



## *A Critical Review of Don Gibson's Views Regarding the Geographical Location of the Cave of Hira*

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### Abstract

*This paper offers a critical examination of Dan Gibson's controversial theory concerning the geographical location of the Cave of Hira. Gibson, a Canadian orientalist, argues that the original sacred city of Islam was Petra rather than Mecca, thereby attempting to relocate significant Islamic sites including the Cave of Hira to Petra. His claims rely heavily on selective readings of early Islamic texts and perceived geographical inconsistencies within traditional narratives. Central to his argument is the assertion that the Cave of Hira must face the Kaaba and contain pagan carvings, which he interprets as evidence of its Petra-based location. This study demonstrates that such interpretations stem from a misreading of Seerah literature and Hadith traditions, reflecting both linguistic inaccuracies and a lack of contextual understanding. Moreover, the identification of a cave in Petra as the Cave of Hira is shown to be logically and theologically problematic, particularly given its association with idolatrous imagery elements fundamentally opposed to the prophetic mission of Muhammad (peace be upon him). By analyzing Gibson's methodology and contrasting it with established Islamic scholarship, the paper argues that his theory is speculative, devoid of credible archaeological or textual support, and ultimately misrepresents Islamic sources. The review concludes that Gibson's approach undermines academic reliability and fails to provide a convincing alternative to the traditional understanding of Mecca as the historical and spiritual center of Islam.*

### Keywords:

*Cave of Hira, Dan Gibson, Petra theory, Mecca, Islamic Sacred Geography, Seerah, Hadith Misinterpretation, Orientalism, Historical Revisionism.*

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## 1- Introduction

Dan Gibson, a Canadian orientalist and researcher, presents a controversial theory that questions the traditional belief about Islam's holiest city. While Mecca is widely recognized as the religious center of Islam, Gibson argues that the original sacred city was actually Petra, located in present-day Jordan.

He bases this claim on his analysis of early Islamic writings, historical records, and geographical descriptions found in traditional biographies of the Prophet Muhammad (known as the *Seerah*). According to Gibson, many details in these early sources do not match the geography of modern Mecca, but instead correspond more closely with the features and terrain of Petra.

As part of this theory, Gibson proposes that important Islamic landmarks—such as the Cave of Hira and the Well of *Zamzam*—were originally located in or around Petra. He believes that these sacred places, central to Islamic rituals and early history, were only later associated with Mecca in the Hejaz region of Saudi Arabia.

### 1.1 Cave of Hira

The Cave of Hira is located in *Jabal al-Noor*, also known as *Jabal Hira*, about five kilometers northeast of the Holy *Kaaba* in Mecca. It is a small cave with a width of 1.5 meters and a length of 4 meters, covering a total area of approximately 5.2 square meters. The Cave of Hira is the sacred place where the first revelation was sent down to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). In the early days of Islam, the Prophet (peace be upon him) used to worship in this cave.

## 2- Don Gibson's Theory Regarding the Geographical Location of the Cave of Hira

According to Don Gibson, Petra—not Mecca—is the sacred city of Islam. He believes that Islam originated in Petra. It is clear that, apart from Mecca, many other locations in its surroundings are deeply connected to the biography of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and are frequently mentioned in the books of *Seerah*. Therefore, when Mecca was relocated from Saudi Arabia to the Jordanian city of Petra in his theory, it became necessary to also relocate the other surrounding sites associated with Mecca. Consequently, Don Gibson began to attempt to relocate the Cave of Hira to Petra as well.

When Don Gibson published his book *Quranic Geography* in 2011, he had no substantial evidence to support this claim. Thus, without any reasonable argument, he simply asserted that the Cave of Hira was not the cave located just a few miles from the *Kaaba*, but rather one of the caves located in Petra. Gibson wrote a few disjointed points, which he considered evidence for his claim. However, we will not waste time on those, as they are extremely absurd and lack any rational basis.<sup>1</sup>

In 2016, when Don Gibson produced a documentary film titled *The Sacred City*, he made a failed attempt to prove that the Cave of Hira was in Petra. He claimed that according to *Seerah Ibn Hisham*, the mouth of the Cave of Hira faced the *Kaaba*, whereas the current Cave of Hira does not face the *Kaaba* but is oriented in the opposite direction. Therefore, he concluded that the current cave is not the one in which the first revelation was sent to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). He further argued that the cave in Petra faces the city of Petra, which according to him, indicates that it is the true Cave of Hira from the Prophet's time.

After further research on the "Qibla Shift Theory," Don Gibson published another book in 2017 titled "Early Islamic Qiblas". In this book, he once again made a failed attempt to prove that the Cave of Hira was in Petra. Gibson stated that the current Cave of Hira is not the one where the first revelation occurred because, according to narrations, there were images carved

into the walls of that cave—while the current Cave of Hira does not have any such images on its walls.<sup>2</sup>

Don Gibson writes;

*“Note that there were pagan images on the walls of the Hira’ cave. Today there is no evidence that there ever were any pagan images there.”*<sup>3</sup>

A few lines later, Don Gibson then shifts his focus to Petra, suggesting that if early Qiblas really did point to this city, there should be a nearby cave that matches traditional descriptions associated with early Islamic history. He argues that while such a setting is hard to envision in Mecca’s landscape, Petra offers several caves overlooking the valley that fit the criteria. One particular cave, which he personally explored, stood out to him. Located north of Petra’s main Siq, there’s a smaller Siq that becomes a flowing stream during parts of the year. At a bend where the water once swirled, a small cave was naturally carved out. Over time, people visited this cave and left behind carvings of gods, niches, and even a crescent. Inside, there’s a raised stone platform suitable for sleeping. The entrance is just a short distance away, and an old walking path passes nearby. According to Gibson, this would have been an ideal location for someone living an ascetic life while also being close enough to offer assistance to passing pilgrims.<sup>4</sup>

### 3- A Critical Review of Dan Gibson's Theory

Dan Gibson has presented two arguments to prove that the Cave of Hira in Mecca is false and that the cave located in the city of Petra is actually the real Cave of Hira.

#### 3.1 First Argument

Dan Gibson’s first argument is that in *Seerah Ibn Hisham*, it is written that the mouth of the Cave of Hira faces the *Kaaba* (*Bayt Allah*). However, the current Cave of Hira does not face the *Kaaba* but is actually in the opposite direction. The excerpt from *Seerah Ibn Hisham* that Dan Gibson refers to is as follows:

"وكان الخطاب قد اذى زيدا، حتى اخرجته الى اعلى مكة، فنزل حراء مقابل مكة، ووكل به الخطاب شباباً من شباب قريش وسفهاء من سفهائهم، فقال لهم: لا تتركوه يدخل مكة<sup>5</sup>

*"And Khattab caused Zayd great suffering, to the point that he drove him out to the upper area of Makkah. So Zayd settled on Mount Hira, which was located opposite Makkah. Khattab then set the youth and the ignorant ones of Quraysh after him and instructed them not to let him enter Makkah."*

Now observe carefully — this passage is not referring to the Cave of Hira, but rather to Mount Hira, and it clearly mentions that it was situated opposite Mecca. In fact, Mount Hira is still located opposite Mecca to this day. However, Dan Gibson is insistent on turning Mount Hira into the Cave of Hira to support his claims.

One should lament Dan Gibson’s reasoning. While translating this very passage, he himself rendered "*Jabal Hira*" as "Mountain of Hira",<sup>6</sup> yet when arguing from this passage, he insists that the mouth of the Cave of Hira does not face Mecca.

#### 3.2 Second Argument

In another argument, Dan Gibson presents a hadith from *Sahih Bukhari* and absurdly claims that it proves there were images on the walls of the Cave of Hira. Since the current Cave of Hira has no such images, he concludes that it cannot be the real Cave of Hira.

First of all, the hadith from which Dan Gibson is arguing does not refer to the Cave of Hira at all, but rather to the Cave of *Thawr*. Therefore, presenting this hadith as evidence is completely meaningless.

Secondly and more importantly this hadith never proves that there were images in that cave. The actual issue is that Dan Gibson either did not understand the hadith correctly or translated it incorrectly. There are only two possibilities: either he deliberately translated it this way which would be an academic betrayal, something not expected from a researcher or he

made an unintentional error in translation, in which case it raises serious doubts about his scholarly credibility. Such a poor translation would not even be expected from someone with the most basic understanding of the Arabic language.

Let us now take a look at the hadith Dan Gibson has quoted.

"قال: كنت مع النبي ﷺ في الغار، فرأيت آثار المشركين، قلت يا رسول الله، لو أن أحدهم رفع قدمه رأنا، قال ما ظنك باثنين الله ثالثهما" <sup>7</sup>

*"Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddiq (may Allah be pleased with him) said: 'I was with the Prophet (peace and blessings be upon him) in the cave. I saw the signs of the polytheists and said: 'O Messenger of Allah! If any one of them were to look down at his feet, he would surely see us.' The Prophet (peace be upon him) replied: 'What do you think about those two, whose third is Allah?'"*

This Hadith has also been narrated by Imam Bukhari at another place with the following words.

"قلت للنبي ﷺ وأنا في الغار: لو أن أحدهم نظر تحت قدميه لا يصرنا، فقال: ما ظنك يا أبا بكر باثنين الله ثالثهما" <sup>8</sup>

*"(Hazrat Abu Bakr Siddiq narrates that) when I was in the cave, I said to the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, 'If any of the disbelievers were to look down towards his feet, he would surely see us.' The Prophet ﷺ replied, 'What do you think about those two whose third is Allah?'"*

Now, have a look at the translation of the first Hadith done by Don Gibson.

*"I was in the company of the prophet in the cave, and on seeing the carvings of the pagans, I said, 'O Allah's Apostle! If one of them (pagans) should lift up his foot, he will see us.'" He said, "What do you think of two (Gods), the third of whom is Allah?"* <sup>9</sup>

After mentioning the translation of the hadith, Dan Gibson further explains "carvings of the pagans" as "images on the walls." <sup>10</sup>

In the first hadith, the phrase "آثار المشركين" (signs of the polytheists) is mentioned, which refers to the footsteps and traces of the disbelievers, as is clearly indicated in both narrations. However, Dan Gibson interprets "آثار المشركين" as the engravings and images carved on the walls of the cave.

In this narration, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) says to Abu Bakr Siddiq (may Allah be pleased with him), "ما ظنك باثنين الله ثالثهما" (What do you think about two people when the third among them is Allah?). In this phrase, the two refer to the Prophet (PBUH) and Abu Bakr (RA), but Dan Gibson translates it as "two gods," which is incorrect. Apart from these two phrases, the rest of his translation is also inaccurate.

Now, finally, we come to the cave near Petra.

There are thousands of caves in the world. If someone were to claim that some other cave is the Cave of Hira, would that cave actually become the Cave of Hira just because of their claim? Of course not. On the other hand, if we talk about the cave near Petra—which Dan Gibson claims to be the Cave of Hira—then, in our view, at the very least, no such claim should be made about that cave. This is because, according to Dan Gibson himself, that cave contains idols, statues, and images <sup>11</sup>—while the mission of the Prophet (PBUH) was to eliminate such things, not to keep them near himself or worship in their presence.

The second point is that if the entrance of a cave faces a certain city, it does not mean that the cave is the Cave of Hira — as Dan Gibson often assumes, thinking that such a cave must be the Cave of Hira.

#### 4- Conclusion

In conclusion, Dan Gibson's theory regarding the relocation of the Cave of Hira to Petra is based on speculative reasoning, selective interpretations, and, at times, incorrect translations of historical sources. His arguments lack solid evidence and fail to meet the standards of sound academic research. The primary sources he cites such as *Seerah Ibn Hisham* and hadith from *Sahih Bukhari* do not support his claims when examined in their proper context. Furthermore, his assertion that a cave in Petra fits the description of the Cave of Hira due to its orientation and presence of carvings is both arbitrary and flawed. Not only does this cave contradict the monotheistic and iconoclastic message of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), but the logic behind associating any cave that faces a city with sacredness is fundamentally weak. The longstanding Islamic tradition, supported by consistent historical, geographical, and religious narratives, identifies the Cave of Hira near Mecca as the authentic site of the first revelation. Therefore, Gibson's claims do not stand up to critical scrutiny and are unconvincing in light of established Islamic history and scholarship.

#### 5- Recommendation

- **Strengthen Scholarly Engagement with Primary Sources**  
Researchers should continue to examine *Seerah* and *Hadith* literature within their authentic linguistic, historical, and cultural contexts to counter speculative reinterpretations such as Gibson's. This will ensure that the reliability of Islamic sources is maintained against orientalist misreadings.
- **Encourage Critical Analysis of Revisionist Theories**  
Academic institutions and researchers must adopt a critical approach towards revisionist claims, evaluating them through established methodologies in history, theology, and archaeology, rather than accepting them on the basis of selective or misinterpreted evidence.
- **Promote Interdisciplinary Research on Sacred Geography**  
Scholars of Islamic studies, history, and geography should collaborate to produce comprehensive research on Islamic sacred sites, reinforcing traditional knowledge with modern scientific tools such as GIS mapping, archaeology, and textual analysis.
- **Develop Educational Resources to Address Misrepresentations**  
To prevent the spread of inaccurate claims, there is a need for accessible scholarly resources that clarify the historical authenticity of Mecca and the Cave of Hira, ensuring that students, educators, and the wider public are not misled by unfounded theories.
- **Encourage Dialogue to Counter Orientalist Narratives**  
Constructive scholarly dialogue should be fostered between Muslim and non-Muslim academics to address orientalist misrepresentations. Such dialogue can help highlight methodological flaws in revisionist theories and promote a more balanced understanding of Islamic history.



## References:

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- <sup>2</sup> : Dan Gibson, *Early Islamic Qiblas*, P: 215-216
- <sup>3</sup> : Ibid, P: 216
- <sup>4</sup> : Dan Gibson, *Early Islamic Qiblas*, P: 217
- <sup>5</sup> : *Ibn-i-Hisham, Al-Sirta-un-Nabawia*, Vol: 1, P: 260
- <sup>6</sup> : Dan Gibson, *Early Islamic Qiblas*, P: 215-216
- <sup>7</sup> : *Abu Abdullah Muhammad bin Ismail Al-Bukhari, Sahih-ul-Bukhari, Hadith: 4663, P: 1150*
- <sup>8</sup> : Ibid, *Hadith: 3653, P: 898*
- <sup>9</sup> : Dan Gibson, *Early Islamic Qiblas*, P: 216
- <sup>10</sup> : Ibid
- <sup>11</sup> : Ibid