



THE TAFSĪR GENRE DEVOTED TO ADDRESSING  
PERCEIVED DIFFICULTIES IN THE QUR'ĀN

BY

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## ABSTRACT

Muslims consider the Qur'ān to be the Word of God dictated to Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) by Angel Gabriel. The Qur'ān itself provides a criterion for testing its source, saying, "Will they not then ponder on the Qur'ān? If it had been from anyone other than Allah they would have found much inconsistency in it" (al-Qur'ān, 4:82). This research focuses upon a type of exegesis known as *tafsīr mushkil al-Qur'ān* that developed over the course of Islamic history to respond to perceived inconsistencies and other difficulties in the Qur'ānic text. The objective of the research is to identify and evaluate the methodology developed by Muslim scholars to deal with perceived contradictions within the Qur'ān itself and between Qur'ānic statements and established empirical facts. In order to do so, the concept of contradiction and its implications for propositions was examined from the point of view of logicians and the scholars of *uṣūl al-fiqh*. Muslim scholars' methodology for dealing with perceived contradictions between Sharī'ah texts was examined by reading classical and contemporary works of *uṣūl al-fiqh*. Three classical and two contemporary *tafsīrs* of the *mushkil al-Qur'ān* genre were studied in detail. It was found that they tended to focus heavily on linguistic issues, which they handled capably. They paid far less attention to perceived contradictions between Qur'ānic verses. Their treatment of the latter employed the tools of *uṣūl al-fiqh* methodology, but some exegetes who wrote more general *tafsīrs* sometimes dealt with the same issues more capably. These works were found to be of little use in addressing contemporary challenges to the empirical accuracy of Qur'ānic statements. However, the *uṣūlī* methodology for dealing with internal contradiction was found to be robust and useful, and it provides a foundation for a methodology of addressing empirical issues. Finally, the importance of this issue calls for the establishment of an institute in the Muslim world to deal with claims of inconsistencies in the Qur'ān and challenges to the empirical accuracy of its statements and its incompatibility with so-called universal values.

## ملخص البحث

المسلمون يعتقدون أن القرآن الكريم كلام الله، نزل به جبريل عليه السلام على محمد صلى الله عليه وسلم، وقد قدّم القرآن نفسه معيارا لامتحان القرآن لمعرفة مصدره، فقال تعالى: ﴿أَفَلَا يَتَذَبَّرُونَ الْقُرْآنَ وَلَوْ كَانَ مِنْ عِنْدِ غَيْرِ اللَّهِ لَوَجَدُوا فِيهِ اخْتِلَافًا كَثِيرًا﴾. هذه الرسالة تركز على نوع خاص من أنواع تفسير القرآن الكريم يسمى تفسير مشكل القرآن؛ قد ظهر في وقت مبكر من تاريخ الإسلام للإجابة عن مواضع التناقض المزعوم في القرآن، وعن غيرها من ألوان الإشكال في أذهان البعض تجاهه، واستمر التأليف في هذا المجال إلى يومنا هذا. والغرض من هذه الدراسة هو وصف المنهاج الذي أوجده العلماء المسلمون لمعالجة التعارض الظاهر بين نصوص القرآن نفسه وبينها والحقائق العلمية. ولتحقيق هذا المقصد قام الباحث بدراسة مفهوم التناقض والتعارض عند علماء المنطق وعلماء أصول الفقه، وما يترتب على وجودهما في قضية أو نص. درس كذلك منهج الأصوليين لمعالجة التعارض الظاهر بين النصوص الشرعية من خلال قراءة عدد من كتب أصول الفقه القديمة والحديثة. ثم اختار الباحث لدراسة مركزية ثلاثة تفاسير قديمة وتفسيرين من القرن العشرين؛ كلٌّ منها يختار آيات معينة لتضمنها نوعا أو آخر من الإشكال فيحاول أن يجيب عنه. فوجد الباحث أن معظم مؤلفيها اعتنوا إلى حد كبير بإشكالات نحوية وبلاغية، وأجادوا في ذلك. قلّت عنايتهم نسبيا بالتناقض المزعوم بين الآيات، واعتمدوا فيه المنهج الأصولي لمعالجة التعارض الظاهر، ومع ذلك بعض مؤلفي التفاسير العامة فاقهم في دقة النظر في القضايا المطروحة. ثم وجد أن هذه التفاسير لا تجدي في معالجة الاتهامات المعاصرة بأن القرآن يخالف بعض الحقائق العلمية. ولكن رغم ذلك، فإن المنهج الأصولي لمعالجة التعارض الظاهر بين النصوص الشرعية منهج قوي ومفيد، ويوفّر أصولا لمنهج فعال للتعامل مع القضايا التحريية، ولكن إيجاد منهج من هذا القبيل أمر يستدعي جهودا منسقة بين علماء المسلمين من المختصين في أصول الفقه، وفلسفة العلم، وغيرها من الاختصاصات. وأخيرا فإن أهمية هذا الموضوع تطالب العالم الإسلامي بإقامة معهد يعالج دعاوي الاختلاف في القرآن نفسه، ومخالفته للحقائق العلمية والقيم العالمية المزعومة.

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any other degrees at IIUM or other institutions.

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## CHAPTER ONE

### 1.1 THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL STATUS OF THE QUR'ĀN

The Qur'ān is the foundation of Islamic civilization. It presents the essential descriptions of reality that form the Muslim worldview: the relationship between the Creator and the created, between the seen and unseen worlds, and between this life and the hereafter. Moreover, it identifies the twin sources of knowledge about the various aspects of reality: revelation and empirical investigation. A relatively small portion of it (approximately 500 out of more than 6200 verses) provides prescriptions for behavior to govern the relationship between humans and their Creator as well as relations between human beings.

The epistemological significance of the Qur'ān was emphasized in a *ḥadīth* of Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) in which he described the questioning to which the dead will be subjected in the grave. When a hypocrite or a person infected by doubt is asked, “What knowledge do you have about this man [meaning Muḥammad (peace be upon him)]?” he will respond:

"لَا أَدْرِي، سَمِعْتُ النَّاسَ يَقُولُونَ شَيْئًا فَقُلْتُهُ."

“I don't know; I heard people saying something so I said the same.”<sup>1</sup>

A believer will respond:

"هُوَ مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ، جَاءَنَا بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ وَالْهُدَى، فَأَجَبْنَا وَاتَّبَعْنَا"

---

<sup>1</sup> Muḥammad ibn Ismā'īl al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, trans. Muḥammad Muḥsin Khan (Beirut: Dar al-Arabia, 4<sup>th</sup> edn. 1405 AH/1985 CE), 1:70-71, *ḥadīth* no. 86; Muslim ibn Ḥajjāj al-Naysābūrī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, translated by 'Abdul Ḥamīd Ṣiddīqī (Lahore: Sh. Muḥammad Ashraf Publishers, 1972), 2:430-431, *ḥadīth* no. 1977.

“He is Muḥammad, the Messenger of Allah; he came to us with clear signs (*bayyināt*) and guidance so we responded [to his call] and followed him.”<sup>2</sup>

According to the *ḥadīth* literature, the clear signs (*bayyināt*) that Prophet Muḥammad (peace be upon him) brought included certain physical miracles. However, they would only have been a sign for those who personally witnessed them. They would not have been, and will not be, particularly compelling for those who were not present to see them. Muḥammad (peace be upon him) identified the Qur’ān as his enduring miracle that would be permanently accessible to humanity, even after his death, saying:

«مَا مِنَ الْأَنْبِيَاءِ مِنْ نَبِيٍّ إِلَّا قَدْ أُعْطِيَ مِنَ الْآيَاتِ مَا مِثْلُهُ آمَنَ عَلَيْهِ الْبَشَرُ، وَإِنَّمَا كَانَ الَّذِي أُوتِيَتْ وَحِيًّا أَوْحَى اللَّهُ إِلَيَّ.»

“Every prophet without exception was given signs that were sufficient to make people believe in him. What I was given was a revelation that Allah revealed to me.”<sup>3</sup>

In a variant narration of the first *ḥadīth*, the believer’s answer is simply, “He is the Messenger of Allah,” whereupon the interrogating angels ask a follow-up question:

"وَمَا يُدْرِيكَ؟"

“How do you know?”

He responds:

"قَرَأْتُ كِتَابَ اللَّهِ فَأَمَنْتُ بِهِ وَصَدَّقْتُ"

“I read the Book of Allah, believed in it and confirmed its veracity.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 6:474, *ḥadīth* no. 504; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 1:90-91, *ḥadīth* no. 283.

<sup>4</sup> Sulaymān ibn al-Ash‘ath Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī, *Sunan Abū Dāwūd*, translated by Aḥmad Ḥasan (Lahore: Sh. Muḥammad Ashraf, 1984), 3:1330, *ḥadīth* no. 4735.

The Qur’ān contains what may be a unique feature among the world’s religious scriptures: a test for determining whether or not it has a divine source:

أَفَلَا يَتَدَبَّرُونَ الْقُرْآنَ وَلَوْ كَانَ مِنْ عِنْدِ غَيْرِ اللَّهِ لَوَجَدُوا فِيهِ اخْتِلَافًا كَثِيرًا

“Will they not then ponder on the Qur’ān? If it had been from anyone other than Allah they would have found much inconsistency in it” (al-Qur’ān, 4:82).

This research focuses upon a body of literature that developed over the course of Islamic history to respond to perceived inconsistencies and other difficulties in the Qur’ānic text. Two trends can be discerned regarding the spirit in which questions were raised about such difficulties. From the earliest era, references can be found to Muslims being puzzled or troubled by their perceptions of some difficulty in the Qur’ānic text. A famous example from the life of the Prophet (peace be upon him) was when verse 82 of Sūrah al-An‘ām was revealed:

الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَلَمْ يَلْبِسُوا إِيمَانَهُمْ بِظُلْمٍ أُولَئِكَ لَهُمُ الْأَمْنُ وَهُمْ مُهْتَدُونَ

“It is those who have faith, and do not mix their faith with wrongdoing, who will be secure, and it is they who are rightly guided.”

His companions were troubled by this and asked, “Which of us has not mixed his faith with wrongdoing (*zulm*)?” Allah’s Messenger (peace be upon him) told them:

إِنَّهُ لَيْسَ بِذَلِكَ، أَلَا تَسْمَعُ إِلَى قَوْلِ لُقْمَانَ لِبَنِيهِ: {إِنَّ الشِّرْكَ لَظُلْمٌ عَظِيمٌ}

“It is not that [meaning of *zulm*]. Haven’t you heard Luqmān’s statement to his son, ‘*Shirk* (ascribing partners to Allah) is, indeed, tremendous *zulm*’?”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 6:121, *ḥadīth* no. 153. The verse quoted is Sūrah Luqman (31):13.

The Companions' difficulty was that they had interpreted the term *zulm* according to its wider linguistic meaning. Allah's Messenger (peace be upon him) directed their attention to a narrower Qur'ānic usage of the term, which was the intended meaning in the passage.

An interesting example from the era of the Ṣaḥābah—the Companions of the Prophet (peace be upon him)—was a series of questions asked of 'Abd Allāh ibn 'Abbās, generally acknowledged as the leading scholar of exegesis among the younger generation of the Ṣaḥābah. Three of the questions concerned apparent contradictions between different verses, and one of them was a lexicographic difficulty with *'aqīdah* implications; that is, the use of *kāna* (past tense of the verb 'to be') in certain descriptions of Allah's attributes; for example:

وَكَانَ اللَّهُ غَفُورًا رَحِيمًا

“God is most forgiving and merciful” (al-Qur'ān, 4:96).

The questioner said:

"فَكَأَنَّهُ كَانَ ثُمَّ مَضَى."

“This seems to be something that was and then passed.”

Ibn 'Abbās answered all his questions in detail and then told him:

"فَلَا يَخْتَلِفُ عَلَيْكَ الْقُرْآنُ، فَإِنَّ كُلًّا مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ."

“Don't think that the Qur'ān has discrepancies for all of it is from Allah.”<sup>6</sup>

In some versions of the narration, when the man first expressed his misgivings, Ibn 'Abbās asked him, “[Are you] saying it's false?”<sup>7</sup> The man told him no; he was just

<sup>6</sup> *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 6:321-324, Chapter 255. (The narration is *mu'allaq*; that is, missing the latest part of the *isnād*.)

<sup>7</sup> Aḥmad ibn 'Alī Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *Taghlīq al-ta'liq 'alā Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, edited by Sa'īd 'Abd al-Raḥmān Mūsā al-Qazaqī (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1405 AH), 4:300.

confused. Some reports mention that the questioner was Nāfi' ibn al-Azraq, who went on to become a leader of the Khawārij. It is interesting that a person of such leanings would have felt the need to divulge his misgivings, given that the Khawārij used to kill Muslims whom they considered to be disbelievers. Therefore, the motive for the questions was not to challenge the Qur'ān's authenticity but, rather, a genuine desire to be shown how the misgivings could be resolved.

However, a second tendency also became apparent over time: persons and parties who raised questions about inconsistencies in the Qur'ān in a spirit of antagonistic challenge. This can be seen from the title of one of the earliest works composed specifically to answer such questions: *al-Radd 'alā al-mulḥiddīn fī tashābuh al-Qur'ān* (*The refutation of the atheists regarding the ambiguities of the Qur'ān*).<sup>8</sup> Its author, Muḥammad ibn al-Mustanīr, better known as Quṭrub (d. 206 AH), clearly had a polemic motive of defending the Qur'ān against hostile faultfinders.

Quṭrub's work (which, unfortunately, has not survived) represents a marked departure in the methodology of *tafsīr* (exegesis of the Qur'ān). The earliest *tafsīrs* were compiled using the methodology of *ḥadīth* scholars; they were limited to statements of the Prophet (peace be upon him) explaining the meaning of a few scattered verses, supplemented with explanations by scholars among the Ṣaḥābah and the Tābi'īn (the second generation of Muslims). Those early narration-based *tafsīrs* pointedly eschewed discussions that involved any kind of human reasoning, including perceived difficulties in the text.

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<sup>8</sup> 'Abd Allah ibn Ḥamad al-Manṣūr, *Mushkil al-Qur'ān: Buḥūth ḥawl istishkāl al-mufasssirrīn li āyāt al-Qur'ān al-Karīm, asbābuh, wa anwā'uh, wa ṭuruq daf'ih* (Al-Dammām, Saudi Arabia: Dār Ibn al-Jawzī, 1426 AH), 28.



The early opposition to the use of personal reasoning (*ra'y*) to discuss issues in the Qur'ān gave way to a measured use of *ra'y* to supplement narrations from the Prophet (peace be upon him) and authoritative scholars from the first two generations. This led to *tafsīrs* that provided commentary on each verse in the Qur'ān, arranged serially, as in the Muṣḥaf (the written copy of the Qur'ān). These comprehensive *tafsīrs* began to deal, to one degree or another, with perceived difficulties in certain verses. The earliest works of this type—for example, the *tafsīr* of Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī—tended to focus almost exclusively on grammatical problems. Al-Ṭabarī occasionally goes beyond grammatical issues. For example, in discussing verses 189-191 of Sūrah al-A'rāf, he addresses a question that was probably circulating at that time as an objection to an interpretation linking the passage to Adam and Eve: if it was about Adam and Eve, it implies that they committed *shirk* (i.e., misdirecting worship to other than God) which is difficult to reconcile with the mainstream Muslim belief that Adam was a prophet and that prophets are protected from such fundamental errors.<sup>9</sup> As time passed, the scope of the problems that exegetes dealt with expanded from rather straightforward grammatical issues to also include rhetorical issues, which required more extensive speculation: why was a certain phrasing or word choice used in one passage while an alternate was used in another passage with a similar topic?

Another type of *tafsīr*, modeled upon Quṭrub's, also continued to develop. These works focused exclusively on perceived difficulties and sought to resolve them, usually on a verse-by-verse basis. Some, like Quṭrub's, were polemical in nature. They perceived a challenge to the Qur'ān from hostile quarters and set out to defend it from such attacks. Others were more in the nature of musings and ponderings, seeking

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<sup>9</sup> See Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān fī ta'wīl al-Qur'ān*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākir & Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, n.d.), 13:315.

to unravel the Qur'ān's mysteries. In either case, it is quite evident that the authors recognized the importance of coherence and consistency to the Qur'ān's claim of uniqueness and its status as the foundation of Islamic civilization. This latter kind of exegesis constitutes a unique genre within the larger domain of *tafsīr* literature, one known as *tafsīr mushkil al-Qur'ān* (exegesis of difficulties in the Qur'ān).

## **1.2 THE EPISTEMOLOGICAL STATUS OF SCRIPTURE IN MAJOR WORLD RELIGIONS**

The stakes of defending their canonical scripture are probably higher for Muslims than for the adherents of other religions. For a large part of its history, the Christian Church made claims about the Bible similar to Muslim claims about the Qur'ān. However, historical criticism of the Old and New Testaments, which began to appear in the late seventeenth century CE, raised a steadily increasing body of doubts about the naïve claims of the medieval era. That was paralleled by the accumulation of knowledge about the natural sciences that was difficult to reconcile with biblical statements about the same subjects.<sup>10</sup> Early attempts to defend the ancient claims of the Bible's inerrancy met with increasing skepticism by learned Christians. Although a diehard faction is still fighting a rear-guard battle,<sup>11</sup> the majority of Christian theologians have responded to the challenges of modern scholarship by downgrading medieval claims about the nature of the Bible.<sup>12</sup> The mainstream Christian view has changed the focus

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<sup>10</sup> Fernhout, 178.

<sup>11</sup> See Jerry Falwell, with Ed Dobson and Ed Hindson (eds.), *The Fundamentalist phenomenon* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday and Company, 1981), 8. See also Norman Geisler and Thomas Howe, *When critics ask: a popular handbook on Bible difficulties* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> See John C. Meagher, *The truing of Christianity: Visions of life and thought for the future* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 85.

of revelation to the person of Jesus and his crucifixion; and the New Testament is now conceptualized as an inspired, but fallible, witness to that revelation.<sup>13</sup>

It is worth noting that this radical revisionist approach to scripture among Christian intellectuals found an echo among some Muslim intellectuals in the last few decades. These writers all identify themselves as Muslims; thus the views they espouse are presented as new Islamic interpretations. They tend to share an entrenched secular outlook; that is, religion is a private, personal matter that has nothing to do with the public space. Most of them are well educated and have strong backgrounds in research methodology. Some are university professors, but few of them have any background in systematic Shari'ah studies. They have had substantial contact and relationships with Western culture in general and orientalists in particular.<sup>14</sup>

Mohammed Arkoun (d. 2010), for instance, got a Ph.D. from the Sorbonne and did all of his teaching in Western universities. The closest he came to an association with a Muslim institution was sitting on the Board of Governors of the Institute of Ismaili Studies.<sup>15</sup> Naṣr Abū Zayd (d. 2010) did his graduate and undergraduate studies at Cairo University and became a professor in its Department of Arabic Language and Literature. His views met with such vehement opposition in Egypt that he was declared an apostate in a civil court. Unrelenting social pressure drove him out of Egypt in 1995, and he settled in Holland, where he taught until his death.<sup>16</sup> He denied the charge of apostasy, saying:

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<sup>13</sup> A prominent proponent of this view was Karl Barth in *Church Dogmatics*, I/2, 481-483; quoted by Fernhout, 195. See also, Meagher, 95; and Richard Bauckham, *Jesus and the eyewitnesses: The Gospels as eyewitness testimony* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Co., 2006), 5, passim.

<sup>14</sup> 'Abd al-Majīd al-Najjār, "al-Qirā'ah al-jadīdah li al-naṣṣ al-dīnī: 'arḍ wa naqd", *Majallat Majma' al-Fiqh al-Islāmī*, no. 16 (1428/2007), 2:101-103.

<sup>15</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohammed\\_Arkoun](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mohammed_Arkoun) (accessed 25 July, 2011).

<sup>16</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nasr\\_Abu\\_Zayd](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nasr_Abu_Zayd) (accessed 25 July, 2011).

I'm sure that I'm a Muslim. My worst fear is that people in Europe may consider and treat me as a critic of Islam. I'm not. I'm not a new Salman Rushdie and don't want to be welcomed and treated as such. I'm a researcher. I'm critical of old and modern Islamic thought. I treat the Qur'ān as a *naṣṣ* (text) given by God to Prophet Muḥammad. That text is put into a human language, which is the Arabic language. When I said so, I was accused of saying that the Prophet Muḥammad wrote the Qur'ān. This is not a crisis of thought but a crisis of conscience.<sup>17</sup>

Buddhists have an ambivalent, even paradoxical, attitude to their canonical literature, the *Tripitaka*. A good portion of the *Tripitaka's* approximately thirty volumes<sup>18</sup> is purportedly the words of the Buddha, even though they were only written down centuries after his death.<sup>19</sup> On the one hand, the Buddha is an infallible Teacher, and all that he taught is true and none of it false.<sup>20</sup> Yet, what he taught, the *dharma*,<sup>21</sup> is more generally the reality that he discovered, something timeless and universal.<sup>22</sup> According to one statement attributed to the Buddha, whatever doctrines lead to awakening are *dharma*.<sup>23</sup> The Buddha's metaphor, comparing scripture to a raft, was used by the Mahayana School to treat scripture as a provisional expedient: A man used a raft to cross a river. He found it so useful that once he reached the other side he decided to strap it on his back and take it with him on his overland hike.<sup>24</sup> The teachings are a guide to achieving an experience, "and at best, the sacred text is never

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<sup>17</sup> From "When the professor can't teach," an interview conducted with him by Nadia Abou El-Magd and published in *al-Ahram Weekly*, 15-21 June, 2010. Found at <http://www.arabworldbooks.com/news10.html> on 25 July, 2011.

<sup>18</sup> See <http://www.palitext.com/> (accessed 20 November, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Richard Gombrich, 9-10; Roy C. Amore and Julia Ching, "The Buddhist Tradition," in *World religions: Eastern traditions*, edited by Willard Oxtoby (Don Mills, Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2002), 220-221.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> This is a transliteration of the Sanskrit version of the word. The Pali version is *dhamma*.

<sup>22</sup> Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *What is scripture? A comparative approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 151.

<sup>23</sup> *Anguttara Nikaya*, 7:9(79):2, in Smith, 150-151.

<sup>24</sup> Allagaddupama Sutta, 13, in *The wisdom of Buddhism*, compiled by Mel Thompson (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000), 105. See also Gombrich, 23-24.

more than an aid that must be abandoned by each individual at a certain point on his journey toward the Buddhist goal of enlightenment”.<sup>25</sup>

Hinduism has, perhaps, the most open and syncretic approach to scripture and canonical literature. This is not very surprising, considering that ‘Hinduism’ is a fairly recent label for an amorphous religion or family of religions lacking a unified system of belief or practice.<sup>26</sup> Unlike the other major world religions, it cannot be ascribed to a single founder.<sup>27</sup> One criterion for distinguishing Hinduism from other religions of the Indian Subcontinent is reverence for the Vedas, a compilation of hymns praising a variety of deities, as well as incantations and spells, dating from around 1500 to 1200 BCE.<sup>28</sup> The term Veda is also employed in a wider sense to include not only the original texts but also commentaries upon them, including symbolic interpretations of their meanings and philosophical speculations based upon them.<sup>29</sup> The latter category, called Upanishads, continued to be composed into the seventeenth century CE.<sup>30</sup> Ironically, although Veda is officially given the highest status in Hinduism, very few Hindus have any direct contact with it (beyond a few hymns that are recited regularly at temple and home liturgies). The core texts are in an ancient form of Sanskrit that only devoted experts master.<sup>31</sup> The texts with which most Hindus have some form of ongoing contact are the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, epic poems from the sixth and third centuries BCE, respectively. Yet, there is no seal on the category of sacred

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<sup>25</sup> Reginald Ray, “Buddhism: Sacred text written and realized” in *The holy book: A comparative perspective*, edited by Frederick M. Denny & Rodney L. Taylor (Columbia, South Carolina: The University of South Carolina Press, 1985), 148.

<sup>26</sup> Narayanan, 13-14.

<sup>27</sup> Klaus Kostermaier, *Hindu writings: a short introduction to the major sources* (Oxford: One World Publications, 2000), 1.

<sup>28</sup> Robert C. Lester, “Hinduism: Veda and sacred texts, in *The holy book: a comparative perspective*, edited by Frederick M. Denny & Rodney L. Taylor (Columbia, South Carolina: The University of South Carolina Press, 1985), 126; Gavin D. Flood, “Hinduism” in *Sacred writings*, edited by Jean Holmes with John Bowker (London: Pinter Publishers, 1994), 72.

<sup>29</sup> Kostermaier, 4, and Lester, 134.

<sup>30</sup> Flood, 77.

<sup>31</sup> Vasudha Narayanan, “The Hindu tradition” in *World religions: Eastern traditions*, edited by Willard Oxtoby (Don Mills Ontario: Oxford University Press, 2002, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition), 22; See also: Flood, 72.

literature. “[T]he compositions of modern holy men and women are also regarded as sacred by their devotees.”<sup>32</sup>

### 1.3 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Given the status of the Qur’ān in Islamic civilization and the stakes involved for Muslims in successfully defending the Qur’ān against accusations of inconsistency and error, Muslim scholars have expended a considerable amount of effort to that end throughout Islamic history. The most notable manifestation of this endeavor is the *tafsīr* genre known as *tafsīr mushkil al-Qur’ān* (exegesis of difficulties in the Qur’ān). After fifteen centuries, it is time to take stock: how successful has this collective endeavour been? In order to do so, the following questions are pertinent:

### 1.4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What constitutes irreconcilable contradiction, and what is the implication of contradiction for the viability of a proposition or a system of propositions?
2. What strategies have Muslim exegetes used to reconcile apparent textual contradictions in the Qur’ān?
3. What are the differences and similarities between various works in the *tafsīr* genre of *mushkil al-Qur’ān*, and to what extent has the field evolved over time?
4. How successful have the authors of works on *mushkil al-Qur’ān* been in achieving their objectives?

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<sup>32</sup> Flood, 71.

5. What contemporary challenges to the Qur'ān remain unaddressed, and what are the most effective means for doing so?

### **1.5 OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH**

1. To define contradiction and explore its role in the history of ideas with respect to justification.
2. To identify and analyze the strategies Muslim exegetes have employed to reconcile apparent textual contradictions in the Qur'ān.
3. To compare the methodologies and concerns of various authors in the *tafsīr* genre of *mushkil al-Qur'ān*, and to determine to what extent the field has evolved over time.
4. To assess the academic value of the *tafsīr* genre of *mushkil al-Qur'ān* and the extent to which its practitioners have achieved their objectives.
5. To identify and discuss a sampling of issues raised by contemporary critics of the Qur'ān for which responses cannot be found in the existing *mushkil al-Qur'ān* literature, and to outline the proper methodology for responding to the various kinds of perceived difficulties in the Qur'ān.

### **1.6 JUSTIFICATION OF THE PROBLEM**

Down through history Muslims have apprehended that defense of the Qur'ān against allegations of contradiction and error form the keystone of their epistemological framework. A project of such importance to the vitality of Islamic civilization is worthy of study. It is equally important to assess the extent to which the project has

been successful, to identify the contemporary challenges to the Qur'ān and to attempt to address them.

## **1.7 METHODOLOGY OF RESEARCH**

The methodology of this research is qualitative, primarily based upon analyzing and comparing works of *tafsīr*, *'ulūm al-Qur'ān* and *uṣūl al-fiqh*. In addition, some consideration will be given to works on the methodology of theory justification in the philosophy of science.

## **1.8 LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **1.8.1 Studies of the Genre of Mushkil al-Qur'ān**

'Abd Allah ibn Ḥamad al-Manṣūr wrote a Ph.D thesis on the topic in Arabic titled *Mushkil al-Qur'ān: Buḥūth ḥawl istishkāl al-mufasssirrīn li āyāt al-Qur'ān al-Karīm, asbābuh, wa anwā'uh, wa ṭuruq daf'ih* (*Difficulties of the Qur'ān: Studies of Qur'ānic verses that exegetes perceived as difficult, their causes, types, and the means of resolving them*). The author provides a useful compilation of titles in the field, identification of factors that lead to the perception of difficulty, and strategies for resolving them. However, he does not provide much critical assessment of the individual works, nor does he address contemporary criticisms of the Qur'ān.

The only specific academic English work this researcher found on the genre in English is a woeful quarter-page in Brill's *Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān* that has virtually nothing to say on the topic. G. H. Jantzen, in *Contemporary Egyptian Exegesis of the Qur'ān*, surveys twentieth-century Muslim attempts to square Qur'ānic statements about physical phenomena with the findings of modern science.