

INTRODUCTION TO THE QUR'AN

A rendition of the original work titled

Ulum al Qur'an

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Introduction

The Qur'an contains the revelations of God, the Creator and Sustainer of the Universe, to mankind. It is the message from God to man and therefore of utmost importance to us. To properly grasp a message, one needs first of all to understand its contents exactly, and for this purpose one must study the Qur'an deeply and in detail. In fact, some people do spend their whole lives studying the Qur'an, reading and reflecting upon it and, as they grow and develop, both physically and spiritually, they discover for themselves new meanings and implications.

Secondly, some special knowledge of the circumstances that surround the message is also necessary for fuller understanding of its meaning and implications. Although some part of this special knowledge can be derived from the Qur'an itself, there remain other areas of knowledge that can only be discovered by wider study and research.

Muslims have from earliest times, applied themselves not only to the message from God the Qur'an but also to its setting and framework, and the preoccupation with these ultimately developed into the 'sciences' of or 'knowledge' about the Qur'an, known as "*ulum al-qur'an*".

The proper approach to the Qur'an, in my humble view, can be described in three stages. You must:

first, *receive* the message of the Qur'an, by hearing or reading it;

second, *understand* the message of the Qur'an by reflecting upon it and studying its meanings;

third, *apply* the message of the Qur'an by ordering your personal life as well as the life of society according to its message.

The branch of knowledge, called '*ulum al-Qur'an*' may be used as a means for the accomplishment of the second stage, understanding the message of the Qur'an, by understanding its setting and circumstances.

According to a general definition, *'ulūm al-qur'ān*¹ denotes studies concerned with the book of revelations sent down upon the last Prophet Muhammad,² namely:

- Its revelation.
- Its collection.
- Its order and arrangement.
- Its writing down.
- Information about the reasons and occasions of revelation.
- About what was revealed in Mecca and what in Madinah.
- About the abrogating and abrogated verses.
- About the 'clear' and the 'unclear' verses.

The term also covers Qur'an-related studies, such as:

- The explanation of verses and passages by the Prophet himself, his Companions, their followers and the later exegetes of the Qur'an.
- The methods of explanation.
- The scholars of exegesis and their books.

The aim of this book as all 'ulum al-qur'an is to help towards a better understanding of the Qur'anic message by providing information on its setting, framework and circumstances. To a great extent it is a descriptive account of the traditional subject of *'ulum al-qur'an*. Some branches of 'ulum al-qur'an, such as the divisions of the text, style, literary form etc., have only been touched upon briefly, while others that seemed more important have been dealt with in more detail. In particular such topics related to the understanding of the text (*asbab al-nuzul*, *al-nasikh wa al-mansukh*, etc.) have been treated more extensively while others, such as the 'seven *ahruf*' or the 'Uthmanic writing, which are of benefit only to readers with a good knowledge of classical Arabic, have been introduced, but not elaborated upon.

I have restricted myself to presenting the generally-accepted views on the issues and, where no consensus exists, have referred to the most important of the divergent opinions. Although I do have my own views on some questions, my basic aim in this 'Introduction' is generally to inform the reader about the subject, and not to guide him overtly or covertly towards my own conclusions.

There are a number of matters related to the study of the Qur'an to which I have drawn special attention since this 'Introduction' to the *'ulum al-qur'an* is aimed at a special readership, namely, young educated Muslims with little or no

¹ Sabuni, Muhammad 'Ali: *al-tibyan fi 'ulum al-qur'an*, Beirut, 1970, p. 10.

² The customary blessings on the Prophet (Allah's blessings and peace be upon him) each time his name is mentioned will not be repeated in the text, but the reader is kindly requested to observe this Muslim tradition.

access to the original sources on the subject. I have therefore included several topics, of special relevance for that readership, such as:

- Orientalists and the Qur'an.
- Translations of the Qur'an.
- Modern interpretation of the Qur'an.
- Language of the Qur'an.
- Reading and recitation of the Qur'an.

Again, particularly for the benefit of these readers, I have often quoted typical examples to illustrate the various points discussed and make them more easily comprehensible.

Finally, to assist readers not familiar with Arabic, I have supplied references to English translations, where available (such as translation of *hadith* books, etc.). However, on certain topics (e.g. *asbab al-nuzul* or *al-nasikh wa al-mansukh*) there is no literature available as yet in English and references had to be restricted to Arabic sources only.

I have also attempted to note in the bibliography at least one or two books in English for each section, from which more insight may be gained on the topic discussed.

May this volume (to the best of my knowledge, the first of its kind in a European language) fulfill its purpose and assist you to grasp fully the message of the Qur'an and to apply it in your life, and may God accept this humble effort and forgive its shortcomings.

Ahmad von Denffer

Leicester, Ramadan 1981/1401

CHAPTER 1 The Qur'an and Revelation

REVELATION AND SCRIPTURE BEFORE THE QUR'AN

God's Communication with Man

God communicated with man. This is the key concept of revelation upon which all religious belief if more than a mere philosophical attempt to explain man's relationship with the great 'unknown', the 'wholly other' is founded. There is no religious belief, however remote it may be in time or concept from the clear teachings of Islam, which can do without or has attempted to do without God's communication with man.

Man denies God

God's communication with man has always accompanied him, from the earliest period of his appearance on this planet, and throughout the ages until today. Men have often denied the communication from God or attributed it to something other than its true source and origin. More recently some have begun to deny God altogether, or to explain away man's preoccupation with God and the communication from Him as a preoccupation with delusion and fantasy. Yet even such people do not doubt that the preoccupation of man with God's communication is as old as man himself. Their reasoning is, they claim, based on material evidence. Following this line of thought they feel that they should deny God's existence, but are at the same time compelled to concede the point for material evidence is abundant that man has ever been preoccupied with thinking about God and the concept of God's communication with man.

Empiricism and Reality

Their general approach to emphasize material evidence in the search for reality and truth, is surely commendable. Not only empiricist philosophy but also commonsense tell us that one should accept as real and existent what can be grasped empirically, that is, by direct experience, by seeing, hearing, touching and so on. While there may be in other systems of thought, other criteria for the evaluation of reality, at present it is a materialistic philosophy that rules the day, and though many people (especially the 'religious' type) are saddened by this and wish back the 'old days of idealism and rule of the creed', I personally think that we have to accept the present state of affairs not as ideal and unchangeable, but as our point of departure and moreover that doing so is of some advantage to us.

Creation is Material Evidence for God

Many now accept empiricism as their guiding principles and God gives ample evidence, material evidence, capable of verification by all empiricists, for His being and existence. The wide earth, the whole universe of creation, are evidence, material evidence, for God. No empiricist would deny that the earth and the universe do exist. It is only that he does not always perceive them as 'creation', for then he would have to argue from the material evidence that he has to a mighty and puissant cause, to reason and purpose behind it. Such an argument would by no means be in contradiction with his empiricist, rational and scientific line of thought, rather in perfect agreement with it.

Man's Pride

I do not wish to discuss here in any detail why then, despite this, man denies God and disregards His communication with man. Suffice to say that the cause must be seen in man's self-perception, his arrogance and false pride. Having discovered that he and his kind constitute the peak of 'creation', he thinks himself autonomous, self-dependent, absolutely free and fully equipped to be master of the universe. Somehow, this self-perception too has been with man from his early days. He has always thought himself better than anything else.¹

Guidance for Man

Muslims, referring to the Holy Qur'an, also conclude that from the beginning of his life on earth, man has received communication from God, to guide him and protect him from such self-perception and deceit:

'We said: Get ye down all from here; and if, as is sure, there comes to you guidance from Me, whosoever follows My guidance on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve' [Q2:38]²

This message and promise has been communicated by God to all mankind, all children of Adam, as the Qur'an explains:

¹ The question of how evil came into the world has preoccupied many sincere seekers after the truth. The answer which the Qur'an gives is simple yet convincing if seen against all the evidence of historical and contemporary human civilization. At the root of all evil in this world is disobedience to God, resulting from the belief that one is superior to another. From this belief stems oppression of man by man discrimination, crime and all other evils that rule the day. The test lies in obedience to God, for seen against God, the 'wholly other', all creation is indeed on the other side and equal. In *surat al-a'raf* (7) it is related that God asked all angels to bow before Adam, the first man. The angels obeyed, and observed God's will, except Iblis. When asked why he opposed God's will, he replied: '*ana khairun minhu*' I (Iblis) am better than him (Adam), you created me from fire and created him from clay' [Q7:12]. This then is the beginning of all evil, for it is Iblis who after this makes it his mission to incite men also to act against God's will.

² I shall use the following two English translations of the Holy Qur'an: A. Yusuf Ali, (Ali, Abdullah Yusuf: The Glorious Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary. Leicester, 1978) and M. Pickthall (Pickthall, Mohammad Marmaduke: The Meaning of the Glorious Koran, New York, 1963).

O ye children of Adam! Whenever there come to you apostles from amongst you, rehearsing My signs unto you those who are righteous and mend (their lives) on them shall be no fear nor shall they grieve. [Q7:35].

The Messengers

The guidance from God comes through the apostles or messengers, and they bring with them the scripture from God:

We sent before time Our apostles with clear signs and sent down with them the book and the balance (of right and wrong) that men may stand forth in justice ... [Q57:25].

The basic message of all prophets from God, and hence of all scriptures they brought, is one and the same message from God to man:

And verily We have raised in every nation a messenger, (proclaiming):
Serve God and shun false gods ... [Q16:36]

The Names of the Prophets and their Number

The Qur'an mentions the following prophets by name: Adam, Nuh, Ibrahim, Isma'il, Ishaq, Lut, Ya'qub, Yusuf, Musa, Harun, Dawud, Sulaiman, Ilyas, Al-Yasa', Yunus, Ayyub, Zakariya, Yahya, 'Isa, Idris, Hud, Dhul Kifl, Shu'aib, Salih, Luqman, Dhul Qarnain, 'Uzair, Muhammad.

This does not mean, however, that only these have been God's prophets. Indeed the Qur'an is very clear that the number of prophets is much larger and that to each community from among mankind God has sent His messenger:

We did aforetime send apostles before thee: of them there are some whose story We have related to thee and some whose story We have not related to thee ... [Q40:78].

To every people (was sent) an apostle ... [Q10: 47].

The Names of the Scriptures and their Number

Just as there have been numerous prophets so there were numerous written records of their messages. The Qur'an mentions the following revelations in particular, which are sometimes called sheets or leaves (*suhuf*) and sometimes book or scripture (*kitab*):

- The 'sheets' of Ibrahim and Musa,
- The Torah (*tawrat*) of Musa,
- The Psalms (*zabur*) of Dawud,

- The Gospel (*injl*) of 'Isa, and
- The Qur'an of Muhammad.

The Contents of the Former Scriptures

All the teachings contained in the former Scriptures that were meant to be of lasting value and importance are included in the Qur'an. The Qur'an also gives some specific accounts, although selective, of what the pre-Qur'anic scriptures contained and it is worthwhile to look briefly at this material:

A reference to the 'sheets' (*suhuf*) of Ibrahim and Musa:

But those will prosper who purify themselves, and glorify the name of their guardian Lord, and (lift their hearts) in prayer. Nay, behold, ye prefer the life of this world; but the Hereafter is better and more enduring [Q87:14-17].³

A reference to the Torah (*tawrat*) of Musa:

It was We who revealed the law (to Moses): therein was guidance and light ... We ordained therein for them: life for life, eye for eye, nose for nose, ear for ear, tooth for tooth and wounds equal for equal, but if anyone remits the retaliation by way of charity it is an act of atonement for himself and if any fail to judge by (the light of) what God has revealed they are (no better than) wrongdoers. [Q5:47-8].

A reference to the Psalms (*zabur*) of Dawud:

And verily We have written in the Psalms, after the Reminder: My righteous slaves will inherit the earth. [Q21:105].

A reference to the Gospel (*injl*) of 'Isa:

Muhammad is the messenger of God. And those with him are hard against the disbelievers and merciful among themselves. Thou (O Muhammad) seest them bowing and falling prostrate (in worship) seeking bounty from God and (His) acceptance. The mark of them is on their foreheads from the traces of prostration. Such is their likeness in the Torah and their likeness in the Gospel like as sown corn that sendeth forth its shoot and strengtheneth it and riseth firm upon its stalk, delighting the sowers that He may enrage the disbelievers with (the sight of) them. God has promised, unto such of them as believe and do good works, forgiveness and immense reward. [Q48: 29].

The pre-Qur'anic scriptures, besides carrying the same basic message about God, the Master of the worlds, and man, His creation, also brought specific

³ Some say that the whole of *Surah* 87 is a reference to this first book of revelation, but others hold that only the few verses quoted here are actually meant. See mukhtasar *tafsir* Ibn Kathir, Beirut, 1402/1981, Vol. 3, p. 631. Another reference to the *suhuf* of Musa and Ibrahim is in *Surah* 53:36 ff.

instructions addressed directly to particular communities of people at given points of time in history and in particular circumstances, such as the Jewish or Christian communities. Revelation before the Qur'an, and hence scriptures before it, were in many of their details situation-oriented in nature and therefore confined to their particular frameworks. This also explains the continuity of revelation. With changing circumstances and in different situations new guidance from God was required. As long as the revelation and scripture were not completely universal in nature, revelation would not reach its finality.

The Final Revelation

Muhammad was the last messenger from God to mankind, and he brought the final revelation from God to man. Therefore the scripture containing this revelation is the last of the Holy Scriptures.

The basic message of the Holy Qur'an is the same as the basic message of the previous revelations and books, and the directives and instructions, by which it provides guidance for man are of a universal nature. They apply for all times to come and in all situations. This revelation corresponds to man's position on earth and in history. Man has reached, in his development, the stage when universal principles need to be applied to safeguard his purposeful existence.

THE QUR'AN, HADITH AND HADITH QUDSI

The Qur'an

The Qur'an can be defined as follows:

- The speech of God, sent down upon the last Prophet Muhammad, through the Angel Gabriel, in its precise meaning and precise wording, transmitted to us by numerous persons (*tawatur*), both verbally and in writing.
- Inimitable and unique, protected by God from corruption.

The word Qur'an

The Arabic word 'qur'an' is derived from the root *qara'a*, which has various meanings, such as to read,⁴ to recite,⁵ etc. Qur'an is a verbal noun and hence means the "reading" or "recitation". As used in the Qur'an itself, the word refers to the revelation from God in the broad sense⁶ and is not always restricted to the written form in the shape of a book, as we have it before us today.

However, it means revelation to Muhammad only, while revelation to other prophets has been referred to by different names (e.g. *tawrat*, *injl*, *kitab*, etc.).

Other Names of the Qur'an

The revelation from God to the Prophet Muhammad is referred to in the Qur'an itself by the name *qur'an* (recitation) as well as by other names, such as e.g.

furqan (criterion, see Al-Qur'an 25: 1),

tanzil (sent down, see Al-Qur'an 26: 192),

dhikr (reminder, see Al-Qur'an 15: 9), and

kitab (scripture, see Al-Qur'an 21:10).

Other references to the Qur'an are by such words as *nur* (light), *huda* (guidance), *rahmah* (mercy), *majid* (glorious), *mubarak* (blessed), *bashir* (announcer), *nadhir* (warner), etc.

All these names reflect one of the various aspects of the revealed word of God.

⁴ Surah 17: 93.

⁵ Surah 75:18:17: 46.

⁶ Surah 17: 82.

The Meaning of hadith⁷

The word *hadith* means news, report or narration. It is in this general sense that the word is used in the Qur'an.⁸

Technically, the word *hadith*, (pl. *ahadith*) means in particular the reports (verbal and written) about the *sunnah* of the Prophet Muhammad. *Hadith* reports about the Prophet Muhammad are of the following kinds:

- What he said (*qaul*),
- What he did (*fi'l*), and
- What he (silently) approved (*iqrar*) in the actions of others.

There are also reports about him, i.e. about what he was like (*sifa*).

The difference between the Qur'an and Hadith

There is agreement among most Muslim scholars that the contents of the *sunnah* are also from God. Hence they have described it as also being the result of some form of inspiration.⁹ The contents of the *sunnah* are however expressed through the Prophet's own words or actions, while in the case of the Qur'an the Angel Gabriel brought the exact wording and contents to the Prophet, who received this as revelation and then announced it, in the very same manner that he received it.

The difference between these two forms has been illustrated by Suyuti (following Juwaini) in the following manner:

The revealed speech of God is of two kinds: As to the first kind, God says to Gabriel: Tell the Prophet to whom I sent you that God tells him to do this and this, and He ordered him something. So Gabriel understood what His Lord had told him. Then he descended with this to the Prophet and told him what His Lord had told him, but the expression is not this (same) expression, just as a king says to someone upon whom he relies: Tell so-and-so: The king says to you: strive in his service and gather your army for fighting ... and when the messenger (goes and) says: The king tells you: do not fail in my service, and do not let the army break up, and call for fighting, etc., then he has not lied nor shortened (the message) ...

⁷ For details on hadith see: A'zami, Muhammad Mustafa: Studies in Hadith Methodology and Literature, Indianapolis, 1977.

⁸ e.g. *Surah* 12:101.

⁹ For details see kitab al-risala, by Imam al-Shafi'i, Cairo, n.d., especially pp. 28-9. In English: Khadduri Majid, Islamic Jurisprudence. Shafi'i's Risala, Baltimore, 1961, chapter 5, especially pp. 121-2.

And as to the other kind, God says to Gabriel: Read to the Prophet this (piece of) writing, and Gabriel descended with it from God, without altering it the least, just as (if) the king writes a written (instruction) and hands it over to his trustworthy (servant) and says (to him): Read it to so-and-so. Suyuti said: The Qur'an belongs to the second kind, and the first kind is the *sunnah*, and from this derives the reporting of the *sunnah* according to the meaning unlike the Qur'an.¹⁰

It is generally accepted that the difference between Qur'an and *sunnah* is as follows:

The ahadith from or about the Prophet Muhammad are:

- The words or actions of a human being, and not the speech of God as the Qur'an is,
- Not necessarily reported in their precise wording, as the Qur'an is,
- Not necessarily transmitted by *tawatatur*, except in some instances, and
- Not protected against corruption by God, and the Qur'an.

Hadith Qudsi¹¹

Qudsi means holy, or pure. There are some reports from the Prophet Muhammad where he relates to the people what God has said (says) or did (does), but this information is not part of the Qur'an. Such a report is called *hadith qudsi*, e.g.:

Abu Huraira reported that God's messenger said:

God, Mighty and Exalted is He, said: If My servant likes to meet me, I like to meet him, and if he dislikes to meet Me, I dislike to meet him.¹²

While the common factor between *hadith qudsi* and the Qur'an is that both contain words from God which have been revealed to Muhammad, the main points of difference between Qur'an and *hadith qudsi* are as follows:

- In the Qur'an the precise wording is from God, while in the *hadith qudsi* the wording is given by the Prophet Muhammad.
- The Qur'an has been brought to Muhammad only by the Angel Gabriel, while *hadith qudsi* may also have been inspired otherwise, such as e.g. in a dream.
- The Qur'an is inimitable and unique, but not so the *hadith qudsi*.

¹⁰ Sabuni, *tibyan*, p. 52.

¹¹ For an introduction to the subject and select sample texts, see e.g. Ibrahim Izzuddin and Denis Johnson-Davies: *Forty Hadith Qudsi*, Beirut, Damascus, 1980.

¹² *ibid.*, No. 30.

- The Qur'an has been transmitted by numerous persons, (*tawatur*) but the *hadith* and *hadith qudsi* often only by a few or even one individual. There are *hadith qudsi* which are *sahih*, but also others *hasan*, or even *da'if*, while there is no doubt at all about any *ayah* from the Qur'an.

Another point is that a *hadith qudsi* cannot be recited in prayer.

Distinctive Features of the Qur'an

The most important distinction between the Qur'an and all other words or writings therefore is that the Qur'an is the speech from God, revealed in its precise meaning and wording through the Angel Gabriel, transmitted by many, inimitable, unique and protected by God Himself against any corruption.

REVELATION AND HOW IT CAME TO THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD

God guides His Creation

God the Creator has not only brought about the creation, but continues to sustain and direct it, in the way that He has created us and all that is around us. He has provided many forms of guidance, indeed, a system of guiding principles, of which the laws of 'nature' are a part.

But God has also granted a special form of guidance for mankind from the outset of its occupancy of the earth. He promised to Adam and his descendants:

Get ye down all from here; and if, as is sure, there comes to you guidance from Me, whosoever follows guidance, on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. [Q2:38].¹³

This guidance comes through the prophets, whom God continuously sent to mankind, until the last messenger, Muhammad received His final guidance.

Guidance through Revelation

We call a man to whom God in his own way communicates His guidance, a prophet or messenger (*nabi, rasul*). Prophets receive the word of God through revelation and then communicate it to their fellow human beings:

We have sent thee INSPIRATION, as We sent it to Noah and the messengers after him: We sent INSPIRATION to Abraham, Ismail, Isaac, Jacob and the tribes, to Jesus, Job, Jonah, Harun and Solomon, and to David We gave the Psalms. Of some apostles, We have already told the story, of others We have not and to Moses God spoke direct apostles who gave good news as well as warning, that mankind after (the coming) of the apostles should have no plea against God: for God is exalted in power and ways. [Q4:163-5].

The two words italicized (capitalized) in the above translation are both derived from the Arabic root "*wahy*".

The Meaning of *wahy*

The word *awha*, from which "*wahy*" (revelation) is derived, occurs in a number of shades of meaning in the Qur'an, each of them indicating the main underlying idea of inspiration directing or guiding someone. In each example below, the italicized words in the translation are forms of the root word *waha* in the original text of the Qur'an:

¹³ The word here used for guidance is *hudan*.

Guidance in natural intuition:

so we sent this inspiration to the mother of Moses . . . [Q28:7]

Guidance in natural instinct:

and thy Lord taught the bee to build its cells in hills, on trees and in (man's) habitations. [Q16:68].

Guidance by signs:

So Zakaria came out to his people from his chamber: he told them by signs to celebrate God's praises in the morning and in the evening [Q19:11]

Guidance from evil:

Likewise did we make for every messenger an enemy—evil ones among men and jinns, inspiring each other with flowery discourses by way of deception... [Q6:112]

Guidance from God:

Remember thy Lord inspired the angels (with the message)... [Q8:12]

Means of Revelation

Wahy in the sense of “revelation” is guidance from God for His creation, brought by the Prophets, who received the word from God through one of the means mentioned in the following Qur'anic verse:

It is not fitting for a man that God should speak to him except by inspiration, or from behind a veil, or by sending of a messenger to reveal with God's permission what God wills: for He is Most High, Most Wise. [Q42:51]

Means of revelation are:

- Inspiration, e.g. in a dream (see [Q37:102], where it is related that Ibrahim receives guidance in a vision, while asleep, to sacrifice his son).
- Speech hidden away (see [Q27:8], where it is related that God spoke to Musa from the fire).
- Words (speech) sent through a special messenger from God (see [Q2:97], where it is related that God sent the Angel Gabriel as the messenger to Muhammad to reveal His message).

The Qur'an revealed to Muhammad

Prophet Muhammad, the last of God's messengers, received the revelation of the Qur'an through a special messenger sent by God for this purpose: the Angel Gabriel, who recited to him God's words exactly.

The Descent of the Qur'an

According to Suyuti¹⁴ on the basis of three reports from 'Abdullah Ibn 'Abbas, in Hakim, Baihaqi and Nasa'i, the Qur'an descended in two stages:

- From the *lawh al-mahfuz*, the "well-preserved tablet", to the lowest of the heavens (*bait al-'izza*) of the world, all together, in *laila al-qadr*.
- From the heavens to earth in stages throughout the twenty-three years of Muhammad's prophethood, and first in *laila al-qadr* of Ramadan, through the Angel Gabriel.

This second descent from the heaven to the heart of the Prophet is referred to in *surat al-isra'* (17) and *surat al-furqan* (25).

BEGINNING OF THE REVELATION

The revelation of the Qur'an began in *laila al-qadr* of Ramadan (the 27th night or one of the odd nights after the 21st) after the Prophet Muhammad had passed the fortieth year of his life (that is around the year 610), during his seclusion in the cave of *hira'* on a mountain near Mecca.

Bukharis Account¹⁵

This is the account, as reported in the Sahih of Bukhari:

Narrated Aisha the mother of the faithful believers: The commencement of the divine inspiration to God's apostle was in the form of good dreams which came like bright daylight (i.e. true) and then the love of seclusion was bestowed upon him.

He used to go in seclusion in the Cave of Hira', where he used to worship (God alone) continuously for many days before his desire to see his family. He used to take with him food for the stay and then come back to (his wife) Khadija to take his food likewise again, till suddenly the truth descended upon him while he was in the Cave of Hira'.

¹⁴ Suyuti, *al-Itqan fi 'ulum al-quran*, Beirut, 1973, Vol. I, pp. 39-40.

¹⁵ English translations of ahadith are, unless otherwise indicated, from Khan, Muhammad Muhsin: The Translation of the Meanings of Sahih al-Bukhari, 9 vols., Istanbul, 1978 (abbr. as Bukhari) and Siddiqi, Abdul Hamid: Sahih Muslim, 4 vols., Lahore, 1978 (abbr. as Muslim).

The angel came to him and asked him to read.

The Prophet replied 'I do not know how to read'. The Prophet added, 'The angel caught me (forcibly) and pressed me so hard that I could not bear it any more. He then released me and again asked me to read and I replied, "I do not know how to read". Thereupon he caught me again and pressed me a second time till I could not bear it any more. He then released me and again asked me to read, but again I replied, "I do not know how to read" (or what shall I read?). Thereupon he caught me for the third time and pressed me, and then released me and said: "Read, in the name of Your Lord, who created, created man from a clot. Read! And Your Lord is the most bountiful."¹⁶

The narration goes on to tell us that the Prophet went back to his wife Khadija and recounted to her his dreadful experience. She comforted him and both of them consulted Waraqa, Khadija's relative and a learned Christian, about it. Waraqa told Muhammad that he had encountered the one 'whom God had sent to Moses' and that he would be driven out by his people.

How Revelation Came

Narrated Aisha, the mother of the faithful believers: Al-Harith Ibn Hisham asked God's apostle: 'O God's apostle. How is the divine inspiration revealed to you?' God's apostle replied, 'Sometimes it is "revealed" like the ringing of a bell, this form of inspiration is the hardest of all and then this state passes off after I have grasped what is inspired. Sometimes the Angel comes in the form of a man and talks to me and I grasp whatever he says'.¹⁷

The First Revelation¹⁸

The first revelation that the Prophet Muhammad received is in the first verses from *surat al-'alaq* [Q96:1-3, according to others 1-5]:

Read in the name of your Lord, who created, created man from a clot. Read! And your Lord is most bountiful. (He who taught) the use of the pen taught man which he knew not.

The remainder of *surah* 96, which now has 19 *ayat*, was revealed on some later occasion.

The Pause

¹⁶ Bukhari, I, No. 3; VI, No. 478; Muslim I, No. 301.

¹⁷ Bukhari, I, No. 2.

¹⁸ See Suyuti, Itqan, I, pp.23-4.

After the first message thus received, revelation ceased for a certain period (called *fatra*) and then resumed:

Narrated Jabir Ibn 'Abdullah Al-Ansari while talking about the period of pause in revelation reporting the speech of the Prophet, 'While I was walking, all of a sudden I heard a voice from the heaven. I looked up and saw the same angel who had visited me at the Cave of Hira' sitting on a chair between the sky and the earth. I got afraid of him and came back home and said "Wrap me (in blankets)" and then God revealed the following holy verses (of the Qur'an): O you covered in your cloak, arise and warn (the people against God's punishment) ... up to "and all pollution shun".

After this revelation came strongly and regularly.¹⁹

The Second Revelation

The second portion of the Qur'an revealed to the Prophet Muhammad was the beginning of *surah al-muddaththir* [Q74:15]. It now consists of 56 verses, the rest revealed later, and begins as follows: 'O you, covered in your cloak, arise and warn, thy Lord magnify, thy raiment purify, pollution shun ...'

Other Early Revelations

Many hold that *surat al-muzzammil* (73) was the next revelation.

According to others, *surat al-fatihah* (1) was the third *surah* to be revealed.²⁰

Among other early revelations, which the Prophet declared in Mecca, are, according to some reports, *surah* 111, *surah* 81, *Surah* 87, *Surah* 92, *Surah* 89, etc. Then revelation continued, 'mentioning Paradise and Hell, and until mankind turned to Islam, then came revelation about halal and haram ...' (21)

Revelation came to the Prophet throughout his lifetime, both in Mecca and Madinah, i.e. over a period of approximately 23 years, until shortly before his death in the year 10 after Hijra (632 C.E.).

The Last Revelation

Many Muslim scholars agree that the last revelation was *Surah* 2, verse 281:

¹⁹ Bukhari, I, end of No. 3.

²⁰ Suyuti, Itqan, I, p.24.

And fear the day when ye shall be brought back to God. Then shall every soul be paid what it earned and none shall be dealt with unjustly.

Some also say that it was [Q2:282] or [Q2:278].²¹

It has also been suggested that all three verses were revealed on one occasion. The Prophet died nine nights after the last revelation.

Others hold that *Surah* 5:4 was the last to be revealed:

This day I have perfected your religion for you, completed My favor upon you and have chosen for you Islam as your religion.

The opinion that this verse was the last revelation is not sound according to many scholars, since it was revealed during the last pilgrimage of the Prophet. This information is based upon a *hadith* from 'Umar. Suyuti explains concerning the verse in *Surah* 5 that after it nothing concerning *ahkam* and *halal* and *haram* was revealed, and in this sense it is the 'completion' of religion. However, revelation reminding man of the coming day of judgment continued and the last such revelation is the above verse.²²

Reasons why the Qur'an was sent down in Stages

The Qur'an was revealed in stages over a period of 23 years, and not as a complete book in one single act of revelation. There are a number of reasons for this; most important are the following:

To strengthen the heart of the Prophet by addressing him continuously and whenever the need for guidance arose,

Out of consideration for the Prophet since revelation was a very difficult experience for him,

To gradually implement the laws of God, and

To make understanding, application and memorization of the revelation easier for the believers.

²¹ Kamal, Ahmad 'Adil: 'ulum al-Qur'an, Cairo, 1974, p.18.

²² Sabuni, *tibyan* pp. 18-9.

CHAPTER 2

Transmission of the Qur'anic Revelation

The revelation contained in the Qur'an has been transmitted to us by numerous persons in two ways: orally and in written form.

MEMORISATION AND ORAL TRANSMISSION

Memorization by the Prophet

Oral transmission of the revelation was based on *hifz* or memorization and the Prophet Muhammad himself was the first to commit a revelation to memory after the Angel Gabriel had brought it to him:

Move not thy tongue concerning the (Qur'an) to make haste therewith. It is for Us to collect it and promulgate it; but when We have promulgated it, follow thou its recital [Q75:16-19].

'... an apostle from God, rehearsing scriptures, kept pure and holy ...' [Q98:2].

Memorization by the Companions

The Prophet then declared the revelation and instructed his Companions to memorize it. The case of Ibn Mas'ud, who was the first man to publicly recite the Qur'an in Mecca, shows that even in the very early phase of the Islamic *ummah* recital of the revelation from memory was practiced by the Companions:

... the first man to speak the Qur'an loudly in Mecca after the apostle was 'Abdullah Ibn Mas'ud. The Prophet's Companions came together and mentioned that the *Quraysh* had never heard the Qur'an distinctly read to them ... When (Ibn Mas'ud) arrived at the *maqam*, he read "In the name of God the Compassionate the Merciful", raising his voice as he did so. "The Compassionate who taught the Qur'an ..." (55:1) ... They got up and began to hit him in the face; but he continued to read so far as God willed that he should read ...¹

It is also reported that Abu Bakr used to recite the Qur'an publicly in front of his house in Mecca.²

The Prophet encourages Memorization

¹ Guillaume, E.: The Life of Muhammad (abbr. as Ibn Hisham), London, 55, pp. 141-2; Ibn Hisham: Sira al-nabi, Cairo, n.d., 1, p.206.

² Sira Ibn Hisham, The Life of Muhammad.

There are numerous ahadith, giving account of various efforts made and measures taken by the Prophet to ensure that the revelation was preserved in the memory of his Companions. The following is perhaps the most clear:

Narrated 'Uthman Ibn 'Affan: The Prophet said: "The most superior among you (Muslims) are those who learn the Qur'an and teach it".³

It is also well known that the recital of the Qur'an during the daily prayers is required and hence many Companions heard repeatedly passages from the revelation, memorized them and used them in prayer.

The Prophet also listened to the recitation of the Qur'an by the Companions.

Narrated 'Abdullah (b. Mas'ud): 'God's Apostle said to me: "Recite (of the Qur'an) for me". I said: "Shall I recite it to you although it had been revealed to you?!" He said: "I like to hear (the Qur'an) from others". So I recited Surat-an-Nisa' till I reached: "How (will it be) then when We bring from each nation a witness and We bring you (O Muhammad) as a witness against these people?" [Q4: 41].

Then he said: "Stop!" Behold, his eyes were shedding tears then.⁴

The Prophet sent Teachers

The Prophet sent teachers to communities in other places so that they might receive instruction in Islam and the Qur'an.

The case of Mus'ab Ibn 'Umair illustrates that this was so even before the hijra:

When these men (of the first pledge of 'Aqaba) left (for Madinah) the apostle sent with them Mus'ab Ibn 'Umair ... and instructed him to read the Qur'an to them and to teach them Islam and to give them instruction about religion. In Madinah Mus`ab was called "the reader".⁵

Another well-known case concerns Mu'adh Ibn Jabal who was sent to Yemen to instruct the people there.

Qur'an Readers among the Companions

³ Bukhari, VI, No. 546.

⁴ Bukhari, VI, No. 106.

⁵ Ibn Hisham, p. 199.

Suyuti⁶ mentions more than twenty well-known persons who memorized the revelation, among them were Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman, 'Ali, Ibn Mas'ud, Abu Huraira, 'Abdullah Ibn 'Abbas, 'Abdullah Ibn 'Amr Ibn al-'As, 'A'isha, Hafsa, and Umm Salama.

From among these, the Prophet himself recommended especially the following:

Narrated Masruq: 'Abdullah Ibn 'Amr mentioned 'Abdullah Ibn Mas'ud and said: I shall ever love that man for I heard the Prophet saying: Take (learn) the Qur'an from four: 'Abdullah Ibn Mas'ud, Salim, Mu'adh and Ubay Ibn Ka'b'.⁷

Another *hadith* informs us about those Companions who had memorized the Qur'an in its entirety and gone over it with the Prophet before his death:

Narrated Qatada: I asked Anas Ibn Malik: Who collected the Qur'an at the time of the Prophet? He replied, Four, all of whom were from the Ansar: Ubay Ibn Ka'b, Mu'adh Ibn Jabal, Zayd Ibn Thabit and Aba Zayd.⁸

The fact that some of the earliest historical reports make special mention in the accounts of the battles that were fought, of Muslims killed who knew (something of) the Qur'an by heart, gives a clear indication that memorization of the revelation was considered important and widely practiced from the earliest times.⁹

The Qur'an Memorized in the Prophet's Lifetime

It is therefore certain that the Qur'an had been memorized by the Companions of the Prophet during his lifetime. This tradition continued among the Companions after the Prophet's death and, later, among the *tabi'un* and all generations of Muslims that have followed, until today.

TRANSMISSION OF THE WRITTEN TEXT

The Written Text at the Time of the Prophet Muhammad

What is meant by Jam' al-Qur'an?

The general meaning of jam' al-qur'an is to 'bring together the Qur'an'. This was done and has to be understood in two ways:

⁶ Itqan 1, p. 124.

⁷ Bukhari, VI, No. 521.

⁸ Bukhari, VI, No. 525.

⁹ See below, on collection of the Qur'an in Abu Bakr's time.

- Bringing together the Qur'an orally, or in one's mind (*hifz*).
- Bringing together the Qur'an in written form, or on sheets, or in a book.

jam' al-qur'an therefore, in the classical literature, has various meanings:

- To learn the Qur'an by heart.
- To write down every revelation.
- To bring together those materials upon which the Qur'an has been written.
- To bring together the reports of people who have memorized the Qur'an.
- To bring together all such sources, both oral and written.

How was the Qur'an Collected?

In Suyuti's *Itqan* it is said that the Qur'an had been written down in its entirety in the time of the Prophet but had not been brought together in one single place, and that therefore these written records or documents had not been arranged in order.¹⁰

However, this statement does not preclude that the ordering of the Qur'an and the arrangement of the *suwar*, was fixed by the Prophet himself and safeguarded through oral transmission.

Stages of Collection

As far as the written text is concerned, one may distinguish three stages:

- In the time of the Prophet:
 - in the hearts of men (memorization).
 - on writing materials
- In the time of Abu Bakr.
- In the time of 'Uthman.

Why was no Book left by the Prophet?

The Prophet Muhammad did not present to his Companions the revelation collected and arranged in a single written volume. There are a number of good reasons for this:

- Because the revelation did not come down in one piece, but at intervals and was received continuously until the end of the Prophet's life.
- Because some verses were abrogated in the course of revelation, and therefore flexibility needed to be maintained.

¹⁰ *Itqan*, I, p. 41.

- The *ayat* and *suwar* were not always revealed in their final order, but were arranged later.
- The Prophet lived only nine days after the last revelation and was severely ill.
- There was no dispute or friction about the Qur'an during the time of the Prophet, as developed afterwards when he, as the final authority, was no longer available.

Writing down the Revelation

While writing was not widespread among the people in Arabia at the time of the Prophet there were persons of whom it is reported that they did write. It is said for example of Waraqa, Khadija's cousin, that he had been converted to Christianity in the pre-Islamic period 'and used to write Arabic and write of the Gospel in Arabic as much as God wished him to write'.¹¹

The Prophet himself did much to encourage the Muslims to learn to write. It is related that some of the *Quraysh*, who were taken prisoners at the battle of Badr, regained their freedom after they had taught some of the Muslims the art of writing.¹²

Did the Prophet himself write?

Although it is not clear whether the Prophet Muhammad knew how to write, there is unanimous agreement among scholars that Muhammad himself did not write down the revelation. The Qur'an clearly states:

And thou (O Muhammad) wast not a reader of any scripture before it, nor didst thou write it with thy right hand, for then might those have doubted who follow falsehood' [Q29:48].

The Qur'an also refers to Muhammad on several occasions as the 'unlettered prophet' which some scholars have interpreted in the sense that he did not read or write:

Those who follow the apostle, the unlettered prophet ... [Q8:157].

His community too has been described as 'unlettered':

It is he who has sent amongst the unlettered an apostle from among themselves ... [Q62:2].

The Qur'an written during the Prophet's Lifetime

¹¹ Bukhari. VI. No. 478.

¹² Tabaqat Ibn Sa'd, II(2), p. 19.

There is no doubt that the Qur'an was not only transmitted orally by many Muslims who had learned parts or the whole of it, but that it was also written down during the lifetime of the Prophet.

The well-known report about 'Umar's conversion shows that large passages of the revelation had already been written down even at a very early time, in Mecca, long before the hijra, when the Prophet was still in the house of Arqam. 'Umar had set out to kill the Prophet Muhammad, when somebody informed him that Islam had already spread into his own family and pointed out to him that his brother-in-law, his nephew and his sister had all become Muslims. 'Umar went to the house of his sister and found her together with her husband and another Muslim. A dispute arose and 'Umar violently attacked both his brother-in-law and his own sister. 'When he did that they said to him "Yes, we are Muslims and we believe in God and His apostle and you can do what you like". When 'Umar saw the blood on his sister, he was sorry for what he had done and turned back and said to his sister, 'Give me this sheet which I heard you reading just now so that I may see just what it is which Muhammad has brought', for 'Umar could write. When he said that, his sister replied that she was afraid to trust him with it. 'Do not be afraid', he said and he swore by his gods that he would return it when he had read it. When he said that, she had hopes that he would become a Muslim and said to him, 'My brother, you are unclean in your polytheism and only the clean may touch it'. So 'Umar rose and washed himself and she gave him the page in which was Taha and when he had read the beginning he said 'How fine and noble is this speech ...'¹³

The Qur'an Dictated by the Prophet

The Qur'an was not only written down by those Companions who did so on their own initiative. Indeed, the Prophet, when a revelation came, called for the scribe and dictated to him. The Prophet while in Madinah had several such scribes,¹⁴ among whom *Zayd Ibn Thabit* was very prominent.

Narrated al-Bara': There was revealed 'Not equal are those believers who sit (at home) and those who strive and fight in the cause of God' (4: 95). The Prophet said: 'Call *Zayd* for me and let him bring the board, the ink pot and the scapula bone (or the scapula bone and the ink pot).' Then he said: 'Write: Not equal are those believers ...'¹⁵

It is also reported that material upon which the revelation had been written down was kept in the house of the Prophet.¹⁶

¹³ Ibn Hisham, pp. 156-7.

¹⁴ M. M. A'zami, in his book *Kuttab al-Nabi* (Beirut, 1393/1974) mentions 48 persons who used to write for the Prophet.

¹⁵ Bukhari, VI, No. 512; also VI, No. 116-18.

¹⁶ Suyuti, *Itqan*, I, p. 58.

Written during the Prophet's Lifetime

Another report informs us that when people came to Madinah to learn about Islam, they were provided with 'copies of the chapters of the Qur'an, to read and learn them by heart'.¹⁷

Further evidence for the existence of the Qur'an as a written document during the lifetime of the Prophet comes from the following account:

Abd God b. Abu Bakr b. Hazm reported: The book written by the apostle of God for 'Amr b. Hazm contained also this that no man should touch the Qur'an without ablution.¹⁸

The book, which God's messenger wrote for 'Amr b. Hazm that no one should touch the Qur'an except the purified one:

Malik said: And no one should carry the *mushaf* by its strap, nor on a pillow, unless he is clean. And even if this be allowed to carry it in its cover, it is not disliked, if there is not in the two hands which carry it, something polluting the *mushaf*, but it is disliked for the one who carries it, and he is not clean, in honor to the Qur'an and respect to it. Malik said: The best I heard about this is the verse 'None shall touch it but those who are clean' [Q56:79].¹⁹

The commentary to the muwatta' explains that the book referred to as written by the Prophet (which means of course written upon his instruction) was sent with some Muslims for instruction in Islam of the people of Yemen.²⁰

In fact the Qur'anic verse [Q56:79], read in context, clearly explains that the Qur'an is available to those who receive instruction by revelation, in the form of a book or a piece of writing:

... this is indeed a Qur'an most honorable, in a book (kitab) well guarded, which none shall touch but those who are clean: a revelation from the Lord of the worlds' [Q56:77-80].

The same fact, i.e. that the Qur'an did exist as a written document in the lifetime of the Prophet is proved by the following ahadith:

From Ibn 'Umar: ... 'The messenger of God (may peace be upon him) said: "Do not take the Qur'an on a journey with you, for I am afraid lest it should fall into the hands of the enemy".²¹

¹⁷ Hamidullah, M.: Sahifa Hammam ibn Munabbih, Paris, 1979, p. 64.

¹⁸ Muwatta', No. 462.

¹⁹ Muwatta', Arabic, p. 204.

²⁰ Muwatta', Arabic, p. 204.

The correctness of the assumption that the reference is to a written document is supported by one of the transmitters: Ayyub (i. e. one of the narrators in the chain of transmission of this report) said: The enemy may seize it and may quarrel with you over it.²²

Furthermore, the chapter-heading used by Bukhari for the section, (which usually contains additional information,) explains:

Ibn 'Umar said: No doubt the Prophet and his Companions traveled in the land of the enemy and they knew the Qur'an then.²³

Collection of Revelation during the Prophet's Lifetime

During his last pilgrimage, at the sermon which he gave to the large gathering of Muslims, the Prophet said: 'I have left with you something which if you will hold fast to it you will never fall into error- a plain indication, the book of God and the practice of his prophet.'²⁴

This advice from the Prophet to the Muslims implies that the revelation was available as kitab (writing) before his death, for otherwise he would have referred to it in some other term.

From other reports also, we can conclude that the Prophet himself took care of the actual arrangement of the revelation, when it was written down.

Zayd is reported to have said:

We used to compile the Qur'an from small scraps in the presence of the Apostle.²⁵

'Uthman said, that in later days, the Prophet 'used to, when something was revealed to him, call someone from among those who used to write for him and said: Place these *ayat* in the *surah*, in which this and this is mentioned, and when (only) one *ayah* was revealed to him, he said: Place this *ayah* in the *surah* in which this and this is mentioned'.²⁶

This indicates that not only was the revelation written down during the lifetime of the Prophet, but that he himself gave instructions for the arrangement of the material. According to some other reports, it is also clear, that this proper

²¹ Muslim, III, No. 4609, also 4607, 4608; Bukhari, IV, No. 233.

²² Muslim, III, No. 4609.

²³ i.e. they knew that the Quran was carried - as a scripture - by the Muslims. Bukhan, IV, p. 146, Ch. 129.

²⁴ Ibn Hisham, p. 651.

²⁵ Itqan, I, p. 99; Salih, p.69.

²⁶ Jeffery, A.: Materials for the history of the text of the qura'n, (incl. Kitab al-masahif by Ibn Abi Dawud (abbr. as Ibn Abi Dawud, masahif) Leiden, 1937, p. 31.

arrangement and order of the *ayat* was well known to the Companions of the Prophet, and they were not prepared to tamper with it.

Narrated Ibn al-Zubayr: I said to 'Uthman "This verse which is in *surat al-Baqarah*: 'those of you who die and leave wives behind ... without turning them out' has been abrogated by another verse. Why then do you write it in the Qur'an?" 'Uthman said: Leave it (where it is) O son of my brother, for I will not shift anything of it (i. e. the Qur'an) from its original position.²⁷

Similarly quite a number of reports mention the various *Suwar* by their names or beginnings. Two examples may suffice to make this point:

Narrated Abu Huraira: The Prophet used to recite the following in the Fajr prayer of Friday: *alif lam mim tanzil (sajdah)* (32) and *hal-ata 'ala al-insani (al-dahr)* (76).²⁸

Abu Huraira said: God's messenger recited in both *rak'ahs* of the dawn prayer: "Say O unbelievers (99) and Say, He is God, one God (112).²⁹

The order and arrangement was of course well known to the Muslims due to the daily recitation of the Qur'an in the prayers at the mosque of the Prophet and at other places. Finally there are three ahadith in Sahih Bukhari, informing us that the Angel Gabriel used to recite the Qur'an with the Prophet once a year, but he recited it twice with him in the year he died. The Prophet used to stay in *i'tikaf* for ten days every year (in the month of Ramadan), but in the year of his death, he stayed in *i'tikaf* for twenty days.³⁰

We can therefore distinguish the following measures which ensured the collection of the revelation in writing during the lifetime of the Prophet:

- Revelation used to be written down even in the very early days of the Prophet's call.
- In Madinah, the Prophet had several persons who wrote down revelation when it was revealed.
- The Prophet himself instructed his scribes as to where the different revealed verses should be placed, and thus determined the order and arrangement.
- This order and arrangement was well known to the Muslims and strictly observed by them.
- The Angel Gabriel went through all the revelation with Muhammad each year in Ramadan, and went through it twice in the year the Prophet died.

²⁷ Bukhari, VI. No. 60.

²⁸ Bukhari, II, No. 16.

²⁹ Robson, J. (transl.): Mishkat al Masabih, Lahore, 1963, I, pp. 172-3 - Tabrizi: Mishkatal-masabih, Beirut, 1961, I, No. 842.

³⁰ Bukhari, VI, No. 520; see also Nos. 518, 519.

- There are numerous reports about the existence of the written Qur'an - in the form of a book or piece of writing (*kitab*) during the lifetime of the Prophet.

What did the Prophet leave behind?

The way the material of revelation was left by the Prophet at his death was the most suitable for the Companions in that:

- All parts of the revelation were available both in written form and memorized by the Companions.
- All pieces were available on loose writing material, making it easy to arrange them in the proper order.
- The order already fixed of the *ayat* within the *suwar*, in the written form, as well as in the memory of the Companions, and of the *suwar* in the memory of the Companions.

What arrangement could have been better than to have everything to hand in written form, as well as memorized by the Muslims, and to have the order and arrangement already determined, partially in the written form and completely in the memories of the people?

It is for these reasons that a later scholar, al-Harith al-Muhasibi in his book *kitab fahm al-sunan*, summarized the first phase of the written collection of the Qur'anic material in the following words:

Writing of the Qur'an was no novelty, for the Prophet used to order that it be written down, but it was in separate pieces, on scraps of leather, shoulder blades and palm risp, and when (Abu Bakr) al-Siddiq ordered that it be copied from the (various) places to a common place, which was in the shape of sheets, these (materials) were found in the house of the Prophet in which the Qur'an was spread out, and he gathered it all together and tied it with a string so that nothing of it was lost.³¹

It is obvious that the history of the Qur'anic text (Textgeschichte) cannot be compared with that of other Holy Scriptures. While the books of the Old and New Testaments, for example, were written, edited and compiled over long periods, sometimes centuries, the text of the Qur'an, once revelation had ceased, has remained the same to this day.

Suhuf and Mushaf

Both words are derived from the same root *sahafa* 'to write'. The word *suhuf* also occurs in the Qur'an [Q87:19] meaning scripture or written sheets.

³¹ Suyuti, Itqan, I, p. 58.

Suhuf (sing. *sahifah*) means loose pieces of writing material, such as paper, skin, papyrus, etc.

Mushaf (pl. *masahif*) means the collected *suhuf*, brought together into a fixed order, such as between two covers, into a volume.

In the history of the written text of the Qur'an, *suhuf* stands for the sheets on which the Qur'an was collected in the time of Abu Bakr. In these *suhuf* the order of the *ayat* within each *surah* was fixed, but the sheets with the *suwar* on them were still in a loose arrangement, i.e. not bound into a volume.

Mushaf in the present context means the sheets on which the Qur'an was collected in the time of 'Uthman. Here both the order of the *ayat* within each *surah* as well as the order of the sheets were fixed.

Today we also call any copy of the Qur'an, which has both order of *ayat* and *suwar* fixed, a *mushaf*.

How the *suhuf* were made

Tradition informs us that at the Battle of Yamama (11/633), in the time of Abu Bakr, a number of Muslims, who had memorized the Qur'an were killed. Hence it was feared that unless a written copy of the Qur'an were prepared, a large part of the revelation might be lost.

The following is the account in the Sahih Bukhari

Narrated *Zayd Ibn Thabit Al-Ansari*, one of the scribes of the Revelation: Abu Bakr sent for me after the casualties among the warriors (of the battle) of Yamama (where a great number of *qurra'* (memorizers) were killed). 'Umar was present with Abu Bakr who said: "Umar has come to me and said, the People have suffered heavy casualties on the day of (the battle of) Yamama, and I am afraid that there will be some casualties among the *Qurra* (those who know the Qur'an by heart) at other places, whereby a large part of the Qur'an may be lost, unless you collect it. And I am of the opinion that you should collect the Qur'an.' Abu Bakr added, 'I said to 'Umar, "How can I do something which God's Apostle has not done?" 'Umar said (to me) "By God, it is (really) a good thing". So 'Umar kept on pressing trying to persuade me to accept his proposal, till God opened my bosom for it and I had the same opinion as 'Umar'. (*Zayd Ibn Thabit* added:) 'Umar was sitting with him (Abu Bakr) and was not speaking. Abu Bakr said (to me), 'You are a wise young man and we do not suspect you (of telling lies or of forgetfulness); and you used to write the Divine Inspiration for God's Apostle. Therefore, look for the Qur'an and collect it (in one manuscript)'. By God, if he (Abu Bakr) had ordered me to shift one of the mountains (from its place) it would not have been harder

for me than what he had ordered me concerning the collection of the Qur'an. I said to both of them, 'How dare you do a thing which the Prophet has not done?' Abu Bakr said, 'By God, it is (really) a good thing. So I kept on arguing with him about it till God opened my bosom for that which He had opened the bosoms of Abu Bakr and 'Umar. So I started locating the Qur'anic material and collecting it from parchments, scapula, leafstalks of date palms and from the memories of men (who knew it by heart). I found with Khuzaima two verses of *Surat at-tawbah* which I had not found with anybody else (and they were):

Verily there has come to you an Apostle (Muhammad) from among yourselves. It grieves him that you should receive any injury or difficulty. He (Muhammad) is ardently anxious over you (to be rightly guided)' [Q9:128].

The manuscript on which the Qur'an was collected, remained with Abu Bakr till God took him unto Him, and then with 'Umar till God took him unto Him, and finally it remained with Hafsa, 'Umar's daughter.³²

Here we can distinguish the following steps, which led to the preparation of the suhuf:

- *Zayd* was instructed by Abu Bakr to collect the Qur'an.
- *Zayd* collected it from various written materials and the memories of people.
- The sheets thus prepared were kept with Abu Bakr, then 'Umar, then Hafsa.

THE MASAHIQ OF THE COMPANIONS

There are numerous indications in the literature of *hadith* that several of the Companions of the Prophet had prepared their own written collections of the revelations.³³ The best-known among these are from Ibn Mas'ud, Ubay Ibn Ka'b and *Zayd* Ibn Thabit.³⁴

A list of Companions of whom it is related that they had their own written collections included the following: Ibn Mas'ud, Ubay Ibn Ka'b, 'All, Ibn 'Abbas, Abu Musa, Hafsa, Anas Ibn Malik, 'Umar, *Zayd* Ibn Thabit, Ibn Al-Zubayr, 'Abdullah ibn 'Amr, 'A'isha, Salim, Umm Salama, 'Ubaid Ibn 'Umar.³⁵

³² Bukhari, VI, No. 201.

³³ Suyuti. Itqan, I, p 62.

³⁴ See Dodge, B, The Fihrist of al-Nadim, New York, 1970 (abbr. as fihrist), pp 53-63.

³⁵ See Ibn Abi Dawud: Masahif, p 14 Ansari, M.: The qura'nic Foundations and Structure of Muslim Society; Karachi, 1973, drawing upon various sources, says (1, p.76, note 2) that there existed at least 15 written copies of the Qur'an in the Prophet's lifetime. In addition to the list of 15

It is also known that 'A'isha and Hafsa had their own scripts written after the Prophet had died.³⁶

The following is a very brief description of some of the *masahif*, which are attributed to the Companions of the Prophet. All the information is based on classical sources.³⁷

The Mushaf of Ibn Mas'ud (d. 33/653)

He wrote a *mushaf*, in which *suwar* 1, 113 and 114 were not included. Ibn al-Nadim³⁸ however said he had seen a copy of the Qur'an from Ibn Mas'ud which did not contain *al-fatihah* (*Surah* 1). The arrangement of the *suwar* differed from the 'Uthmanic text. The following is the order attributed to Ibn Mas'ud's copy:³⁹

2, 4, 3, 7, 6, 5, 10, 9, 16, 11, 12, 17, 21, 23, 26, 37, 33, 28, 24, 8, 19, 29, 30, 36, 25, 22, 13, 34, 35, 14, 38, 47, 31, 35, 40, 43, 41, 46, 45, 44, 48, 57, 59, 32, 50, 65, 49, 67, 64, 63, 62, 61, 72, 71, 58, 60, 66, 55, 53, 51, 52, 54, 69, 56, 68, 79, 70, 73, 74, 83, 80, 76, 75, 77, 78, 81, 82, 88, 87, 92, 89, 85, 84, 96, 90, 93, 94, 86, 100, 107, 101, 98, 91, 95, 104, 105, 106, 102, 97, 110, 108, 109, 111, 112.

This list is obviously incomplete. It contains only 106 *suwar* and not 110, as Ibn Nadim wrote.

In *Surah al-baqarah*, which I take as an example, there are a total of 101 variants. Most of them concern spelling, some also choice of words (synonyms), use of particles, etc.

Examples:

Pronunciation:

2:70	Ibn Mas'ud reads	<i>al-baqira</i>
	in place of	<i>al-baqara</i>

Spelling:

2:19	He reads	<i>kulla ma</i>
	in place of	<i>kullama</i>

names quoted above, he includes Abu Bakr, 'Uthman, Mu'adh b. Jabal, Abu Darda', Abu Ayyub Ansari, 'Ubada b. al-Samit, Tamim Dari. This would add up to 23 written copies of the Qur'an, which existed while the Prophet was alive.

³⁶ Rahimuddin, M. (transl.): Muwatta' Imam Malik, Lahore, 1980, No. 307, 308; Malik b. Anas: al-muwatta', Cairo, n.d., p. 105.

³⁷ For details see Ibn Abi Dawud, also fihrist and Itqan

³⁸ Fihrist, I, pp. 57-8.

³⁹ Fihrist, I, pp. 53-7.

Synonyms:

2:68	He reads	<i>sal</i> (seek, beseech)
	in place of	<i>ud'u</i> (beseech)

Assuming that all these are reliable reports, the copy of Ibn Mas'ud would then have been prepared for his personal use and written before all 114 *suwar* were revealed.

Nadim, who lived in the tenth century (4th century Hijra) also added: 'I have seen a number of Qur'anic manuscripts, which the transcribers recorded as manuscripts of Ibn Mas'ud. No two of the Qur'anic copies were in agreement and most of them were on badly effaced parchment ...'⁴⁰

This note indicates that the question of authentic manuscripts of Ibn Mas'ud needs to be treated with some caution.

The Mushaf of Ubay bin Ka'b (d. 29 H/649)

He wrote a *mushaf*, in which two 'additional *suwar* and another 'additional *ayah*' were reportedly found.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Fihrist, I, p. 57.

⁴¹ Itqan, I, p. 65; Ibn Abi Dawud, *masahif*, pp. 18S1; also Noldeke, T. et al.: *Ceschichte des Qorans*, Leipzig, 1909-38 (abbr. as GdQ), 11, pp. 33-8. The first so called *surah* entitled *al-khal'* (separation), translates as follows: 'O Allah, we seek your help and ask your forgiveness, and we praise you and we do not disbelieve in you.

We separate from and leave who sins against you.' The second so-called *surah*, entitled *al-hafd* (haste) translates as follows: 'O Allah, we worship You and to You we pray and prostrate and to You we run and hasten to serve You. We hope for Your mercy and we fear Your punishment. Your punishment will certainly reach the disbelievers.' Obviously these two pieces constitute so-called '*qunut*', i.e. supplications which the Prophet sometimes said in the morning prayer or *witr* prayer after recitation of *suwar* from the Qur'an. They are in fact identical to some parts of *qunut* reported in the collections of hadith. See: Nawawi, *al-adhkar*, Cairo, 1955, pp. 57-8.

As to the single additional so-called *aya*, its translation is as follows: 'If the son of Adam was given a valley full of riches, he would wish a second one, and if he was given two valleys full of riches, he would surely ask for a third one. Nothing will fill the belly of the son of Adam except dust, and Allah is forgiving to him who is repentant.'

Again this text is known to be a hadith from the Prophet. See Bukhari, VIII, No. 444-47. According to Ibn 'Abbas (No. 445) and 'Ubay (No. 446) this text was at times thought to be part of the Qur'an. However Ubay himself clarifies that after *surah* 102: I had been revealed, they (i.e. the *sahaba*) did not consider the above to be part of the Qur'an. See Bukhari, VIII, No. 446. This explanation of Ubay also makes it very clear that the Companions did not differ at all about what was part of the Qur'an and what was not part of the Qur'an. when the revelation had ceased. and if e.g. this hadith occurred in the *mushaf* of Ubay, it was a *mushaf* for his own personal use, in other words, his private notebook, where he did not always distinguish between Qur'anic material and hadith, since it was not meant for general use and he himself knew well what to make of his

The order of the *suwar* is again different from 'Uthman as well as Ibn Masud.

The following is the order of *suwar* in the copy attributed to Ubay b. Ka'b:⁴²

1, 2, 4, 3, 6, 7, 5, 10, 8, 9, 11, 19, 26, 22, 12, 18, 16, 33, 17, 39, 45, 20, 21, 24, 23, 40, 13, 28, 27, 37, 38, 36, 15, 42, 30, 43, 41, 14, 35, 48, 47, 57, 52, 25, 32, 71, 46, 50, 55, 56, 72, 53, 68, 69, 59, 60, 77, 78, 76, 75, 81, 79, 80, 83, 84, 95, 96, 49, 63, 62, 66, 89, 67, 92, 82, 91, 85, 86, 87, 88, 74?, 98?, 61, 93, 94, 101, 102, 65?, 104, 99, 100, 105, ?, 108, 97, 109, 110, 111, 106, 112, 113, 114.

Again, as in the case of Ibn Mas'ud above this list is incomplete and does not contain all 114 *suwar* of the Qur'an.

Ubay has a total of 93 variants in *surat al-baqarah*.⁴³ Very often, his readings are similar to those of Ibn Mas'ud. For example, he reads *al-baqarah* in [Q2:70] as *al-baqirah*. So does Ibn Mas'ud.

The Mushaf of Ibn 'Abbas (d. 68/687)

Ibn 'Abbas also wrote a *mushaf*, which according to the *itqan*⁴⁴ also included the two additional *suwar* which Ubay had. Again his arrangement of the *suwar* differed from the other copies. In *Surah al-baqarah*, he has a total of 21 variants, some of them identical with Ibn Mas'ud and Ubay as well as other Companions.

Some other Companions

According to the *itqan*⁴⁵ the *mushaf* of Abu Musa al-Ash'ari (d. 44/664) contained the same material as Ubay had.

There is only one variant reported from him in *surat al-baqara*, namely that he read Ibrahim in place of Ibrahim.

own notes. The same is true of the other copies of the Qur'an, which some of the Companions had for their own personal use. Also those who transmitted to us the reports about these copies of the Qur'an of the Companions have only narrated to us the various differences which occurred there according to reports that reached them (e.g. the hadith in Bukhari, VIII, No. 446 that Ubay at some early stage held this sentence to be part of the Qur'an). However the actual manuscripts of these copies of the Qur'an of the Companions have not come down to us, since all of them agreed on the correctness and validity of the copies which 'Uthman had arranged to be written and distributed for general use. Hence their own personal notebooks became obsolete and were destroyed.

⁴² Fihrist, I, pp. 58-60.

⁴³ Again taken as example only to illustrate the point.

⁴⁴ I, p. 65; Ibn Abi Dawud, *masahif*, p. 193.

⁴⁵ I, p. 65; Ibn Abi Dawud, *masahif*, p. 210.

Hafsa (d. 45/665) had three variants in the same surah, and Anas b. Malik (d. 91/709) had five.

Examples:

To further illustrate, here are a number of examples. They have been taken, as far as possible, from well-known *suwar*. While perhaps better examples exist to illustrate the points under discussion, they might not be understood as easily by readers less familiar with the Qur'anic text.

Difference in vowelling:

Ibn 'Abbas⁴⁶ is reported to have read in *surah* 111:4

ḥāmilatu -l-ḥaṭab, in place of

ḥāmmālat-l-ḥaṭab

which could not be distinguished on the basis of the early written text, which omitted both *haraka* and *alif*. The actual text must have looked something like this: حملت لخطب (without the dots also)

Difference in spelling:

Ibn 'Abbas⁴⁷ reportedly wrote in [Q1:6] as well as all other places the word *al-sirāt* as *al-ṣirāt*.

Some variants attributed to Ibn Mas'ud:⁴⁸

1. in surat al-fatihah:

1:6	he read	<i>arshidnā</i>	in place of	<i>lhdinā</i>
	he read	<i>man</i>	in place of	<i>al ladhīna</i>
	he read	<i>ghaira</i>	in place of	<i>ghairi</i>

2. in surat al-baqarah:

2:2	he read	<i>tanzilu-l-kitābi</i>	in place of	<i>dhalika-l-kitābu</i>
2:7	he read	<i>ghishwatan</i>	in place of	<i>Ghishawatun</i>
2:9	he read	<i>yakhda'ūna</i>	in place of	<i>Yukhādi'ūna</i>
2:14	he read	<i>bi shayātinihim</i>	in place of	<i>ilā shayātinihim</i> etc.

⁴⁶ I, p. 65; Ibn Abi Dawud, *masahif*, p. 208.

⁴⁷ I, p. 65; Ibn Abi Dawud, *masahif*, p. 195.

⁴⁸ I, p. 65; Ibn Abi Dawud, *masahif*, p. 25.

Variants on *Surah Al-Ikhlās*, (112)

Verse	Ibn Mas'ud ⁴⁹	'Ubaid ⁵⁰	'Umar ⁵¹	normal reading by
112:1	<i>qul</i> omitted <i>Al-wāḥid</i> , in place of <i>al-Ḍaḥḍad</i>	<i>qul</i> omitted	<i>qul</i> omitted	Ali, Ibn Abbas, Abu Musa, Hafsa Anas b. Malik, Zayd b. Thabit, Ibn al Zubair, Ibn Amr,
112:2	omitted			
112:3	<i>lam yulad wa lam</i> <i>yulid</i> , in place of <i>lam</i> <i>yolid wa lam yulad</i>			Aisha, Salim, Umm Salama, Ubaid b. Umar

Even today the variants and synonyms are found in such copies of the text as are attributed to the Companions and are of some value to us in the sense that they may have served as an early rudimentary form of *tafsir*. For example, according to some reports the words 'salat al-wusta' (middle prayer) were read and written by Hafsa,⁵² Ubay⁵³ and Ibn 'Abbas⁵⁴ as '*salat al-'asr*' (i.e. afternoon prayer).

As long as the *sahabah* wrote their own copies for personal use only, there was nothing wrong, if they did not strictly adhere to the order of *suwar* which was the order of the Qur'an. Later on, when 'Uthman's copy became the standard version, the Companions adopted the order of this copy including Ibn Mas'ud who perhaps differed most.⁵⁵

There were also, as indicated, some variant readings in these copies,⁵⁶ when some words were pronounced and spelt in slightly different ways, etc. However, it should be noted that variant readings are usually reported by a single person only, and occasionally by perhaps two or three while the version called the 'Uthmanic text is mutawatir, i.e. transmitted by numerous people and is without doubt authentic.

THE MUSHAF OF 'UTHMAN

During the time of 'Uthman differences in reading the Qur'an became obvious, and after consultation with the Companions, 'Uthman had a standard copy prepared from the suhuf of Abu Bakr that were kept with Hafsa at that time.

⁴⁹ I, p. 65; Ibn Abi Dawud, *masahif*, p. 113.

⁵⁰ I, p. 65; Ibn Abi Dawud, *masahif*, p. 180.

⁵¹ I, p. 65; Ibn Abi Dawud, *masahif*, p. 222.

⁵² *Muwatta' Malik*; Jeffery, p. 214.

⁵³ Jeffery, p. 122.

⁵⁴ Jeffery, p. 196.

⁵⁵ Ibn Abi Dawud, p. 12; Salih, S.: *Mabahith fi 'ulum al-qura'n*, Beirut, 1964,

⁵⁶ See also below, seven readings and qira'at.

The following is the report transmitted in the Sahih Bukhari:

Narrated Anas Ibn Malik: Hudhaifa Ibn Al-Yaman came to 'Uthman at the time when the people of Sham and the people of Iraq were waging war to conquer Arminya and Adharbijan. Hudhaifa was afraid of their (the people of Sham and Iraq) differences in the recitation of the Qur'an, so he said to 'Uthman, 'O chief of the Believers! Save this nation before they differ about the Book (Qur'an), as Jews and the Christians did before'. So 'Uthman sent a message to Hafsa saying, 'Send us the manuscripts of the Qur'an so that we may compile the Qur'anic materials in perfect copies and return the manuscripts to you'. Hafsa sent it to 'Uthman. 'Uthman then ordered *Zayd* Ibn Thabit, 'Abdullah Ibn Az-Zubair, Sa'id Ibn Al-'As and 'Abd al-Rahman Ibn Hisham to rewrite the manuscripts in perfect copies. 'Uthman said to the three Qurayshi men, 'In case you disagree with *Zayd* Ibn Thabit on any point in the Qur'an, then write it in the dialect of *Quraysh* as the Qur'an was revealed in their tongue'. They did so, and when they had written many copies, 'Uthman returned the original manuscripts to Hafsa. 'Uthman sent to every Muslim province one copy of what they had copied, and ordered that all the other Qur'anic materials whether written in fragmentary manuscripts or whole copies, be burnt. *Zayd* Ibn Thabit added, 'A verse from *Surah al-Ahzab* was missed by me when we copied the Qur'an and I used to hear God's Apostle reciting it. So we searched for it and found it with Khuzaima Ibn Thabit Al-Ansari'. (That verse was): 'Among the Believers are men who have been true in their covenant with God' (33: 23).⁵⁷

The following events led to the preparation of the *mushaf* of 'Uthman:

- Disputes had arisen among the Muslims about the correct manner of reciting the Qur'an.
- 'Uthman borrowed the suhuf, which were kept with Hafsa.
- 'Uthman ordered four Companions, among them *Zayd* Ibn Thabit, to rewrite the script in perfect copies.
- 'Uthman sent these copies to the main centers of the Muslims to replace other materials that were in circulation.

Chronology of the Written Text

Around 610	Muhammad's Prophethood commences.	1st revelation in cave on Mount Hira	Transmitted orally, later in written form.
610-32	Muhammad in Mecca and Madinah.	Continuous revelation on numerous occasions	Transmitted orally after memorization by many, and writing down of revelation by various companions upon the direct instruction of the Prophet himself.

⁵⁷ Bukhari, VI, No. 510.

632	Prophets death.	Last revelation few days before this.	Complete revelation left behind both in the memories of various companions as well as on various writing materials.
		At the death of the Prophet, complete revelation left behind.	
632-34	Abu Bakr's caliphate		
633	During the battle of Yamama several companions who knew the Quran by heart were killed.	Abu Bakr instructs <i>Zayd</i> b. Thabit to prepare a single copy of the complete revelation.	<i>Zayd</i> b. Thabit brings together all the revelation into the suhuf from both oral as well as written sources demanding two witnesses for each piece. The Suhuf remain with Abu Bakr.
		During the 1st/2nd year after the Prophets death the entire revelation was copied onto sheets (suhuf).	
634-44	Umar's Caliphate.		The suhuf remain with Umar.
644-56	Uthman's Caliphate.		The suhuf remain with Hafsa bint Umar.
653	Campaign against Armenia and Azerbaidjan.	Serious differences arose among Muslims about the correct recitation of the Quran. Uthman instructs <i>Zayd</i> together with three other <i>sahabah</i> to prepare copies from the suhuf kept with Hafsa.	<i>Zayd</i> and three Companions prepare a number of fresh copies from the suhuf. These copies are sent to the various Muslim regions to replace other material in circulation. Suhuf returned to Hafsa. 'Uthman also keeps one copy (<i>mushaf</i>).
		Several copies of the entire revelation available through out the Muslim lands.	

What the Prophet left to the Muslims

The revelation, as left by the Prophet, was available both orally and written on various materials. Its internal order was known to the Muslims and strictly observed by them.

Abu Bakr collected these loose materials and had their contents written on to sheets (*suhuf*).

The Difference between Abu Bakr's and 'Uthman's Collection

Abu Bakr had made one single copy from the various verbal and written material. This copy was later kept by 'Umar and then by his daughter Hafsa.

'Uthman had many copies prepared from this copy and sent them to various places in the Muslim world, while the original suhuf were returned to Hafsa and remained with her until her death. Later, Marwan b. Hakam (d. 65/684), according to a report in Ibn Abi Dawud, collected it from her heirs and had it destroyed, presumably fearing it might become the cause for new disputes. 'Uthman also kept one of the copies for himself. This version of the text, also known as '*Mushaf* 'Uthman in fact constitutes the *ijma'*(consensus) of the *sahabah*, all of whom agreed that it contained what Muhammad had brought as revelation from God.⁵⁸

The wide distribution of this text and its undisputed authority can also be deduced from the reports on the battle of Siffin (A.H. 37) 27 years after the death of the Prophet, and five years after 'Uthman's copies were distributed, Mu'awiya's troops fixed sheets from the Qur'an on their spears to interrupt the battle.⁵⁹ However nobody accused anyone else of using a 'partisan' version of the text, which would have made a splendid accusation against the enemy.

⁵⁸ According to Ibn Abi Dawud (117-8) eleven changes were made under al-Hajjaj, among them e.g. 5:48 '*shari'atan wa minhajan*' into '*shir'atan wa minhajan*'; 12:45 '*ana atikum bi-ta'wilihi*' into and '*unabbi'ukum bi ta'wilihi*'. These are again according to Ibn Abi Dawud mistakes which were made in the preparation of Uthman's copy (pp. 37-49). The first version of 12:45 e.g. was the reading of 'Ubay (ibid. p. 138) and Ibn Masud (ibid. p. 39).

⁵⁹ See Suyuti, History of the Caliphs. transl. H. S. Jarrett. Baptist Mission Press Calcutta. 1881, p. 177.]

CHAPTER 3

The Qur'an in Manuscript and Print

THE QUR'ANIC SCRIPT

Writing, although not very widespread in pre-Islamic time, was well-known among the Arabs. The script used in the seventh century, i. e. during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, consisted of very basic symbols, which expressed only the consonantal structure of a word, and even that with much ambiguity.

While today letters such as *ba*, *ta*, *tha*, *ya*, are easily distinguished by points, this was not so in the early days and all these letters used to be written simply as a straight line.

From this very basic system of writing there developed over the ages, various types of script, such as *Kufi*, *Maghribi*, *Naskh*, etc., which spread all over the world.

The later invention of printing with standardized types has contributed to formalizing the writing.

However, as far as the actual script of the Qur'an is concerned, there were two important steps which brought about the forms in which we have the Qur'anic text as it is today. These were the introduction of:

- Vowelling marks (*tashkil*).
- Diacritical marks (*a'jam*).

Tashkil

Tashkil is the name for the signs indicating the vowels in Arabic scripts. They were apparently unknown in pre-Islamic times. These signs help to determine the correct pronunciation of the word and to avoid mistakes.

Example:

Byt بيت

Baitun بَيْتٌ

When more and more Muslims of non-Arab origin and also many ignorant Arabs¹ studied the Qur'an, faulty pronunciation and wrong readings began to increase. It is related that at the time of Du'ali (d. 69/638) someone in Basra¹ read

¹ Yaqut reports in his book *irshad* that al-Hajjaj b. Yusuf himself once read *ahabba* in 9: 24 wrongly as *ahabbu*, see GdQ. 111, 124, note 6.

the following *ayah* from the Qur'an in a faulty way, which changed the meaning completely:

انّ الله بريء من المشركين ورسوله

That God and His apostle dissolve obligations with the pagans [Q9: 3].

انّ الله بريء من المشركين ورسوله

That God dissolves obligations with the pagans and the apostle.

The mistake occurred through wrongly reading *rasulih* in place of *rasuluhu*, which could not be distinguished from the written text, because there were no signs or accents indicating the correct pronunciation. Unless someone had memorized the correct version he could out of ignorance easily commit such a mistake. [See also fihrist, 1, pp. 87-8.] The signs or accents to prevent such problems were introduced not long before the *a'jam* and then got the shape they have to this day:²

Name	Old Style	New Style
Fatha	ب with large dot on top	بَ
Kasra	ب with large dot underneath	بِ
Damma	ب with large dot to the left of it	بُ

For an example of the old style see appendix.

It has been suggested that the origin of *fatha* is *alif*, the origin of *kasrah* is *ya* (without dots as in early books), and the origin of *damma* is *waw*. *Hamzah* was previously written as 2 dots.³

a'jam

The function of *a'jam* is to provide a letter with a diacritical point.

The Arabic letters, as we know them today, are made up of lines and points. The latter are called *a'jam*. The ancient Arabic script did not have them, but consisted of strokes only.

The addition of diacritical points to the plain writing of strokes helped to distinguish the various letters which could be easily mixed up.

² Hughes, T.P.: *A Dictionary of Islam* London, 1895 p.687.

³ Abbott, N.: *The Rise of the North-Arabic Script and its Koranic Development*, Chicago, 1939, p. 39.

Example: بيت and بيت without any of the dots (it can't be done with the software)

Without dots this word cannot be easily recognized. With *a'jam*, the letters of this word can easily be distinguished.

Although the *a'jam* (diacritical points) were already known in pre-Islamic times, they were rarely used. The very early copies of the Qur'anic manuscripts (and Arabic writing in general) did not have these signs. They were apparently introduced into the Qur'anic script during the time of the fifth Umayyad Caliph, 'Abd al-Malik Ibn Marwan (66-86H/685-705) and the governorship of Al-Hajjaj in Iraq, when more and more Muslims began to read and study the Qur'an, some of whom did not know much of the Qur'an, and others were of non-Arab origin. It is said of the well-known *tabi'i* (Follower) Al-Du'ali that he was the first to introduce these points into the Qur'anic text.

EARLY MANUSCRIPTS

Writing Material

Early manuscripts of the Qur'an were typically written on animal skin. We know that in the lifetime of the Prophet, parts of the revelation were written on all kinds of materials, such as bone, animal skin, palm risps, etc. The ink was prepared from soot.

Script

All old Qur'anic script is completely without any diacritical points or vowel signs as explained above. Also there are no headings or separations between the *suwar* nor any other kind of division, nor even any formal indication of the end of a verse. Scholars distinguish between two types of early writing:

- Kufi, which is fairly heavy and not very dense.
- Hijazi, which is lighter, denser and slightly inclined towards the right.

Some believe that the Hijazi is older than the Kufi, while others say that both were in use at the same time, but that Hijazi was the less formal style.⁴

Some Peculiarities of the Ancient Writing

⁴ This is the view of N. Abbott: 'We can no longer draw a chronological demarcation line between what are commonly termed the Kufi and the Naskhi scripts, nor can we consider the latter as a development of the former. This ... now demands a more general recognition. Our materials show that there were two tendencies at work simultaneously, both of them natural ones' (Abbott, op. cit., p.16) . See plates 5 and 6.

Numerous copies of the Qur'an were made after the time of the Prophet Muhammad and the Rightly-Guided Caliphs, and the writers of these manuscripts strictly observed the autography of the 'Uthmanic Qur'an. There are, compared to the usual Arabic spelling, some peculiarities. Here are a few of them, only concerning the letters *alif*, *ya*, *waw*, by way of examples:⁵

- The letter alif is often written on top of a letter instead of after it. (see appendix)
- The letter ya (or alif) of the word is omitted,
- Some words have the letter waw in place of alif.

OLD MANUSCRIPTS OF THE QUR'AN

Most of the early original Qur'an manuscripts, complete or in sizeable fragments, that are still available to us now, are not earlier than the second century after the Hijra. The earliest copy, which was exhibited in the British Museum during the 1976 World of Islam Festival, dated from the late second century.⁶ However, there are also a number of odd fragments of Qur'anic papyri available, which date from the first century.⁷

There is a copy of the Qur'an in the Egyptian National Library on parchment made from gazelle skin, which has been dated 68 Hijra (688 A.D.), i.e. 58 years after the Prophet's death.

What happened to 'Uthman's Copies?

It is not known exactly how many copies of the Qur'an were made at the time of 'Uthman, but Suyuti⁸ says: 'The well-known ones are five'. This probably excludes the copy that 'Uthman kept for himself. The cities of Mecca, Damascus, Kufa, Basra and Madinah each received a copy.⁹

There are a number of references in the older Arabic literature on this topic which together with latest information available may be *summarized* as follows:

The Damascus Manuscript

⁵ For more examples see Kamal, op. cit., pp.47-9; a list of these peculiarities has been provided by M. Hamidullah: 'Orthographical Peculiarities in the text of the Qur'an, in: Islamic Order, 3 (4), 1981, pp.72-86.

⁶ Lings, M. and Y. H. Safadi: The Qur'an, London, 1976, No. 1A. See appendix.

⁷ Grohmann, A.: Die Entstehung des Koran und die ältesten Koran-Handschriften', in: Bustan, 1961, pp. 33-8.

⁸ Makhdum, 1.: *Tarikh al-mushaf al-'Uthmani fi Tashqand*, Tashkent 1391/1971 p. 17.

⁹ GdQ, 111. 6, Note 1.

Al-Kindi (d. around 236/850) wrote in the early third century that three out of four of the copies prepared for 'Uthman were destroyed in fire and war, while the copy sent to Damascus was still kept at his time at Malatja.¹⁰

Ibn Battuta (779/1377) says he has seen copies or sheets from the copies of the Qur'an prepared under 'Uthman in Granada, Marakesh, Basra and other cities.¹¹

Ibn Kathir (d. 774/1372) relates that he has seen a copy of the Qur'an attributed to 'Uthman, which was brought to Damascus in the year 518 Hijra from Tiberias (Palestine). He said it was 'very large, in beautiful clear strong writing with strong ink, in parchment, I think, made of camel skin'.¹²

Some believe that the copy later on went to Leningrad and from there to England. After that nothing is known about it. Others hold that this *mushaf* remained in the mosque of Damascus, where it was last seen before the fire in the year 1310/1892.¹³

The Egyptian Manuscript

There is a copy of an old Qur'an kept in the mosque of al-Hussain in Cairo. Its script is of the old style, although Kif, and it is quite possible that it was copied from the *Mushaf* of 'Uthman.¹⁴

The Madina Manuscript

Ibn Jubair (d. 614/1217) saw the manuscript in the mosque of Madinah in the year 580/1184. Some say it remained in Madinah until the Turks took it from there in 1334/1915. It has been reported that this copy was removed by the Turkish authorities to Istanbul, from where it came to Berlin during World War I. The Treaty of Versailles, which concluded World War I, contains the following clause:

Article 246: Within six months from the coming into force of the present Treaty, Germany will restore to His Majesty, King of Hejaz, the original Koran of Caliph Othman, which was removed from Medina by the Turkish

¹⁰ GdQ. 111, 6. Note 1.

¹¹ Salih, op. cit., p.87.

¹² Salih, op. cit., p.88.

¹³ Salih, op. cit., p.89; Muir, in 'The Mameluke Dynasties' also writes that this manuscript was burnt in Damascus in 1893; see Abbott, op. cit., p.51.

¹⁴ Kamal, op. cit., p.56.

authorities and is stated to have been presented to the ex-Emperor William II.¹⁵

The manuscript then reached Istanbul, but not Madinah.¹⁶

The 'Imam' Manuscript

This is the name used for the copy which 'Uthman kept himself, and it is said he was killed while reading it.¹⁷

According to some the Umayyads took it to Andalusia, from where it came to Fas (Morocco) and according to Ibn Battuta it was there in the eighth century after the Hijra, and there were traces of blood on it. From Morocco, it might have found its way to Samarkand.

The Samarkand Manuscript¹⁸

This is the copy now kept in Tashkent (Uzbekistan). It may be the Imam manuscript or one of the other copies made at the time of 'Uthman.

It came to Samarkand in 890 Hijra (1485) and remained there till 1868. Then it was taken to St. Petersburg by the Russians in 1869. It remained there till 1917. A Russian orientalist gave a detailed description of it, saying that many pages were damaged and some were missing. A facsimile, some 50 copies, of this *mushaf* was produced by S. Pisareff in 1905. A copy was sent to the Ottoman Sultan 'Abdul Hamid, to the Shah of Iran, to the Amir of Bukhara, to Afghanistan, to Fas and some important Muslim personalities. One copy is now in the Columbia University Library (U.S.A.).¹⁹

The manuscript was afterwards returned to its former place and reached Tashkent in 1924, where it has remained since. Apparently the Soviet authorities have made further copies, which are presented from time to time to visiting Muslim heads of state and other important personalities. In 1980, photocopies of such a facsimile were produced in the United States, with a two-page foreword by M. Hamidullah.

¹⁵ Israel, Fred L. (ed.): Major Peace Treaties of Modern History, New York, Chelsea House Pub., Vol. II, p.1418.

¹⁶ The same information about this copy was published in a Cairo magazine in 1938 (Makhdum, op. cit., p.19). Surprisingly the standard book *Geschichte des Qorans*, the third part of which was published in Germany in 1938, i.e. well after the Treaty of Versailles, although discussing the 'Uthmanic Qur'an and old manuscripts in detail, makes no reference whatsoever to this event. Also, the writer of the *History of the Mushaf of 'Uthman in Tashkent*, indicates that he does not know what to make of this reference.

¹⁷ Ibn Said: *al-Tabaqatal-kubra*, Cairo, n.d., Vol. 111, (1). pp. 51-2.

¹⁸ Makhdum, op. cit., p.22ff.

¹⁹ *The Muslim World*, Vol. 30 (1940), pp.357-8.

The writer of the History of the *Mushaf* of 'Uthman in Tashkent gives a number of reasons for the authenticity of the manuscript. They are, excluding the various historical reports which suggest this, as follows:

- The fact that the *mushaf* is written in a script used in the first half of the first century Hijra.
- The fact that it is written on parchment from a gazelle, while later Qur'ans are written on paper-like sheets.
- The fact that it does not have any diacritical marks which were introduced around the eighth decade of the first century; hence the manuscript must have been written before that.
- The fact that it does not have the vowel symbols introduced by Du'ali, who died in 68 Hijra; hence it is earlier than this.

In other words: two of the copies of the Qur'an which were originally prepared in the time of Caliph 'Uthman, are still available to us today and their text and arrangement can be compared, by anyone who cares to, with any other copy of the Qur'an, be it in print or handwriting, from any place or period of time. They will be found identical.

The 'Ali Manuscript

Some sources indicate that a copy of the Qur'an written by the fourth Caliph 'Ali is kept in Najaf, Iraq, in the Dar al-Kutub al-'Alawiya. It is written in Kufi script, and on it is written: "Ali Ibn Abi Talib wrote it in the year 40 of the Hijra".²⁰

THE QUR'AN IN PRINT

From the sixteenth century, when the printing press with movable type was first used in Europe and later in all parts of the world, the pattern of writing and of printing the Qur'an was further standardized.

There were already printed copies of the Qur'an before this, in the so-called block-print form, and some specimens from as early as the tenth century, both of the actual wooden blocks and the printed sheets, have come down to us.²¹

The first extant Qur'an for which movable type was used was printed in Hamburg (Germany) in 1694. The text is fully vocalized.²² Probably the first Qur'an printed by Muslims is the so-called 'Mulay Usman edition' of 1787,

²⁰ Attar, D.: *Mujaz 'ulum al-qur'an*, Beirut 1399/1979, p. 116.

²¹ Grohmann, op. cit., p.38; Exhibition in the British Library, London.

²² Al-Coranus, *lex islamitica Muhammedis*, Officina Schultzio-Schilleriana. Hamburg, 1694; Exhibition No. 22.

published in St. Petersburg, Russia, followed by others in Kazan (1828), Persia (1833) and Istanbul (1877).²³

In 1858, the German orientalist Fluegel produced together with a useful concordance the so-called 'Fluegel edition' of the Qur'an, printed in Arabic, which has since been used by generations of orientalists.²⁴ The Fluegel edition has however a very basic defect: its system of verse numbering is not in accordance with general usage in the Muslim world.²⁵

The Egyptian Edition

The Qur'anic text in printed form now used widely in the Muslim world and developing into a 'standard version', is the so-called 'Egyptian' edition, also known as the King Fu'ad edition, since it was introduced in Egypt under King Fu'ad. This edition is based on the reading of Hafs, as reported by 'Asim, and was first printed in Cairo in 1925/1344H. Numerous copies have since been printed.

The Sa'd Nursi Copy

Finally, the Qur'an printed by the followers of Sa'id Nursi from Turkey should be mentioned as an example of combining a hand-written beautifully illuminated text with modern offset printing technology. The text was hand written by the Turkish calligrapher Hamid al-'Amidi. It was first printed in Istanbul in 1947, but since 1976 has been produced in large numbers and various sizes at the printing press run by the followers of Sa'id Nursi in West Berlin (Germany).

²³ Blachere, R.: Introduction au Coran, Paris, 1947, p. 133.

²⁴ Fluegel, Gustav: Corani texn Arabicus. Leipzig, 1834.

²⁵ See e.g. 74: 31, where he makes four verses out of one.

CHAPTER 4

Form, Language and Style

DIVISIONS OF THE TEXT

Ayah and Surah

Ayah (pl. *ayat*) actually means 'sign'. In technical language it is the shortest division of the Qur'anic text, i.e. a phrase or sentence. The revelation is guidance from God to mankind and it is therefore not at all surprising to find that its smallest divisions are called (guiding) 'signs'. The term 'verse' is not appropriate since the Qur'an is not poetry.

Surah (pl. *Suwar*) means literally 'row' or 'fence'. In technical language, it is the passage-wise division of the Qur'anic text, i.e. a chapter or part, set apart from the preceding and following text.

The Qur'an has 114 *suwar* of unequal length, the shortest consisting of four and the longest of 286 *ayat*.

All *suwar* (with the exception of *surah* 9) begin with the words *bismillahir rahmanir rahim*. This is not a later addition to the text, but was already used, even before Muhammad's call to prophethood.¹

All 114 *suwar* in the Qur'an have names, which serve as a sort of heading. The names are often derived from an important or distinguishing word in the text itself, such as e.g. *al-anfal* (8) or *al-baqarah* (2). In other cases it is one of the first few words with which the *surah* begins e.g. *ta-ha* (20) or *al-furqan* (25).

Order and Arrangement

Both the order of the *ayat* within each *surah* and the arrangement of the *suwar* were finally determined by the Prophet under guidance from the Angel Gabriel in the year of his death, when Gabriel twice came to revise the text with him.²

Scholars have also grouped the *suwar* into four kinds:

- *al-tiwal* (long ones): 2-10.
- *al-ma'un*: *suwar* with approximately 100 *ayat*: 10-35.
- *al-muthana*: *suwar* with less than 100 *ayat*: 36-49.
- *al-mufassal*: the last section of the Qur'an beginning with *Surah qaf*: 50-114.

¹ See *Surah* 27: 30.

² See above. transmission of the Qur'anic revelation, p. 31.

Other Divisions of the Text

Juz' (pl. *ajza'*) literally means part, portion. The Qur'an is divided into 30 portions of approximately equal length for easy recitation during the thirty nights of a month, especially of the month of Ramadan. Usually they are indicated by the word and the number of it given alongside, (e.g. *juz'* 30 beginning with Surah 78).

Some copies of the Qur'an have the *suwar* divided into paragraphs called *ruku'*. They are indicated by the symbol ξ and the explanation of the Arabic numerals written with each is as follows, e.g. 2:20:

- The top figure (2) indicates that this is the second completed *ruku'* in the respective *surah* (here *surat al-baqarah*).
- The middle figure (13) indicates that this completed *ruku'* contains 13 *ayat*.
- The lower figure (2) indicates that this is the second *ruku'* in the respective *juz'* (here first *juz'*).

Copies of the Qur'an printed in the Middle East in particular have each *juz'* subdivided into four *hizb* indicated by the sign حزب e.g. [Q2:74] is the beginning of the second *hizb* of the Qur'an, indicated by the figure 2: حزب 2

Each *hizb* is again subdivided into quarters, indicated as follows:

- First quarter of the *hizb*: ربع الحزب
- Half of the *hizb*: نصف الحزب
- Third quarter of the *hizb*: ثلاثة أرباع الحزب

The Qur'anic text is also divided into seven parts of approximately equal length, called *manzil*, for recitation over seven days, indicated in some copies by the word *manzil* منزل and the respective number in the margin. The following table shows the division of the text into *juz'* and *manzil*.³

<i>Manzil</i>	<i>Juz</i>	<i>Surah</i>
1	1	1:1
	2	2:142
	3	2:253
	4	3:92 or 93
	5	4:24
	6	4:148
2	6	5:1
	7	5:82 or 83
	8	6:111

³ Hamidullah, Muhammad: Le Saint Coran. Traduction integrale et noires. Paris: Club Francais du Livre, n.d., p.XLI.

	9	7:88
	9	7:286
	10	8:41
3	11	9:93 or 94
	11	10:1
	12	11:6
	13	12:53
	13	13:15
	14	15:1 or 2
4	14	16:50
	15	17:1
	15	17:109
	16	18:75
	16	19:58
	17	21:1
	17	22:18
	17	22:77
	18	23:1
	19	25:21
	19	25:60
5	19	27:1
	19	27:26
	20	27:56 or 60
	21	29:45 or 46
	21	32:15
6	22	33:31
	22	35:1
	23	36:22 or 28
	23	38:24 or 25
	24	39:32
	24	41:38
	25	41:47
7	26	46:1
	26	50:1
	27	51:31
	27	53:62
	28	58:1
	29	67:1
	30	78:1
	30	84:21
	30	96:19

The ends of the various *manzil* according to Qatadah are 4:76, 8:36, 15:49, 23:118, 34:54, 49:18 and 114:6.⁴

LANGUAGE AND VOCABULARY

The language of the Qur'an—as is well known—is Arabic. The Qur'an itself gives some indication about its language:

We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an in order that ye may learn wisdom' [Q12: 2].

In another place the language of the Qur'an is called 'pure Arabic' (*'arabiyyun mubin*):

This (tongue) is Arabic, pure and clear. [Q16:103].

The question that arises is: Why was the Qur'an revealed in Arabic, and not in any other language? The first and perhaps the most obvious reason is already referred to in the Qur'an, namely that because the messenger who was to announce this message was an Arab, it is only natural that the message should be announced in his language:

Had We sent this as a Qur'an (in a language) other than Arabic they could have said: Why are not its verses explained in detail? What! (a book) not in Arabic and (a messenger) an Arab? Say: It is a guide and a healing to those who believe ... [Q41:44].

Another important reason concerns the audience which was to receive the message. The message had to be in a language understood by the audience to whom it was first addressed, i.e. the inhabitants of Mecca and the surrounding areas:

Thus We have sent by inspiration to thee an Arabic Qur'an: that thou mayest warn the mother of the cities and all around her- and warn (them) of the day of assembly of which there is no doubt (when) some will be in the garden and some in the blazing fire. [Q42:7].

The Qur'an Needed to be Understood

The Qur'an contains revelation from God and the true nature of revelation is to guide mankind from darkness to light:

⁴ Ibn Abi Dawud, p. 118.

A book which we have revealed unto thee in order that thou mightest lead mankind out of the depths of darkness into light- by the leave of thy Lord- to the way of (Him) the exalted in power, worthy of all praise. [Q14:1].

The revelation came in the language of the messenger and his people in order that it might be understood:

We have made it a Qur'an in Arabic that ye may be able to understand (and learn wisdom). [Q43:3].

In the process of understanding a message two steps are essential:

- To receive the message correctly and completely, in this case to receive its words correctly and completely.
- To 'decode' it, to grasp the meanings of the message received.

Only the combination of the two elements, i.e. reception and decoding, lead to proper understanding of the message.

To Understand the Qur'an

It is not correct to assume that understanding the Qur'an in order to take guidance from it depends upon direct knowledge of the Arabic language, since there are numerous Arabic-speaking people who do not understand the message of the Qur'an. Rather the Qur'an tells us that right guidance comes only from God:

This is the guidance of God: He giveth that guidance to whom He pleaseth of His worshippers ... [Q6:88].

However, to understand the language of the Qur'an is a prerequisite to fully grasp its meanings. Hence many Muslims have learned this language. Others, who have not done so, make use of translations, which for them is an indirect means of knowing the language, as in the translations the meanings of the Qur'an have been rendered into their mother tongues so that they may familiarize themselves with the message from God.

This message can be understood by all human beings who are willing to listen, for the Qur'an is not difficult but easy:

We have indeed made the Qur'an easy to remember: but is there any that remembers it? [Q54:17].

Non-Arabic Words in the Qur'an

There is some difference of opinion among scholars whether the language of the Qur'an includes expressions which are not Arabic. Some (among them Tabari and Baqillani) hold that all in the Qur'an is Arabic and that words of non-Arabic origin found in the Qur'an were nevertheless part of Arabic speech. Although these words were of non-Arab origin the Arabs used and observed them and they became genuinely integrated in the Arabic language.

However, it is conceded that there are non-Arabic proper names in the Qur'an, such as Isra'il, Imran, Nuh., etc.

Others have said that the Qur'an does contain words not used in the Arabic language, such as e.g.:

- *al-Qistas* [Q17:35], derived from the Greek language.
- *al-Sijil* [Q15: 74], derived from the Persian language.
- *al-Ghassaq* [Q78:25], derived from the Turkish language.
- *al-Tur* [Q2:63], derived from the Syriac language.
- *al-Kifl* [Q57:28], derived from the Abyssinian language.

Some scholars have written books on the topic of 'foreign vocabulary in the Qur'an', e.g. Suyuti, who compiled a small book with a list of 118 expressions in different languages.⁵

LITERARY FORMS AND STYLE

The Qur'an is the revelation from God for the guidance of mankind and not poetry or literature. Nevertheless it is expressed verbally and in written form, and hence its literary forms and style may be considered here briefly.

Broadly speaking there are two main literary forms:

- Prose.
- Poetry.

By prose is meant a way of expression close to the everyday spoken language, and distinct from poetry insofar as it lacks any conspicuous artifice of rhythm and rhyme.

The Qur'an is not Poetry

Not only European orientalists have described some passages of the Qur'an as more 'poetic' than others: the opponents of Muhammad had already used this argument, accusing him of being a poet or a soothsayer. This is refuted by the Qur'an itself:

⁵ The Mutawakkili of Al-Suyuti, trans. by William Y. Bell, Yale University Dissertations, 1924; see also Itqan.

It is not the word of a poet; little it is ye believe! Nor is it the word of a soothsayer: little admonition it is ye receive. (This is) a message sent down from the Lord of the worlds. [Q69:40-43].

The accusations against Muhammad refuted in the above passage are based on the usage of a particular style, employed in the Qur'an, which is said to be like *saj'* or close to it.

The word *saj'* is usually translated as 'rhymed prose', i.e. a literary form with some emphasis on rhythm and rhyme, but distinct from poetry. *Saj'* is not really as sophisticated as poetry, but has been employed by Arab poets, and is the best known of the pre-Islamic Arab prosodies. It is distinct from poetry in its lack of metre, i.e. it has no consistent rhythmic pattern, and it shares with poetry the element of rhyme,⁶ though in many cases somewhat irregularly employed.

The Difference between Literature and the Qur'an

Ibn Khaldun (d. 809/1406), the well-known author of the *muqaddimah* pointed out in a passage on the literature of the Arabs the difference between literature and the Qur'an in general and between *saj'* and the Qur'an in particular:

It should be known that the Arabic language and Arab speech are divided into two branches. One of them is rhymed poetry ... The other branch is prose, that is, non-metrical speech ... The Qur'an is in prose. However, it does not belong in either of the two categories. It can neither be called straight prose nor rhymed prose. It is divided into verses. One reaches breaks where taste tells one that the speech stops. It is then resumed and "repeated" in the next verse. (Rhyme) letters, which would make that (type of speech) rhymed prose are not obligatory, nor do rhymes (as used in poetry) occur. This situation is what is meant by the verse of the Qur'an:

God revealed the best story, a book harmoniously arranged with repeated verses ... [Q39:23].⁷

Examples:

A good example for a *saj'*-like passage in the Qur'an would be *surat al-ikhlas* [Q112:14]. It is somewhat irregular in its rhythm, and it has a rhyme ending with the syllable *ad*:

<i>qul huwa allahu ahad</i>	Say: He is God the One and Only
<i>allahu asamad</i>	God the Eternal, Absolute
<i>lam yalid wa lam</i>	He begetteth not nor is He

⁶ Called *fasilah* (pl. *fawasil*) when used for the Qur'an.

⁷ Ibn Khaldun: The Muqaddima, Princeton, 1967, Vol. 3, p.368; Ibn Khaldun: Muqaddima, Cairo, n.d., p.424.

<i>yulad</i>	begotten
<i>wa lam yakun lahu kufuwan ahad</i>	And there is none like unto Him.

Of the many passages more like plain prose, although not quite identical to it, as the kind of end-rhyme indicates, the following may serve as an example:

Inna auhaina ilaika kama auhaina ila nuhin wa nabiyyina min ba'dihi wa auhaina ila ibrahima wa isma'ila wa ishaqa wa ya'quba wa-l-asbati wa 'isa wa ayyuba wa yunusa wa haruna wa sulaimana wa ataina dawuda zabura. Wa rusulan qad qasasnahum 'alaika min qablu wa rusulan lam naqsushum 'alaika wa kallama llahu musa taklima. Rusulan mubashshirina wa mundhirina li'alla yakuna li-nnasi 'ala llahi hujjatun ba'dar rusuli wa kana llahu 'azizan hakima (Al-Qur'an 4: 163-165).

We have sent thee inspiration as We sent it to Noah and the messengers after him: We sent inspiration to Abraham, Ismail, Isaac, Jacob and the tribes, to Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, and Solomon, and to David we gave the Psalms. Of some apostles We have already told thee the story, of others We have not. And to Moses God direct spoke. Apostles who gave good news as well as warning that mankind after (the coming) of the apostles should have no plea against God; for God is exalted in power, wise.

STYLE

Narrative in the Qur'an

The Qur'an contains many narratives (*qisas*, sing. *qissah*), referred to in the Qur'an itself:

We do relate unto thee the most beautiful of stories, in that We reveal to thee this (portion of the) Qur'an ... [Q12:3].

These narratives, which illustrate and underline important aspects of the Qur'anic message, fulfill their functions in a variety of ways. The following are some of the more common patterns:

Explanation of the general message of Islam.

- General guidance and reminder.
- Strengthening the conviction of the Prophet and the believers.
- Reminder of the earlier prophets and their struggle.
- Indication for the continuity and truth of Muhammad's message.

- Providing arguments against some opponents of Islam, such as e.g. Jews and Christians.

As far as the contents of these narratives are concerned, one may, broadly speaking, distinguish between the following three kinds:

- Stories of the Prophets of God, their peoples, their message, their call, their persecution, etc.; such as e.g. the narratives about Nuh (Surah 26), Musa (Surah 28), 'Isa (Surah 19) and many others.
- Other Qur'anic narratives about past people or events, such as the narratives about the Companions of the cave, or about Dhu al-Qarnayn (Surah 18).
- References to events that took place during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, such as the battle of Badr (3: 13), the battle of Uhud [Q3:121-8], the battle of Ahzab [Q33:9-27], *al-isra'* [Q17:1], etc.

Similes in the Qur'an

The Qur'an also employs similes (*amthal*, sing. *mathal*) in many places to explain certain truths or to drive home important points of the message, by likening it to something well known or describing it in a pictorial manner.⁸

Example:

He sends down water from the skies and the channels flow, each according to its measure; but the torrents bear away the foam that mounts up to the surface. Even so, from that (ore) which they heat in the fire to make ornaments or utensils therewith there is scum likewise, thus doth God (by parable) show forth the truth and vanity, for the scum disappears like froth cast out; while that which is for the good of mankind remains on the earth. Thus doth God set forth parables. [Q13:17].

Passages with qul

More than 200 passages in the Qur'an open with the word 'Qul' (say:), which is an instruction to the Prophet Muhammad to address the words following this introduction to his audience in a particular situation, such as e.g. in reply to a question that has been raised, or as an assertion of a matter of belief, or announcement of a legal ruling, etc.

Examples:

Say: Nothing will happen to us except what God has decreed for us: He is our Protector ... [Q9:51].

⁸ See, e.g. 16: 75-6.

Say: O people of the book. Do ye disapprove of us for no other reason than that we believe in God, and the revelation that has come to us and that which has come before (us) and perhaps that most of you are rebellious and disobedient? [Q5:62].

They ask thee concerning (things taken as) spoils of war. Say: (Such) spoils are at the disposal of God and the apostle: for fear God and keep straight the relation between yourselves: obey God and His apostle, if ye do believe... [Q8:1].

Oaths in the Qur'an

In a number of places the Qur'an employs oath-like expressions (*aqsam*, sg. *qasam*).⁹ Their function is to strengthen and support an argument, and to disperse doubts in the mind of the listener. In the Arabic text these passages are often opened by the word 'wa' or the phrase 'la uqsimu' (indeed I swear).

Examples:

Sometimes an oath is taken by God himself:

But no, by thy Lord, they can have no real faith until they make thee judge in all disputes between them and find in their souls no resistance against thy decisions but accept them with fullest conviction. [Q4:65].

Other oaths are taken by God's creation:

By the sun and his (glorious) splendor, by the moon as she follows him, by the day as it shows up (the sun's) glory, by the night as it conceals it; by the firmament and its (wonderful) structure, by the earth and its (wide) expanse, by the soul and the proportion and order given to it ... [Q91:1-7].

I do call to witness this city ... [Q90:1].

Man should only take an oath by God the creator. but not by anything created.

MUHKAMAT AND MUTASHABIHAT

The word *muhkamat* - (sg. *muhkam*) is derived from the root *hakama* which means to decide between two things. It is a verbal noun in the plural, meaning judgments, decisions and in technical language refers to all clearly decided verses of the Qur'an, mostly those concerning legal rulings, but also to other clear definitions such as between truth and falsehood etc. This is what is meant by 'general *muhkamat*'.

⁹ For a brief discussion see also Abdullah Yusuf Ali, op. cit., App. XIV, pp. 1784-7.

Mutashabihat (sg. *mutashabih*) is derived from the root '*shabaha*' meaning 'to be doubtful'. It is a verbal noun in the plural, meaning the uncertain or doubtful things. In technical language it refers to those verses of the Qur'an the meanings of which are not clear or not completely agreed upon, but open to two or more interpretations.

Example of *muhkamat*:

O you who believe! When ye deal with each other, in transactions involving future obligations, in a fixed period of time, reduce them to writing. Let a scribe write down faithfully as between the parties ... [Q2:282].

Example of *mutashabihat*:

(God) Most Gracious is firmly established on the throne (of authority). [Q20:5].

Note that the words in brackets have been added by the translator in an attempt to interpret this *ayah*.

The Qur'an on *muhkamat* and *mutashabihat*

The Qur'an says of itself that it contains two kinds of *ayat*, both of which are fundamental components of the book, and both of which must be accepted:

He it is who has sent down to thee the Book: in it are verses basic or fundamental (of established meaning); they are the foundation of the book: others are allegorical, that is those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part thereof that is allegorical, seeking discord and searching for its hidden meanings, but no one knows its hidden meanings except God and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge say: "We believe in the book; the whole of it is from our Lord;" and none will grasp the message except men of understanding. [Q3:7].

Here *muhkamat* and *mutashabihat* are described as follows:

***muhkama*:**

- Something of which knowledge was desired.
- Something with only one dimension.
- Something sufficient in meaning, requiring no further explanation.

***mutashabihat*:**

- Something known to God only.

- Something with more than one dimension.
- Something requiring further explanation.

Hence in the Qur'an those *ayat* dealing with halal and haram, punishments, inheritance, promise and threat, etc. belong to the *muhkamat*, while those concerning the attributes of God, the true nature of the resurrection, judgment and life after death etc. belong to the *mutashabihat*.

General and Specific

Some verses of the Qur'an are of a very wide, general application (*al-'am*), e.g. including all human beings, or all Muslims etc. Other *ayat* are restricted in their application to certain special circumstances only (*al-khas*).

Example:

Every soul shall have a taste of death. [Q3:185]

Let there be no obscenity, nor wickedness nor wrangling in the Hajj. [Q2:187].

God (thus) directs you as regards your children (inheritance). [Q4:11].

Furthermore one also distinguishes between 'general verses' which remain general, and others which intend a specific meaning.

Example:

Pilgrimage thereto is a duty man owes to God- those who can afford the journey. [Q3:97].

Of the 'special meanings' there are several varieties. Usually some kind of condition or limitation is specified.

Example:

Your step-daughters under your guardianship, born of your wives to whom you have gone in. [Q4:23].

It is prescribed when death approaches any one of you, if you leave any goods that he make a bequest to parents and next of kin. [Q2:180].

So keep away from the women in their courses, and do not approach them until they are clean. [Q2:222].

Free' and 'Bound' Verses

Some of the *ahkam* verses are valid, 'free' (*mutlaq*) from any conditions or circumstances, while others are 'bound' (*muqayyad*) to special conditions or situations, and apply only therein.

Examples:

If it is beyond your means, fast for three days, that is expiation for the wrath ye have sworn. [Q5:92].

It is free, i.e. left to one's discretion whether to fast three days consecutively or with interruptions.

And if ye find no water then take yourselves clean sand or earth and rub therewith your faces and hands. [Q5:6].¹⁰

'Literal' and 'Understood' Meanings

The meaning of certain *ayat* is derived from the literal wording (*mantuq*) while that of others is derived from what is understood (*mafhum*) by them:

Of the literal understanding there are several kinds. The first concerns a clear text, i.e. a text clear and without ambiguity.

Example:

But if he cannot afford it, he should fast three days during the Hajj and seven days on his return, making ten days in all. [Q2:196].

In other cases the text may be somewhat ambiguous in its expression but obvious as far as the meaning is concerned.

Example:

And do not approach them until they are clean. [Q2:222].

The Arabic word *tatahharna* may refer to the end of the woman's menstrual period, or the completion of the bath after the period; the second being more obvious.¹¹

Still other verses imply a meaning through the context, although the wording itself is not clear.

Example:

¹⁰ Some say this aya is 'bound', as the same aya mentioning *wudu'* instructs washing of the hands 'to the elbows'; others say it is 'free'.

¹¹ Qattan, M.: *mabahith fi 'ulum al-qur'an*, Riyadh. 1971.

And out of kindness reward to them the wing of humility. [Q17:24].

This applies to parents, and not to all human beings in general, as the context of this verse suggests.

Al-muqatta'at

The so-called 'abbreviated letters' are an important section of the *mutashabihat*¹² insofar as their meanings are not known. The word is derived from the root '*qata'a*' –to cut, and means 'what is cut', and also 'what is abbreviated'.

In technical language the word is used for certain letters found at the beginning of several *suwar* of the Qur'an, called 'the abbreviated letters'.

Their Occurrence

There are fourteen such letters occurring in various combinations at the beginning of 29 *suwar*. The following is a list of their occurrence and distribution in the Qur'an:

- *Alif lam ra'*: 10, 11, 12, 14, 15.
- *Alif lam mim*: 2, 3, 29, 30, 31, 32.
- *Alif lam mim ra'*: 13.
- *Alif lam mim sad*: 7
- *Ha mim*: 40, 41, 43, 44, 45, 46.
- *Sad*: 38.
- *Ta sin*: 27.
- *Ta sin mim*: 26, 28.
- *Ta-ha*:20.
- *Qaf*: 50.
- *Kaf ha ya 'ain sad*: 19.
- *Nun*: 68.
- *Ya sin*: 36.

Variety of Explanations

¹² Itqan, II, p.8f. A summary of the orientalist's efforts on this topic is in Jeffery. Arthur: The Mystic Letters of the Quran, MW, 14 (1924), pp. 247-60. Some of the orientalist's suggested that the letters are abbreviations of the names of the various Companions who used to write the Qur'an for Muhammad. Still others say that the letters are simply symbols employed to distinguish the *Surah* from others before the now common names were introduced. *Surah* Ta Ha would be a case in point. This is also based on some Muslim scholars' views (Itqan, 11, p.10). Watt, the Edinburgh priest-orientalist, writes 'We end where we began; the letters are mysterious, and have so far baffled interpretation' (Watt, M.: Bell's Introduction to the Qur'an, Edinburgh, 1977, p.64).

The meaning and purpose of these letters is uncertain. There have been a variety of explanations offered by Muslim scholars throughout the ages. Among them are:¹³

- These letters might be abbreviations for certain sentences and words, such as e.g. *alif lam mim* meaning *ana allahu a'lam*; or *nun* meaning *nur* (light), etc.
- These letters are not abbreviations but symbols and names of God, or something else.¹⁴
- These letters have some numerical significance, as the Semitic letters also have numerical value.
- These letters were used to attract the attention of the Prophet (and later his audience) for the revelation to follow.

There are also many other explanations which cannot be referred to here. The 'abbreviated letters' are part of the Qur'anic message, revealed to the Prophet Muhammad and therefore included in the text of the Qur'an. They are to be recited and read as part of the *suwar* where they occur. They are a good example for one kind of *mutashabihat* which is referred to in the Qur'an itself, [Q3:7], the meaning of which is known to God. The Qur'an says of them: '... these are the symbols of the perspicuous book...' [Q12:1].

¹³ See *itqan*, 11, pp.9-11.

¹⁴ e.g. the letter nun standing for 'fish' . which occurs in every *surah* that has nun as 'abbreviated letter' in front, or ta standing for snake, as every *surah* with [a as abbreviated letter in front contains the story of Musa and the snake.

CHAPTER 5

Understanding the Text

MECCAN AND MADINAN REVELATIONS

The growth and development of the Muslim *ummah* is marked by two great phases:

- The period in Mecca, before the *hijra* (A.D. 622).
- The period in Madinah, after the *hijra*.

Naturally the revelation from God to guide the Muslims also responded, to some extent, to these particular situations.

The Meccan Phase

The Meccan phase of the revelation lasted about 13 years, from the first revelation up to the *hijra*.

This phase is determined by the prime task of the Prophet to call people to Islam. The main themes of this call, based on the Qur'anic revelation are:

- God and His unity (*tawhid*).
- The coming resurrection and judgment.
- Righteous conduct.

The role of the Prophet in this phase is in particular that of an announcer and Warner.

The Madinan Phase

The Madinan phase lasted about ten years, from the *hijra* to the death of the Prophet. While the basic themes of the Meccan phase remain, the factor of the Muslims' growing together into a community and the formation of the *umma*, now makes its presence clearly felt.

In Madinah, there are four groups of people to be met:

- The *muhajirun*, who migrated from Mecca to Madinah.
- The *ansar*, who originated from Madinah and helped the *muhajirun*.
- The *munafiqun*, who are from Madinah and pretended to support the Muslims.
- The *ahl al-kitab*, i.e. Jews and Christians, with their respective scriptures.

In addition to these the Qur'an also continued to address *al-nas*, 'mankind' i.e. all people, and referred to the disbelievers and ignorant ones.

Meccan and Madinan Suwar

Suwar of the Qur'an have also been classified, according to their origin, into Meccan and Madinan *suwar*.

A *surah* is said to be of Meccan origin, when its beginning was revealed in the Meccan phase, even if it contains verses from Madinah.

A *surah* is said to be of Madinan origin, when its beginning was revealed in the Madinan phase, even if it has verses from the Meccan period in its text.¹

The following 85 *suwar* are, according to Zarkashi,² of Meccan origin:

96, 68, 73, 74, 111, 81, 87, 92, 89, 93, 94, 103, 100, 108, 102, 107, 109, 105, 113, 114, 112, 53, 80, 97, 91, 85, 95, 106, 101, 75, 104, 77, 50, 90, 86, 54, 38, 7, 72, 36, 25, 35, 19, 20, 56, 26, 27, 28, 17, 10, 11, 12, 15, 6, 37, 31, 34, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 51, 88, 18, 16, 71, 14, 21, 23, 32, 52, 67, 69, 70, 78, 79, 82, 84, 30.

There is a difference of opinion as to what was last revealed in Mecca. Some say, following Ibn 'Abbas, that it was *Surah 29 (al-ankabut)*; others say *Surah 23 (al-mu'minun)*; still others say *Surah 83 (al-mutaffifin)*. Some believe that *Surah 83* is actually Madinan.

The following 29 *suwar* are, according to Zarkashi,³ of Madinan origin:

2, 8, 3, 33, 60, 4, 99, 57, 47, 13, 55, 76, 65, 98, 59, 110, 24, 22, 63, 58, 49, 66, 61, 62, 64, 48, 9, 5.

Some hold that *Surah 1 (al-fatiha)* is of Meccan, others that it is of Madinan, origin.

The Meccan *suwar* constitute about 11, and the Madinan about 19 *juz'* of the text.

From the above division it is obvious that the Madinan *suwar* are the longer ones and comprise a much larger part of the Qur'an.

Chronology

¹ Mabani, in GdQ, 1, p.59.

² Zarkashi, B.: *Al-burhan fi 'ulum al-Qur'an*, Cairo, 1958, Vol. 1, p. 193.

³ Zarkashi. Vol. 1, p. 194. For another list see fihrist. 1, pp. 52-3.

According to a list based upon Nu'man b. Bashir and given in the fihrist of al-Nadim,⁴ the chronological order of the revelation of the *suwar* is as follows:

96, 68, 73, 74, 111, 81, 94, 103, 89, 93, 92, 100, 108, 102, 107, 109, 105, 112, 113, 114, 53, 80, 97, 91, 85, 95, 106, 101, 75, 104, 77, 50, 90, 55, 72, 36, 7, 25, 35, 19, 20, 56, 26, 27, 28, 17, 11, 12, 10, 15, 37, 31, 23, 34, 21, 37, 40, 41, 47, 43, 44, 45, 46, 51, 88, 18, 6, 16, 71, 14, 32, 52, 67, 69, 70, 78, 79, 82, 84, 30, 29, 83, 54, 86.

Why is it important to know the chronology of the *suwar* and verses, although the Qur'an is not arranged in chronological order?

To know the origin and order of some of the revelation is important for understanding its meaning which can often be more easily grasped if one knows the time and circumstances that relate to it. For instance, many *ayat* from the Meccan period may be especially meaningful to Muslims living in a strongly un-Islamic environment, while some of the Madinan period would appeal much to Muslims who are in the process of formation of the *ummah*. In some cases, unless one knows which of two or more related verses was revealed first, one cannot decide which legal ruling is now binding upon the Muslims. Here knowledge of the chronology is directly linked with the issue of *al-nasikh wa al-mansukh*.⁵ It is also important to know the chronology of verses in order to understand the gradual development of many Muslim practices, attitudes and laws such as e.g. towards prohibition of alcohol, towards fighting, etc. and to see how these matters developed historically, i.e. during the lifetime of the Prophet in order to understand their full implications.⁶

Knowledge about the Meccan and Madinan *suwar* derived from the *sahabah* and *tabi'un* and nothing is said about this by the Prophet himself.⁷ This is because at his time everyone was a witness and well aware of the occasions of revelation.

Often there is internal evidence, as to which, part of the revelation is Meccan or Madinan. There are a number of guiding criteria, which help to distinguish between them:

- The theme. Does it belong to the Meccan or Madinan period? e.g. verses about warfare (9: 5) are only revealed after hijra.

⁴ Fihrist, I. pp.49-52.

⁵ See below for details.

⁶ For example as far as fighting the enemy is concerned, the first verse revealed on this particular subject is from *Surat al-hajj* (22). This verse is from the Madinan period and it becomes clear from this that Muslims were not drawn to fight against the non-Muslims before the hijra. This has important implications for our own planning and thinking, e.g. to decide when Islam has to be defended today with verbal and when with physical means.

⁷ al-Baqillani, in Qattan, op. cit., p.55.

- Sometimes there is a direct reference, such as e.g. to Abu Lahab in *Surah* 111, or to the Battle of Badr in *Surah* 3: 123.
- The length. Meccan *ayat* are often short, Madinan ones longer, e.g.: *surah al-shu'ara'* (26) is Meccan. It has 227 *ayat*. *Surat al-anfal* (8) is Madinan. It has (only) 75 *ayat*.

Meccan *suwar* are usually short, Madinan ones longer, e.g.: Juz' 30 is overwhelmingly Meccan. It has 543 (Meccan) *ayat*. Juz' 18 is overwhelmingly Madinan. It has (only) 117 (Madinan) *ayat*.

There are however exceptions in both cases.

- The form of address. Often the address: 'O ye who believe', and 'O people of the book' indicates a Madinan origin, while the addresses 'O Mankind' and 'O People' are usually of Meccan origin.
- The theme. Among the Meccan themes are tawhid, shirk, day of resurrection, moral corruption, stories of the Prophets. These topics are also found in Madinan *suwar*, but usually only touched upon briefly. Madinan themes which are not found in Meccan revelations are of social and legal implications, concerning marriage, divorce, inheritance, punishment, etc.
- There are 19 *suwar* with so-called *huruf tahajji* (such as *alif*, *lam*, *mim*, etc.). All these *suwar* are Meccan, except *surat al-baqarah* (2) and *aali 'imran* (3).
- All *ayat* with the word *kalla* are Meccan.
- All *suwar* containing *sajda* are Meccan.
- Most of the *suwar* of the group *mufasssal*, beginning with *surat qaf* (50) in the latter part of the Qur'an are Meccan.
- All references to the *munafiqun* are from Madinah (except *surat al-'ankabut* (29). Its verse 11 is Meccan.

Summary

The knowledge of Meccan and Madinan revelations is one of the important branches of "ulum al-Qur'an. It is not merely of historical interest, but particularly important for the understanding and interpretation of the respective verses.

Many *suwar* of the Qur'an do contain material from both periods of revelation, and in some cases there exists difference of opinion among scholars concerning the classification of a particular passage. However, on the whole, it is a well-established distinction, fully employed in the science of *tafsir* and best derived from the internal evidence of the text of the Qur'an itself.

ASBAB AL-NUZUL

The Qur'an has been revealed for guidance, for all times and situations to come. However, various *ayat* were revealed at a particular time in history and in particular circumstances. The Arabic word *sabab* (pl. *asbab*) means reason, cause and '*marifat asbab al-nuzul*' is the knowledge about the reasons of the revelations, i.e. the knowledge about the particular events and circumstances in history that are related to the revelation of particular passages from the Qur'an.

Its Importance

Wahidi (d. 468/1075), one of the best classical scholars in this field wrote: 'The knowledge about *Tafsir* of the *ayat* is not possible without occupying oneself with their stories and explanation of (the reasons) for their revelation.'⁸

Knowledge about *asbab al-nuzul* helps one to understand the circumstances in which a particular revelation occurred, which sheds light on its implications and gives guidance to the explanation (*tafsir*) and application of the *ayah* in question for other situations.

In particular, knowledge about the *asbab al-nuzul* helps one to understand:

- The direct and immediate meaning and implication of an *ayah*, as it can be seen within its original context.
- The imminent reason underlying a legal ruling.
- The original intent of the *ayah*.
- Whether the meaning of an *ayah* is specific or of general application, and if so, under which circumstances it is to be applied.
- The historical situation at the time of the Prophet and the development of the early Muslim community.

Example:

To God belong the East and the West: whithersoever ye turn, there is the presence of God, for God is all-pervading, all-knowing... [Q2:115].

Without knowing the *sabab* (reason), one might easily conclude that this revelation permits the Muslim to face any direction when performing prayer, while it is well known that to face *qiblah* is one of the conditions without which prayer becomes invalid. The circumstances in which this revelation occurred explains its implications:

According to Wahidi⁹ a group of Muslims traveled on a dark night and they did not know where the *qiblah* was, so they later realized that they had prayed in

⁸ *Asbab al-nuzul*, by al-Wahidi al-Nisaburi. Cairo, 1968, p 4.

⁹ op. cit. pp. 20-21.

the wrong direction. They asked the Prophet about it and he kept silent until the above verse was revealed.¹⁰ Taking into account this reason for the revelation one cannot come to the wrong conclusion that it is unimportant where to turn in prayer. The scholars say however that this verse excuses the mistake of those who un-willingly and under adverse circumstances fail to observe the correct *qiblah*.

How it is Known

The well-known *asbab al-nuzul* have been related to us by the reliable Companions of the Prophet Muhammad. Only reports which are *sahih* (sound) can be considered fully reliable, as is the case in the science of *hadith* generally. A particular condition here is also that the person who relates it should have been present at the time and occasion of the event (the revelation).¹¹ Reports from *tabi'in* only, not going back to the Prophet and his Companions are to be considered weak (*da'if*). Hence one cannot accept the mere opinion of writers or people that such and such verse might have been revealed on such and such occasion. Rather one needs to know exactly who related this incident, whether he himself was present, and who transmitted it to us.

Kinds of Reports

There are two kinds of reports on *asbab al-nuzul*:

- Definite reports.
- Probable reports.

In the first kind (definite) the narrator clearly indicates that the event he relates is *sabab al-nuzul*.

Example:

¹⁰ Based on a report from Jabir b. 'Abdullah. Wahidi also informs us about some other situations when the aya reportedly applied:

- That one may pray voluntary prayer on one's riding camel, in whichever direction it may turn (based on Ibn 'Umar).

- That the Companions of the Prophet asked why they were ordered to pray for the dead Negus of Abyssinia, who had prayed towards a different *qibla* than their own (based on Ibn 'Abbas and 'Ata').

- That the Jews asked, why the *qibla* of the Muslims had been changed from *bait al-maqdis* (based on Ibn Abi Talha).

See Wahidi, op. cit., p.21. All this supports the view (to which in particular K. Murad drew my attention) of Suyuti based on Zarkashi (Suyuti, *lubab an-nuzul*, Tunis, 1981, p.7.) that when the *suhaba* of the Prophet spoke about an aya of the Qur'an, saying 'It was revealed concerning ...'(nazalat fi kadha) they do not restrict themselves to narrating a single 'cause' for the revelation of an aya but rather refer to the 'situations' to which particular verses were found applicable during the lifetime of the Prophet while the occasion of the first revelation of the aya may have been much earlier. In this lie great avenues for understanding and *tafsir* of the Qur'anic message.

¹¹ Wahidi. p. 4.

Narrated Ibn 'Abbas: the verse 'Obey God and obey the apostle and those of you (Muslims) who are in authority ...' [Q4:59] was revealed in connection with 'Abdullah Ibn Hudafa Ibn Qais Ibn 'Adi when the Prophet appointed him as the commander of a *sariyyah* (army detachment).¹²

In the second kind (probable) the narrator does not indicate clearly that the event narrated is *sabab al-nuzul*, but suggests this probability.

Example:

Narrated 'Urwa: Al-Zubayr quarreled with a man from the Ansar because of a natural mountainous stream at Al-Harra. The Prophet said: O Zubair, irrigate (your land) and then let the water flow to your neighbor. The Ansar said: O God's apostle (this is because) he is your cousin? At that the Prophet's face became red (with anger) and he said: O Zubair. Irrigate (your land) and then withhold the water till it fills the land up to the walls and then let it flow to your neighbor. So the Prophet enabled al-Zubayr to take his full right after the Ansari provoked his anger.

The Prophet had previously given an order that was in favor of both of them. Al-Zubayr said: 'I don't think but this verse was revealed in this connection: But no, by your Lord, they can have no faith, until they make you judge in all disputes between them' [Q4:65].¹³

Kinds of Reasons

There are three kinds of 'reasons' which are connected with revelation of particular passages from the Qur'an:

- Revelation in response to an event or a general situation.
- Revelation in response to a particular question that has been asked by someone.
- Revelation for other reasons, known or not known to us.

Examples:

Response to an Event

Narrated Ibn 'Abbas: The Prophet went out towards Al-Batha' and ascended the mountain and shouted: 'O *Sabahah*', so the *Quraysh* people gathered around him. He said: 'Do you see? If I tell you that an enemy is going to attack you in the morning or in the evening, will you believe me?' They replied: 'Yes'. He said- 'Then I am a plain Warner to you of a coming severe punishment'. Abu Lahab said: 'Is it for this reason that you have

¹² Bukhari, VI, No. 108.

¹³ Bukhari, VI, No. 109.

gathered us? May you perish!' Then God revealed 'Perish the hands of Abu Lahab' (*Surah* 111: verse 1).¹⁴

The *Surah* concerning Abu Lahab was revealed in response to this event, when Abu Lahab said: 'May you perish!'

Response to a Particular Situation

Surah 2:158 concerning Safa and Marwa was revealed in response to a particular situation in Mecca during the time of the Prophet.

Narrated 'Urwa: I asked 'A'isha (regarding the *sa'yi* between *al-Safa* and *al-Marwa*). She said: 'Out of reverence to the idol Manat which was placed in Al-Mushallal those who used to assume Ihram in its name, used not to perform *sa'yi* between As-Safa and Al-Marwa (because there were two other idols between these two hills). So God revealed: Verily As.-Safa and Al-Marwa are among the symbols of God.' Thereupon God's apostle and the Muslims used to perform *sa'yi* (between them). Sufyan said: The (idol) Manat was at Al-Mushallal in Qudaid. 'A'isha added: 'The verse was revealed in connection with the Ansar. They and (the tribe of) Ghassan used to assume Ihram in the name of Manat before they embraced Islam'. 'A'isha added 'There were men from the Ansar who used to assume Ihram in the name of Manat which was an idol between Mecca and Medina. They said, O God's Apostle! We used not to perform the Tawaf (*sa'yi*) between As-Safa and Al-Marwa out of reverence to Manat.¹⁵

In response to this situation [Q2:158] was revealed.

Question to the Prophet

On many occasions the Muslims addressed questions to the Prophet concerning Islamic beliefs and the Islamic way of life. An example of the many occasions when a revelation was revealed in response to such a question posed to the Prophet is [Q4:11]:

Narrated Jabir: The Prophet and Abu Bakr came on foot to pay me a visit (during my illness) at Banu Salama's (dwellings). The Prophet found me unconscious, so he asked for water and performed the ablution from it and sprinkled some water over me. I came to my senses and said O God's apostle! What do you order me to do as regards my wealth?

¹⁴ Bukhari, VI, No. 496.

¹⁵ Bukhari, VI, No. 384; also Nos. 22. 23.

So there was revealed 'God commands you as regards your children's (inheritance)' [Q4: 11].¹⁶

The verse in question is concerned with inheritance and explains the rules of inheritance for children as follows:

God (thus) directs you as regards your children's (inheritance): To the male a portion equal to that of two females: if only daughters, two or more, their share is two-thirds of the inheritance. If only one, her share is half ... [Q4:11].

Question by the Prophet

On other occasions, the Prophet himself asked questions. *Surah* [Q19:64] was revealed in response to such a question by the Prophet Muhammad:

Narrated Ibn 'Abbas: The Prophet said to the Angel Gabriel, What prevents you from visiting us more often than you visit us now? So there was revealed: 'And we (angels) descend not but by the command of your Lord. To Him belongs what is before us and what is behind us ... [Q19:64].¹⁷

Response to a General Question

There are numerous occasions when revelation was sent down providing guidance concerning general questions that had arisen in the Muslim community.

Thabit narrated from Anas: Among the Jews, when a woman menstruated, they did not dine with her, nor did they live with them in their houses; so the Companions of the apostle (may peace be upon him) asked the apostle (may peace be upon him) and God the Exalted revealed: 'And they ask you about menstruation: say it is a pollution, so keep away from women during menstruation' to the end [Q2:222].

The messenger of God (may peace be upon him) said: Do everything except intercourse...¹⁸

This report is also a good example of how the Prophet himself explained the meanings of the revelation when such questions arose.

¹⁶ Bukhari, VI, No. 101.

¹⁷ Bukhari, VI, No. 255.

¹⁸ Muslim, I. No. 592.

Particular Persons

Often a general rule which became part of the Qur'anic revelation, was first revealed in response to the circumstances or needs of a particular person, e.g. [Q2:196]:

... And if any of you is ill, or has an ailment in his scalp (necessitating shaving) he should in compensation either fast or feed the poor or offer sacrifice ...' Ka'b Ibn 'Ujra said this verse - and if one of you is ill or has an ailment in his scalp, - was revealed concerning me. I had lice on my head and I mentioned this to the Prophet and he said: Shave (your head) and compensate by fasting three days or a sacrifice or feed six poor, for each poor one *saa'*.¹⁹

This is again an example of the Prophet himself explaining the revelation in detail. At other times such revelation could not be applied but to the respective person. The best example of such a revelation is *surat Lahab* (111) already referred to above. Other examples are references to the Prophet Muhammad in the Qur'an, such as e.g. [Q75:16]:

Narrated Ibn 'Abbas (as regards God's statement) 'Move not your tongue concerning (the Qur'an) to make haste therewith. [Q75:16].

When the Angel Gabriel revealed the divine inspiration to God's Apostle he moved his tongue and lips, and that stage used to be very hard for him, and that movement indicated that revelation was taking place. So God revealed in *surat al-qiyamah* which begins: 'I do swear by the Day of Resurrection ...

The Verses: 'Move not your tongue concerning (the Qur'an) to make haste therewith. It is for us to collect it (Qur'an) in your mind and give you the ability to recite it by heart' [Q75:16-17].²⁰

Several *asbab* and One Revelation

From the reports of the *sahabah* it appears that particular passages of the Qur'an were revealed in response to more than one event, situation or question, or that the application of a particular passage of the Qur'an was for more than one particular occasion, as pointed out above.

Examples:

¹⁹ Muslim, II, Nos. 2735, 2738, 2739; Wahidi, op. cit., p.31. One *saa'* is a cubic measure of approx. 2.6 kg.

²⁰ Bukhari. VI. No. 451.

Surat al-ikhlas (112) firstly responds to the *mushrikun* in Mecca before the hijra, and secondly to the *ahl al-kitab* encountered in Madinah after the hijra.²¹

Another example is [Q9:113]:

This *ayah* was revealed firstly in connection with the death of the Prophet's uncle Abu Talib, where Muhammad said 'I will keep on asking (God for) forgiveness for you unless I am forbidden to do so'. Then there was revealed: it is not fitting for the Prophet and those who believe that they should pray for forgiveness for pagans, even though they be of kin, after it has become clear to them that they are the companions of the Fire.²²

The other occasion reported is when the Companions and in particular 'Umar b. al-Khattab found the Prophet shedding tears when he visited the graveyard. The Prophet explained that he had visited his mother's grave and that he had asked his Lord's permission to visit it which had been granted to him and that he had also asked his Lord's permission to pray for her forgiveness which had not been granted to him and the above *ayah* had been revealed.²³

Several Revelations and One Sabab

A well-known example for several revelations, which are connected with one particular circumstance, are three verses which according to reliable reports, came down in response to the question of Umm Salama, whether or why only the men had been referred to in the Qur'an, as being rewarded. According to Al-Hakim and Tirmidhi the verses [Q3:195], [Q4:32] and [Q33:35] were revealed in response to this question:

And their Lord has accepted of them and answered them: Never will I suffer to be lost the work of any of you be he male or female: Ye are members, one of another: those who have left their homes, or have been driven out therefrom, or suffered harm in My cause, or fought or been slain - verily I will blot out from them their iniquities and admit them into gardens with rivers flowing beneath; a reward from the presence of God and from His presence is the best of rewards...[Q3:195].

And in no wise covet those things in which God has bestowed His gifts more freely on some of you than on others; to men is allotted what they earn and to women what they earn: but ask God of His bounty for God has full knowledge of all things. [Q4:32].

For Muslim men and women - for believing men and women - for devout men and women, for true men and women, for men and women who are

²¹ Itqan, I, p.35; Wahidi, op. cit., pp.262-3.

²² Bukhari, VI, No. 197.

²³ Wahidi, op. cit., p. 152.

patient and constant, for men and women who humble themselves, for men and women who give in charity, for men and women who fast, for men and women who guard their chastity, and for men and women who engage much in God's praise - for them has God prepared forgiveness and great reward. [Q33:35].²⁴

Several Views on *sabab al-nuzul*

It also occurs that the Companions of the Prophet when mentioning a revelation, differed in their views about its *sabab al-nuzul*. This is due to the fact that as already shown above there have been various *asbab* for one particular revelation, and each of the persons reporting the circumstances had been present only on one of the various occasions.

Otherwise several views about the same revelation have to be judged on their merits according to the rules of *'ulum al-hadith*, and one of them will be found to be stronger than the others.

Example:

There are two reports concerning the revelation of *Surah 17: 85*:

According to Ibn 'Abbas, as reported in Tirmidhi, the *Quraysh* asked the Jews to give them something they could ask the Prophet about and they were advised to ask about the Spirit (*al-ruh*). Then the *ayah 17:85* was revealed.

From Ibn Mas'ud, as reported in Bukhari, it is related that he said:

While I was in the company of the Prophet on a farm, and he was reclining on a palm leaf stalk, some Jews passed by. Some of them said to the others: Ask him about the Spirit. Some of them said: What urges you to ask him about it. Others said: (Don't) lest he should give you a reply which you dislike, but they said, Ask him. So they asked him about the Spirit. The Prophet kept quiet and did not give them any answer. I knew that he was being divinely inspired so I stayed at my place. When the divine inspiration had been revealed, the Prophet said 'They ask you (O Muhammad) concerning the Spirit. Say: "the Spirit", its knowledge is with my Lord and from the knowledge it is only a little that has been given to you (mankind). [Q17:85].

The second report, although the first one has been declared *sahih* by Tirmidhi, is considered to be stronger because it comes from Ibn Mas'ud, who

²⁴ Salih, op cit., p. 148.

says that he was present on the occasion of the revelation, while the report from Ibn 'Abbas in Tirmidhi does not contain this information.²⁵

Specific or General?

Another question leads directly to the field of *tafsir*, but is still connected with *asbab al-nuzul*. When one knows about the *sabab al-nuzul*, it is still to be decided whether the revelation has a specific implication for the particular occasion it was connected with, or whether it is of general implication and needs to be applied by all Muslims at all times.

Example:

As to the thief, male or female, cut off his or her hands: a punishment by way of example, from God, for their crime: and God is exalted in power. [Q5:41].

This verse although it was revealed concerning a specific person who had stolen a piece of armour and had been punished accordingly, is of general application.²⁶

What is not *asbab al-nuzul*

In some cases scholars have provided us with the background of certain events that have been narrated in the Qur'an. Obviously, however, such information does not belong to the field of *asbab al-nuzul*. Although it may help to understand the message of the revelation, it is not related in a direct and reliable way, showing immediate reason for or the occasion of the revelation.

Example:

Seest thou not how thy Lord dealt with the companions of the elephant? [Q105:1].

The following passage from a book of *tafsir*, although it contains information about the background of the event narrated in the *surah*, does not belong to the field of *asbab al-nuzul*:

(The companions of the elephant) had come from the Yemen and wanted to destroy the *Ka'bah* (they were) from Abyssinia and their leader was Abraha al-Ashram, the Abyssinian.²⁷

²⁵ See Salih, op. cit., pp. 145-6; Bukhari, VI, No. 245.

²⁶ See Wahidi, op. cit., p.111; also *Tafsir* Ibn al-Jawzi, Beirut, 1964, Vol. II, p.348.

²⁷ Tujibi, mukhtasar min *tafsir* al-Tabari, Cairo, 1970, II, p.529.

Summary

The branch of 'ulum al-Qur'an concerned with the *asbab al-nuzul* is one of the most important areas of knowledge for the proper understanding and explanation of the Qur'anic revelation. The message of the Qur'an is guidance for all times. However its *ayat* were revealed at particular points of time in history and in particular circumstances.

One of the most crucial steps in meaningful interpretation is to distinguish between that part which is attached solely to the historical event and that part, which, although attached to the historical event, also has wider implications. The knowledge of *asbab al-nuzul* helps to distinguish between these two by:

- Clarifying the events and circumstances, which are connected with the revelation of certain *ayat*.
- Illustrating the application of such *ayat* by referring to situations, when the Companions of the Prophet found them proper and applicable.

AL-NASIKH WA AL-MANSUKH

The revelations from God as found in the Qur'an touch on a variety of subjects, among them beliefs, history, tales of the prophets, day of judgment, Paradise and Hell, and many others. Particularly important are the *ahkam* (legal rulings), because they prescribe the manner of legal relationships between people, as God wishes them to be observed.

While the basic message of Islam remains always the same, the legal rulings have varied throughout the ages, and many prophets before Muhammad brought particular codes of law (*shari'ah*) for their respective communities.

The Arabic words 'nasikh' and 'mansukh' are both derived from the same root word '*nasakha*' which carries meanings such as 'to abolish, to replace, to withdraw, to abrogate'.

The word *nasikh* (an active participle) means 'the abrogating', while *mansukh* (passive) means 'the abrogated'. In technical language these terms refer to certain parts of the Qur'anic revelation, which have been 'abrogated' by others. Naturally the abrogated passage is the one called 'mansukh' while the abrogating one is called 'nasikh'.

The Qur'an on Naskh

The principle of *naskh* (abrogation) is referred to in the Qur'an itself and is not a later historical development:

None of Our revelations do We abrogate or cause it to be forgotten, but We substitute something better or similar: knowest thou that God has power over all things? [Q2:106].²⁸

How it came about

When the message of Islam was presented to the Arabs as something new, and different from their way of life, it was introduced in stages. The Qur'an brought important changes gradually, to allow the people to adjust to the new prescriptions.

Example:

There are three verses in the Qur'an concerning the drinking of wine. Wine drinking was very widespread in pre-Islamic times and, although a social evil, highly esteemed. The three verses which finally led to the prohibition of intoxicating substances were revealed in stages [Q4:43, 2:219; 5:93-4].

Why it is important

Knowledge of al-nasikh wa al-mansukh is important because it concerns the correct and exact application of the laws of God. It is specifically concerned with legal revelations:

- It is one of the important pre-conditions for explanation (*tafsir*) of the Qur'an.
- It is one of the important pre-conditions for understanding and application of the Islamic law (*hukm, shari'ah*).
- It sheds light on the historical development of the Islamic legal code.
- It helps to understand the immediate meaning of the *ayat* concerned.

Tafsir (explanation of the Qur'an) or legal ruling is not acceptable from a person who does not have such knowledge.

How do we know it?

As in the field of *asbab al-nuzul*, the information about al-nasikh wa al-mansukh cannot be accepted upon mere personal opinion, guesswork or hearsay, but must be based on reliable reports, according to the *ulum al-hadith*, and should go back to the Prophet and his Companions.

The report must also clearly state which part of the revelation is nasikh and which is mansukh.

²⁸ Some however say that this refers to the revelations before the Qur'an, which have now been substituted by the Qur'an itself. See Mawdudi. *The Meaning of the Qur'an*, Lahore, 1967, Vol. I, p.102. note 109.

Some scholars say that there are three ways of knowing about al-nasikh wa al-mansukh:

1. Report from the Prophet or Companions.
2. *Ijma'* (consensus of the *ummah* upon what is nasikh and what mansukh).
3. Knowledge about which part of the Qur'an preceded another part in the history of revelation.²⁹

Example:

Narrated Mujahid (regarding the verse):

Those of you who die and leave wives behind, they (their wives) shall await (as regards their marriage) for four months and ten days [Q2:234].

The widow, according to this verse, was to spend this period of waiting with her husband's family, so God revealed: Those of you who die and leave wives (i.e. widows) should bequeath for their wives, a year's maintenance and residence without turning them out, but if they leave (their residence) there is no blame on you for what they do with themselves, provided it is honorable (i.e. Lawful marriage) [Q2:240].

So God entitled the widow to be bequeathed extra maintenance for seven months and 20 nights and that is the completion of one year. If she wished, she could stay (in her husband's home) according to the will, and she could leave it if she wished, as God says: Without turning them out, but if they leave (the residence) there is no blame on you.

So the idea (i.e. four months and ten days) is obligatory for her.

'Ata' said: Ibn 'Abbas said: This verse i.e. the statement of God ... without turning one out ... cancelled the obligation of staying for the waiting period in her late husband's house, and she can complete this period wherever she likes.

'Ata' said: If she wished, she could complete her *'iddah* by staying in her late husband's residence according to the will or leave it according to God's statement:

'There is no blame on you for what they do with themselves.'

'Ata' added: Later the regulations of inheritance came and abrogated the order of the dwelling of the widow (in her dead husband's house) so she

²⁹ Qattan, op. cit., p. 199

could complete the *'iddah* wherever she likes. And it was no longer necessary to provide her with a residence.

Ibn Abbas said: This verse abrogated her (i.e. the widow's) dwelling in her dead husband's house and she could complete the *'iddah* (i.e. four months and ten days) (wherever she liked, as God's statement says: ...'without turning them out ...'³⁰

This report explains clearly which part of the revelation is nasikh and which is mansukh. Mujahid was one of the well-known *tabi'un* and Ibn 'Abbas was a Companion of the Prophet.

What is Abrogated?

According to some scholars the Qur'an abrogates only the Qur'an. They base their view on *suwar* 2: 106 and 16: 101. According to them the Qur'an does not abrogate the *sunnah* nor does the *sunnah* abrogate the Qur'an. This is, in particular, the view held by Shafi'i.³¹

Others are of the opinion that the Qur'an may abrogate the Qur'an as well as the *sunnah*. They base their view on [Q53:34].

There is also the view that there are four classes of *naskh*:

- Qur'an abrogates Qur'an.
- Qur'an abrogates *sunnah*.
- *Sunnah* abrogates Qur'an.
- *Sunnah* abrogates *sunnah*.³²

In this discussion, we shall only consider the abrogation in the Qur'an, and leave aside the abrogation in the *sunnah*.

Three Kinds of Naskh in the Qur'an [Ibn Salama, al-nasikh wa al-mansukh, Cairo, 1966, p.5.]

The scholars have divided abrogation into three kinds:

- Abrogation of the recited (verse) together with the legal ruling.
- Abrogation of the legal ruling without the recited (verse).
- Abrogation of the recited (verse) without the legal ruling.

³⁰ Bukhari, VI, No. 54.

³¹ For details see Kitab al-risala, Cairo, n.d., pp.30-73; English translation by M. Khadduri, op. cit., pp. 12345; for a brief summary of Ash-Shafi'i's views see also Seeman, K., Ash-Shafi'i's *Risala*, Lahore, 1961, pp.53-85.

³² Qattan, op. cit, pp. 201-2.

Examples:

For abrogation of the recited (verse) together with its legal ruling:

'A'isha (God be pleased with her) reported that it had been revealed in the Holy Qur'an that ten clear sucklings make the marriage unlawful, then it was abrogated (and substituted) by five sucklings and God's apostle (may peace be upon him) died and it was before that time (found) in the Holy Qur'an (and recited by the Muslims).³³

For abrogation of a legal ruling without the recited (verse):

O Prophet! We have made lawful to thee thy wives to whom thou has paid their dowers; and those whom thy right hand possesses out of the prisoners of war whom God has assigned to thee; and daughters of thy paternal uncles and aunts and daughters of thy maternal uncles and aunts, who migrated (from Mecca) with thee; and any believing woman who dedicates her soul to the Prophet if the Prophet wishes to wed her; - this only for thee and not for the believers (at large); We know what we have appointed for them as to their wives and the captives whom their right hands possess; - in order that there should be no difficulty for thee and God is off-forgiving, most merciful. [Q33:50].

It is not lawful for thee (to marry more) women after this, nor to change them for (other) wives, even though their beauty attract thee, except any thy right hand should possess (as handmaidens); and God doth watch over all things. [Q33:52].

This is one of the few very clear examples of *naskh*, though only concerning the Prophet specifically, since for Muslims in general the number of wives has been restricted to four. [Q4:3].

For abrogation of the recited (verse) without the legal ruling:

Abdullah Ibn 'Abbas reported that 'Umar Ibn Khattab sat on the pulpit of God's messenger (may peace be upon him) and said: Verily God sent Muhammad (may peace be upon him) with truth and he sent down the book upon him, and the verse of stoning was included in what was sent down to him. We recited it, retained it in our memory and understood it. God's messenger (may peace be upon him) awarded the punishment of stoning to death (to the married adulterer and adulteress) and after him, we also awarded the punishment of stoning. I am afraid that with the lapse of time, the people (may forget it) and may say: We do not find the punishment of stoning in the book of God, and thus go astray by abandoning this duty prescribed by God. Stoning is a duty laid down in

³³ Muslim, II, No. 3421.

God's book for married men and women who commit adultery when proof is established, or if there is pregnancy or a confession.³⁴

The punishment of stoning for adultery by married people has been retained in the *sunnah*, while it is not included in the Qur'an .

The Abrogated Verses

There are, according to Ibn Salama,³⁵ a well-known author on the subject:

- 43 *suwar* with neither *nasikh* or *mansukh*.
- 6 *suwar* with *nasikh* but no *mansukh*.
- 40 *suwar* with *mansukh* but no *nasikh*.
- 25 *suwar* with both *nasikh* and *mansukh*.

According to Suyuti's Itqan there are 21 instances in the Qur'an, where a revelation has been abrogated by another. He also indicates that there is a difference of opinion about some of these: e.g. 4: 8, 24: 58, etc.³⁶

Some scholars have attempted to reduce the number of abrogations in the Qur'an even further, by explaining the relationships between the verses in some special ways, e.g. by pointing out that no legal abrogation is involved, or that for certain reasons the *naskh* is not genuine

Shah Waliullah (d. 1759) the great Muslim scholar from India only retained the following 5 out of Suyuti's 21 cases as genuine:

<i>Mansukh</i> 2: 180	<i>nasikh</i> 4: 11, 12
<i>Mansukh</i> 2:240	<i>nasikh</i> 2: 234.
<i>Mansukh</i> 8:65	<i>nasikh</i> 8: 62.
<i>Mansukh</i> 30:50	<i>nasikh</i> 33: 52.
<i>Mansukh</i> 58: 12	<i>nasikh</i> 58: 13.

Example:

A case listed by Suyuti, which has no direct legal implication is the following:

Narrated Ibn 'Abbas: When the verse: 'If there are 20 amongst you, patient and persevering, they will overcome two hundred', was revealed, it became hard on the Muslims, when it became compulsory that one Muslim ought not to flee before 10 (non-Muslims) so God lightened the order by revealing: 'but now God has lightened your (task) for He knows that there is weakness in you. But (even so) if there are 100 amongst you

³⁴ Muslim, III, No. 4194; Bukhari, VIII, No. 816.

³⁵ Op cit., see pp.6-8 for the names of these *suwar*.

³⁶ Itqan, II, pp.20-3; Kamal, op. cit., pp.101-9 also gives Suyuti's complete list.

who are patient and persevering, they will overcome 200 (non-Muslims)' [Q8:66].

So when God reduced the number of enemies that Muslims should withstand, their patience and perseverance against the enemy decreased as much as their task was lightened for them.³⁷

Still others hold that there are no genuine (sahih) reports available on this issue, going back to the Prophet, while those going back to the Companions contradict each other.³⁸ Therefore to them the issue of nasikh wa al mansukh is perhaps not of great importance. However, it is clear from the Qur'an itself, (e.g. in the case of inheritance, ([Q2:180; 4:7-9], etc.) that abrogation occurred occasionally. Hence it is wrong to completely ignore the subject.

Abrogation and Specification

There is of course a difference between abrogation and specification. By the latter is meant that one revelation explains in more detail or according to specific circumstances how another revelation should be understood.

Example:

Surah 2:183 says 'O you who believe, fasting is prescribed to you ...'

Narrated 'Ata' that he heard Ibn 'Abbas reciting the Divine verse 'for those who can do it is a ransom, the feeding of one that is indigent' [Q2:184].

Ibn 'Abbas said 'This verse is not abrogated but it is meant for old men and old women who have no strength to fast, so they should feed one poor person for each day of fasting (instead of fasting).³⁹

³⁷ Bukhari, VI, No.176.

³⁸ Ali, M.M.: The Religion of Islam, Lahore, 1936, p.32. It may be pointed out that Ali's treatment of the subject is not very thorough. Of the three examples he cites in support of his opinion ('in most cases, where a report is traceable to one Companion who held a certain verse to have been abrogated, there is another report traceable to another Companion, through the fact that the verse was not abrogated' - p. 33) two are definitely not in his favor, while the third can be easily explained. His first case concerns *Surah* 2:180 (inheritance). It has certainly been superseded by other verses, e.g. 4:7-9 and that is probably all that is meant, when saying it is mansukh Ali's second case, '2:184, is considered by Ibn 'Umar as having been abrogated while Ibn 'Abbas says it was not'. See below, where I have quoted this very hadith from Ibn 'Abbas (Bukhari, VI, No.32) where Ibn 'Abbas himself explains why he does not hold it as abrogated. The third case is, like the first one, definitely not in support of Ali: '2: 240 was abrogated according to Ibn Zubair, while Mujahid says it was not'. This is wrong, see Sahih Bukhari, VI, Nos. 53 and 54, where both Ibn Zubair and Mujahid hold the verse to be abrogated. Furthermore both Ibn Zubair and Mujahid are tabi'un, and not Companions (sahaba).

³⁹ Bukhari, VI, No. 32.

It is quite clear that the second verse (2:184) does not abrogate the rule of fasting from the first verse (2:183) but explains that in a specific case, that of feeble old people, there is a way of making up for the loss of fast.

In the same way the verses concerning intoxicating drinks can be understood as specifications rather than abrogations (see 4:43;2:219;5:93-4).

Summary

The Qur'an, in 2:106, refers to the concept of *naskh*. However, there is a difference of opinion about the extent to which al-nasikh wa-al mansukh does in fact occur in the text of the Qur'an. The information concerning al-nasikh wa-al mansukh must be treated with great caution as, for all reports concerning the text of the Qur'an, two independent witnesses are required. Many of the examples which the scholars have drawn upon to illustrate this question (and I have quoted them for the same purpose) are based on one witness only. 'A'isha alone reported that 10 or 5 sucklings had been part of the Qur'anic recitation, and only 'Umar reported that the 'verse of stoning' had been included in the Qur'anic text. These legal rulings are not included in the Qur'an precisely because they were not considered reliable, being based on one witness only. Similarly, other examples about *naskh*, based on the words of Ibn 'Abbas or Mujahid alone, are to be judged by the same measure.

However, as mentioned there remain a small number of verses which, as far as can be ascertained from the internal evidence of the Qur'an, have been superseded by other verses in the Qur'an.

VARIETY OF MODES

What is the meaning of *al-ahruf al-sab'ah*?

The word *sab'ah* means seven, and *ahruf* is the plural form of *harf*, which has many meanings, among them 'edge' border, letter, word', etc. In technical language it describes the variety of modes of the Qur'an transmitted to us, also expressed in various forms of writing the text.

Example:

Read the two versions of *Surah 2:9* given on plates 7 and 8. Disregard the difference in style of writing. The first example is from a Qur'an from North Africa, the second from a Qur'an from Jordan. In the North African version, the word '*yukhadi'una*' (they deceive) is used twice, while in the Jordan version, the word occurs as '*yakhda'una*' in the second instant. Both are correct and accepted readings, since they have been transmitted to us. Also there is no objection from the viewpoint of grammar or correct language and the writing without vowel signs can carry both readings.

The Language of *Quraysh*

In the time of the Prophet Muhammad when the Qur'an was revealed, the Arab tribes scattered all over the peninsula, spoke a number of dialects, each containing peculiar words and idioms.

The language of *Quraysh* had developed into a form of 'high Arabic' due to the many influences it absorbed, being spoken at the main centre of trade and pilgrimage in Arabia. Hence this language was obviously the most suitable to carry the messages of revelation which were to reach all peoples and not be restricted to a particular tribe.

The Seven Modes

The *hadith* reports tell us that the Qur'an was actually revealed in seven modes (*al-ahruf al-sab'a*). This has been narrated by more than ten of the Prophet's Companions, among them Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman, Ibn Mas'ud, Ibn 'Abbas and others.⁴⁰

The following is the *hadith* in Bukhari:

Narrated 'Abdullah Ibn 'Abbas: God's apostle said: Gabriel recited the Qur'an to me in one way. Then I requested him (to read it in another way), and continued asking him to recite it in other ways, and he recited it in several ways till he ultimately recited it in seven different ways'.⁴¹

On another occasion, 'Umar complained to the Prophet that Hisham had recited *surat al-furqan* in a way different from what 'Umar had heard from the Prophet, but the Prophet said: '... this Qur'an has been revealed to be recited in seven different ways, so recite of it whichever is easier for you'.⁴²

Salman is reported to have said that he read a passage from [Q5:82] in the presence of the Prophet in the following two versions, the first of which is now in the Qur'anic text, while the second constitutes a variant reading according to 'Ubay b. Ka'b'.⁴³

1. *dhalika bi-anna minhum qissisina wa ruhbana.*
2. *dhalika bi-anna minhum siddiqina wa ruhbana.*⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Itqan, I, p. 41.

⁴¹ Bukhari, VI No. 513.

⁴² Bukhari, VI No. 514.

⁴³ Ibn Abi Dawud., p. 129.

⁴⁴ Ibn Abi Dawud., p. 103.

Muslim scholars have put forward a number of explanations and benefits for the Muslim *ummah* deriving from the revelation of the Qur'anic message in several modes. Among these the following are most important:

- To make the reading, pronunciation and memorization more easy, as many people were illiterate in the Prophet's time.
- To unite the new Muslim community on the basis of one common language, the Arabic of the *Quraysh*, with minor variations accepted, according to spoken language.
- To show something of the unique nature of the Qur'an, in the realm of language.
- To show something of the unique nature of the Qur'an, in the realm of meaning and legal rulings.
- To explain a legal ruling in more detail.

Scholars Differ

There is a difference of opinion among classical Muslim scholars on the subject of the 'seven modes', to the extent that one of them was able to say: 'the degree of difference of opinion (*ikhtilaf*) among the scholars is to the extent of 35 sayings'.⁴⁵

Some of these different opinions are that the 'seven modes' are:

- Different languages (dialects) current among the Arabs at the time of revelation, such as e.g. *Quraysh*, Hudhail, Tamim, etc., who had different ways of pronunciations which could even affect the spelling, e.g. *al-tabuh* and *al-tabut*. [Q2:248]⁴⁶ or: *hiyaka for iyaka* [Q1:5]. or: *atta for hatta* [Q12: 35].
- It may also be the usage of words from the different languages in the Qur'an (this is considered one of the most sound views).
- Usage of synonyms in the Qur'an, i.e. that a variety of expressions describe one and the same concept. A well-known example is *Surah* 101: 5, which reads as '*Ka-l-'ihni-l-manfush*', but in another version '*Ka-s-sufi-l-manfush*' both meaning 'like carded wool'. The word *arshidna* was read in place of *ihdina* (*Surah* 1: 6), etc.⁴⁷
- Different aspects of the revelation, such as e.g. order, prohibitions, promise, narrations, etc.
- Seven differences, such as possible ways of reading words and structures in the Qur'an, e.g. the word 'trusts' in 23: 8 which can be read both 'trust' (sing.) or 'trusts' (pl.) according to the plain text without vowels: *li-amanatihim* or *li-amanatihim*.

⁴⁵ Itqan, I, p.45.

⁴⁶ See Kamal, op. cit., p.46.

⁴⁷ Both examples from Ibn Mas'ud. This view is also very close to the Idea of various dialects. and many scholars tend to accept such usage of synonyms, as meaning the seven modes'.

- Slightly different wordings of a particular passage, such as e.g. in 9: 100: 'Gardens under which rivers flow' which some read as 'Gardens from under which rivers flow', adding the word 'from' (*min*) to the text.
- Different ways of pronunciation as they have been explained in great detail by the scholars of *qira'a* (recitation) such as e.g. *imala*, *idgham*, etc.⁴⁸

However, even non-Muslim orientalisists concede that 'no major differences of doctrines can be constructed on the basis of the parallel readings based on the 'Uthmanic consonantal outline, yet ascribed to *masahif* other than his. All the rival readings unquestionably represent one and the same text. They are substantially agreed in what they transmit...⁴⁹

Summary

From these different opinions, of which only some have been listed above, by way of illustration, a generally-accepted conclusion is that the 'seven modes' are at the basis of several distinct ways of reciting the Qur'an, reflecting the different usage at the time of revelation, comprising variations in pronunciation and even minor differences in wording. The 'seven 'ahruf are however, not identical with the well-known 'seven readings'. These came about in a later age. Although much of what the 'seven readings' contain is also found in the seven ahruf, there are some differences, which will be explained when discussing the seven readings.

Only a few examples for 'ahruf have been transmitted to us. They are of importance for *tafsir*, rather than *qira'a*.

Seven Modes in the Qur'an

While some scholars⁵⁰ hold that the written Qur'an now includes only one of the 'seven modes', and the others are transmitted orally to us, there is some evidence also for the view that the text of the Qur'an, as we have it in front of us, may include all these 'seven modes' because:

- No one would change the Qur'an.
- The present text was written upon the basis of the *sahabah* testimonies, both orally and written, going back directly to the Prophet.
- The Qur'an is protected by God.

⁴⁸ This view has also been favored by many, because it does not cause much controversy.

⁴⁹ Burton, J.: The Collection of the Qur'an, Cambridge. 1977, p. 171.

⁵⁰ e.g. Tabari, Jami' al-bayan 'an ta'wil *ayat* al-Qur'an, Cairo, 1968. See introduction to this *tafsir*. Zarkashi, Vol. 1, p.213 says most scholars are of the first view, and that the last double-reading of the Qur'an by Muhammad in the presence of the Angel Gabriel served, among others, the purpose of eliminating the other six modes.

THE VARIOUS READINGS

Al-qira'a (pl. *qiraa'at*) is derived from the word *qara'a*, 'reading, reciting'; from which also the word Qur'an is derived. It is a verbal noun, meaning recitation. In technical language it describes the oral recitation of the Qur'an as well as the punctuation of the written text, which corresponds to the oral recitation.

Examples:

Mawdudi⁵¹ has very convincingly explained the proper understanding of some accepted difference in reading. He wrote that in *al-fatihah* [Q1:3]:

- Maliki } both describe one of the attributes of God, and there is
 - mālīki } absolutely no contradiction between 'sovereign' and
- 'master' of the day of judgment, but 'these two readings make the meaning of the verse all the more clear'.

Similarly [Q5:8] *arjulakum*⁵² and *arjulikum*⁵³ carry two meanings:

- Wash } your feet
- Wipe }

Both are indeed correct, for under normal circumstances a man will wash his feet, while some other person e.g. a traveler may wipe them. Here the text of the Qur'an carries both meanings at the same time. This is indeed a unique feature of the revelation from God.

Readers among the Sababa

Reading and reciting of the Qur'an has been done since revelation began, and the Prophet was the first to recite. This has already been discussed in the section on transmission of the text. After his death, the recitation continued through his Companions. Among the famous readers from whom many of the *tabi'un* learned, were Ubay Ibn Ka'b, 'Ali, Zayd Ibn Tbahit, Ibn Mas'ud, Abu Musa al-Ash'ari and many others.

Later Development

Later on, with Muslims settling in many parts of the world, the Qur'an was recited in a variety of ways, some of which were not in accordance with the accepted text and the transmitted readings from the Prophet and the Companions. This necessitated a thorough screening and distinction between what is *sahih* (sound) and what is *shaadh* (exceptional).

⁵¹ Introduction to the Study of the Qur'an, Delhi, 1971, p.21.

⁵² Reading of Nafi, Hafs 'an Asim, Kisa'i.

⁵³ Reading of Ibn Kathir, Abu Amr, Abu Bakr 'an 'Asim, Hamza.

The Seven Readings

The 'seven readings' were standardized in the second/eighth century. Ibn Mujahid, a ninth-century Muslim scholar, wrote a book entitled *The Seven Readings*, in which he selected seven of the prevailing modes of recitation as the best transmitted and most reliable. Others were subsequently disfavored and even opposed, among them the readings of Ibn Mas'ud and 'Ubay Ibn Ka'b. However, this is not to say that one must restrict oneself to one of these seven readings, or to all of them. Below are listed the local origin of the seven readings and the names of readers⁵⁴ and some transmitters (*rawis*) connected with them:

Place	Reader	Transmitter
1. Madinah	Nafi' (169/785)	Warsh (197/812)
2. Mecca	Ibn Kathir (120/737)	
3. Damascus	Ibn 'Amir (118/736)	
4. Basra	Abu 'Amr (148/770)	
5. Kufa	'Asim (127/744)	Hafs (180/796)
6. Kufa	Hamza (156/772)	
7. Kufa	Al-Kisa'i (189/804)	Duri (246/860)

Readings No. 1 and 5 are of particular importance: the reading transmitted by Warsh is widespread in Africa, except Egypt, where, as now in almost all other parts of the Muslim world, the reading transmitted by Hafs is observed.

Other Views

Later on other views emerged, making ten or fourteen well-known readings. In addition to the seven above, the following make up the ten and the fourteen readers:

Place	Reader	Transmitter
8. Madinah	Abu Ja'far (130/747)	
9. Basra	Ya'qub (205/820)	
10. Kufa	Khalaf (229/843)	

⁵⁴ For their short biographies see Fihrist ,I, p. 63ff.

11. Basra	Hasan al Basri (110/728)	
12. Mecca	Ibn Muhaisin (123/740)	
13. Basra	Yahya al-Yazidi (202/817)	
14. Kufa	al-A'mash (148/765)	

The readings are also divided as follows:⁵⁵

- The *mutawatir* (transmitted by many; they include the seven well-known readings).
- The *ahad* (transmitted by one; they number three, going back to the *sahabah* and together with the seven make up the ten).
- The *shadh* (exceptional; they go back to the *tabi'un* only).

Muslim scholars have laid down three criteria for the acceptance of any *qira'a* and three criteria for preferring some over others. The best transmission was of course *mutawatir*. The three criteria for acceptance of other readings are:

- Correctness according to Arabic grammar.
- Agreement with the written text of 'Uthman.
- Traced back reliably to the Prophet.

The three criteria for preference are:

- Correctness according to Arabic grammar.
- Agreement with the written text of 'Uthman.
- Reported/preferred by many (majority).

Summary

The best *summary* on this topic is perhaps contained in the words of the scholar Abu-l-Khair Ibn al-Jazari (d. 833/1429), who wrote:

Every reading in accordance with Arabic (grammar) even if (only) in some way, and in accordance with one of the *masahif* of 'Uthman, even if (only) probable, and with sound chain of transmission, is a sound (*sahih*) reading, which must not be rejected, and may not be denied, but it belongs to the seven modes (*ahruf*) according to which the Qur'an was revealed, and the people are obliged to accept it, no matter whether it is from the seven Imams, or the ten or from other accepted Imams, but when one of these three conditions is not fulfilled, it must be rejected as weak

⁵⁵ Suyuti, Itqan, I, p 77.

(*da`if*) or exceptional (*shaadh*) or void (*batil*), no matter whether it is from the seven or from one who is older than them.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ Suyuti, *Itqan*, I, p.75.

CHAPTER 6

Interpreting the Text

TAFSIR, ITS KINDS AND PRINCIPLES

Tafsir (exegesis) of the Qur'an is the most important science for Muslims. All matters concerning the Islamic way of life are connected to it in one sense or another since the right application of Islam is based on proper understanding of the guidance from God. Without *tafsir* there would be no right understanding of various passages of the Qur'an.

Tafsir and Ta'wil

The word *tafsir* is derived from the root '*fassara*' – to explain, to expound. It means 'explanation' or 'interpretation'. In technical language the word *tafsir* is used for explanation, interpretation and commentary on the Qur'an, comprising all ways of obtaining knowledge, which contributes to the proper understanding of it, explains its meanings and clarifies its legal implications.¹ The word *mufassir* (pl. *mufassirun*) is the term used for the person doing the *tafsir*, i.e. the 'exegete' or 'commentator'.

The word *ta'wil*, which is also used in this connection, is derived from the root '*awwala*' and also means 'explanation, interpretation'.

In technical language it similarly refers to explanation and interpretation of the Qur'an.

Tafsir in the language of the scholars means explanation and clarification. It aims at knowledge and understanding concerning the book of God, to explain its meanings, extract its legal rulings and grasp its underlying reasons. *Tafsir* explains the 'outer' (*zahir*) meanings of the Qur'an. *Ta'wil* is considered by some to mean the explanation of the inner and concealed meanings of the Qur'an, as far as a knowledgeable person can have access to them. Others are of the opinion that there is no difference between *Tafsir* and *ta'wil*.

Why is it Important?

There are a number of reasons why *tafsir* is of great importance, but the basic reason is the following: God has sent the Qur'an as a book of guidance to mankind. Man's purpose is to worship God, i.e. to seek His pleasure by living the way of life God has invited him to adopt. He can do so within the framework of

¹ See Zarkashi, op. cit., 1, p. 13.

the guidance that God has revealed concerning this, but he can do so only if he properly understands its meanings and implications.

A Warning

Some Muslim scholars have warned against *tafsir*. Ahmad b. Hanbal, e.g. has said: 'Three matters have no basis: *Tafsir*, *malahim* (tales of eschatological nature) and *maghazi* (tales of the battles)'.²

By this is meant that there is much exaggeration and unsound material in these fields, but it does not mean that neither of them ought to be considered. This is clear from another version of the same verdict, in which the word *isnad* is used for 'basis'.

Basic Conditions

Muslim scholars have laid down certain basic conditions for sound *Tafsir*. Any *Tafsir*, which disregards these principles must be viewed with great caution, if not rejected altogether. The most important among these conditions are the following:

The mufassir must:

- Be sound in belief ('*aqidah*).
- Well-grounded in the knowledge of Arabic and its rules as a language.
- Well-grounded in other sciences that are connected with the study of the Qur'an (e.g. '*ilm al-riwayah*).
- Have the ability for precise comprehension.
- Abstain from the use of mere opinion.
- Begin the *Tafsir* of the Qur'an with the Qur'an.
- Seek guidance from the words and explanations of the Prophet.
- Refer to the reports from the *sahabah*.
- Consider the reports from the *tabi'un*.
- Consult the opinions of other eminent scholars.

Grades of Sources³

The best *Tafsir* is the explanation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an.

The next best is the explanation of the Qur'an by the Prophet Muhammad, who, as Shafi'i explained, acted according to what he understood from the Qur'an.

² Ibn Taimiya, *muqaddima fi usul al-tafsir*, Kuwait, 1971, p.59.

³ See Ibn Taimiya, op. cit., p.93.

If nothing can be found in the Qur'an nor in the *sunnah* of the Prophet, one turns to the reports from the *sahabah*.⁴

If nothing can be found in the Qur'an, the *sunnah* and the reports from the *sahabah*, one turns to the reports from the *tabi'un*.⁵

However, nothing can match the explanation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an and the explanation of the Qur'an by the Prophet.

Kinds of Tafsir

- *Tafsir* may be divided into three basic groups.⁶
- *Tafsir bi al-riwayah* (by transmission), also known as *Tafsir bi al-ma'thur*.
- *Tafsir b al-ra'y* (by sound opinion; also known as *tafsir bi al-diraya*, by knowledge).
- *Tafsir bi al-isharah* (by indication, from signs).

Tafsir bi al-riwayah

By this is meant all explanations of the Qur'an which can be traced back through a chain of transmission to a sound source, i.e.:

- The Qur'an itself.
- The explanation of the Prophet.
- The explanation by Companions of the Prophet (to some extent).

Naturally, the explanation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an and the explanation of the Qur'an by the Prophet are the two highest sources for *tafsir*, which cannot be matched nor superseded by any other source. Next to these rank the explanations by the *sahabah*, since the *sahabah* were witnesses to the revelations, were educated and trained by the Prophet himself and were closest to the period of the first Muslim *ummah*. Of course all reports of explanations by the Prophet or by a *sahabi* must be sound according to the science of *riwaya* as in *'ulum al-hadith*.

The Qur'an explained by the Qur'an

The interpretation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an is the highest source of *tafsir*. Many of the questions which may arise out of a certain passage of the Qur'an have their explanation in other parts of the very same book, and often there is no need to turn to any sources other than the word of God, which in itself contains *tafsir*. To seek to explain an *ayah* from the Qur'an by referring to another

⁴ See Ibn Taimiya, op. cit., p.95.

⁵ See Ibn Taimiya, op. cit., p. 102.

⁶ This classification has been borrowed from Sabuni, tibyan, p.63. See also Qattan, op.cit. section 25.

ayah from the Qur'an is the first and foremost duty of the mufasssir. Only if this does not suffice, he will refer to other sources of *tafsir*.⁷

Examples:

A case in point is the detailed explanation of 5:2 by 5:4, concerning permissible and prohibited meat. Another example of explanation of one *ayah* in the Qur'an by other concerns a question which might arise from [Q44:3]. It is explained in [Q97:1]:

We sent it down during a blessed night. [Q44:3].

Which night is this blessed night, in which the Qur'an was sent down?

We have indeed revealed this in the *laylat al-qadr*. [Q97:1].

A third example is the explanation of [Q2:37] by [Q7:23]:

Then learnt Adam from his Lord words of inspiration, and his Lord turned towards him, for He is Oft-Returning, Most Merciful. [Q2:37].

These 'words of inspiration' are explained by the Qur'an as follows:

Our Lord! We have wronged our own souls. If Thou forgive us not, and bestow not upon us Thy mercy, we shall certainly be lost. [Q7:23].

The Qur'an explained by the Prophet

There are numerous examples of explanation of the Qur'an by the Prophet, who either himself asked the Angel Gabriel for explanation of matters not clear to him, or who was asked by the Companions about the Qur'an. Suyuti has given a long list of explanations of the Qur'an by the Prophet *surah by surah*.⁸

Here one example may suffice:

And eat and drink until the white thread of dawn appears to you distinct from its black thread. . . [Q2:187].

Narrated 'Adi b. Hatim: I said: 'O God's Apostle! What is the meaning of the white thread distinct from the black thread? Are these two threads?' He said: 'You are not intelligent, if you watch the two threads'. He then added, 'No, it is the darkness of the night and the whiteness of the day'.⁹

⁷ Itqan, 11, pp.181-2.

⁸ Itqan, 11, pp. 191-205.

⁹ Itqan 11. pp. 191-205.

Tafsir by sahaba¹⁰

Next, after explanation of the Qur'an by the Qur'an and of the Qur'an by the Prophet himself, ranks the explanation of the Qur'an by the *sahabah*. Among them, the following were best known for their knowledge of and contribution to the field of *tafsir*: Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman, 'All (not much has been reported from them), Ibn Mas'ud, Ibn 'Abbas, 'Ubay b. Ka'b, *Zayd* b. Thabit, Abu Musa al-Ash'ari, 'Abdullah b. Zubair.

Ibn 'Abbas

Abdullah b. 'Abbas (d. 68/687) is considered to be the most knowledgeable of the Companions in *tafsir*.¹¹ He has been called '*tarjuman al-qur'an*', the interpreter of the Qur'an. Since he was related to the Prophet, being his cousin, and his maternal aunt Maimuna being one of the Prophet's wives, he was very close to the Prophet Muhammad and learnt much about the revelation. It is said that he saw the Angel Gabriel twice. Apart from his detailed knowledge of everything concerning *tafsir*, he is also given the credit for having emphasized one of the basic principles of '*ilm al-tafsir*' which has remained important to this day, namely, that the meaning of words, especially of unusual words in the Qur'an ought to be traced back to their usage in the language of pre-Islamic poetry. There is a long list of such explanations quoted by Suyuti.¹²

Example:

The following is an example of *tafsir* from a *sahabi*, namely Ibn 'Abbas, confirmed by 'Umar:

So celebrate the praises of your Lord, and ask for His forgiveness. Verily! He is the one who accepts the repentance and forgives. [Q110:3].

Narrated Ibn 'Abbas: 'Umar used to make me sit with the elderly men who had fought in the battle of Badr. Some of them felt it (did not like that and said to 'Umar: 'Why do you bring in this boy to sit with us, while we have sons like him?

'Umar replied 'Because of what you know of his position' (i.e. his religious knowledge).

¹⁰ For a brief summary on early *Tafsir* see al-Sawwaf, 'Early *Tafsir*', in Ahmad, K. and Z. 1. Ansari. Islamic Perspectives. Leicester, 1979, pp.135-45.

¹¹ A book titled *tanwir al-miqbas min Tafsir Ibn Abbas* (Beirut, n.d.) is a complete *tafsir* of the Qur'an. all explanations of which are said to go back to Ibn 'Abbas. On the question of authenticity, see al-Sawwaf, op.cit. p. 140.

¹² Itqan 1 pp.120-33.

One day 'Umar called me and made me sit in the gathering of those people, and I think that he called me just to show them (my religious knowledge). 'Umar then asked them in my presence: 'What do you say about the interpretation of the statement of God'.

'When comes help of God, and the conquest . . .' [Q110:1].

Some of them said: 'We are ordered to praise God and ask for His forgiveness, when God's help and the conquest (of Mecca) comes to us'. Some others kept quiet and did not say anything. On that 'Umar asked me: 'Do you say the same, O Ibn 'Abbas?' I replied: 'No'. He said: 'What do you say then?' I replied: 'That is the sign of the death of God's apostle which God informed him of. God said:

'(O Muhammad) when comes the help of God (to you against your enemies) and the conquest (of Mecca) (which is the sign of your death) - you should celebrate the praises of your Lord and ask for His forgiveness, and He is the One who accepts the repentance and forgives' [Q110:1-3]. On that 'Umar said: 'I do not know anything about it other than what you have said'.¹³

Another short example is:

Narrated 'Ata': When Ibn 'Abbas heard:

'Have you not seen those who have changed the favor of God into disbelief?' [Q14:28].

He said: 'Those were the disbelieving pagans of Mecca'.¹⁴

Tafsir by Tabi'un

There are many more persons from among the *tabi'un* known for their preoccupation with *tafsir*, because many more people had embraced Islam and the need for knowledge about the Qur'an had increased manifold. Also, the Prophet himself and many of his Companions were no longer available to give this guidance, and therefore greater efforts had to be made to satisfy this need for proper understanding of the book of God.

Of the *mufassirin* from among the *tabi'un* one distinguishes three groups, according to their origin and area of activity:

- Those from Mecca.
- Those from Madinah.

¹³ Bukhari, VI, No. 494.

¹⁴ Bukhari VI No. 222.

- Those from Iraq.

The Meccan Group

According to many scholars, this group of mufassirun from among the *tabi'un* are the most knowledgeable in *tafsir*, because they learnt about it from 'Abdullah b. 'Abbas. They are many in number, and among the best known out of many others are Mujahid (d.104/722), 'Ata' (d.114/732) and 'Ikrima (d.107H).

Mujahid, the best known among them, is reported to have gone through the Qur'an thrice with Ibn 'Abbas and to have asked him about the 'when' and 'how' of each verse that had been revealed.¹⁵

A complete book of *tafsir* by Mujahid has been published. It is based on a manuscript from the 6th Hijra century and is edited by Surti.¹⁶

Example:

Humaid b. Qais Makki reported: I was with Mujahid and we were circumambulating the house (Ka'ba). A man came and asked whether the fasts of penalty of an oath should be observed continuously or severally. Humaid replied that if he liked he could observe them severally too! But Mujahid said: Not severally, for the reading of 'Ubayy b. Ka'b is *thalathi ayyamin mutatabi'at*, i.e. to fast three days continuously'.¹⁷

The Madinan Group

The mufassirun among the *tabi'un* from Madinah had many Companions as their teachers, among the best known being 'Ubay b. Ka'b. The following are some of the well-known Qur'an exegetes among them: Muhammad b. Ka'b al-Qarzi (d.117/735), Abu al-'Alliya al-Riyahi (d.90/708) and Zayd b. Aslam (d.130/747).

The Iraq Group

There were also many mufassirun among the *tabi'un* in Iraq. Their principal teacher was Ibn Mas'ud. Their main centers were Basra and Kufa. The best known among them are: Al-Hasan al-Basri (d.121/738), Masruq b. al-'Ajda' (d.63/682) and Ibrahim al-Nakha'i. (d.95/713).

¹⁵ Taimiya p. ;102.

¹⁶ Surti, A.: *Tafsir* Mujahid, 2 vols., Beirut, n.d.

¹⁷ Muwatta Malik, No. 617.

Summary

Nothing can excel the *tafsir* of the Qur'an by the Qur'an. This is followed by sound reports about the Prophet's explanation of the revelation.

Whatever is sound and genuine in the explanation of the Qur'an by the *sahabah* and the *tabi'un* may not be rejected, but the following principles are to be observed:

- Sound reports must be distinguished from unsound ones, for many views have been falsely attributed to some *sahabah* and *tabi'un* (especially to Ibn 'Abbas and Mujahid, the most renowned ones among them), which cannot be traced back to them when the isnad is investigated. Those reports must of course be rejected.
- Material from the ahl-al-kitab, in particular the Jewish traditions (*isra'iliyat*)¹⁸ must be sorted out and evaluated.
- Material which crept in due to theological, philosophical, political and other considerations, must be sorted out and evaluated (such as e.g. some Shi'a attributions to 'Ali, or 'Abbasid attributions to Ibn 'Abbas, etc.).
- False material purposely introduced by the enemies of Islam must be distinguished from sound material.

Tafsir bi al-ra'y

The second kind of *tafsir*, after *tafsir bi al-riwayah*, is the so-called *tafsir bi al-ra'y*. It is not based directly on transmission of knowledge by the predecessors, but on the use of reason and *ijtihad*.

Tafsir bi al-ra'y does not mean 'interpretation by mere opinion', but deriving an opinion through *ijtihad* based on sound sources. While the former has been condemned already in the *hadith*, the latter is recommendable, when used in its proper place as sound *ijtihad*, and was also approved by the Prophet, e.g. when he sent Mu'adh Ibn Jabal to Yemen.¹⁹

Tafsir bi al-ra'y on the other hand has been declared *haram* on the basis of the following *hadith*:

From Ibn 'Abbas: God's messenger said: "He who says (something) concerning the Qur'an without knowledge, he has taken his seat of fire".²⁰

However this *hadith* has been explained in two ways:

¹⁸ For details, see below, p. 133.

¹⁹ *Mishkat al-masabih*, op.cit., II, p.794: (Arabic), Vol. 2, No. 3737.

²⁰ Ibn Taimiya, p.105, from Tirmidhi, who says it is *hasan sahih*.

- That no one should say of the Qur'an what is not from the *sahabah* or *tabi'un*.
- That no one should say of the Qur'an what he knows to be otherwise.²¹

The obvious meaning of the *hadith* is that one should not say something about the Qur'an without having the proper knowledge, the sources of which have already been explained.²²

Two Kinds of *tafsir bi al-ra'y*:

In view of this, it is obvious that *tafsir bi al-ra'y* should not be rejected in toto, but is acceptable if based on sound *ijtihad*.²³ Scholars have therefore grouped *tafsir bi al-raby* into two kinds:

- *Tafsir mahmud* (praiseworthy), which is in agreement with the sources of *tafsir*, the rules of *shari'ah* and the Arabic language.
- *Tafsir madhmum* (blameworthy), which is done without proper knowledge of the sources of *tafsir*, *shari'ah* and the Arabic language. It is therefore based on mere opinion and must be rejected.

Sahaba and Tabi'un shun mere opinion:

While the *tafsir bi al-ra'y* based on sound sources was accepted, it is reported that from the outset the *sahabah* had refused to involve themselves in giving explanations based on mere opinion:

It is reported that a man asked Ibn 'Abbas about the day (mentioned in the Qur'an) which measures 50 years, and Ibn 'Abbas replied: 'They are 2 days which God has mentioned in His book, and God knows best about them', and he disliked that he should say concerning the book of God, what he did not know.²⁴

The same attitude is also found among the *tabi'un*:

We used to ask Sa'id b. al-Musayyib about *halal* and *haram*, and he was the most learned man, but when we asked him about *tafsir* of a verse of the Qur'an, he kept silent, as though he did not hear.²⁵

Summary

²¹ Sabuni.tibyan,p.174.

²² The Qur'an explained by the Qur'an, by the Prophet, by the Companions. By the *tabi'un*. by sound *ijtihad*.

²³ Someone who practices *tafsir bi al-ra'y* must have sound knowledge in the following fields: '*ilm al-balagha*, '*ilm usul al-fiqh*, '*ma'rifat asbab al-nuzul*, '*ma'rifat al-nasikh wa-l-mansukh*, '*ilm al-qira'a* Also, he must be inclined towards faith, which is a gift from Allah, and not a skill to be acquired.

²⁴ Ibn Taimiya, p. 110, based on Tabari.

²⁵ Ibn Taimiya, p.112, based on Tabari.

Some scholars have said that *tafsir bi al-ra'y* is not allowed. since it cannot be traced back to the Prophet or his Companions directly. Others, who form the majority, say that it is permissible under the conditions described briefly above, because it is done by *ijtihad*, based on sound sources, which is a permissible means of obtaining knowledge.

Tafsir bi al-isharah

By this is meant the interpretation of the Qur'an beyond its outer meanings, and the people practicing it concern themselves with meanings attached to verses of the Qur'an, which are not visible to anyone, but only to him whose heart God has opened. This kind of *tafsir* is often found with mystically-inclined authors. While it must not be denied that God guides to the understanding of the Qur'an whom He pleases and as He wills, it has to be said that *tafsir bi al-isharah* is not a matter of science and scientific principles, which may be acquired and then used, as are the other branches of 'ulum al-qur'an and of *tafsir*. Some scholars have therefore rejected it from the viewpoint of general acceptability and said it is based on mere opinion.²⁶ However Ibn al-Qayyim²⁷ is reported to have said that results achieved by *tafsir bi al-isharah* are permissible and constitute good findings, if the following four principles are jointly applied:

- That there is no disagreement with the plain meaning of the verse.
- That it is a sound meaning in itself.
- That in the wording there is some indication towards it.
- That there are close connections between it and the plain meaning.

Differences in Tafsir

In some cases the mufassirun do not agree on the interpretation of a given verse from the Qur'an. There are a number of reasons for this, the most important ones are the following:

- External: Disregard for isnad.
 - Use of unsound materials, such as *israiliyat*.²⁸ Conscious misrepresentation, based on a preconceived belief or other ulterior motives.
- Internal: Genuine mistake in comprehension.
 - Interpretation based on unconscious preconceived notion.
 - Multiplicity of meanings in the revelation from God.

²⁶ Itqan. n, p.174.

²⁷ Qattan, op.cit., pp.309-10.

²⁸ See below.

The main cause however is, in the view of Ibn Taimiya, that the people introduced false innovation (*bid'ah*) and 'twisted the speech (of God) from its actual position, and interpreted the speech of God and His apostle(s) other than it is meant, and explained it other than it should be explained'.²⁹

Israiliyat³⁰

This word, meaning 'of Jewish origin' refers to explanations derived from non-Muslim sources and especially from the Jewish tradition, but also including other ahl al-kitab in general. Such material was used very little by the *sahabah*, but more by the *tabi'un* and even more by later generations. There are many aspects of the Qur'an which can be explained by referring to such sources, when there is common ground between the Qur'an and the other traditions. However, the information taken from such sources must be used with great caution and cannot be considered sound according to the standards of 'ilm al-*hadith*, unless traced back to the Prophet himself and his Companions. The Prophet has already cautioned Muslims against this source of knowledge:

Narrated Abu Huraira: The people of the scripture (Jews) used to recite the Torah in Hebrew and they used to explain it in Arabic to the Muslims. On that God's apostle said: 'Do not believe the people of the scripture or disbelieve them, but say: "We believe in God and what is revealed to us"' [Q:136].

Similarly Ibn Mas'ud, the well-known Companion, is reported to have said: 'Do not ask the ahl al-kitab about anything (in *tafsir*), for they cannot guide you and are themselves in error.'³¹

Hence one distinguishes three kinds of the so-called *isra' iliyat*:

- Those known to be true because the revelation to the Prophet Muhammad confirms them.
- Those known to be false, because the revelation to the Prophet Muhammad rejects them.
- Those not known to be true or false, and we do not say they are true or false.

Summary

A concise but useful *summary* of the vast field of *tafsir* can be found in the following words said to be from Ibn 'Abbas:³²

²⁹ Ibn Taimiya, op.cit., p.91.

³⁰ See Ibn Taimiya, op.cit., pp.S6-8.

³¹ Ibn Taimiya, op.cit., p.57.

³² Ibn Taimiya, p. 115, based on Tabari.

Tafsir has four aspects:

- the aspect the Arabs knew because of its language,³³
- *tafsir*, for ignorance of which no one will be excused,³⁴
- *tafsir*, which the scholars know,
- *tafsir*, which no one knows except God'.

THE TAFSIR LITERATURE

Some important Books of Tafsir

Numerous books have been written by Muslim scholars on the subject of *tafsir*.³⁵ The oldest text available is attributed to Ibn 'Abbas (d.68/687) although some doubt its authenticity. Other old books of *tafsir*, still available to us, include the works of Zayd Ibn 'Ali (d.122/740) and Mujahid, the famous *tabi'i* (d.104/722).³⁶

However it is generally accepted that the *magnum opus* among the early books of *Tafsir*, which have come down to us is the *tafsir* al-Tabari.

Tafsir al-Tabari:

This book was written by Ibn Jarir al-Tabari (d-310/922) under the title *jami al-bayan fi tafsir al-qur'an*. It belongs to the most famous books in *tafsir* and is perhaps the most voluminous work we have on the subject. It belongs to the class of *Tafsir bi al-riwayah* and is based on the reports from the Prophet, the *sahabah* and the *tabi'un*, giving the various chains of transmission and evaluating them. However, it also contains reports that are not sound, without clearly indicating this, including so-called *isra'iliyat*. Tabari also says in some places that one cannot know about certain things and that not to know about them does not do any harm. In spite of all this the book is nevertheless one of the most important works in *tafsir* referred to by almost every subsequent scholar. It has been printed twice in Egypt (in 1903 and 1911) in 30 volumes, while a third edition begun in 1954 has reached volume 15.

Other Well-Known Books of Tafsir

- **Tafsir al Samarqandi:** by Abu al-Laith al-Samarqandi (d.373/983) under the title *bahr al 'ulum* with many reports from the *sahabah* and *tabi'un*, but without *sanad*.

³³ i.e. Linguistic matters.

³⁴ i.e. concerning haram and halal.

³⁵ For extracts from the classical books of *tafsir* translated into English see Gaetje. H.: The Qur'an and its Exegesis, London. 1976.

³⁶ See Sawwaf, op.cit., pp. 135 45.

- **Tafsir al Tha'alabi:** by Ahmad ibn Ibrahim al-Tha'alabi al-Nisaburi (d.383/993) under the title *al-kashf wa-al-bayan 'an tafsir al-qur'an* with some *sanad* and some unsound tales and stories.

Tafsir al-Baghawi: by Hasan Ibn Mas'ud al-Baghawi (d.510/1116) under the title *ma'alim al-tanzil* being an abridgement of Tha'alabi with its weaknesses but with more emphasis on soundness of *hadith*.

Tafsir Ibn Kathir: by Isma'il Ibn 'Amr ibn Kathir al-Dimashqi (d.774/1372) under the title *tafsir al-qur'an al-azim*, one of the better-known books of *tafsir*, perhaps second to Tabari, with more emphasis on soundness of reports, in particular rejection of all foreign influences such as *isra'iliyat*, discussing the *sanad* of various reports often in detail, which makes it one of the more valuable books of *tafsir*. Makes much use of *tafsir al-qur'an bi-al-qur'an*, referring a reader to other relevant *ayat* on the topic discussed. This book has been printed on various occasions (in 8 volumes) and an abridged version (*mukhtasar*) has been edited by Sabuni. No English translation available. This book although of greatest importance to Muslims has been widely ignored by the orientalists.³⁷

Tafsir al-Suyuti: by Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d.911/1505) under the title *al-durr al-manthur fi al-tafsir bi al-ma'thur*.

Some important books from the class of *tafsir bi al-ra'y* are as follows:

Al-kashshaf, by Abu'l-Qasim Mahmud Ibn 'Umar al-Zamakhshari (d.539/1144), one of the well-known books of *tafsir* based on a *mu'tazili* approach and considered to be the standard work of *mu'tazila tafsir*, with much emphasis on Arabic grammar and lexicography as a means of interpretation with less attention given to *sanad*.

Mafatih al-ghaib, by Muhammad Ibn 'Amr al-Husain al-Razi (d.606/1209). One of the most comprehensive works of *tafsir bi al-ra'y* covering many areas often beyond the actual field of exegesis, also known as *tafsir al-kabir*.

Anwar al-tanzil, by 'Abd God Ibn 'Umar al-Baidawi (d.685/1286), a *summary* of Zamakhshari with additional material to counterbalance the *mu'tazila* stance of the *kashshaf*.

Ruh al ma'ani, by Shihab al-Din Muhammad al-Alusi al-Baghdadi (d.1270/1854), criticizes unsound reports; considered to be among the best of *tafsir bi al-ray'*.

³⁷ See e.g. Gaetje, op.cit., who does not even mention Ibn Kathir's name. Also Goldziher, 1.: Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranslegung, Leiden, 1970, is silent about him.

Tafsir al-Jalalain, by Jalal al-Din al Mahalli (d.864/1459) and Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti (d.911/1505)? a handy book of **tafsir**, containing only brief notes on various passages of the Qur'an.

None of these important books have ever been translated into any European language.³⁸

To conclude here is an example from the *tafsir* al-Jalalain:³⁹

About the Hypocrites:

Among men are those who say, we believe in God and in the Last Day - (that is the Day of Resurrection, because it is the last of days): but they are not believers. They Endeavour to deceive God and those who have believed, by making a show of the reverse of the infidelity that they conceal; but they deceive not any except themselves; for the punishment of their deceit shall come upon them, and they shall be disgraced in this world, in consequence of God's acquainting His Prophet with that which they conceal, and shall be punished in the world to come; and they know not that they deceive themselves. In their hearts is a disease. Doubts and hypocrisy in this order them; and God has increased their disease by what he has revealed in the Kuran, because they disbelieve it; and for them (is ordained) a painful punishment because they have charged with falsehood the Prophet of God and when it is said to them: corrupt not in the earth by infidelity and hindering others from embracing the faith - they reply, we are all only rectifiers - assuredly they are the corrupters; but they are not sensible thereof and when it is said unto them, believe ye as other men, the Companions of the Prophet, have believed- they say, shall we believe as the fools have believed? – assuredly they are the fools; but they know it not. And when they meet those who have believed they say, we believe; - but when they retire privately to their devils (that is, their chiefs), they say, we agree with you in religion; we only mock at them by making a show of their faith - God will mock at them. He will requite them for their mockery and continue them in their exceeding wickedness, wandering about in perplexity. These are they who have purchased error in exchange for right

³⁸ There are, however, a few extracts available in English, which may help the reader gain some idea of this important field of study: See Gaetje, op.cit.

³⁹ Lane, Edward William: Selection from the Kuran with an interwoven commentary, London, Madden, 1843. This is a most interesting though very rare book. Apart from a lengthy introduction (96 pages) almost wholly from Sale, it contains selections from the Qur'an, translated into English with commentary taken from the *tafsir* al-Jalalain. It therefore gives some idea of what this *tafsir* is like. The selections reflecting the translator's cultural and historical milieu rather than the message of the Qur'an are on the following topics: God and His Works, Predestination, Angels and Jinn, Various Prophets and Books, Messiah, Muhammad and the Qur'an, Believers and Unbelievers, Paradise and Hell.

direction, and their traffic has not been profitable; on the contrary, they have incurred loss; for their transit is to the external fire; and they have not been rightly directed in that which they have done' (2: 7-15).⁴⁰

Contemporary Tafsir Literature⁴¹

Among numerous books on *Tafsir* that have been written in the twentieth century, three are outstanding. They have greatly influenced the thinking of Muslims all over the world, and are briefly introduced here. They are:

- *Tafsir al-manar*,
- *Fi zilal al-qur'an*, and
- *Tafhim al-qur'an*.

***Tafsir al-manar*.** The actual title of this book is *tafsir al-qur'an al-hakim*. It was compiled by Muhammad Rashid Rida (d.1354/1935), the well-known disciple of Muhammad 'Abduh (d.1323/1905), and published in Egypt. It is called *tafsir al-manar* since some of its parts had been serialized in the periodical *al-manar*. The *tafsir* covers the first 12 *juz'* of the Qur'an. The influence of the 'Manar School of Thought' on Muslims all over the world since the turn of the century has been tremendous, although today, after several decades, some of the attempts to harmonize contemporary scientific as well as social development with the teachings of the Qur'an seem rather inappropriate. For example, the commentary on *Surah* 1: 276, where Jinns are explained as microbes causing diseases, or on 4:3 where polygamy is 'prohibited' according to the *tafsir al-manar*, because justice cannot be done between two or more wives. However the basic notion of the 'Manar School of Thought' was that Islam is different and has to be seen as different from all Western philosophies and must regain its original position. This view, underlying the *tafsir al-manar* continues to be voiced by many later Muslim scholars and leaders alike.⁴²

***Fi zilal al-qur'an*.** This book, covering the complete Qur'anic text in 4 volumes, with the title *In the Shade of the Qur'an* has greatly influenced numerous Muslims especially the younger generations, and particularly in the Middle East. It was written by the well-known author Sayyid Qutb (d.1386/1966), mostly during his imprisonment (1954-64), and completed before he was executed by the Egyptian government because of his association with the *ikhwan al-muslimun*.

⁴⁰ Lane. pp.285-7.

⁴¹ For a survey of the modern *tafsir* literature as perceived by the orientalists. See Baljon, J . M. S.: *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation*. Leiden. 1968 and Jansen. JG.: *The Interpretation of the Qur'an in Modern Egypt*. Leiden. 1971.

⁴² Also *juz' 'amma* has been published. For a short extract on *Surah* 4: 3, see Gaetje, op. cit., pp.248-61.

Qutb's aim, with this commentary on the Qur'an was to explain the true nature of Islam to contemporary Muslims, so as to invite them to join the struggle for the establishment of Islam both on the individual as well as the social level. He emphasized in particular the differences that exist between Islam and the non-Islamic systems, as well as the need for Muslims to strive for the establishment of a movement for Islam.⁴³

Tafhim al-qur'an.⁴⁴ Written in Urdu, and first published in article form, from 1943, in the journal *tarjuman al-qur'an*, this *tafsir*, covering the complete Qur'anic text was completed in 1973. It is of great importance for contemporary Muslim thinking, particularly in the Indian subcontinent (Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Ceylon), but has also, by means of translation, reached a much wider audience.⁴⁵ This *tafsir*, entitled *Understanding of the Qur'an* was written by the well-known founder of the *Jama'at-i-Islami* in Pakistan, Abul A'la Mawdudi (d.1400/1979). Addressed primarily to a non-Arabic speaking audience this *tafsir* places great emphasis on the thorough explanation of basic Qur'anic concepts, such as *ilah*, *rabb*, *ibada* and *din*, and the Qur'an as a 'book of guidance', not least containing guidance for a movement of Islamic reconstruction and the Islamic way of life. Numerous notes add to the usefulness of this aid to understanding the Qur'an. It is particularly suitable for the young educated Muslim with no direct access to the Arabic original.

Summary

There is a common factor in these three contemporary books. *Tafsir al-manar* for the first time in modern history attempted to relate, to some extent, the Qur'anic message to the actual situation of the Muslim *ummah* in the contemporary world, and here, for the first time for centuries, *Tafsir* is no longer restricted to purely academic exercise and intellectual stimulus, but regains social and political significance. This is upheld and further elaborated in the two other books referred to.

Apart from these three main books of *tafsir*, numerous other attempts have been made to interpret the Qur'an for the contemporary age. All efforts of *tafsir* are however, apart from their varying degrees of utility and reliability, only human efforts to present the Qur'anic message in accordance with the needs and requirements of the age, and therefore in the final analysis can be only faint reflections of the Qur'an as the word of God, against which all human efforts are inadequate, incomplete and of only limited validity. This basic principle, which all *mufassirun* make the starting point of their work, should also be well remembered

⁴³ The last juz' of this book is now available in English: Qutb, Sayyid. *In the Shade of the Qur'an* (Vol. 30), MWH Publishers, London, 1979.

⁴⁴ See Ahmad, Khurshid: 'Some thoughts on a new Urdu *tafsir*', in *Actes du XXIXE Congress International des Orientalistes*, 1, 1, Paris, 1975, pp. 1-7.

⁴⁵ English translation, so far nine volumes, up to *Surah* 26, published under the title *The Meaning of the Qur'an*, Islamic Publications Ltd., Lahore, 1967-79.

by the readers of the books of *tafsir*, so as to remain aware of the actual book from God, the Qur'an, upon which all exegesis and explanation rests.

TRANSLATION OF THE QUR'AN

By translation (*tarjamah*) of the Qur'an is meant the expression of the meaning of its text in a language different from the language of the Qur'an, in order that those not familiar with it may know about it and understand God's guidance and will.

There is agreement among Muslim scholars that it is impossible to transfer the original Qur'an word by word in an identical fashion into another language. This is due to several reasons:

- Words of different languages do not express all the shades of meanings of their counterparts, though they may express specific concepts.
- The narrowing down of the meaning of the Qur'an to specific concepts in a foreign language would mean missing out other important dimensions.
- The presentation of the Qur'an in a different language would therefore result in confusion and misguidance.

However, there is no doubt that translations of the meanings of the Qur'an had already been made at the time of the Prophet Muhammad as a solution for those who did not understand the language of the Qur'an:

When Heraclius, the Byzantine emperor received the message Muhammad had sent to him by messenger, the verses of the Qur'an therein, together with the message, had to be translated, and the report by Abu Sufyan on this matter⁴⁶ states *expressis verbis* that translators were called for the conversation between the emperor and Abu Sufyan and that the message from the Prophet included a passage from the Qur'an, namely [Q3:64].

Similarly, translation from a passage from *Surat maryam* (19), which was recited by the Muslims in front of the Negus of Abyssinia⁴⁷ must have occurred. It might even be taken as indicating that the Muslims carried with them written extracts from the Qur'an in case the Negus questioned them, before one of them recited from the Qur'an: do you have something with you from what he brought from God?⁴⁸

There is also some reference to the Persian language:

⁴⁶ Bukhari, VI, No. 75.

⁴⁷ See Ibn Hisham, p. 152.

⁴⁸ *hal ma'aka mima ja'a bihi 'an allahi min shai'*: see Ibn Hisham, Arabic 1, p.224.

Some Iranians- one is not certain whether they were from Yemen or Bahrain, Oman or elsewhere - were converted to Islam and applied for permission to say their prayers temporarily in their mother tongue. The Persian Salman al-Farisi translated the first chapter (*surat al-fatihah*) and sent it to one of them.⁴⁹

Translation of the Meanings

A word-by-word translation of the Qur'an into another language would not be adequate. Therefore good translators have always aimed at first determining the meaning of a passage and then rendering it into the other language. Hence translations of the Qur'an are actually expressions of meanings of the Qur'an in other languages. M. Pickthall, one of the well-known English Qur'an translators opened his Foreword with the following lines:

The aim of this work is to present to English readers what Muslims the world over hold to be the meaning of the words of the Qur'an and the nature of that Book...The Qur'an cannot be translated. That is the belief of old fashioned Sheikhs and the view of the present writer. The book is here rendered almost literally and every effort has been made to choose befitting language. But the result is not the glorious Qur'an, that inimitable symphony the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy. It is only an attempt to present the meaning of the Qur'an - and peradventure something of the charm - in English.⁵⁰

Limitations of Translation

The Qur'an is the word of God. Scholars say that since the Qur'an has been revealed in the Arabic language any translation of it would not be the word of God. Furthermore, the concept of the uniqueness and inimitability of the Qur'an (*i'jaz al-qur'an*) is, in the mind of these scholars, closely linked to its expression in the Arabic language. This would become immaterial in translation. Lastly, because of the different meanings that words carry in different languages, the translation would never adequately express all the meanings of the Qur'an carried by the original text.

Importance of Translations and their Benefits

The translations of the meanings of the Qur'an are of great importance for two reasons:

⁴⁹ Hamidullah, Munabbih, p. 19; also: Le Saint Coran, p.xxxvi; see also: 'Is the Qur'an translatable? Early Muslim Opinion', in: Tibawi. A.L., Arabic and Islamic Themes, Luzac, London, 1974, pp.7245, here p.73.

⁵⁰ Pickthall, M. M.: The Meaning of the Glorious Koran, New York, 1963.

- To present the message of Islam to non-Muslims and invite them to ponder over the Qur'an.
- To point out to Muslims the revealed guidance and will of God to be observed by them.

Without translations of the Qur'an today there is no way of effective *da'wah* either to non-Muslims or to Muslims themselves since those familiar with the language of the Qur'an are few in number, and the vast majority of people have no opportunity to become acquainted with the meaning of the Qur'an unless it be rendered into their mother tongue.

Translations of the meanings of the Qur'an therefore are not only permissible but a duty and obligation upon Muslims,⁵¹ and the practical basis for the extension of the Islamic *da'wah* to other peoples all over the world.

Translation in Salat?⁵²

There is a difference of opinion as to whether the translated meanings of the Qur'anic verse could be recited during prayer. Some scholars (in particular some Hanafites) say that someone not familiar with the Qur'anic language may recite short passages in his mother tongue until he has learnt them in the Qur'anic language.⁵³ The majority of scholars say that this would render the prayer invalid and only recitation of the Qur'an in its revealed form is permissible.

Which translation?

The first translation of the Qur'an, from Arabic into Latin, made in Europe was done under the instructions of Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny, in 1143. It was an attempt at the dawn of crusades and to equip the 'reconquerors' for mission among Muslims and refutation of Islam, and since then many other translations have followed.

Here we are however only concerned with translations into the English language. Borrowing from the field of *Tafsir* (and translation, as we have seen is certainly some kind of *Tafsir*, since the expression of its meaning in another language require *tafsir*) the conditions which need to be fulfilled would be:

- The translation must be done by someone with the correct belief, i.e. by a Muslim.
- The translation must be done by someone with adequate knowledge of both the language of the Qur'an and the language for the translation.
- The translation must be done by someone well acquainted with the related sciences, such as *hadith*, *tafsir*, etc.

⁵¹ Sabuni, *tibyan*, p.232.

⁵² See Qattan, *op.cit.*, pp..272b.

⁵³ See also GdQ, III, p. 106.

From the above principles it is obvious that all such translations by missionaries and their help-mates, the orientalists (even if excellent with regard to their English idiom)⁵⁴ should be rejected. This also applies to all non-Muslim translators and to those holding beliefs other than those based on the Qur'an and sunnah.

Authors well grounded in Islam but proposing explanations not in conformity with the consensus should be read with caution.

Translations by persons with insufficient knowledge of either language, or with insufficient educational background, poor knowledge of related sciences, etc., are of little use and may confuse, if not mispresent, the meanings of the Qur'an.

There remain only a few translations into English which can be recommended. Among them the following two seem most useful:

- Abdullah Yusuf Ali: This is a book of mixed value, since the translation in places is a little far from the text. The numerous footnotes provide helpful explanations and background information but some of them seem odd if not unacceptable.
- Marmaduke Pickthall: This is a mere translation with no explanation and footnotes which makes it perhaps more difficult for the beginner. The author took great care to give as far as possible a literal translation.

⁵⁴ Such as e.8. Arberry, A. J.: The Koran Interpreted, London, 1964.

CHAPTER 7

Some Related Issues

THE QUR'AN AS A MIRACLE

Ijaz al-Qur'an

Why do we call the Qur'an a miracle? The Qur'an has certain features which make it unique and of inimitable quality. This inimitability is called *i'jaz al-qur'an*, the 'miraculous nature' of the Qur'an.

The word *i'jaz* is derived from the root '*ajaza*' which has various meanings, ranging from 'to be incapable, to make powerless', to 'to be impossible, to be inimitable'.

In technical language it means the inimitable and unique nature of the Qur'an which leaves its opponents powerless or incapable of meeting the challenge which the revelation poses to them. It is also said that the Qur'an is the *mu'jizah*, the miracle of Muhammad:

'Narrated *Abu Huraira*: The Prophet said "Every prophet was given miracles because of which people believed but what I have been given is divine inspiration which God has revealed to me so I hope that my followers will outnumber the followers of the other prophets on the Day of Resurrection".¹

What is a Miracle?²

According to Muslim scholars the following five conditions must be met before an event can be accepted as a miracle from God:

- That no one else apart from God the Master of the world is able to do it.
- That it breaks the usual norms and differs from the laws of nature (not the laws of God, but the way nature normally is).
- That it serves as proof for the truth and claim of the messenger.
- That it happens in accordance with the messenger's claim.
- That the event happens through the messenger and no one else.

The Tahaddi

Muhammad was an unlettered man (*umiyy*) but proclaimed a recited message. The challenge (*tahaddi*) to others to imitate the Qur'an has been posed by the revelation itself on various occasions and in various ways:

¹ Bukhan, VI, No. 504

² Sabuni, *tibyan*, p.99.

Say: Then bring ye a book from God which is a better guide than either of them that I may follow it if ye are truthful. [Q28:49].

However, the Qur'an declares that no one could possibly bring such a book, not even if mim and jinn combined their efforts [Q17:90].

This challenge is repeated more than once: the enemies of the Prophet should produce ten *suwar*, if their disbelief was justified [Q11:16] or only one *surah* [Q10:39].

If you are in doubt as to what We have revealed from time to time to Our servant, then produce a *surah* like thereunto and call your witnesses or helpers besides God if your (doubts) are true but if ye cannot - and of surely you cannot - then fear the fire, whose fuel is men and stones - which is prepared for those who reject faith. [Q2:23-4]

This challenge posed by the Qur'an has never been met, precisely because of the reason the Qur'an itself gives: that it cannot be done. If at any point in time, whether during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad or at any other time someone had met this challenge, the opponents of Islam would certainly have made full use of it, but among the manifold attacks which have been, and are still being launched against Islam, none has been or is in this particular line. The *tahaddi*, which has not been met and, as the Qur'an says, cannot be met, is one of the main aspects of the unique and inimitable nature of the Qur'an called *i'jaz*.

Various Aspects of I'jaz

The Muslim scholar al-Qurtubi (d.656/1258) in his commentary on the Qur'an has indicated the following ten aspects of the *i'jaz al-qur'an*:

- Its language excels all other Arabic language.
- Its style excels all other Arabic style.
- Its comprehensiveness cannot be matched.
- Its legislation cannot be surpassed.
- Its narrations about the unknown can only result from revelation.
- Its lack of contradiction with the sound natural sciences.
- Its fulfillment of all that it promises, both good tidings and threat.
- The knowledge it comprises (both legal and concerning the creation).
- Its fulfillment of human needs.
- Its effect on the hearts of men.

Others, such as al-Baqillani (d.403/1013) in his book *i'jazat al-qur'an*³ have discussed the following three aspects:

1. **The unlettered Prophet.** Prophet Muhammad has been called '*ummi*',

³ Printed on the margin of Suyuti's *itqan*.

unlettered. Some say that Muhammad could neither read nor write at all, but *ummi* may also mean that he belonged to an uneducated people. Perhaps he did read or write a little or perhaps not. This does not affect his basic situation as *ummi*. He was not a scholar and not a historian, neither was he a philosopher nor a priest and the common view is that he did not even read or write but he proclaimed the Qur'an and recited its many *suwar* and *ayat* in which he informed about the earlier prophets, earlier scriptures and earlier events, all in spite of his belonging to an uneducated people, in one of the most remote parts of the world and far away from the centers of civilization and culture. In this also is one of the aspects of *i'jaz al-qur'an*.

2. The unseen world. Another aspect of the *i'jaz al-qur'an* are the prophecies it contains which are only possible with knowledge of the unseen world. The best-known such prophecy concerns the historical victory of the Romans over the Persians, shortly after the Romans had been defeated by the Persians and this prophecy was fulfilled during the Prophet's lifetime, when the enemies of Islam could themselves be witnesses to it:

The Roman Empire has been defeated in a land close by; but they (even) after (this) defeat of theirs will soon be victorious within a few years. [Q30:2-3].

The defeat of the Romans had taken place in 614/15, when Jerusalem was taken by the Persians, while the defeat of the Persians began only seven years later, when the Romans won the battle at Issus in 622.

Another prophecy is the victory of Islam over all other religions [Q9:33] and [Q24:54].

3. No contradictions. The message of the Qur'an revealed over a period of 23 years in both short and longer parts, on numerous occasions and in a variety of circumstances is nevertheless free of any contradictions. If the Qur'an had been written by a human being then certainly some contradiction would be there and could be discerned. Already the Qur'an has pointed out this fact:

Do they not consider the Qur'an? Had it been from other than God they would surely have found therein much discrepancy. [Q4:82].

The Literary Aspect

Scholars have also pointed out that there does not exist a piece of literature that can match the Qur'an, with respect either to style and form or to content.

The *sarraf*

Some scholars have suggested that it should normally be possible to imitate the Qur'an for there is nothing inimitable in it, but that it was God's 'aversion' (*sarraf*) which prevented the enemies of Islam from doing so.

Other scholars have disagreed with this, saying that this contradicts the view of holding the Qur'an itself to be a miracle, while the 'aversion-view' suggests that the miracle lies in God's interference preventing the opponents of Islam from producing something like the Qur'an.

The Qur'an and a Computer Study

In [Q74:30] the following *ayah* has sometimes perturbed the interpreters: "Over it are 19".

A computer study made in the U.S.A. by a Muslim scientist revealed that the figure 19 is of some significance to the composition of the text.⁴ The computer data reportedly revealed that the numbers of certain letters in various *suwar* are always multiples of 19, e.g. that *surat qaf* contains the letter *qaf* 57 times which is a multiple of 19 (3 times 19), and that the formula *basmalah* is composed of 19 letters and that this formula occurs 114 times in the Qur'an which is 19 times 6 (namely in front of each *surah* except *Surah* 9 (= 113) but one more time in *surah* [Q27:30] (= 113 plus 1)), and that each of the four words in the formula occurs in multiples of 19 in the Qur'an etc. However, this latter claim is not correct, as a simple count with the help of 'Abd al-Baqi's concordance shows.⁵

From these findings the researcher has concluded that it is not humanly possible to compose a text of the size, form and content of the Qur'an, with these underlying features. To him this is the 'mathematical proof' for the unique nature of the Qur'an.

The Miracle of the Qur'an

While there may be, and in fact is, some difference of opinion with regard to the relevance of all the indications given for the *i'jaz* of the Qur'an including both the oldest classical scholars' views as well as the latest computer studies the real unique feature of the Qur'an is seen by all Muslims as being God's *guidance* for mankind, and there is no other and no better guidance than this. This makes the Qur'an unique and inimitable. 'The miracle of the Qur'an lies in its being the *hidayah* (guidance).' This is what is claimed by the Qur'an, 'Say (unto them): Then bring a scripture (*kitab*) from the presence of God that gives clearer guidance (*ahda*) than those so (that) I may follow it, if you are truthful' (*al-qasas*, [Q28:49]. Here lies the uniqueness, miraculousness and supremacy of the Qur'an over all other writings. Herein lies the miracle of the Qur'an. The claim is evident. The content of the *hidayah* is evident. No single person, whether human or jinn, can produce a better *hidayah* than the Qur'an . . . the Qur'an, by claiming to be 'unique guidance' transcends all superficial characteristics assigned to it by a finite human mind. The message of the Qur'an is extremely simple, remarkably clear: 'Anyone who will seek *hidayah* (guidance) with an open mind, a non-colored vision and unbiased ears will reach the truth'.⁶

THE QUR'AN AND SCIENCE

⁴ See Khalifa, R.: *The Perpetual Miracle of Muhammad*, Tucson, 1978; also Deedat. A.: *Al-Qur'an the Ultimate Miracle*, Durban, 1979.

⁵ *al-mu'jam al-mufahras li-alaz al-qur'an al-karim*, Cairo.

⁶ Ahmad, A.: 'The Miracle called Qur'an at the mercy of Charlatans', in *Al-Ittihad*, April, 1978, pp.45-62, here 61-2. This article also contains a brief review of the classical views on *i'jaz*.

Science could be broadly defined as knowledge - as far as it is available - about the material universe, described as accurately as possible. Scientific research is the attempt to obtain such knowledge, and a scientific truth or a scientific fact is the result of this research. Science as knowledge about things is also considered to be a branch of truth, but the important aspect of this is that scientific truths are not ultimate but change continuously. The continuousness of scientific research and discovery means that the scientific truth of today will be seen in a different light tomorrow, as new elements of knowledge become available. Lastly, being an Endeavour of the human mind with all its faculties as well as limitations, scientific facts do constitute a *human* perspective with all its variety and limitations, on the true nature of things.

Science and the Qur'an

The classical scholars while dealing with the unique nature of the Qur'an (*i'jaz al-qur'an*) had already pointed out that the Qur'an contains information about the nature of things, the material environment, etc.⁷ and that this information is not in conflict with man's perspective and experience. Furthermore, the development of science and its immediate effect upon the lives and societies of Muslims, especially during the last and in the present century, have led many Muslims to look at science against the background of the Qur'an, and they have made numerous suggestions about the correct description in the Qur'an of certain scientific facts.

Among some of the very important aspects of this line of thought, i.e. that the Qur'an contains information on scientific facts which are in perfect agreement with the findings of man's scientific pursuits, are the following:⁸

- That the earth was previously part of the sun and only after separation from it became a habitable place for mankind [Q21:30].
- That all life originated from water [Q21:30].
- That the universe was in the shape of a fiery gas (which the Qur'an calls *dukhan*) [Q41:11].
- That matter is made up of minute particles [Q10:62].
- That the oxygen content of the air is reduced at higher altitudes [Q6:125].
- That in nature everything consists of complementary elements, not only man and animals, but also plants and even inorganic matter [Q36:36].
- That the embryo in the womb is enclosed by three coverings [Q39:6].
- That fertilization of certain plants is done by the wind [Q15:22].
- That microscopic organisms exist that are not visible to the naked eye, such as spermatozoon [Q96:1].
- That each human being has permanent individual fingerprints. [Q75:4].

These are just a few of many examples.⁹

⁷ See above, *i'jaz al-qur'an*.

⁸ Bucaille's approach in his book *The Bible, the Qur'an and Science*, Indianapolis, 1978, is more cautious. He writes: 'The Qur'an did not contain a single statement that was assailable from the modern scientific point of view' (Introduction, p. viii).

⁹ See Sabuni, *tibyan*, pp.131-7; for more examples and detailed discussion, see also Bucaille, M., *op.cit.*

All these matters which are in agreement with scientific findings could not, it is argued, have been known to any human being at the time of the revelation of the Qur'an. They were only discovered many centuries later after intense scientific research. Hence their inclusion in the Qur'an shows the heavenly origin of the book. This heavenly origin is further corroborated, the argument continues, by the correctness of the description of the scientific facts.

Science or the Qur'an?

The basic question that needs to be raised here despite the very attractive evidence presented by the scholars and writers from the field of science, is: If a scientific 'fact' which is held to be valid, since it presents the latest result of scientific research, is in agreement with the Qur'an today and if one is convinced solely by this argument of the heavenly origin of the Qur'an, what will be one's attitude, when or if, after more intensive research, the very same scientific fact is seen in a new light and perhaps differs from what one previously accepted as the Qur'an's position on the matter? Should this discrepancy then convince us of the human origin of the Qur'an, and so refute its heavenly origin? In other words, until very recently, very many scientific facts were in utter disagreement with today's scientific truths - and if today's scientific truths are in agreement with the Qur'an, this means that perhaps a few decades or a century ago no believer in science could have been convinced of the heavenly origin of the Qur'an. Similarly, a few decades or a century from now, science, which is after all the human perspective on the true nature of things, might describe its findings entirely differently from the way it presents its 'truths' today.

Science and scientific truths, therefore, cannot be generally accepted as criteria for the genuineness or non-human origin of the Qur'an, although at this point *in time* there are perhaps many good examples to be cited for the concordance between science and the Qur'an on certain questions. However, the Qur'an is a book of guidance for mankind and not a book of science nor a mine of cryptic notes on scientific facts.

Muslims believe the Qur'an to be guidance from God, while science is a human Endeavour and we believe the Qur'an to be guidance from God under any circumstances irrespective of whether science, which changes continuously, seems to be in support of it or not.¹⁰

THE QUR'AN AND THE ORIENTALISTS

¹⁰ In my view, even Bucaille's attempt at qualification is unsatisfactory. Bucaille says he wishes to use 'data definitely established. . . incontrovertible facts and even if science can only provide incomplete data, they will nevertheless be sufficiently well-established to be used without fear of error' (Introduction, p.vii). His case in point is: 'It has been established that the earth revolves around the sun and the moon around the earth and this fact will not be subject to revision' (p.123). But it is precisely this point which led to the great Copernican controversy only a few centuries ago and previously it was as staunchly asserted that the sun revolves around the earth! What guarantee is there that no new perspective in science will completely alter our present view? This is the best example to show that we should not accept scientific facts as absolute truths. They are rather what we presently know about them.

One of the main preoccupations of the few orientalists who have ever seriously studied the Qur'an has been to investigate what they conceived to be the original order of the Qur'anic text, since to them the 'chronological arrangement is of fundamental importance for the understanding of the text'.¹¹

This effort resulted in a number of studies of the text of the Qur'an as well as several translations of the Qur'an with a 'rearrangement' of the *suwar*.¹²

Strangely enough, although during the past two centuries of more intense orientalist study of Islam perhaps tens of thousands of books on Islam have been written and published by the orientalists, the original studies on the Qur'an, which are the sole basis of all research on Islam, number not more than half a dozen or so. For a quick overview follow brief reviews of the original works by orientalists on the Qur'an - apart from translations - published during the present century.

Geschichte des Qorans.¹³ This 'History of the Qur'an' produced by four German orientalists, deals in three parts with 'The Origin of the Qur'an', 'The Collection of the Qur'an' and the 'History of the Qur'anic Text'. The complete book naturally reflects the different approaches and types of scholarship of the various authors. Noeldeke's bias against Islam can still be clearly discerned, although he later renounced some of his views regarding the history of the Qur'an.¹⁴

The main substance of the first volume is its second part 'On the Origin of the Various Parts of the Qur'an'. Here, on the basis of Noeldeke's earlier work, the *suwar* have been arranged in four periods, three Meccan and one Madinan, depending heavily on Muslim sources, especially on Suyuti's *itqan* and Tabari. Due to this, the material presented is, apart from the usual biased comments, a good cross-section of classical Muslim writings on the subject. Incidentally, Pickthall (the well-known Qur'an translator), relied heavily on this for his remarks on chronology in his translation.¹⁵

There is a final section on 'Revelation not included in the Qur'an' discussed on the basis of various *ahadith* and other sources.

The second volume, dealing with the collection, is almost completely based on

¹¹ *Shorter Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Leiden, 1961, p.284.

¹² All orientalists classified the *surat* into several periods, some Meccan and some Madinan. The most original contribution here is Weil, G.: *Historisch-Kritische Einleitung in den Koran*, Bielefeld and Leipzig, 1878. See also Muir, W.: *The Coran, its composition and teaching*, London, 1878, and especially Noeldeke, Th.: *Geschichte des Qorans*, upon which is based Rodwell, A.: *The Coran, translation with the Suwar arranged in chronological order*, London, 1876. Other such rearranged translations are: Bell, R.: *The Quran translated with a critical rearrangement of the Suwar*, Edinburgh, 1937 and Blachere, R.: *Le Coran. Traduction nouvelle*, Paris, 1949-50. Naturally the translations had to go even further in the attempt at 'reclassification' by allotting a particular place to each verse and cannot restrict themselves to looking at *surat* only.

¹³ Noeldeke, T., et. al.: *Geschichte des Qorans*, Leipzig, 1909-38, in 3 parts.

¹⁴ See Part 11, p.76 and his Preface to the 2nd edition, about his former view that the 'abbreviated letters' found at the beginning of certain *suwar* are the initials of the scribes or owners of the manuscripts.

¹⁵ See the various short introductions to the *surat* e.g. p.31, note 2; p.32, note 1; p.78, note 2; etc. in Pickthall, M. *op.cit.*

Muslim sources (again *itqan* dominates) and presents a calm discussion of the 'ruling tradition' *vis-à-vis* other reports about the collection of the Qur'an. Schwally, after presenting the material and his reflection on it, comes to conclusions very close to the Muslim classical views, namely that 'the shape of the Qur'an, as we have it now, was completed two to three years after the death of Muhammad, since the 'Uthmanic edition is only a copy of Hafsa's piece, the editorial work of which had been completed under Abu Bakr, or at latest under 'Umar. This editorial work however probably only concerned the compositions of the *suwar* and their arrangement. As far as the various pieces of revelation are concerned, we may be confident that their text has been generally transmitted exactly as it was found in the Prophet's legacy'.¹⁶

Volume three is mostly concerned with the written text of the Qur'an and the various readings. It is once more a sober presentation of information derived basically from Muslim sources. Bergstraesser has dealt mainly with the written form of the 'Uthmanic Qur'an, the variant readings, as contained in the *masahif* of Ibn Mas'ud and 'Ubay. He then introduces the historical development of the *qira'ah*.

Pretzl presents the various readings, emphasizing the famous 'seven readings', describes the Muslim literature on *qira'ah* and finally deals very briefly with the palaeography and decorative designs of old Qur'anic manuscripts. As in volume two, the main sources are classical Muslim authors, especially Suyuti, Mabani, Jazari and various writers on *qira'ah*. Until today, Noeldeke/Schwally is the most comprehensive - if not the sole - serious attempt by orientalists to deal with the Qur'an - at least in a descriptive manner. For this is what the later authors - not so much Noeldeke - had in view: to collect the available material on the subject and to present it. While some of the authors' comments and conclusions would not be welcomed by Muslims, the vast area that has been covered and the presentation based on the classical Muslim literature on the topic are of a merit that has to be acknowledged.¹⁷

Especially in the latter two volumes, there is surprisingly little that Muslims might find derogatory in style, and indeed the basic presentation is not unlike the classical Muslim literature on the subject.¹⁸

¹⁶ *GdQ*, 11, p.120.

¹⁷ Hence it is not surprising to find that Yusuf Ali, the well-known translator of the Qur'an into English, did not say more about this book (when he knew it, volume three was not even published) than simply: A German essay on the chronology of the Qur'an. Its criticisms and conclusions are from a non-Muslim point of view and to us not always acceptable, though it is practically the last word of European scholarship on the subject'. *The Holy Qur'an*, Lahore, 1934 (Introduction, p.xiv).

¹⁸ Blachere's *Introduction* (Blachere, R.: *Introduction au Coran*, Paris, 1947), to which Salih has often referred when refuting the orientalists' views, is not much more than a French summary of Noeldeke-Schwally. Blachere freely admits that he owes much to them (p.XXIX), but seems to be less detached than his German predecessors. He often makes quite unfitting suggestions and raises questions attempting to cast doubt upon matters accepted among Muslims, and also not refuted by Noeldeke-Schwally. In this he is closer to Noeldeke's original work than the revised version of *Geschichte des Qorans*. Also, his constant reference to the 'Uthmanic text as the '*vulgate*' indicates how difficult it must be for him to look beyond the horizon of his Western-Christian tradition.

Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'an.¹⁹ The author was one of the few orientalists, who concentrated at all seriously on the subject of Qur'anic studies, and perhaps until very recently the only English-speaking scholar in this field. As the title suggests, this book was intended 'as a contribution to the problem of the history of the Qur'an text' with the chief aim to finally 'write the history of the development of the *Qur'anic* text'.²⁰

Jeffery has combined in this volume the edition of an Arabic manuscript entitled *Kitab al-masahif* by Ibn Abi Dawud (d. 316/928) with a long list of so-called 'variant readings' of the Arabic text of the Qur'an. By 'variant readings' are meant the differences between the Qur'anic text as we have it today and the oldest sources about the written text of the Qur'an. Such differences had occurred in the personally written collections of the Qur'anic text, which some of the Companions of the Prophet and their followers had prepared for their personal use before the Caliph 'Uthman had several copies of the Qur'an prepared and sent to various Muslim regions.

Jeffery's suggestion is of course that the text of the Qur'an, as we have it today, is not the 'original' or 'correct' version, but has been tampered with, if not by many hands, then at least by 'Uthman and/or Abu Bakr, who were involved with the collection of the material of the Qur'an. Only such an assumption could justify the objective of the orientalists to collect as much information on the 'pre-'Uthmanic codices' (i.e. written collections of the Qur'an) in order to relate such information to the present text, and thus prepare a 'critical apparatus' as has been done, e.g., with the Bible. Nevertheless, this voluminous study appears to be a useful collection of information on such variant readings, from a total of 28 collections attributed to the Companions of the Prophet and their followers.

Jeffery's attempt to 'reconstruct' a critical text of the Qur'an has apparently not been successful, since it was never published.²¹

Secondly, and this to me is of much greater importance: all the variants - or probably most of them - listed in the classical works from which Jeffery has drawn his information, must be supplied with an *isnad*, showing how the information about the particular variant reading has been obtained and transmitted. Perhaps Jeffery might have thought it useless to study the *isnad* - since orientalists usually assume that they are fabricated anyway. But if this is so, from where then does the confidence arise that his collection can be of any use for a critical text of the Qur'an? However, in my view, the *isnad* needs to be scrutinized carefully in each and every case to see which of the reports on variant readings are indeed probable or improbable, and among the probable ones, which are sound and which are not. All this, it is true, can still be done, but Jeffery's collection is only of limited use for such a study.

The Collection of the Qur'an. John Burton's book, *The Collection of the*

¹⁹ Jeffery, Arthur: *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'an. The old codices*. Leiden, 1937.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p.vii.

²¹ *ibid.*, p.17.

*Qur'an*²² is the latest attempt by a Western orientalist to rewrite the history of the Qur'anic text. Burton attempts to cast doubt upon all the *ahadith* in connection with the history of the Qur'anic text. He simply adopts the 'method' of Goldziher and Schacht, who have argued that many, if not all, *ahadith* are the result of second and third century forgery.²³

In particular, Burton suggests that the legal scholars of the second/third century adopted some practices not based on the Qur'an. In order to support these they invented the theory of *al-nasikh wa al-mansukh*,²⁴ as well as the various reports about the collection of the Qur'anic text. In particular they attributed a number of variant readings to several Companions of the Prophet, supposedly strengthening their argument.²⁵

Their opponents, according to Burton, therefore invented the dominant version of the history of the collection of the Qur'an at the time of 'Uthman to strengthen their case.²⁶

All reports about the collection of the Qur'an are therefore contradictory and inventions.²⁷

At the end of his book, Burton maintains that the text of the Qur'an we now have in our hands is 'the text which has come down to us in the form in which it was organized and approved by the Prophet. . . What we have today in our hands is the *mushaf* of Muhammad'.²⁸

Burton's account, though fascinating in its conclusions, is weak in several instances: The Goldziher-Schacht perspective has already been refuted.²⁹ Hence to adopt it and to apply it to the history of the Qur'an cannot be convincing.

Burton's instances to prove that 'certain debated topics' among the legal scholars motivated the invention of reports and attribution of variant collections of the Qur'an text to a number of Companions, are in fact only two.³⁰ This is not sufficient proof for such a grave accusation.

The collections of the Companions³¹ which according to Burton were 'invented' together with their variant readings do *not* contain any such verses which could be used to support the legal views of some alleged parties. In fact, *none* of these

²² Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1977.

²³ Introduction, pp.5-6.

²⁴ Suggesting that such practices are based on verses of the revelation, the wording of which was abrogated but the legal ruling of which remained intact (*naskh al-tilawa duna al-hukm*), p.63.

²⁵ p.44.

²⁶ pp.196-7.

²⁷ p.225.

²⁸ pp.239-40.

²⁹ In particular by scholars who proved that *ahadith* had been written down in the first century. To propose that they were fabricated in the second/third century means to reject this evidence (see, for example; Sezgin, Fuad: *Geschichte der Arabischen Literatur*, Leiden, 1967, Volume 1; Hamidullah, Muhammad: *Sahifa Ibn Munabbih*, Paris, 1979).

³⁰ The so-called 'verse of stoning' (p.72ff) and the so-called 'verse of suckling' (p.86ff).

³¹ Such as 'Ubay, Ibn Mas'ud and Ka'b.

Companions has either of the two verses (stoning verse, suckling verse) differing from 'Uthman's text.³²

Burton developed a new theory, based partly on his predecessors among the orientalist, but differing from their presentation and conclusions.³³ He failed to substantiate some of the most important of his claims, such as e.g. that the 'collections' of the Companions were invented to support the legal usage concerning punishment of adultery or the practice of suckling, for none of these 'collections' by the Companions differ in these matters from the text of 'Uthman, which is the Qur'anic text we read today, and the text of the revelation Muhammad proclaimed.

³² See p.220 where Burton himself describes the actual differences between them and 'Uthman's text.

³³ A study of the book suggests also that his particular claim - to open new avenues because of access to several manuscripts not known to his predecessors cannot be accepted. Although he cites seven manuscripts in his bibliography, none of them apparently features prominently in his presentation or documentation. Also Burton himself does not indicate *where* these manuscripts shed new light upon the subject and they rather seem to express what other sources also contained.

CHAPTER 8

Reading and Studying the Qur'an

ETIQUETTE WITH THE QUR'AN

Cleanliness

The Holy Qur'an is the word of God addressed to us, and we should therefore treat it with due respect. One of the prime conditions for handling the Qur'an has been set in the book itself:

A book well guarded which none shall touch but those who are clean. [Q56:78-9].

This means that in order to *touch* the Qur'an one needs to be in a state of ritual purity (*taharah*) to be obtained through *wudhu'* or *ghusl*, as the case may be.¹

The Right *Niyah*

When taking up the Qur'an for study, recitation and reflection it must be done with the intention to seek God's pleasure. Although worldly gain may be found in the revelation from God, as may be derived from practices in religion and Islam, the true servant of God is concerned with the world to come and considers his actions here and now as preparation for the life to come.

In a *hadith* reported by 'Ubaida al-Maliki the Prophet Muhammad said:

O ye who believe in the Qur'an, do not make it a pillow, but correctly recite it day and night and popularize its recitation. Pronounce its words correctly and whatever is said in the Qur'an you should think over it to take guidance from it that you may become successful and never think of gaining worldly benefits through it but recite it just to secure God's pleasure.²

There are a number of points in this advice from the Prophet which we need to consider:

- Recite it day and night; this implies a *regularity* of Qur'anic recitation which should be a continuous preoccupation.
- Popularize it; this implies that one should firstly observe the instruction to recite regularly and secondly *invite* and *give encouragement to others* to do so, such as one's family members, relatives, friends, etc.
- Pronounce its words correctly; this implies that one needs to pay attention to *correct pronunciation* both of the various letters as well as words, length, pauses, etc.
- Think over it; this implies the need to *understand* what one recites.

¹ As to *reciting* from the Qur'an, (without touching it) there is indication from the *ahadith* that the Prophet recited with or without *wudu'*, but not in the state of impurity after sexual intercourse. Women also do not recite while menstruating.

² Hashimi, R.: *A Guide to Moral Rectitude*, Delhi, 1972, pp.114-5.

Although mere recitation of words is also of some benefit, the Prophet's instruction is unmistakably clear that one should reflect, seek guidance and hence act upon what one recites. This is indeed a very important point, especially in the present state of Muslims, where hardly anyone reflects upon the Qur'an and acts upon it.³

Of course the Prophet's emphasis on reflecting and acting is based upon God's instruction in the Holy Qur'an itself:

- (Here is) a book which we have sent down unto thee, full of blessings, that they may meditate on its signs, and that men of understanding may receive admonition. [Q38:29].
- Recite (and reflect, seek guidance from and act upon) for the sake of God alone.

Etiquette of Reading and Reciting

- Keep the Qur'an in a clean place.
- Seek only God's pleasure not any worldly gain.
- Concentrate fully and leave aside all other preoccupations.
- Be ritually clean, and sit on clean ground.
- Preferably sit facing the *qiblah*.
- Ibn Mas'ud read the Qur'an in the mosque while kneeling on both knees.⁴
- Observe humility, tranquility and respect.
- Begin with *a'udhu bi-llahi . . .* and *basmalah*.
- Read with a good voice.
- Ask God's blessing when reading a verse which contains a promise, and ask God's help when reading a verse which contains a threat.
- Repeat important verses many times.
- Say *sadaqa allahu al-azim'* at the end of the recitation, and close with a *du'a'* that God may accept it from you.

Also:

- Let no day pass without reading the Qur'an.
- Do not read in a manner that disturbs others.
- Sometimes read alone, sometimes in a group (your family too!).
- Reply, if someone gives *salam* while you read.
- Interrupt, when you hear the *adhan*.
- Observe *sajdat al-tilawah*.
- Memories as much as you can.

³ For today many Muslims do not understand the Arabic of the Qur'an, and even the average Arab of today has little access to the Qur'anic language. Hence the great need to encourage all Muslims, especially the younger generation, to attempt to learn the language of the Qur'an and to constantly refer to reliable translations of the Qur'an in one's mother tongue as long as one has not yet progressed in Qur'anic Arabic.

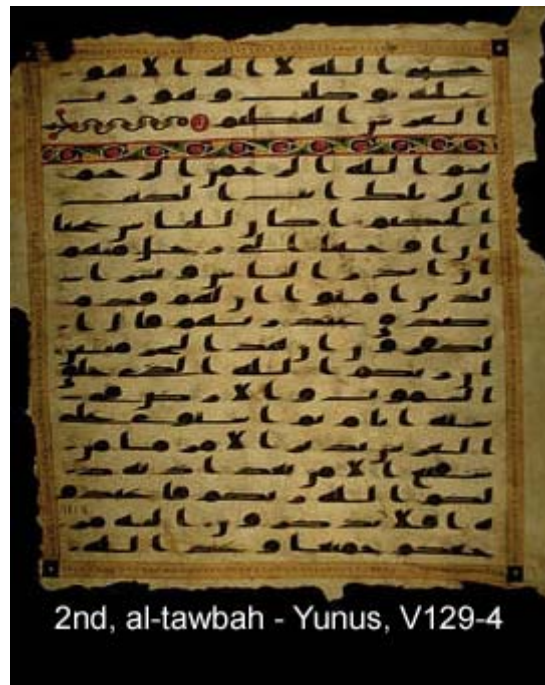
⁴ Abu Dawud, see Kamal, *op.cit.*, p.114.

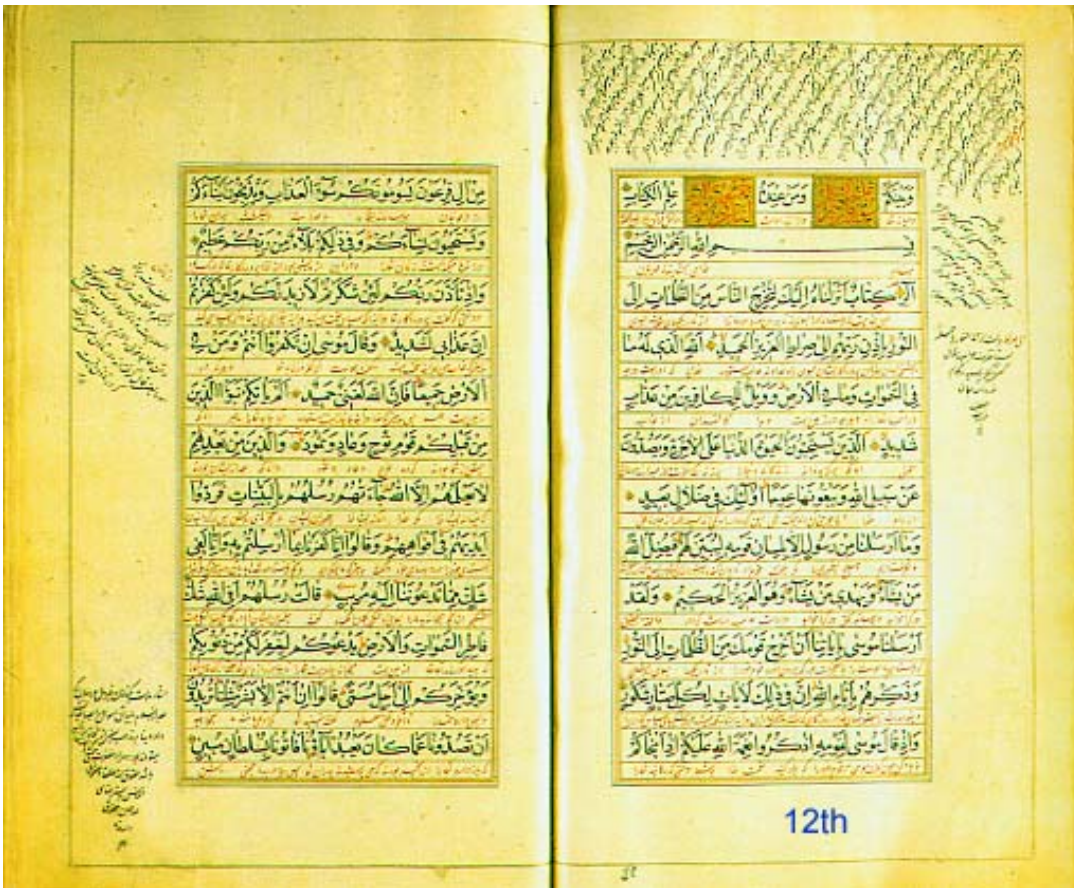
Appendix



Plate 1 *Jabal al-nur* (Mount of Light) near Mecca, with the cave of Hira', where the Prophet received the first revelation. [Q96:1-5].

Some manuscripts of the Qur'an





12th

15th (current, from Turkey)

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
 الَّذِينَ يَأْتُونَكَ بِاللَّيْلِ عَمِيمًا
 أَسْوَأَ الَّذِي أَسْوَا بَيْنَهُمْ وَأَشَدُّ
 الْعَنَادَةً لَكَ بِهِمْ أُولَئِكَ هُمُ
 الْعَذَابُونَ الْعَلِيمُونَ ﴿١٥٠﴾
 وَأَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ لَكُمْ اللَّيْلَ أَنْ تَسْكُنُوا
 وَالنَّهَارَ أَنْ تَعْبُدُوا فِي حَقِّ
 مَا بَدَأْتُمْ بِاللَّيْلِ وَالنَّهَارِ
 وَتَقُولُونَ عَفْوًا ﴿١٥١﴾
 وَأَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ لَكُمْ اللَّيْلَ وَالنَّهَارَ
 وَالشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ وَالسَّجَابِدَ
 وَمَا يُغْمِضُ أَبْصَارَ بَعْضِ
 الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٥٢﴾
 وَأَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ لَكُمْ اللَّيْلَ وَالنَّهَارَ
 وَالشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ وَالسَّجَابِدَ
 وَمَا يُغْمِضُ أَبْصَارَ بَعْضِ
 الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٥٣﴾
 وَأَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ لَكُمْ اللَّيْلَ وَالنَّهَارَ
 وَالشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ وَالسَّجَابِدَ
 وَمَا يُغْمِضُ أَبْصَارَ بَعْضِ
 الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٥٤﴾
 وَأَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ لَكُمْ اللَّيْلَ وَالنَّهَارَ
 وَالشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ وَالسَّجَابِدَ
 وَمَا يُغْمِضُ أَبْصَارَ بَعْضِ
 الْعَالَمِينَ ﴿١٥٥﴾

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