And when Abraham said, “My Lord, make this land secure, and turn me and my sons away from serving idols; my Lord, they have led astray many men. Then whoso follows me belongs to me; and whoso rebels against me, surely Thou art All-forgiving, All-compassionate.

Our Lord, I have made some of my seed to dwell in a valley where is no sown land by Thy Holy House; Our Lord, let them perform the prayer, and make hearts of men yearn towards them, and provide them with fruits; haply they will be thankful. Our Lord, Thou knowest what we keep secret and what we publish; from God nothing whatever is hidden in earth and heaven. Praise be to God, who has given me, though I am old, Ishmael surely my Lord hears the petition. My Lord, make me a performer of the prayer, and of my seed. Our Lord, and receive my petition. Our Lord, forgive Thou me and my parents, and the believers, upon the day when the reckoning shall come to pass.

Qur’ân, 14:35—41


It is well known that the Biblical criticism, which has accumulated the achievements of semitology, classical philology, and many other fields of humanities, influenced greatly the development of Qur’anic studies. It was the success of German Biblical studies that led to the pre-eminence of German scholars in the study of the Qur’ân (G. Flügel, T. Nöldeke, F. Schwally, G. Bergstresser, O. Pretzl and many others), a trend established in the nineteenth century. Forces and resources that Biblical Studies have historically accumulated and continue to accumulate are incomparable to that of Qur’anic studies. For many decades the latter has been able to use methodological approaches and achievements from Biblical Studies to address its own critical problems. An excellent confirmation of this is a capital work of Rev. Dr. Keith E. Small, Visiting Lecturer and Associate Research Fellow at London School of Theology, dedicated to the least-studied period in the history of the Qur’ân.

Until now the history of the Qur’ân’s textual establishment has not been studied and described properly. The research and findings of recent years convincingly demonstrate that the works of medieval Muslim authorities as well as works based on them by European scholars reveal only a part of a significantly more diverse and contradictory history of the Sacred text’s fixation. A discussion of J. Wansbrough’s “Qur’ānic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation” by such specialists as A. Rippin, J. van Ess, E. Ullendorf, R. Paret, L. Nemoy, W. A. Graham, R. Serjeant, G. H. A. Juynboll, I. J. Boulatta, E. Wagner, K. Rudolph, and others have shown

1 Translation by A. J. Arberry.
2 Dr. Small has taught at undergraduate and postgraduate levels in Britain and internationally. In addition to his academic credentials he has nearly twenty years of ministry experience to Muslims in the UK.
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that research based on the Muslim tradition is no longer capable at present of providing unambiguous answers to questions connected with the early history of the Qur’ânic text.

We have pointed out several times that the main problem, in this connection, is related to

the fact that the study of the Muslim tradition took place in isolation from the description and study of actual Qur’ânic manuscripts. This gap led, in large part, to the methodo-

dological crisis which Qur’ânic studies experienced in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Moreover, a substantial number of the Qur’ânic fragments which have reached us con-
tain unique information on the initial period of the Sacred text's existence. It is already clear today that this true history preserved by early copies will differ significantly from the history which rests on the Muslim tradition and which was summarized above.

The book, which draws from the author’s 2008 doctoral dissertation, is devoted to the thorough textual analysis of the famous Ibrâhîm / Abrahâm prayer (14:35—41) as preserved in twenty-two manuscripts, nineteen of which were copied during the first four Islamic centuries. Dr. Small managed to situate the manuscript evidence alongside the information provided by Islamic tradition, and attempted to recover the earliest form of text and trace the development of the text from the rise of Islam until the 10th century AD. This was evidently the important period when older copies that contained a by then unacceptable number of variant readings were being actively removed from circulation. In most cases, they made their way to special repositories in large mosques where they slowly decayed. They could also be “buried” with a special ritual. In our view, the widespread disappearance of early copies took place not under the caliph ‘Utlmân (at that time there were only a few full copies of the Qur’ân), but at the turn of the eighth — ninth centuries. Additionally, copies created at that time with a minimal number of variant readings were preserved by the community for many centuries. Such was the fate, for example, of the two “Utlmânîc Qur’ânîs” (from Katta-Langar / St. Peters-

burg and Taşkent). For the goals of his study Dr. Small applies a methodology widely used in New Testament criticism. He dates the manuscripts and gives descriptions of each, paying special attention to:

orthographic variants involving long vowels;

copyist mistakes; diacritical mark variants and vari-

ants affecting grammar;

rasm variants; variant verse divisions; physical cor-

crections to manuscripts;

discerning intentionality / non-intentionality in vari-

ants;

effects of orality upon written transmission.

Greyscale images of the folios under discussion give a reader the possibility to compare the results of the author’s analysis to that of his own. The author traces a sig-
nificant amount of al-qira‘ āt and in many places indicates their origin. Texts and manuscripts comparison proves once more that until the end of the seventh century when the Qur’ân existed in both written and oral form the text remained fluid.

In general Dr. Small brings new insights to the history of the development of a standardized text of the Qur’ân. To his point of view the early edited form of the consonantal text which we have does not provide the possibility of re-
covering “the original form”. Dr. Small stressed once that

the primary task in New Testament textual criticism has been to recover one text from among many — to recover the first published text of each New Testament book from among the textual variants and text-types that have accumulated throughout the history of the transmission of the text. The primary task in Qur’ânic textual criticism, as practiced his-
torically in Islam has been instead to justify one form of the text against many others. These efforts to establish and justify one text from among a group of collections of material, both oral and written, has resulted in irreparable loss of the earliest authoritative forms of the text. The entire shape of the text of the Qur’ân shows it to be an intentionally developed text.

His book shows once more that only the joint efforts of palaeographers, linguists and historians, the careful de-
scription and study of extant manuscripts (in the first place the Qur’ân from Şan’a‘, Or. 2165 from the British Library, the Istanbul and Cairo collections, also from the St. Peters-

burg collections), the completion of the fantastic Sergio Noja project and the creation of a data-base of early copies

4 H. Motzki analyzing Muslim tradition on Qur’ânic text fixation with the help of isnad-cum-matn approach was able to bring out clearly groundlessness of main Western methods of criticizing basic elements of Islamic tradition devoted to the history of Sacred text fixation (see: H. Motzki, “The Collection of the Qur’an: A Reconsideration of Western Views in Light of Recent Methodological Developments”, Qur’ân Studies on the Eve of the 21st Century (Indonesian-Netherlands Cooperation in Islamic Studies, 10—20 June, 1998, Leiden), pp. 1—27). Thirty — fifty years, the time passed since the events had taken place, constitute necessary but enough period to transfer actual knowledge into historical one.


7 K. Small, Holy Books Have a History: Textual Histories of the New Testament & the Qur’an (USA, 2010), p. 78

8 Early Qur’âns. The Era of the Prophet, the Right Guided Caliphs and the Umayyades (Noseda Foundation, Italy).

9 See: E. A. Rezvan, “The Qur’an: Between Textus Receptus and ’Critical Edition’”, Les problèmes pose par l’éditeur critique des textes anciens et medievaux, ed. by J. Hamesse (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1992), pp. 291—310. A similar database (Sfar-data) of dated Jewish manuscripts, emerging within the framework of the Jewish Palaeographic Project under the direction of Prof. Malachi Beyr-Arie, has convincingly demonstrated that this is not merely an ordinary computer catalogue, but a powerful tool for research.
can provide us with objective material for reconstructing the early history of the Qur’ān.

In the final analysis, it is only with such efforts that we will succeed in drawing closer to reconstructing the real history of the Sacred text, a history which manifested itself in the struggle and collision of various opinions and which ended with the affirmation of the Muslim canon. The work of Keith Small seems to be an important step to the goal.

This September I took a copy of the book, kindly sent to me by the author, in an expeditionary trip to Kazakhstan to the area of the ex-Soviet nuclear test site. Here in the former exclusion zone one can find a cave, which for centuries was revered as sacred at first by local Buddhists and then the Muslims. At the airport, in the hotel, on a halt in the desert I was preparing notes for a review, which was about to be published in the latest issue of our journal for the year. Unfortunately, the book copy as well as my notes disappeared while returning along with part of the expedition luggage. I ordered a new copy of the book and next year will supplement this brief review with new observations and suggestions.

E. Rezvan