Nasser Shady Hekmat
The Transmission of the Variant Readings of the Qur'ān. The Problem of Tawātur and the Emergence of Shawādhdh.

Brill, Leiden-Boston 2013,
xii, 252 p.
ISBN : 978-9004240810

Nasser's book is a small but firm academic step forward towards desanctifying some scholarly clichés (circulating both amidst traditional Muslim theologians as well as partly in the Western scholarship on the Qur'ān) in the field of the Qur'ānic *qirā'āt* (variant readings of the Qur'ān). It is mainly a study on the process of transmission of the *qirā'āt* (not to mix with the notion of *sab`at aḥruf* which Nasser tends to define separately as the *seven modes of recitation*, although the correlation between them and the *qirā'āt* is strong), including their codification and canonization, and with a great deal of attention devoted to the emergence and evolution of the *šawāḏḏ* (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 *qirā'āt* 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 Qur'ānic readings and the collection and codification of the Qur'ān itself (mainly from the Sunni perspective, since the *qirā'āt* 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 Qur'ān). We learn (p. 6-7 and 10) that for many prominent Muslim scholars such as al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamaḫšarī and Ibn Ḫaldūn, the canonical readings were stripped of their divine nature, and their origin was not attributed to the Prophet himself, but to the Qur'ān readers and transmitters, i.e. to their selectivity in reading and understanding (*ijtihād*) of the 'Uthmānic consonantal *rasm*, as well as that the *ḥadīth* on *al-aḥruf al-sab`a* (with its several multiple versions) is the only Prophetic legitimization for the existence of the variant readings of the Qur'ān, without which only "one" reading of the Qur'ān is possible.

The seven *qirā'āt* became an established canon not earlier than the 6th/11th century (p. 112). Till that time they were referred to by scholars as "*al-qirā'āt al-mašhūra*". Nasser argues that early Muslim scholars did not look at the variant readings of the Qur'ān as divine revelation. They attributed the Qur'ānic variants to human origins – selectivity of the Qur'ān 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 *sab`at aḥruf* (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 Qur'ān was the person of Ibn Shihab Al-Zuhrī). Excluding the "conspiracy theory" on the fabrication of the *sab`at aḥruf* tradition, the author concludes that the notion of the *sab`at aḥruf* 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 *qirā'āt* 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 *qirā'āt* 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-Sab'a* (p. 48). The modern Muslim literature lists over 40 works on *qirā'āt* prior to Ibn Mujāhid (including al-Ṭabarī with his twenty variant readings), not to mention dozens of authors after him (e.g Ibn al-Jazarī'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 *mutawātira* (although the *qirā'āt* failed to meet the conditions of *tawātur* set by the *uṣūlī*-s - legists of the principles of Islamic law) and acquired divine status (after consolidating it ultimately with the *sab`at aḥruf* tradition)? Remarkably, as Nasser notes, in later *qirā'āt* 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 *ḥadīth* reporters have multiplied in each generation after the Companions (p. 124). Nasser admits

BCAI 30 (2016) Nasser Shady Hekmat: The Transmission of the Variant Readings of the Qur'ān. The Problem of Tawātur and the Emergence of Shawādhdh., recensé par Marcin Grodzki
© IFAO 2026 BCAI en ligne http://www.ifao.egnet.net

rightly that the modern Arabic scholarship on *qirā'āt* 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 *qirā'āt* just as legal rulings (*aḥkām*) and that only much later the *uṣūlī*-s and *the qirā'at scholars* moved the discipline of the variant readings from the domain of *fiqh* to the domain of prophetic tradition - *ḥadīth* (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 *ijmā'* of the Qur'ān readers of five major Islamic metropolises (*qurrā' al-amṣar*) 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-qirā'āt* appeared neither with Ibn Mujāhid nor al-Ṭabarī (p. 65). The role of *isnād* in the transmission of *qirā'āt* 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 *qirā'āt* 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 *qirā'āt* 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 *ijmā'* of many) differing significantly from the story of consecrating the *qirā'āt*?

Nasser's book covers also the problems of *Ḥadd al-Qur'ān* and the *tawātur* of the canonical readings, the emergence of *šawāḏḏ* 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 (*uṣūlī*-s, *muḥaddithūn, fuqahā, qurrā'),* the notions of *tawātur* and inimitability as parameters and characteristics of the Qur'ān, the capacity of the *šawāḏḏ* 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-Mufaḍḍaliyyāt*) 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 *ibdāl, wazn* 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 *sab`at aḥruf* (in its broader sense encompassing the Qur'ānic *qirā'āt*) 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 *šawāḏḏ*. However, his method of juxtaposing the mechanisms of the *qirā'āt* transmission with those of the early Islamic poetry, merely drawn in very general terms, needs further study and development

BCAI 30 (2016) Nasser Shady Hekmat: The Transmission of the Variant Readings of the Qur'ān. The Problem of Tawātur and the Emergence of Shawādhdh., recensé par Marcin Grodzki
© IFAO 2026 BCAI en ligne http://www.ifao.egnet.net

(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.

Marcin Grodzki
Assistant Professor at the Department of Arabic & Islamic Studies
Faculty of Oriental Studies
University of Warsaw

BCAI 30 (2016) Nasser Shady Hekmat: The Transmission of the Variant Readings of the Qur'ān. The Problem of Tawātur and the Emergence of Shawādhdh., recensé par Marcin Grodzki
© IFAO 2026 BCAI en ligne http://www.ifao.egnet.net