

6. Was the Qur'an Revealed according to Seven Harfs?

Synopsis: Presentation of the traditions about the revelation of the Qur'an according to seven *harfs*; a refutation of these traditions; the lack of any reference to a rational meaning of the revelation of the Qur'an in seven *harfs*; the ten interpretations mentioned for the seven *harfs*; explanation of the incorrectness of these interpretations.

It has been narrated in the traditions of the Sunnis that the Qur'an was revealed in seven *harfs*.¹ It is appropriate to present these traditions first and then undertake the investigation [of them].

1. Al-Tabari relates a tradition on the authority of Yunus and Abu Kurayb, who reported from a chain of transmission that goes back to Ibn Shihab, whose chain of transmission had gone back to Ibn 'Abbas, who had said that the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) said: "Gabriel recited to me the Qur'an in one *harf*. I asked him to repeat it, and continued to ask him for more until he ultimately recited it in seven *harfs*."²

Muslim relates this tradition on the authority of Hurmalah, who related it from Ibn Wahb, who had related it from Yunus.³ Al-Bukhari relates it through another chain of transmission,⁴ and also relates its content from Ibn al-Barqi, whose chain of transmission goes back to Ibn 'Abbas.

2. Al-Tabari also relates on the authority of Abu Kurayb, whose chain of transmission goes back to 'Abd al-Rahman b. Abi Layla, who had reported from his grandfather, who had reported from Ubayy b. Ka'b, who had said:

I was in the mosque when a man came in to pray. He recited the Qur'an with a reading which I disapproved of him using. Then another man entered and recited in a way different from that of his fellow worshiper. So we all went to the Messenger of God (peace be upon him and his progeny). I said: "O Messenger of God, this person recited in a reading which I disapprove of him using. Then came this fellow and recited with a reading that was different from that of his fellow worshiper." The Prophet

commanded both of them to recite, and approved both readings. This threw in my heart a doubt the like of which I did not feel since accepting the faith. When the Prophet saw what had overcome me, he struck my breast, and I began to perspire as if I were contemplating God in great fear. Then he said to me, "O Ubayy, it was conveyed to me to recite the Qur'an in one *harf*" I replied, requesting him [the angel] to make things easier for my community. He came to me a second time and told me to recite the Qur'an in one *harf* [5](#) Again, I requested him to make things easier for my community. He returned a third time and told me to recite it in seven *harfs* and [added that] "for each repetition [of God's command] you may ask something of Me." Thus, I said, "O my God, forgive my community! O my God, forgive my community." And I delayed the third request for the day when all creatures, including Abraham (peace be upon him), would ask for my intercession.

This tradition is also reported by Muslim, with only a slight variation. [6](#) Al-Tabari also relates it, with very little difference, on the authority of Abu Kurayb, through another chain of transmission. He also relates a variant on the authority of Yunus b. 'Abd al-'A'la and Muhammad b. 'Abd al-'A'la al-San'ani, who had reported from a chain of transmission going back to Ubayy.

3. Tabari relates on the authority of Abu Kurayb, who reported from a chain of transmission going back to Sulayman b. Surad, who had reported from Ubayy b. Ka'b, who had said:

I went to the mosque and heard a man reciting. I asked him, "Who taught you this recitation?" He said, "The Messenger of God (peace be upon him and his progeny)." I took him to the Prophet and said, "Ask this man to recite." The man recited and the Prophet said, "Well done!" I said, "But you taught me to read like this and like that"(giving him examples). The Prophet said, "Well done to you as well!" I said, "You have approved both recitations!" He struck me on my chest with his hand and prayed, "O, God, take away doubt from Ubayy!" I began to perspire and was filled with great fear. Then he said: "The two angels came to me. One of them said, 'Recite the Qur'an in one *harf*' The other said, 'Increase it for him,' and I said, 'Increase it for me.' [At that] he said, 'Recite it in two *harfs*.' This went on until the number reached seven. Thus, he said, 'Recite it in seven *harfs*.'"

4. Al-Tabari relates on the authority of Abu Kurayb, whose chain of transmission goes back to 'Abd al-Rahman b. Abi Bakra, who reported from his father, who had said:

The Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) said: "Gabriel said, 'Recite the Qur'an in one *harf*' Michael said, 'Ask him to increase.' Gabriel said, [Recite] 'in two *harfs*.' [This went on] the number reached six or seven *harfs*"-this doubt [about the number] is on the part of Abu Kurayb. "Then he (Gabriel) said: 'All these [*harfs*] are clear and sufficient as long as no verse about punishment ends in mercy, nor a verse about mercy in punishment. It is as if one were to say *halumma* instead of *ta'ala*'" [both meaning "Come!"]. [7](#)

5. Al-Tabari relates on the authority of Ahmad b. Mansur, whose chain of transmission goes back to 'Abd Allah b. Abi Talha, who reported from his father, who had reported from his grandfather, who had

said:

A man recited [the Qur'an] to 'Umar b. al-Khattab, and 'Umar altered his reading for him. The man said, "I recited it to the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny), and he did not alter it for me." Both argued in the presence of the Prophet. The man asked, "O Messenger of God, did you not teach me to recite the verse in such and such a manner?" The Prophet said, "Yes." Something occurred in 'Umar's mind and the Prophet perceived it in his face. He struck his chest and said, "Drive away the satan." He repeated this thrice, and then added, "O 'Umar, the Qur'an is all the same, as long as you do not turn mercy into punishment and punishment into mercy."

Al-Tabari also relates on the authority of Yunus b. 'Abd al-A'la, whose chain of transmission goes back to 'Umar b. al-Khattab, an incident similar to the one reported above involving 'Umar and Hisham b. Hakim. Al-Bukhari, Muslim, and al-Tirmidhi also relate the story of 'Umar and Hisham, but with another chain of transmission, and variations in the wording of the tradition.⁸

6. Al-Tabari relates on the authority of Muhammad b. al-Muthanna, whose chain of transmission goes back to Ibn Abi Layla, who reported on the authority of Ubayy b. Ka'b, who said:

He said that the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) was at the watering place of Banu Ghaffar when Gabriel came to him and said, "God has commanded you to teach your community the Qur'an in one *harf*." He (the Prophet) said, "Ask God for His forgiveness and mercy and [tell Him] that my community cannot bear this." Then Gabriel came again to him and said, "God has commanded you to teach the Qur'an to your community in two *harfs*." The Prophet replied, "Ask God for His forgiveness and mercy and [tell Him] that my community cannot bear this." Then Gabriel came a third time and said, "God commands you to teach the Qur'an to your community in three *harfs*." The Prophet said, "Ask God for His forgiveness and mercy and [tell Him] that my community cannot bear this." Then Gabriel came the fourth time and said, "God commands you to teach your community to read the Qur'an in seven *harfs*." In whichever *harf* they read, they would have recited correctly.

This tradition is also related by Muslim in his *Sahih*⁹ Al-Tabari relates something to this effect from Ibn Kurayb, too, whose chain of transmission goes back to Ibn Abi Layla, who reported from Ubayy b. Ka'b. He also relates part of the tradition, with slight variations, on the authority of Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Tusi, whose chain of transmission goes back to Ibn Abi Layla, who reported from Ubayy b. Ka'b. As well, he relates it on the authority of Muhammad b. al-Muthanna, whose chain of transmission reaches [back to] Ubayy b. Ka'b.

7. Al-Tabari also relates on the authority of Abu Kurayb, whose chain of transmission goes back to Zarr, who reported from Ubayy b. Ka'b, who had said:

The Messenger of God met Gabriel at a place called Ahjar al-Mara'. He said, "I have been sent to a community of unlettered people (*ummiyyun*), among whom are youths and servants, old men and women." Gabriel said, "In that case, teach them the Qur'an in seven *harfs*."¹⁰

8. Al-Tabari also relates on the authority of 'Amr b. 'Uthman al-'Uthmani, whose chain of transmission goes back to al-Maqbari, and from him to Abu Hurayra, who said:

The Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) said: "Indeed, this Qur'an has been revealed in seven *harfs*. Hence, read it [in any one *harf*] and there is no objection [in so doing]. However, do not wind up a mention of mercy with that of punishment, nor a mention of punishment with that of mercy."

9. Al-Tabari also relates on the authority of 'Ubayd b. Asbat, whose chain of transmission goes back to Abu Salma, and from him to Abu Hurayra, who said:

The Messenger of God (peace be upon him and his progeny) said, "The Qur'an was revealed in seven *harfs* [that indicate God is] The All-Knowing, the All-Wise, the All-Forgiving, the All-Merciful."

Al-Tabari relates a similar tradition on the authority of Abu Kurayb, whose chain of transmission goes back to Abu Salma, and from him to Abu Hurayra.

10. Al-Tabari [relates] from Sa'id b. Yahiya, with his chain of transmission going back to 'Aim, and from him to Zarr, and to 'Abd Allah b. Mas'ud, who said:

We were debating about a sura of the Qur'an, whether it had thirty-five or thirty-six verses. Consequently, we went to the Messenger of God (peace be upon him and his progeny), and found him engaged in conversation with 'Ali. We told him that we had disputed the reading. The Prophet's face became red [with anger] and he said, "Surely, those before you perished only because of their disagreement." Then he whispered something to 'Ali, who told us: "The Messenger of God commands you to recite the way you were taught."

11. Al-Qurtubi relates the following tradition on the authority of Abu Dawud, who reported from Ubayy, who had said:

The Messenger of God (peace be upon him and his progeny) said: "O, Ubayy, I used to recite the Qur'an. I was asked whether [to recite it] in one *harf* or two. The angel who was with me said, 'Say, in two.' Then I was asked, 'In two or three *harfs*?' The angel who was with me said, 'Say, in three.' [This went on] until the number reached seven. Then he said, 'Any of these (seven *harfs*) is comprehensive and sufficient. Thus, you can say, [God is] the All-Hearing, Knowing, Mighty, and Wise, as long as you do not confuse a verse about punishment with one about mercy, and vice versa.'" [11](#)

These are the most important traditions on this subject, all of them [being] related through Sunni channels. They contradict the sound tradition reported by Zurara on the authority of Abu Ja'far [the Imam Muhammad al-Baqir] (peace be upon him). He said:

The Qur'an is one, revealed by the One. However, the differences are caused by the transmitters [of the readings] [12](#)

Al-Fudayl b. Yasar said to Abu 'Abd Allah [the Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq] (peace be upon him), "People are saying that the Qur'an was revealed in seven *harfs*." The Imam said: "They lie, those enemies of God. Undoubtedly, it was revealed in one *harf* from the One Being." [13](#)

We already stated briefly that the points of reference in matters of religion, after the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny), are the Book of God and the Family of the Prophet (*ahl al-bayt*), from whom God removed all impurities, [thereby] purifying them thoroughly, as they ought to be. A detailed treatment of this subject shall follow after this, God willing. There is no value to the traditions when these contradict those [traditions] that are proven sound. It is for this reason that it is not important to discuss the chains of transmission of these reports, for [contradicting the sayings of the Imams] is the first thing that makes a tradition fall short of being reliable and authoritative [evidence in deriving legal decisions on its basis]. Add to this the disagreement and inconsistency among them, and the incongruity in some of them between the questions and the answers.

The Incoherence of the Traditions

Among the inconsistencies is that some of the traditions indicate that Gabriel taught the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) one *harf* of reading, and that the Prophet asked him to increase the *harfs*, and the angel did so, till the number of the *harfs* reached seven. This indicates that the increase was gradual. But in some traditions, the increase occurs all at once in the third instance; in others, God commanded the Prophet in the third instance to recite in three *harfs*, and the command to recite it in seven *harfs* was in the fourth instance.

Among the contradictions is that some traditions indicate that all the increases [to seven *harfs*] were made in one instance, and that the Prophet's request for the increase was on Michael's advice. Thus, Gabriel increased it until the number reached seven. Other traditions indicate that Gabriel left and returned each time [to receive God's response to the Prophet's request].

Another inconsistency is that some traditions narrate that Ubayy entered the mosque and saw a person reciting [in a version] contrary to his reading. In other narratives, he was in the mosque when two persons entered and recited the Qur'an [in a version] contrary to his reading. There is contradiction as well in what the Prophet said to Ubayy, and so on.

An example of the incongruity between the questions and the answers occurs in the tradition [related] by Ibn Mas'ud, where 'Ali (peace be upon him) reportedly said, "The Messenger of God (peace be upon him and his progeny) commands you to recite the way you were taught." This response has no connection with the subject of the argument regarding the dispute over the number of verses. In addition to all that, the tradition does not refer to the seven *harfs* in any rational sense, nor does it afford the observer any accurate understanding of the expression "seven *harfs*."

The Interpretations of the Seven Harfs

A number of interpretations have been given to explain the revelation of the Qur'an in seven *harfs*. We will refer to the important ones, discuss them, and demonstrate their incorrectness.

The Approximation Interpretation

[First], the expression "seven *harfs*" refers to different words that are close in meaning, such as '*ajjil*, *asri*', and is 'a (all meaning "move quickly"). These *harfs* remained in circulation until the caliphate of 'Othman, who reduced them to one *harf* and ordered all other texts based on the remaining six to be destroyed. This interpretation was adopted by al-Tabari,¹⁴ and by others. According to al-Qurtubi, this opinion was [indeed] adopted by the majority of scholars,¹⁵ and so did Abu 'Amr b. 'Abd al-Barr say this.¹⁶ They supported their argument on the traditions related by Ibn Abi Bakra, Abu Dawud, and others mentioned above, as well as on a tradition reported by Yunus on the authority of Ibn Shihab, who said:

Sa'id b. al-Musayyab informed me about the person who is mentioned by God in the verse, "And we know very well that . . . they say: '**Only a mortal teaches him**' (Qur'an 16:103)." He [this person] was infatuated by the fact that he was engaged in writing down the revelation. The Messenger of God (peace be upon him and his progeny) used to dictate to him [the words] *sami'un 'alim* or *'azizun Hakim*, or something to that effect, used as verse endings. Then the Messenger, being under [the influence of the] revelation, would be distracted from him. The man would sometimes inquire from the Messenger of God, saying, "Is it *'azizun Hakim* or *sami'un 'alim* or *'azizun 'alim*?" The Messenger would say to him, "Whichever you write is all right." He was infatuated by this. Thus, he used to say, "Muhammad has entrusted [the writing of the revelation] to me, and I write what I wish."

They also drew their conclusion from Anas's reading of Qur'an 73:6, as follows: ***Inna nashi 'atal-layli hiya ashaddu wat'an wa aswaba qilan*** [instead of *wa aqwama qilan*].¹⁷ Someone said to him, "O Abu Hamza, the word in the verse is *aqwama*." He said, "*Aqwama*, *awaba*, or *ahda* are all the same."¹⁸ They also drew their conclusion from Ibn Mas'ud's reading of Qur'an 36:29: ***Inna kanat illi zaqiyyatan*** [instead of *shayatan*] *wahidatan*;¹⁹ and from a tradition reported by al-Tabari from Muhammad b. Bashshar and Abu al-Sa'ib, whose chain of transmission goes back to Humam. According to this tradition, Abu al-Darda' was teaching a man how to read ***Inna shajarata al-zaqqumi ta amu al-athimi*** [***The tree of Zaqqum is the food of the sinner (Qur'an 44:43-44)***]. But the man, again and again, read it as *Inna shajarata al-zaqqumi ta 'amu al-yatimi* [The tree of *Zaqqum* is the food of the orphan]. After unsuccessfully making the man repeat the verse, Abu al-Darda' realized that he did not understand the difference between *athim* (sinner) and *yatimi* (orphan) regarding the closeness between them. So he taught him: ***Inna shajarata al-zaqqumi ta 'amu al-fajiri*** [The tree of *zaqqum* is the food of the wicked].²⁰

Moreover, they also made their inference from the traditions, cited above, that indicate how far one can go in facilitating the reading: "As long as no verse about punishment ends in mercy, nor a verse of mercy

in punishment." The limits set down in this injunction serve no purpose except if the reference to the seven *harfs* is intended as a permission to substitute some words for others. Consequently, an exception was made in that a verse about punishment may not be concluded with mercy, nor a verse about mercy with punishment. According to these traditions—and once the concise traditions which deal with the seven letters have been referred back to the traditions which deal with the matter at length and make it clear—we have no choice but to understand those traditions in the sense explained above.

However, all the meanings that have been suggested for this expression are extra neous to the object of these traditions, as we shall indicate; therefore, we must discard the traditions because abiding by their contents is impossible. There are several reasons for that.

First, the above interpretation of the seven *harfs* is applicable only in some places in the Qur'an where it is possible to refer to seven synonymous words. But, inevitably, it does not apply to most of the Qur'an. Then, how does one conceive of these seven *harfs* in which the Qur'an is said to have been revealed?

Second, if this interpretation means that the Prophet (peace be upon him) permitted the replacement of words in the existing Qur'an with other words close in meaning, as stated in some of the traditions, then the very possibility of making such a change would undermine the Qur'an, which is a timeless miracle and an irrefutable proof for all people. A rational person would surely know that this would cause people to renounce the revealed Qur'an and fail to heed it. Is it possible for any reasonable person to imagine that the Prophet would permit the reader to recite, *Yasin wa al dhikri al-azim innaka la-mina al-anbiya* 'just to please those who regard such a thing as permissible? However, this is nothing more than a false accusation. Indeed, God, the Exalted, says:

Say [O Muhammad]: It is not for me to change it of my own accord. I only follow that which is revealed to me (Qur'an 10:15).

If [indeed] it is not for the Prophet to change it of his own accord, how could that be possible for others? The Prophet had taught Barra' b. 'Azib a prayer in which there was the phrase *wa nabiyyuka al-ladhi arsalta*. Barra' read it as *wa rasuluka al-ladhi arsalta*.²¹ The Prophet ordered him not to write the word *al-rasul* (messenger) in place of *al-nabi* (prophet).²² If this was the case with a prayer, then how would it be with the Qur'an? If, however, the purport of the above interpretation is that the Prophet recited the Qur'an according to the seven *harfs*, as maintained by the numerous traditions cited above, then the one who maintains such an opinion should point out these seven *harfs* in which the Prophet recited the Qur'an, for God, the Exalted, has promised to preserve what He has revealed:

Lo! We, even We, reveal the Reminder, and lo! We verily are its Guardian (Qur'an 15:9).

Third, the above mentioned traditions have related that the purpose of revealing the Qur'an in seven *harfs* was to make it easier for the Muslim community, because they could not recite according to one dialect. This was what impelled the Prophet to pray God asking Him to increase the number of dialects to seven. Yet we have seen that the differences in readings led some Muslims into mutual accusations

of disbelief, until 'Uthman restricted the reading to one *harf*, and destroyed all the other texts.

Certain conclusions may be derived from the above discussion.

1. The dispute over the readings of the Qur'an was a curse on the Muslim community, whose effects became evident during the caliphate of 'Othman. Accordingly, how could it be true that the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) had asked God for something which would cause corruption in the community? And how could it be true that God granted such a request? Many traditions report that the Prophet admonished against disagreement, warning that it would lead to the destruction of the community. Some traditions relate that the Prophet's face changed, and became red with anger, when he was told about the dispute over the reading. Some of these traditions have already been mentioned and others will be cited here.

2. The above mentioned traditions include a statement to the effect that the Prophet said that the Muslim community will not be able to "read [the Qur'an] in one *harf* " This is a clear falsehood, which cannot conceivably be attributed to the Prophet, for we find that the community, after 'Uthman, in spite of its different races and languages, was able to read the Qur'an in one way. Consequently, how could it be difficult for it to agree on one way during the lifetime of the Prophet, when the community was made up of people who spoke pure Arabic?

3. The dispute that compelled 'Uthman to confine the reading to one style also occurred during the Prophet's lifetime, and the Prophet confirmed each reader in his reading, and ordered the Muslims to accept them all, informing them that this represented the mercy of God on them. How, then, could it be permissible for 'Uthman and those after him to close the gate of divine mercy in spite of the Prophet's order to allow people to read the Qur'an? How could it be permissible for Muslims to reject the Prophet's opinion and accept 'Uthman's and endorse his action [in this regard]? Did they find him more merciful to the community than its Prophet? Or did they find him more aware of something about which the Prophet (God forbid!) was ignorant? Or did the revelation come down on 'Uthman to abrogate these *harfs*?

In short, this opinion is so appalling that it does not deserve the effort of refuting it, and this was the basic factor that caused later Sunni scholars to reject it. It is for this reason that some of them, such as Abu Jafar Muhammad b. Sa'dan al-Nahawi and al-Hafiz Jalal al-Din Suyuti, have resorted to the view that these reports [about the seven *harfs*] belong to the category of ambiguous traditions, whose purport is unknown.²³ They say this despite the fact that, as the reader has seen, their purport is clear and no one who reflects on them can doubt that, because the majority of scholars have spoken of them and followed them.

The Seven Gates

In the second interpretation, the term "seven *harfs*" is intended to mean the seven [heavenly] gates (*al-abwab al-sab'a*) from which the Qur'an came down. These deal with verses about prohibition (*jazr*) and

command (*amr*), what is lawful and unlawful, what is clear and ambiguous, and parables.

This explanation has been argued on the basis of a tradition related by Yunus, whose chain of transmission goes back to Ibn Mas'ud, who reported from the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny). He [Ibn Mas'ud] said:

The first [heavenly] book came down from one gate and in one *harf*. The Qur'an came down from seven gates and in seven *harfs*, which deal with prohibition and command, what is lawful and unlawful, what is clear and ambiguous, and parables. Thus, allow what it makes lawful, proscribe what it makes unlawful, do what you have been commanded, avoid what has been prohibited, be warned by its parables, act according to its clear verses, and believe in its ambiguous verses and say, "***We believe therein; the whole is from our Lord***" [Qur'an 3:7].[24](#)

This view can be refuted as follows.

1. According to the literal meaning of the tradition, the seven *harfs* in which the Qur'an was revealed are not the same as the seven gates from which it came down. It is therefore incorrect to explain the former by the latter, the way those who support this view have [explained it].
2. The tradition itself is contradicted by one reported by Abu Kurayb, whose chain of transmission goes back to Ibn Mas'ud, who said, "God revealed the Qur'an in five *harfs*: [These deal with the] lawful and unlawful, [the] clear and ambiguous, and [the] parables."[25](#)
3. The tradition is muddled in its purport, because "forbidding" (*jazr*) and "unlawful" (*haram*) have the same connotation. Consequently, the gates do not add up to seven. On the other hand, there are matters covered by the Qur'an that are not included in these seven gates, such as the genesis and the return to God, accounts of past communities, the arguments of the Qur'an, the forms of learning, and so on. If those who maintain this explanation intend to include all these subjects under the [categories of] clear and ambiguous verses, then they should also include all the other gates under them, and divide the Qur'an into two *harfs* only—the clear and the ambiguous—because all that is in the Qur'an can be classified under these two categories.
4. The notion that the subjects of the Qur'an are divided according to seven *harfs* does not accord with the contents of the previously cited traditions that speak about making matters easy for [people in] the Muslim community because they were not able to read according to one *harf*.
5. Some of the previously cited traditions clearly state that the seven *harfs* are the styles on which the readers differed. This last tradition, assuming that its inference is correct, does not support any explanation that differs from it.

Another Meaning of the Seven Gates

According to [a third] interpretation, the seven *harfs* deal with command, prohibition, persuasion, threat, disputation, stories of bygone communities, and parables. This explanation is supported on the tradition related by Muhammad b. Bashshar, whose chain of transmission goes back to Abu Qallaba, who said:

It has been related to me that the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) said, "The Qur'an is revealed in seven *harfs* [dealing with verses about] command and prohibition, persuasion and intimidation, argumentation, stories of past communities, and parables." [26](#)

The argument against this view may be inferred from our argument against the second view [cited] above.

The Eloquent Dialects

According to [the fourth] interpretation, the seven *harfs* are the eloquent dialects of Arabic. These dialects are interwoven in the Qur'an. Hence, parts of it are in the dialect of the Quraysh; others are in the dialects of the Hudhayl, Hawazan, al-Yaman, Kinana, Tamim, and Thaqif. This view has been attributed to a group of scholars, among whom are al-Bayhaqi, al-Abhari, and the author of *al-Qamus* [al-Fayruzabadi].

The response [to this is as follows].

1. The above mentioned traditions have determined the purport of the expression "seven *harfs*." Accordingly, it is not possible to ascribe to it such meanings that do not conform to its original sense.
2. To ascribe the meaning "dialects" to the *harfs* contradicts what has been related on the authority of 'Umar, who said, 'The Qur'an was revealed in the Mudar dialect."[27](#) According to this tradition, 'Umar disapproved of Ibn Mas'ud's reading [in which he said], '*atta hin*, instead of *hatta hin* (till a time), and wrote him that "the Qur'an was not revealed in the dialect of the Hudhayl; hence, teach it to people in the dialect of the Quraysh and not that of the Hudhayl."[28](#)

Furthermore, it has been related that 'Uthman said to the three tribes of the three clans of the Quraysh, "If you and Zayd b. Thabit dispute over something in the Qur'an, then write it in the dialect of the Quraysh, because it was revealed in their dialect."[29](#)

Another tradition reports that "a dispute arose between 'Umar and Hisham b. Hakim concerning a reading in "Surat al-Furqan" (sura 25). Hisham recited it in one way, and the Prophet (peace be upon him and his progeny) said, 'This is the way it was revealed.' Then 'Umar recited it in another way, and the Prophet [again] said, 'This is the way it was revealed.' Then the Messenger of God added, 'This Qur'an has been revealed in seven *harfs*.'" [30](#)

Both 'Umar and Hisham belonged to the Quraysh; therefore, there was no cause for them to disagree at that time over the reading of the Qur'an. In addition to all this, to ascribe the meaning of "dialects" to the *harfs* has no scientific basis and is merely a judgment without proof.

3. If those who maintain this opinion mean to say that the Qur'an includes idioms from other dialects that the Quraysh dialect did not have, then this explanation runs against those traditions that say the purpose of revealing the Qur'an in seven *harfs* was to make it easier for the Muslim community [to recite]. In fact, it runs against the truth—namely, the fact that the dialect of the Quraysh predominated over all other Arabic dialects. It [the Qur'an] assimilated the most eloquent words of each dialect, and for that reason it deserved the status of being the standard for measuring the Arabic language and for applying the rules of its grammar. However, if they mean to say that the Qur'an includes other dialects, but that they are interwoven with the dialect of the Quraysh, then there would be no reason for limiting them to seven dialects, because the Qur'an contains nearly fifty dialects. [Indeed], according to a tradition reported on the authority of Abu Bakr al-Wasiti: "In the Qur'an there are fifty dialects. Those include the dialects of the Quraysh, Hudhayl, Kinana, Khazraj, Ash'ar, Namir. . . ." [31](#)

The Mudar Dialect

According to [the fifth] interpretation, [32](#) the seven *harfs* refer to the seven dialects of the Mudar tribes, in particular. These dialects are interwoven in the Qur'an, and they are the dialects of the Quraysh, Asad, Kinana, Hudhayl, Tamim, Dubba, and Qays. This explanation is refuted by everything we said above against the fourth explanation.

The Differences in the Readings

[The sixth] interpretation regards the seven *harfs* as the categories of differences in the readings. Some of those who maintain this opinion have said, "We reflected on the categories of differences in the readings and found that they are seven" [in number]. In one of them, the differences are in vocalization, while the meaning and form are the same. For instance, [the verse] ***wa hunna utharu lakum [Qur'an 11:78—"They are purer for you"]***, uses *utharu* instead of *atharu*.

In another category, the differences are over form and meaning, arising from differences in desinential inflection. For example, ***Rabbana ba'id bayna asfarina [Qur'an 34: 19]***—Our Lord, make the stage between our journeys longer] has been read in the imperative [as here] as well as in the past tense [i.e., *ba'ad* (made), instead of *ba'id* (make)].

In the third category, the forms are the same but the meanings differ as a result of using different letters: for example, *nunshizuha*, with the letter *za*, and *nunshiruha*, with the letter *ra*. [33](#)

In the fourth category, the forms are different but the meanings are the same. Thus, for instance, ***kal-ihni Tal-manfush [Qur'an 101:5—like colored corded wool]*** was also read as *kal-sufi al-manfosh* [like

corded wool].

In the fifth, both the form and meaning are different. For example, *talhin mandud* [Qur'an 56:29- clustered plantains] has also been read as *tal'in mandud* [ranged clusters]. In the sixth category, the order of the words in the phrase is different. For example, "**And the agony of death comes in truth**" [Qur'an 50: 19] has been read as "and the agony of truth comes with death."

In the seventh category, the difference consists of the addition and omission of words. For instance, "**My brother has ninety-nine ewes**" [Qur'an 38:23] has been read as "ninety-nine *she-ewes*"; and, "**As for the lad, his parents were believers**" [Qur'an 18:80] has been read as "As for the lad, he was a disbeliever and his parents were believers"; and, "**Then after their compulsion, God will be forgiving, merciful**" [Qur'an 24:33] has been read as "After their compulsion, to them God will be forgiving, merciful."

The above opinion may be refuted as follows.

1. There is no evidence to support this view. This is particularly so because those addressed in these traditions were unaware of these differences.
2. Among the above mentioned categories of differences, there are those which are defined on the basis of whether the difference in reading leads to a difference in meaning, or whether it does not. It is obvious that the occurrences or non occurrences of a change of meaning do not in themselves necessitate a division into two points. This is because the conditions of the actual word and its reading do not change. In fact, ascribing a difference to the actual word in this sense is similar to describing a thing by the condition of its object. Hence, the different readings of *talhin mandid* and *kal- 'ihni al-manfush* [categories five and four] can be classified as one category.
3. Among the categories of differences mentioned above, there are those which are defined on the basis of whether the difference leads to a change of form, or whether it does not. Here again, it is evident that this is not cause for separate classification. The reason is that retaining the form pertains to the way the word is written, not to the way it is recited. The Qur'an is the name given to the recitation, not to the script form and not to its written version; and the revelation was in the spoken word, not in writing. Consequently, the variant readings of *talh* and *nunshizuha* [categories five and three] are to be classified in one category, not two.
4. The traditions cited above state explicitly that the Qur'an was initially revealed in one *harf*. It is evident that the intention here is not to convey that this one *harf* constitutes one of the above mentioned variants. How, then, could it be possible to infer that the seven refer to them collectively?
5. Most of the Qur'an is a source of agreement among the readers, not of disagreement. Accordingly, if we add the parts on which they are in agreement to the categories of their disagreement, they add up to the number of eight. This means, [according to the above argument], that the Qur'an was revealed in eight *harfs*.

6. The ultimate point of the traditions quoted earlier in this chapter is that the disagreement over the readers was in fact over specific words. This was mentioned in the story about 'Umar and others. According to the preceding discussion, this disagreement forms one of the seven *harfs*. In resolving their dispute, the Messenger of God (peace be upon him) did not need to offer the excuse that the Qur'an was revealed in seven *harfs*. Is it [even] possible to attribute the coming down of Gabriel with one *harf*, then two *harfs*, then three, and, finally seven, to these [word] differences? Indeed, al-Jaza'iri states it very fairly when he says: "There are many opinions in this matter, and most of them are far from accurate." It would appear that those who maintained these opinions had overlooked the content of the tradition that says that the Qur'an was revealed according to seven *harfs*, and that therefore, they [the readers] said what they said.[34](#)

Variation in the Readings in Another Sense

According to [the seventh] interpretation, the seven *harfs* are the points of difference in the readings, but in a different sense than discussed so far. Al-Zurqani adopted this opinion and has related it, on the authority of Abu al-Fadl al-Razi, in his book *al-Lawa'ih*:

The points of difference do not exceed the seven *harfs*. First, there are differences in nouns, whether they are singular, dual, or plural, or whether they are masculine or feminine. Second, there are differences in the conjugation of the verbs, whether they are in past, present, or imperative forms. Third, there are differences pertaining to the aspects of desinential inflection (*i'rab*). Fourth, there are differences regarding omission and addition [of words]. Fifth, there are differences pertaining to the position of the words in the verse. Sixth, there are differences caused by phonetic change. Seventh, there are differences of accent among the different dialects, such as opening, softening, emphasizing, articulating the consonants, or contracting a letter into another, and so on.

The refutation [of this point of view is as follows].

In our discussion of the sixth interpretation, we dealt with the problems of classifying the first, the fourth, and the fifth differences [cited by al-Zurqani]. In addition, the differences in nouns and verbs share the characteristic of involving variations in forms; hence, there is no sense in categorizing them separately. If we take into account the particulars of this classification, then it becomes necessary to regard each difference in structure—in regard to its being in the dual, plural, masculine, feminine, past, present, or imperative [forms]—as forming a separate category. In addition to that, differences in the pronunciation of the same word, involving contracting a letter into another or articulating it, or slurring a vowel or slightly articulating it, or softening a consonant or strengthening it, do not prevent it from being the same word. Ibn Qutayba, according to al-Zurqani, has already made this point.[35](#)

The truth of the matter is that the points of disagreement on the readings are six in number:

First, a difference might occur in the pronunciation of the word, which does not affect its substance, such

as a disagreement on whether the word *b.a.'d* (to separate) should be read in the past tense [*ba 'ada*] or in the imperative [*ba'id*], or on whether the word *amanatihim* [36](#) (pledge) is in the plural or the singular.

Second, a difference might occur in the meaning of the word, which does not affect its form, such as a disagreement over the word *nunshizuha*—whether it is written with the letter *ra* or a *zayn*.

Third, a difference might occur in the meaning and form of the word, such as the disagreement over whether the word [in Qur'an 70:9 and Qur'an 101:5] is *al- 'ihni* or *al-saif* (colored wool or wool).

Fourth, a difference in the form of a word might arise from a disagreement over its desinential inflection, such as the difference in reading the word *arjulakum* (accusative case) or *arjulikum* (genitive case).

Fifth, a difference might occur in the position of a word in the sentence, such as the examples that have been cited above.

Sixth, a difference might occur in the addition or omission of words, as shown in the examples above.

Single-Digit Plurality

According to this [eighth] opinion, the word seven [in the traditions] refers to a plurality of single digits [and not necessarily to the number seven only], just as the words seventy and seven hundred refer, respectively, to two- and three-digit pluralities. This opinion has been attributed to al-Qadi 'Ayyad and those who followed him.

The response [to this is as follows]. This opinion is contrary to the apparent meaning of the traditions. In fact, it is contrary to the explicit meaning of some of them. Moreover, this cannot be regarded as an independent view distinct from other interpretations, because it does not determine the meaning of the word *flaif s* in the traditions. This is necessary. Obviously, it accepts one of the meanings mentioned above; hence, it is refuted as they have been.

The Seven Readings

One of the meanings suggested for the seven *harfs* under discussion is that which involves seven different readings of the Qur'an.

The response [to this is as follows]. If these seven readings are intended [to mean] the famous seven readings, then we have already explained to the reader [in chapter 5] the baselessness of this probability. However, if the seven *harfs* are intended to absolutely mean the seven readings, then it is evident that the number of readings is more than one. On the other hand, it is impossible to interpret this view as meaning that the utmost number of possible variants of every word in the Qur'an is seven. For, if it is intended that the majority of the words in the Qur'an can be read in seven different ways, then such a view is invalid, because the words that can be read in seven different ways are very few indeed. And if

it is intended that this condition is present in some words and by way of partial confirmation, then it is obvious that some of the Qur'an's words can be read in more than seven ways. The expression ***wa 'abd al-taghut*** [*Qur'an 5:60-who serves idols*], for example, was read in twenty-two different ways, and the word ***uffin*** [*Qur'an 17:23, 21:67, 46: 17-fie*] in more than thirty ways. Furthermore, this opinion does not agree with the terms of the traditions [cited above], and most of the other views on this matter are like it in that respect.

The Different Dialects

According to [the tenth] interpretation, the seven *harfs* refer to the different accents with which a single word may be pronounced. This view was adopted by al-Rafi'i in his book *Ijaz al Qur'an*.³⁷

Al-Rafi'i maintains that each community among the Arabs had a particular way of pronouncing certain words. For this reason, we find that the Arabs differ in the way they pronounce the same word, in accordance with their different accents. Thus, for example, an Iraqi changes the letter *qaf* in the word *yaqulu* to the Persian *qaf*, whereas a Syrian changes it to the glottal stop *a*. The Qur'an was revealed in all these dialects to make it easier for the Muslim community [comprised of all these different communities], because limiting it to one particular dialect among these many dialects would have caused difficulty for other tribes that were not familiar with that particular dialect. Hence, the term seven is a figurative reference to the pronunciation that each group considers the most correct way. Accordingly, it does not matter if the actual number of accents in Arabic is more than seven.

The response [to this is as follows]. This interpretation, although, relatively, the best among those so far considered, is also incomplete.

1. It contradicts what has been related on the authority of 'Umar and 'Uthman: that the Qur'an was revealed in the dialect of the Quraysh, and that 'Umar prevented Ibn Mas'ud from reading *'atta hin*.
2. It also contradicts 'Umar's disagreement with Hisham b. Hakim over the reading, although both were from the Quraysh.
3. Moreover, it contradicts the occasions of the traditions, and in some cases their explicit statement, which maintains that the difference [in the readings] was in the actual words, not in the way they were pronounced, and that these were the *harfs* in which the Qur'an was revealed.
4. The word seven, as this interpretation explains it, is different from the apparent sense of the traditions and, in some cases, their explicit statements.
5. The corollary of this opinion is that it is permissible to use the different dialects in reciting the Qur'an. This is certainly against the absolute practice of all Muslims. It is not possible to claim the abrogation of the permission to read in the one designated dialect, because such an opinion is baseless. Nor is it possible for those who maintain such a view to argue for the abrogation on the basis of a definite

consensus on the issue, because the consensus is, rather, on the absence of definite proof that the Qur'an was revealed according to different dialects. In addition, if it is hypothetically agreed that such a thing is established, as maintained by those who subscribe to this opinion, how can a consensus be reached in this matter and, more so, in view of the fact that the Prophet insisted that the Qur'an [was revealed] in seven *harfs* to make matters easy for the Muslim community. How can it be possible that this should be confined to the short period after the revelation of the Qur'an, and how can it be correct that a consensus or any other proof was established to that effect? More important, it is evident that the Muslim community was even more in need of a respite in the later period because those who adhered to Islam in the earlier period were few indeed. Thus, it was possible for them to agree on a single dialect for reading the Qur'an. This was unlike the situation of the Muslims in subsequent periods [who were far more numerous]. We shall limit our discussion to the views already cited, for they make it unnecessary to mention the rest and refute them.

In conclusion, the notion that the Qur'an was revealed in seven *harfs* cannot be explained satisfactorily. Consequently, it is necessary to reject the traditions supporting such a view, especially since the traditions of the Imams Muhammad al-Baqir and Ja'far al-Sadiq have proved their falsity, and have established that the Qur'an was revealed in one *harf*, and that the differences originate with the transmitters [of the text of the Qur'an].

[1.](#) For the lexical meaning of this term, see chapter 5, note 7.–Trans.

[2.](#) This tradition and traditions 2 to 10, cited below, are all related in Tabari, Tafsir, pp. 22–24, 39–50. Tradition 11 is related in Qurtubi, Tafsir, vol. 1, p. 43

[3.](#) Muslim b. Hajjaj al-Qushayri, al-Jami' al-Sahih, 8 vols. (Dar al-Khilafat al-'Aliyya [Istanbul]: Al-Matba'at al-'Amira, 1911–12) vol. 2, p. 202

[4.](#) Bukhari, Sahih, vol. 6, pp. 481–82

[5.](#) Cited in Tabari, Tafsir; but in Muslim, Sahih, vol. 2., p. 203, it is "two harfs."

[6.](#) Muslim, Sahih, vol. 2, p. 203

[7.](#) This last sentence means that the difference in the dialectical recitations is a difference of words, not of meaning, just as *halumma* and *ta ala* mean the same thing.–Trans.

[8.](#) Muslim, Sahih, vol. 2, p. 202; Bukhari, Sahih vol. 3, p. 90; vol. 6, p. 482; vol. 8, pp. 53, 215; and Muhammad b. 'Isa al-Tirmidhi, Sunan al-Tirmidhi wa Huwa al-Jami' al-Sahih, ed. 'Abd al-Wahhab 'Abd al-Latif, 3d ed., 5 vols. (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr, 1978) vol. 4, pp. 263–64.

[9.](#) Muslim, Sabhih, vol. 2, p. 203

[10.](#) Quoted in Tirmidhi, Sunan, vol. 4, p. 263

[11.](#) Qurtubi, Jami', vol. 1, p. 43

[12.](#) Kulayni, Al-Kafi, tradition no. 12, cited in vol. 1 1, pp. 64–65

[13.](#) Ibid., tradition no. 13, p. 66

[14.](#) Tabari, Tafsir, vol. 1, pp. 48–50

[15.](#) Qurtubi, Tafsir, vol. 1, p. 42

[16.](#) Jaza'iri, Tibyan, p. 39

[17.](#) "The vigil of the night is [a time] when an impression is more keen and speech more certain."–Trans.

[18.](#) The three words could be used interchangeably to mean "certain," "accurate," "correct."–Trans

[19.](#) Both words (*zaqiyyatan* and *sayhatan*), mean "a shout."–Trans

[20.](#) Tabari, Tafsir, vol. 25, p. 78.

[21.](#) "And Your prophet, whom You sent." Al-Barra' substituted "messenger" for "prophet."– Trans

- [22.](#) Jaza'iri, Tibyan, p. 58
- [23.](#) Ibid., p. 61
- [24.](#) Tabari , Tafsir, vol. 1, p. 68
- [25.](#) Ibid., p. 69
- [26.](#) Ibid., p. 69
- [27.](#) Jaza'iri, Tibyan, p. 64.
- [28.](#) Ibid., p. 65
- [29.](#) Bukhari, Sahih;, p. 475
- [30.](#) I cited this tradition above
- [31.](#) Suyuti, al-Itqan, vol. 2, sec. 37, p. 102.
- [32.](#) The Mudar is the conglomeration of tribes to which the Quraysh, the Prophet's tribe, belonged .-Trans
- [33.](#) Nunshizuha (to adjust or arrange it) occurs in Qur'an 2:259. Nunshizuha means "to spread it out." The letters za and ra are similar in appearance, distinguished only by a dot over the Arabic za. Dotting was introduced into Arabic script at a later date.-Trans.
- [34.](#) Jaza'iri, Tibyan, p. 59.
- [35.](#) Zurqani, Manahil al- 'Irfan, p. 154
- [36.](#) This word occurs in Qur'an 23:8 and Qur'an 70:32 and is spelled, in both cases, consonantly, i.e., am.n.tihim. Hence, while there could be no doubt that the second vowel is a full vowel, the third could be read as a full vowel (amaniitihim; hence the plural) or as an accented vowel (singular: amanatihim).- Trans
- [37.](#) Mustafa Sadiq al-Rafi'i, I'jaz al-Qur'an wa al-Balagha al-Nabawiyya (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-'Arabi, 1973) pp. 67-68.

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