapter 2, the Qur'an and its traditions are astonishingly absent from the religious life of Muhammad's followers for most of the first century of their existence. Both are highly allusive texts intended for use seemingly by leaders of the community, whose knowledge of a broader, primarily oral tradition could bring to life these rather skeletal written memory aids. Likewise, we are dealing in both cases with writings that were subject to significant regional variations, determined by the individual communities that put them to use in different places. These collections were also in a constant state of being updated and improved, one expects, as they continued to be in regular use and as

new traditions and circumstances were regularly encountered by the community and its leadership.

In contrast to the early Christian tradition, which was content to allow the diversity and distinctiveness of its initial collections of the oral tradition to stand in the canonical fourfold gospel tradition, the Islamic tradition determined to produce a single scriptural harmony on the basis of these antecedent collections. This, it seems, was the task that ʿAbd al-Malik and al-Ḥajjāj took up around the turn of the eighth century. Yet the impulse toward the harmonization of tradition was not completely unknown in early Christianity, and most notably it produced the second-century gospel harmony of Tatian, the Diatessaron. Inasmuch as this Diatessaron was the preferred version of the gospels among Syriac-speaking Christians up until the fifth century, the notion of a harmonized scripture was certainly not foreign to the Christians of the late ancient Near East.[72] In any case, the editorial process adopted by ʿAbd al-Malik's initiative to standardize and canonize the Qurʾan was clearly a very conservative one in that it preserved these variants of the same tradition even in the face of their repetition and difference, as well as outright contradictions among them in some cases.

We find similarly conservative and inclusive principles at work in the compilation of various texts in the Hebrew Bible, including the Pentateuch most notably, as well as in the Christian New Testament, with its varied and often contradictory fourfold gospel tradition. Or, moving in the opposite direction from the turn of the eighth century, we may look to the example of the *Book of Common Prayer* in the early years of the English Reformation. Disputes over the Real Presence in the early English Reformation led to the rapid issue of two prayer books with very different versions of the words of administration, spoken by the priest to the communicant. The first version, from 1549, affirmed the Real Presence, while the second, published in 1552, removed this profession and instead provided a memorialist interpretation of the sacrament. Yet when Elizabeth I came to the throne, she had a new prayer book published in 1559, which, as a comprise, included both versions of the words of administration, so that the priest would speak both and the communicant could hear them as he or she wished.[73] Such inclusive redaction was essential for religious unity, and no doubt this same phenomenon was operative in producing the canonical version of the Qurʾan, resulting in its variant parallels.

At this point one might rightly ask, what prompted ʿAbd al-Malik to undertake the standardization and canonization of the Qurʾan, along with a concerted effort to enforce this new standard and purge his empire of its rivals? Once again, the work of Assmann proves helpful for understanding this development in the Believers' sacred tradition. As Kelber aptly sums up Assmann's position, "The need for canonicity, [Assmann] reasons, arises out of the experience of an excessive textual pluralism and lack of ideational uniformity that threaten the *raison d'être* of the tradition. In that situation, the canon responds to 'the need to rein in the principle that "anything goes"; we fear loss of meaning through entropy.'" Can-

onization privileges certain texts by authorizing them at the expense of others; it likewise seeks to control their content, in order to limit the growth of entropy within the tradition and tame the disruptive phenomenon of variance. It marks an effort "to cope with pluriformity and variability by selectivity and exclusivity."[74] If we listen to the early Islamic tradition, it would seem that these concerns were paramount: discrepancies among the regional collections of sacred tradition had reached such a level that they were threatening to cause serious divisions within the community if no action were taken. Presumably, there is much truth in these reports—even if we are skeptical about any role played by ʿUthmān in establishing the canonical version of the Qur'an. Given the dynamics of memory, transmission, and recording that we have considered so far, it stands to reason that there would have been some significant differences in memories of the sacred tradition. ʿAbd al-Malik thus intervened to establish a single authoritative version of the Qur'an in order to stave off the threatening divisions within the faith of the Believers and his bourgeoning empire that such variance in the tradition seemed to invite.

Equally important is Assmann's concept of the *Traditionsbruch*, which he identifies not only as an impulse toward the writing down of oral tradition but also the creation of a canon. Once again, we return to the limitations of both human memory and oral transmission for preserving a tradition over an extended interval of time. As we noted in the previous chapter, Assmann, following Vansina, observes that within a span of roughly eighty years, memories of events begin to degrade profoundly, to the point that nearly all memory of what happened before is soon erased. In the case of memories of a community's foundation and its defining religious beliefs, such a loss would ultimately lead to the community's dissolution. Accordingly, in order to prevent this devastating loss, a new medium for remembering must be sought, not only to ensure the preservation of these essential memories but of the community itself. For this reason, Assmann observes, in contexts where writing is available, after around forty years there is an increasing move to preserve the oral tradition in writing so that it will not be lost. Forty years, according to Assmann, approximately comprise the interval at which the most reliable bearers of the living tradition, those who had been eyewitnesses, have largely died off. The growing break within the tradition demands the move to a more durable medium: unless such a text is written down and institutionalized, it runs "risks of being forgotten."[75]

The end result of this process is the canonization of a formally authorized version of these written materials, which enduringly bridges the *Traditionsbruch* for the community and serves as a foundation for the community's emergent collective identity. The latter effect would contribute significantly to ʿAbd al-Malik's deliberate campaign to consolidate both a powerful collective Arab cultural and linguistic identity as well as a distinctive religious identity for the Believers as Muslims, in his coordinated program of Arabization and Islamicization. Establishing a new canonical Arabic and Islamic scripture for the Believers was certainly an

instrumental part of this process, even if it was also a response to an emerging *Traditionsbruch* within the community. A *Traditionsbruch*, one should note, can also result from some sort of trauma experienced by the community, and the events of the Second Civil War, which held strong religious charge, no doubt provided ʿAbd al-Malik with the inspiration to consolidate the community's collective memory and to standardize and centralize religious authority within his empire.[76] One final consideration is also the rise of the authority of the religious scholars, the *ulamā*, around this same time, as we noted in the first chapter.[77] The resulting shift from the direct religious authority of the caliphs to a new configuration that located such authority instead in scholars' knowledge of Muhammad's religious teaching can partly explain the formation of a canonical scripture and its newfound importance at this point. In this regard, the following comments from Assmann seem highly relevant: "Where there is a king, one of whose main duties is to issue laws and put them into effect, no legal code is required: that would improperly restrict the king's own legislative competence."[78] It is an explanation, one should note, that also does double duty in explaining why the authority of Muhammad and the Qur'an are so strikingly absent from the early Islamic tradition for most of the seventh century.

## CONCLUSIONS

In seeking to understand the Qur'an's emergence within its late ancient literary environment, a number of different models help us to appreciate how its originally oral sacred traditions made the shift to written format. Firstly, we should expect that this process of transition to writing was gradual rather than sudden, beginning primarily as memory aids to assist with recall of the oral tradition. Moreover, the emergence of written documents does not immediately eclipse the value and authority of the oral tradition, which generally remains operative and even ascendant alongside the written memoranda. Yet the introduction of writing to the tradition occurs, as Assmann explains, with some regularity after several decades have elapsed since the sacred tradition's originating event. At this stage in the history of a community and its oral tradition, memories have begun to fade significantly, and considerable diversity has entered into its sacred tradition as a result of repeated oral transmission. Writing is introduced to serve as a bulwark against both these threats: the loss of forgetting and increasing variance within the tradition.

Nevertheless, even as we note that the written tradition began to proliferate and steadily emerged as a more authoritative and reliable medium for tradition, we must not allow ourselves to be deceived into thinking that the tradition suddenly became fixed and stable. Recent scholarship on the formation of Jewish and Christian sacred tradition has drawn our attention to the fact that such written collections remained open and fluid before the imposition of a canon, par-

ticularly in their early stages. The ongoing process of addition, subtraction, and revision to these early collections also provides us with an invaluable model for understanding the Qur'an's inclusion of numerous variants reporting different versions of the same tradition. Such parallels likely emerged as revisions made to existing traditions, while others were new discoveries added to the collection to ensure completeness. We must also bear in mind that in the early stages of writing down the Qur'anic tradition, collections were being made independently across the vast empire that the Believers controlled, in the main areas that they colonized.

From these early collections would eventually emerge the various regional codices, identified by the early Islamic tradition. Although the later authorities report only relatively minor variations among these regional codices, it seems clear that their differences were much greater than they were either willing or able to recall. Indeed, these competing codices were so diverse that their differences appear to have occasioned disruptions within the early community, such that it became necessary to produce a single, imperial authorized version that would replace them and provide the community with a primary foundation for its emerging collective identity. This was the task that ʿAbd al-Malik undertook, with the assistance of al-Ḥajjāj, with the direct aim of eliminating these regional codices and replacing them with a new, imperially imposed, canonical version. As a result, the Qur'an has come down to us today with remarkable uniformity; nevertheless, one must recognize that this was no accident but was the result of concerted imperial enforcement and policing.[79] Absent such direct actions, there is no chance that the Qur'an could have possibly achieved such strict uniformity. Yet, prior to this decisive development, the various collections of Qur'anic tradition would have remained, like their early Jewish and Christian counterparts, fluid and open to change.

Of course, one might object that, in contrast to the early Jews and Christians, the Believers had before them the model of a written, closed, canonical scriptural tradition. Yet, as we have already noted, the evidence indicates that the Qur'an and Muhammad's teaching in general seem to have held little significance in the religious lives of his followers for most of the seventh century. Likewise, we must recall Brakke's necessary warning that we should not approach the Qur'an's emergence as a canonical scripture by continuing "to tell a story with a single plot line, leading to the seemingly inevitable τέλος of the closed canon."[80] As historians, we must avoid at all costs the "danger of judging matters with too much regard for the present," as if history were a simply linear process predetermined to reach the present condition, so that "people of earlier times already had the same goal as us, but were simply not yet so close to it."[81] In order to understand the Qur'an's early history during the first decades of the Believer's movement, we must free our investigations from the constraints imposed by understanding the Qur'anic traditions according to their current status, as canonical Islamic scripture. Likewise, we must eliminate any notion that the materials under consideration were somehow destined to eventually become a canonical scripture. Only from such a perspective

can we discover how the Qur'anic traditions relate to their late ancient cultural environs and similarly how they ultimately would develop into a new sacred scripture for a new religious community.

Therefore, for much of the seventh century, while canonical status remained in abeyance for the Qur'anic traditions, we should expect that they remained subject to the "*mouvance* of tradition" that characterized those of the early gospel before their canonization and that continued to govern the transmission of biblical apocrypha. Such is the terminology that Kelber borrows from Paul Zumthor for describing "the dynamics of the phenomenon of textual variability and pluriformity" that characterize ancient media realities in general and "the nature of the Jewish and Christian biblical traditions, especially in their respective initial stages."[82] Like these other precursors and counterparts to canonical scriptures, we must similarly view the Qur'anic traditions during the early decades of their history as fluid and open, prone to change and developing in conversation with contemporary biblical and extrabiblical traditions.