Chapter Five

THE RECORDING AND ARRANGEMENT OF THE QUR'AN

1. During the Makkah Period

 Though revealed verbally, the Qur'ān consistently refers to itself as kitāb (Kitab: Book), as something written, indicating that it must be placed into written form. In fact verses were recorded from the earliest stages of Islam; even as the fledgling community suffered innumerable hardships under the wrath of Quraysh. The following narration concerning Umar bin al-Khattāb, taken just prior to his conversion to Islam, helps illustrate this point:

 One day 'Umar came out, his sword unsheathed, intending to make for the Prophet and some of his Companions who (he had been told) were gathered in a house at as-Ṣuṣā. The congregation numbered forty, including women; also present were the Prophet's uncle Ḥamza, Abū Bakr, 'Ali, and others who had not migrated to Ethiopia. Nu'aym encountered 'Umar and asked him where he was going. "I am making for Muhammad, the apostate who has split Quraysh asunder and mocked their ways, who has insulted their beliefs and their gods, to kill him." "You only deceive yourself, 'Umar," he replied, "if you suppose that Bani 'Abd Manṣūr will allow you to continue reading the earth if you dispose of Muhammad. Is it not better that you return to your family and resolve their affairs?" 'Umar was taken aback and asked what was the matter with his family. Nu'aym said, "Your brother-in-law, your nephew Sa'id, and your sister Fāţima have followed Muhammad in his new religion, and it is best that you go and deal with them." 'Umar hurried to his brother-in-law's house, where Khābiyā was reciting Sūra Tāhā to them from a parchment. At the sound of 'Umar's voice Khābiyā hid in a small room, while Fāţima took the parchment and placed it under her thigh..."¹

¹ 'Umar's angry quest that day culminated in his embrace of Islam; his stature and reputation proved a tremendous boon to those who, just a few hours before, he had meant to kill. The point of this tale is the parchment. According to Ibn 'Abbas verses revealed in Makkah were recorded in
Makkah, a statement echoed by az-Zuhri. Ṭābilāh b. Sa‘id b. Abi aṣ-Ṣaḥib, the one scribe officially engaged in recording the Qur’ān during this period, is accused by some of fabricating a few verses in the Qur’ān—accusations which I have exposed elsewhere as baseless. Another candidate for official scribe is Khālid b. Sa‘id b. al-‘Āṣ, who states, “I was the first to write down ‘lisn al-Mubānāt wa-ra‘ītim’ [The Name of Allah, Most Compassionate, Most Merciful].”

Al-Katānī cites this incident: when Rāfi‘ b. Malīk al-Anṣārī attended al-‘Aṣbha, the Prophet handed him all the verses that had been revealed during the previous decade. Once back in Madinah, Rāfi‘ gathered his tribe together and read these pages to them.

2. During the Madani Period

i. Scribes of the Prophet

Regarding the Madani period we have a wealth of information including, at present, the names of approximately sixty-five Companions who functioned as scribes for the Prophet at one time or another:


ii. The Prophet’s Dictation of the Qur’ān

Upon the descent of wa‘līyyah, the Prophet routinely called for one of his scribes to write down the latest verses. Zaid b. Thābit narrates that, because of his proximity to the Prophet’s Mosque, he was often summoned as scribe whenever the wa‘līyyah commenced. When the verse pertaining to jihād (ṣa‘b) was revealed, the Prophet called on Zaid b. Thābit with inkpot and writing material (board or scalpula bone) and began dictating: ‘Amr b. ‘Umāmah al-Ma‘ṣūmah, sitting nearby, inquired of the Prophet, “What about me? For I am blind.” And so came, “ā‘lamu an ḥaddah al-ma‘ṣūmah” (“for those who are not among the disabled”). There is also evidence of proofreading after dictation; once the task of recording the verses was complete, Zaid would read them back to the Prophet to ensure that no scribal errors had crept in.

iii. Recording the Qur’ān was Common Practice Among Companions

Spurred by the prevalence of recording activity among the Companions, the Prophet declared that no one should record anything from him save for the Qur’ān, “and whoever has written anything from me other than the Qur’ān should erase it.” By this he meant that Qur’ānic and non-Qur’ānic (e.g. hadith) materials must not be written on the same sheet, so as to avoid any confusion. In fact those who were unable to write often appeared in the Mosque, vellum and parchment in hand, requesting volunteers who might record for them. Based on the total number of scribes, and the Prophet’s custom of summoning them to record all new verses, we can safely assume that in his own lifetime the entire Qur’ān was available in written form.

References:

4 Ibn Ḥajar, Fath al-Bāri, inc.22.
6 As-Suyūṭī, al-Durr al-Mamduhar, i:11. The printed text gives his name as Khālid b. Khālid b. Sa‘id, likely the mistake of a previous copyist.
8 For a detailed study, see, M.M. al-‘Aqāmī, Kātibah an-Nabī.
10 Ibn Abī Dāwūd, al-Majma‘īf, p. 3; see also al-Bukhārī, Sahīh, Fisqal al-Qur’ān, p. 495.
15 See al-Baihaqī, Sunan al-Kubrā, vi:16.
3. The Arrangement of the Qur'ān

i. The Arrangement of Verses Within Sūras

It is commonly acknowledged that the arrangement of ʿayāt (أيَة: verses) and sūras (سَوْر) chapters) in the Qur'ān is unique. The layout does not follow the chronological order of revelation, nor does it follow subject matter. What secret lies behind this arrangement is best known to Allah, for it is His Book. Now if I play the unscrupulous editor and re-arrange the words of someone else’s book, by changing the sequence of the sentences etc., then altering the entire meaning of the work becomes tremendously easy. This end product can no longer be attributed to the original author, since only the author himself is entitled to change the wording and the material if the rightful claim of authorship is to be preserved.

So it is with the Book of Allah, for He is the sole Author and He alone has the right to arrange the material within His Book. The Qur’ān is very clear about this:

“Ilā jiyyihi ḥamda, ‘alayhī wa rabbīqī ‘an ʿalayhi ʿalayhī wa lā ʿalayhi ma’alī.”

“...and We have sent down unto you the Message (O Muḥammad); that you may explain clearly to people what is sent for them.”

In granting him this privilege, Allah was sanctioning the Prophet’s explanations as authoritative. Only the Prophet, through divine privilege and revelation, was qualified to arrange verses into the unique fashion of the Qur’ān, being the only privy to the Will of the Creator. Neither the Muslim community at large nor anyone else had any legitimate say in organizing the Book of Allah.

The Qur’ān consists of sūras of uneven length; the shortest contain three verses while the longest has 286. Various reports show that the Prophet actively instructed his scribes about the placement of verses within sūras.

‘Uḥmān states that whether the revelation consisted of lengthy, successive verses, or a single verse in isolation, the Prophet would summon one of his scribes and say, "Place this verse [or these verses] in the sūra where such-and-such is mentioned."19 Zaid bin Thabit remarks,

"We, in the presence of the Prophet, would compile the Qur’ān from pieces of parchment."20

Further testimony for verse arrangement is given by the narrations below, some of which also cite the role of the Archangel Jibrīl in this regard.

- ‘Uḥmān bin Abī l-‘Āṣ reports that he was sitting with the Prophet when the latter fixed his gaze upon a definite point, then said, "The Archangel Jibrīl has just come to me and expressly asked me to place the verse ‘...Allah ..." in the sūra ‘...Allah ...’ on this page."

Qu’ān 75:16-19. These verses should be read while keeping in mind at Ṭabarî’s commentary in his Tafsīr, vol. 29, p. 189. The Arabic word Jamā'ah (جمع) has different meanings. Jamā'ah (جمع) means memorization, and also to collect and compile. At-Ṭabarî quotes Qūḍā (6:16-17) as saying: "In this verse, Jamā'ah means compilation." Ma’mār b. al-Muḥammād at-Turānī (110-210 A.H.) explained the meaning of the verse as: "It is an Us to compile by means of connecting one piece to another." (Abū ‘Ubaidah, Majā'is al-Qur'ān, p. 18, see also p. 2). When al-Ṭibrī (666 A.H./1268 C.E.) compiled his work Inkhāb ar-Ra‘īsī, he wrote: "In this verse, the verses in the sense 'compiled by.' (Quoted by Fust Seelig, ed.), Majā'is al-Qur'ān, Introduction, p. 31).

As mentioned previously, in this light the Prophet’s sūnna—which is in fact a worrisome explanation of the Qur’ān—has also been practically and verbally sanctioned by Allah, with no one possessing the authority to deny it its rightful place.

See at-Tirmidhī, Sunan, no. 3086; also al-Aqīq, ii:42; Ibn Ḥansāl, Fathul Bāri, ii:22; see also Abū ‘Ubaid, Fadilat, p. 280.

See at-Tirmidhī, Sunan, Manābhī, no. 3954; Ibn Ḥansāl, Fathul Barī, ii:22; see also Abū ‘Ubaid, Fadilat, p. 280.

Qu’ān 14:96.

16 Qur’ān 75:16-19. These verses should be read while keeping in mind at-Ṭabarî’s comment in his Tafsīr, vol. 29, p. 189. The Arabic word Jamā'ah (جمع) has different meanings. Jamā'ah (جمع) means memorization, and also to collect and compile. At-Ṭabarî quotes Qūḍā (6:16-17) as saying: "In this verse, Jamā'ah means compilation." Ma’mār b. al-Muḥammād at-Turānī (110-210 A.H.) explained the meaning of the verse as: "It is an Us to compile by means of connecting one piece to another.” (Abū ‘Ubaidah, Majā'is al-Qur'ān, p. 18, see also p. 2). When al-Ṭibrī (666 A.H./1268 C.E.) compiled his work Inkhāb ar-Ra‘īsī, he wrote: "In this verse, the verses in the sense 'compiled by.' (Quoted by Fust Seelig, ed.), Majā'is al-Qur'ān, Introduction, p. 31).

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in a certain position within a particular sūrah.\textsuperscript{23} Al-Kalbī narrates from Abū ʿAbdullāh Ibn Abdullāh’s authority regarding the verse:

\begin{quote}
\textlangle \text{ذَٰلِكَ أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَىٰ مُحَمَّدٍ} \rangle
\end{quote}

He states, “This was the last verse revealed to the Prophet. The Archangel Jibrīl descended on him and instructed him to place it after verse two hundred and eighty in Sūra al-Baqara.”\textsuperscript{24} Ubayy bin Ka‘b states, “Sometimes the beginning of a sūrah is revealed to the Prophet, so I write it down, then another revelation descends upon him so he says, ‘Ubayy! write this down in the sūrah where such-and-such is mentioned.’ At other times a revelation descends upon him and I await his instructions, till he informs me of its rightful place.”\textsuperscript{25} Zaid bin Thābit remarks, “While we were with the Prophet compiling the Qur’ān from parchments, he said, ‘Blessed be the Shām.’\textsuperscript{26} He was asked, ‘Why do, O Prophet of Allah?’ He replied, ‘Because the angels of the Most Compassionate (عِبَارَةُ جَلَّ لَهُ) have spread their wings upon it.’”\textsuperscript{27} In this hadith we again note that the Prophet was supervising the compilation and arrangement of verses.

Finally we have the clearest evidence of all, that of reciting sūras in the five daily prayers. No public recital can occur if the sequence of verses has not been universally agreed upon, and there is no known incident of a congregation disagreeing with its imām on his sequence of verses, whether in the Prophet’s era or our own. In fact, the Prophet would occasionally recite entire sūras during the Jumu’ah (Friday) sermon as well.\textsuperscript{28}

Further support is given by numerous hadiths which demonstrate that the Companions were familiar with the beginning and end points of sūras.

- The Prophet remarked to ‘Umar, “The concluding verses of Sūra an-Nisā’ would alone be sufficient for you [in resolving certain cases of inheritance].”\textsuperscript{29}

\textsuperscript{23} Ibn Hanboll, Muhadid, iv:218, no. 17947; see also as-Suyūtī, al-Iṣāba, i:173.
\textsuperscript{24} Qur’ān 2:281.
\textsuperscript{25} Al-Baṣāṣṣūrī, al-Iṣāba, p. 166.
\textsuperscript{26} ‘Umayr the name given to present-day Syria, Jordan, Lebanon and Palestine.
\textsuperscript{27} Al-Baṣāṣṣūrī, al-Iṣāba, pp. 176-7.
\textsuperscript{28} Muslim, Sahih, Jumu’ah 5:52.
\textsuperscript{29} Muslim, Sahih, al-Farā’idh 9.

\textit{The Recording and Arrangement of the Qur’ān}

\textit{ii. The Arrangement of Sūras}

Some references allege that the Muṣḥabs (مُصَّحَبة: compiled copies of the Qur’ān)\textsuperscript{30} used by Ubayy bin Ka‘b and Ibn Maṣ‘ūd exhibited discrepancies in their arrangement of sūras, as compared to the universal norm. But nowhere do we find any reference to a disagreement in the ordering of verses within a particular sūrah. The Qur’ān’s unique format allows each sūrah to function as an independent unit; no chronology or narrative carries over from one to the next, and therefore any change in the sequence of sūras is purely superficial. Such were these discrepancies, if indeed they existed, that the message of the Qur’ān remained inviolate. Variations in word order or the sequence of verses would be a different matter altogether—a profound altercation that fully not even the best-known variant Musḥabs can make claims to.

Scholars unanimously agree that to follow the sūra order in the Qur’ān is not compulsory, whether in prayer, recitation, learning, teaching or memorization.\textsuperscript{31} Each sūrah stands alone, and the latter ones do not necessarily possess greater legal bearing than their earlier counterparts; sometimes a masūdī (masūdī: abrogated) verse appears in a sūrah that is subsequent to the sūra containing the verse that replaces it. Most Muslims begin memorizing the Qur’ān from the end, beginning with the shortest sūras (nos. 114, 113, …) and working backwards. The Prophet once recited the Sūras of al-Baqara, an-Nisā’ then Ali-Imāmīn (sūras nos. 2, 4 and 3, respectively) within a single rak‘a (rak‘a),\textsuperscript{32} contrary to their order of appearance in the Qur’ān.

As far as I am aware, there are no hadiths in which the Prophet delineates the order of all the sūras. Opinions differ, and can be summarized as follows:

1. The arrangement of all the sūras, as it stands, harkens back to the Prophet himself.\textsuperscript{33} This is the opinion that I subscribe to.

\textsuperscript{30} Al-Bukhārī, Sahih, Fad’il al-Qur’ān:10.
\textsuperscript{31} Al-Bukhārī, Sahih, al-Wu’ūd:37; Muslim, Sahih, Musāffīrīn, no. 182. For details see Muslim, Kāmil at-Tanwir, edited by M.M. al-Azham, pp. 183-5.
\textsuperscript{32} Literally a collection of sheets, here meaning sheets of parchment containing the Qur’ān. See p. 91.
\textsuperscript{33} Al-Baṣāṣṣūrī, al-Iṣāba, p. 167.
\textsuperscript{34} Muslim, Sahih, Musāffīrīn, no. 203.
\textsuperscript{35} See as-Suyūtī, al-Iṣāba, iv:176-77; see also Abū Dīwān, Sunan, no. 796.
counterview disagrees with this, citing that the Musḥaf of certain Companions (such as Ibn Mas‘ūd and Ubayy b. Ka‘b) supposedly differed in sura order from the Musḥaf presently in our hands.  
2. Some believe that the entire Qur‘ān was arranged by the Prophet except for sura no. 9, which was placed by ‘Uthmān.  
3. Another view credits the arrangement of all suras to Zaid b. ‘Hābit, Caliph ‘Uthmān and the Prophet’s Companions. Al-Baqillānī adheres to this notion.  
4. Ibn ‘Aṭīyya supports the view that the Prophet arranged some of the suras while the rest were arranged by the Companions.  

iii. The Arrangement of Sūras in Some Partial Musḥafs

Muslim scholarly opinion unanimously holds that the present arrangement of suras is identical to that of ‘Uthmān’s Musḥaf. Anyone desiring to copy the Qur‘ān in its entirety has to follow that sequence, but for those who seek to copy only particular suras, following the arrangement outlined in ‘Uthmān’s Musḥaf is no longer necessary. An analogous situation occurs when I travel by air: I like to take my work with me but, not wanting to carry bulky volumes in my suitcase, I simply photocopy those portions that I need during my trip.

In the early days Musḥaf were scribed on parchment of course, usually much heavier than paper, so that a full Musḥaf may have weighed a few kilograms. And we have many examples (for instance the Yemeni collection; see Figures 5.1-5.2) where the Qur‘ān is written in such large calligraphy that an entire Musḥaf’s thickness would easily exceed one meter.

Taking the Musḥaf printed by the King Fahd complex in Madinah as a standard, we find that it contains some six hundred pages (approximately 9,000 lines). Interestingly, the entire text of the parchment in Figure 5.2 is half a line in the Musḥaf printed at Madinah, meaning that an entire Musḥaf written on that scale would require 18,000 pages. Voluminous calligraphy is by no means rare, but it does generally indicate that the Musḥaf consisted of no more than a handful of suras. Library shelves throughout the world are filled with partially written Qur‘āns; listed below are a few dozen examples from just a single library, the Salar Jung Museum in Hyderabad, India.

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36 See Chapter 14, which is specially devoted to the Musḥaf of Ibn Mas‘ūd.  
37 As-Sayyībī, al-Itiqān, i:177; quoting al-Baihaqī, Ma‘būdah; see also Abu Dāwūd, S. man, no. 780.  
38 Al-Baqillānī, al-Inṣiqāb, p. 166.  
40 See Chapter 7.  
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of sūras</th>
<th>Order of sūras</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>244</td>
<td>36, 48, 55, 56, 62, 67, 75, 76, 78, 93, 94, 97 and 99–114</td>
<td>c. Early 11th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>246</td>
<td>62 (first 8 ayahs only), 110, 1, 57, 113, 56, 94, 114, 64, 48, 47, 89, 112, 36, 78 and 67</td>
<td>c. An early 10th, and late 11th century copy</td>
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<tr>
<td>247</td>
<td>1, 36, 48, 56, 67, 78, 109 and 112–114</td>
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<tr>
<td>248</td>
<td>9, 73, 51, 67, 55, 62, 109 and 112–114</td>
<td>1076 A.H. (1666 C.E.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>249</td>
<td>9, 17, 18, 37, 44, 50, 69, 31, 89 and 38</td>
<td>1181 A.H. (1767 C.E.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>250</td>
<td>9, 20, 21, 22, 63 and 24–28</td>
<td>c. Early 12th</td>
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<td>8, 6, 38, 48, 56, 62, 67 and 76</td>
<td>c. Early 11th</td>
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<td>8, 1, 6, 18, 34, 35, 56, 67 and 78</td>
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<tr>
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<td>8, 1, 36, 48, 55, 67, 73, 56 and 78</td>
<td>c. Early 14th</td>
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<td>254</td>
<td>7, 36, 48, 56, 62, 67, 71, 73 and 78</td>
<td>c. Late 13th</td>
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<td>255</td>
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<td>c. Mid 11th</td>
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<td>257</td>
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<td>261</td>
<td>7, 36, 48, 78, 56, 67, 55 and 73</td>
<td>c. Late 13th</td>
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<td>262</td>
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<td>1115 A.H. (1704 C.E.)</td>
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<td>263</td>
<td>6, 36, 48, 55, 56, 67 and 68</td>
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<td>264</td>
<td>6, 1, 36, 48, 56, 78 and 67</td>
<td>1278 A.H. (1862 C.E.)</td>
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<td>c. Early 10th</td>
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<td>266</td>
<td>6, 36, 55, 56, 62, 63 and 78</td>
<td>c. Late 13th</td>
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<tr>
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<td>5, 36, 48, 56, 67 and 78</td>
<td>989 A.H. (1581 C.E.)</td>
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<td>271</td>
<td>5, 36, 48, 67, 72 and 78</td>
<td>1106 A.H. (1694 C.E.)</td>
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<td>272</td>
<td>5, 36, 48, 56, 67 and 78</td>
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<td>273</td>
<td>5, 36, 48, 55, 56 and 67</td>
<td>1200 A.H. (1786 C.E.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>275</td>
<td>5, 36, 78, 48, 56 and 67</td>
<td>1237 A.H.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

42 Some Muṣḥaṣṣ have the scribing date written on them, while others are undated. For the latter, I have copied the approximate date (c.a.) as per the catalogue and preceded it with the circa symbol.

43 Six sūras with some supplications in accordance with the Shiʿite creed.

44 In addition to some supplications in accordance with the Shiʿite creed.

45 This Muṣḥaṣṣ is copied by Yaʿqūb al-Mustaʿṣimī.