
A Critical Study of Arthur Jeffery's Approach to the Qur'an as Scripture

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Abstract

Arthur Jeffery's *The Qur'an as Scripture* (1952) remains one of the most influential works in Western Qur'anic studies. Frequently cited as a foundational text, the book attempts to situate the Qur'an within the category of "scriptural religions" through historical-critical analysis. This article argues that while Jeffery's work reflects significant philological engagement, it is structured by methodological and epistemological biases inherited from Orientalist scholarship. These biases shape his understanding of revelation, textual transmission, variant readings, and canonization. By tracing the intellectual origins of Jeffery's assumptions, examining their reinforcement by Orientalist predecessors and successors, and critically engaging both classical and contemporary Muslim responses, this study demonstrates that Jeffery's conclusions are not inevitable scholarly results but products of a particular academic tradition. The article concludes by emphasising the necessity of methodological pluralism in Qur'anic studies.

Keywords: Arthur Jeffery; Orientalism; Qur'anic Studies; Textual Criticism; Biblical Criticism; Qiraat; Manuscripts; Islamic Historiography, Oral Tradition

1. Introduction and Research Problem

Arthur Jeffery (1892–1959) is widely regarded as one of the most important Western scholars of the Qur'an. His *The Qur'an as Scripture* sought to introduce Islam's sacred text to Western academia by analyzing it within a framework familiar from Biblical studies. Jeffery explicitly states that Islam "fell among the Scriptural religions" and that the Qur'an must therefore be studied "as scripture in the historical sense."¹ This seemingly neutral classification, however, is not without consequence.

The central research problem addressed in this article is whether Jeffery's application of Biblical critical models to the Qur'an constitutes a legitimate comparative method or reflects an inherited bias that distorts the Qur'an's own epistemological framework. While Jeffery claims scholarly

objectivity, Muslim scholars have consistently argued that his approach presupposes instability, redaction, and human authorship in ways incompatible with Islamic tradition.²

This article argues that a critical reassessment of Jeffery's *The Qur'an as Scripture* is necessary for three reasons. First, his work continues to be cited as authoritative in Western academia. Second, many of its claims are presented without sufficient engagement with classical Muslim scholarship. Third, contemporary Muslim scholars have produced substantial research drawing on manuscripts, transmission sciences, and historiography that challenges Jeffery's assumptions while maintaining academic rigor.

2. Literature Review

Western Qur'anic studies emerged within a broader Orientalist tradition shaped by Enlightenment skepticism and Protestant Biblical criticism. Theodor Noldeke's *Geschichte des Qorāns* established the assumption that the Qur'an developed gradually and can be reconstructed through literary analysis.³ Ignaz Goldziher extended this skepticism by treating Islamic traditions as theological constructions rather than reliable historical data.⁴

Richard Bell's work further reinforced the idea of editorial intervention within the Qur'anic text, suggesting rearrangement and redaction during the compilation process.⁵ John Wansbrough radicalized this trajectory by questioning the very existence of a fixed Qur'anic canon in the first Islamic century.⁶

In contrast, classical Muslim scholarship represented by al-Zarkashi, al-Suyuti, and Ibn al-Jazari developed sophisticated sciences of Qur'anic transmission centuries earlier.⁷ Contemporary scholars such as Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami, Jonathan A.C. Brown, William Graham, and Harald Motzki have revisited these debates using modern academic tools while respecting Islamic methodological assumptions.

Despite extensive literature on Jeffery and Qur'anic textual history, several gaps remain. First, many Western studies cite Jeffery without critically interrogating his assumptions. Second, Muslim critiques are often dismissed as apologetic rather than evaluated on methodological grounds. Third, few studies attempt a systematic synthesis of Orientalist findings with classical Islamic scholarship.

This article seeks to address these gaps by critically analyzing Jeffery's work within its intellectual context, engaging both classical and contemporary Muslim responses, and offering a balanced reassessment that neither dismisses Western scholarship nor marginalizes Islamic epistemology.

3. Jeffery's Concept of "Scripture"

Jeffery's foundational bias lies in his definition of scripture. He asserts that "Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, is a religion of a Book," thereby placing the Qur'an within a framework shaped by Biblical textual history.⁸ This classification imports assumptions of redaction, canonization, and textual instability.

Jeffery repeatedly emphasizes that revelation during the Prophet's lifetime existed in "fragmentary written materials and imperfect human memory."⁹ He further claims that the Qur'an only achieved textual form through later editorial activity.¹⁰ Such language subtly shifts authority from divine preservation to human agency.

Central to Jeffery's concept of scripture is his treatment of variant readings and early codices. He presents reports concerning the codices of Companions such as Ibn Masud and Ubayy b. Kaab as evidence that multiple textual forms of the Qur'an circulated in the early community.¹¹ From Jeffery's perspective, this plurality resembles the textual diversity found in early Biblical manuscripts and supports the view that the Qur'anic text evolved toward standardization over time.

Jeffery privileges written codices over oral transmission, treating oral memorization as secondary.¹² This methodological choice is central to his analysis and forms the basis of subsequent critiques regarding structural bias and Orientalist assumptions.

4. Nature and Origin of Jeffery's Bias

Privileging Written Evidence

Jeffery consistently prioritizes written manuscripts over oral transmission, asserting that "written evidence must always take precedence over memory."¹³ This assumption reflects Western textual bias rather than Islamic epistemology. Classical Muslim scholars considered mass oral transmission (tawatur) the strongest form of verification.¹⁴

Misreading Variant Readings

Jeffery treats the existence of multiple qiraat as evidence of textual plurality, stating that "uniformity was achieved only after a process of suppression." Ibn al-Jazari, however, demonstrates that canonical readings were rigorously authenticated and divinely sanctioned.¹⁵

Companion Codices

Jeffery interprets reports about the codices of Ibn Masud and Ubayy ibn Kaab as rival textual traditions. Al-Suyuti explicitly clarifies that these were pedagogical aids, not alternative canons.¹⁶

Epistemological Reductionism: Jeffery applies historical skepticism developed for Biblical studies without adopting Islamic criteria

of authenticity (isnad, tawatur). This asymmetry constitutes a structural bias rather than neutral criticism.

5. Orientalist Reinforcement of Jeffery

Arthur Jeffery's conclusions in *The Qur'an as Scripture* did not emerge in an intellectual vacuum. Rather, they were both shaped and reinforced by a well-established Orientalist scholarly tradition that approached the Qur'an through historical-critical paradigms derived from Biblical studies.

Theodor Noldeke and the Historical-Critical Paradigm

The most significant influence on Jeffery's work is Theodor Noldeke, whose *Geschichte des Qorāns* laid the foundation for Western Qur'anic philology. Noldeke approached the Qur'an as a text that developed gradually over time, proposing a chronological reordering of surahs based on linguistic and stylistic criteria.¹⁷ Jeffery adopts this historical framework implicitly, particularly in his assumption that Qur'anic form and content reflect evolving historical circumstances.

Ignaz Goldziher and the Problem of Tradition

Ignaz Goldziher further reinforced Jeffery's perspective by casting doubt on the reliability of early Islamic traditions. Goldziher argued that many Islamic reports, including those related to Qur'anic readings, reflected later theological and legal developments rather than authentic early history.¹⁸ This approach encouraged scholars to read variant readings and codex reports as signs of doctrinal contestation rather than as regulated components of revelation.

Richard Bell and Redactional Assumptions

Richard Bell advanced Orientalist Qur'anic studies by emphasizing redactional activity within the Qur'an. Bell argued that the present arrangement of the Qur'an does not reflect its original order and that editorial intervention occurred during the compilation process.¹⁹ Although Jeffery does not fully endorse Bell's redaction theories, he shares the assumption that the Qur'an's final form resulted from a human process of selection and organization.²⁰

6. Classical Muslim Scholarly Responses

Classical Muslim scholarship developed a comprehensive and internally coherent framework for understanding the revelation, transmission, and preservation of the Qur'an long before the emergence of modern Orientalist critique. Far from being silent on issues of compilation, variant readings, and textual authority, early Muslim scholars addressed these matters systematically through what later came to be known as the 'ulūm al-Qur'ān. When examined closely, these classical discussions

directly challenge the assumptions underlying Arthur Jeffery's analysis in *The Qur'an as Scripture*.

Quranic Preservation as a Dual Oral–Written System

One of the most consistent themes in classical Muslim responses to questions of textual integrity is the emphasis on dual preservation: oral memorization (*hifz*) and written documentation. Al-Zarkashi states explicitly that the Qur'an "was preserved in the breasts of men and in written records," stressing that reliance on memorization was not a sign of textual fragility but a deliberate and communal practice.¹²¹ This dual system ensured that any written record was constantly verified against a living oral tradition.

This understanding directly challenges Jeffery's privileging of written evidence. By evaluating the Qur'an primarily through manuscripts and codices, Jeffery implicitly treats orality as secondary and unstable. Classical scholars, by contrast, viewed mass memorization (*tawātur*) as the primary guarantor of textual stability, with written materials serving a confirmatory role.

Compilation of the Quran and the Role of the Companions

Classical Muslim historians and Qur'anic scholars provide detailed accounts of the Qur'an's compilation, particularly during the caliphates of Abū Bakr and 'Uthmān. Al-Suyuti reports that the initial compilation under Abū Bakr was motivated by concern for preservation following the deaths of Qur'an memorizers, and that it involved careful verification requiring multiple witnesses for each verse. This process, far from being haphazard, reflects a high level of communal scrutiny.

The standardization under Uthman is often misinterpreted in Orientalist literature as an act of textual suppression. Classical scholars, however, describe it as a measure to prevent dialectal confusion, not to eliminate competing textual traditions. Al-Suyuti clarifies that Uthman standardized the written form while preserving the authorized modes of recitation. This distinction undermines the claim that standardization implies prior textual chaos.²²

Variant Readings (Qiraat) and Their Theological Function

Perhaps the most significant point of divergence between Jeffery and classical Muslim scholarship concerns the interpretation of variant readings. Jeffery treats reports of variant readings as evidence of textual plurality and instability. Classical scholars, however, consistently maintained that the *qirā'āt* were divinely sanctioned.

Al-Zarkashi explains that the revelation of the Qur'an in multiple modes (*ahruf*) was intended as a facilitation for diverse Arab dialects, not as a source of contradiction. Al-Jazari later systematized this

understanding by establishing rigorous criteria for the acceptance of canonical readings, requiring reliable transmission, conformity with Arabic grammar, and compatibility with the 'Uthmānic consonantal text.²³

This framework demonstrates that variation was regulated, not accidental, and that differences in recitation did not undermine the unity of the Qur'anic text. Jeffery's failure to fully engage this tradition results in a misinterpretation of the significance of variant material.

Reports of Companion Codices Reconsidered

Jeffery places particular emphasis on reports concerning codices attributed to Companions such as Ibn Mas'ūd and Ubayy b. Ka'b. Classical scholars did not deny the existence of personal codices, but they interpreted them as private study copies, not as competing canonical texts.

Al-Suyuti notes that such codices often reflected differences in arrangement, explanatory notes, or abrogated recitations, none of which challenged the integrity of the Qur'an as preserved by the community. By treating these reports as evidence of textual competition, Jeffery overlooks the interpretive conventions through which classical scholars understood these materials.²⁴

Authority, Isnād, and Scholarly Consensus

A defining feature of classical Muslim responses is their reliance on isnād-based verification and scholarly consensus (*ijmā'*). Al-Tabari emphasizes that Qur'anic readings were accepted not on individual preference but through widespread communal transmission. This principle ensured that no single individual or group could alter the text.

Jonathan A.C. Brown observes that Western scholars often underestimate the epistemic rigor of isnād systems, dismissing them as circular or apologetic.⁸ Classical Muslim scholars, however, viewed isnād as a critical historical tool that allowed for both preservation and critical evaluation.²⁵

Implications for Jeffery's Claims

When read in light of classical Muslim scholarship, Jeffery's conclusions regarding textual instability appear less compelling. The phenomena he identifies variant readings, early codices, and compilation efforts were not hidden or suppressed within Islamic tradition. Rather, they were openly discussed, theorized, and regulated within a robust scholarly framework.

This does not render Jeffery's work irrelevant, but it does reveal the limitations of an approach that engages Islamic sources without adopting their interpretive logic. Classical Muslim scholarship offers not merely apologetic responses, but a coherent alternative epistemology that must be taken seriously in any academic study of the Qur'an.

7. Contemporary Muslim Responses

Contemporary Muslim scholarship on the Quran has emerged in direct engagement with Orientalist studies, including the works of Arthur Jeffery. Unlike earlier apologetic responses, modern Muslim scholars employ historical methods, manuscript analysis, and interdisciplinary approaches that grounded in classical Islamic epistemology. Their work represents a significant methodological progress that challenges Jeffery's assumptions without rejecting academic rigor.

Muhammad Mustafa al-A'zamī and the Question of Textual Integrity

One of the most influential contemporary responses to Jeffery's scholarship is offered by Muhammad Mustafa al-A'zamī. In *The History of Qur'anic Text from Revelation to Compilation*, al-A'zamī directly addresses claims regarding textual instability and late canonization. He argues that the Qur'an was compiled through a public, transparent, and collectively verified process, fundamentally different from the historical development of the Biblical canon.²⁶

Dr. Hafiz Zubair Ahmad

Dr. Zubair argues that Jeffery's methodology is flawed because it imposes Western manuscript-centered assumptions on an oral culture.²⁷ He writes that "the Qur'an's preservation is based on collective memory reinforced by verification, not solely by written codices."³⁴ He criticizes Jeffery's treatment of qiraat, stating that controlled variations are a feature, not a flaw.³

Dr. Samiullah & Safarish Khan

Dr. Samiullah emphasizes that authentic readings were transmitted through verified chains (isnād), which preserved reliability.²⁸ Safarish Khan confirms that early reports about individual codices reflect pedagogical practice, not alternative scriptures.

8. Critical Evaluation (Synthesis)

Jeffery's work is neither malicious nor insignificant. His documentation remains valuable. However, his conclusions are constrained by methodological inheritance, epistemological reductionism, and Orientalist reinforcement. The failure to distinguish authorized variation from instability remains his most significant weakness.²⁹

Edward Said's critique of Orientalism provides a valuable lens for understanding this phenomenon. The authority of Jeffery's conclusions often rests less on decisive empirical evidence than on the institutional dominance of Western scholarly norms. Recognizing this does not invalidate Jeffery's work, but it relativizes its authority.³⁰

9. Conclusion

Arthur Jeffery's *The Qur'an as Scripture* reflects both the strengths and limitations of early Western Qur'anic studies. While influential, it is shaped by assumptions that conflict with Islamic epistemology. Classical and contemporary Muslim scholarship provides a coherent, empirically supported account of Qur'anic preservation that challenges Jeffery's conclusions. Methodological pluralism, rather than epistemic hierarchy, offers the most balanced path forward.

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