

## **CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: Variants in Manuscripts and Readings**

In the past, Muslims have frequently made the claim that today's Qur'an is exactly the same as when it was first written down. However, the Qur'an that Muslims hold in their hands today is not the same text as the earliest manuscripts of the Qur'an known to scholars. The *muṣḥaf*, or written codex of the Qur'an, went through dramatic changes even in its first century.

This chapter measures traditional Muslim claims against the manuscript evidence. For example, the “original” of the Qur'an is not known to exist. The earliest manuscripts of the Qur'an known to academic scholars today are themselves copies. Though Muslims have often made claims for the existence of Qur'ans going back to 'Uthmān, historians are not convinced by any of these manuscripts, “some of which show signs of being very poor forgeries.” The academic scholars best acquainted with the history of the Qur'an's text write that the development of the fully-pointed and vocalized text took around three hundred years. The material in this chapter is not written in order to offend Muslims but to put our scriptures on a level playing field by exploring academic research on each of our scriptures.

### 1. Arabic writing in the seventh century (see next page for details)

- In the seventh century, when Muslims believe the text of the Qur'an was established, the system of writing Arabic was still in its early stages of development and was not yet sufficiently developed to actually preserve all the sounds of Arabic in writing (*scriptio defectiva*). For example, the earliest manuscripts lack the diacritic dots that distinguish consonants of the same shape from one another.

### 2. Early fluidity in transmission

- It took three hundred years or more to fully develop the Arabic writing system. The diacritic dots, long and short vowels, and other marks for pronunciation that appear in modern printings of the Qur'an needed to be added. This means a change to the text, changes that not all who worked on it agreed with.

### 3. No 'Uthmānic manuscripts

- To date, no manuscripts of the Qur'an have been discovered that academic scholars are able to connect with Muslim traditions about the collection and edition of the Qur'an by the caliph 'Uthmān. Scholars date the earliest complete Qur'ans to the third or fourth Islamic centuries.

### 4. Variants in manuscripts

- This section discusses manuscript variants in the “consonantal skeleton” itself (*rasm* or *ductus*).

### 5. Hidden under the writing surface (= a palimpsest)

- No evidence of manuscripts of this kind (i.e. palimpsest) had been found until quite recently (*Codex San 'ā' I* discovered in 1972). The *San 'ā' I* palimpsest shows variants of a substantially different nature from those found in the rest of the Qur'anic manuscript tradition.

### 6. Variants in readings

- In Muslim tradition, the “readings” (different ways of reciting the Qur'an) are known as the *qirā'āt*. The earliest writings of Islam freely mention differences in readings (from simple pronunciation variants through different case endings or verbal forms, synonyms or near synonyms, to interpolations of whole phrases).

### 7. Signs of standardization

- Muslim sources from Islam's early centuries reported a number of efforts to standardize the text of the Qur'an and eliminate variants. These Muslim accounts tell of changes to the consonantal text of the Qur'an during the first century of Islam. A common theme is the involvement of political powers in enforcing a particular version—or set of readings—of the Qur'an from above.

### 8. Does the “original” of the Qur'an exist?

- The central accusation of the *Izhār al-ḥaqq* is that the original Torah and Gospel no longer exist. So does the original of the Qur'an exist? No, and no authoritative text-form of the Qur'an is known to exist.

### 9. Comparisons to New Testament manuscripts

- According to scholars, neither copies of the Qur'an connected with 'Uthmān nor the autograph copies of the New Testament writings exist. Muslim reports of official political editing and destruction of manuscripts (under 'Uthmān) means that the original of the Qur'an is more difficult to establish through the science of textual criticism. The high number of New Testament manuscripts, and therefore the many textual variants, actually make it easier for textual criticism to determine the original text.

## Arabic Writing in the Seventh Century

Scholars of paleography and orthography describe the Arabic script in the seventh century as being insufficiently developed to actually preserve all the sounds of Arabic in writing.

For example, the earliest manuscripts of the Qur’an known to scholars today generally lack the diacritic dots that distinguish **consonants** of the same shape from one another. In the middle of an Arabic word, the pointed shape that scholars call a “tooth” could be any one of five different consonants, depending on the dots placed above or below the pointed shape. Without a dot, the shape signifies nothing in particular.

- One dot above makes the shape an “n”;
- two dots above make it a “t”;
- three dots above make it a “th”;
- one dot below makes it a “b”;
- two dots below make it a “y”.

ي	ث	ت	ب	ن	و
yaa	thaa	taa	baa	nuun	

There are several other sets of consonants that are distinguished by dots.

- The shape for the strong “h” has no dots;
- put a dot above it and the shape becomes a “kh”;
- put a dot below it and the shape becomes a “j”.

خ	ح	ج
kha	haa	jiim

Similarly, a dot above changes:

- a “d” shape into a “dh”;
- an “r” into a “z”;
- a “ṣ” into a “ḍ”;
- a “ṭ” into a “ẓ”;
- a “‘ayn” into a “ghayn”.

ذ	د
thaal	daal

ز	ر
zaay	raa

ض	ص
daad	saad

ظ	ط
thaa	taa

غ	ع
ghayn	ayn

The shape for “s”, when it has three dots above, becomes a “sh”.

ش	س
shiin	siin

The letters “f” and “q” share the same shape in most positions, except that “f” has one dot above and “q” has two.

ق	ف
qaaf	faa

The ambiguity of the seventh century Arabic script carries implications for the history of the text of the Qur’an, according to Professor François Déroche. *“The various deficiencies noted in the hijāzī-style manuscripts mean that it was not, in fact, possible to adequately preserve the integrity of the Qur’ān through writing as the caliph ‘Uthmān intended when, according to the tradition, he decided to document the revelation.”*