

**An Introduction To Quranic Studies of Orientalists with
an Emphasis upon Criticism of Regis Blachere's Opinions
concerning Collection and Formulation of the Quran¹**

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ABSTRACT

Orientalists have made notable efforts in Quranic studies with different motives. Even in cases where their motive and intention are good, they have made considerable mistakes in commenting on Quranic topics due to various reasons. The present essay intends to review some of those issues with an emphasis upon Regis Blachere's opinions concerning Quranic collection and formulation as a fundamental issue in this connection.

Key Words: Quranic studies, orientalist, Regis Blachere, Quranic collection and formulation, criticism.

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1. Introduction

Among undeniable facts in the present era is the expansion of Islamic studies carried out by orientalists and presentation of numerous books and articles in the realm of Quranic studies. Since Quran is the most fundamental Islamic text, orientalists have paid special attention to it and have presented so many works concerning Quranic studies, which must be called "Orientalists' Quranic Studies" (Haji Mirzaee,2,2047). Orientalists have made vast studies concerning Quran whose most important axes are as follows:

- Compilation of specific books concerning Quran, especially Quranic history (Ali al-Saghir, 21), knowledge of the Quran, and Quranic sciences (Ramyar, 1).²
- Writing special essays on various Quranic subjects.³
- Collection of Arabic manuscripts, edition of Islamic and Quranic texts, translation of them into western languages, and publishing edited books (Hamdi Zaquq, 73-81).⁴

². For more information about the amount of orientalists' Quranic works, see Fehrest Ketabhaye Olum va Ma'aref Qurani Chap Shodeh be Zabanhaye Latin dar Faseleye 1995-2001, Entesharat Kitab Mobin; also al-Sibae,34.

³. See Morteza Kariminiya, Ketabshenasi Maghalat Qurani be Zabanhaye Orupae dar Faseleye 2000-2004, Vizheh Name Ekhtesasi Golestan Quran, No.190.

- Publishing specific journals on Orientalism and Islamic studies (al-Sibae, 37-8).
- Writing *Encyclopedia of Islam* and specifically entries on the Quran.⁵
- Writing *Encyclopedia of the Quran*.⁶
- Collection of indexes concerning the holy Quran.⁷
- Translation of Quran into live European as well as other languages.⁸

However, orientalist's Quranic studies are based on principles and criteria whose results and achievements look unacceptable to Muslims. In the meantime, one should not

⁴. See Arthur Jeffery's works in editing and publishing *al-Masahif* by Ibn Abi Dawud al-Sijistani and *Muqaddamatan fi Ulum al-Quran*. See also Ali al-Saghir, 73.

⁵. See *Encyclopedia of Islam* in which a detailed entry is written by two orientalist named A.T. Welsh and J.D. Person. This entry is criticized in detail in *al-Quran al-Karim min al-Mandhar al-Istishraqi* by Muhammad Abu Layla, Egypt, 1423 A.H.

⁶. This encyclopedia will have 5 volumes and 1000 entries of which 3 volumes are published so far (the first in 2001 and the third in 2003) containing entries from A to Q. The editor in chief is Damen Mc. Olief, professor in George Town University, who is assisted by four western orientalist.

⁷. See: Labum, *Tafsil Ayat al-Quran al-Karim*; also Ali al-Saghir, 76.

⁸ Among oldest works of orientalist and clearest manifestations of their orientalism are their translation of Quran totally and partly commencing from twelfth century (by people of church), with the intention of attacking Islam (Ali al-Saghir, 63-4; Abd al-Hamid, 11; Askari, 2, 707), and continuing rapidly in later centuries (al-Jandi, 341).

overlook valuable services of impartial orientalists in introducing Islam and Quran to the world. Thus, we should find out fundamental problems of orientalists' Quranic studies in order to prepare the ground for logical use of their researches. Knowing principles and criteria of orientalists' Quranic studies and case study of Regis Blachere's opinions as one impartial orientalist can be considered a practical step in this way.

2. Investigation of Orientalists' Motives in Islamic Studies

We mentioned earlier that orientalists dealt with their studies in Islam and Quran with different motives. Among that, colonialistic, commercial, religious or missionary, and scholarly motives can be mentioned (see Hamdi Zaquq,88-9; Ali al-Saghir,15-20; al-Sibae,20-31). Among motives mentioned above, the first or the most important is the missionary one (al-Sibae,20; al-Qutb,13). According to this motive, orientalists magnify weakness of Muslims and attempt to attribute contradiction and distortion to the Quran. They also try to prove truthfulness of Judaism and Christianity for their audience through annulment of Islamic fundamental teachings. They do not avoid distortion as well as incorrect introduction of Quranic truths in this connection.

Based on this motive, orientalist's attempt is to insist on this point that Islam is a mixture of pre-Islamic culture and the culture risen from Judaism and Christianity. So many orientalist hold that as far as divine as well as human affairs of the Quran are concerned, this book does not have a new teaching other than what Jews and Christians have brought (Fu'ad,120 & 126). Such orientalist as Goldziher, George Sale, and Anderson have studied Islam and Quran from this viewpoint introducing Islam, in their declarations, as being influenced by Judaic and Christian culture (see Goldziher,12; bd al-Hamid, 20; amdi zaqzuq,100; Ali- al-Saghir,41; Sulayman,34).

Among outstanding motives of orientalist in Islamic studies, one can mention their scholarly motive. Based on this motive, having taken impartial position, orientalist take Islamic sources into consideration and investigate Islam as a religion and Quran as a book. It can be said that only in their Quranic history, the following issues are greatly taken into consideration in orientalist's researches:

- Arabic handwriting and the itinerary of its transformation.
- Research on the term "*Ummi*" and attempt to prove literacy of the holy prophet.
- Quran being sent down in the Arabic society.
- Quranic primary preservation or writing down.

-Subsistence or destruction of various parts of the Revelation.

-Quranic collection in the prophetic time: nature and achievement.

-Variation in the Quranic recitation in prophetic era and later eras.

-Attempt to find some sources for the Quran.

-Unity or contradiction of Quranic texts.

-*Mushafs* of companions; their unity and variation.

-Quran being influenced by alien languages (*al-mu'arrabat*).

-Human wills (of companions and others) in Quranic formulation.

-Quranic collections after the prophet's passing away including the time of Abubakr and Uthman; multiplicity of Uthmanic *mushafs*.

-Reformation and evolution of Quranic handwriting.

-Dividing Quran into sura, hizb, juz', etc.

For familiarization with some examples of orientalist's researches in the Quranic history, here we survey Regis Blachere's perspective briefly. He has written an introduction to the French translation of the Quran speaking of the Quranic history and sciences in detail. He has attempted to study

Quranic collection in the prophetic era as well as its collection and formulation in later eras on the basis of historical evidence.

According to his researches:

2.1. Despite scattered writings, Quran was preserved in memories in the prophetic time. Although writing and formulation of the Quran were on the agenda for Muslims in the last years of the holy prophet's life, the whole Quran did not exist in writing when he was about to pass away (*Ibid*,30-1).

2.2. When the holy prophet passed away, each of the outstanding companions prepared a *mushaf* for himself according to his taste and position. Those *mushafs* had remarkable differences from different aspects such as readings, number of suras, and arrangement of suras, whose reason being lack of prophetic control over making one Quranic text in his lifetime. Anyhow, appearance of Abubakr's *mushaf* was a personal effort in the same connection (*Ibid*,54).

2.3. In Uthman's time, variation of readings caused social disputes. Subsequently, Uthman attempted to eliminate readings and unify *mushafs*. But he chose a special delegation from his family and Meccan aristocrats and thereby formulated a Quran which reflected Quraysh tribal interests and removed

interests of his opponents including Ali and Ibn Mas'ud (*Ibid*,75-7).

Before a detailed investigation of detriments of orientalist's Quranic studies, however, we should mention that Regis Blachere's opinions on the Quranic collection in different eras contradict seriously the Muslim scholars' perspective, for according to researches of Muslim scholars:

First, the entire Quran was written down in prophet's lifetime by those who wrote the revelation.

Secondly, controlled by the holy prophet, Quran was gathered in the form of a *mushaf*. This fact is especially considered by so many Shiite scholars.

Thirdly, existence of personal *mushafs* is a historical fact, but differences of companion's *mushafs* are magnified.

Fourthly, unification of *mushafs* in 'Uthman's time was a correct and influential action. It is not related to 'Uthman's tribal interests and removal of his opponents. (For detailed information of all points mentioned above and criticism of Regis Blachere's opinions, see Ibn Maja, 2,961; al-Sijistani, 3,36; al-'Amili, 85; Ramyar, 257,261,263,275,280; Sahib al-Mabani, 49; al-Zarkashi, 1,237 & 256; al-Suyuti, 1,202; al-Khuae, 256; Maaref, 99-122).

3. Detriments of Orientalists' Quranic Studies

Even if we suppose that orientalists' Quranic studies are impartial and their motives are scholarly research, they still encounter so many problems, such as:

3.1. Specific Presuppositions

Orientalists' look at the Islamic-Quranic studies is from outside, i.e., they do not study Islam and its issues as a Muslim. Therefore, they do not believe in the prophecy of Muhammad, peace be upon him, do not consider Quran as a revelation, do not treat it as a miracle, and do not believe in the Divine Will to safeguard Quran against any kind of distortion. Of course, they are not expected to study Quran like Muslims, but the important point is that orientalists often have theories contradictory to Muslims' beliefs and they attempt to prove it in their researches. This fact is clearer in their researches done by missionary motive (Abd al-Hamid, 12-22). In such cases, they do not encounter Islam and Quran impartially in a scholarly approach. Some of Orientalists' presuppositions do not leave any room for their truth-attaining, such as their dogmatic belief in negating the prophecy of the holy prophet, belief in the influence of Jewish, Christian, etc. sources on the Quran, assuming that the Quran is not collected and formulated in prophetic time, multiplicity and difference of *mushafs* and

readings in early Islam - mentioned in Regis Blachere's opinions - and finally the issue of contradiction in the Quran and distortion in the Divine Book.

3.2. Reference to the Whole Islamic Sources without Classifying Them with regard to Their Validity

Orientalists have referred to all Islamic sources concerning exegesis, hadith, history, literature, theology, etc., without considering any specific classification with regard to their validity (see Noldeke, 249; Blachere, 49-50).

In their reference to the research sources, orientalists' primary principle is their being oldest and earliest – something correct and notable in scholarly researches, but not enough. For instance, in exegesis books, al-Tabari's *Jami' al-Bayan* is not at the same level with Ibn Kathir al-Dimashqi's *Tafsir al-Quran al-Adhim*, for the former is full of poor and Jewish lore (al-Ma'rifa,2), while the latter is notably purified from Jewish lore and the author mostly mentions weakness of traditions and criticizes the Jewish lore (mar'ashli,1,23). The same ratio exists between al-Tabari's and Ibn Kathir's history. Also, according to hadith scholars, hadiths narrated in *Musnad* books cannot be treated to be at the same level of validity with those narrated in two *Sahihs* (Sobhi Salih,296; Qasemi,239). Such differences are taken into consideration in Muslims'

researches, but orientalists benefit from Islamic sources and texts equally.

Another point in using sources is that since Sunni sources are abundant and more available in the world, orientalists mostly study and judge Islam through a Sunni perspective, while, first, in such sources there are so many poor and unacceptable points even in Sunni scholars' view. Secondly, there are so many points in such sources that, despite being accepted by Sunni scholars, are opposed by views and hadiths of other Islamic sects like Shi'a (al-Khuae, 169-93; al-Askari, 2,121-83). More examples will be presented later.

3.3. Priority of "Text Criticism" over "Transmission-chain Criticism" in Orientalists' Works

Some such orientalists as Caetani and Schacht hold that Muslims did not pay attention to text criticism and only dealt with criticism of transmission-chain (Shacht, 2,279; Mehrizi, 18; also 'Ajjaj khatib, 254 narrating from Goldziher). It should be noted, in the meantime, that chain-transmission is formed at the late first and early second Hijri centuries (al-A'dhami, 2, 392 & 397). Orientalists look with doubt at traditions narrated in hadith books because of that reason ('Ajjaj Khatib, 254). The result of that doubt is that: First, they do not refer to and use, or criticize and doubt in, hadiths whose contents are in

opposition to their presuppositions. Secondly, they easily rely on poor and doubted hadiths even though the latter are in explicit contradiction to Muslims' beliefs, Quran, undoubted-certain hadiths, or the intellect. A good example of this subject is orientalist's reliance upon hadiths concerning commencement of revelation in Sunni sources⁹, *Gharaniq* legend, and forgetfulness of the holy prophet ('Askari, *Naqsh 'Aisha dar Trikh Islam*, 4, 407, Blachere, 31; Bohl, 4,449; Schacht, 2,266)¹⁰.

3.4. *Incorrect Understanding of Quranic Verses and Hadiths*

Another problem in Orientalists' researches is related to their incorrect understanding of some Quranic verses and hadiths. This is caused by lack of precise familiarity of orientalist with Arabic literature, language of verses and hadiths¹¹, corners of

⁹. For criticism of such hadiths, see Maaref, *Wahy va Resalat Nabavi*, 55-6.

¹⁰. In a chapter in his *Naghs 'Aisha dar Tarikh Islam*, 'Askari criticizes scholarly and in detail the use of Montgomery Watt in *Muhammad in Mecca*, R.F. Bodly in *The Life of Muhammad*, Karl Brockelmann in *Tarikh al-Shu'uab*, and F. Bohl and Joseph Schacht in *The Encyclopedia of Islam* of hadiths of commencement of revelation, *Gharaniq* legend, and *ifk* of 'Aisha. (see also Amin al-Khuli's criticism of thoughts of Schacht and Caetani in *The Encyclopedia of Islam*, 2, 265-90.)

¹¹. In a discourse entitled *al-Ab'ad al-Fanniya li Tarjimat al-Quran wa Mushkilatiha al-Balaghiyya 'ind al-Mustashriqin*, Muhammad Hussain Ali al-Saghir presents multiple evidences for weakness and disability of orientalist in understanding some Quranic terms and phrases in

Islamic history, and dimensions of Muslim's religious culture on the one hand (Ali al-Saghir, 109-42; Hossaini Tabatabaee, 189-211) and their not referring to all texts and evidence in one subject on the other. In addition, should the correct concept of a verse or hadith contradict some presuppositions of orientalists, they would often refer to that understanding of Islamic texts which is in harmony with their beliefs and mentalities. Here, we mention only some examples:

3.4.1. Understanding of the Term *Ummi*

So many orientalists, including Noldeke and Springer, hold that the prophet was literate (Ramyar, 506-7). Discussing derivation of the *ummi* from *ummah*, considering its semantic transformation in Islam, and criticizing opinion of some orientalists such as Frantz Boll, Parrot, the German orientalist, writes, "Some have argued that Muhammad is called *ummi* because he did not read and write. But in fact the term *ummi* has no relation with that, for the verse 78 of sura 2 which is presented as the evidence for their argument condemns and blames Jewish *ummi*s because of lack of knowledge of the

translating the Divine Revelation which are notable (109-42). Also, in a discourse entitled *Naghd Daeratolma'aref Islam*, Hossaini Tabatabaee presents and criticizes ten wrong understandings of orientalists.

Celestial Book and not because of lack of knowledge of reading and writing” (*Ibid.*,2,645).

Considering such an understanding of the concept of *ummi*, one can conclude that Parrot neglects the researches of scholars of lexicography, exegesis, history and even the verse 48 of sura 29 which asserts, “Not before this did you recite any Book, or inscribe it with your right hand, for then those who follow falsehood would have doubted” and insisting on his theory, he describes the holy prophet as being literate. (For detailed criticism of such a theory see al-Raghib al-Isfahani, 31; al-Tabrisi, 4,749; Ramyar, 504-18).

3.4.2. Understanding of Adhan Hadith

Concerning legitimacy of *adhan* in Islam, Juynboll writes, “Islamic tradition says that having entered Medina, the Prophet consulted his companions personally in the first or second Hijri year to find out the best way for reminding Muslims of prayer time. Some suggested to kindle a fire, or blow a bugle; but a Muslim, named Abd Allah b. Zaid, said that he saw in his dream a man, standing on the roof of the mosque, called Muslims to the prayer. ‘Umar liked that too, and since Muslims accepted it unanimously the Prophet commanded them to pursue it (1, 560).

The result of Juynboll's words is that *adhan* in Islam is born by the dream of Ibn Zaid and 'Umar confirmed by the holy prophet (Hossaini Tabatabaee, 194). This belief, however, can be seriously criticized from the two following aspects:

3.4.2.1. Sunni Hadiths concerning Adhan

Sunni hadiths concerning *adhan* do not collectively imply that legitimacy of *adhan* in Islam is rooted in a Muslim's dream confirmed by the holy prophet, but rather, as explicitly cited in some hadiths, that dream was preceded by Divine Revelation. Narrating a hadith concerning *adhan*, Ibn Hisham says, "Umar b. al-Khattab saw in his dream that they call 'Do not blow the bugle, but say *adhan* for prayer'. He went to the prophet to tell him about his dream, but before that the revelation had informed the prophet of the precept of *adhan*. Thus, 'Umar saw that Bilal is saying *adhan*, and when he informed the holy prophet of his dream the prophet told him, "

'You are preceded by the Revelation' " (2, 156).

3.4.2.2. Shi'a Hadiths concerning Adhan

Shi'a hadiths denote the legitimacy of *adhan* more explicitly. In one hadith, Zurara cites from Imam al-Baqir who said, "When the holy prophet ascended to heaven and reached *al-Bayt al-Ma'mur*, it was the time for prayer. Gabriel said *adhan* and *Iqama*, and the holy prophet stood saying prayer while all

angles and prophets were behind him saying prayer” (al-Kulaini, 3,302). In another hadith, Mansur b. al-Hazim cites from Imam al-Sadiq that he said, “Gabriel brought down *adhan* and *Iqama* to the holy prophet while his head was on Ali’s lap. When it was finished, the prophet asked Ali whether he heard it. Ali’s response was positive. Again he asked whether he memorized it. Ali’s response was positive. The holy prophet told him to call Bilal and teach him *adhan* and *Iqama*, and Ali did so (*Ibid.* see also al-Saduq, 1,183; al-Tusi, *Tahdhib al-Ahkam*, 2,64-5).

3.4.3. *Understanding of the verse of Naskh*

Orientalists attribute forgetfulness to the holy prophet and believe that this is based on hadiths. Regis Blachere writes, “We realize through hadiths that one day Muhammad passed somewhere and heard that someone is reciting a part of Quran by heart. Being surprised, the prophet realized that he had forgotten that part and it was that accident that gave him the opportunity to remember it. This event, whose historical validity is negotiable, is confirmed by a verse of the second sura [106]. Although the phrase ‘ننسىها’ in that verse may be taken as its ambiguous meaning, i.e., leaving aside, some Quranic commentators take it as its principal meaning, i.e., elimination from memories” (31-2. see also Schacht, 2,267).

As for criticism of perspective of Blachere and Schacht – and Noldeke before them – their problem is that they have referred to and relied on Sunni books in attributing

forgetfulness to the holy prophet. For instance, if someone refers to Bukhari's *al-Sahih*, he encounters this hadith from 'Aisha that the prophet heard someone recite in the mosque, and said, "May God grant mercy upon him! He reminded me of so and so verses I had dropped them from so and so suras" (8, 428). Considering such hadiths in Sunni sources, one cannot blame Blachere, Noldeke, and Schacht. Rather, such orientalist's problem is that why did they not pay attention to verses 6 and 7 of sura 87 – "We shall make you recite Quran not to forget it, unless God wills" - which are Meccan - instead of arguing by verse 106 of sura 2 - which is Medinan as they themselves assert - and thereby not conclude the contradiction of such hadiths to the Quran? Since those two verses bear God's promise to safeguard prophet against forgetfulness, and God's promise has definitely been actualized. The exception "unless God wills" does not imply happening of forgetfulness to the holy prophet, but rather indicates merely God's power to make the prophet forget if He wishes (al-Tabatabaee, 20,266); like this verse: "If We willed, We could take away what We have revealed to you, then you would find none to guard you against Us; excepting by some mercy of your Lord, surely His favor to you is great" (17, 86-7) which clearly indicates God's power to make the prophet forget and not necessarily happening of that to him (For other criticisms concerning "ننسىها" and the exception "unless God wills" see Amin al-Khuli, 2, 271 & 273).

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