

Did Muṣḥaf-al-Imām Contain Seven Readings (Muslim and Non-Muslim perspective)

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Abstract

Qur'ān was revealed in seven readings, facilitating ease of recitation for people according to their dialects. These readings were preserved in Muṣḥaf-al-Imām compiled during the reign of 'Uthmān r.a. to be accessible worldwide. Scholars debate whether the Muṣḥaf al-Imām included all the seven readings or they were abandoned during 'Uthmānic compilation. On the other hand orientalists view this flexibility as evidence that the Qur'ān has a human origin and is not a fix text. This article examines these issues to understand the scholarly perspective on the matter.

Keywords: Qur'ān, Orientalists, seven readings, Muṣḥaf al-Imām

Introduction:

In the early Islamic period in Makka, the Qur'ān was recited by a small group of Muslims, leading to no evident variation in reading or dialectal issues. As Islam spread and people from different regions and tribes embraced it, they naturally recited the Qur'ān according to their regional dialects resulting in variations in recitations.¹ This variation, known as "*lahn wa lahja*" (accent) led to different in pronunciation. Various traditions indicate that a man was reciting surah al-furqan, he could not pronounce *ṭa 'ām al-athīm*, when the prophet (p.b.u.h.) heard that he permitted him to recite *ṭa 'ām al- zālīm*.² This flexibility was granted to help all Arabs recite the Qur'ān in their native dialects, acknowledging the difficulty in switching to the Qurayshi dialect. Some *ahādith* indicate this relaxation as follows:

"It is narrated from Umar b. al Khattāb [that] he said: "I heard Hishām b. Ḥakīm reciting Surat al Furqan during the lifetime of Allah's Messenger. I listened to his recitation and noticed that he recited in several different way which Allah's messenger had not taught me. I was about to jump on him during his prayer but I controlled my temper. When he had completed his prayer, I put his upper garment around his neck and seized him by it and said, "Who taught you this sura which I heard you reciting? He said, Allah's Messenger taught it to me. I said, You have told a lie, for Allah's messenger has taught it to me in a way different from yours. So I dragged him to Allah's messenger and said (to Allah's messenger), I heard this person reciting Surat al Furqan in a way which you have not taught me. On that, Allah's Messenger

said, 'Release him (O Umar)! Recite O Hisham! Then he recited in the same way as I heard him reciting. Then Allah's messenger said, 'It was revealed in this way' and added 'recite O Umar. I recited it as he had taught me. Allah's messenger then said, 'It was revealed in this way. This Qur'ān has been revealed to be recited in seven *ahruf*, so recite of it whichever is easier for you.³

"The Qur'ān was sent down in seven *ahruf*, so recite what seems easy therefrom".⁴

"The Prophet (Peace be upon him) met Jibrail and told him, I have been sent to an illiterate people, among them are the old woman, the aged shaykhs, the servant and the female servant, and the men who have never read any book at all."⁵

"Verily this Qur'ān has been revealed in seven *ahruf*, so recite at liberty..."⁶ Jibrail said, O Muhammad, Read the Qur'ān on one letter. Mikail said to the Prophet to ask for addition to it, until they reached Seven letters...⁷

'Uthmān's compilation of the Qur'ān aimed to unify Muslims and correct errors in personal manuscripts. The Muṣḥaf prepared under his direction excluded synonyms and explanatory notes ensuring an accurate transcription of the Qur'ān as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), accommodating all permissible readings. This compilation was unanimously accepted by the companion and the broader Muslim community.

Orientalism on Seven Readings:

Orientalists generally reject the notion of the seven readings. For instance: H. Lammens asserts:

"Certain variants spring from the imperfect paleography of the Arabic alphabet the rarity of accented letters in primitive manuscripts. The complete absence of vocalization gives rise to dissimilar readings and orthographic renderings. There are also some intentional corruptions. Some critics have proposed to soften in places where Qur'ān text seems too harsh or elsewhere to make its meaning clear by the adoption of synonyms or even the insertion of a very brief gloss. For instance, the practice of commerce, is authorized during the pilgrimage and during fairs" adds a variant. (2:194). The fasts omitted during Ramadan should be replaced by an equivalent number of days. Successive or following on as a reading hastens to explain."⁸

Almost all orientalists raised the objection that of which kind of this divine book is? If it was revealed by Allah why its text and vocalization was not fixed by Him? If anyone can recite the Qur'ān in his own way then it can not be a divine book with fixed text. So the permission of seven readings confirms that the book was authored by Muhammad himself and it contains

various linguistic errors. It is strange that these variant readings are recognized by Muslims as of equal authority. James A Bellemy maintained that there are in the Koranic text many variants readings (*qiraat*), which do not involve errors, but each of which is evidence that a mistake was made in the tradition at some time....⁹ Two scholars tried to present these variant reading. First of them was Voller who discussed the language spoken at Makka in 7th century and regarded the variant readings, rejected by authorities are very important and assured that they belong to the time of Prophet.¹⁰ Theodore Noldeke also cited some variant readings attributed to companions.¹¹ Then Jeffery collected a bulk of variant reading and presented codices of companions and their followers.¹²

The Seven Readings:

The Qur'ān has been revealed on seven letters. The meanings of seven letters are:

Scholars differed in interpreting the meaning of seven letters. Most scholars maintained that the expression Seven in the *ahadith* means precisely the odd number seven that follows the number six.¹³ A group of scholars say the number "seven" mentioned in the *ahadith* is not intended as an exact number, but is a symbolic term meaning a considerable number less than ten. Hence, the number seven denotes numerousness in the single figures, just as seventy means numerousness in tens, and seven hundred means numerousness in hundred.¹⁴ Thus most scholars agree that the number is limited and confined to seven specially.

The word *Ahruf* is the plural of *harf*. It is given several meanings in the Arabic lexicons:

- 1: The extreme, verge, margin, brink, side or edge of any thing.¹⁵
- 2: According to Khalil b. Ahmad it means mode, or manner of reciting the Qur'ān in accordance with the seven modes of reading.¹⁶
- 3: In his *Lisan al-Arab* Ibn Manẓūr quoted Azharī that *harf* is nothing other than readings,¹⁷ which means dialects and idioms or mode of expression peculiar to certain Arabian, accent and way of vocalization.¹⁸

So Qur'ān is recited in seven different modes. The majority of scholars accepted that these *ahadith* indicate the Qur'ān has been revealed in seven *ahruf*.¹⁹

In the life of Prophet (p.b.u.h.) whenever the companions differed in reading they referred to Prophet (p.b.u.h.). The companions read the Qur'ān as they had been taught by Prophet (p.b.u.h.) and by whom he authorized to teach other. The only condition for the authenticity and acceptability of *Qiraat* was *riwaya* (chain). For the followers of companions, the condition of authenticity of *qiraat* was that it should be in accordance with the *mutawatar* *Qiraat* of companions. Before the authorized compilation of Qur'ān by 'Uthmān r.a., Qur'ān was recited by companion according to their dialectical variation, because it was not forbidden in the Muṣḥaf compiled by Abū Bakr r.a.²⁰

Whereas all readings which did not correspond with *al-muṣḥaf al-Imām* were abandoned and the personal codices were burnt by the command of ‘Uthmān r.a. after the compilation of authorized *muṣḥaf*. The authorized *masahifs* are said to contain as much of the *ahruf* as can be accommodated within the Qur’ān, according to the final revealed version.

The permission of seven readings proves that above all the recitation and understanding of the Qur’ān. Language and accent are of secondary importance. Although Qur’ān is unparalleled in its eloquence, no one in the world can compose such a beautiful and eloquent book. But Qur’ān was not revealed as a specimen of literature, but for guidance of mankind. So it appeared as a eloquent, unchangeable book, as a code of life and the book of every one.²¹ It contains features of different Arabian dialects. It is the last divine message to mankind so readings are allowed to facilitate people of different countries with different languages to understand and recite the Qur’ān.

Muṣḥaf al-Imām-preservation of all permitted readings:

In the light of authentic sources we come to know that ‘Uthmān's aim was to unify Muslims and to provide them with *maṣāḥif* to correct the mistakes of some *Qurra* and their personal manuscripts and to make his *maṣāḥif* a reference for all Muslims.²² Abū Shāma, stated that what ‘Uthmān r.a. had done was to stop people from reciting the Qur’ān in certain unauthentic ways and interpolating explanatory material.²³

As far as the use of synonyms is concerned, it was very common in the early days of Islam because all Arabs were not fully conversant with the dialect of Quraysh. Hence greater flexibility was allowed in the beginning that they could read the Qur’ān with any of the synonyms they had heard from the Prophet. Hence in the beginning quite frequently one recital had one word and another had its synonyms. When people became familiar with the Qur’ānic language this type of variation in recitals was gradually minimized. When the Prophet revised the Qur’ān twice with Jibrail a.s., most of these synonyms were abrogated and thus the difference in synonyms was brought down to a bare minimum.

The *masahif* compiled in the reign of ‘Uthmān r.a. were exempt from the synonyms of explanatory notes. These copies of Qur’ān were prepared with utmost care with full endorsement and affirmation of hundreds of Companions and the entire Muslim world and the Qur’ān was transcribed in them exactly as it was revealed to the Holy Prophet p.b.u.h. and not a single soul objected to it.

Did Muṣḥaf al-Imām contain seven Readings: Debate among scholars

Scholars differ on whether ‘Uthmān’s Muṣḥaf contained the seven readings. Some said that ‘Uthmān r.a. prohibited seven readings and compiled Qur’ān on one.²⁴ Whereas some other are of the view that he managed to compile the Qur’ān in such a manner to accommodate seven or some of seven readings.²⁵

Some scholars are of the view that seven letters are not preserved in ‘Uthmānic text. Most prominent is Imām Tabari who is of the view that ‘Uthmānic version was compiled on the dialect of Quraysh and other six are non-existent. So he says that:

“The Qur’ān was being recited on these seven letters until the time of ‘Uthmān r.a. But when Islam spread far and wide disputes arose among the people due to their ignorance about the reality of seven versions. Everyone recited the Qur’ān on different rendering and found fault in the recitals of the other. In order to overcome the problem, ‘Uthmān r.a. consulted the other companions and compiled seven copies of the Qur’ān only on one version, that is, the language of Quraysh and sent them to the different provinces of the State, and burnt all other copies, so that no dispute might arise. Hence, only the version on the dialect of Quraysh remained and the other six are non-existent. The variations in the recitals which we find today are in fact the different ways of expression of the same Qurayish letter.²⁶

Where as majority of scholars deny these views as:

Ibn Hazm has refuted the view of Ḥafiz Ibn Jarir strongly. He has stated that the views about abolishing six dialects is totally wrong, and ‘Uthmān r.a. could not have done it even if he had desired so, because the Ḥafizs were spread to every nook and corner of the Islamic world. He writes:

“As for the view that ‘Uthmān r.a. abrogated six letters, whoever said it was wrong. If he had done it or intended it do it, he would have been out of the fold of Islam without the delay of a single moment. The fact is that all the seven Readings are fully preserved with us and still used in popular recitals.²⁷

Abū al Walīd al-Bājī says:

We are asked if it is our view that all the seven Readings exist even today and hence their recital (according to you) is permissible, then we would emphatically say ‘Yes! This is our view, and the proof of its truth is the Word of Allah in the Qur’ān. (*Surely We have repeated the Admonition (the Qur’ān) and surely We are its Guardian Al Hjr 15:9*) And the Qur’ān cannot be separated from its recital in a manner that itself remaining safeguarded its recitals are abolished or become extinct. Another proof of the validity of our view is that the tradition of the Holy Prophet clearly affirms that the Qur’ān was revealed in seven Readings in order that it be easy for its readers, best conforming to his nature and be nearest to his dialect. This is because it is

difficult to give up or change one's style of conversation of which one has become used to. And today we are more in need of this facility due to the 'Ajmi influence on our language and our alienation from Arabic eloquence.²⁸

Ahmad 'Alī Imam says indications of more than one harf exist in the masahif...The masahif contained neither vowels nor diacritic points, and thus in this respect the Arabic orthography resembled the scripts from which it was derived.²⁹

Ahmad 'Alī and many scholars are of the view that the lack of vocalization and diacritics was intentional, so that either all seven ahurf or some portion of them could be accommodated. The scholars who shared this view are: ad-Dani, Ibn al-'Arabī, Ibn Taymiya and Ibn al-Jazari. They say that vocalization and diacritics were known to the Arabs when they wrote the maṣāḥif.³⁰

Ad-Dānī says that: The *maṣāḥif* remained unchanged until it was self necessary to develop their orthography by introducing vocalization to help the readers of the Qur'ān read it perfectly and avoid errors in the *I'rāb*, which had been brought about by non-Arabs who had embraced Islam.³¹

Therefore, the seven dialects are preserved even today and continue to be recited. However in the early days of Islam the varieties of recitation were many more as was the use of synonymous words. This was allowed to accommodate those who found difficulty with the language of the Qur'ān. As people became used to it, different synonyms were withdrawn. So that many of the readings abrogated by the time the Prophet p.b.u.h. recited the Qur'ān for the last time before Jibaril (known as the Final Recital or Review). However, the readings that were not abrogated continue to this day are being recited even today.

Badar ad-Dīn in his '*Umdat al-Qārī* says:

"And there is a difference of opinion among the scholars whether the Qur'ān can now be recited on seven letters or not? Tabari has denied it and stated that the reading of Qur'ān today is lawful only on one letter which is the letter of Zayd bin Thabit. And Qadī Abū Bakr is also inclined to the same view. But Imam Abū Hasan Ash'arī states that there is a consensus among Muslims that it would not be lawful for anyone to abolish or eradicate the facility provided by Allah by revealing these letters, and the Umma is not authorized to stop a thing that has been permitted by Allah. But the fact is that all the seven letters are included in our present recitals and are included in the Qur'ān in varied forms, yet specifically they are not known, thus, their recital is lawful even today, and the same is the view of the Qadī. All the readings that have come down to us through an authentic line of transmission are permitted for recital and even discriminating one from

the other is not necessary. Hence, there is no harm if the recital of Nāfi‘ can be memorized by mixing with that of Kasai and Ḥamza".³²

Ibn Ḥazm says:

"The fact is that all the seven Readings are fully preserved with us and still used in popular recitals."³³

Ghazzālī asserts:

"The discourse that has reached us uninterrupted in accordance with the popular seven readings bound in two cardboards as the Book."³⁴

Sources tell us that ‘Uthmān r.a. instructed the committee under Zaid bin Thabit to compile the Qur’ān on the dialect of Quraysh. Tradition goes as:

"If there be a difference among you and Zayd bin Thabit about any part of the Qur’ān then write it in the language of Quraysh because the Qur’ān has been revealed in their language."³⁵

Then we come to know that:

"So, there arose a difference on the writing of tābūh or tābūt. The Quraysh said it is tābūt But Zayd bin Thabit r.a. said it should be tābūh. The difference was brought to the notice of ‘Uthmān r.a. who said, "Write it as at- tābūt because the Qur’ān has been revealed in the language of Quraysh."³⁶

In fact it means that the Qur’ān should be written in accordance with the orthography of Qurayshitic dialect. It does not mean that ‘Uthmān r.a. ordered to abolish the different (allowed readings of the Qur’ān). ‘Uthmān’s r.a. purpose in initiating these measures was to bring about a uniformity, throughout the world of Islam, in the script and in the sequence of the *Surahs* in the scriptures and to incorporate in them all the Seven Letters, leaving no room for anybody to reject a correct recital or insist on a wrong one, and making it possible for them to resolve their difference in recital through reference to the standard scriptures.

This is evident from a statement of ‘Alī r.a. that has been reported by Imam Abū Dā’ūd in his book.

"Say nothing about ‘Uthmān r.a. except what is good for him because by Allah! Whatever he did about the scriptures was done in our presence. He had consulted us and enquired our view about these recitals and said, I am receiving information that some people say to others that their recital was better than that of others, although this is an utterance very close to disbelief. On this we asked ‘Uthmān r.a. what is your opinion? He said, I propose that we unite all people on one scripture so that there remain no differences or anomalies. We all said, you have brought very good proposal".³⁷

Consequently, no reading was accepted as correct until authentic proof was available for its origin from the Prophet. If the recitations had simply emerged due to ‘Uthmānic script, every recital that could be incorporated in it would have been deemed correct, and the third condition would not have been introduced. Anyone who examines the various will clearly see that at various occasions there was room to read a word in several ways but since they lacked proof of originating from the Prophet they were rejected.

Holy Prophet p.b.u.h. in his sayings that the Qur’ān was revealed in seven Readings to facilitate its readers, best conform to their nature and be closest to their dialect. This is because it is difficult to give up or change one's accustomed style of conversation. Today, we need this facility even more due to the ‘*Ajāmī*’ influence on our language and our distance from Arabic eloquence. From a very earlier era we find some conditions to accept a reading. The conditions are:

- 1: It should be in accordance with the orthography of ‘Uthmānic texts.
- 2: It must conform to the rules of Arabic Grammar.
- 3: It should have authentic proof of uninterrupted transmission from the Prophet p.b.u.h.”³⁸

The examples of Ibn Miqṣam³⁹ and Ibn Shanabudh⁴⁰ who used to recite the unauthentic variant readings confirm that the objection of orientalist that everyone read according to their own interpretation, reading is baseless. The well known scholar, Jeffery, himself showed sympathy for Ibn Miqṣam and Ibn Shanabudh who were punished reciting Qur’ān in a reading that did not meet the conditions mentioned above. How then can one raise objection on the facility of different readings?

The essence discussion is that it is a great favor of Allah al-Mighty to those Muslims who are not Arabs and speak languages other than Arabic. Consequently they have genuine problems in pronunciation of Arabic. Through this relaxation they can recite the Qur’ān easily. For this purpose the *Muṣḥaf al-Imām* contain seven readings or *saba‘a aḥruf*. Muslim scholars unanimously recognized it and recite Qur’ān in various permitted styles of *Qiraāt* all over the world.

Conclusion:

The debate over the inclusion of the seven readings in ‘Uthmān’s Muṣḥaf reflects the rich scholarly tradition in Islam and the importance of the matter in Muslim society. The standardization efforts were crucial for maintaining the Qur’ān integrity and ensuring its accurate transmission. Despite differing opinions, the overarching consensus emphasize the meticulous preservation of the Qur’ān, as a divine revelation. The preservation of only the permitted readings (proved in the light of authentic sources) emphasizes that it is not permissible to recite the Qur’ān according to personal preference. Thus, the claims made by orientalist regarding variant readings are unfounded and reflect their bias rather than factual discrepancies.

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