

Lesson 3: Ayah, Surah, History of the Collection of the Qur'an

Introduction

All authors when compiling a book, they usually divide it into chapters. The chapters are also divided into paragraphs. Paragraphs are a combination of sound sentences. This classification makes the process of reading and understanding the book easier.

Classification of the Qur'an is based on 'Surah' and 'Ayah'. In the language of the Qur'an an Ayah is nearly similar to a sentence, although not exactly the same. For sometimes an Ayah is an incomplete sentence as I will explain.

Ayah

Ayah and its plural 'Ayaat' is used in the Qur'an in three seemingly different meanings:

Sign: The first meaning of the 'Ayah' which is its literal meaning is 'sign' or 'indication'. The road signs can be literally called Ayah. With reference to its literal meaning the Almighty in the Qur'an states: ***"And their Prophet (Samuel) said to them: Verily the Sign (Ayah) of his (Saul) kingdom is that..."*** (2:248)

Miracle: The term Ayah is also used in the Qur'an to mean the miracles performed by the Prophets by the Leave of God. Allah the Almighty states: ***"Ask the Children of Israel how many clear miracles (Ayaat) We gave them."*** (2:211)

Evidence: the Ayah is used in the Qur'an in many instances to mean 'evidence' or 'proof' for the existence of God. Such as: 'And of His evidences (Ayaat) is the creation of the heaven and the earth.'

The Almighty has used the term 'Ayah' to refer to a collection of some words of the Qur'an which makes

a sentence or even one word or sometimes even two letters! The Ayah is the smallest unit in the Qur'an. Allah states: **"And when We change an Ayah (of the Qur'an) in place of another..." (16: 101)**

It seems a sentence of the Qur'an is called an Ayah for it is a Sign for the truth of the Prophet Muhammad (S) and his Divine Mission. It is also a vivid evidence of the Words of God as it is also a miracle. Therefore, the translation of the Ayah to 'verse' is not an accurate translation and does not convey the message behind the term. I would therefore suggest to either use the Arabic term 'Ayah' or its literal translation 'Sign'.

Identification of the Ayah

If there is no grammatical structure governing the formation of an Ayah then how and who is supposed to decide which words/word/letters should be called an Ayah?

It is for this reason that we believe the identification of the Ayaat of the Qur'an are by divine confinement (al-Tauqifee), i.e. no human has any authority on it. The Almighty Allah states: **"Ta Seen. These are the Ayaat of the Qur'an, and a Clear Book." (27: 1)**

Had the identification of the Ayaat been by humans they would have never been in the present order. For instance, **"Alef Lam Mim Sad" (7: 1)** is one Ayah whereas a similar to it- in term of the number of letters- such as **"Alef Lam Mim Ra" (13: 1)** is not an independent Ayah. Similarly, **"Ha Mim. Ayn Seen Qaf" (42: 1-2)** are two Ayaat, but similar to that is **"Kaf Ha Ya Ayn Sad" (19: 1)** which is one Ayah. **Why?**

Moreover, sometimes an incomplete sentence is part of an Ayah such as **"so announce the good news to My devotees" (39: 17)**. Then the rest of the sentence is mentioned in the following Ayah: **"Those who listen to the Word and follow the best thereof." (39: 18)**.

The words and the letters that are making an Ayah are not always the same. The shortest Ayah in the Qur'an has only two letters, i.e. **"Ta Ha" (20: 1)** whereas the longest (2:82) has 128 words which is the combination of 540 letters.

Number of Ayaat

Although there are different opinions for the counting the Ayaat of the Qur'an, it seems the most accurate one is the counting of the Kufans that is narrated from Imam Ali (a.s) by Abdullah ibn Habib al Sullami. According to this counting, the Ayaat of the Qur'an are 6236. Today most of the copies of the Qur'an are according to this counting.

Surah

Surah literally means 'high position and elevated status'. Tall buildings are also called surah. Arabs used to call the fortresses surrounding cities in the ancient times 'sur'. The term Surah is used in the Qur'an

10 times referring to parts of the Qur'an which are nearly similar to chapters. The Almighty states, ***"And if you are in doubt concerning that which We have sent down to Our devotee then produce a Surah(chapter) of the like thereof."*** (2:23)

It however seems that the expression of 'Surah' as used in the Qur'an would sometimes include even an Ayah or few Ayaat.

Number of the Surahs

The number of the Surah of the Qur'an is 114. Although there are other narrations they are not reliable.

Names of the Surah

It is more likely that the names given to the Surahs of the Qur'an are also by divine confinement (al-Tauqifee). Thus, although no Prophet is mentioned so repeatedly in the Qur'an as that of Prophet Moses; no chapter is named after him. Had the naming of the Surahs were by the choice of mankind they would have naturally named either of chapter 28, chapter 20 or chapter 26 in which the story of Prophet Moses is mentioned much, Surah Moses. Similarly, no Surah is named after Jesus though there is a Surah named after his mother Mary (19). This is despite the fact that there are Surah in the Qur'an named after some Prophets whether lawmaking or not. Such as, Noah, Ibrahim, Hud, Lot, Yunus, Yusuf and Mohammad (S).

Longest and Shortest Surahs

The longest Surah of the Qur'an is the second Surah with 286 Ayat and 6221 Words. The shortest Surah is Surah 108 with three Ayat and only 10 words.

The First and the Last Surah

The most famous opinion is that Surah Al-Hamd is the first complete Surah which was revealed to the Prophet although the first few Ayaat of Chapter 96 are the first Ayaat revealed to the Prophet. There are also different opinions about the last Surah. Some suggest that it was Surah 5 others Surah 9 but most of the scholars of the Sciences of the Qur'an agree that it was Surah 110.

The Order of the Surahs

The discussion about whether the present order of the chapters of the Qur'an are by divine confinement or not depends on our opinion on the collection of the Qur'an as whether it is a man-made effort or it was by divine confinement. Therefore, I invite you to the following discussion which is the most controversial part of the Sciences of the Qur'an

The History of the Collection of the Qur'an

The science of the story of the collection of the Qur'an is surely one of the most controversial discussions of the Sciences of the Qur'an which has divided the scholars into two big groups:

- 1) Those who assert the Qur'an was compiled after the demise of the Prophet (S): This would include almost all Sunni scholars as well as some renowned Shia scholars such as the Late Allamah Tabatabai, some of his students and the late Allamah al-Balaghi.
- 2) Those who believe that the Qur'an was compiled prior to the demise of the Prophet (S) by the divine confinement and under the supervision of the holy Prophet (S). Some Shia scholars are the advocates of this opinion. The presenter of this course belongs to the second group.

The Meaning of Collection of the Qur'an (Jam')

Before analysing the reasons of which group we ought to clarify one common terminology. The scientists of the Qur'an have usually referred to this discussion as 'the history of the collection of the Qur'an' (Tarikh Jam' al- Qur'an). By the term collection they mean either of the following meanings:

Collection of the Qur'an in the sense of its memorisation in the heart: in the early years of Islam those who knew the Qur'an by heart were called Jumma'ul Qur'an (those who have collected the Qur'an in their hearts).

Collection in the sense of writing and compilation: Collection in this sense has two meanings: one – writing and compilation of the Ayaat without organising the order of the Surahs, the second the compilation and the order of the Ayaat as well as the Surahs of the Qur'an, to compile them as a complete book, as that of the present Qur'an

Collection in the sense of collecting all different accents and unifying the Qur'an based on one authorised accent.

There is no dispute that the collection in its first sense did exist in the time of the Prophet. Surely some of the companions of the Prophet knew the entire Qur'an by heart and their names are recorded in history. Collection in the third sense of it, is also unanimously agreed by all scholars. There is almost a consensus that during the reign of Othman the Qur'an was unified on the basis of the accent of Quraysh which was the accent of Prophet Mohammad (S). The entire argument rotates around the second meaning of collection, i.e. whether the Ayaat or/and the Surahs of the Qur'an were collected as the present Book prior to the demise of the Prophet or after his demise?

Note: It should be noted that none of the above opinions would conclude any alteration or perversion in the Qur'an for indisputably there is only one Qur'an and all it contains are the revelation of God to the Prophet (S) with no addition or omission.

The Proofs of the First Opinion

The adherers to the theory that the Qur'an was compiled after the demise of the Prophet (S) and during the reign of Abu Bakr and somehow Omar, rely mainly on the following reasons:

1. The Hadith of Zaid ibn Thabit: nearly two years after the demise of the Prophet (S) and in the second year of the reign of Abu Bakr, a bloody war took place between the Muslim army and the army of Musaylamah al-Kathab. This battle is known as the Battle of Yamamah' during which many of the companions of the Prophet who knew the Qur'an by heart were killed. I shall narrate the rest of the story as quoted by Al-Bokhari in his Sahih from Zaid ibn Thabit:

"After the battle of Yamamah Abu Bakr sent after me. When I visited him Omar ibn Khattab was also with him. Abu Bakr said, 'Omar has informed me that during the battle of Yamamah the recitors of the Qur'an were killed and I am concerned that should this be repeated most of the Qur'an would be destroyed.' He asked me to order for the collection of the Qur'an. I said to Omar 'How can I do something that the Messenger of God did not do?!' Omar said, 'By Allah, this is a good deed.' Thus Omar repeatedly visited me until the Almighty expanded my heart and I agreed with Omar. Then Abu Bakr said to me, 'You are a young and intelligent man, there is no accusation towards you and you were the one who used to write the revelation for the Messenger of God. Thus, search for the Qur'an and collect it all.

By Allah if I (Zaid) was ordered to move a mountain it would not be more difficult for me than the task of the collection of the Qur'an.' I said to Abu Bakr 'How can you do something that the Messenger of God did not do? Abu Bakr replied 'this is a good deed.' Thus, Abu Bakr repeatedly called me until God expanded my heart insomuch as He had expanded the hearts of Abu Bakr and Omar. I agreed and began searching for the Qur'an and collected it from the leaves of the palms and white stones as well as from the chests of people. Finally, I found the last two Ayaat of Surah 9 with Abu- Khozaimah al-Ansari and I could not find them with anyone else. This collection of the Qur'an stayed (in hiding) with Abu Bakr until he died and then stayed with Omar until he died and then with Hafzeh the daughter of Omar."

The above narration which is in the most authentic Sunni books of Hadith is one of the main reasons for those who believe that the Qur'an was compiled after the demise of the Prophet (S). In this narration the good innovation of the collection of the Qur'an claimed to have been initiated by Omar and his persuasion.

Response

Unfortunately we cannot agree with the above narration for various reasons.

a) The above narration contradicts many other historical narrations. For instance Ibn Sireen said "Omar was killed and he did not collect the Qur'an." The late Ayatollah Khomeini after quoting 22 narrations that are the main narrations in this field, elaborates in analysing them and explains the contradictions among

them. Thus, all of them are nullified. In addition you need to bear in mind that the above narration and its similar are only narrated by the Sunni scholars.

b) It seems all these narrations aim at creating virtues for Abu Bakr and Omar to equalize their status with that of Othman during whose reign the unification of the Qur'an has taken place. Notice that in the above narration it is explicitly claimed that they are doing "something good that the Prophet did not do!" Isn't this similar to the accusation they gave to the holy Prophet that he did not appoint anyone as his caliph before he dies! Accepting the above narration means accepting that Omar and following him Abu Bakr were more concerned for the protection of the Qur'an than the holy Prophet of Islam (S)!

c) If there is any truth in the above narration the motivation of Abu Bakr would not be more than having a copy of the Qur'an for himself as similar to some of the companions of the Prophet who historically compiled the entire Qur'an for themselves. It is for this reason that Abu Bakr hides the collection of Zaid in a box and so does Omar. Had they really been concerned for the loss of the Qur'an they would have made many copies of that original and spread it among the Muslims.

2. Various Shia and Sunni narrations have quoted that Imam Ali (a.s) committed himself to the collection of the Qur'an right after the demise of the Prophet (S). He had promised himself not to leave his home except on Fridays until he finishes his task. It is narrated that his Qur'an was according to the order of the periods of revelation (chronological order) and he had mentioned the abrogating and the abrogated Ayaat.

The Late Allamah Tabatabai who is one of the renowned Shia adherents of the theory of the collection of the Qur'an after the demise of the Prophet asserts: "The meaning of the above narration (the collection of Imam Ali a.s) is one of the indisputable facts among the Shia." He further argues that should the Qur'an have been compiled in the present order at the time of the Prophet, it would have been impossible for Imam Ali (a.s) to compile the Qur'an in a different format than that of the Prophet (S) which was based on divine confinement. His eminence therefore asserts: "the collection of the Qur'an in its present format must have certainly happened after the demise of the Prophet (S).

Response

The collection of the Qur'an by Imam Ali (a.s) as quoted in the Shi'a books of Hadith was about the interpretation of the Qur'an not the collection of the Qur'an itself. Thus, the Imam (a.s) has mentioned the abrogating and the abrogated, the Makki and the Madani and all details related to any Ayah. The collection of the Imam is referred to in many Hadith as "Al-Jame'a" (the Comprehensive) or "Al Jaffr" (the Paper on which the Imam has written), or Mushaf Fatima (for the Prophet (S) had dictated it to the Imam mostly in the house of Fatima). These names indicate that the collection of the Imam was the Qur'an with its interpretation. For further study of the book of the Imam see Al-Kafi 1:39 and Al Wafi 1:63 and Beharul Anwar 1:140.

3. The third proof is the gradual revelation of the Qur'an and the continuation of the revelation until the

end of the life of the Prophet (S). The late Alameh Al- Balaghi while mentioning this proof claims that this phenomenon could not make the collection of the Qur'an possible.

Response

The response to this claim is very obvious. We propose that as the Qur'an was being gradually revealed so would it be compiled. Many narrations suggest that Gabriel (a.s) used to descend to the Prophet and ask him where the exact place of the revealed Ayah shall be. For instance, it is quoted in many narrations that when the last Ayah was revealed to the Prophet saying, "And be afraid of the Day when you shall be brought back to Allah" Gabriel said to the Prophet to place it between Ayah 282 and 280 of chapter 2. Similarly, many narrations suggest that any time "Bismillahe Rahmane Raheem" was revealed the Prophet (S) knew that the previous Surah was finished and a new Surah was commencing.

The Proofs of the Second Opinion

The second opinion is the opinion of those Shi'a scholars who hold the Qur'an, as it is today, was collected at the time of the Prophet (S) and under his supervision by divine confinement. The following are some of the main reasons:

1. There are many contradictions between the narrations about the collection of the Qur'an after the Prophet (S) and hence are nullified.
2. The Hadith of Thaqaalayn that is narrated by both Shi'a and Sunni in which the Prophet (S) leaves two precious things, i.e. The Book of Allah and Ahlul Bayt confirms that the Qur'an was a Book prior to the demise of the Prophet (S), not only a memory in the hearts of the believers.
3. The second famous name of the Qur'an as mentioned in the Qur'an is 'Book'. A book is something that is written and compiled. The first time the Qur'an was referred to as 'Book' was with the revelation of Surah Maryam (Chapter 19). In this Surah the Almighty refers to the Qur'an as 'Book' five times (19:16, 19:41, 19:51, 19:54, 19:56). This Surah was revealed to the Prophet (S) six years after his prophetic mission when he was still in Makka. We suggest that the Almighty has named the Qur'an a 'Book' for it must be compiled. As it was named 'the Qur'an' for it has to be recited.

In fact, with the exception of 'al-Mo'allaqatu-Sab' (The Seven Poems) that Arabs during the pre-Islamic era (Jahiliyyah) had written and hanged them on the curtains of Ka'ba-if there is any truth in it- there hasn't been any written heritage for the Arabs of Jahiliyya. The Qur'an marks the first written Book in the history of Arabs. Thus, Islam divided the history of Arabs into two distinct periods of the era of Jahilliyah and the Islamic era.

4. It is not possible that the Prophet (S) has left the Ummah without compiling the Revelation, insomuch as it was not possible for him to leave the Ummah without any leader. It seems the claim of Abu-Bakr that 'the Prophet (S) did not collect the Qur'an' is another side of his forged coin concerning the issue of

caliphate after the Prophet (S). Is this not similar to his alleged claim that the Prophet (S) left this world without appointing any one as his caliph?

5. The Prophet (S) had Scribes of Revelation whose numbers varied from time to time from 23 to 43. Since he was in Makka he had appointed Scribes. The Prophet (S) was dictating the received revelation to them and would ask them to recite it for him to check if there were any mistakes in their writings.

6. Finally the most definite proof that the Qur'an was compiled during the time of the Prophet (S) and under his supervision is the order of the Ayaat and the Surahs of the Qur'an. As discussed earlier it is just impossible for any human no matter how intelligent or simple to have come up with the existing order of the Ayaat and the Surahs.

Imagine the entire Words of the Qur'an in a box. Then you give them to a group of well-versed Arab linguists to compile them as a book. It is impossible for them to compile it in the way it is. They would either compile it based on the chronological order, or according to different subjects, or the length of the Ayaat and the Surahs or the like. Guess what? The order of the Qur'an is none of the above.

This is the actualization of the Words of God Who states: ***"Verily, We, it is We Who have sent down the Dhikr (the Qur'an) and surely We will guard it."*** (15:9) as He states: ***"It is for Us to collect it and its recitation."*** (75:17)

Unification of the Accents of the Qur'an

The Arabic writing during the early time of Islam did not have any dots or signs. With the spread of Islam various Arabs and non-Arabs used to recite the Qur'an with their own accents. Gradually, people of various tribes assumed only their pronunciation is correct and the rest are wrong. This would sometimes cause to make slight changes in the meanings of the words. For instance, instead of reciting 'fatabayano' (49:6), some had recited 'fatathabbato', or they had recited 'Nonsheroha' instead of 'Nonshezoha' (2:259)

Finally the issue was brought to the attention of Othman; the third Caliph. He appointed a group for unification of the accents of the Qur'an. He commanded them that should they disagree on any accent, the authorised accent shall only be the accent of Qoraysh for it was the accent of the Prophet(S).

When the task was fulfilled the unified Qur'an was presented to Imam Ali and by consulting some of the companions and with the endorsement of Imam Ali (a.s) it was spread across the then world. All other copies were destroyed.

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