The Qur'ān before the book
History and concepts of Qur'ānic variants (*qirā'āt*)

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Abstract

Purpose: This paper addresses methodological issues related to the concept of 'Qur'ānic variants and readings' (*qirā'a* pl. *qirā'āt* and *ḥarf* pl. *aḥruf*, respectively). I investigate the way they have been depicted in early Islamic narratives, developed in the field of medieval Islamic Qur'ānic sciences (*ʿulūm al-Qur'ān*), and discussed in Western Qur'ānic studies scholarship in the last two decades.

Methodology: The paper proceeds chronologically by discussing variants in the three aforementioned fields: early narratives, classical Islamic Qur'ānic sciences (*ʿulūm al-Qur'ān*), and modern Western scholarship.

Findings: The paper shows the necessity of generating a new approach to studying the history of the Qur'ān and its main concepts. The epistemological tools used in Western Qur'ānic studies on the history of the text of the Qur'ān need to be renewed.

Originality: The paper addresses epistemological issues related to Western Qur'ānic studies. It seeks to assess the progress in the field and offers a new perspective on the study of specific topics: Qur'ānic variants and readings.

Keywords: Variants, Qur'ān; Early Islam; Collections of the Qur'ān; Transmission of the Qur'ān; Qur'ānic sciences

القرآن قبل المصحف

القراءات القرآنية: التاريخ والمفاهيم

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ملخص البحث

أهداف البحث: يتناول هذا البحث مسائل منهجية تتعلق بمفهوم «القراءات القرآنية»، وندرس فيه طريقة الحديث عن القراءات في النصوص الإسلامية الأولى، وفي مجال علوم القرآن، وأيضا الطريقة التي نظرت بها الدراسات القرآنية الغربية إلى القراءات في العقدين الأخيرين.

منهج الدراسة: يدرس البحث التطور التاريخي لمفهوم القراءات القرآنية في المجالات الثلاثة المذكورة آنفا: النصوص الإسلامية الأولى ودراسات علوم القرآن الإسلامية القديمة والدراسات القرآنية الغربية الحديثة والمعاصرة.

النتائج: يبين البحث ضرورة تقديم مقاربة جديدة لتاريخ القرآن والمفاهيم الرئيسية في هذا التاريخ، موضحًا أنه قد حان الوقت لكي تجدد الدراسات القرآنية الغربية أدواتها الإبستيمولوجية في دراستها تاريخ النص القرآني.

أصالة البحث: يتناول البحث مسائل إبستيمولوجية متعلقة بالدراسات القرآنية الغربية، في محاولة لتقييم وجوه التقدم الحاصلة في هذا المجال وطرح منظور جديد لتناول موضوع بعينه؛ ألا وهو: القراءات القرآنية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: قراءات، قرآن، الإسلام الأول، جمع القرآن، رواية القرآن، علوم القرآن

Introduction

Over the last two decades, Islamic studies have dedicated a significant amount of study to the Qur'ān and hadith, the foundational texts of Islam as interpreted by medieval Muslim scholars.[1] Western scholars have focused on the evolution of the two sources from a double perspective: the historicity of the texts and their canonization.[2] Medieval scholars discussed both Qur'ān and hadith variations and attached great importance to them. Qur'ānic sciences (*ʿulūm al-qurʾān*) elaborate the concept of Qur'ānic variants and readings (*qirāʾa* pl. *qirāʾāt* and *ḥarf* pl. *aḥruf*, respectively),[3] while hadith sciences talk about '*wajh* pl. *wujūh* (literary: face)[4] and *ṭarīq* pl. *ṭuruq* (literary: paths/strands).[5] The term *wajh* designates the different versions of a single hadith narrative; a version can be considered distinct due to a divergence in the chain of transmission or in the content of the hadith. These differences are ultimately due to there being multiple channels of transmission of one single text.[6]

In these discussions, medieval Muslim scholars describe specific vocabulary, letters, vocalizations and, sometimes, whole sentences in both texts as entailing differing versions but share the perspective of transmitting the different various versions of the source. This suggests a basic common view of preserving divergent transmissions of the Qur'ān and hadith.[7]

In this paper, we use the expression 'Qur'ānic variants and readings' to refer to Islamic sources, and we use the word 'variation' when we refer to textual features that are not mentioned in those Islamic sources.

To reiterate, underlying medieval Muslim views of textual variation in Qur'ān and hadith material is a common thread; both types of material have been influenced by the dynamics of oral and written transmission, a point medieval Muslim scholars incorporated into their critical assessments of such

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(1) For major contributions in hadith studies, see the definitive work by Shah, Mustafa, (ed.), *The Hadith: Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies,* London, Routledge, 2009. For an overview of Qur'ānic studies scholarship, see Shah, Mustafa and Abdel-Haleem, Muhammad, (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies,* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2020.

(2) On the canonization of hadith, see, Jonathan Brown, *The Canonization of al-Bukhârî and Muslim. The Formation and Function of the Sunnî Hadîth Canon,* Leiden, Boston, Brill, 2007. For the canonization of the Qur'ān, see Aziz al-Azmeh, 'Canon and canonization of the Qur'ān' *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Three, Brill.

(3) On the various meanings of the word *ḥarf,* see Muslim b. al-Ḥajjāj (d. 875), *al-Jāmiʿ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*, vol. I, pp. 560–66; H. Fleisch, 'Ḥarf', *EI²* (Brill Online). About its meaning in the history of the collection of the Qur'ān, see Viviane Comerro, *Les traditions sur la constitution du* muṣḥaf *de ʿUthmān* (Beirut, 2012), pp. 107–109; Shady Hekmat Nasser, *The Transmission of the variant readings of the Qur'ān. The problem of tawātur and the emergence of Shawādhdh*, Brill, Boston-Leiden, 2013, pp. 5–33; Andrew Rippin, Book review of Shady Hekmat Nasser, *The The Transmission of the variant readings of the Qur'ān. The problem of tawātur and the emergence of Shawādhdh*, Brill, Boston-Leiden, 2013. In, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, Vol. 25, 2014-Issue 3, pp. 394-397.

(4) Burhān al-Dīn al-Biqāʿī, *al-Nukat al-Wafiyya bimā fī Sharḥ al-Alfiyya lil-ʿIrāqī fī ʿIlm Muṣṭalaḥ al-Ḥadīth*, ed., Usāma ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm, *Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya*, Beyouth, 1971, p. 104; Suheil Laher, "Between Dogmatism and Speculation: A Critical Assessment of Qirā'āt Studies", *Journal of College of Sharia and Islamic Studies*, Volume 38, Issue 1, 2020, pp. 176-190, p. 183.

(5) Yaḥya b. Sharaf al-Nawawī, *al-Minhāǧ. Šarḥ ṣaḥīḥ Muslim Ibn Ḥaǧǧāǧ*, Dār Iḥyā' al-turāṯ al-ʿarabī, Beyrouth, 1972, p. vol. 6, p. 102.

(6) Al-Biqāʿī, *al-Nukat al-Wafiyya*, p. 104.

(7) When discussing Qur'ānic variants without adopting the specific terminology used in Islamic sources discourse, Michael Cook, uses the word "variation"; see Michael Cook, *The Koran. A very short introduction*, Oxford, 2000, p. 73. However, his usage of the word "variation" specifically refers to details on the differences between the variants. The interpretation of scriptures as variants is not unique to the Islamic tradition. On this last point, see David M. Carr, *Writing on the tablets of the heart: Origins of scripture and literature*, Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 59. One should note that the interpretation of textual fragments as variants is common in multiple Arabic literary genres, including *belles lettres* (*adab*) literature. On this last point, see Nasser, *The Transmission,* pp. 177-227.

works. The present contribution reflects on the deployment of the variations in the history of the Qurʾān and in the related sciences. A specific objective of this paper is to shed light on what I find to be a blind spot in the field—specifically, the uncritical adoption of classical Islamic views in the Western Qurʾānic studies scholarship of the last two decades when dealing with the subject of Qurʾānic variants.

I- Qurʾānic variants in Islamic sources

Definition of Qurʾānic variants and readings

As depicted in Islamic sources, the history of Qurʾānic variants overlaps with the history of the Qurʾān. The term *Qirāʾa* (pl. *qirāʾāt*) refers to the different versions of the Qurʾān in which words, entire passages, and the diacritization of the *rasm* (a consonantal form of the text) were transmitted orally and in writing.[1] The number of canonical Qurʾānic variants ranges from seven to ten, and these variants are said to have circulated orally during the first three centuries of Islam as well as in the form of epistles and various forms of collections.[2] The Qurʾānic variants are supposed to echo the recitations of specific readers and reciters of the Qurʾān who became eponymically associated with their respective readings; thus, for example, scholars can refer to "the reading of Ibn Masʿūd" or "the reading of ʿUbayy Ibn Kaʿb."[3] The Qurʾānic readings are also identified according to the geographical areas in which each reading circulated as attested by the concept of regional codices (*maṣāḥif al-amṣār*).[4] Some Companions of the Prophet are said to have had in their possession their own copies of the Qurʾān with their own Qurʾānic variants. However, as will be discussed later in this paper, the Islamic narratives do not specify the form, medium (scroll, leaves, books, etc.), or precise content of these copies, and there is no material evidence that allows studying them first hand.[5]

The account of the Companions' copies presupposes the idea that the revelation was recorded as it progressed. According to the prophetic tradition, the Qurʾānic variants and readings were announced by the Prophet himself; the very appellation of *qirāʾāt* and *aḥruf* refers to the prophetic hadith: "This *Qurʾān* has been revealed in seven readings/dialects. Read what is easy [of the readings]".[6]

There are, however, traditions that refer to a singular reading and discuss the necessity of having multiple variants in this context. Nawawī's commentary on this hadith is based on a more complete version of the same text in which the Prophet describes his negotiations about the divine order to recite the Qurʾānic revelation in one reading.[7] The Prophet appears to request that his Lord reveals the Qurʾān in more ways than only one strict reading; his request seems intended to make the reading

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(1) On the discussion among medieval scholars about the history and meaning of Qurʾānic variants, see al-Ṣuyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī ʿulūm al-qurʾān*, éd. Muḥammad Abū l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, *Maktabat Dār al-Turāṯ*, Cairo, s.d., vol. 1, p. 139; Comerro, *Les traditions*, pp. 119–35; Nasser, *Transmission*, pp. 35–65. On the notion of *rasm*, see Frederick Leemhuis, 'Codices of the Qurʾan', *EQ* (Brill Online); Hassan Chahdi, *Le muṣḥaf dans les débuts de l'islam*. Recherches sur sa constitution et étude comparative de manuscrits coraniques anciens et de traités de *qirāʾāt*, *rasm* et *fawāṣil*, Phd. Thesis, École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris, 2016; Marijn Van Putten, "Inferring the Phonetics of Quranic Arabic from the Quranic Consonantal text" in *International Journal of Arabic Linguistics*, vol. 5, issue 1, 2019, pp. 1-19.

(2) Leemhuis, 'Codices'; Nasser, *Transmission*, pp. 36–47.

(3) Cook, *The Koran*, p. 53.

(4) Leemhuis, 'Codices'. On the historicity of the codices, see Michael Cook, 'The Stemma of the Regional Codices of the Koran', in George K. Livadas, ed., *Graeco-Arabica* 9–10: *Festschrift in honour of V. Christides* (Athens, 2004), pp. 89–104.

(5) For the studies that claim to prove the existence of these copies, see note 45.

(6) *Innᵃ hāḏā al-Qurʾānᵃ unzilᵃ ʿalā sabʿaᵗⁱ aḥrufⁿ fa-ʿqraʾū mā tayassarᵃ minhᵘ"* al-Nawawī, *al-Minhāǧ,* vol. 6, p. 99 ; About the seven readings, see Claude Gilliot, « Les sept "lectures": corps social et écriture révélée » in *Studia Isamica* 61 (1985), p. 5-25, et 63 (1986), p. 49-62; Comerro, *Les Traditions*, pp. 120-136; Nasser, *The Transmission*, pp. 5-33;

(7) Al-Nawawī, *al-Minhāǧ*, vol. 6, p. 102.

of the Qur'ān easy for his community.[1] The complete hadith narrates: "He [God] sent me [the order] to read the Qur'ān following one reading/dialect. Then I answered: please make it easy for my community".[2]

Following this interpretation of the seven *aḥruf* hadith, the multiple readings are strictly related to the revelation (*tanzīl*). Their multiplicity is represented as given by God out of His will to facilitate the reading of the Qur'ān among the Muslim community.[3] However, one should note that the seven *aḥruf* hadith alludes to the initial singular revealed reading (*ʿalā ḥarf*).[4] Within the context of this hadith, the very existence of seven readings of the Qur'ān is legitimized. However, the same hadith hints at the divine order to keep the readings of the Qur'ān singular and challenges the notion of multiple readings by presenting them as a way to accommodate and ease (*tahwīn*) the task of reading the Qur'ān, which is an obligation for the Prophet's community.

The variants before the book

The Sunnī representation of the Qur'ānic variants and readings often refers to the precanonical form of the Qur'ān, which is to say, to its transmission in fragments.[5] As for the questions of where, when and how the Qur'ānic variants were recorded, the sources state that before being collected, the Qur'ān (with its variants) was recorded in the minds and the "hearts of men" and was written on various media such as skins, tablets, and parchment during the early years of Qur'ānic revelation.[6]

The Islamic narratives and their interpretations by Muslim scholars describe the transmission of the Qur'ān and other religious material with some ambiguity.[7] The authors of early Islamic sources are ambiguous in employing terms such as '*ṣaḥīfa* pl. *ṣuḥuf*' (leaves) and '*muṣḥaf*' (codex) without precisely indicating the length or the content of these media.[8]

The following is an example of a narrative about the *ṣaḥīfa* attributed to ʿAli Ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 661CE), who was asked by a group of followers (*tābiʿūn*), "Did the Prophet leave something to you that he did not leave to the others?" ʿAli answered that the Prophet had not left anything except an understanding of the Qur'ān given by God and the content of this *ṣaḥīfa*. When ʿAli was asked about the content of the *ṣaḥīfa*, he replied (or showed the content of) the *ṣaḥīfa*, which included details on the blood price[9] and the retaliation and indicated that a Muslim should not be executed for a crime against a non-Muslim[10] and that Medina is a sacred (*ḥaram*) place, precisely located in between the

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(1) Al-Nawawī, *op. cit.*

(2) *"arsalᵃ ilayyᵃ an iqraʾ al-Qurʾānᵃ ʿalā ḥarfⁿ fa-radadtᵘ ilayhⁱ an hawwin ʿalā ummatⁱ"* al-Nawawī, *op. cit.*

(3) On the so-called 'hadith of the seven *aḥruf*', 'This Qur'ān has been revealed in seven *aḥruf*', see Comerro, *Les traditions*, pp. 107–109; Nasser, *Transmission*, pp. 5–33. On the agreement among the Muslim scholars that *qirāʾa* and *ḥarf* do not refer to the same phenomenon, see Nasser, *Transmission*, p. 15, Chahdi, *Le muṣḥaf*, pp. 57-70.

(4) Contrary to Nasser's view, the representation of the Qur'ān as being revealed in one reading is not specific to the Shīʿī view, as is discussed here; it is rather shared between Shīʿī and Sunnī representations of the Qur'ānic variants. See Nasser, *The transmission*, p. 33.

(5) About the fragmentariness of early material including the Qur'ān and the methodological settings it implies, see Asma Hilali and Stephen R. Burge, *The Making of religious texts in Islam. The fragment and the whole*, Berlin, 2019, pp. 1-9.

(6) The narratives relating the dissemination of religious material, including the Qur'ān in various supports are present in almost all the chapters of knowledge (*Kitāb al ʿilm*) in the canonical hadith collections.

(7) Al-Azmeh, 'Canon'

(8) John Burton 'Muṣḥaf' *EI₂* (Brill Online); al-Azmeh, 'Canon'.

(9) Rudolph Peters, 'ʿĀqila' EI₃ (Brill online).

(10) Joseph Shacht, 'ḳiṣāṣ', *Encyclopédie de l'Islam* (Brill Online)

mountains of Thabīr and Thawr.[1]

The content of the *ṣaḥīfa* is summarized here thematically and includes mainly juridical topics. There is no hint as to the genre and source that address these topics. Does the *ṣaḥīfa* contain passages from the Qur'ān? *Ḥadīth* narratives? A list of general religious-juridical precepts? One might infer that the content of the *ṣaḥīfa*, presented alongside an understanding (*fahm*) of the Qur'ān includes material that covers overlapping topics and is referred to as a source of authority. This example shows that although a *ṣaḥīfa* in the possession of a Companion might contain Qur'ānic variants, the same *ṣaḥīfa* might contain more than Qur'ānic material; it might include other religious material.

Collections of variants

According to the classical tradition, bringing together the disparate leaves of the Qur'ān into a single book took place gradually following a political process involving the initiatives of the caliphs Abū Bakr (r. 632-34CE), 'Umar (r. 634-44CE), and ' Uthmān (r. 644-56CE) and the governor of Medina and future caliph Marwān b. al-Ḥakam (r. 684-685CE).[2] Each of these political and religious leaders participated in collecting the Qur'ān and excluding the versions that were not part of the official book, i.e., the *muṣḥaf;* in contrast, they were considered as part of the Qur'ānic variants and readings. The Qur'ānic variants and readings were collected and canonized; the noncanonized fragments were considered rare (*Shadhdh*) and compiled as such in *shawādh qira'āt* works.[3] Among the canonized Qur'ānic variants, we find so-called companion codices such as those of 'Abdullāh Ibn Mas'ûd (d. 650), 'Ubayy Ibn Ka'b (d. 649/651), 'Alī Ibn Abī Tālib (d. 661).[4]

The canonization of the variants and readings took place under Ibn Mujāhid (d. 936CE),[5] followed by other authors, such as al-Jazarī (d. 1429CE)[6] and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505CE).[7] The hadith of the seven readings has major importance in justifying the canonical status of the Qur'ānic variants.[8] Moreover, criteria related to the transmission of the Qur'ānic readings were also taken into consideration in the canonization process.[9] In this respect, some Qur'ānic variants were considered sound (*ṣaḥīḥ*) and used by scholars (*ma'mūl bihā*); others were considered rare (*shādhdh*) and obsolete (*matrūk*).[10] Here, again, Muslim scholars applied the same criteria to the Qur'ānic variants that they had to the prophetic hadith: the first criterion of soundness is the validity of the chain of transmission of a given reading. The acceptability of the variants decreases according to the decreasing soundness of the chain of transmission.[11]

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(1) *"hal 'indakum šay'ᵘⁿ 'ahadahᵘ ilaykum rasūlᵘ Allāhⁱ ṣallā Allāhᵘ 'alayhⁱ wa sallamᵃ lam ya'hidhᵘ ilā al-nāsⁱ? Fa-qālᵃ {'Ali} lā wallaḏī falaqᵃ al-habbatᵃ wa bara'ᵃ al-nasmᵃ illā fahmᵃⁿ yu'tīhⁱ Allāh 'abdᵃⁿ fī al-Qur'ānⁱ wa mā fī hāḏihⁱ al-ṣaḥīfatⁱ. Qultᵘ: wa mā fī hāḏihⁱ al-ṣaḥīfatⁱ? Fa 'iḏā fīhā al-'aqlᵘ wa fikākᵘ al-asīrᵘ wa an lā yuqtalᵃ muslimᵘⁿ bi kāfirⁱⁿ wa annᵃ al-Madīna ḥaramᵘⁿ mā baynᵃ Thabīr ilā Thawr."* Ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa al-nihāya*, vol. 7, p. 298. Thabīr, Thawr and Ḥirā' are the most prominent mountains in Mecca that played important role in the pre-Islamic pilgrimage; see Eds. 'Thabīr' EI2 (Brill online).

(2) J. Burton '*Muṣḥaf*' *EI2* (Brill Online).

(3) Nasser, Transmission, pp. 117-163.

(4) About the companion codices, see p. 9 of this paper.

(5) James Robson, '*Ibn Mujāhid*', EI2 (Brill Online), Nasser, *Transmission*, pp. 35–76.

(6) Shady H. Nasser, 'al-Jazari', EI3 (Brill online)

(7) Eric Geoffroy, '*al-Suyūṭī*' *Encyclopédie de l'islam, 2d edition (Brill online)* ; *Comerro, Les Traditions*, p. 137ff

(8) Nasser, *Transmission*, pp. 5-33.

(9) In his study of the variants, Shady H. Nasser analysis the methods of the selection of the Qur'ānic variants and underlines some of the incoherencies of the same criteria; see Nasser, *The transmission*, p. 163ff

(10) Muhammad Ibn Ali al-Qayjāṭī (d. 811 H), *Masā'il fī al-Qirā'āt*, (scientific editor: Ben Younes al-Zākī) pp. 254-255.

(11) Al-Qayjāṭī, p. 254. About the discussion of the criteria used by Ibn Mujāhid in his selection of the Qur'ānic variants, see Nasser, *The transmission*, pp. 52-53.

The Twelver Shīʿī perspective

The above historical summary is largely based on Sunnī accounts. In fact, Sunnīs and Shīʿīs hold different perspectives on the meaning of the Qurʾānic variants.[1] The Shīʿī scholar Muḥammad al-Sayyārī, who lived in the ninth century, collected Qurʾānic variants from the Shīʿī point of view[2]; his book has a double title: *Kitāb al-qirāʾāt* (The Book of Readings) and *Kitāb al-Tanzīl wa al-taḥrīf* (The Book of Revelation and Falsification).[3] These two titles convey different meanings for the word 'reading': the common Sunnī meaning defined above, i.e., different consonantal orthography for particular words in the Qurʾān, and the Shīʿī meaning that relates the Qurʾānic variants and readings to the modifications that are claimed to have occurred in the text of the Qurʾān to favor Sunnī Islam at the expense of Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 661) and his allies (*shīʿa ʿAli*)[4] (this last word being the literal meaning of the word Shīʿa). The second title of al-Sayyārī's book, The Book of Revelation and Falsification, is chronologically organized according to the events that led to the falsification. We note here a crucial difference within the prophetic tradition of the seven readings cited above. The prophetic hadith mentions the multiplicity of the Qurʾānic variants and readings as inherent to and simultaneous with the revelation, while in the Shīʿī perspective, the multiplicity in readings followed the original revelation and was a result of unfortunate historical circumstances.

In summary, like the Qurʾān, the Qurʾānic variants and readings were first transmitted in fragments, a period that I would call "the Qurʾān before the book". Next, these fragments of variants were circulated in separate collections during a period that coincided with the beginning of the revelation and ran until the collection of the Qurʾān by ʿUthmān (632-660), ending before their canonization by Ibn Mujāhid (d. 936). Finally, the variants were assembled in canonical collections by Ibn Mujāhid. This was followed by the elaboration of the hermeneutical framework of Qurʾānic sciences; at this stage, both the concept and the corpus of *qirāʾāt* (variants) were fully realized by Jalāl al-Dīn Ṣuyūṭī (d. 1505).[5]

II- Qurʾānic studies scholarship and Qurʾānic variants

Manuscripts studies and the search for variants

In most studies of Qurʾānic manuscripts, the Qurʾānic variants are assumed to be those recorded in canonical collections such as that of Ibn Mujāhid (d. 936). Scholars such as Yassin Dutton, Alba Fedeli, Intisar Rabb, Keith Small, Alain Georges, François Déroche, and those writing on the Ṣanʿāʾ palimpsest have traced their findings and observations on early Qurʾānic manuscripts and manuscript fragments to the canonical collections of Qurʾānic variants such as the *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif* of Ibn Abī Dāwud (d. 929).[6] These studies on early Qurʾānic manuscripts connect the manuscript

(1) Etan Kohlberg and Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, (eds), *Revelation and Falsification: The Kitāb al-qirāʾāt of Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Sayyārī* (Leiden and Boston, 2009); Shady H. Nasser dedicates a short chapter to this important perspective in the history of the Qurʾānic variants and notes that the Shīʿī view is not as 'sophisticated' as the Sunnī view of the same topic; see Nasser, *The transmission*, p. 31ff.

(2) Kohlberg and Amir-Moezzi, (eds), *Revelation and falsification.*

(3) Kohlberg and Amir-Moezzi, (eds), *op. cit.*

(4) Wilfred Madelung 'Shīʿa' *Encyclopédie de l'Islam, 2d edition* (Brill online)

(5) Comerro, *Les Traditions*, pp. 137.

(6) Yassin, 'Some Notes on the British Library's "Oldest Qurʾan Manuscript" (Or. 2165)', *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies* 6, no. 1 (2004); Alba Fedeli, 'Relevance of the Oldest Qurʾanic Manuscripts for the Readings Mentioned by Commentaries. A Note on Sura "Ṭā-Hā"', *Manuscripta Orientalia* 15, no. 1 (2009), pp. 3–10; Fedeli, "Digital Humanities and Qurʾānic Manuscript Studies: New Perspectives and Challenges for Collaborative Spaces and Plural Views" in, *Journal of College of Sharia and Islamic Studies* (Vol. 38, Issue 1), pp. 147-159.

Intisar A. Rabb, 'Non-Canonical Readings of the Qurʾan: Recognition and Authenticity (The Ḥimṣī Reading)', *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies* 8, no. 2 (2006), pp. 84–127; Keith E. Small, *Textual Criticism and Qurʾān Manuscripts* (Lanham, MD, =

material with narratives about the Qur'ānic variants; in so doing, they confirm Islamic narratives and harmonize manuscript evidence with the classical tradition. Some other scholars identified a number of passages in Qur'ānic fragments as having been in the 'lost' companion codices, such as the Ibn Masʿūd's codex.[1] They thus helped Qur'ānic manuscript scholarship conform, at least partially, with traditional accounts of the precanonical period of the Qur'ān during which the Qur'ānic variants were supposed to have circulated. The findings of these studies are crucial in reconstructing a large part of the history of Qur'ānic text. However, a methodological problem with this approach is that some evidence in the actual manuscripts does not always correspond to that in published collections of variants. For example, evidence in the lower text of the Ṣanʿā' palimpsest defies scholarship that limits interpretation of the canonical Qur'ānic variants scope. As I have described in previous work, the textual features in the lower text of the Ṣanʿā' palimpsest fit neither the canonical variants nor the *shādhdh* variants; they also do not correspond to variants in the Shīʿī sources.[2] The evidence of the Ṣanʿā' palimpsest invites scholarship to reconsider the analytic tools used to examine the history of the Qur'ān, as I demonstrate in the third section of this paper.[3]

The variant as a 'blind spot'

As I explain above, most of the approaches of the Qur'ānic variants and readings exclude the possibility that old Qur'ānic manuscript evidence might yield results that do not conform with traditional accounts of the history of the Qur'ān. Editions of old manuscripts as well as analyses of various textual features within the same category of sources interpret the data they find in such a way that they conform with the materials collected and canonized by medieval Muslim scholars such as Ibn Abū Dawūd and Ibn Mujāhid. I would suggest that this limited perspective has made the Qur'ānic variants a kind of 'blind spot' in Qur'ānic studies scholarship.[4]

I would provisionally offer a different starting point as a way to approach both old Qur'ānic manuscript evidence and the canonical collections of Qur'ānic variants and readings. The classical collections of variants should be viewed as the end result of multiple stages of canonization that entailed multiple actors and processes.[5] These include readers, scholars and transmitters.[6] It would be ahistorical to assume that the canonized lists of Qur'ānic variants conform with the content of the original codices; undoubtedly, much was omitted. Nevertheless, careful examination of data within the sources (such as interlinear comments, corrections, errors, and marginalia) suggests the extent

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=   2011); Gerd-R. Puin, 'Observations on Early Qur'an Manuscripts in Ṣanʿā'', in Stefan Wild, ed., *The Qur'an as Text* (Leiden, 1996), pp. 107–111; Behnam Sadeghi and Mohsen Goudarzi, 'Ṣanʿā' 1 and the Origins of the Qur'ān', *Der Islam* 87 (2012), pp. 1–129.

(1) See, for example, Behnam Sadeghi and Mohsen Goudarzi, 'Ṣanʿā' 1'; Mathieu Tillier, « Le Coran d'Asmā' », *Les carnets de l'Ifpo*, mis en ligne le 3 juillet 2011. URL : http://ifpo.hypotheses.org/2296 ; Morteza Karimi-Nia, "A New Document in the Early History of the Qur'ān: Codex Mashhad, an ʿUthmānic Text of the Qur'ān in Ibn Masʿūd's Arrangement of Sūras", *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts*, (10) 2019, pp. 292-326.

(2) Asma Hilali, "Was the Ṣanʿā' Qur'ān Palimpsest a Work in Progress?", in David Hollenberg, Christian Rauch, Sabine Schmidke, eds, *The Yemeni Manuscript Tradition* (Leiden, 2014), pp. 12–27; eadem, *The Ṣanʿā' palimpsest. The transmission of the Qur'an in the seventh century* A.H., Oxford university Press.

(3) For the noncanonical variations in the lower text of the Ṣanʿā' palimpsest, see Hilali, *The Ṣanʿā' palimpsest*, pp. 46-61.

(4) Hilali, *The Ṣanʿā' palimpsest*, pp. 21-23.

(5) Aziz al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity. Allah and His People*, Cambridge university Press, Cambridge, 2014, pp. 474-477.

(6) This remark includes the Twelver Shīʿī Qur'ānic variants or falsifications and could be applied to al-Sayyārī's *Kitāb al-qirā'āt*; see note 39.

of these processes.[1]

If we return to the comparison made at the beginning of this paper between hadith and Qur'ānic collections, the variations in hadith narratives have been preserved in canonical collections as well as in collections of forged hadith. However, since the 20th century, modern hadith studies have gone beyond the epistemological framework of classical hadith sciences and established a modern hadith criticism[2]; a similar perspective is needed in modern Qur'ānic studies and Qur'ānic manuscript studies.

This critique addressing Qur'ānic studies scholarship does not cast doubt on the historicity of the Qur'ānic variants, as they were collected by Ibn Mujāhid and other scholars, nor does it cast doubt on the historicity of the companion codices. Rather, it shows the discrepancy between different historical periods and different corpora. Rather than fitting manuscript evidence into the classical genre of Qur'ānic variants, I would suggest a new approach. The Qur'ānic variants enshrined in the classical collections should be reimagined as reflections of what were once codices or portions of codices that, to their owners, readers, and students, represented the single version of the Qur'ān. [3]

III- Critique of variant *vs.* canon approach

The history of the formation of the Qur'ān often limits the historical frame to the 'Uthmānic edition of the *muṣḥaf*. I would suggest that the collection of the Qur'ān followed three phases:

(1) Before the book. The fragments of the text were transmitted orally and written down on various media, such as leaves.

(2) The book. The disparate fragments were compiled into one book facilitated by the real or symbolic destruction of the other versions and by the dissemination of the canonized version.

(3) After the book. The "refragmentation" of the text by means of the literature of the Qur'ānic variants, which established lists of omissions and additions to the canonical text.

The first phase, "before the book," started with the beginning of the revelation and continued until the death of the Prophet in 632 CE. In this period, the Qur'ān was collected in fragments. The writing, transmission, and collection of fragments continued after the emergence of the book, as witnessed by the many hadith describing disparate sheets (*ṣaḥīfa* pl. *ṣuḥuf*) of the Qur'ān held by some of the Companions of the Prophet.[4]

The witnesses of the second phase of the collection of the U<u>t</u>hmānic codex and its canonization refer to the ambiguous concept of *jamʿ* (collection).[5] While scholars have tended to define *jamʿ* as the initial collection of the text, it actually encompasses a broader scope. The notion of *jamʿ* had three meanings: collection, memorization, and canonization.[6] The first sense entailed collecting the leaves

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(1) Asma Hilali, *The Ṣanʿā' palimpsest*, pp. 67-70 eadem, 'Writing the Qur'ān between the lines. Marginal and interlinear notes in selected Qur'ān fragments from MIA, Qatar.' in, Bradford A. Anderson, ed., *From Scrolls to Scrolling: Sacred Texts, Materiality, and Dynamic Media Cultures*, Berlin: de Gruyter, 2020, pp. 51- 62.

(2) Shah, Mustafa, (ed.), *The Hadith: Critical Concepts in Islamic Studies,* London, Routledge, 2009.

(3) One of the exceptions is the reflection dedicated by Shady Nasser to the variants considered by the scholars of Qur'ānic variants as *shawādhdh* (rare). See Nasser, *The transmission*, pp. 117ff.

(4) Aziz al-Azmeh, "Modelling the Paleo-Qur'ān: Declamations, Reiterations, and collations" in, Hilali and Burge, *The* Fragment, pp. 35-77, p. 55

(5) Cook, *The Koran*, p. 73; al-Azmeh, 'Canon'

(6) About the ambiguity of the meaning of the word *jamʿ*, including the meaning of canonization, see Claude Gilliot, "Collecte ou memorization du Coran. Essai d'analyse d'un vocabulaire ambigu" in Gilliot (Claude) und TilmanNagel (hrsg. von), Das Prophetenḥadīṯ. Dimensionen einer islamischen Literaturgattung [Actes du Göttinger Kolloquium über das

in one codex. The second sense entailed memorizing all of the Qur'ānic text by heart.[1] The third sense of the meaning of *jam'* is the most difficult to situate historically; it included the canonization of the Qur'ān, which occurred in the seventh century, and the canonization of the Qur'ānic variants, which took place progressively between the seventh and tenth centuries.

The early accounts claimed that there were variants from the first phase, as attested in the hadith of the seven readings. However, the expression or analytic tool (*qirā'āt*) was not conceived of until the third phase. I would suggest that the field of Qur'ānic manuscript studies needs to approach the history of the so called 'Qur'ānic variants by taking into consideration two methodological points: (a) adopting a scope of interpretation that goes beyond the framework of the Islamic sources and (b) considering the gap between the evidence in the manuscripts and the later classical concepts of Qur'ānic variants and readings.

Conclusion

In their analyses of early manuscript fragments of the Qur'ān, the authors of a number of recent studies have confirmed the traditional Sunnī scholastic account of the Qur'ān's collection of variant readings. Specifically, they situate their findings in noncanonical Qur'ānic material, such as that found in the companion codices discussed by medieval Muslim scholars. I have argued previously that the accuracy of such attempts is largely unsupported by the data. In light of the evidence, I argue that the application of later scholastic technical language (*qirā'āt*, *aḥruf*) pertaining to the record of the standardization of the written text is insufficient to describe the evidence found in early fragments. These concepts were more likely conceived by scholars post hoc as part of the story of the "*muṣḥaf*" canonization; the evidence suggests that these concepts offer little utility in describing the practices of the early copyists. By studying the history of the variants on the one hand and their elaboration as a concept on the other, this paper shows that the Qur'ānic variations were both a form of transmission of the Qur'ān in the precanonical period and a conceptual tool for the canonization of the text of the Qur'ān—the Qur'ānic variants and readings simultaneously designate both the text and its diverse interpretations.[2]

ḥadīṯ, Göttingen, Seminar für Arabistik, 3-4 novembre 2000], Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht (Nachrichten der Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Göttingen. I. Philologisch- Historische Klasse, Jahrgang 2005/1), 2005, pp. 14-39, p. 11 ; 22.

(1) About the various meanings of *jam'* (collection, learning by heart), see Jalāl al-Dīn al-Ṣuyūṭī, *al-Itqān,* vol. 1, pp. 192-196, p. 332.

(2) Kirill Dmitriev, 'An early christian arabic account of the creation of the world', in Angelika Neuwirt-Nicolai Sinai-Michael Marx, *The Qur'an in Context. Historical and literary investigations into the Qur'ānic milieu*, Brill, Leiden-Boston, 2010, p. 350, note, 6.

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