

A LINGUISTIC STUDY OF THE QURANIC WORD “BAKKAH”: REFUTING DAN GIBSON’S HAGARISM -BASED ARGUMENT

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Abstract

This study critically examines Dan Gibson's linguistic interpretation of the Qur'anic term Bakkah, which constitutes one of the principal pillars of his Hagarism-based theory that Petra, rather than Mecca, was the original sacred center of Islam. Gibson argues that Bakkah derives from an ancient Semitic term meaning "weeping" or "tears" and therefore refers to a place marked by catastrophic events, a description he considers more applicable to Petra than to Mecca. Employing a descriptive, analytical, and critical methodology, this article evaluates Gibson's argument in light of historical linguistics, classical Arabic lexicography, Qur'anic evidence, and historical sources. The study demonstrates that the semantic value of a lexical item in the Qur'an must be determined according to established Arabic usage rather than its alleged meaning in another language. It further shows that classical Arab philologists consistently regarded Bakkah either as a dialectal variant of Makkah or as another proper name for the same sacred city, deriving the term from Arabic roots associated with crowding around the Ka'bah or the humiliation of tyrants. The article also argues that Gibson's appeal to historical calamities is methodologically untenable and fails to establish any exclusive connection between Bakkah and Petra. Furthermore, the explicit Qur'anic mention of Makkah, the uninterrupted Qur'anic manuscript tradition, and the absence of any historical or philological evidence identifying Petra as Bakkah collectively undermine Gibson's hypothesis. The study concludes that the Qur'anic term Bakkah unequivocally refers to Mecca and that Gibson's linguistic argument does not withstand critical academic scrutiny.

Keywords: *Bakkah; Makkah; Dan Gibson; Historical Linguistics; Qur'anic Geography; Hagarism.*

1. Introduction

Don Gibson, a Canadian revisionist scholar, has presented the controversial Hagarism-based hypothesis in a systematic and comprehensive manner. According to his argument, the sacred city of Islam—where the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was born and spent more than fifty years of his life—is not Mecca, nor was the Ka'bah the original qiblah of the early Muslim community. Rather, he contends that the original sacred city of Islam was Petra in present-day Jordan, and that the earliest Muslims directed their prayers toward Petra.

Gibson develops this thesis primarily in his books *Qur'anic Geography* and *Early Islamic Qiblas*. Both works advance substantially the same arguments, with considerable repetition throughout. In these publications, he attempts to substantiate his hypothesis through a combination of historical, geographical, astronomical, and linguistic evidence.

Among his principal linguistic arguments is his interpretation of the Qur'anic term *Bakkah*, which he identifies with Petra rather than Mecca. The present study critically examines this linguistic argument and evaluates its validity in light of linguistic and historical evidence.

2. Don Gibson's Argument

Allah the Almighty states in the Qur'an:

(إِنَّ أَوَّلَ بَيْتٍ وُضِعَ لِلنَّاسِ لَلَّذِي بِبَكَّةَ مُبَارَكًا وَهُدًى لِلْعَالَمِينَ)ⁱ

"Indeed, the first House established for mankind was the one at Bakkah, blessed and a guidance for all the worlds."

Gibson argues that the Qur'an deliberately employs the term *Bakkah* rather than Mecca to designate Islam's sacred city. According to him, *Bakkah* is an ancient Semitic term meaning "weeping" or "tears." He maintains that when a place bears the designation *Bakkah*, it signifies a location associated with profound sorrow or calamity, implying that a catastrophic event once occurred there and left such a lasting impression that the place came to be remembered as "the place of weeping."

He writes:

*If a location was assigned the title "Bacca" it would mean the place of bacca. For example The Valley of Bacca means the Valley of Weeping or the Valley of Tears. This is usually because some calamity happened there that caused people to weep.*ⁱⁱ

Based on this interpretation, Gibson argues that the Qur'anic designation of the sacred city as *Bakkah* suggests that the site must have experienced a major catastrophe in the distant past. He further claims that the historical record contains no evidence of any significant natural disaster or catastrophic event affecting Mecca that could account for such a name. By contrast, he points out that Petra experienced several devastating earthquakes and other destructive events throughout its history, which, in his view, correspond more closely to the supposed meaning of *Bakkah* as "a place of weeping" or "calamity." Consequently, he concludes that the designation *Bakkah* is more appropriately applied to Petra than to Mecca.

Gibson further states:

*By associating Mecca with Bacca, the Qur'ān tells us that the original location of the Holy City was a place of calamity. Something terrible happened there at some point so that people remembered it as a place of weeping. While there is no evidence for any substantial tragedies occurring at the Mecca site in Saudi Arabia before 800 AD, there are a number of tragic events that took place at Petra including the following major earthquakes: 363 AD, 551 AD, 713 AD. There is archeological evidence that these earthquakes caused a great deal of damage.*ⁱⁱⁱ

On the basis of this reasoning, Gibson concludes that the Qur'anic use of the term *Bakkah* indicates that the original sacred center of Islam was not Mecca but Petra.

3. A Counter-Argument to Don Gibson's Interpretation

A *reductio ad absurdum* of Gibson's argument may be advanced as follows: if a city is to be designated *Bakkah* merely because it has been the site of repeated calamities and disasters, then numerous cities throughout history would possess a far stronger claim to this designation than Petra. By the logic of Gibson's argument, the title *Bakkah* would be more appropriately applied to one of these cities.

A notable example is Jerusalem, a city that has witnessed some of the greatest catastrophes in human history. Historical records indicate that Jerusalem has been attacked fifty-two times, besieged on twenty-three occasions, captured and occupied forty-four times, and completely destroyed twice. Accordingly, if the name *Bakkah* were to be derived from a city's long history of suffering, devastation, and human tragedy, Jerusalem—or many other cities with similarly turbulent histories—would have a considerably stronger claim to this designation than Petra.

Gibson's argument, therefore, fails to establish any necessary or exclusive connection between the Qur'anic term *Bakkah* and Petra. The mere occurrence of historical calamities in a

particular city cannot, by itself, serve as a valid linguistic basis for identifying that city with the Qur'anic Bakkah.

4. A Critical Evaluation of Dan Gibson's Argument

Before presenting a critical assessment of Dan Gibson's argument, it is necessary to establish a preliminary linguistic premise that will serve as the methodological foundation for the following analysis.

4.1. A Preliminary Linguistic Premise

The Qur'an was revealed by Allah in the Arabic language. Allah states:

(إِنَّا أَنْزَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ)^{iv}

"Indeed, We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an so that you may understand."

The Qur'an itself explicitly describes its language as Arabic on eleven separate occasions.^v The question, however, arises as to whether the Qur'an contains words that were originally borrowed from other languages.

Addressing this issue, Ibn al-Jawzī maintains that the Qur'an contains a number of lexical items whose original etymology is non-Arabic. These words entered Arabic from other languages and, after being adopted—either in their original form or with slight phonetic modifications—and widely used by the Arabs, became fully integrated into the Arabic lexicon. Consequently, although their historical origin lies in another language, they are regarded as genuine Arabic words in terms of linguistic usage.^{vi}

This raises a further question: once a borrowed word becomes part of Arabic, which meaning should be regarded as authoritative? Should its meaning be determined according to the language from which it originated, or according to the semantic value assigned to it by the Arabs?

A fundamental principle of historical linguistics is that when a lexical item is borrowed into another language, it becomes an integral part of the recipient language. Its accepted meaning is therefore determined by the semantic conventions of the recipient speech community, not by the meanings it possessed in its source language. Consequently, the original sense of the word in its language of origin is not linguistically normative for its interpretation in Arabic.

4.2. The Etymology of the Word *Bakkah*

The word *Bakkah* is generally regarded as having originated in Hebrew before being incorporated into Arabic. Therefore, in accordance with the aforementioned linguistic principle, its meaning in the Qur'an must be determined according to its established usage in Arabic rather than by the semantic value it may have possessed in Hebrew.

4.3. Classical Lexicographical Opinions Concerning *Bakkah*

Classical Arab philologists and lexicographers have expressed two principal views regarding the word *Bakkah*.

The first view, represented by Ibn Qutaybah and numerous other authorities, maintains that *Bakkah* is not an independent lexical form but merely an alternative dialectal pronunciation of Makkah. In certain Arabic dialects, the consonant *mīm* (م) is occasionally replaced by *bā'* (ب). Classical examples include *samad/sabad* (سمد / سبد), *lāzim/lāzib* (لازم / لازب), *maghmaṭah/maghbaṭah* (مغبطة / مغبطة), *rātim/rātib* (راتب / راتم) and *namīṭ/nabīṭ* (نميظ / نبيظ).^{vii}

The second view, held by al-Ḍaḥḥāk and many exegetes and lexicographers, argues that *Bakkah* is an independent word and constitutes another proper name for Makkah.^{viii}

The next question concerns the reason why Makkah came to be known as *Bakkah*. Classical scholars have proposed two well-known explanations.

According to the first opinion, attributed to 'Abd Allāh b. 'Abbās, Sa'īd b. Jubayr, 'Ikrimah, Qatādah, al-Farrā', Muqātil, and many other exegetes and philologists, *Bakkah* is derived from the sense of "crowding" or "congestion," because the area surrounding the Ka'bah is continuously filled with pilgrims and worshippers.^{ix}

At this point, Dan Gibson once again departs from the established testimony of the classical Arabic linguistic tradition. He assigns to *Bakkah* a meaning that is unsupported by either the classical lexicons or the recognized authorities of Arabic philology. Gibson claims that, in Arabic, *Bakkah* denotes a "densely populated city." He further argues that because Makkah was not a densely populated urban center during the Prophet's lifetime, the designation *Bakkah* cannot properly refer to Makkah.^x This interpretation, however, finds no support in the classical Arabic lexicographical tradition.

According to the second opinion, attributed to 'Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr, *Bakkah* derives from the sense of "breaking" or "crushing," because Makkah breaks the necks and destroys the power of every tyrant who seeks to violate its sanctity, as exemplified by the fate of Abraha.^{xi} Classical scholars also debated whether the term *Bakkah* refers to the entire city of Makkah or only to a particular part of it.

According to the first opinion, held by al-Ḍaḥḥāk, Ibn Qutaybah, and the majority of exegetes, *Bakkah* designates the entire city of Makkah.^{xii}

According to the second opinion, attributed to 'Abd Allāh b. 'Abbās, Mujāhid, 'Ikrimah, Abū Mālik al-Ghifārī, Ibrāhīm al-Nakha'ī, Abū Ṣāliḥ, Muqātil b. Ḥayyān, Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī, al-Zajjāj, 'Aṭīyyah al-'Awfī, Ḍamrah b. Rabī'ah, and numerous other authorities, *Bakkah* refers specifically to the Ka'bah itself or to the Ka'bah together with al-Masjid al-Ḥarām, whereas Makkah denotes the city as a whole.^{xiii}

Accordingly, when the evidence of historical linguistics is considered alongside the testimony of the classical Arabic lexicographical tradition, it becomes evident that the application of the term *Bakkah* to Makkah is entirely appropriate and linguistically well-founded. By contrast, there exists no semantic or philological basis for associating the Qur'anic term *Bakkah* with Petra, as proposed by Dan Gibson.

5. Another Response to Dan Gibson's Argument

A further response to Dan Gibson's argument concerns the Qur'anic evidence itself. In Surah al-Fath, the Qur'an explicitly mentions the sacred city by the name Makkah,^{xiv} thereby providing clear textual evidence that Makkah—not Petra—was the original and primary center of early Islam. This Qur'anic testimony alone undermines Dan Gibson's speculative hypothesis that Islam originated in Petra.

In an attempt to preserve his theory, however, Gibson claims that the original reading of Surah al-Fath was *Bakkah*, and that during the Abbasid period the letter bā' (ب) was deliberately altered to mīm (م), thereby changing *Bakkah* into Makkah. This assertion is entirely unsupported by historical or manuscript evidence.

In response to this claim, two fundamental questions may be posed to Gibson. First, if the Abbasids indeed altered the Qur'anic text by replacing *Bakkah* with Makkah in Surah al-Fath, why did they leave the word *Bakkah* unchanged in Surah Āl 'Imrān (3:96)? If such a systematic textual alteration had actually occurred, consistency would have required that every occurrence of *Bakkah* be changed to Makkah. Why, then, was only one alleged instance altered while the other remained untouched?

Second, can Gibson produce a single early Qur'anic manuscript in which Surah al-Fath contains the reading *Bakkah* instead of Makkah? To date, no such manuscript has been identified or presented. The complete absence of manuscript evidence renders this allegation historically and textually indefensible.

It is therefore evident that Gibson is unable to provide convincing answers to either of these questions. His argument appears to rely not on verifiable historical evidence but rather on speculative assertions that generate doubt while offering no demonstrable proof.

A further question may also be directed to Gibson: Who, in the historical record, ever referred to Petra as "*Bakkah*"? Which ancient historian, geographer, or early scholar identified Petra by this name? No such evidence has been produced from any credible historical source.

Likewise, if Petra was truly the sacred city of early Islam, why does the Qur'an never mention the name Petra? The complete absence of this designation from the Qur'anic text further weakens Gibson's hypothesis.

A critical evaluation of these questions demonstrates that Gibson's theory rests on conjecture rather than historical, textual, or manuscript evidence. It represents a speculative reconstruction intended to cast doubt upon well-established facts of early Islamic history, rather than a conclusion supported by rigorous academic inquiry.

6. Can the Hebrew Meaning of the Word *Bakkah* Be Applied to Mecca?

Yes. In fact, if the alleged Hebrew meaning of *Bakkah* is taken into consideration, it corresponds to Mecca far more convincingly than to Petra.

How many times did people weep in Petra? At most, only on a limited number of occasions. For how long did they continue to do so? Only for a relatively brief period. In total, such episodes lasted only a few years.

By contrast, from the construction of the Ka'bah until the present day, Mecca has remained a place where millions of believers continuously weep before God, humbly supplicate, and seek forgiveness for their sins. Therefore, even if one were to accept the proposed Hebrew meaning of *Bakkah*, it would be far more appropriately applied to Mecca than to Petra.

Moreover, a number of Muslim scholars have maintained that Makkah is the Arabic name of the city, whereas *Bakkah* represents its Hebrew designation, which is also mentioned in the Bible.^{xv} They further draw attention to the Qur'an's distinctive rhetorical style. According to this interpretation, the Qur'an employs the name Makkah in contexts relating to the Arabs, while the name *Bakkah* appears in a context associated with the Children of Israel.

This reflects one of the Qur'an's remarkable rhetorical features. Whenever synonymous or closely related expressions occur in the Qur'an, their selection is not arbitrary but serves a deliberate rhetorical purpose. One such feature is that, when the discourse concerns the Children of Israel, the Qur'an may employ terminology familiar to their linguistic tradition, whereas in passages concerning the Arabs, it employs the corresponding Arabic expression.

A comparable example may be found in the Qur'anic usage of the words *baḥr* and *yamm*, both of which denote "sea." *Baḥr* is the Arabic term, whereas *yamm* is of Coptic origin. The word *yamm* occurs eight times in the Qur'an, and in every instance it appears within the narrative context of the Children of Israel or Pharaoh and his people. By contrast, the Arabic term *baḥr* appears thirty-three times, its objective dual form *baḥrayn* twice, ("the two seas") the subjective dual form *baḥrayn* ("the two seas") four times, and its plural *biḥār* twice. These occurrences are predominantly found in contexts relating to the Arabs and the Muslim community.

7. Conclusion

This study has critically examined Dan Gibson's linguistic argument concerning the Qur'anic word *Bakkah* and has demonstrated that his identification of *Bakkah* with Petra is neither linguistically nor historically sustainable. Gibson's interpretation rests primarily on an assumed Hebrew etymology that associates *Bakkah* with "weeping" or "tears," from which he infers that the Qur'anic sacred city must have been a location marked by catastrophic historical events. However, this reasoning proves to be methodologically flawed, since the occurrence of calamities in a particular city cannot, by itself, establish its identity with the Qur'anic *Bakkah*. By the same logic, numerous other cities—notably Jerusalem—would possess a stronger claim to this designation than Petra. The study has further demonstrated that the meaning of the Qur'anic term *Bakkah* must be determined according to the conventions of the Arabic language in which the Qur'an was revealed, rather than according to a speculative meaning derived from Hebrew. Classical Arabic lexicographers and exegetes consistently regarded *Bakkah* either as a dialectal variant of Makkah or as another proper name for the same sacred city. Their

explanations derive the term from Arabic roots associated with crowding around the Ka'bah or with the humiliation and destruction of tyrants who violate its sanctity. None of the authoritative works of classical Arabic philology associates Bakkah with Petra or interprets it as "the place of weeping." The Qur'anic evidence itself likewise refutes Gibson's hypothesis. The explicit mention of Makkah in Sūrat al-Faṭḥ, together with the uninterrupted manuscript tradition of the Qur'an, provides no support for the claim that the text was altered during the Abbasid period. Moreover, no early Qur'anic manuscript, historical source, or geographical work identifies Petra as Bakkah. The absence of such evidence leaves Gibson's theory without a credible textual or historical foundation. Finally, even if one were to accept, solely for the sake of argument, the proposed Hebrew meaning of *Bakkah* as "a place of weeping," that meaning corresponds more naturally to Mecca than to Petra. For more than fourteen centuries, Mecca has remained the spiritual center of Islamic worship, where countless believers have continuously turned to God in repentance, supplication, and devotion. Thus, even this alternative interpretation fails to support Gibson's conclusion. In light of the linguistic, philological, historical, and textual evidence examined in this study, it may be concluded that the Qur'anic term *Bakkah* refers to Mecca and not to Petra. Consequently, Dan Gibson's attempt to employ the word *Bakkah* as linguistic evidence for his Hagarism-based reconstruction of early Islamic sacred geography is unsupported by the evidence and does not withstand critical academic scrutiny.

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