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## Canon and canonisation of the Qurʾān, in the Islamic religious sciences

Like that of other scripturalist religions, the **Islamic** literary **canon** consists of various texts and layered textual traditions of varying degrees of sanctity, authority, and stability, acquired at various times in history. The **Qurʾān** and *ḥadīth* (collections of Prophetic and Shīʿī Imāmist logia and exempla) have complex histories of composition and **canonisation**, accompanied and sustained by scholarly and institutional traditions and sanctions, called consensus (*ijmāʿ*) among Sunnīs, that have the pragmatic authority of a lower-order canon. These components of the Muslim canon might be seen to correspond schematically to scriptural, apostolic, patristic, and church traditions among Christian denominations.

The major components—the Qurʾān and the *ḥadīth* (on which, see Brown, Helali)—have complex histories of composition, redaction, incipient canonisation, and canonical closure, however flexible and however contested and open, in the case of the latter *ḥadīth*. Their rela-

tionship is complex and, in some respects, bears comparison to the rabbinical canon. Consensus is a more diffuse process, and scholarship has yet to make possible a synthesis and synopsis in terms of the social and institutional mechanisms that govern the establishment and circulation of consensus, which is, in effect, corporately self-ratifying (Mansour).

### 1. THE QURʾĀN

The Qurʾān is the emblematic canonical text of the Muslim religion, but it is not the only text to perform the canonical functions of proof-textual and symbolic reference. It is a text that Muslim consensus, based upon the Qurʾānic text itself, regards as being of divine provenance, although this is far from clear from the Qurʾān itself, especially given its abrupt pronominal shifts relating to speakers and addressees (Watt, 65ff.; Robinson, 245ff. and chap. 11, passim; Pohlmann, 62ff.).

On the basis of inspired provenance alone, the Qurʾān has the theoretical status of the cardinal canonical text, although this status is negotiated, refracted and restated through *ḥadīth*, commentary, and accumulated religious traditions and practices.

Instances from before the late nineteenth century of a Muslim *sola scriptura* approach to the Qur'ānic canon analogous to the revolutionary Reformation conception of scripture, requiring specific types of reading, are rare and have remained marginal (cf. Folkert, *passim*; Smith, 301; Stern, 231–2).

The word “Qur'ān” appears in the Qur'ānic text as a verbal noun denoting some form of enunciative delivery and as a proper name denoting a text, irrespective of its medium of retention. The history of the texts's composition might be seen as transposing the former into the permanent register of the latter, imprinted onto memory no less than onto a graphic medium, generally called *ṣahīfa* (sheet, pl., or *mushaf* (codex or, rarely, roll). Both are instances of the revealed Book of scripture (*kitāb*), which has become a textual phenomenon.

Canonisation is this process of literarisation, whose rapid cumulative emergence is reflected in the chronology of the text. This moved from rather indistinct references to sheets or tablets (*ṣuhuf*) sent to Abraham and Moses (Q 87:17, 19; 53:36; 20:133), followed by generic references to a book (Q 52:2; 50:4), followed in turn by the Book, clearly a full scripture, sent down to Moses (Q 46:12; 40:53; 29:27; 28:45, 25:35)—a generic book of phatic delivery, a notion that was to persist through Muslim history, along with other senses, after the Qur'ān came to be considered, exegetically and otherwise, as a canonical text (cf. Madigan, 52, 56).

This move from direct prophetic delivery to reiterative performances and on to the register of such cumulative performances carrying them beyond their original pronouncements (cf. Kellermann, 6), from “beatific audition” (Hoffmann, 40) and phatic delivery to the canonical textual

register of those performances, is paralleled by the text's movement to increasing awareness, textual self-reflexivity, and cumulative (sometimes expansive, scholastic, or abrogating) self-reference, recalling, amplifying, reiterating, and modifying earlier enunciations. While the earliest revelations displayed no concern with self-authorisation and no traces of consistent self-referentiality (Sinai, “Self-referentiality,” 108), the Book would later put forward powerful arguments for its own canonical status, allied to a partial disqualification of earlier scriptures, and to swear by itself (Boisliveau, §§ 20, 27, 29; Nöldeke et al., 1:20).

After the turn in Muḥammad's career from local, Cassandra-like Warner (*nadhīr*) to God's Apostle, it seems evident that a scripturalist intent was present early (Q 13:30; 17:82; Bell, *Commentary*, 1:401, 474; Hirschfeld, 33; Boisliveau, §§ 29, 51ff.), as Muḥammad the gentile (*ummī*) addressed a gentile people unfamiliar with scripture (Ibn Hishām, § 61; Bell, 1:80; Paret, 21 f.; Ummī, *EQ*). This rendered virtually all Muḥammadan public pronouncements potentially Qur'ānic and a performative *pars pro toto* of the Book. Each enunciation, and, by extension, the register of such enunciations, was authoritatively oracular.

The Apostle's evidentiary miracle was a revealed Book, *kitāb* (Q 46:4), a collection of primordial signs (*āyāt*, sing. *āya*, the word that designates also verses of the Qur'ān), a revelation precipitating division from previous revelations, and a new point of departure, *al-furqān*, announced in the opening verse of the chapter (*sūra*) by this name (Q 25:1). The canonisation of any and every particular Word of God preceded the recognition of the canonical authority of the textually standardised *mushaf* (codex, van Ess, *TG*, 1:34; cf. Stern,

229; Chapman, 30ff., 38; Halbertal, 11ff.). Literary canonisation involved the literary delimitation of this oracular material and its durable register (cf. Sinai, *Fortschreibung*, 5; Boisliveau, § 19).

## 2. COMPOSITION AND THE PRE-LITERARY CANON

It is clear from recent scholarship—based on a critical use of Arabic literary sources and on the materiality of the text as evidenced by literary structure and material remains—that the process of Qur'ānic composition was complex and early. The evidence is not only codicological but also epigraphic (Whelan, *passim*). Hyper-sceptical, tradition-historical studies of recent decades have been shown to lack a solid foundation and to have employed untenable and unnecessary assumptions (Donner, *Narratives*, 26ff., 139; Donner, *The Qur'ān*; Motzki; van Ess, *Review*, 139).

Recent research into the earliest Qur'ānic parchments, including carbon dating of the single “Stanford 07” parchment folio, provides evidence of very early redaction, not later than fifteen years after the Apostle's death, with indications of prototypes closer than some other Companion codices to what became the 'Uthmānic vulgate, on evidence of the sequence of sentences within verses (Sadeghi and Bergman, 346f., 353). These would constitute what have been termed “predecessor text-forms” (Epp, *passim*; Small, 163f., 180).

Apart from the circulation—oral, as well as written on various materials—of Qur'ānic fragments of various lengths and descriptions, there are indications of the early composition of autograph Qur'āns (Sijistānī, 50; Ibn Sa'd, 2:306f; among these autographs are those by Ubayy b.

Ka'b (d. between 19/640 and 35/656), Mu'adh b. Jabal (d. 17/638 or 18/639), Zayd b. Thābit (d. between 42/662–3 and 56/675–6), Ibn Mas'ūd (d. 32/652–3), 'Uthmān b. 'Affān (r. 23–35/644–56), Mujammi' b. Jāriya, and the obscure figures Qays b. Zā'ūrā' (killed at the battle of Badr, 2/624) and Qays b. al-Sukn: Ibn Ḥazm, 146). Extensive reports about parchment records (*ṣuhuf*) of Muḥammad's sayings in the custody of 'Ā'isha and others in Muḥammad's hand or dictated by him, cannot be without foundation and are, in fact, likely. The same may be true of a collection in the custody of Ḥafṣa, another wife of Muḥammad (Ibn Shabba, §§ 997, 1711; Comerro, 160, 163, chap. 8, *passim*). The Qur'ān speaks clearly of collation (*jam'*), with reference to itself (Q 75:17; Watt, 90). This process collated materials from codices, texts of single *sūras* or groups of *sūras* (identified by sigla often referred to as “mysterious letters,” Welch, *Qur'ān, EI2*), and various other groups of texts (Al-Azmeh, *Emergence*, chap. 7). A certain degree of literary intervention and redaction, at least in some parts of the text and at various stages in composition and transmission, is undeniable (Sinai, *Heilige Schrift*, 54ff.).

## 3. LITERARY CANONISATION AND VARIANTS

As with narratives of pre-literary canonical material, traditional narratives of literary canonisation are neither implausible nor improbable in their broad outlines, as incomplete and as incoherent as they may be with regard to some details (cf. Watt, 44). These matters call into question the seamlessness of the process as cast in Muslim traditions and convey the impression that canonisation was a long and complex process, but these do not undermine the

credibility of the overall picture (Schoeller, 789). Considering critically the voluminous material already referred to (Ibn Shabba, § 1711ff.), along with the ideologically more streamlined but divergent standard accounts (al-Bukhārī, K. 66, B. 3; al-Ṭabarī, ad Q 2:248, 33:23; Comerro, *passim*) of the literary canonisation of the Qur'ān, one gains a strong impression of a state-directed operation that involved selection and exclusion from among the materials that, despite their divergences, were fairly uniform in structure and content. The period of Uthmānic literary canonisation is c. 23–9/644–50.

That the agreement between the various so-called readings that emerged—the *qirā'āt* (al-Suyūṭī, 1:153ff., 469ff.)—is “stunning” (Sadeghi and Bergmann, 379ff.) testifies to a considerable textual conformity striven for by the authors of the pre-literary, predecessor autograph and other pre-canonical versions. The readings recorded in Shīrī sources, including forty-nine not attested elsewhere (Amir-Moezzi, 98), are of the same type, if we exclude material of specifically Shīrī doctrinal and political import. Codicological evidence for more significant variants is absent from extant manuscripts but present in earlier palimpsests (Small, 101 f., 174 f., 177), at least one of which preserves traces of other, hitherto unknown redactions (Hilālī, Palimpseste, 445).

The *qirā'āt* literature reports, in all, thirty-eight *sūras* without variations, and ten with a single disputed division; *sūra* 20 stands out, with twenty disputed divisions. The density of disputed points is greater in the shorter *sūras* (cf. Sadeghi and Bergmann, 377). Sequences of verses in individual chapters are the same in all readings, but the non-Uthmānic codices deriving from the pre-literary autograph

texts (Leemhuis, Codices) of Ibn Mas'ūd, Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī (d. 52/672), Miqdād b. Aswad, and Ubayy b. Ka'b were not simply variants of the Uthmānic codex (Beck, 353; Sadeghi and Gouadzari, Ṣan'ā', 1:17ff.) and need to be seen as independent lines of transmission that have all the dynamics of repetition and emendation. Some excluded portions of the text were retained in the canonical codices, others included elements not found in it, and some had different names for chapters and minor variations in the sequence of chapters. Some *sūras* were shortened in the final redactions: *sūra* 33, possibly also 2, 105 and 106 (al-Sayyārī, §§ 418ff., 661, 699).

In most cases, the readings concerned vocabulary, vocalisation, articulation, orthography (Small, Chapter 3), and related features (see Ibn Qutayba, 28f., for a crisp typology, and al-Qurṭubī, for later exegetical possibilities), including textual variation more broadly understood (e.g., *al-riyāṭ<sup>u/u</sup> musakhhharāt<sup>h/um</sup> bi-amrī<sup>i</sup>* for the canonical 16:12, *wa-sakhhhar<sup>a</sup> lakum<sup>u</sup> l-layl<sup>a</sup> wa-l-nahār<sup>a</sup>*; Sufyān al-Thawrī, 122).

But these are all variations on a text—not on a literary urtext, for such does not exist, but a text that developed and was transmitted in various forms and media, to be redacted in various ways, including the autograph versions, until a literary canon was set, with which comparison could be made. Variations, including those already mentioned, conform to several patterns that have been well studied in New Testament paleography and codicology and put to good use in similar studies of Qur'ānic variants and readings (Sadeghi and Bergmann, 385ff., 388 ns. 85–6, 396; Small, chaps. 3–7).

The relationship between the autograph readings and the literary canon of

the Qur'ān does not, therefore, represent a departure from a common mother text but rather conformity with the skeletal-morphemic text redacted with reference to available texts—autograph as well as more fragmentary—adopted as canonical during the reign of 'Uthmān (Ibn Shabba, §§ 1165ff.). When this had been established, much leeway for variation was available, 'Uthmān being plausibly reported to have asserted that the Qur'ān does indeed contain linguistic infelicities, *luḥūn* (sing. *lahn*), which the Arabs, he trusts, will rectify according to their various dialects (Ibn Shabba, §§ 1762f.), a variability that needs to be taken as intrinsic to the text (Kellermann, 12–3).

In this sense, the “sealing” of the canon appears more flexible than is usually assumed. The 'Uthmānic codex therefore laid out a path but provided no definitive solution to the vexed question of the relationship between writing and verbal enunciation, a relationship that involves feedbacks between grammatical formalisation and standardisation and dialects, and translation between media, bringing into play sociolinguistic factors as well as technical factors of orthography. The decision to adopt a *rasm* without the dots that would facilitate vocalisation (*raqsh*)—dots whose use at the time is revealed by evidence that has been accumulating rapidly in the past few years—suggests a deliberate choice (al-Ghabbān, 95).

Pointing (*raqsh*) had been available very early—as evidenced physically in papyri (22/643) and inscriptions (24/645)—predating the reign of 'Uthmān and probably also the prophet Muḥammad (al-Asad, 34ff.; Abbott, 18, 39; al-Ghabbān, 91, 93; Ghabbān, 218, 225ff.; Grohmann, 1:57; Ibn Manẓūr, s.v. *r-q-sh*; Robin, 320, 339ff.). The vocalisation of a consonantal

text (*rasm*) had long been conceived as an undertaking distinct from the basic *rasm* itself, the graphic register. Variations in reading were sometimes related to the graphic register, as illustrated by the Ṣan'ā' Qur'ān parchments (Puin, 109). What was still missing was a special notation for short vowels, an important orthographic innovation that was to come later. This all took place in the context of the Medinan reform of writing conventions, possibly following the example of the court at al-Ḥīra (Robin, 322, 342; Abbott, 10ff., 22ff.; cf. Khoury, 263 f.). Déroche suggests that this reform is reflected in early Qur'ān manuscripts (*Transmission*, 162).

Recent studies of the earliest Qur'ān manuscripts, despite being “defective” in the ways outlined above, show, in great detail, a deliberative formalisation fitting for a canon. This included a literary sequence in an approximate order of decreasing length that seems to have marked the earliest recensions, an arrangement interrupted to accommodate *sūra*-groups identified by their sigla (Bauer). Divisions within chapters were notated, signifying breaks in reading and connecting rhythmically bodies of text that are not otherwise coherent (Spitaler). Many of these features are evident in the early manuscripts studied recently and published in facsimile (Déroche, *Transmission*; Déroche and Noja Nosedá, vols. 1 and 2/1; *al-Muṣḥaf* 1, 2; Rezvan; the online publications of the Corpus Coranicum; Neuwirth, 267ff., is an excellent conspectus of modern codicological developments). Some are physically arranged in a deliberate way, after the manner of extant Greek manuscripts, divided into quinions (quires of five folios), with the flesh side of the parchment out, dating from as early as the second half of the first/seventh century (*al-Muṣḥaf* 1, 86;

Déroche, *Codicology*, 73 f.; Déroche, *Transmission*, 151). The layout shows evidence of ruling and attention to the physical proportions of the page (Déroche, *Codicology*, 159 f., 169), and chapters were indicated by red marks, which were sometimes added to older manuscripts that lacked them (Rezvan, 12).

To emergent political institutionalisation corresponded emergent graphic forms of the Qur'ān, first as a *ne varietur* graphic redaction in principle, later as what was, in principle, a *ne varietur* set of readings. Not all 'Uthmānic codices in Syria, Medina, Basra, and Kufa were copied from a single archetype, but variations between them are negligible, and there is little contamination between them, testifying to fairly stable transmissions (Cook, 90ff., 103f., and *passim*), despite some orthographic irregularity and inconsistency that indicates developing work by individual scribes (Déroche, *Transmission*, 168).

#### 4. EDITORIAL STANDARDISATION AND SEALING THE CANON

With the skeletal-morphemic 'Uthmānic codices in place and others proscribed, it was possible to subject the canon to further editorial refinement, corresponding to the growing rationalisation of state procedures. The canon was an imperial product par excellence; extant manuscripts are sumptuous and monumental in size and were clearly produced at great expense, many of them probably under imperial patronage for lodging in mosques (von Bothmer, 5, 15f.; Rezvan, 60; Déroche, *Beauté*, 23); the commodification of the canon would come later, along with the availability of paper (Cortese, *passim*). The Umayyads—'Abd al-Malik (r. 65–86/685–705) and his son al-Walīd (r. 86–96/705–15), in particular—gave a decisive push towards

the standardisation of Qur'ānic text after the Second Civil War (c. 62–73/680–92), with the attempt, ultimately successful, to adapt and adopt the 'Uthmānic redaction of the Book and to consign to the margins others that remained in circulation at the time but that thereafter led a largely literary, exegetical, and antiquarian career.

Elements of Umayyad chancery and monumental script were used in this standardised text (contrast Déroche, *Transmission*, 109ff., with Khoury, 263). Texts used and collated by the commission set up by al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf (d. 95/714), the governor of Iraq, are of various provenances, some presumably used in the redaction of the 'Uthmānic codex (Hamdan, 35, 37ff., 133ff., 141ff.). The result was a codex that attempted, with greater rigour than its predecessors, to reform and tighten orthographic conventions. Apart from eleven changes in reading/writing, it involved the canonical divisions of the text, a greater consistency in diacritical pointing, divisions in tenths, sevenths, and fifths relevant to recitation on specified occasions, and counts of the numbers of words and consonants it contained (Sijistānī, 49f.; Hamdan, 149ff., 152ff., 156ff.).

In short, there was a move towards a *scriptio plena* as the standard. By the fourth/tenth century, following the fuller grammatisation of Arabic, matters had developed to a state in which all *maṣāḥif* acquired complete phonetic notation as standard c. 287–390/900–1000 (Déroche, *Coran*, 79f.). The canonical text was thereby closed, but variant readings were not precluded. Copies were dispatched to the provinces, and other codices were destroyed, including the particularly resilient one of Ibn Mas'ūd, whose reading, though proscribed, was to remain in circulation for centuries and was used later by the Fāṭimids.

The variant readings of the 'Uthmānic vulgate were eventually brought into the system of "seven readings" by Ibn Mujāhid (d. 324/936), according to several internal and external, formal, and historical criteria (Brockett, 37), under the patronage of the 'Abbāsīd *wazīr* Ibn Muqla (d. 328/940). It is significant that this ultimate canonisation of the Qur'ānic text took place just a few decades later than the composition of works that were to constitute the canon of *ḥadīth*: the former spreading out from Iraq, the latter from the east and northeast of the Muslim oecumene (cf. Al-Azmeh, 108). This further rationalisation of canon was, not surprisingly, accomplished along with another reform of Arabic script, that towards cursive, again following administrative practice (Tabbaa, *Canonicity*, passim; Tabbaa, *Transformation*, passim; Leemhuis, *Readings*, 335; Rezvan, 70ff.). This had, in turn, succeeded another, when the 'Abbāsīds came to power and the Hījāzī script (for which, see Déroche and Noja, 2/1: xivff.) of the earliest extant manuscripts was displaced by the Kufic (Rezvan, 70).

With Ibn Mujāhid we have seven allowable readings, with the "three after the seven" to be added a century later, after fulfilling Ibn Mujāhid's criteria (al-Qurṭubī, 1:42ff.; Leemhuis, *Readings*). Just a century later, two distinct lines of transmission for each of the seven readings were already on record. Departures from the vulgate and its approved variants, and public readings of non-'Uthmānic or pre-'Uthmānic Qur'āns resulted in the requirement of formal, written, and witnessed recantation, if grave consequences were to be avoided.

The very individual reading of 'Āṣim b. Bahdala al-Asadī (d. 127/745) (Beck,

376), one of the seven canonical readings, was the one adopted, through the transmission of his pupil Ḥafṣ b. Sulaymān al-Bazzāz (d. 180/796), by the Cairo Vulgate of 1923, again under the royal patronage of King Fu'ād I. This was in line with the preferred Ottoman reading and was consistent with Muslim modernists' loss of interest in readings (Rezvan, 110) and their evident preference for the notion, inspired by Protestantism, of a stable canon. This standard canon came to supplant the variety of readings used in live Qur'ānic recitations current at the time (Bergsträsser, *Koranlesung*, 112), thereby again, in effect, working towards the suppression of variants and establishing what has now become the chief standard edition of the Book, with the exception of the Warsh reading approved by Moroccan authorities and others habitually used in Tunisia and elsewhere. This edition has acquired even greater force by the world-wide distribution of Qur'āns printed in Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries. Unlike the Qur'ān of Catherine the Great (r. 1762–96) (Rezvan, 109), the Cairo edition has met with almost universal success. Nevertheless, the intrinsic characteristic of variability persists in oral performances, rigid as their conventions might be, and the oral performance and the acoustic Qur'ān are pragmatically a part of the canon (Kellermann, 21ff.; Neuwirth, 261f.).

Neither of these standard versions was based on what might be called a critical edition of the Qur'ān. Work on a critical edition was begun by students of Nöldeke (Bergsträsser, *Plan*; Jeffery) and is being continued vigorously, in various ways, by individuals and groups of researchers in recent years.

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