

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

Question:

'The Qur'ān was never put together as a complete text until the time of the fourth Khalīfah, 'Uthmān ؓ'. How accurate is this assessment of the history of the collection of the Qur'ānic text?

Answer:

The history of the Qur'ānic text has been the cause of great debate in recent times. Although it is believed by Muslims that the Qur'ānic text has been preserved down to each letter, they did not have any real opposition to scrutinise this fact. The first claims of doubt on the preservation came from some Shia Muslims. They believed that certain individuals had taken out portions and verses from the Qur'ān to hide the virtues of the family of the Prophet ﷺ and more specifically the entitlement of 'Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib ؑ to become Khalīfah¹. The main culprits must then have been those compiling the text and standardising it, who were none other than Abu Bakr, 'Umar and 'Uthmān ؓ. The vast majority of Muslim scholars considered this view as heresy and one that takes a person out the fold of Islām.

This argument was responded via two angles: 1) the uprightness of the Companions, hence not making it possible for them to carry out this huge conspiracy, and 2) sifting through the so called narrations supporting this view and proving them to be forgeries.

This was not too much of a difficult task as the opponents believed in the truth of Islām and accepted (to an extent) the *Isnād*² (chain) system. So, to prove that the companions of the Prophet ﷺ were upright, a scholar could produce the ḥadīth of the Prophet ﷺ giving witness to their uprightness and their status before Allāh ﷻ. This may be convincing for the Muslim, but a person who does not believe in his Prophethood will require some more evidence.

Therefore, when interest was given to Islāmic scholarship from the West, non-Muslim scholars came with many theories as how to understand and utilise the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth. These opinions ranged from a total rejection of both, to accepting parts of the two which seemed rationally or historically 'plausible'³. This

¹ See Gibril Fouad Haddad 'Encyclopaedia of Hadith Forgeries', 1st edition, Beacon Books, 2013, p. 33. He quotes from the Shia Ḥadīth collection 'al-Kāfi' where the 6th Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, is claimed to have said that the original Qur'ān included somewhat 16,000 verses! To be fair, many Shia scholars have condemned these narrations as being fabrications and have accepted immaculate preservation of the Qur'ān, Ibid, p.35.

² This refers to chain of narrators from the one narrating the incident back to the original authority.

³ See for the varying Orientalists views of the Isnād, M. Mustafa al-Azami 'Studies in Early Hadith Literature', 1st edition, Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2001 p.213-215.

latter approach was heavily based on *Matn*⁴ (textual) analysis, contrary to the traditional Sunnī approach, which was mainly based upon *Sanad* analysis⁵.

A relevant example is the compiling of the Qur'ān during the Khilāfah of Abū Bakr رضي الله عنه. This is mentioned in various Sunnī Ḥadīth canons, including the 'most authentic book after the Qur'ān' Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī. Thus, from a *Sanad* perspective, there is no doubt in this incident because of its mass transmission from authoritative sources. However, certain Western scholars cast doubt on this compilation by stating that this initial compilation was forged, to either make the compilation of the Qur'ān more early to the time of the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم (hence, making it more reliable), or to attribute the initial compilation to Abū Bakr because 'Uthmān رضي الله عنه was not liked⁶.

The glaring problem with the *Matn* approach is that it is very speculative and opens the doors to bizarre theories and ideas, whereas the *Sanad* approach is much more scientific, but has its shortcomings. This is why the classical traditionalists have stated: if there is a narration which has a sound *Sanad*, but the *Matn* is extremely odd or contradicts something that is more certain, then the narration is to be rejected. This makes the traditionalist approach much more reasonable and scientific.

Despite the Western *Matn* approach, Ibn Warraq (who takes the most extreme view and claims that the Qur'ān was a flexible liquid text with no real form for some 200 years) concedes that most modern scholars⁷ accept that the Qur'ān was compiled by 'Uthmān رضي الله عنه between the years 650-656AC⁸.

With that in mind, the compilation of 'Uthmān رضي الله عنه took place only 18 years after the demise of the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم. This would mean that many senior companions who had heard the Qur'ān directly from the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم were still alive, and also narrows down the possibility of a great conspiracy, as we would then have to believe that many of these companions, who had sacrificed so much for their faith, would agree to forge or allow forgery in the book of God, despite their caution when it came to the words of the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم. It is rather convincing to accept the accuracy of 'Uthmān's رضي الله عنه compilation and would refute those who claimed that the compilation of Abū Bakr رضي الله عنه was forged, as it does not seem necessary to go through all that effort for something which is convincing to begin with.

However, to really answer the question, we need to look at the details of to what extent the Qur'ān was compiled at the time of the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم, then the first official compilation, and see what exactly Abū Bakr رضي الله عنه ordered for, and then what was the reason for 'Uthmān's compilation when Abū Bakr رضي الله عنه had supposedly done the job?

The Time of the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم

⁴ This refers to the actual wording of the statement/incident at the end of the *Isnād*.

⁵ See for further details and the reason for this, Dr Jonathan A.C. Brown 'How We Know Early Ḥadīth Critics Did *Matn* Criticism and Why It's so Hard to Find' *Islāmic Law and Society* 15 (2008) 143-184.

⁶ Ibn Warraq 'The Origins of the Koran: Classic essays on Islām's holy book', New York: Prometheus Books, p.11.

⁷ Modern Scholars refers to the Western scholarship.

⁸ Ibn Warraq 'The Origins of the Koran', p.12. Ibn Warraq himself follows Wansborough in rejecting that the Qur'ān was compiled by 'Uthmān.

We know that the Prophet ﷺ allowed and, at times, ordered the writing of the Qur'ān during his lifetime. This is evident from the story for 'Umar's (the 2nd Khalīfah) conversion to Islām, where he initially sets to go and kill the Prophet ﷺ, but is intercepted by Nu'aym , who tells him that his sister and brother-in-law have accepted Islām. The incident then mentions:

'Umar hurried to his brother-in-law's house, where Khabbāb was reciting Sūrah TāHā to them from a **parchment**.'⁹

This incident took place in Makkah, and despite the oppression the Muslims faced, the Qur'ān was still being written down. This transcribing naturally increased and systemised when the Muslims attained authority and order in Madīnah. This gave rise to the *Kuttāb* (the transcribers of the revelation). Al-Azami has counted the number of *Kuttāb* to be 48, with some being more famous in transcribing than others.¹⁰ At the demise of the Prophet ﷺ, we learn that companions had parts of the Qur'ān written, like 'Ā'ishah (the wife of the Prophet ﷺ) had transcripts of parts of the Qur'ān.¹¹

Although the text was being written, it was not compiled in a systemised form. However, this did not pose too much of an issue for the Muslims, as the Oral tradition was very strong, and the Qur'ān was seen as secure in the hearts of the Believers. We find that many companions had memorized the whole Qur'ān in the time of the Prophet ﷺ, in one particular narration it is mentioned:

'Four individuals had gathered (i.e. memorized) the Qur'ān in the time of the Prophet; they were all from the Anṣār: Ubayy, Mu'ādh Ibn Jabal, Abū Zayd and Zayd Ibn Thābit.'¹²

This is also proven from the very tradition where Abū Bakr initiates the compilation of the Qur'ān, where Zayd Ibn Thābit relies on the Oral tradition. 'Umar worried that the Qur'ān may get lost, despite it having been written on various parchments, due to the deaths of many of the Qurrā' in the Battle of Yamamah. So, Abu Bakr sent for Zayd Ibn Thabit as he knew him to be one of the scribes and well known for piety. Zayd reluctantly took up the task and began the search for parchments using the help of what had been memorized in the heart of the believers.¹³

Many Western scholars have cast doubt on the reliability of this incident, both from the angle of its *Matn* and its *Isnād*. The most common critique is that not many Qurrā' died at the Battle of Yamamah, which casts doubt that 'Umar would have called for a compilation. However, when looking at the history books, many historians have listed numerous early companions from amongst the Muhājirūn

⁹ M. Mustafa al-Azami 'The History of The Qur'ānic Text: from Revelation to Compilation', 1st edition, Leicester: UK Islamic Academy, 2003, p. 67. He narrates the incident from *Sirah* of Ibn Hishām (emphasis mine).

¹⁰ M. Mustafa al-Azami 'Kuttāb al-Nabī', 2nd edition, Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1978, p. 113-115

¹¹ Fred M. Donner 'The Historical Context', as part of 'The Cambridge Companion of the Qur'ān', Ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p.31

¹² Al-Bukhārī (3810) and Muslim (2465).

¹³ Al-Bukhārī (4701), al-Tirmidhī (3103) and various other places.

and the Anṣār who were martyred. Naturally, these early companions consisted of Qurṛā', as they had witnessed the revelation. Khalīfah Ibn Khayyāt ؓ (d. 240AH) named 24 Muhājirūn (9 amongst whom witnessed Badr) and 34 Anṣār.¹⁴ Others have given the death toll as much more, like Balāḍūrī ؓ (d. 279AH), who says the different figures vary from between 700 to 1700.¹⁵ Al-Qurṭubī ؓ (d. 671AH) mentioned 700 Qurṛā' were martyred; Ibn Kathīr ؓ (d. 774AH) mentioned 500 Qurṛā'; and Ibn Ḥajar ؓ (d. 852AH) mentioned something similar.¹⁶

To argue that the names of all these Qurṛā' are not mentioned is merely an argument from silence. Despite that, we have many historians stating contrary to it. Furthermore, the term 'Qurṛā'' does not necessitate that these individuals had memorized the whole Qur'ān; it can simply mean large portions.

As for the narrations having various variants, they do not affect the overall fact that the Qur'ān was gathered under the order of Abū Bakr ؓ. These variants can simply be explained as being errors from a narrator, or can be understood in a way that eliminates contradictions. For example, in some narrations, it may be mentioned that Zayd Ibn Thābit ؓ collected the Qur'ān from palm trees and from parchments, and others may mention that Zayd used Ubayy Ibn Ka'b's ؓ *Mushaf* (Qur'ānic text).¹⁷ This can be easily explained by the possibly that Zayd ؓ used both.

As from the perspective of the *Isnād*, those scholars who do not accept the whole system of the *Isnād* will be out the pale of our discussion, as that will be a study of itself. From a traditionalist Muslim perspective, the narration has come in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī - which naturally means it is authentic. Harald Motzki has shown that from a pure historical analysis of the chains, it can be concluded that this narration can go as far back Ibn Shihāb al-Zuhrī ؓ (d. 124AH).¹⁸ From Ibn Shihāb ؓ to Zayd Ibn Thābit ؓ, there is the narrator Ibn Sabbāq ؓ (this is from the chain in Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī). There are other chains from Ibn Shihāb ؓ to Zayd ؓ via the means of Khārijah Ibn Zayd ؓ, and another which is direct to the companion Anas Ibn Mālik ؓ.¹⁹ This latter one drops the intermediary to Anas ؓ and is labelled as *Munqaṭi'* or *Mursal* (both mean a gap in the chain, while the latter is generally when the companion is dropped).

The question then arises: 'why is such a major event related from only two or three individuals up till the time of Ibn Shihāb ؓ?' It is possible that due to 'Uthmān's recension, Abū Bakr's ؓ compilation lost its importance, but this seems a bit far-fetched. It seems that to respond to this problem, the most just response would be that what Abū Bakr ؓ was trying to do was not to produce a single state copy of the Qur'ān; rather, he might have sought a private compilation which can be used

¹⁴ Shehzad Saleem 'Collection of the Qur'ān: A Critical and Historical Study of Al-Farāhī's View', PhD submitted in the University of Wales Lampeter, 2010, p.80

¹⁵ Ibid, p.80

¹⁶ Ibid, p.80

¹⁷ Ibid, p.86

¹⁸ Harald Motzki 'The Collection of the Qur'ān: A Reconsiderations of Western Views in Light of Recent Methodological Developments', *Der Islam* 78 (2001), p. 26.

¹⁹ Ibid, p.24-25

in the time of need. This would also explain why the copy was passed onto Ḥafṣah²⁰ by ‘Umar, instead of the Khalīfah, ‘Uthmān ؓ. It also explains the reason this compilation was not narrated by many individuals.

Majority of the scholars have accepted that the full Qur’ān was not compiled by the Prophet ﷺ in a form of a text²¹, but the compilation of Abū Bakr ؓ suggests that the full Qur’ān was compiled during his Khilāfah. This is supported by the fact that the compiler, Zayd Ibn Thābit ؓ, had memorized the whole Qur’ān.²² So it can be assumed that he would have compiled what he had memorized. This then proves that the Qur’ān was fully compiled before the era of ‘Uthmān ؓ. A further problem is still left unanswered: that is, if the Qur’ān was compiled before the era of ‘Uthmān ؓ, what was the reason for ‘Uthmān’s ؓ compilation? To understand this, we must first analyse the nature of the Qur’ān.

The Qur’ān was revealed in seven *Aḥruf*. This is established from the Prophet ﷺ in various aḥādīth found in numerous books which reach the level of *Mutawātir*.²³ The general definition of *Aḥruf* would be ‘various ways the verses of the Qur’ān are read’.²⁴ It is understood that these *Aḥruf* were revealed for the ease of the various Arabic dialects. An example of these *Aḥruf* is when ‘Umar heard Hishām Ibn Ḥakīm ؓ reciting the Qur’ān based on another dialect and was angered, thinking that Hishām ؓ had changed the Qur’ān, only to learn from the Prophet ﷺ that it was an acceptable dialect.²⁵ This indicates to the fact that the changes were quite considerable. Many scholars have also mentioned that the differences were sometimes substitute words.²⁶ Therefore, it was not surprising that soon after the demise of the Prophet ﷺ, as the Islāmic empire was rapidly expanding, the differences emerged. This was the very cause which resulted in ‘Uthmān ؓ wanting to gather the Qur’ān. The famous companion, Ḥudhayfah Ibn al-Yamān ؓ, complained to ‘Uthmān ؓ because of the confusion that had arose due to the different forms of recitation being transmitted.²⁷

This then shows that the compilation done under the order of Abū Bakr ؓ was as a protection of the text of the Qur’ān (including all the *Aḥruf*), and the compilation under the order of ‘Uthmān ؓ was to restrict the various dialect under a skeleton text, which meant certain readings would be left, while others are still possible to read.²⁸

We also learn from the very incident of ‘Uthmān’s ؓ ordering of gathering the Qur’ān that he used the copy which was in the possession of Ḥafṣah ؓ, and that the

²⁰ Al-Bukhārī (4701).

²¹ Claude Gilliot ‘Creation of a Fixed Text’, as part of ‘The Cambridge Companion of the Qur’ān’, Ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 44.

²² Narration already quoted above, Al-Bukhārī (3810) and Muslim (2465).

²³ Yasir Qadhi ‘An introduction into the Sciences of the Qur’aan’, 1st edition, Birmingham: Al-Hidaayah Publishing and Distribution, 1999, p.173.

²⁴ Ibid, p.172.

²⁵ Ibid, p.173 quoted from Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī and Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim.

²⁶ Ibid, p.178

²⁷ Al-Bukhārī (3315).

²⁸ ‘Abdullāh Ibn Yūsuf al-Juday’ in his ‘*Al-Muqaddimāt al-Asāsiyyah fī ‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān*’ 1st edtion, Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Rayān, 2001, p.100-101.

chief compiler was, again, Zayd Ibn Thābit ﷺ.²⁹ This supports the point that the Qur'ān was already compiled as a full text or at least a large portion of it and that the *Muṣḥaf* of Ḥafṣah ﷺ was known to the Khalīfah, 'Uthmān ﷺ. This latter point is supporting evidence to the reality of Abū Bakr's ﷺ compilation, which many Western scholars have doubted.

In conclusion, we have outlined in the above that the compilation of 'Uthmān ﷺ is a fact accepted by the vast majority of scholars, with the exception of a small group. We have shown writing the scripture was something acted upon from the very early days of Islām, which systemized in the Madanī period. The compilation under the guide of Abū Bakr ﷺ took place - an incident which has been mentioned in the most authoritative Sunnī Ḥadīth book. The main arguments to cast doubt on the incident have been shown to be mere speculation. This compilation was headed by Zayd ﷺ, who had memorized the Qur'ān, so it is implausible to assume he had failed to compile the complete Qur'ān. As for the compilation of 'Uthmān ﷺ, it was for a different purpose; and 'Uthmān ﷺ using the *Muṣḥaf* of Ḥafṣah ﷺ further supports our conclusion.

²⁹ Al-Bukhārī (3315).