Chapter Six

The Written Compilation of the Qur’an

Though the Prophet enlisted all possible measures to preserve the Qur’an, he did not bind all the suras together into one master volume, as evidenced by Zaid bin ‘Ihabb’s statement that:

خِلَتْ النُّبِيُّ ﷺ فِي الْقُرْآنِ ۖ فَلَمْ يَكُنَّ الْقُرْآنُ ۖ بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ

“The Prophet was taken [from this life] whilst the Qur’an had not yet been collected into a book.”

Note the usage of ‘collected’ rather than ‘written’. Commenting on this al-Khaṭṭābī says, “This quote refers to [the lack of] a specific book with specific traits. The Qur’an had indeed been written down in its entirety during the Prophet’s lifetime, but had not been collected together nor were the suras arranged”.

Setting up a master volume might have proved challenging. Any divine naṣīḥ (ناصِح: abrogation) revealed subsequently, affecting the legal provisions or wordings of certain verses, required proper inclusion. A loose page format also greatly simplified the insertion of new verses and new suras, for the revelations did not cease until a short time before the Prophet’s death. But with his death the naṣīḥ ended forever: there would be no more verses, abrogations or rearrangements, so that the situation lent itself perfectly for the compilation of the Qur’an into a single, unified volume. Prudence compelled the community to hasten in this task, and Allāh guided the Companions to serve the Qur’an in such fashion as to fulfill His promise of forever preserving His Book.

نَفَّذْنَ نَذَاكَرًا فَزَيَّنَّا لَهُمْ نُصْرَتًا ﷺ

“We have, without doubt, sent down the message; and We will assuredly guard it [from corruption].”

1 Ibn Ḥajar, Fatḥul Bāri, i:12; see also al-Bukhārī, Sahīh, Jam‘i al-Qur’ān, Ḥadīth no. 4986.
2 Al-Suyūṭī, al-Inqā‘, i:164.
3 Qur’an 15:9.
1. Compilation of the Qur'an During Abū Bakr's Reign

i. Appointment of Zaid bin Thābit as Compiler of the Qur'an

Zaid reports,

Abū Bakr sent for me at a time when the Yamūmah battles had witnessed the martyrdom of numerous Companions. I found Umar bin al-Khaṭṭāb with him. Abū Bakr began, "Umar has just come to me and said, 'In the Yamūmah battles death has dealt most severely with the qurrā', and I fear it will deal with them with equal severity in other theatres of war. As a result much of the Qurʾān will be gone. (†۱۹۱۳) I am therefore of the opinion that you should command that the Qurʾān be collected.'" Abū Bakr continued, "I said to Umar, 'How can we embark on what the Prophet never did?' Umar replied that it was a good deed regardless, and he did not cease replying to my scruples until Allah reconciled me to the undertaking, and I became of the same mind as him. Zaid, you are young and intelligent, you used to record the revelations for the Prophet, and we know nothing to your discredit. So pursue the Qurʾān and collect it together." By Allah, had they asked me to move a mountain it could not have been heavier to me than the request of the Prophet. I asked them how they could undertake what the Prophet had never done, but Abū Bakr and Umar insisted that it was permissible and good. They did not cease replying to my scruples until Allah reconciled me to the undertaking, the way Allah had already reconciled Abū Bakr and Umar.

On being convened Zaid accepted the momentous task of supervising the committee and 'Umar, who had proposed the project, agreed to lend his full assistance.

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4 *Qurrā* [literally: reciters] is another term for the *bakhīṣ,* those who had committed the entire Qurʾān to memory. The *qurrā,* in their piety, always fought in the front lines during combat and hence suffered greater losses than other soldiers. There is no real consensus on the number of Muslims who were martyred at Yamūmah. One estimate puts the figure at 600 to 700 [al-Qurṣānī, al-Jaʾrāʾī & Akhānī al-Qurʾān, 1/50; also ibid., pp. 38–39], while Ibn Kathīr favors 450 [al-Bidāya wa an-Nihāya, vi, 340].


ii. Zaid bin Thābit's Credentials

In his early twenties at the time, Zaid had been privileged enough to live in the Prophet's neighborhood and serve as one of his most visible scribes. He was also among the *bakhīṣ,* and the breadth of these credentials made him an outstanding choice for this task. Abū Bakr as-Ṣiddīq listed his qualifications in the narration above:

1. Zaid's youth (indicating vitality and energy).
2. His irreproachable morals. Abū Bakr specifically said <i>‘Allah fi an-nisb al-murid</i> ("We do not accuse you of any wrongdoing").
3. His intelligence (indicating the necessary competence and awareness).
4. His prior experience with recording the *wāhij.*
5. I may add one more point to his credit: Zaid was one of the fortunate few who attended the Archangel Jibril's recitations with the Prophet during Ramaḍān.

iii. Abū Bakr's Instructions to Zaid bin Thābit

Let me quote a brief case brought before Abū Bakr while he was caliph. An elderly woman approached him asking for her share in the inheritance of her deceased grandson. He replied that the amount of a grandmother's share was not mentioned in the Qurʾān, nor did he recall the Prophet making any statements regarding this. Inquiring of those in attendance, he received an answer from al-Mughira who, standing up, said he had been present when the Prophet stated that a grandmother's share was one-sixth. Abū Bakr asked if any others could corroborate al-Mughira, to which Muhammad bin Maslama testified in the affirmative. Carrying the matter beyond the realm of doubt meant that Abū Bakr had to request verification before acting on al-Mughira's statement. In this regard Abū Bakr (and subsequently Uthmān, as we shall see) were simply following the Qurʾān's edict concerning witnesses:

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The second opinion finds the most favor with me: acceptance of only those materials which, according to the sworn testimony of two others, had been written in the Prophet’s presence. Ibn Umar’s statement affirms this view, that “Zaid was unwilling to accept any written material for consideration unless two Companions bore witness that the man received his dictation from the Prophet himself.”

According to Prof. Shauqi Daif, Bilal bin Rabah paced the streets of Madinah requesting the attendance of any Companion who possessed verses recorded by the Prophet’s own dictation.

iv. How Zaid bin Thabit Utilized the Written Materials

The normal procedure in collating manuscripts is for the editor to compare different copies of the same work, though naturally not all copies will be of equal value. In outlining manuscript gradations, which are most dependsable and which are worthless, Bergstrasser set out a few rules among the most important of which are:

1. Older copies are generally more reliable than newer ones.
2. Copies that were revised and corrected by the scribe, through comparison with the mother manuscript, are superior to those which lack this.
3. If the original is extant, any copy scribbled from this loses all significance.

Blachère and Sauvaget reiterate this third point: should the author’s original autograph exist, or a copy revised by the author, then the value of all other copies is negated. Likewise, in the absence of the author’s original, any duplicate whose mother copy is available is discarded.

Suppose that a manuscript’s lineage follows the tree above. Consider these two scenarios:

- Assume that the original author only produced a single edition of his book. There were no second editions, or emendations to

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10 Qur’an 2:282. The decree of substituting two women for one man may be due to the former’s lesser fluency with general business procedures. See Muhammad Asad’s translation of the Qur’an, Sana’a 1983.

11 Ibn Abi Dawid, al-Maqalādī, p. 6; see also Ibn Īḥāṣān, Fathul Bāhārī, 114-145.

12 Ibn Īḥāṣān, Fathul Bāhārī, 114-145.

13 Ibn Īḥāṣān, Fathul Bāhārī, 114-145. For the sources of collected materials, see al-Bukhārī, Sunnah, hadith no. 6986.


16 ibid, p. 20.

the first. Three manuscripts of this work are uncovered: (1) the
autographed original (an entire copy written in the author's hand);
(2) a single manuscript which was scribed from the author's original
(A for example); and (3) another manuscript which is very late (L
perhaps). Obviously the second and third manuscripts are worthless
and cannot be taken into consideration when editing the work,
since neither of them is of equal status to the original author's
handwritten copy.
• Again, assume a single edition of the book. Failing to locate the
autographed copy however, the editor is forced to rely on three
other manuscripts. Two manuscripts, written by the original author's
students, we designate as A and B. The third manuscript X is copied
from B. Here X has no value. The editor must depend entirely on A and
B, and cannot discard either of them since both have equal
bearing.

Such are the underpinnings of textual criticism and editing as established
by Orientalists in the 20th century. Fourteen centuries ago, however, Zaid
did precisely this. The Prophet's sojourn in Madinah had been a time of
intense scribal activity; many Companions possessed verses which they had
copied from the parchments of friends and neighbors. By limiting himself
to the verses transcribed under the Prophet's supervision, Zaid ensured that
all of the material be was examining was of equal status, thereby guaranteeing
the highest attainable accuracy. Having memorized the Qur' an and scribed
much of it while seated before the Prophet, his memory and his writings
could only be compared with material of the same standing, not with second-
or third-hand copies.18 Hence the insistence of Abi Bakr, 'Umar and
Zaid on first-hand material only, with two witnesses to back this claim
and assure 'equal status'.

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18 In establishing any text, it is academically unacceptable to compare between dif-
fer grades of manuscripts.
vi. Authentication of the Qur’an: The Case of the Last Two Verses from Sūrat Barā‘a

Tawātūr (تواتر) is a common word in the Islamic lexicon; for example, that the Qur’ān has been transmitted by tawātūr or that a certain text has become established through tawātūr. It refers to gathering information from multiple channels and comparing them, so that if the overwhelming majority agrees on one reading then that gives us assurance and the reading itself acquires authenticity. While no scholarly consensus exists on the number of channels or individuals needed to attain tawātūr, the gist is to achieve absolute certainty and the prerequisites for this may differ based on time, place, and the circumstances at hand. Scholars generally insist on at least half a dozen channels while preferring that this figure be much higher, since greater numbers make falsification less likely and more difficult.

So we return to Sūrat Barā‘a, where the two concluding verses were verified and entered into the Suhuf based solely on Abū Khuzayma’s parchment (and the obligatory witnesses), backed by the memories of Zaid and some other Ḥuffāṣ. But in a matter as weighty as the Qur’ān how can we accept one scrap of parchment and a few Companions' memories as sufficient grounds for tawātūr? Suppose that in a small class of two or three students a professor recites a short, memorable poem and we, directly after the lecture, individually quiz every student about it; if they all recite the same thing then we have our absolute certainty that this is what the professor taught. The same can be extended to the written word or any combination of written and oral sources, provided of course that no collision has occurred between the players, and this is a concept that I myself have demonstrated in classrooms empirically. Such was the case with Sūrat Barā‘a in that the unanimity of the sources on hand, relatively meager though they were, provided enough grounds for certainty. And to counter any fears of collision there is a logical argument: these two verses do not hold anything new theologically, do not speak praise of a particular tribe or family, do not provide information that is not available elsewhere.

within the Qur’ān. A conspiracy to invent such verses is irrational because no conceivable benefit could have arisen from fabricating them. Under these circumstances and given that Allah personally vouches for the Companions’ honesty in His Book, we can infer that there was indeed sufficient tawātūr to sanction these verses.

vii. Placement of the Suhuf into the State Archives

Once complete, the compiled Qur’ān was placed in the ‘state archives’ under the custodianship of Abū Bakr. His contribution, we can summarize, was to collect all first-hand Qur’ānic fragments, then scattered about Madīnah, and arrange for their transcription into a master volume. This compilation was termed Suhuf. It is a plural word (سُحُف; literally, sheets of parchment), and I believe it bears a different connotation from the singular Mūshaf (مصحف), which now designates a written copy of the Qur’ān. At the conclusion of Zaid’s efforts all suras and all verses therein were properly arranged, most likely penned using the prevalent Madani script and spelling conventions (رسم المدنى) as he was a native son of Madīnah. But it seems that sheets of unequal size were used for this task, resulting in what may have been a disorderly heap of parchments. Thus the plural appellation Suhuf. A mere fifteen years later, when Caliph Uthmān sought to dispatch copies to the far corners of the expanding Madani caliphate, the revenues from military conquests had greatly enhanced the availability of quality parchments and he was able to adopt books of equal sheet sizes. These came to be known as Mūshafs.

2. Umar’s Role in the Spread of the Qur’ān

Appointing ‘Umar as the next caliph on his deathbed, Abū Bakr entrusted his successor with the Suhuf.22 Aside from decisive victories on the battlefield, ‘Umar’s reign was marked by the Qur’ān’s rapid spread beyond the confines of the Arabian Peninsula. He dispatched at least ten Companions to Baṣra for the purpose of teaching the Qur’ān,23 and likewise sent Ibn Maš‘ūd to Kūfah.24 When a man subsequently informed ‘Umar that there was a

22 See pp. 323 – 24. for an instance of fabrication in the Bible where the passage has tremendous theological importance.
23 Al-Bukhārī, Sahīḥ, Fad’il al-Qur’ān: Abū ‘Ubaid, Fad’il, p. 281; at-Tirmidhī, Sunan, hadith no. 3102.
24 Abū ‘Ubaid, Fad’il, p. 281.
25 See ad-Dārīnī, Sunan, t.135, edited by Dahmān.
26 Ibn Sa’d, Tabaqāt, vi.3.
person in Kufa dictating the Holy Qur'an to them solely by heart, 'Umar became furious to the point of madness. But discovering the culprit to be none other than Ibn Mas'ud, and recalling his competence and abilities, he calmed down and regained his composure.

Significant information also exists about the spread of the Qur'an in Syria. Yazid bin Abi Sufyan, Syria's governor, described to 'Umar the Muslim masses requiring education in Qur'an and Islamic matters, and appealed to him for instructors. Selecting three Companions for this mission - Mu'adh, 'Ubada, and Abi ad-Dardaa' - 'Umar instructed them to proceed to Hims where, after achieving their objectives, one of them would journey on to Damascus and another to Palestine. When this triumvirate was satisfied with its work in Hims, Abi ad-Dardaa' continued on to Damascus and Mu'adh to Palestine, leaving 'Ubada behind. Mu'adh died soon afterwards, but Abi ad-Dardaa' lived in Damascus for a long time and established a highly reputable circle, the students under his tutelage exceeding 1600.27

Dividing his pupils into groups of ten, he assigned a separate instructor for each and made his rounds to check on their progress. Those passing this elementary level then came under his direct instruction, so that the more advanced students enjoyed the dual privileges of studying with Abi ad-Dardaa' and functioning as intermediary teachers.28

The same method was applied elsewhere. Abi Rajaa' al-Ajaradi states that Abi Musa al-Ash'ari separated his students into groups within the Bajra Masjid,29 supervising nearly three hundred.30

In the capital, 'Umar selected Yazid bin 'Abdullah bin Qusayt to teach the Qur'an to the outlying Bedouins,31 and designated Abi Sufyan as an inspector, to proceed to their tribes and discover the extent to which they had learned.32 He also appointed three Companions in Madinah to teach the children, each with a monthly salary of fifteen dirhams,33 and advised that everyone (including adults) be taught in easy sets of five verses.34

Stabbed by Abi Lu'lu'a (a Christian slave from Persia)35 towards the end of 23 A.H., 'Umar refused to nominate a caliph, leaving the decision to the

people and in the meantime entrusting the ' succinctly fo his daughter Hafsah, the Prophet's widow.

3. Conclusion

In serving the Qur'an Abi Bakr acquitted himself most admirably, heeding its mandate of two witnesses for establishing authenticity,36 and applying this rule to the Qur'an's own compilation. The result, though written on rudimentary parchments of varying size, constituted as sincere an effort as possible to preserve the Words of Allah. Decisive victories beyond Arabia's desert boundaries pushed the frontiers of Islamic education to Palestine and Syria: 'Umar's reign witnessed the blossoming of schools for the memorization of the Qur'an in both the parched sands of Arabia and the rich soils of the fertile crescent. But a new concern clouded the horizon during the 'Umayyad Caliphate, and Zaid bin Thabit's endeavors, as it turned out, were not to end with the passing of Abi Bakr.

28 ibid, ii:346.
30 Al-Fayyabi, Feq' Al-Qur'an, p. 129.
31 Ibn al-Kalbi, Jami'at as-Nasab, p. 143; Ibn Hazm, Jami'at an-Anbiyaa, p. 182.
32 Ibn Hajar, Isr'al Al-Isba', 1:83, no. 332.
33 Al-Baihaqi, Sunan Al-Kabir, vi:124.
34 Ibn Khushir, Feq' Al, vii:495.
36 Qur'an 2:282.