

HITEC ISLAMICUSAvailable Online: <https://hitecislamicus.hitecuni.edu.pk/>

Online ISSN: 3105-4099 - Print ISSN: 2521-0777

**A Critical Review of Dan Gibson's Views Regarding
Surah Al-Baqarah****Nisar Ahmad**Ph.D. Scholar, Department of Islamic & Arabic Studies,
University of Swat, KP

Email: nisarkabal123@gmail.com

Dr. Javed KhanAssistant Professor, Department of Islamic & Arabic Studies,
University of Swat, KP

Email: javed48442@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper critically examines the controversial theory proposed by Canadian researcher Dan Gibson, who challenges the traditional Islamic narrative of Makkah as the original sacred city of Islam. What is Dan Gibson's view point about Surah Al-Baqarah Ayat 144, which references the change of the Qibla (direction of prayer) from Jerusalem to Makkah? What was his argument in this regard? The key point in Gibson's argument is that the Surah al-Baqarah—particularly verse 144, which references the change of the Qibla (direction of prayer) from Jerusalem to Makkah—is absent from the earliest Qur'anic manuscripts discovered in Sana'a, Yemen. He uses this claim to argue that Petra, not Makkah, was the initial spiritual center of Islam and that the Qibla-change verse was a later interpolation to legitimize Makkah's religious status. This paper refutes Gibson's argument by highlighting the methodological flaws in relying on incomplete manuscripts to assert textual additions. It further presents evidence from multiple early Qur'anic manuscripts, including several from the Yemeni collection at Dār al-Makhṭūṭāt, that contain Surah al-Baqarah and verse 2:144. Additional facsimiles from ancient manuscripts around the world reinforce the conclusion that this surah and verse have been part of the Qur'anic text since the earliest periods of Islamic history. This study thus affirms the historical authenticity and continuity of the Qur'anic text, countering revisionist claims with manuscript-based evidence.

Key words: *Surah Al-Baqarah, Early Quranic, Manuscripts, Dan Gibson, Orientalism.*

1- Introduction

The textual history of the Qur'an has long been a subject of scholarly inquiry, particularly with the discovery of early manuscript fragments that offer insight into the transmission and preservation of the Islamic scripture. In recent years, a controversial theory has been advanced by Dan Gibson, a Canadian researcher known for his revisionist approach to early Islamic history. Gibson challenges the traditional Islamic narrative regarding the sacred geography of early Islam, specifically questioning the status of Makkah as the original *Qibla* (direction of prayer) and the city of the Prophet Muhammad's Sallahu Alaa'ih Wassalam birth. The key point in Gibson's argument is that the Surah al-Baqarah—especially verse 144, which mentions the change of the *Qibla* from Jerusalem to Makkah—is absent from early Qur'anic manuscripts discovered in Sana'a, Yemen. Based on this assertion, Gibson proposes that Petra, not Makkah, was the original spiritual center of Islam and that key Qur'anic passage regarding *Qibla* was later interpolated to legitimize Makkah's religious significance.

The basic questions of our research are as follows:

1. Is Surah Al-Baqarah, particularly verse 144, absent from the ancient Qur'anic manuscripts discovered in Yemen? **2.** Is Surah Al-Baqarah and its verse 144 fully preserved in other ancient Qur'anic manuscripts apart from the Yemeni ones? **3.** What are the intellectual and scholarly flaws in Dan Gibson's methodology that lead him to incorrect and unacceptable conclusions?

In this paper, we will try our best to search for the answers of these questions.

2- Dan Gibson's Argument

Dan Gibson posits that during restoration efforts at the ancient Great Mosque of Sana'a (Yemen) in 1972 and again in 2010, several early Qur'anic manuscripts were discovered. These manuscripts have since been the subject of ongoing scholarly examination. According to Gibson, radiocarbon (Carbon-14) dating indicates that many of these manuscripts can be traced back to the first century of the Islamic calendar.

A notable aspect of Gibson's claim is the alleged absence of Surah al-Baqarah in these early manuscripts, particularly verse 144, which references the change of the *Qibla* (direction of prayer). Based on this

observation, he argues that the original sacred city of Islam was Petra, not Makkah. He asserts that the Prophet Muhammad (Sallahu Alaaiah Wassalam) was born in Petra and that early Muslims initially directed their prayers toward this city.

Gibson further contends that it was only toward the end of the first Islamic century that the religious focus shifted from Petra to Makkah. He claims that under the Abbasid Caliphate, Surah al-Baqarah—containing the Qibla-change verse—was introduced or canonized in the Qur'anic text as a means of legitimizing Makkah as the new religious center of Islam. According to this hypothesis, the absence of Surah al-Baqarah and its pivotal verse in the earliest Qur'anic manuscripts serves as substantive evidence that Makkah was not originally regarded as Islam's sacred city.¹

3- A Critical Review of Dan Gibson's Argument

First and foremost, it is important to understand that today, numerous ancient manuscripts of the Holy Qur'an are preserved in various libraries and museums around the world. Many of these manuscripts are incomplete, primarily due to the natural wear and deterioration that occurs over time, resulting in the loss of various sections. If a particular manuscript of the Qur'an lacks a certain portion—such as a surah or a set of verses—another manuscript may be missing a different portion, a different surah, or a different set of verses. Therefore, it is methodologically unsound to rely on a single ancient manuscript to assert that the Surahs or verses it contains represent the only complete original Qur'anic text, while those not found in it were later additions.

This position is not limited to Muslim scholars; many Orientalists also acknowledge this view. Hence, Dan Gibson's claim cannot be accepted as valid—that the absence of Surah Al-Baqarah in the ancient Yemeni manuscript of the Qur'an proves it was a later addition to the text. It is entirely plausible that the section containing Surah Al-Baqarah was lost over time due to manuscript damage or decay.

We now turn to an examination of whether Surah Al-Baqarah is indeed absent from the ancient Qur'anic manuscripts discovered in Ṣan'ā.

3.1 Ancient Yemeni Manuscripts of the Qur'an

In 1972, during restoration work on the Great Mosque (*al-Jāmi' al-Kabīr*) in the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, a significant cache of ancient Qur'anic manuscripts was discovered. These manuscripts date back to the early periods of Islamic history, with the collection comprising approximately twelve thousand fragments. Radiocarbon (Carbon-14) dating has confirmed that many of these manuscripts are remarkably

old. Around one hundred of them were written between the first century AH and the fifth century CE.

These manuscripts have been the subject of extensive scholarly research by both German and Yemeni experts. Notable among these researchers are Gerd R. Puin, Hans-Caspar Graf von Bothmer, Behnam Sadeghi, Mohsen Goudarzi, and Asma Hilali.

Dan Gibson claims that the ancient Yemeni manuscripts do not contain Surah al-Baqarah, including the verse regarding the change of *Qibla*. The underlying reason for this claim is that the verse in Surah al-Baqarah related to the change of *Qibla* serves as evidence for the sanctity of Makkah in Islam. Since Dan Gibson believes that Petra, not Makkah, was the original holy city of Islam, he attempts to dismiss any evidence supporting the sacred status of Makkah. Consequently, he denies the antiquity of Surah al-Baqarah and argues that both the Surah and the *Qibla*-change verse are absent from the early Yemeni manuscripts and were later additions to the Qur'anic text.

However, Gibson's claim is entirely baseless and false. Multiple ancient Qur'anic manuscripts from Sana'a contain not only Surah al-Baqarah but also the specific verse referring to the change of *Qibla* (verse 2:144). Many of these manuscripts are still preserved today in the "*Dār al-Makhṭūṭāt*" (House of Manuscripts) in Sana'a. Below, we present photographic samples from a selection of these manuscripts, showing both Surah al-Baqarah and the *Qibla* change verse. These samples serve to expose the fallacy of Dan Gibson's assertion.

See: Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3, Figure 4.



Figure 1: Sura Al-Baqara Verses: 142-149, Dar al-Mahtutat (دار المخطوطات) Sanaa (Shelf Mark: DAM 01-20.6)²

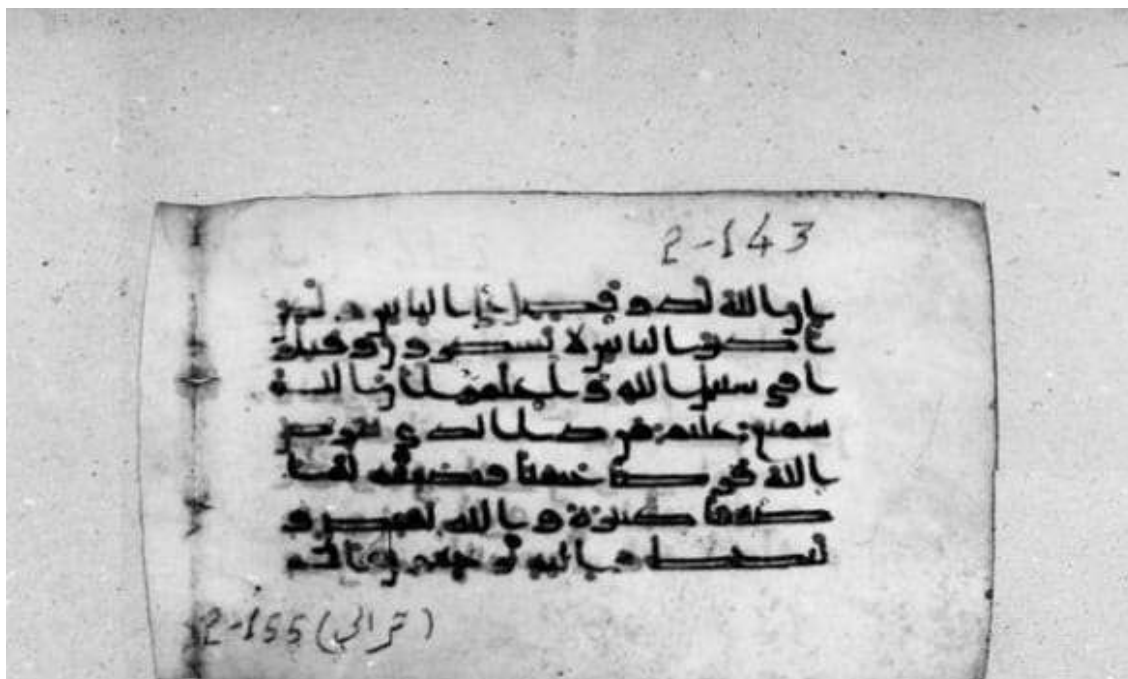


Figure 2: Sura Al-Baqara Verses: 143-150, Dar al-Mahtutat (دارالمخطوطات) Sanaa (Shelf Mark: DAM 07-10.2)³



Figure 3: Sura Al-Baqara Verses: 143-145, Dar al-Mahtutat (دارالمخطوطات) Sanaa (Shelf Mark: DAM 13-16.1)⁴

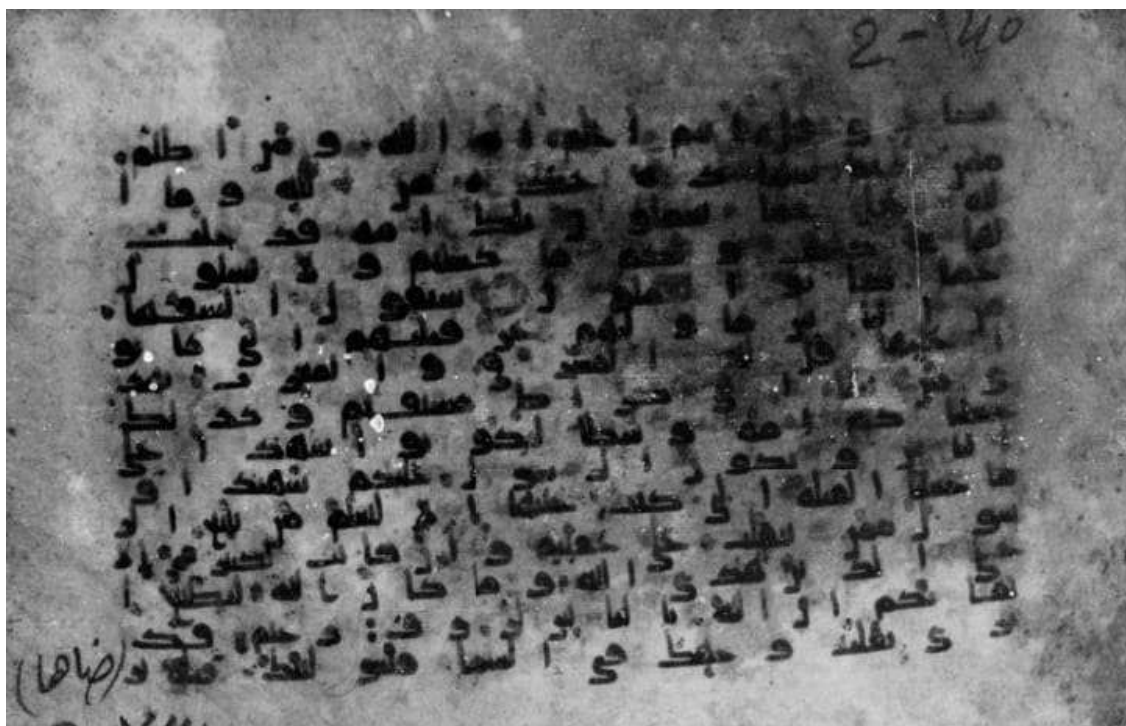


Figure 4: Sura Al-Baqara Verses: 140-144, Dar al-Mahtutat (دارالمخطوطات) Sanaa (Shelf Mark: DAM 01-11.7)⁵

The facsimiles from the above-mentioned Yemeni manuscripts (See figures 1, 2, 3, and 4) demonstrate that early Yemeni Qur'anic copies include Surah Al-Baqarah along with the verse concerning the change of *Qibla*. Since Dan Gibson based his argument exclusively on Yemeni manuscripts, we presented the facsimiles from the Quranic manuscripts of Sanna only.

However, it should be noted that the majority of early Qur'anic manuscripts preserved in various libraries and museums around the world today also contain Surah Al-Baqarah and the verse related to the change of *Qibla*.

Below, we present facsimiles of this verse from ancient Qur'anic manuscripts located in different parts of the world.

See: Figure 5, Figure 6, Figure 7, Figure 8, Figure 9, Figure 10, and Figure 11.



Figure 5: Sura Al-Baqara Verses: 143-146, Topkapi Palace Museum, Istanbul, Turkey⁶



Figure 6: Sura Al-Baqara Verses: 140-144, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin (Germany)
(Shelf Mark: Minutoli 296 (Ahlwardt 304))⁷

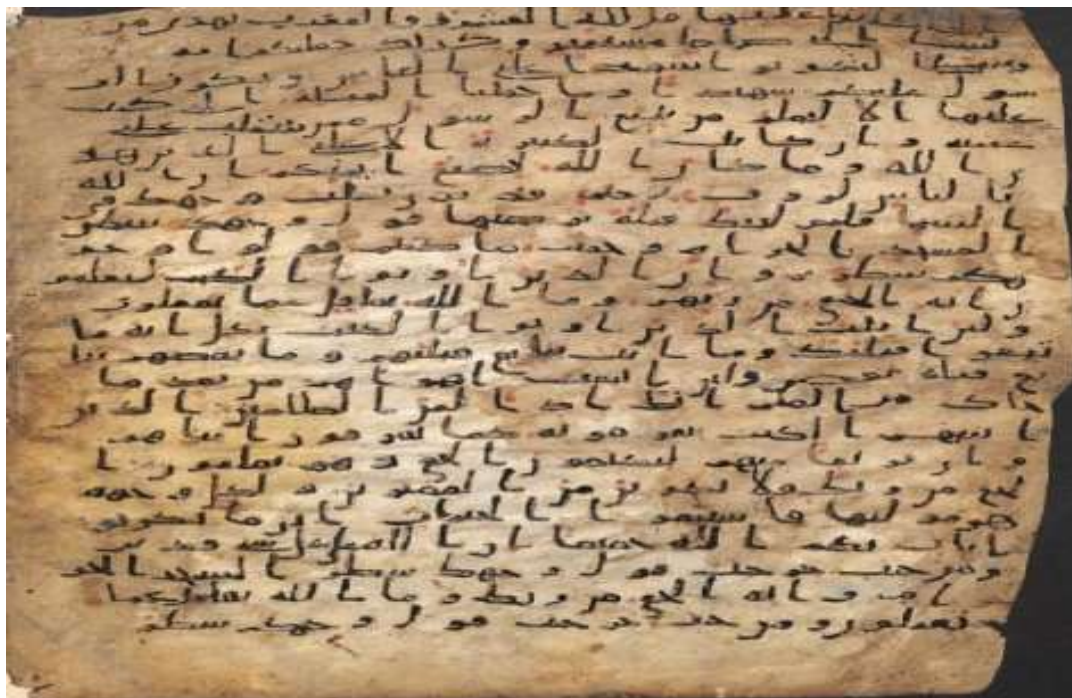


Figure 7: Sura Al-Baqara Verses: 142-150, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin (Germany)
(Shelf Mark: Wetzstein II 1913 (Ahlwardt 305))⁸



Figure 8: Sura Al-Baqara Verses: 139-144, Universitätsbibliothek Tübingen
(Germany) (Shelf Mark: Ma VI 151)⁹



Figure 9: Sura Al-Baqara Verses: 143-144, Universitätsbibliothek Tübingen (Germany) (Shelf Mark: Ma VI 157)¹⁰

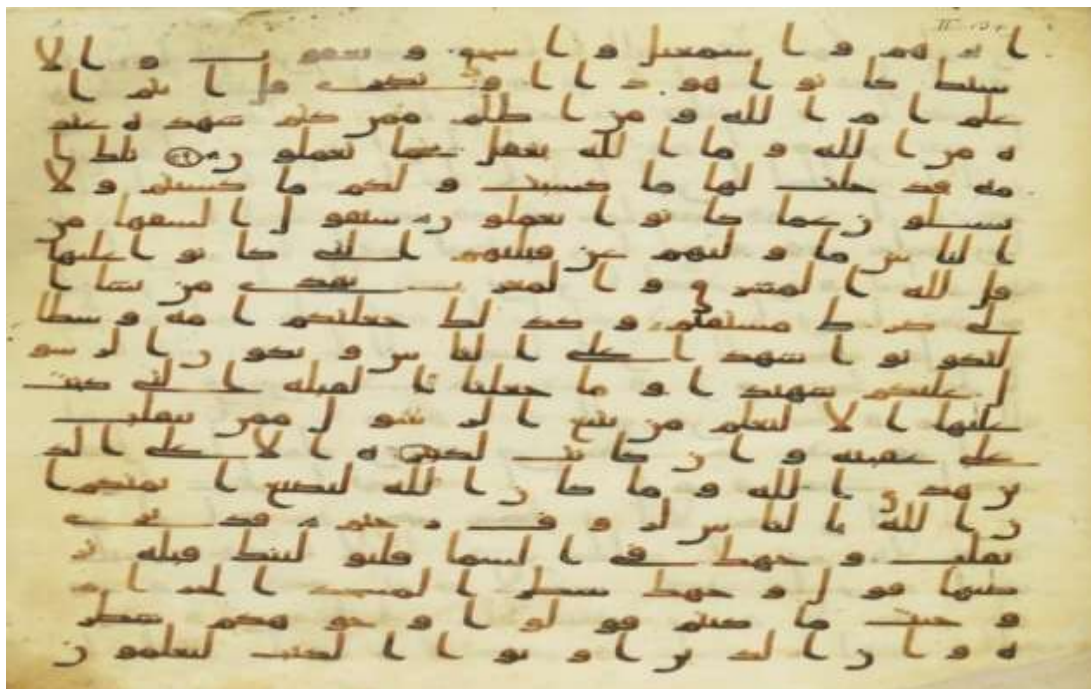


Figure 10: Sura Al-Baqara Verses: 140-144, Bibliotheque nationale de France (Paris)
(Shelf Mark: Arabe 331)¹¹

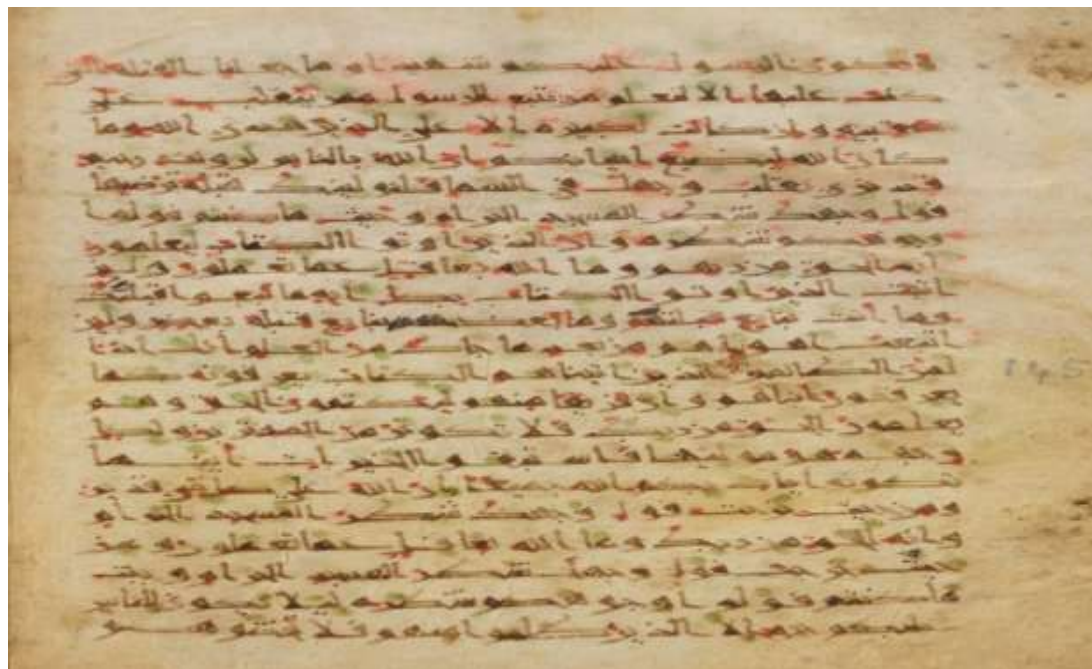


Figure 11: Sura Al-Baqara Verses: 143-150, Cambridge University Library
(Cambridge) (Shelf Mark: MS Add. 1113)¹²

Certainly, the above facsimiles (See figure 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11) prove that not only is Surah Al-Baqarah — and specifically its verse 144 — present in ancient Yemeni Qur'anic manuscripts, but it is also found in other early Qur'anic manuscripts preserved in libraries and museums around the world. This fact decisively reveals that Dan Gibson's claim is not only incorrect but entirely baseless.

4- Conclusion

The theory proposed by Dan Gibson—that Surah al-Baqarah, and specifically verse 2:144 regarding the change of *Qibla*, is absent from early Qur'anic manuscripts and was later added to legitimize Makkah—does not withstand critical scrutiny. While Gibson's revisionist narrative seeks to redefine the early geography of Islam by relocating its sacred origins from Makkah to Petra, his central argument is fundamentally flawed in both methodology and evidence.

First, the assertion that the absence of certain Qur'anic passages in some early manuscripts signifies later interpolation fails to account for the fragmentary and often incomplete nature of ancient manuscript collections. Manuscripts from the early Islamic period frequently exhibit physical damage, lacunae, and deterioration, which makes the absence of certain verses or Surahs a weak foundation for such sweeping conclusions. As both Muslim scholars and Western academics agree, no single manuscript can be treated as a complete representation of the early Qur'anic text, nor can the absence of a portion be construed as evidence of its non-existence in the original revelation.

Second, Gibson's claim is directly contradicted by physical evidence. Numerous early manuscripts discovered in Sana'a, Yemen—including those radiocarbon-dated to the first Islamic century—contain Surah al-Baqarah and the *Qibla*-change verse (2:144). These manuscripts, preserved in *Dār al-Makhṭūṭāt* and studied by various international scholars, decisively undermine Gibson's assertion. The facsimiles presented in this study, along with others housed in libraries and museums across the world, further confirm the presence of Surah al-Baqarah and the pivotal verse in question in the earliest strata of Qur'anic transmission.

In conclusion, Gibson's hypothesis does not hold up under textual, historical, or archaeological examination. His theory is not supported by the broader corpus of ancient Qur'anic manuscripts, which consistently preserve the passages he claims were later additions. Rather than reflecting a suppressed alternative history, Gibson's narrative appears to be a speculative revision unsupported by the material record. The continuity of Surah al-Baqarah, including verse 144, across

geographically and chronologically diverse manuscripts affirms the textual stability of the Qur'an and reinforces the centrality of Makkah in Islamic tradition from its earliest days.

Recommendations

New researchers should take these recommendations into account while conducting further research on Dan Gibson's theories.

1. Future analyses of Gibson's claims should incorporate a broader range of manuscript evidence, especially radiocarbon-dated codices from diverse geographic origins, to contextualize and test the validity of his assertions regarding Surah al-Baqarah.
2. Researchers should critically engage with Gibson's methodology by applying established principles of textual criticism, particularly regarding the fragmentary nature of early Qur'anic manuscripts, to avoid drawing conclusions from incomplete data sets.
3. It is recommended that future scholarly rebuttals address not only the textual inaccuracies in Gibson's work but also the broader historical, theological, and archaeological assumptions underlying his Petra hypothesis, ensuring a multidisciplinary critique.

References

-
- 1 Gibson, Dan. *Quranic Geography*. Canada: Independent Scholar Press, 2011, 300–301.
 - 2 Corpus Coranicum. Manuscripts. Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities. Accessed May 22, 2025. <https://corpuscoranicum.de/en/manuscripts>.
 - 3 Ibid.
 - 4 Ibid.
 - 5 Ibid.
 - 6 *Al-Mushaf al-Sharif al-Mansub ila 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān*. Istanbul, Turkey, 2007 (1428 AH), p. 26.
 - 7 Corpus Coranicum. Manuscripts. Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences and Humanities. Accessed May 22, 2025. <https://corpuscoranicum.de/en/manuscripts>.
 - 8 Ibid.
 - 9 Ibid.
 - 10 Ibid.
 - 11 Ibid.
 - 12 Ibid.