

A Critical Study of Arthur Jeffery's Views on the Collection and Compilation of the Qur'an

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Abstract

Arthur Jeffery (1892–1959) is among the most influential Orientalist scholars who examined the traditional Islamic narrative of the Qur'an's collection and preservation. In his writings, particularly *The Qur'an as Scripture*, Jeffery argued that the Qur'an was not compiled during the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and that later political and historical factors shaped its final form. This article critically examines Jeffery's objections through a comprehensive analysis of Qur'anic verses, Prophetic traditions, early Islamic historiography, and classical as well as modern Muslim scholarship. By engaging all available primary quotations and offering logical and textual commentary on each, this study demonstrates that the Qur'an was preserved through a dual system of memorization and writing under the direct supervision of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), officially compiled during the caliphate of Abu Bakr (RA), and standardized under Uthman (RA) to preserve unity, not to alter content. The study further argues that Jeffery's methodology reflects a Biblical textual paradigm that is not applicable to the Qur'anic transmission model. The findings reaffirm that the Qur'an's compilation was divinely guided, historically verifiable, and textually secure from the earliest period of Islam. The study concludes that Jeffery's objections are based on misunderstanding and selective reading of historical sources.

Keywords: Qur'anic Compilation, Arthur Jeffery, Orientalism, Mushaf, Preservation of the Qur'an, Islamic Textual History

1. Introduction

The Qur'an is the central religious text of Islam and is believed by Muslims to be the literal word of Allah, revealed to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) through Angel Gabriel over a period of twenty-three years. From the earliest period of Islam, the Qur'an was regarded as both a recited and a written scripture. Muslim belief in its preservation is not merely theological but is grounded in historical practices of memorization, documentation, and verification. Muslims further believe that Allah Himself guaranteed its preservation from distortion.

Despite this, several Orientalist scholars have challenged the Islamic belief of Qur'anic preservation. Among them, Arthur Jeffery stands out for his systematic critique of the Qur'an's compilation history, particularly in *The Qur'an as Scripture*. Jeffery questioned the completeness of the Qur'an at the Prophet's death and interpreted later compilations as evidence of textual instability. He suggested that the Qur'an evolved through multiple stages of editing and recension, influenced by political and cultural forces. This article critically reassesses Jeffery's claims by examining the Qur'an's preservation during the Prophet's lifetime, its compilation under Abu Bakr (RA), and its standardization under Uthman (RA) through a comprehensive engagement with Islamic primary sources and scholarly consensus.

Here we briefly study the process of the Quran's preservation and compilation during the lifetime of the blessed Prophet (PBUH) and during the Era of Hazrat Abu-Bakr Siddique (RA) and Hazrat Usman (RA).

2. Literature Review

Western Qur'anic scholarship has often approached the Qur'an using methodologies developed for Biblical textual criticism. Scholars such as Theodor Noldeke, Richard Bell, Montgomery Watt, and Arthur Jeffery applied historical critical methods to analyze Qur'anic origins. Jeffery's work became particularly influential because of his focus on variant readings and early codices.

However, Muslim scholars such as Imam al-Suyuti, al-Zarkashi, al-Qurtubi, and, in the modern period, Dr. Muhammad Mustafa al-Azami, have consistently emphasized the uniqueness of the Qur'an's transmission model. These scholars argue that Orientalist conclusions often stem from methodological bias rather than empirical evidence.

While previous studies have either defended Islamic tradition or critiqued Orientalist assumptions, there remains a gap in **systematic, quotation based analytical engagement** with Jeffery's claims that integrates Qur'anic, Hadith, historical, and Orientalist sources in a single framework.

3. Preservation of the Qur'an During the Prophet's Lifetime Divine Guarantee

The Islamic understanding of Qur'anic preservation is rooted in divine assurance Allah clearly declared His responsibility for its preservation:

"إِنَّا نَحْنُ نَزَّلْنَا الْكِتَابَ إِنَّا لَهُ لَحَافِظُونَ"^١

"Indeed, it is We who sent down the Qur'an, and indeed, We will be its guardian."

This verse establishes a divine framework for preservation. Human efforts of memorization, writing, compilation are understood as mechanisms through which this divine promise is fulfilled. Human efforts of compilation are understood as part of this divine promise, not separate from it. Muslim scholars interpret later compilations not as human corrections, but as instruments through which divine protection was realized.

Methods of Preservation

During the life of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the Qur'an was preserved in two main ways: **systematic memorization** and **written documentation**. Many companions memorized the Qur'an completely. They were known as **Huffaz**. At the same time, the Prophet appointed scribes, such as Zaid ibn Thabit, to write the revealed verses.

The verses were written on parchment, leather, bones, and palm leaves. The Prophet (PBUH) ensured accuracy by asking scribes to read back what they wrote. The Prophet (PBUH) personally supervised this process and verified written material. He also reviewed the Qur'an with Angel Gabriel every year, and twice in his final year.

Jeffery's Critique of the Prophetic Period

Arthur Jeffery argued that no complete written Qur'an existed at the Prophet's death. He claimed the verses were scattered and unorganized, which could have risk of loss or alteration. He writes:

“To begin with it is quite certain that when the Prophet died there was no collected, collated, arranged body of material of his revelations.”²

From this objection Jeffery wants to create doubts regarding the Quran that as it was in scattered form and was on the risk of alterations. Jeffery notes the absence of a single bound volume but incorrectly assumes this meant weak preservation. He overlooks the strong oral culture and systematic memorization of early Muslims.

Critical Evaluation:

Jeffery confuses the absence of a bound volume with absence of preservation. Jeffery's statement is factually correct only in a narrow sense there was no single bound volume. However, his inference that this implied textual instability ignores the highly developed oral culture of seventh-century Arabia and the Prophet's direct supervision of verse arrangement. Ironically, Jeffery admits:

“The Qur'an still stands as a unique composition.”

This admission undermines his broader claim of instability.

Islamic Response

Muslim scholars clarify that the Qur'an was not compiled into one book because revelation was ongoing. However, preservation was ensured

mainly through memorization, supported by writing. The centrality of memorization is emphasized in the divine statement:

"وَأَنْزَلْتُ عَلَيْكَ كِتَاباً لَا يَغْسِلُهُ الْمَاءُ"³

"I have revealed to you a Book that cannot be washed away with water."

This Hadith ensuring that the Qur'an could never be erased through physical destruction, this statement highlights the Qur'an's protection through memorization, ensuring it could not be destroyed like written manuscripts, a problem historically observed in earlier scriptures.

Qur'anic Self-Identification as a Written Text

The Qur'an itself calls itself "**al-Kitab**" (**the Book**), showing that it was written. Hadith reports confirm that companions compiled verses under the Prophet's guidance. This proves that the Qur'an was preserved carefully and systematically.

The Qur'an repeatedly refers to itself as al-Kitab:

"ذَلِكَ الْكِتَابُ لَا رَبَّ لَهُ دُوَيْلَمُتَّقِينَ"⁴

"This is the Book (al-Kitab) in which there is no doubt."

The use of the term al-Kitab confirms that the Qur'an was recorded in written form from its earliest period. Molana Abdul Majid Daryabadi explains:

"The Quran thus at its very beginning declares itself to be a written, not an oral, Revelation."⁵

This directly contradicts claims that the Qur'an was initially an unstructured oral tradition later reduced to writing.

Prophetic Supervision of Compilation

Muslim scholars explain that the Qur'an was not compiled into a single book because revelation was still continuing. However, the Qur'an was fully preserved through memorization and written records. The Prophet (PBUH) personally supervised its arrangement and forbade mixing Hadith with Qur'anic text to avoid confusion. Zaid ibn Thabit reports:

"عَنْ زَيْدِ بْنِ ثَابَتٍ قَالَ: كُنَّا عِنْدَ رَسُولِ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ نَوْلِفُ الْقُرْآنَ مِنَ الرِّقَاعِ"⁶

"We were with the Messenger of Allah collecting the Qur'an on pieces of cloth."

This Hadith proves that compilation and arrangement of verses took place under the Prophet's supervision. Al-Bayhaqi further clarifies:

"وَإِنَّمَا أَرَادَ تَأْلِيفَ مَا نَزَّلَ مِنَ الْآيَاتِ الْمُنْفَرِقةَ، فِي سُورَتَهَا وَجَمِيعَهَا فِيهَا بِإِشَارَةِ النَّبِيِّ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ"⁷

These reports prove prophetic supervision of compilation and arrangement and demonstrate that verses were not merely written but were compiled and arranged into surahs under prophetic instruction, not later editorial decisions. To protect the Qur'an from mixing with Hadith, the Prophet (PBUH) commanded:

⁸"لَا تَكْتُبُوا عَنِّي... وَمَنْ كَتَبَ عَنِّي غَيْرُ الْقُرْآنَ فَلِيَمْحُه"

This instruction ensured a clear distinction between Qur'anic revelation and Hadith, preventing textual modification. This prohibition reflects extraordinary textual discipline and an early awareness of the risk of textual alteration unparalleled in earlier scriptural traditions.

Orientalist Admissions

Despite his critique, Jeffery himself acknowledged:

"The Qur'an shows signs of Jewish and Christian influence but still stands as a unique composition."⁹

This acknowledgment weakens Jeffery's own argument, as he concedes the Qur'an's originality and coherence. Montgomery Watt states: "For over twenty years... Muhammad continued to receive such revelations."¹⁰

This supports the Islamic view of gradual revelation and continuous preservation. Richard Bell admits:

"Most of them were probably written down during Muhammad lifetime."¹¹

Bell's admission contradicts the claim that the Qur'an was written only after the Prophet's death. These admissions significantly weaken the Orientalist claim of late Qur'anic construction and implicitly support early documentation.

Muslim Scholars Views

Muslim scholars maintain that the Qur'an was carefully preserved during the lifetime of Prophet Muhammad (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) through both memorization and written documentation. Dr. Muhammad Mustafa Al-Azami emphasizes that the process of collection occurred under divine guidance, leaving "no room for human editing or interference,"¹² thereby affirming that the Qur'an remains exactly as it was revealed. Similarly, Imam Jalaluddin al-Suyuti affirms that the Qur'an was compiled under the Prophet's direct supervision, noting that "the Qur'an was compiled during the life of the Prophet under his supervision"¹³.

Together, these scholarly positions underscore that by the Prophet's passing, the Qur'an had been fully recorded in writing and firmly preserved through collective memorization, ensuring an unbroken and authentic transmission safeguarded from distortion.

4. Compilation Under Abu Bakr (RA)

After the Prophet's death, many Huffaz were martyred in the Battle of Yamama. Caliph Umar (RA) feared that portions of the Qur'an might be lost. He advised Caliph Abu Bakr (RA) to compile the Qur'an into one manuscript.

Zaid ibn Thabit (RA) was appointed to lead this task. He collected verses from written materials and verified memories. Only verses

confirmed by two witnesses were included. The compiled *Mushaf* was kept with Abu Bakr, then Umar, and later Hafsa (RA).

Jeffery objection:

Jeffery argued that the compilation during Abu Bakr's time was a reaction to the deaths of many reciters at the Battle of Yamama. He considered it a personal effort, not a divinely commanded one, and referred to this stage as an unofficial and uncertain attempt. Jeffery argued that it was a private collection rather than an official collection. As Jeffery mentions:

“It was a private not an official undertaking.”¹⁴

Jeffery claimed this compilation was a private and unofficial effort, motivated by fear rather than divine guidance. This statement ignores strong historical evidence of state authority and community consensus.

Rebuttal:

This claim is contradicted by *Sahih al-Bukhari*, where Abu Bakr officially commands Zaid for collection of holy Quran. This proves official authorization by the Caliph, refuting the idea of a private effort. Zaid bin Thabit narrates:

”إِنْ عَمِّرْتَنِي فَقَالَ... وَإِنِّي أُرِي أَنْ تَأْمِرَ بِجَمْعِ الْقُرْآنِ”¹⁵

“You used to write the Divine Inspiration... so you should search for the Qur'an and collect it.”

This Hadith shows that the compilation was motivated by preservation, not personal interest. Islamic sources confirm that Abu Bakr, upon Umar's advice, initiated the first official compilation of the Qur'an to preserve the revelation. The *Mushaf* was publicly accepted, proving it was not a private effort. Al-Suyuti explains:

”إِنَّمَا لَمْ يَجْمِعْ الْقُرْآنَ فِي الْمَسْكُنِ... فَلَمَّا انْقَضَى نَزْوَلِهِ بِوْفَاتِهِ أَلَّمْ أَخْلَفَ اللَّهُ الْخَلْفَاءِ الرَّاشِدِينَ ذَلِكَ”¹⁶

This interpretation connects human action directly to divine guidance. Islamic sources clearly show that this was an official state project. It was approved by leading companions and accepted by the entire Muslim community. The strict verification process ensured complete accuracy. Scholars explain that this effort was part of Allah's promise to protect the Qur'an. Dr. Mustafa al-A'zami concludes:

“The compilation was a necessary step, and it preserved the authenticity of the Quranic text.”¹⁷

Modern scholarship affirms the early compilation as a protective measure, not a corrective one. The compilation process was state authorized, collectively verified, methodologically rigorous and unanimously accepted these conditions are impossible for a private initiative

5. Standardization Under Uthman (RA)

As Islam spread beyond Arabia, differences in Qur'anic recitation appeared due to dialects. To prevent disputes, Caliph Uthman (RA) ordered

the standardization of the Qur'an in the Qurayshi dialect. A committee led by Zaid ibn Thabit prepared standard copies using Abu Bakr's Mushaf as the main source. These copies were sent to major Islamic cities. Other personal copies were removed to avoid confusion. Differences in recitation appeared as Islam spread. Hudhayfah (RA) warned:

"أدرك هذه الأمة قبل أن يختلفوا في الكتاب اختلاف اليهود والنصارى"¹⁸

This warning highlights the urgency to preserve unity before disputes became permanent. Uthman (RA) formed a committee led by Zaid bin Thabit and standardized the Qur'an in the Qurayshi dialect.

Jeffery's Objection

Jeffery viewed this action as political. He claimed Uthman suppressed alternative versions of the Qur'an. Jeffery notes:

"He appointed a Committee of men of the Quraish..."¹⁹

Even Jeffery admits the process was organized and committee-based, not arbitrary. Muslim scholars explain that Uthman's action aimed at unity, not control. Leading companions, including Ali ibn Abi Talib (RA), supported this decision. The burned copies were not different Qur'ans but personal notes, dialect variations, and commentaries. Ali ibn Abi Talib (RA) affirmed:

"لوكنت الوالي وقت عثمان لفعلت في المصاحف مثل الذي فعل عثمان"²⁰

This endorsement by Ali (RA) shows unanimous companion support. Classical scholars like al-Suyuti, al-Nawawi, al-Zarkashi, and al-Qurtubi unanimously agree that Uthman's standardization protected the Qur'an from division and distortion. Classical scholars explain Uthman's intent. Al-Suyuti explains:

"جمع الناس على مصحف واحد... حتى لا يؤدي إلى اختلاف في الدين"²¹

The aim was unity of recitation, not suppression of revelation. Al-Nawawi states:

"واما إحراق عثمان للمصاحف فكان لما رأى فيه من المصلحة"²²

This clarifies that burning non-standard copies served public benefit. Al-Zarkashi adds:

"وكان المقصود من جمع عثمان المصحف أن يتحد الناس على قراءة واحدة"²³

This confirms the preventive nature of Uthman's decision. Al-Qurtubi concludes:

"فكان فعله هذا صيانة عظيمة للقرآن، وحفظاً له"²⁴

Classical scholars unanimously viewed Uthman's action as preservation, not destruction. The burning of non-standard codices eliminated personal notes and dialectal differences, variants, not revelation. The act preserved unity and textual clarity.

6. Discussion

Jeffery's critique reflects a Biblical textual framework, where scriptures evolved through uncontrolled scribal transmission. The Qur'an, however, emerged within a memorization-centered culture with centralized prophetic authority and early state supervision. Applying Biblical assumptions to Qur'anic history produces distorted conclusions.

7. Conclusion

This study shows that the Qur'an was preserved with great care from the time of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). It was preserved through a unique, multi-layered system involving divine guarantee, prophetic supervision, communal verification, memorization, written documentation started in the Prophet's lifetime, and state-authorized compilation. All historical, Qur'anic, and scholarly evidence confirms that the Qur'an was preserved accurately from the Prophet's time. The compilation under Abu Bakr (RA) and the standardization under Uthman (RA) were official, consultative, collective, and religious efforts under divinely guided processes.

Arthur Jeffery's objections collapse under historical scrutiny and methodological analysis. These objections overlook strong historical, textual, and scholarly evidence and reflect Orientalist bias rather than factual history. His claims are based on assumptions drawn from Biblical textual history rather than Islamic tradition. The Qur'an remains a uniquely preserved divine scripture in human history, fulfilling Allah's promise of protection.

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