

5. An Examination of the Readings

Synopsis: The uninterrupted transmission of the Qur'an is one of the necessities; the readings of the Qur'an are not transmitted uninterruptedly; statements by experts that the readings were not uninterruptedly transmitted; the seven *harfs* are not the seven readings of the Qur'an; the authoritativeness of the readings; the lawfulness of their recitation for daily worship.

At the beginning of chapter 4, we cited some opinions on whether or not the readings of the Qur'an have been transmitted by uninterrupted transmission (*tawatur*). We pointed out that those who investigated this matter have denied that the readings have been handed down by uninterrupted transmission, while, by contrast, Muslims are in agreement about the uninterrupted transmission of the Qur'an itself. We shall now proceed to discuss the rudiments that support the view we have adopted regarding the readings of the Qur'an—namely, that these readings have not been transmitted without interruption in every generation of their chains of transmission.

First, careful consideration of the transmitters themselves reveals with certainty that the readings have reached us through single narrations (*akhbar al-ahad*), the transmitters of which do not reach anywhere near the number that is required for the readings to be regarded as uninterrupted transmissions. Indeed, this is evident from what we included in the transmitters' biographies. How, then, could it be valid to claim conclusively that these readings have reached us through uninterrupted transmission? This is not to mention that some of these transmitters have neither been acknowledged nor confirmed as trustworthy.

Second, careful reflection on the ways in which the readers received their readings would lead us to conclude with certainty that these readings were undoubtedly transmitted to them through single narrations.

Third, the fact that the chains of transmission go back to the readers only, [not to the Prophet], disrupts the continuity of transmission even if the transmitters in each generation are beyond suspicion of connivance in a falsehood. The reason is that each reader was evidently transmitting his own reading [rather than one transmitted to him from the Prophet].

Fourth, the fact that each of these [ten readers], as well as their followers, produced arguments to prove the authenticity of their respective readings, and their rejection of readings [other than] their own is an absolute proof that the readings were based on the personal judgment of the reader and the opinions of those who followed him. Otherwise, had the readings been received without interruption from the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny), there would have been no need for proof and arguments confirming their validity.

Fifth, the rejection of a number of readings by a number of prominent scholars is itself a clear proof of the lack of continuity in the transmission of the readings, for, otherwise, such a rejection would be incorrect. Ibn Jarir al-Tabari, for example, rejects the reading of Ibn 'Amir and contests, in numerous places, some other readings among the seven. Others have challenged the readings of Hamza, Abu 'Amr, and Ibn Kathir. The scholars have generally agreed on denying the status of uninterrupted transmission to any reading which is not supported by one of the accepted levels of Arabic rhetoric, and have determined that some readers did indeed commit errors.¹ We have already mentioned in the biography of Hamza that his reading was rejected by the founder of the Hanbalite school of jurisprudence, Ahmad b. Hanbal, as well as by Yazid b. Hamn, Ibn Muḥdi,² Abu Bakr b. 'Ayyash, and Ibn Durayd.

Al-Zarkashi, having adopted the view that the [accepted] readings are not open to choice, disagreed with a number of scholars, including al-Zamakhshari, who held that readings are [in fact] open to choice, and that this choice depends on the opinion of the masters of language and on the independent reasoning of the rhetoricians. Al-Zarkashi refutes the choice of Hamza where he read the word *wa al-arhama* ["the wombs," in verse 4:1] with the declension *ī* [i.e., *al-arhami*], and then goes on to say:

Similarly, it has been reported that Abu Zayd, al-Ama'l, and Ya'qub al-Hadrami faulted Hamza for reading *wa ma antum bi-musrikhiyya* ["nor can you help me," in verse 14:22] with the genitive declension *i* over the stressed ending [i.e., *musrikhiyyi*]. They also criticized Abu 'Amr for contracting the letter *ra* into the letter *lam* in *yaghfir lakum* ["will forgive you," a recurrent phrase in the Qur'an: i.e., he read it as *yaghfir-rakum*, instead of *yaghfir lakum*]. "This," al-Zajaj said, "is an atrocious error."³

Statements by the Scholars Who Deny the Uninterrupted Transmission of the Readings

To make this matter as clear as possible, it is appropriate to mention here [ten] excerpts of what has been said by authorities in this field who deny that the readings were transmitted without interruption.

1. Ibn al-Jazan says:

Any reading that accords with one of the levels (*wajh*) of Arabic grammar,⁴ and complies with one of the 'Uthmanic codices,⁵ even if this were only a supposition,⁶ and is supported by a sound chain of transmission, then it should be considered a sound reading, and may not be refuted, nor would it be

lawful to repudiate it; rather, it should be regarded as one of the seven *harfs*,⁷ according to which the Qur'an was revealed, and it is incumbent on people to accept it regardless of whether it is transmitted on the authority of the seven, or ten, leading readers [of the Qur'an] or any other acceptable prominent reader. However, when any [one] of these three criteria is not met, then such a reading must be designated as weak, rare, or invalid, regardless of whether it has been transmitted by one of the seven readers or someone even more prominent.

This opinion is correct and has been maintained by leading scholars of past and present generations. It has been explicitly stated by the leading traditionist Abu 'Amr 'Uthman al-Dani, and has been expressed more than once in writing by the religious scholar Abu Ahmad Makki b. Abi Talib and [by] Abu al-'Abbas Ahmad b. 'Ammar al Mahdawi. The leading traditionist Abu al-Qasim 'Abd al-Rahman b. Isma'ti, known as Abu Shamma, has confirmed it as being the opinion of all the early scholars, of whom no one is known to have opposed it.

2. [Ibn al-Jazari continues]:

Abu Shamma writes in his book *al-Murshid al-Wajiz*: "One should not be deceived by every reading attributed to one of those leading [readers] and regard it as accurate and declare that it was thus revealed by God, except if it meets [the above mentioned] criteria. But if they [the readings] do not meet them, no compiler would be alone in transmitting them, nor would such a compiler limit himself to transmitting them from one of the seven, for their soundness would not be weakened if they were transmitted from someone other than the seven. The evaluation of a reading depends on how much it meets the above criteria, not on the person to whom it is ascribed. In the final analysis, all readings, whether attributed to the seven or others, are classified either as generally accepted or as rare. People feel greater confidence in the seven readers, however, because so much of their reading has been generally accepted as sound."⁸

3. Ibn al-Jazari says further:

With regard to this criterion [i.e., sound tradition], a contemporary scholar has stipulated that the transmission must be uninterrupted [from the Prophet's time], and he would not be content with a chain of transmission which is merely sound. He argues that the authenticity of the Qur'an is not established except through uninterrupted transmission, and that anything that has been transmitted through a single narration cannot be considered part of the Qur'an. The weakness of this argument is obvious, for if uninterrupted transmission were established, there would be no need for any of the other two criteria, like the text [of one of the 'Uthmanic codices]. This is because whatever variant is confirmed by uninterrupted transmission from the Prophet (peace be upon him) must be accepted definitively as part of the Qur'an regardless of whether it agrees with the 'Uthmanic codices or not. If we are to make uninterrupted transmission a condition in judging every instance of alternative recitation, most of the variant recitations preserved on the authority of those seven authorities and others would be disproved. Earlier, I was inclined toward this opinion; but subsequently, its weakness became obvious to me, it

being better to agree with the opinion of past and present authorities.

4. [Ibn al-Jazari continues]:

The great scholar Abu Shamma writes in his book al-Murshid: "It has become well known among the contemporary teachers [of the Qur'an], and a group among the followers of the seven readings, that all of these readings have been transmitted from the seven readers without interruption, in chains of single authorities reporting successively from one another. Moreover, they maintain that it is incumbent to accept as conclusive that all of them have been revealed by God. We, too, believe in this, but only with regard to such of their readings on which there is a consensus among the chains of transmitters and the various religious groups, [these] having become widespread and well known without being refuted by anyone. This is the minimum condition for accepting a reading that has not been transmitted without interruption. [9](#)

5. Al-Suyuti writes:

The best person who expressed his opinion on this matter is the leading reader of his time, the teacher of our teachers, Abu al-Khayr b. al-Jazari. At the beginning of his book, al-Nashr, he writes: "Any reading that accords with one of the levels (*wajh*) of Arabic grammar and complies with one of the 'Uthmanic codices . . . then it should be considered a sound reading."

He goes on to quote in full the same passage we quoted above, then adds, "The imam Ibn al-Jazari was extremely well-versed in this matter." [10](#)

6. Abu Shamma writes in his book *Kitab al-Basmala*:

We are not one of those who insist on uninterrupted transmission for the words on which there is a difference of opinion among the readers; rather, all readings are based on uninterrupted as well as interrupted transmissions. This is clear to anyone who is fair and knowledgeable, and who has examined the readings and the chains of their transmission. [11](#)

7. Some other scholars, [according to Abli Shamma],

have mentioned that none of the leading scholars of legal theory (*Usuliyyun*) have stated that the readings have been transmitted uninterruptedly. On the other hand, there are those who maintain that investigations have shown that the seven readings have been uninterruptedly transmitted from those seven authorities; but it is questionable if the uninterrupted transmissions go back to the Prophet (peace be upon him). The chains of transmission going back to the seven readers can be found in the books of readings. They are chains of single narrators, reporting successively from one another. [12](#)

8. Some later authorities on the traditions have said:

Some scholars of legal theory (*ahl al-usul*) have claimed that each of the seven readings has been

reported by uninterrupted transmission, and others have claimed that for all the ten readings. For this opinion there is no trace of research Moreover, a group of readers has reported that there is a consensus that each of the readings is based on uninterrupted transmission as well as on single narrations. No one in this latter group maintains that each one of the seven readings, let alone the ten, is entirely based on uninterrupted transmission. The latter view is the opinion of some legal theorists. However, the people most knowledgeable [about] a subject are the ones who practice it. [13](#)

9. In the course of discussing this subject, Makkr says, among other things:

Sometimes they [some legal theorists] defer to what 'Asim and Nafi' agreed upon, for the readings of these two authorities are the most preferable and have the soundest chains of authority, and the most eloquent Arabic style. [14](#)

10. Among those who have admitted the lack of uninterrupted transmission in even the seven readings is the jurist-doctor Muhammad b. Sa'id al-'Iryan, in his annotations to [al-Rafi'i's *I'jaz al-Qur'an*], where he says:

None of the readings is free of incongruity; even the seven famous [ones] have much incongruity in them. [15](#) According to [some authorities], the soundest readings from the point of view of well-documented chains of transmission are those of Nafi' and 'Aim; and the ones which strive for the highest level of eloquence are those of Abu 'Amr and al-Kisa'i. [16](#)

In the preceding, we have cited the minimal number of views necessary. We shall have the opportunity to cite more views later.

At this juncture let us ponder for a moment. After the testimony of all these prominent scholars about its absence, is there any value left to the claim regarding the uninterrupted transmission of the readings? In addition, is it possible to prove the uninterrupted transmission by following the opinion of an authority, that is, through *taqlid* (unquestioning adoption of ideas), and by accepting the lead of those who have merely conceded to somebody else's investigation without seeing evidence to that effect, more particularly in cases where the conscience refutes the claim to uninterrupted transmission? And even more astonishing than all of this is the ruling of the mufti of Andalusia, Abu Sa'id, that anyone who denied its uninterrupted transmission had committed an act of disbelief (*kufr*)!

Assuming that, according to all concerned, the readings were transmitted without interruption, would someone who denies this be committing an act of disbelief, if [maintaining such a belief] is not one of the necessities of religion? Furthermore, assuming that, as a result of this presumed uninterrupted transmission, such a belief becomes a necessity of religion, then, would anyone denying it be committing an act of disbelief, even the one for whom this is not proven? O, my God, indeed, such a claim is nothing but insolence against You, and a transgression against Your boundaries, and a cause of division among the followers of Your religion!

The Evidence That Supports the Uninterrupted Transmission of the Readings

Those who maintain that the seven readings have been transmitted without interruption base their views on the following considerations.

First, [consider] the claim that there is a consensus of scholars from early times till the present on this opinion. The error of this claim has already been made clear to the reader. Add to this that a view accepted by one school of thought and rejected by others does not constitute a consensus. We shall elaborate on this [later], God willing.

Second, the importance paid to the Qur'an by the Companions of the Prophet and their Followers must have entailed the uninterrupted transmission of its reading. And this is evident to any fair-minded and just person.

The response to this is as follows. This argument actually establishes only the uninterrupted transmission of the Qur'an itself, not the manner of reading it, especially since the readings of some of the readers are based on personal judgment (*ijtihad*) or on hearing (*sama'*) even from a single authority, as we have already pointed out. If this had not been so, the logical necessity of this argument would be to regard all readings as having been transmitted without interruption, and not just the seven or ten of them. We shall explain [later] that the confinement of the readings to the seven occurred in the third century of the hijra (emigration). Before this period, such an opinion had no existence or trace. The logical conclusion of this view is that we should accept the uninterrupted transmission of all readings without any distinction among them, or reject it of all of them on the points where they disagree. Indisputably, the first proposition is invalid, and, therefore, the second proposition is established.

Third, if the seven readings have not been uninterruptedly transmitted, then the Qur'an cannot be regarded as uninterruptedly transmitted either. Since the concluding proposition is invalid, the antecedent is necessarily invalid. That which establishes this logical necessity is that the Qur'an reached us through those who memorized it as well as through the famous readers. Thus, the Qur'an is uninterruptedly transmitted only if their readings are uninterruptedly transmitted, otherwise not. Therefore, there is no escape from the opinion regarding the uninterrupted transmission of the readings themselves.

The response [to this is as follows].

1. [The argument about] the uninterrupted transmission of the Qur'an [from the Prophet himself] does not necessitate that the same be maintained about the readings, for the difference of opinion on the style of a word does not negate an agreement on its original state. It is for this reason that we find that the difference among the transmitters of some words in al Mutanabbi's poetry, for example, is not inconsistent with their being uninterruptedly transmitted from him, or with the fact that he composed

them. Similarly, the variations in the particulars about the account of the Prophet's hijra does not in any way negate the fact that the reports about the hijra itself have been transmitted without interruption.

2. What has come down to us from the readers is [that there are] nuances in their readings. The actual Qur'an, however, has reached us [from the Prophet himself] through uninterrupted transmission among Muslims from generation to generation. Moreover, it was preserved through memorization in their hearts and through writing. The readers of the Qur'an had nothing to do with this [aspect of preservation] at all. It is for this reason that the uninterrupted transmission of the Qur'an is an established fact even if we assume that the seven, or ten, readers never existed. The greatness of the Qur'an is far too exalted to depend on that handful of individuals.

Fourth, if the readings are not to be regarded as uninterruptedly transmitted, then the same would apply to some terms of the Qur'an, like *malik* and *malik*. Consequently, accepting one of them, rather than the other, as the correct reading would be an unwarranted arbitrariness. This is the argument that was submitted by Ibn al-Hajib, and a group has subsequently followed him in this.

The response [to this is as follows].

1. According to this argument, one should rule that all the readings are uninterruptedly transmitted, and that to limit this to the seven would also be an unwarranted arbitrariness, especially since some readers other than the seven have been acknowledged as more important and reliable than the seven, as we shall note. Even if we concede that the seven readers were the most reliable and the most knowledgeable about the features of the readings, it does not follow that uninterrupted transmission is true only of their readings, to the exclusion of all others. Of course, in practice, this would make their readings preferable to the others. Nevertheless, there is a vast difference between these two matters, and the view that all the readings are uninterruptedly transmitted is necessarily incorrect.

The differences in the reading, however, cause confusion between what is from the Qur'an and what is not, and make it difficult to differentiate them from the point of form and vocalization. This is not inconsistent with the uninterrupted transmission of the original Qur'an. The substance [of the Qur'an] remains uninterruptedly transmitted even if there are variations in its form or vocalization. One of the two or more forms [transmitted in the readings] is bound to be from the Qur'an, even if we do not know exactly which one.

Further Observations

The fact of the matter is that the uninterrupted transmission of the Qur'an does not necessitate the uninterrupted transmission of the readings as such. Al-Zurqani admitted this when he said:

Some people have exaggerated in their commendation of the seven readings, and have maintained that anyone who asserts that there is no need for uninterrupted transmission in them has committed an act of

disbelief, since that entails that the whole Qur'an has not been transmitted without interruption. This view is ascribed to the mufti of Andalusia, al-Ustadh Abu Sa'id Faraj b. Lubb, who was unflinching in his opinion and wrote a lengthy treatise to support his belief and refute those who refuted him. However, his reasoning does not hold, for the opinion that the seven readings are not uninterruptedly transmitted does not entail the opinion that the Qur'an also is not transmitted uninterruptedly. Why should that follow, when there is such a big difference between the Qur'an and its seven readings that it could be true that the Qur'an has been transmitted without interruption through other readings than the seven, or [transmitted] to the extent that all the readers have agreed upon, or in as much as is accepted by a number of persons, whether readers or not readers, large enough to ensure that they are not conniving in a falsehood. [17](#)

Some others have maintained that the uninterrupted transmission of the Qur'an [from the Prophet] does not necessitate that the readings have been transmitted without interruption. Indeed, none of the leading scholars of legal theory (*usliyyun*) have arrived at the conclusion that the readings are uninterruptedly transmitted, and that the uninterrupted transmission of the Qur'an depends on its readings being transmitted without interruption, as maintained by Ibn al-Hajib. [18](#) According to Al-Zarkashi, in his book al-Burhan, "The Qur'an and the readings [of the Qur'an] are two entirely different realities. The Qur'an is the divine revelation to Muhammad (peace be upon him and his progeny), intended to serve as an elucidation [of divine guidance] and a miracle [as evidence of the prophethood of Muhammad]. [In contrast], the readings are the differences in the modes of the words of this revelation, whether shortened or doubled and so on. The seven readings are regarded by the majority as uninterruptedly transmitted, but some maintain that they [the seven] are only the most acceptable." Al-Zarkashi also says:

Investigation establishes that these readings are uninterruptedly transmitted from the seven authoritative readers. However, as for their being uninterruptedly transmitted from the Prophet, there is reason for doubt in this. The chains of transmission of these seven readings are recorded in the books of readings; they are chains of single authorities reporting successively from one another. [19](#)

[The Readings and the Seven harfs](#)

It may be imagined that the seven *harfs* in which the Qur'an was revealed are the seven readings, and this, in turn, may be used to prove that the seven readings are part of the Qur'an. It is therefore necessary to point out the fallacy of such an inference, and that it is something that has not occurred to any of the investigating scholars. In that, we shall concede [here] the authenticity of these traditions, without contesting them in any measure, small or great. We shall discuss them [later] from the point of view of their authenticity.

First, we shall quote al-Jaza'iri's statement on this subject:

The seven readings were not held in greater esteem than any other reading until the time when the

Imam Abu Bakr Ahmad b. Musa b. al-'Abbas b. Mujahid, in the year 300 A.H. (912 C.E.), undertook the task of gathering them in Baghdad. Thus he collected the seven readings of the best-known authorities of Mekka and Medina, Iraq and Persia, and Syria. These were: Nafi', 'Abd Allah b. Kathir, Abu 'Amr b. al-A'la, 'Abd Allah b. 'Amir, 'Aim, Hamza, and 'Ali al-Kisa'i. Some people are under the delusion that the seven readings are the seven *harfs*, but that is not the case. . . . A number of scholars have blamed Ibn Mujahid for his choice of the number seven, for the confusion that it could cause. . . . Ahmad b. 'Ammar al-Mahdawi says: "By making them seven in number, he (Ibn Mujahid) did something which he should not have done. He obscured the matter for the commonality by suggesting to those with little insight that these seven readings are the seven *harfs* related in the tradition. If only he had made the number less or more than seven, he would have removed this obscurity."[20](#)

Al-Ustadh Isma'il b. Ibrahim b. Muhammad al-Qurab writes in his book al-Shafi:

Adherence to the seven readings of the [well-known] readers at the exclusion of others is without precedent or support in the prophetic tradition (*sunna*). The seven readings were brought together by a later reader of the Qur'an who had not learned more than the seven readings. He compiled a book and named it The Book of the Seven [Readings]. This, subsequently, spread among the commonality. [21](#)

The Imam Abu Muhammad Makki writes:

Some scholars have mentioned more than seventy leading [readers of the Qur'an] who were held in higher esteem and prominence than those seven. . . . Consequently, how can it be permissible to assume about those late seven scholars that each of their readings represents each of the seven *harfs* that [is] mentioned in the traditions? Indeed, this is a gross misunderstanding [lit., "backwardness"]! Was this on the basis of the Prophet's clear instructions [as reported in the tradition], or what else was it? How could that be allowed when al-Kisa'i was added to the seven only yesterday, during the reign of al-Ma'mun and other [Abbasids]. The seventh used to be Ya'qub al-Hadrami, but in the year 300 or thereabouts, Ibn Mujahid substituted al-Kisa'i for him.[22](#)

Al-Sharaf al-Mursi writes:

Many among the common people have imagined that seven *harfs* mean the seven readings [of the Qur'an]. This is a gross ignorance.[23](#)

Al-Qurtubi writes:

A large number of our scholars, such as al-Dawudi, Ibn Abi Sufra, and others, have said that these seven readings that are attributed to those seven readers are not the seven styles (*harfs*) which the Companions [of the Prophet] had at their disposal to recite. They, rather, all go back to one of the seven styles, on the basis of which 'Uthman codified the Qur'an. This has been mentioned by Ibn al-Nahhas and others. On the other hand, these famous readings are the ones that are selected by those leaders of the readers. [24](#)

Ibn al-Jazari undertook to put an end to the error of those who assert that the seven *harfs* are the ones in which the Qur'an was revealed and which continue till the present day. He says:

You can gauge [the weakness of] this opinion. Surely, the famous readings today, whether seven, ten, or thirteen, are few in number and not more than a drop in the ocean in comparison to the readings well known during the early period. Those who are well informed know with certainty that the readers who received their readings from those seven, and many others besides them, were far more numerous than accounted for; and those who received their readings from this latter group were even greater in number, and so on in every generation. This continued until the third century, when the differences between the readings became too great and efforts at precision too little. The learning of the Book [of God] and the sunna (prophetic tradition) was the most widespread branch of learning in that period, and some leading scholars undertook to record the readings from those who were transmitting them. The first respected authority to collect the readings in a book was Abu 'Ubayd al-Qasim b. Sallam (d. 224 A.H./838 C.E.), who included, I think, twenty-five readers in addition to those seven. Following him, Ahmad b. Jubayr b. Muhammad al-Kufi (d. 258 A.H./871 C.E.), who had settled in Antioch, compiled a book consisting of five readings, one from each major Islamic city. After him, al-Qadi Isma'il b. Ishaq al-Maliki (d. 282 A.H./895 C.E.), Qalun's associate, wrote a book on readings in which he assembled the readings of twenty leading authorities [on the subject], among whom were included those seven. Thereafter, the great scholar Abu Ja'far Muhammad b. Jafar al-Tabari (d. 310 A.H./922 C.E.) compiled a book entitled *al-Jami'*, in which he assembled more than twenty readings. A little after al-Tabari, Abu Bakr Muhammad b. Ahmad b. 'Umar al-Dajuni (d. 324 A.H./935 C.E.) compiled a book on the readings, in which he included Abu Ja'far al-Tabari as one of the ten readers. Following him, Abu Bakr Ahmad b. Musa b. al-'Abbas b. Mujahid (d. 324 A.H./935 C.E.) was the first person [to write a book] limiting the readings to those seven, basing his report only on the authority of al-Dajuni and Abu Ja'far al-Tabari.[25](#)

Ibn al-Jazari goes on to mention a group of scholars who wrote about the readings:

We have lengthened this section because it has been reported to us that according to some persons who do not have [enough] knowledge, the authentic readings are these seven; or, that the seven *harfs*, to which the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) alludes, are these seven [readings]. The majority of ignorant persons believe that the correct readings are the ones mentioned in the two books *al-Shafibiyya* and *al-Taysir*, and that it was to this that the Prophet alluded when he said: "The Qur'an has been revealed in seven *harfs*." Some of them go as far as to regard any reading not mentioned in these two books as noncanonical. Moreover, many among these persons regard any reading derived from any other source than these seven as noncanonical, whereas it is possible that many of the readings that are not in *al-Shafibiyya* and *al-Taysir*, or among the seven readings, are more accurate than many of those that are. Undoubtedly, what led them to this dubious opinion is that they heard the tradition which says, "The Qur'an was revealed in seven *harfs*," and also heard about the seven readings, and thus conjectured that these seven are the ones intended by [the traditions]. It was for this reason that many early scholars disapproved of Ibn Mujahid's limiting the readers to the seven, and

found fault with him in this matter. [This latter group] says, "He should have made their number less or more than seven, or, alternatively, made his intention [of choosing seven] clear in doing so, so that those who are not well informed would be spared this confusion."[26](#)

Ibn al-Jazan goes on to cite the opinions of Ibn 'Ammar al-Mahdawi and Abu Muhammad Makki, which we cited above.

Abu Shamma writes:

A group of people have conjectured that the seven readings existing at present [i.e., contemporary to Abu Shamma] are the ones intended by the tradition [about the seven *harfs*], but this contradicts the consensus of learned scholars, and is assumed only by some ignorant people."[27](#)

These citations make it perfectly clear that the readings are not uninterruptedly transmitted, neither from the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) nor from the readers themselves, regardless of their being seven or more. Even if we were to concede that they were transmitted from the readers without interruption, they certainly could not be held as [having been] transmitted uninterruptedly from the Prophet himself. This is because they were either transmitted through single narrations or adopted through the personal decisions of the readers themselves. At this point, it is necessary to discuss two matters that arise from this conclusion.

The Authoritativeness of the Readings

A group of scholars has maintained that these readings are authoritative in the sense that it is permissible to cite them in formulating a legal judgment pertaining to the Shari'a. Thus, for instance, the prohibition [of] sexual intercourse with a woman in menstruation, who has become clean but has not performed the ritual bath, was deduced on the basis of chapter 2, verse 222, as the scholars of Kufa, with the exception of Hafs, read it as, "And do not approach them until they have cleansed themselves [*yaffaharna*]"- with the stressed *ta*.[28](#)

In response, the truth of the matter is that these readings are not authoritative, and, hence, they cannot be cited in the formulation of legal decisions. What proves this is that each of these readers is open to the possibility of error; nor is there any rational or textual justification to follow any reader among them, in particular. Independent reason suggests, and sacred law forbids, following any source other than certain knowledge. We shall elaborate on this point [later].

It is likely that one might say that even if the readings are not uninterruptedly transmitted, they still are transmitted on the authority of the Prophet. Accordingly, they are included in the category of definitive forms of evidence that establish the authoritativeness of the single narration (*khobar al-waid*). And once they are included in this category, to then use them as documentary evidence is no longer subject to establishing an opinion on the basis of conjecture, through a general recourse to these readings (*wurud*),

or by using them as a basis for legal arbitration (*ukuma*), or for having recourse to any particular one of them (*takhsis*) for judgment.

The response to this is as follows.

First, it is not evident that the readings have been established through transmission in order for them to be admitted as one of these forms of evidence [in deriving a legal decision]. They were very possibly established through the personal judgments of the readers themselves. This possibility is supported by the statements of the leading scholars, presented above, and is further enforced if we take into consideration that the disagreement of the readers over the reading of the Qur'an was due to the absence of diacritical points and vocalization marks in the codices that were sent to the provinces.[29](#)

Ibn Abi Hashim, according to al-Jaza'iri, says:

The cause of the differences in the seven readings and others besides them was that the regions to which the 'Uthmanic codices were sent had in them Companions from whom the people of those regions had received the reading of the Qur'an. Since the codices lacked diacritical points and vocalization marks, the people in each region, says Ibn Abi Hashim, continued to recite it as they had heard it from the Companions, as long as it agreed with the written text of the Qur'an. And, that which disagreed with the written text was abandoned. It was, consequently, from here that the differences arose between the readers of the different regions.[30](#)

Al-Zarqani writes:

The scholars of the early period of Islam regarded the pointing and vocalization of the Qur'an as reprehensible because of their extreme concern to preserve the recital of the Qur'an in the way it was transcribed in the 'Uthmanic codices, and because of the fear that introducing [the diacritical points and vocalization] would lead to changes in it.

. . . However, as you know, times have changed and the Muslims were forced to add diacritical points and vocalize the Qur'an for this very same reason—that is, to ensure that it was recited in exactly the way it was transcribed, and because of the fear that the lack of diacritical points and vocalization would lead to changes in it.[31](#)

Second, not all the transmitters of these readings are of established reliability, and for this reason, they do not have the authoritativeness of trustworthy narrators. This has been shown in our biographical sketches of the readers and their transmitters. Third, even if we concede that all the readings are based on oral transmission [and not on the personal judgment of the readers], and that all their narrators are known to be reliable, it remains that we generally know that parts of these readings could never have originated from the Prophet. It is evident that such knowledge should make us aware of contradictions among these transmissions, so that each of them would be a repudiation of the other. Consequently, all of them forfeit their claim to authoritativeness. To ascribe greater validity to some of them would entail

giving them preponderance without [having them] rest on a preponderant [argument]. It is therefore necessary to fall back on the probabilities arising from these contradictions. Without this method, it is not permissible to formulate legal decisions on the basis of any of these readings.

This conclusion is to be inferred even if we concede that the readings were transmitted from the Prophet without interruption. Thus, if it can be said that any two different readings were transmitted from the Prophet without interruption, then both of them would have to be from the Qur'an as revealed by God. They would not differ from the point of view of the source of the transmission, but from that of their meaning. When we know, in general, that one of the two apparent senses [of the reading] is not what is, in reality, intended, then there is no choice but to abandon both of them and fall back on the principle of literal or practical sense. The reason is that the proofs based on the [principles of] preponderance or optionality are entirely conjectural and include none that come from an authoritative source. We have discussed this matter at length in one of our published lectures on the science of *usul*, entitled "The Principles of Islamic Law," under the section "Resolution and Contrariety and the Preponderance" [in the selection of contradictory evidence].

The Permissibility of the Recitation [of the Readings] in Prayer

The majority of Sunni and Shi'ite scholars have maintained the permissibility of reciting the Qur'an in the ritual prayers in any of the seven readings. In fact, a consensus has been claimed on this matter by many of them. Some have even permitted recitation according to any of the ten readings. Still others maintain that it is permissible to recite the Qur'an in any reading that conforms with one of the levels of Arabic,³² and that agrees with one of the 'Uthmanic codices—even if it [happens to] be on probability—and whose chain of transmission is sound. Accordingly, they do not limit them to any specific number.

The truth of the matter is that what is required by the first condition is the impermissibility of reciting any reading in the daily prayers that is not proven to have come from the Noble Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) or from one of his legatees, the Infallible Ones (peace be upon them). The reason is that what is obligatory in the prayers is the recitation of the Qur'an. It is therefore not sufficient to recite something which is not of the Qur'an. Reason has independently deduced the necessity of obtaining something definitively certain to follow the knowledge of having worked to meet one's obligation. Hence, the only way to ensure complete compliance in the manner of performing the prayer is to repeat it after reciting from each different reading, or, at least, to repeat the variations in a single prayer. Consequently, in reciting the *Fatiha* (Opening Sura), one would have to combine the two variant readings *maalik* and *malik*. As for the complete sura that is required to be recited following the *Fatiha*, it would be incumbent, on the basis of the clearer evidence in this connection, to either choose a sura for which there are no variant readings, or combine the variant readings as explained above.

But from the standpoint of instructions—that have been proven authentic—[in which] the infallible Imams [told] to their readers to adopt any reading that was well known in their time, it doubtless follows that a

single reading is sufficient for the prayer. Indeed, the various readings were well known during the lifetime of the Imams, and it has not been reported that they prohibited any of them. Had there been any prohibition, it would have reached us through uninterrupted transmission, or, at least, through a single transmission. On the contrary, it has been related, on their authority, that they had approved these readings through their declaration: "Read as the people [in general] do. Recite as you have been taught."³³ Accordingly, there is no sense in limiting the permission to the seven or ten readings. Yes, the permission must take into consideration that the reading should not be rare, and established by a transmission that is regarded as untrustworthy by Sunni authorities, nor should it be invented. As for rare readings, an example is to say, *Malaka yawma al-din* (He owned the day of judgment), with the verb *malaka* (owned) in the past tense and *yawm* (day) in the objective case.³⁴ As for invented readings, an example is, *Innama. yakhshini Allahu min 'ibadihi al- 'ulama. 'a* (God fears among His bondsmen only the learned), with the word Allah (God) in the subjective case and '*ulama*' (learned men) in the objective,³⁵ in accordance with the reading of al-Khuza'i, who reported it on the authority of Abu Hanifa.

The essence of all this is that it is permissible to recite in the daily prayer any reading that was well established during the lifetime of *ahl al-bayt* [i.e., the infallible Imams of the Prophet's family] (peace be upon them all).

1. Al-Mu'taim bil-Lah Tahir b. Salih b. Ahmad al-Jaza'iri, Al-Tibyan (Cairo: Al-Manar, 1915) p. 106
2. Ibn Muhdi's full name is 'Abd al-Rahman b. Muhdi. Ibn Hajar al-Asqalani reports that Ahmad b. Sinan said that he heard 'Ali b. al-Madani say, "'Abd al-Rahman b. Muhdi was the most learned person." He said this repeatedly. According to al-Khalili, "He was a leader without a contender." Al-Shafi'i said, "I do not know an equal to him in the whole world." See Ibn Hajar, Tahdhib al-Tahdhib, vol. 6, p. 280
3. Jaza'iri, Tibyan, p. 87.
4. By this, Ibn al-Jazari means, as he later explains, that the reading must fully accord with Arabic grammar on one of the following levels: the very eloquent, the eloquent, the generally accepted, and, finally, the level on which there is an inconsequential disagreement. See Ibn al-Jazari, Al-Nashr, vol. 1, p. 10.–Trans.
5. Ibn al-Jazari, here, has in mind the slight discrepancies of wording in the 'Uthmanic codices. See *ibid.*, p. 11.–Trans
6. Ibn al-Jazari is allowing here for the possibility that the reader of the Qur'an may follow one of the 'Uthmanic codices on hearsay, not having seen it himself. See *ibid.*, p. 11. Trans.
7. For a discussion of this controversial term, see chapter 6. Lexically, the word *if* means the extremity of a thing, its border, margin, brink, side, edge. Thus, it is sometimes taken to signify a style or manner or way of doing a thing. (Cf. Qur'an 22: 11, "And among mankind is he who worships God upon a narrow marge (harf) so that if good befalls him, he is content therewith, but if a trial befalls him, he falls away utterly.") Alternatively, the word means a letter of the alphabet, or a whole word, and thus could sometimes signify a dialect.–Trans.
8. Ibn al-Jazari, Al-Nashr, vol. 1, pp. 9–10
9. *Ibid.*, p. 13
10. Suyuti, Al-Itqan, vol. 1, pp. 210–15 sec. 22–27
11. Jaza'iri, Tibyan, p. 102
12. *Ibid.*, p. 105
13. *Ibid.*, p. 106
14. *Ibid.*, p. 106
15. Muhammad Sa'id al-Iryan, in Raf'i, I'jaz al-Qur'an, p. 52, n. 1
16. *Ibid.*, p. 53, n. 2
17. Zurqani, Manahil al-'Irfan, p. 428.

- [18.](#) Jaza'iri, Tibyan, p. 105
- [19.](#) Suyuti, Al-Itqan, secs. 22–27, vol. 1, p. 215.
- [20.](#) Jaza'iri, Tibyan, p. 103.
- [21.](#) The author cites al-Shafi as quoted by Jaza'iri, Tibyan, p. 82
- [22.](#) Jaza'iri, Tibyan, p. 82
- [23.](#) Ibid., p. 61.
- [24.](#) Qurtubi, Jami', vol. 1, p. 46.
- [25.](#) Ibn al-Jazari, Al-Nashr, vol. I , pp. 33–37.
- [26.](#) Ibn al-Jazari, Al-Nashr, vol. 1, pp. 33–37.
- [27.](#) Suyuti, al-Itqan, secs. 22–27, vol. 1, p. 223.
- [28.](#) The established reading is yathurna: "until they are clean from menses" (i.e., when the menstruation period is over).– Trans.
- [29.](#) The system of diacritical points and vocalization marks that are essential to the legibility of Arabic script was not developed till much later in the century.–Trans.
- [30.](#) Jaza'iri, Tibyan p. 86.
- [31.](#) Zurqani, Manahil al- 'Irfan, p. 402.
- [32.](#) See note 4.–Trans.
- [33.](#) Kulayni, al-Kafi, vol. 11, pp. 71, 74
- [34.](#) Chap. 1, verse 3 of the Qur'an. The correct reading is maliki yawmi al-din (owner of the day of judgment).– Trans.
- [35.](#) Chap. 35, verse 28. The correct reading is innama yakhsha Allaha min 'ibadihi al 'ulama'u (the learned among His bondsmen fear God alone).–Trans.

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