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The Transmission of the Variant Readings of the Qurʾān. The Problem of Tawātur and the Emergence of Shawādhdh.

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Nasser’s book is a small but firm academic step forward towards desacralizing some scholarly clichés (circulating both amidst traditional Muslim theologians as well as partly in the Western scholarship on the Qurʾān) in the field of the Qurʾānic qirāʿāt (variant readings of the Qurʾān). It is mainly a study on the process of transmission of the qirāʿāt (not to mix with the notion of sabʿ at ahruf which Nasser tends to define separately as the seven modes of recitation, although the correlation between them and the qirāʿāt is strong), including their codification and canonization, and with a great deal of attention devoted to the emergence and evolution of the šawāḍḍ (irregular) readings. It is a general academic study, without going comprehensively into the intricacies of many aspects of the researched field, yet broad enough to point to some discovered inconsistencies and a historicity in the traditional qirāʿāt scholarship, and yielding a good overview of the factual state of our knowledge on it.

The book is a revised version of S.H. Nasser’s Ph.D., dissertation submitted at the Harvard University in 2011 (the Lebanese author works as a senior lector of Arabic at Yale University). It comprises five chapters, starting with a general introduction into the field of variant Qurʾānic readings and the collection and codification of the Qurʾān itself (mainly from the Sunni perspective, since the qirāʿāt are almost entirely the domain of the Sunni scholars and were partly used by the Shia to support arguments for the falsification and alteration of the Qurʾān). We learn (p. 6-7 and 10) that for many prominent Muslim scholars such as al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamaḫšarī and Ibn Ḥaldūn, the canonical readings were stripped of their divine nature, and their origin was not attributed to the Prophet himself, but to the Qurʾān readers and transmitters, i.e. to their selectivity in reading and understanding (ijtihād) of the ‘Uthmānic consonantal rasm, as well as that the hadith on al-ahruf al-sabʿa (with its several multiple versions) is the only Prophetic legitimation for the existence of the variant readings of the Qurʾān, without which only “one” reading of the Qurʾān is possible.

The seven qirāʿāt became an established canon not earlier than the 6th/11th century (p. 112). Till that time they were referred to by scholars as “al-qirāʿāt al-mašhūra”. Nasser argues that early Muslim scholars did not look at the variant readings of the Qurʾān as divine revelation. They attributed the Qurʾānic variants to human origins – selectivity of the Qurʾān readers and transmitters, ijtihād or simply their erroneous deciphering of the ‘Uthmānic consonantal outline. One of Nasser’s main concerns is to establish an approximate dating for the circulation of the tradition of sabʿ at ahruf (which has more than thirty-five different interpretations in the Muslim scholarship), for which he applies the methodology of H. Motzki (in which the common link of all the accounts on the collection and codification of the Qurʾān was the person of Ibn Shihab Al-Zuhri). Excluding the “conspiracy theory” on the fabrication of the sabʿ at ahruf tradition, the author concludes that the notion of the sabʿ at ahruf was probably widely promulgated towards the last quarter of the first century hijra (p. 29). However, one must remember that Nasser’s assessment must be considered rather arbitrary, since he is measuring the timeframe of the Islamic tradition by the sources of the very tradition itself. The same goes for his insufficiently critical approach towards the dating of the qirāʿāt works themselves – it is not a mystery that the titles of many variant readings are being attributed to early authors although they most probably belong to much later periods.

Nasser deals extensively with Ibn Mujāhid’s (d.324/936) understanding of the qirāʿāt problem which apparently differs widely from how most Muslim theologians began perceiving it later (and continue till today). Nasser deserves praise for his attempt to reconstruct Ibn Mujāhid’s never-explicitly expressed methodology applied by him for selecting the seven eponymous readings in his Kitāb al-Sabāʿ (p. 48). The modern Muslim literature lists over 40 works on qirāʿāt prior to Ibn Mujāhid (including al-Ṭabarī with his twenty variant readings), not to mention dozens of authors after him (e.g Ibn al-Jazari’s ten variant readings from the 9th/15th century). Nasser tries to answer the following question: Why did Ibn Mujāhid categorization of the variant readings establish itself in the Sunni Islam as the mainstream one, and was centuries later consecrated to become mutawāṭira (although the qirāʿāt failed to meet the conditions of tawātur set by the usūl-s -legists of the principles of Islamic law) and acquired divine status (after consolidating it ultimately with the sabʿ at ahruf tradition)? Remarkably, as Nasser notes, in later qirāʿāt works we find that more reporters/qurrā’ were documented to have transmitted variants on the authority of the seven Reader’s disciples, just as the hadith reporters have multiplied in each generation after the Companions (p. 124). Nasser admits
rightly that the modern Arabic scholarship on qirāʿāt is apologetically concerned with defending the valid and divine nature of the canonical readings and tries to establish a continuous tradition of a never-before-disputed consensus regarding the validity of the canonical readings, a consensus (which probably never existed) that allegedly goes back long before Ibn Mujāhid. Nasser argues that Ibn Mujāhid and early Muslim scholars viewed qirāʿāt just as legal rulings (ahkām) and that only much later the usūlī-s and the qirāʿāt scholars moved the discipline of the variant readings from the domain of fiqh to the domain of prophetic tradition - ḥadith (p. 50).

What is more, Nasser argues that Ibn Mujāhid’s intention was not to limit the canonical readings to the specific number of “seven”, and that one of his main criteria of methodological selection was the ījmāʿ of the Qur’ān readers of five major Islamic metropolises (qurrāʿ al-ʿamsār) who adhered to the ‘Uthmānic codices – Mecca, Medina, Damascus, Basra and Kufa (p. 52-53). The criterion of isnād/tawātur was apparently of inferior importance to Ibn Mujāhid. The term tawātur al-qirāʿāt appeared neither with Ibn Mujāhid nor al-Ṭabarī (p. 65). The role of isnād in the transmission of qirāʿāt was for Ibn Mujāhid different from that of ḥadīth without which a tradition would be automatically dismissed. Ibn Mujāhid did not intend to present the variant readings of the Qur’ān as waḥy (revelation), unlike how later qirāʿāt scholars have presumed (p. 59). As Nasser remarkably notes, if Ibn Mujāhid or the seven eponymous readers believed in the divine nature of the variant readings, they would not have tried to argue for or against certain readings. Nasser concludes boldly that canonizing the qirāʿāt was an act that violated the sunnah of the prophet and the practice of the Companions and the successors some of whom kept reciting the Qur’ān in ways which were rejected by the new Canon (p. 62). Interestingly enough, one might wonder, if so was the case with Ibn Mujāhid and his eponymous readings, was the process of the canonization of the Qur’ānic rasm by the caliph ‘Uthmān (proclaiming the validity of only one consonantal outline variant against the ījmāʿ of many) differing significantly from the story of consecrating the qirāʿāt?

Nasser’s book covers also the problems of Ḥadd al-Qur’ān and the tawātur of the canonical readings, the emergence of ʿawāḏḏ and the nature of the Qur’ānic variants. The author looks at differences in the definitions of the Qur’ān and the notion of tawātur by chosen traditional Islamic authors (usūlī-s, muḥaddithūn, fuqahā, qurrā’), the notions of tawātur and inimitability as parameters and characteristics of the Qur’ān, the capacity of the ʿawāḏḏ readings to establish legal rulings, and the nature of the basmala. He suggests a mechanism for the emergence of the non-canonical readings, by examining and comparing the chains of transmission of the irregular readings with the transmissions of the canonical readings in order to discern what made the isnād-s of canonical readings in the eyes of the qurrā’ more reliable and stronger than the irregular ones. The author also examines whether the types of variants in the Qur’ān (Nasser chooses for this job the last 30 Qur’ānic surahs) and early Arabic poetry (the author chooses Al-Mufaddāliyyāt) have something in common and whether one can find any patterns/trends in the variants in both literature. As it is widely known, the corpus of pre- and early Islamic poems is replete with variants which is considered an important characteristics of the oral nature of Arabic poetry (these variants include different verses order, paraphrasing of complete verses, additions and omissions of words and verses, contradictory case endings and internal vowels etc.) (p. 209). For the purpose of this concordance Nasser determines a set of twenty-three categories of variants (such as case endings, vowels, germination, but also ḥadīth, ṭawāʾir and amalgamation). He concludes his analysis by stating that both literatures share the same types of variants, regardless of the proportions and percentages of each type in its respective genre. What’s more, he suggests that many of the Qur’ānic variants coexisted during the time of the prophet just as variants in ancient poetry coexisted during the lifetime of the poets and rawī-s who lived in an oral-transmission environment (p. 232). Nasser concludes that the mysterious tradition of sabʿ at aḥruf (in its broader sense encompassing the Qur’ānic qirāʿāt) was probably a consequence of the failure of the codification process by ‘Uthmān, which was not able to produce a single unified Reading of the Qur’ān. Thus, the variant readings kept multiplying exponentially until Ibn Mujāhid, when their number became limited again.

Nasser’s book may be considered a good introduction into the field of critical studies on the Qur’ānic variants and the process of their transmission, with a broader glimpse towards the problem of the ʿawāḏḏ. However, his method of juxtaposing the mechanisms of the qirāʿāt transmission with those of the early Islamic poetry, merely drawn in very general terms, needs further study and development.
(e.g. analysis on a larger portion of material). Still it is a valued attempt to step out of the traditional stereotypes of the religious tradition by pointing towards critical academic ways of deduction and reasoning.

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