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A LINGUISTIC STUDY OF THE QURANIC WORDS "*UMM AL-QURA*": REFUTING DAN GIBSON'S HAGARISM -BASED ARGUMENT

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ABSTRACT
This study critically examines Dan Gibson's interpretation of the Qur'anic designation Umm al-Qurā and his rejection of its traditional identification with Mecca. Gibson argues that Umm al-Qurā denotes either a major urban centre or an ancient city and maintains that Mecca does not satisfy these criteria. He further argues that the alleged absence of archaeological remains predating the ninth century CE demonstrates that Mecca did not exist as an established city during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. This study evaluates these claims through a critical analysis of Qur'anic language, classical exegetical literature, Islamic historical tradition, and archaeological methodology. It demonstrates that the classical exegetical tradition offers multiple explanations for the designation of Mecca as Umm al-Qurā, emphasizing its religious, geographical, historical, and spiritual centrality rather than merely its physical size or antiquity. The study further argues that Gibson's linguistic interpretation of umm as implying a large or ancient city does not adequately account for its broader semantic range and established usage in expressions such as Umm al-Kitāb and Umm al-Qur'ān. Regarding archaeology, the study contends that the absence of extensive pre-ninth-century remains from central Mecca cannot, by itself, establish the absence of an ancient settlement, particularly given continuous occupation, urban redevelopment, and restrictions on archaeological excavation. The comparison with Medina further raises questions concerning the consistency of Gibson's archaeological methodology. The study concludes that Gibson's reconstruction requires substantially broader engagement with textual, exegetical, historical, geographical, and archaeological evidence before the traditional identification of Mecca as Umm al-Qurā can be rejected.

Keywords: *Umm al-Qurā; Mecca; Dan Gibson; Qur'anic Exegesis; Islamic Archaeology.*

1.Introduction

Mecca occupies a central place in the Qur'anic and Islamic historical tradition as the site of the *Kaʿbah* and the sacred centre of Muslim worship. The Qur'an refers to it as *Umm al-Qurā* ("Mother of the Cities"), a designation traditionally understood by Muslim exegetes as referring to Mecca. Dan Gibson, however, challenges this identification within his broader revisionist reconstruction of the historical geography of early Islam. He argues that *Umm al-Qurā* denotes either a major urban centre or an ancient city and maintains that Mecca does not satisfy these criteria. He further contends that the absence of archaeological remains predating the ninth century CE indicates that Mecca did not exist as an established city during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.

This study critically examines Gibson's arguments by analyzing the linguistic and exegetical meanings of *Umm al-Qurā,* the explanations offered by classical Muslim exegetes for its application to Mecca, and the methodological validity of using the limited archaeological record as evidence against the antiquity of the city. It also considers the archaeological and historical circumstances that may account for the limited visibility of ancient remains in continuously inhabited sacred cities. The study

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argues that Gibson's conclusions require a more comprehensive engagement with the Qur'anic, exegetical, historical, geographical, and archaeological evidence.

2. Dan Gibson's Argument

Dan Gibson argues that the Qur'an employs the term *Umm al-Qurā* to designate the sacred city of Islam. The Qur'an states:

(وَهَذَا كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ مُبَارَكٌ مُصَدِّقُ الَّذِي بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ وَلِتُنْذِرَ أُمَّ الْقُرَى وَمَنْ حَوْلَهَا)[1]

"And this is a blessed Book which We have sent down, confirming what came before it, so that you may warn the Mother of Cities and those around it."

According to Gibson, *Umm al-Qurā* is a specific geographical designation whose application to Mecca has, in his view, been inadequately demonstrated by the classical exegetical tradition. He maintains that the expression does not refer to Mecca but rather to another location.

Gibson further argues that the expression *Umm al-Qurā* conveys two principal characteristics of a city. First, it may denote a large, prominent, and magnificent urban centre; second, it may refer to a very ancient and historically significant city. On the basis of these characteristics, Gibson evaluates the historical and archaeological status of present-day Mecca.

According to his argument, when contemporary Mecca is examined in light of this definition, it does not appear to satisfy either of these criteria. He contends that Mecca was neither a major urban centre in the relevant historical period nor, on the basis of the available archaeological evidence, an ancient city of substantial antiquity.

Gibson further claims that there is no archaeological evidence in Mecca dating to before the ninth century CE. He regards this alleged absence of earlier archaeological remains as evidence that the city emerged only after the ninth century. In his reconstruction, the region of Mecca before this period was largely deserted, sparsely or entirely uninhabited, and devoid of significant traces of human civilization.

Consequently, Gibson concludes that the designation Umm al-Qurā cannot appropriately be applied to Mecca, since, in his assessment, Mecca was neither an ancient urban centre nor a major city of the kind implied by the Qur'anic expression. This forms an important component of his broader revisionist reconstruction of the historical geography of early Islam.[2]

3. A Critical Examination of Dan Gibson's Argument

Dan Gibson has levelled the unfounded accusation against Qur'anic exegetes that they have failed to demonstrate the application of the term *Umm al-Qurā* to Mecca. This assertion is, in fact, based on a misleading assumption and constitutes a serious methodological weakness in his argument, as it bears little correspondence to the extensive exegetical tradition on the subject.

For centuries, thousands of Muslim exegetes have devoted considerable intellectual effort to the interpretation of the Qur'an, producing an extensive body of *tafsīr* literature. Numerous exegetical works discuss in detail the meaning of *Umm al-Qurā* and its application to Mecca. It is therefore striking that, in support of his claim, Gibson does not appear to cite a single classical exegete or authoritative *tafsīr* demonstrating that the exegetical tradition failed to explain the term. His assertion consequently remains an unsupported claim rather than a conclusion established through engagement with the relevant primary and exegetical sources.

It is therefore necessary, before evaluating Gibson's argument further, to clarify how Qur'anic exegetes have understood the expression Umm al-Qurā, and on what grounds they have applied it to Mecca.

3.1 Why Is Mecca Called *Umm al-Qurā*? — The Views of the Exegetes

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The expression *Umm al-Qurā* occurs twice in the Qur'an, [3]and according to the exegetical tradition, it refers to Mecca in both instances. [4]The expression literally signifies the "Mother of the Cities" and, by extension, the principal or central city among human settlements.

The exegetes have offered several explanations for why Mecca is designated as *Umm al-Qurā.* The principal interpretations may be summarized as follows:

3.1.1 First Interpretation

Mecca is called *Umm al-Qurā* because, according to a view attributed to ʿAbd Allāh ibn ʿAbbās, the creation and spreading out of the earth began from this location. In this sense, Mecca is metaphorically regarded as the "mother" of the earth or of its inhabited regions. This interpretation has been transmitted by several exegetes in their discussions of the verse.[5]

3.1.2 Second Interpretation

Abū Bakr al-Aṣamm explains that Mecca is designated *Umm al-Qurā* because it is the *qiblah* of Muslims throughout the world. Muslims from every region turn toward Mecca during prayer; consequently, the city occupies a unique position as the spiritual centre toward which the world's Muslim communities orient themselves.[6]

3.1.3 Third Interpretation

Another explanation is that Mecca is called *Umm al-Qurā* because the *Bayt Allāh* (the *Kaʿbah*), the first house established for the worship of God, was situated there. Accordingly, Mecca became the central sanctuary toward which other places of worship and human settlements are oriented. [7]

3.1.4 Fourth Interpretation

According to another group of exegetes, Mecca is called *Umm al-Qurā* because it was regarded as one of the earliest human settlements on earth and as a place associated with the settlement of Adam, peace be upon him. On this interpretation, its designation as the "Mother of the Cities" reflects its primordial association with human habitation.[8]

3.1.5 Fifth Interpretation

Another explanation holds that Mecca is called *Umm al-Qurā* because of its geographical centrality on the earth. According to this interpretation, its designation reflects its position as a geographical centre in relation to the world's inhabited regions. This view has been articulated by some later Muslim scholars in discussions of the geographical significance of Mecca.[9]

3.1.6 Sixth Interpretation

Mecca is also described as *Umm al-Qurā* because people from settlements throughout the world gather there in large numbers for worship, *ḥajj,* and *ʿumrah.* The city thus functions as a global centre of religious assembly. This universal gathering and its enduring religious significance provide a further basis for describing it as the "Mother of the Cities."[10]

3.1.7 Seventh Interpretation

Another interpretation maintains that Mecca is called *Umm al-Qurā* because the Islamic religious mission originated in this blessed land, from which the message of Islam subsequently spread to different parts of the world. In this sense, Mecca represents a source of religious and spiritual guidance for Muslim communities across the globe.[11]

3.1.8 Eighth Interpretation

Finally, some exegetical discussions associate the designation *Umm al-Qurā* with the exceptional sanctity, dignity, and religious eminence of Mecca. On this understanding, Mecca occupies a unique spiritual position among the cities of the world, owing to the presence of the *Kaʿbah* and its status as the most sacred sanctuary in Islam.[12]

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In light of these interpretations, a fundamental question may be posed to Dan Gibson: which of these explanations, precisely, does he consider inapplicable to Mecca, and on what evidentiary basis?

A critical examination of Gibson's argument reveals that he does not adequately engage with this extensive exegetical discussion before dismissing the traditional identification of *Umm al-Qurā* with Mecca. His argument therefore requires substantially greater engagement with the classical *tafsīr* sources before his conclusion can be considered historically and methodologically persuasive.

The issue is not simply whether one accepts or rejects a particular interpretation of *Umm al-Qurā;* rather, the methodological question is whether a historical claim concerning the Qur'anic expression can be sustained without systematically engaging with the exegetical tradition that has interpreted it for centuries. On this point, Gibson's argument appears to require further substantiation and a more comprehensive examination of the relevant primary sources.

3.2 The Meaning of *Umm al-Qurā* According to Dan Gibson

According to Dan Gibson, the expression *Umm al-Qurā* can be understood as referring to one of two types of cities: either a very large city or a very ancient city.

3.2.1 Gibson's First Interpretation of *Umm al-Qurā*

According to Gibson, the first possible meaning of *Umm al-Qurā* is "a very large city." This interpretation, however, is linguistically and exegetically problematic. Neither the standard Arabic lexical tradition nor the major Qur'anic commentaries ordinarily define *Umm al-Qurā* as meaning "the largest city" or "a very large city."

The expression *Umm al-Qurā* is, in grammatical terms, an *Murakab-i-Idhafi* , consisting of *Umm* and *Al-qurā*. In Arabic, the word *umm* may convey the meanings of mother, origin, source, foundation, or centre, depending on context. [13] The term *qurā* is the plural of *qaryah,* meaning settlements, villages, or towns. [14] Accordingly, *Umm al-Qurā* may literally and conceptually denote the origin, foundation, or centre of settlements.

This explains why Muslim exegetes have generally understood *Umm al-Qurā* as referring to a place that occupies a foundational or central position in relation to other settlements. In the Islamic exegetical tradition, this designation is applied to Mecca, as demonstrated by the explanations transmitted from the *Mufassirūn.*

A comparable semantic usage can be observed in the Qur'anic expression *Umm al-Kitāb.* The term is used in relation to the *Lawḥ al-Maḥfūẓ* in Qur'anic discourse because it is understood within the Islamic tradition as the primordial source or repository associated with the revealed scripture. [15] Likewise, in the Prophetic tradition, *Sūrat al-Fātiḥah* is referred to as Umm al-Qur'ān. [16] This designation does not mean that *al-Fātiḥah* is the "largest" or "longest" *sūrah* of the Qur'an. Rather, it reflects the fact that the fundamental themes, meanings, and essential message of the Qur'an are understood to be comprehensively represented in this *sūrah.* It also stands at the beginning of the Qur'anic text.

If, however, Gibson's proposed semantic assumption were accepted—namely, that umm in such constructions means "the largest" or "greatest"—the expression *Umm al-Qur'ān* would become difficult to explain. *Sūrat al-Fātiḥah* is certainly not the longest *sūrah* of the Qur'an; rather, it is one of its shortest. If *Umm al-Qur'ān* simply meant "the largest *sūrah* of the Qur'an," then *Sūrat al-Baqarah,* which is the longest *sūrah,* would presumably be the more appropriate candidate for this designation.

Yet neither the Prophetic traditions nor the classical exegetical tradition designate *Sūrat al-Baqarah* as *Umm al-Qur'ān* on the basis of its length. This semantic distinction demonstrates that the interpretation of umm as simply "the largest" does not adequately

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account for established Qur'anic and Prophetic usage. The term is instead associated with the notions of origin, foundation, source, or centrality, according to context.

3.2.1.1 The Internal Problem in Gibson's Argument

Even if, for the sake of argument, Gibson's proposed meaning were accepted, it would still not establish the conclusion he seeks to draw. According to Gibson's broader reconstruction, Petra was the sacred centre of early Islam and the original *qiblah.* If *Umm al-Qurā* were understood simply as referring to a "great" or "large" city, however, Petra would not readily satisfy that criterion.

By population, Tokyo is commonly identified among the world's largest urban centres, while, depending on the geographical definition employed, Chongqing, China, is often identified as the world's largest municipality by administrative area. If Gibson's proposed interpretation were applied literally, the designation *Umm al-Qurā* would potentially have to be associated with one of these exceptionally large urban centres rather than Petra. Yet Gibson himself does not argue for such an interpretation; his reconstruction specifically assigns central religious significance to Petra.

The underlying conceptual problem is that urban size does not necessarily correspond to political, geographical, religious, or cultural centrality. A city may be the largest in a country without being its capital or principal administrative centre. For example, New York City is the largest city in the United States by population, whereas Washington, D.C. is the national capital. Similarly, Toronto is Canada's largest city, while Ottawa is its capital. In Pakistan, Karachi is the country's largest city, whereas Islamabad is the federal capital.

Thus, even if urban magnitude were accepted as one possible characteristic of a city, size alone cannot establish that a city is the geographical, political, or sacred centre of a civilization. This distinction poses a fundamental challenge to interpreting *Umm al-Qurā* merely as "a very large city." The semantic range of umm, the established usage of cognate Qur'anic expressions such as *Umm al-Kitāb* and *Umm al-Qur'ān,* and the distinction between urban size and centrality all indicate that Gibson's proposed interpretation requires considerably stronger linguistic and exegetical justification.

3.2.2 Gibson's Second Interpretation of *Umm al-Qurā*

According to Dan Gibson, the second possible meaning of *Umm al-Qurā* is an ancient and historically significant city. Although Mecca is, according to the Islamic historical tradition, an ancient and historically significant city, mere antiquity does not, in itself, constitute sufficient grounds for designating a city as *Umm al-Qurā.* According to the Islamic historical tradition, the history of Mecca extends back approximately four millennia, reaching the time of the Prophet Abraham (*Ibrāhīm*), peace be upon him. [17]

Gibson, however, rejects the antiquity of Mecca and goes so far as to argue that the city did not even exist during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, claiming instead that the region was desolate and uninhabited. He bases this assertion primarily on the alleged absence of archaeological remains in Mecca dating from before the ninth century CE.

Gibson's argument is highly problematic from both logical and methodological perspectives. A detailed refutation of this claim will be presented in detailed in another research paper. At this stage, however, several preliminary observations may be made.

3.3 Denying the Antiquity of Mecca on the Basis of the Absence of Archaeological Evidence

Dan Gibson argues that Mecca is a modern city. He claims that there are no archaeological remains in Mecca dating from before the ninth century CE and regards this as evidence that the city came into existence only after the ninth century. According to him, the region of Mecca was previously desolate and uninhabited.

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However, Gibson's claim is extremely weak for the following reasons:

(1) Gibson's argument that the absence of archaeological remains demonstrates the lack of antiquity of Mecca is contrary to established scholarly principles. In archaeology, as in other scientific disciplines, it is a recognized principle that the absence of evidence for something is not necessarily evidence of its absence. Therefore, the mere failure to discover archaeological remains cannot, by itself, be used to deny the historical status or antiquity of a particular place.

(2) The area occupied by Mecca during the Prophetic period has never been completely abandoned. Rather, it has remained inhabited and has undergone continuous development from the time of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ to the present. The area corresponding to the historical city of Mecca during the Prophetic period has now been almost entirely incorporated into the precincts of *al-Masjid al-Ḥarām* and the surrounding modern urban infrastructure. Consequently, archaeological excavation in this area is extremely difficult, if not practically impossible. If systematic excavation has not taken place, the absence of archaeological remains cannot itself constitute evidence against the existence of the historical city.

(3) If Gibson does not apply the same argument to Medina, this raises the question of methodological consistency. The area occupied by Medina during the Prophetic period has likewise been continuously inhabited and has undergone extensive development. Much of the historical settlement is now incorporated into the expanded precincts of *al-Masjid al-Nabawī.* Ancient Medina has never been completely abandoned, which is one reason why systematic archaeological excavation in its central area has likewise been limited or impracticable. Consequently, extensive archaeological remains from the Prophetic period are not readily available there either. Nevertheless, Gibson accepts present-day Medina as the Medina of the Prophetic period. Why, then, should a different standard be applied to Mecca? If modern Medina can be identified with the city of the Prophetic period despite the limited archaeological record, why should the same principle not be considered in the case of Mecca?

(4) Because of the present architectural circumstances of *al-Masjid al-Ḥarām* and *al-Masjid al-Nabawī,* their religious sanctity, and the policies governing these sacred sites, archaeological excavation in their central precincts is highly restricted. Western scholars, such as Jeremy Johns, have also acknowledged that the absence of archaeological evidence should not simply be interpreted as evidence that these cities are recent or fictitious; rather, the lack of excavation itself is an important factor in explaining the limited archaeological record. [18]

(5) The historical sites in Mecca mentioned in the Prophetic biography and Islamic tradition—such as the Cave of *Ḥirāʾ*, the Cave of *Thawr*, the Well of *Zamzam, Maqām Ibrāhīm,* and *Shiʿb Abī Ṭālib*, among others—remain identifiable at their traditional locations in Mecca. If Mecca had genuinely been inhabited only after the ninth century CE, while the original sacred city had been located elsewhere, it would require a substantial explanation as to how these historically associated sites came to be situated in their present geographical locations.

(6) Although systematic excavation has not been conducted in the central area of Mecca, archaeological discoveries in the areas surrounding the city have contributed evidence relevant to the historical status and antiquity of the Meccan region. These findings will be examined in greater detail in a separate research study. Gibson's failure to engage adequately with such evidence may indicate either a limited consideration of the available archaeological record or an attempt to interpret the evidence through a prior historical hypothesis.

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The foregoing discussion demonstrates that Gibson's claim that Mecca did not exist before the ninth century CE cannot be established merely on the basis of the alleged absence of archaeological remains. Such an argument is methodologically and logically problematic. The absence of archaeological discoveries in the central area of Mecca is more appropriately considered in light of the limited possibilities for excavation resulting from continuous occupation, extensive urban development, and the religious and architectural circumstances of the sacred precincts.

Therefore, the lack of discovered archaeological remains should not be treated as evidence that Mecca lacked antiquity. Rather, in this context, the limited archaeological record is substantially related to the absence or severe restriction of systematic excavation, and cannot, by itself, constitute proof of the non-antiquity or non-existence of Mecca.

4. Conclusion

This study has critically examined Dan Gibson's interpretation of the Qur'anic designation *Umm al-Qurā* and his claim that Mecca could not have been the city intended by this expression. The analysis has shown that Gibson's interpretation of *Umm al-Qurā* as either a very large or an ancient city does not adequately reflect the broader semantic range of the Arabic term *umm* or its established Qur'anic and Prophetic usage. The classical exegetical tradition provides several explanations for the designation of Mecca as *Umm al-Qurā,* including its religious centrality, association with the *Kaʿbah,* its position as the *qiblah,* and its historical and sacred significance. The study has also examined Gibson's reliance on the alleged absence of archaeological remains predating the ninth century CE as evidence against the antiquity of Mecca. It has argued that such an inference is methodologically problematic because the absence of excavated remains cannot, by itself, establish the absence of an ancient settlement, particularly in a continuously inhabited and extensively redeveloped sacred city. The same archaeological circumstances apply, in significant respects, to Medina, which Gibson nevertheless identifies with the Prophetic city. Accordingly, Gibson's conclusions concerning Mecca and *Umm al-Qurā* require a more comprehensive engagement with Qur'anic language, classical *tafsīr,* Islamic historical sources, geography, and archaeological methodology. The evidence examined in this study indicates that the traditional identification of *Umm al-Qurā* with Mecca cannot be dismissed merely on the basis of linguistic assumptions or the limited archaeological visibility of the ancient city. A sound historical reconstruction requires the consideration of the totality of available evidence rather than reliance on a single category of evidence.

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