

Journal of Tafsir Studies
Tefsir Arařtırmaları Dergisi

مجلة الدراسات التفسيرية

<https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/pub/tader>

E-ISSN: 2587-0882

Volume/Cilt: 7, Issue/Sayı: Special, Year/Yıl: 2023 (September/Eylül)

Fluidity of Reading the Qur'ān into Late Middle Ages Between the Readers and the Exegetes: the Case of Abū al-Su'ūd/Ebussuud (d. 1574 CE).

Kurrā ve Müfessirler Arasında Geç Döneme Kadar Kur'an Kiraatlerinde Fluluk: Ebussuud ve Tefsiri Örneđi

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Makale Bilgisi – Article Information

Makale Türü/Article Type: Arařtırma Makalesi/ Research Article

Geliř Tarihi/Date Received: 13/06/2023

Kabul Tarihi/Date Accepted: 28/08/2023

Yayın Tarihi/Date Published: 30/09/2023

Atıf / Citation: Őimőek, Halil. Fluidity of Reading the Qur'ān into Late Middle Ages Between the Readers and the Exegetes: the Case of Abū al-Su'ūd/Ebussuud (d. 1574 CE). *Journal of Tafsir Studies* 7/Special Issue (September/Eylül, 2023), 72-102.

<https://doi.org/10.31121/tader.1313942>

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Yayıncı / Published by: Ali KARATAŐ / Türkiye

Abstract

A significant topic of the Qur'anic studies is the subject of variant readings. According to Muslim tradition, the Qur'ān can be read at least in seven variant readings. Primary sources of Muslim scholarly tradition on the history of the Qur'ān exhibit, to some degree of variance, two distinct historical tiers: one is on the written form of the Qur'ān; and the other is on the oral features of the Qur'ān. Although the history of the written form of the Qur'ān seems to have culminated with the collection of the caliph 'Uthmān (r. 26-36/646-656), the oral character of it continued to entertain variances in unspecified numbers. Attempts to limit, systematize, and canonize these variances, despite political backing at times, have failed to find reception with the scholars of Qur'anic readings and the scholars of Qur'anic exegesis well into the late Middle Ages. The latter, in their exegetical works, have continued to revive, utilize, and assess the readings that had been deemed non-canonical by the former. The Muslim tradition in general purports that the Qur'anic readings have been limited and systematized in non-exegetical settings, and the scholars of Qur'anic readings have allowed for the utilization of non-canonical readings for exegetical purposes. Our study here aims to assess this claim and re-examine if it can be corroborated with historical developments. We hope to demonstrate that not only does this claim stand on shaky grounds, but the exegetical literature well into the late Middle Ages strove to maintain the liberal ground for the oral aspect of the Qur'ān. We have tackled the issue through the exegetical work of Abū al-Su'ūd al-Īmādī, *Irshād al-'aql al-salīm ilā mazāyā al-Kitāb al-Karīm*, with references to earlier exegetical works on which Abū al-Su'ūd seems to have drawn. We would like to demonstrate that the exegetes contested the Qur'anic readers in the oral features of the Qur'ān and stood their ground in keeping the liberal approach that allowed for some degree of fluidity and which was guided and governed by several different and non-fixed criteria such as tradition, meaning, literary excellence, linguistic reasoning, etc. **Key words:** Qur'anic exegesis, History of the Qur'ān, Qur'anic/variant readings, al-aḥruf al-sab'a, Ottoman exegetical heritage, Abū al-Su'ūd, *Irshād al-'aql al-salīm*.

Öz

Kur'ân arařtırmalarının en önemli konularından birisi de Kur'ân kıraâtleridir. Yerleşik Sünnî İslami anlayışa göre Kur'ân en az yedi değişik vecihle okunabilir. İslam literatürünün ana kaynakları, kendi aralarında bazı farklılıklar arzetsen de Kur'ân lafızları ve tarihi hakkında iki katmanlı bir tarihsel süreç önermektedir: Birincisi, yazılı Kur'ân metni; ikincisi ise, şifâhî okuma farklılıkları. Geleneksel ve yerleşik öğretisi, yazılı kanonik metni Hz. Osman'a dayandırsa da şifâhî okuma farklılıkları devam ede gelmiş ve bu farklılıkların sayısını tahdit etme girişimleri, siyasi iktidar desteğine rağmen hem kurrâ nezdinde hem de tefsir uleması nezdinde zorlu bir sınavla karşılaşmıştır. Kurrâ uleması 9/15. yy itibarıyla bu kıraatleri yedi ve/veya on ile sınırlandırarak kanonize etmiş olsa da, kanonik addetmedikleri okumaların tefsir amaçlı kullanılmasına göz yummuşlar, kanonik olmayan okumaların tefsir dışında kullanılması gerektiğine hükmetmişlerdir. Bizim bu çalışmamız bu iddianın tarihsel doğruluğunu mercek altına almakta, tefsircilerin böyle bir ayırımı kabul etmeden Kur'ân metninin esnek yapısının kurrâ'nın çizdiği sınırlarla tahdit edilemeyeceği yönünde eğilim sergilediklerini ve böylece de oral yapısını tahdit eden kriterlerin birtakım tarihi verileri göz ardı ettiğini ortaya koymaya çalışmaktadır. Araştırmamız Ebussuud'un tefsiri *İrşâdu'l-akli's-selîm ilâ mezâyâ'l-Kitâbi'l-Kerîm* ve bu tefsire kaynaklık ettiğini düşündüğümüz daha erken dönem tefsir literatürü ile karşılaştırılarak bir değerlendirme sunmaktadır. Bu araştırmamızda, tefsircilerin Kur'ân'ın şifâhî özellikleri konusunda kurrâyaya, karşı bir söylem benimsediklerini, bu söylemleriyle Kur'ân'ın şifâhî karakterine rivayet, anlam, belağat, lügavi kıyas, vb. değişken ve farklı kriterler doğrultusunda fluluk, yani esneklik ve serbestiyet atfettiklerini göstermeyi hedeflemekteyiz.

Anahtar kelimeler: Tefsir, Kur'ân tarihi, kıraatler, el-ahrufu's-seb'a, Osmanlı tefsir mirası, Ebussuud, *İrşâdu'l-akli's-selîm*.

1. Introduction: The Traditional Account on The History and Development of the Qur'ānic Text and its Reading¹

1.1. The Qur'ānic Text

Before we delve into *Irshād* on variant readings², we would like to present here a brief Muslim traditional account on the history of Qur'ānic text in order to prepare the ground for the discussion of Abū al-Su'ūd's and other Muslim scholars' attitude towards the phenomenon of variant Qur'ānic readings.³ The modern western scholarship has raised objections to the traditional Muslim narrative and produced alternative accounts for the history of Qur'ānic text, an aspect of Qur'ānic studies that is beyond the scope of this study.⁴

According to Muslim traditional account, the Qur'ān, held to be the revealed speech of God, was received piecemeal by Muḥammad over the course of 23 years from 610 to 632 CE. These revelations received by Muḥammad were preserved either in memory or in writing in primitive materials, such as flat animal bones and stones, and pieces of cloth and wooden boards, or even both in memory and writing. We do not know if the written fragments of the Qur'ān into abovementioned primitive materials constituted collectively the entire Qur'ān, but the circumstantial evidence may indicate that it was the case. That the Qur'ān as we have it today in a uniform book was never *in toto* written during the time of the Prophet may strongly indicate that it was meant to be preserved in memory and recitation.⁵ The traditional narrative also preserved several traditions which clearly indicate that the Prophet taught these revelations to his Companions in an unspecified number of variances in reading, probably reflecting the variances in the dialects of tribes to which those Companions belonged.⁶ At any rate, when Muḥammad died, the Qur'ānic revelations had not been collected into a uniform written book. Though the generally accepted tradition propounds that the Qur'ān had been collected/preser-

¹ This article is extracted with slight revisions from my doctorate dissertation entitled "The Missing Link in the History of Quranic Commentary: The Ottoman Period and the Quranic Commentary of Ebussuud/Abū al-Su'ūd al-ʿImādī (d. 1574 CE) *Irshād al-ʿaql al-salīm ilā mazāyā al-Kitāb al-Karīm*" supervised by Walid Saleh (Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Toronto, Toronto, Canada, 2018).

² The concept of variant readings is a convention of western scholarship, and it denotes that there is a standard reading to which others are considered variant. But the Muslim scholarship does not differentiate between various Qur'ānic readings and all canonical readings are considered just as standard.

³ The kernel of the following historical account can also be found, with slight variances, in several recent modern studies. See for example, Claude Gilliot "Creation of a Fixed Text" *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2006), 41-58; Fred Leemhuis, "From Palm Leaves to the Internet" *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. J. D. McAuliffe, (Cambridge: Camb. Univ. Press, 2006), 145-161, pp. 145-153; François Déroche, "Witten Transmission" *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. A. Rippin (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing Ltd., 2006), 172-186; Fred Leemhuis, "Readings of the Qur'ān", *Encyclopedia of the Qur'ān [EQ]*, ed. J. D. McAuliffe, (Leiden: Brill, 2004), 4/353-366.; Abdülhamit Birişik, "Kıraat", *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi [DİA]*, (Ankara: TDV Yayınları, 2002), 25/426-433.

⁴ For a recent assessment on the alternative accounts of western scholarship, see Harald Motzki, "Alternative accounts of the Qur'ānic formation" *The Cambridge Companion to the Qur'ān*, ed. J. D. McAuliffe, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 59-79.

⁵ The word Qur'ān lexically means, according to some views and though not exclusively, recitation and/or reading. The issue at hand is much more complex, but for the sake of brevity, we are operating on the presumption that the Prophet, or God for that matter, intended these revelations to be collected into a book form, a task that was carried out by the Prophet's Companions after his passing away.

⁶ This phenomenon of variances in reading during the Prophet Muḥammad's time is predicated on the doctrine of *al-ahruf al-sab'a* (the Seven Modes [of reading]) about which more will be discussed in the following pages.

ved by heart by a number of individuals before Muḥammad died, unorthodox views that interpret the same and different evidence otherwise are also encountered.⁷ The traditional account tells us that there were two collection attempts after the death of the Prophet: the first one was by the first caliph Abū Bakr (r. 11-13/632-634); and the second one by the third caliph ‘Uthmān. Abū Bakr commissioned Zayd b. Thābit (d. 45/665), a Companion of the Prophet who, according to the Muslim narrative, was also one of his secretaries who wrote down the revelations as they descended, to collect the Qur’ān. This attempt of collecting the Qur’ān into a binder of sheets, traditionally known as *Muṣḥaf*⁸, was instigated by the fact that most of those who had been preserving the Qur’ān in their memories had perished in the late battles that Abū Bakr had waged against the rebels on the wake of Muḥammad’s death. Zayd thus proceeded and wrote the Qur’ānic revelations into sheets, coupled with the oral testimony of other Companions, which had previously been recorded on the abovementioned primitive materials. These sheets that Zayd collected formed the *Muṣḥaf*, or *Ṣuḥuf*, which was then entrusted to the care of Abū Bakr, the first caliph/head of the Muslim community. We have no way of ascertaining if the collection of Abū Bakr was predicated on a single mode of reading or if it was written in a way that reflected a number of possible variances representing the ones sanctioned by the Prophet. When Abū Bakr died, the *Muṣḥaf/Ṣuḥuf* passed to ‘Umar (r. 14-26/634-646), who succeeded the former in caliphate, and, upon ‘Umar’s death to Ḥafṣa, the latter’s daughter and one of Muḥammad’s widows. We are here to infer, based on the events that were to unfold, that though there was a written uniform Qur’ān, Muslims in various and remote parts of the realm continued learning the Qur’ān from Companions, who, now dispersed in far-off lands, must have passed it onto their students in the variance(s) that they claimed they had received from the Prophet.⁹ Though these variances seem not to have engendered any controversy or disputation amongst most of the Companions, those who were unaware of the variance phenomenon and/or the generation of Successors (*al-Tābi’ūn*) began raising serious problems over the correct reading of Qur’ān. During the caliphate of ‘Uthmān, who succeeded ‘Umar, Ḥudhayfa b. al-Yamān, a military commander of one of the expeditions, became concerned about the disputes that arose amongst his soldiers over the correct reading of the Qur’ān and brought it up with the caliph. ‘Uthmān thus formed a commission of four or five Companions headed by Zayd b. Thābit for the collection of the Qur’ān for a second time. ‘Uthmān requested the sheets that were collected by Abū Bakr and were now in Ḥafṣa’s possession, and ordered the commission to produce a codex on the basis of Abu Bakr’s collection. He further instructed them that if there was any discrepancy and/or disagreement in dialect, they should record it according to the dialect of

⁷ See: Gilliot, “Creation of a fixed text”, 44 where Gilliot opined that the Mu’tazilite Abū al-Qāsim al-Balkhī’s (d. 319/931) contradictory report that “no one had collected (or memorized “*jama’ a*”) the Qur’ān during the life of the Prophet” could also be understood to mean “no one had memorized it”. See for a further detailed discussion on the technical term *jama’ a*, Claude Gilliot, “Collecte ou mémorisation du Coran. Essai d’analyse d’un vocabulaire ambigu (Collection or memorization of the Koran. An attempt to analyse an ambiguous vocabulary)” in Lohlker (Rüdiger) (hrsg.von), *Hadīstudies – Die Überlieferungen des Propheten im Gespräch. Festschrift für Prof. Dr. Tilman Nagel*, (Hambourg: Verlag dr. Kovac, 2009), 77-132.

⁸ The etymology and meaning of this word has been the subject of a number of studies: See for example, John Burton, “Muṣḥaf”, *Encyclopedia of Islam* (New Edition [E²]), 7/668-69; and Harald Motzki, “Muṣḥaf” *EQ*, 3/463-66.

⁹ This argument presupposes that those Companions who carried the Qur’ān forward to new members of the Muslim community had received it, in toto, from the Prophet directly in a given reading; however, the lack of credible evidence requires us to question this premise, even if we ultimately fail to provide counter evidence as well. Nonetheless, we would like to note our preservation that not only may the Companions have been teaching the Qur’ān only partially because of the fact that they had not learned all of it from the Prophet, but also there is circumstantial evidence indicating that they were given the choice of reading the Qur’ān in an unspecified way(s) provided that they observe the meaning.

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Quraysh, the tribe to which Muḥammad belonged. Upon the completion of this copy which came to be known as the 'Uthmanic Codex (*al-Muṣḥaf al-'Uthmānī*), 'Uthmān ordered for the reproduction of four or five, or yet according to some other accounts, six more copies which were to be sent to the central cities of Makka, Baṣra, Kūfa, and Damascus. The city of Madina, the seat of the caliphate, was to preserve the Imām/original copy. 'Uthmān further ordered his governors in those cities to burn and destroy all other copies that may have been circulating and were in non-compliance with his copy. His attempt to procure a uniform text did not initially achieve conclusive success and other Companions, now dispersed in various central and remote cities of a vast Muslim realm, and spearheaded by the likes of Ibn Mas'ūd (d. 33/653), Ubayy b. Ka'b (d. 18/639 or 28/649), and Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī (d. 42/662), all of whom were eminent Companions of the Prophet, produced their own codices that differed in reading and writing from the codex of 'Uthmān. The copies of the codices produced by other Companions did not survive, but contents of them have survived in oral transmissions until recorded in early *tafsīr* works.¹⁰

1.2. The Qur'ānic Readings

Reports about variant ways of reciting and/or reading the Qur'ān even during the life of Muḥammad abound. These variances involved the whole range of lexical points from simple pronunciation through different case endings, synonyms, to variances in entire phrases. Islamic tradition predicated these variances during the lifetime of Muḥammad on the doctrine of *al-aḥruf al-sab'a* (the Seven Modes [of reading/reciting]) which involved a number of variances in reading/recitation according to which Gabriel recited the Qur'ān to Muḥammad and the latter allowed his followers to freely choose to recite/read the Qur'ān in accordance with one of those modes.¹¹ Traditional accounts indicate that the Qur'ān was equally canonically being read and recited in one of these various modes until 'Uthmān collected it for a second time into a relatively uniform written text in a volume of sheets—*Muṣḥaf*—, had it reproduced into four more copies, or six more copies according to some accounts, and sent it to major cities of the Muslim realm. We would like to note our reservation by saying that the *Muṣḥaf* collected by 'Uthmān was relatively uniform, because there were two significant characteristics to it: first was that not all of the five copies were identical in script; and second is that it was defective (*scriptio defectiva*), without vowels and/or diacritical marks in the sense that it allowed for a number of possible different readings.¹²

There arose the phenomenon of variant readings of the Qur'ān. On the one hand there was a group of variant readings that were predicated on the doctrine of *al-aḥruf al-sab'a*, and on the other, there was a group of readings that was engendered by *scriptio defectiva*. Though

¹⁰ Based on Ubayy b. Ka'b's death date, the terminus ante quem for 'Uthmān's collection should be 649, or it is also not unlikely that the former, along with other Companions, had already collected the Qur'ān in writing into a codex years before 'Uthmān, thence the latter's order that all the other codices be burnt and destroyed.

¹¹ For a collection of *ḥadīth*s on *al-aḥruf al-sab'a*, see Shihāb al-Dīn 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ismā'il b. Ibrāhīm Abī Shāma al-Maqdisī, (d. 665/1266-67), *al-Murshid al-wajīz ilā 'ulūm tata'allaq bi al-Kitāb al-'Azīz*, ed. Ibrāhīm Shams al-Dīn (Bairut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2003), 78-86; and for a somehow systematic presentation and study of these traditions see, Shady Hekmat Nasser, *The Transmission of the Variant Readings of the Qur'ān: The Problem of Tawātur and the Emergence of Shawādhidh*, (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 18-29.

¹² For a number of sample variances see, Ibn al-Jazarī, Abī al-Khayr M. b. Muḥammad al-Dimashqī (d. 833/1430), *al-Nashr fī al-qirā'āt al-'ashr*, ed. 'Alī M. al-Ṣabbāgh and Zakariyyā 'Umayrān, 2 vols. (Bairut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1998), 1/16. Note that these variant readings borne out by the *scriptio defectiva* are not necessarily the same as the variant readings that had prophetically been accommodated on account of *al-aḥruf al-sab'a*.

the variant readings borne out by the doctrine of *al-aḥruf al-sab'a* involved a variety of variances, the most conspicuous characteristic of them was that in innumerable instances they differed from the 'Uthmanic Ductus in the expression of an entirety of a given Qur'ānic word in grapheme. For example, *wa li kull(in) wijhat(un)*¹³ is read in the reading attributed to Ibn Mas'ūd as *wa li kull(in) qiblat(un)*. Even though the meaning may remain the same, in this instance the entire grapheme of the Arabic expression changes.¹⁴ But the variant readings borne out by *scriptio defectiva* represented mostly variations without making any changes with the grapheme of the words. The variances in reading, whether they be borne out by the script or the doctrine of *al-aḥruf al-sab'a*, continued to exist in an unspecified number even after the introduction of 'Uthmanic codex. The canonicity of a given reading was in a way up for grabs, no official attempt was recorded for a period of two or three centuries to determine the admissibility or inadmissibility of given transmitted reading, and it was rather the purview of Muslim scholars in various fields to assess the validity of this heritage of unspecified number of variant readings. Probably the first official attempt to mark some boundaries on the written form of the Qur'ān came during mid-Umayyad period. The *scriptio defectiva* was made into *scriptio plena*¹⁵ probably by al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf (d. 96/714), the governor of Irāq during the reign of the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik (r. 66-87/685-705), who introduced a number of systems represented in the diacritical marks and vowelization symbols, that served to distinguish between the identical graphemes of the Arabic alphabet and captured the case endings, short/long vowels, and so forth. But the variant readings that differed from the 'Uthmanic codex continued to be transmitted from various companions, especially from Ibn Mas'ūd, and survived until the 10th century Qur'ānic scholar Ibn Mujāhid's (d. 325/936) time who, with the help of Abbasid authorities, introduced certain criteria by which the canonicity of a given reading could be measured. Ibn Mujāhid also reduced the number of readings to be deemed canonical to seven, each is identified with an eponymous reader from the cities to which 'Uthmanic copies had been sent. Even though Ibn Mujāhid did not expressly state his criteria for determining the canonicity of a given Qur'ānic reading, the medieval and modern scholarship inferred them to boil down to three:

1. Compliance with the 'Uthmanic Ductus/*rasm*;
2. Authoritative transmission¹⁶;
3. Compliance with the rules of Arabic language.

Between the introduction of 'Uthmanic codex and Ibn Mujāhid's time, on the other hand, Muslim scholars did not feel bound by the criteria set by Ibn Mujāhid, nor did they display restriction against the 'Uthmanic Ductus and continued to treat the readings that differed from it equally as canonical as al-*Muṣḥaf al-'Uthmānī*. Though those early scholars did not stipulate the criteria they observed, F. Leemhuis deduced that they were also three¹⁷:

1. Compliance with "a codex/*Muṣḥaf*" (any codex);
2. Transmission through an authoritative chain;
3. Compliance with the rules of Arabic language.

¹³ al-Baqara 2/148.

¹⁴ In several other instances, even the meaning changes depending on the interpretation rendered by a given exegete.

¹⁵ *Scriptio defectiva* and *scriptio plena* are two technical terms denoting the writing systems of a given text where the former designates a text that is written with only consonants and/or without vowels, and the latter designates a text that includes both the consonant and vowel characters.

¹⁶ A rather loose term that may designate several technical meanings; more on this will soon be discussed further.

¹⁷ Leemhuis, "Readings of the Qur'ān", 4/353-366.

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It seems that the difference between Ibn Mujāhid's criteria and the criteria of those who preceded and/or succeeded him boils down to the issue of compliance with a written text; Ibn Mujāhid identified the written text solely with the 'Uthmanic Ductus, while those who disagreed with him recognized the other codices, mainly that of Ibn Mas'ūd, as equally canonical.

Owing to the political backing Ibn Mujāhid was able to secure through the 'Abbasid authorities of his time¹⁸, his system was solely enforced in liturgy, and the variant readings that did not comply with the 'Uthmanic Ductus continued to survive within the literary output of scholarly circles, especially the corpus of exegetical material that survived through the Qur'ānic commentary of Tha'labī (d. 427/1035) and those whose works mainly drew on it. It is therefore not improbable that had Ibn Mujāhid not secured the support of political authorities of his time, the variant readings would have survived even in liturgy.

The fact that Ibn Mujāhid limited the acceptable canonical readings to seven is not without significance. Although Ibn Mujāhid did not clearly state it, the way that the medieval Muslim scholars treated the subject indicates that he intended to identify his selection of seven readings with the Seven Modes (*al-ahruf al-sab'a*) of reading that are prophetically and/or divinely sanctioned. Regardless of whether or not Ibn Mujāhid had such intentions, the majority of scholars have expressed their disagreement on such identification and viewed *al-ahruf al-sab'a* as something entirely different than the phenomenon of current variant readings of the Qur'ān.¹⁹

After Ibn Mujāhid, the variant readings that did not make into his list did not immediately die out and scholars continued to debate the criteria implicitly advanced by him. Eventually three more readings that are stipulated to have complied with his unstated criteria were added to make up the number of canonical readings to ten. The debate around the degree of authoritative transmission, one of Ibn Mujāhid's criteria, proved crucial. It seems that Ibn Mujāhid did not elaborate on the degree of authoritative transmission, and consequently some took it to mean *mutawātir* (multiply attested), and some others took it to include even the *mashhūr* transmissions.²⁰

¹⁸ The two figures that are frequently mentioned in the sources and that have been subjected to official interrogation and forced to recant are Ibn Miqṣam (d. 354/965) and Ibn Shannabūdh (d. 328/939); See: Christopher Melchert, "Ibn Mujāhid and the Establishment of Seven Qur'anic Readings," *Studia Islamica* 91(2000), 5-22; and Muazzem Yener, "İbn Miksem: Hayatı, Kıraat İlmindeki Yeri ve Şâz Okuyuşları," *Jass Studies-The Journal of Academic Social Science Studies*, 15/89 (2022), 269-286; and Abdulmecit Okcu, "İbn Şenebûz: Hayatı, Kıraat İlmindeki Yeri ve Resmi Hatta Muhallif Okuyuşları," *Atatürk Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi*, 42(2014), 1-30.

¹⁹ Leemhuis, "Readings of the Qur'ān", 4/353-366.

²⁰ *Mutawātir*, *mashhūr*, and *āḥād* are technical terms that have been developed by Muslim scholars for the purpose of verifying oral transmissions. *Mutawātir* is a highly polemical category and was mostly adopted not by *ḥādīth* scholars, but by the *uṣūlīs*, those who were interested in the theoretical foundations of Islamic epistemology. In broad terms it designated an oral report that is transmitted by so big a number of transmitters whose collusion in fabricating such a report is precluded by sound and/or conventional reasoning. An oral report transmitted in *mutawātir* manner was held to have yielded epistemological certainty as to the source and provenance of it, namely it could with certainty be ascribed to the source from which it was said to have originated. The key factor in *mutawātir* is the number of transmitters. Different scholars have designated this number differently. *Mashhūr*, on the other hand, is an oral report that is transmitted by a number of transmitters fewer than those found in *mutawātir*. *Āḥād* reports are the transmissions that are transmitted by single persons or only by a very few number of individuals. Most of the traditions fall under the category of *āḥād*. Many eminent medieval scholars of *ḥādīth* rejected the category of *mutawātir* on account of its extreme rarity. Though the categories of *mashhūr* and *āḥād* are broadly termed as being sound (*ṣaḥīḥ*), Muslim scholars stated that they yield only probable knowledge, namely that they can with high probability be ascribed to its origin. For a somehow detailed analysis of *mutawātir* between the *uṣūlīs* and *ḥādīth* scholars, see Shady Hekmat Nasser, *The Transmission of the Variant Readings of the Qur'ān*, 66-76; and for the epistemological degree of each of

In addition to discussions about the nature and degree of authoritative transmissions, the scholars also disagreed over which of Ibn Mujāhid's criteria had precedence over another. The argument that the conformity with the 'Uthmanic Ductus constituted *ijmā'*, consensus of the community and/or scholars, allowed for the controversial acceptance of four more readings which continue to be viewed by some as *qirā'āt shādhda* (deviant/isolated readings).²¹

Of the seven readings established by Ibn Mujāhid, the reading of the Kūfan 'Āṣim (d. 127/745) as transmitted by Ḥafṣ (d. 180/796) was adopted by the Ottomans under whose suzerainty the greater part of the Middle East had lived until the early 20th century. In 1924, the Qur'ān was published in Cairo on the basis of the reading of 'Āṣim and this is the edition that commonly and widely circulates in the Muslim world today.

1.3. An Assessment of the Foregoing Narrative

The traditional account broadly outlined above resulted in several complications that the succeeding generations of scholars were invested with the task of resolving. We would now like to touch upon the efforts of some scholars to resolve the issues surrounding the variant readings in order to demonstrate that the issue remained rather unresolved, and that although these attempts were coupled at times with political interferences, the liberal approach to the acceptance of an unspecified number of variant readings continued to exist until late medieval ages.

First of all, there was an official written codex, and at the same time a few unofficial codices reported to belong to the likes of Ibn Mas'ūd, Ubayy b. Ka'b, and Abū Mūsā al-'Ash'arī, along with readings that differed from the official codex. Not only was there more than one Qur'ān, but the number of readings according to which these Qur'āns were being recited was unspecified. Two main theories have been advanced by scholars in an attempt to first accommodate the apparent discrepancy and second pave the way for the creation of a uniform text. One of these theories was the doctrine of abrogation. Those who have argued that the compliance with the official 'Uthmanic Codex is the most foundational criterion for the acceptability of a given reading tried to support their claim with the doctrine of abrogation on two fronts. On the one hand, they argued that the Prophet Muḥammad used to rehearse the Qur'ān with Gabriel every year, and the year he passed away he had rehearsed it twice. Based on this last rehearsal, Zayd b. Thābit, who was present during it, was charged with the task of collecting the Qur'ān into sheets first by Abū Bakr and then by 'Uthmān, and consequently Zayd must have known this last reading that was sanctioned by the archangel Gabriel. It was not mere coincidence that Zayd was the choice for both Abū Bakr and 'Uthmān to be tasked with the collection of Qur'ān. This explanation operates on the presumption that Muḥammad rehearsed only one mode of reading and Gabriel sanctioned it. Though our sources say nothing about whether or not Gabriel sanctioned only one mode of reading in the last rehearsal and the probability does not seem to be far-fetched, the opposite, namely that Gabriel might have sanctioned a number of other readings or Muḥammad might have rehearsed the last time in a number of modes of reading, is equally not unlikely. As a matter of fact there is circumstantial evidence indicating that Zayd's collection of 'Uthmanic Codex, much less the one he collected on the

these categories see, Wael Hallaq, "The Authenticity of Prophetic Ḥadīth: A Pseudo-Problem" *Studia Islamica*, 89 (1999), 75-90.

²¹ Nasser further divides *shādhda* (pl. *shawādhda*) readings into two distinct categories: anomalous and irregular; while the latter designates a reading which conforms to the consonantal outline of 'Uthmanic Ductus but suffers the support in transmission and the consensus of the community of readers, the former is that which disagrees with the 'Uthmanic *rasm*. He provides no further detail if the former category can find support in tradition and linguistic requirement. See: Nasser, *The Transmission of the Variant Readings of the Qur'ān*. 16, ft. 59.

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order of Abū Bakr the first time around, was not written in a single mode of reading. The traditional account tells us that the copies produced on the order of 'Uthmān were not identical and there was some degree of variance among them. Abī Shāma al-Maqdisī (d. 665/1266-67), a prominent medieval figure and a close examiner of the scholarly discussions in the field, related from Abū Tāhir 'Abd al-Wāḥid b. Abī Hishām, a student of both Ibn Mujāhid and Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), that the copy sent to Madina and Damascus read *wa awṣā bihā Ibrāhīm* whereas the copy sent to Kūfa, which reflects the current rendering, read *wa waṣṣā bihā Ibrāhīm*.²² The author concluded that Zayd must have heard the Prophet recite the abovementioned verse in both modes.²³ To question whether Zayd heard him recite in two different modes during the last rehearsal or during different occasions is irrelevant here. This instance clearly indicates that variant readings still existed even during the second collection of the Qur'ān and therefore the claim of abrogation falls through the cracks. On a side note, we have to mention here a point borne out by the abovementioned sample of variance in the 'Uthmanic codex. The point mentioned in the traditional account that 'Uthmān ordered Zayd to record the collection in the Qurayshī dialect is also problematic. Al-Qurṭubī (d. 672/1273) related from al-Qāḍī Ibn al-Ṭayyib [Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī] (d. 394/1003) that the tribe of Quraysh did not indicate the *hamza*, the glottal stop, in writing, whereas the copies sent to Madina and Damascus, as we saw above, record it. He also related from Ibn 'Abd al-Barr (d. 464/1071) that 'Uthmān's wording that the Qur'ān was revealed in the Qurayshī dialect, and therefore he ordered Zayd to collect it in that dialect, does not necessarily mean that the entire Qur'ān was revealed in it, but most of it, or the overwhelming part of it. This is obviously an attempt to reconcile the factual discrepancy between what 'Uthmān is reported to have ordered Zayd and the fact that some copies which Zayd collected and/or produced did not comply with the Qurayshī dialect.²⁴ Based on the abovementioned verse, we can clearly state that not only were Zayd's collected copies not identical, but also, in the abovementioned instance, some of the copies were not recorded in the Qurayshī dialect either. Furthermore, nor can we safely state that what Zayd had collected the first time on the order of Abū Bakr was based on a single mode of reading. In fact, the subsequent traditions tend to refute such a statement. When 'Uthmān charged Zayd for the second time along with three or four other Companions with the task of collecting the Qur'ān, he specifically instructed them that had they differed in the reading of a word and/or a verse they should record it with the dialect of Quraysh, the tribe to which Muḥammad belonged. If the first collection of Abū Bakr was already written in one mode of reading or in the dialect of Quraysh, 'Uthmān's specific instructions would have no point. Nor is there a reason for Zayd to collect it in a dialect other than the dialect of Quraysh if we were to assume that he recorded it in one specific mode of reading the first time around. Therefore, he must have written it either in the dialect of Quraysh or in a way that reflected several modes of reading. The possibility that some verses or some words were written in a dialect other than that of Quraysh is also highly probable on account of the fact that Zayd collected it from an unspecified number of people belonging to an unspecified number of different tribes. So, the probability that a word or an expression in a given verse was recorded according to a dialect reflecting the tribe of the person from whom Zayd collected it, and the probability that another word or an expression in another verse was

²² al-Baqara 2/132.

²³ Abī Shāma al-Maqdisī, *al-Murshid al-wajīz*, 118.

²⁴ Abī 'Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Abī Bakr al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li aḥkām al-Qur'ān wa al-mubayyin li mā taḍammanah min al-Sunna wa āy al-Furqān/Tafsīr al-Qurṭubī*. ed. 'Abdullāh b. 'Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī, (Bairut: Mu'assasa al-Risāla, 2016) 1/75.

recorded in accordance with the dialect of the person of another tribe from whom Zayd collected it, cannot be dismissed.

On the other hand, if with the last rehearsal all the other permitted modes of reading were abrogated, why was Abū Bakr's codex not made official, or why did 'Uthmān not simply copy it to the letter the second time around. The theory that the last rehearsal constituted the final sanctioned version and all the other modes of reading were therefore abrogated with it does not really hold water.

Another theory propounded by the same camp, those who argued for the principality of compliance with the 'Uthmanic Ductus, was that it also involved the doctrine of abrogation, but from another front. They argued that 'Uthmān's collection and its widely accepted reception by the community constituted *ijmā'* (consensus) which, in turn, abrogated the previously permitted seven modes of reading.²⁵ The fact that the likes of Ibn Mas'ūd, Ubayy b. Ka'b, and Abū Mūsā al-'Ash'arī continued not conforming with the 'Uthmanic Codex allows us to seriously question if the claim of *ijmā'* can be established. Furthermore, the fact that *ijmā'* constituted the abrogation of a divinely ordered permission engendered problems of foundational proportions. It is beyond the scope of this study to discuss here the premises of legal theories, but we would like to only mention here that among the earliest scholars who discussed the doctrine of *ijmā'* on the variant readings was Makkī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 437/1045-46), a prominent medieval figure on the subject of variant readings. Though Makkī admitted that the abrogation of the Qur'ān with *ijmā'* was a disputed matter, he nevertheless castigated and went on a tirade against those who contradicted and/or differed from the 'Uthmanic Ductus. One cannot help but detect the emotional pain that Makkī went through when he discussed this situation, as was relayed by Abī Shāma al-Maqdisī: "This (namely differing from the 'Uthmanic *rasm*) is neither good (*jayyid*) nor right (*sawāb*)". Abī Shāma al-Maqdisī took, as it were, Makkī b. Abī Ṭālib to task and stated that the close examiners (*al-muḥaqqiqūn*) of foundations of legal theory have verified that "nothing can be abrogated by *ijmā'* on account of the fact that there can be no abrogation after the revelation ended; all that *ijmā'* can do is to determine the abrogating (instance) that happened during the descension of revelation".²⁶

We would like to mention as a side note here a significant ramification of the assertion that the permission of *al-aḥruf al-sab'a* was abrogated. To state that the certain reception of the Qur'ān or its certain feature was abrogated should amount to no less than the simple admission of the historicity of the Qur'ān or parts of its features.

There is no disagreement among the early or late Muslim scholars that, during the Prophet's lifetime, reading the Qur'ān was not limited to a single mode and what was meant by *al-aḥruf al-sab'a* is something other than what came to be traditionally and in practice known as the seven, ten or 14 modes of reading. Even those who propagate the permissibility of seven, ten and/or 14 readings admit that the doctrine of *al-aḥruf al-sab'a* was a historical fact but they limit its practice up to the time of 'Uthmanic recension. There have been innumerable attempts at explaining what was meant by *al-aḥruf al-sab'a*, but it defied any easy solution.²⁷ We are not going to venture a detailed study of these attempts here and, for the sake of brevity, simply express the prevailing view in the matter that *al-aḥruf al-sab'a* involved the variance in wording

²⁵ Note the difference between the two theories of abrogation: the first indicates that the abrogation was predicated on the last rehearsal by the Prophet; the second indicates that it was predicated on the consensus of the community of Muslims—*ijmā'*—, long after the Prophet had passed away; a phenomenon that begets complications of utmost significance: can there be abrogation after the Prophet's passing away!

²⁶ Abī Shāma al-Maqdisī, *al-Murshid al-wajīz*, 122.

²⁷ For a detailed modern study on *al-aḥruf al-sab'a*, see Nasser, *The Transmission of the Variant Readings of the Qur'ān*, 15-33.

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of a particular concept by various Arab tribes such as *halumma*, *ta'āla*, and *aqbil*, all of which correspond to the imperative form of the common expression “come” but each of which is used exclusively by different tribes.²⁸ This is also the view propounded by Abū Ṭāhir ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Abī Hishām, a student of both Ibn Mujāhid and Ṭabarī who elsewhere are said to have stated the same view.²⁹ The strongest proof for the fact that the traditionally accepted readings are not the same as *al-aḥruf al-sab'a* is the historical fact that the former are not limited to seven any more, but to ten almost unanimously or 14 controversially. We need to note the caveat that what is indicated by the word “seven/*al-sab'a*” is to be taken to mean seven, as was mostly understood by a majority of scholars, and it is not merely a symbolic number to represent an unlimited number of readings, as was also understood by a number of scholars. What we would like to draw attention to here is the fact that the ‘Uthmanic Ductus engendered newer problems. The *scriptio defectiva* of ‘Uthmān’s was liable to cause another number of possible variant readings. Were the variant readings that were engendered by the ‘Uthmanic Ductus part of the doctrine of *al-aḥruf al-sab'a*? If we are to understand the number seven as a symbol for an unlimited number of variant readings, the probability cannot be dismissed. Otherwise, we are compelled to accept the fact that the *scriptio defectiva* was the cause of them. Notwithstanding the fact that the definite meaning of *al-aḥruf al-sab'a* defied a consensual proposition, the majority of scholars stated that they were entirely different from the variant readings that are borne out by the ‘Uthmanic Ductus. The variant readings that existed prior to the ‘Uthmanic recension were predicated on the doctrine of *al-aḥruf al-sab'a*. Notwithstanding the fact that medieval Muslim scholarship does not make a distinction between pre-‘Uthmanic and post-‘Uthmanic variant readings in terms of what they are predicated on, we fail to locate a distinct account on what justifies the current variant readings. The phenomenon of variant reading collectively is founded on the doctrine of *al-aḥruf al-sab'a*. But the fact that the current variant readings of the Qur’ān are predicated on and justified by the doctrine of *al-aḥruf al-sab'a* creates for us the modern scholars a predicament of utmost significance. If *al-aḥruf al-sab'a* are entirely different from the existing variant readings that are mainly borne out by the ‘Uthmanic Ductus, how can the latter be predicated on the former? Though not entirely improbable, a perfunctory explanation that the doctrine of *al-aḥruf al-sab'a* allowed for an unfettered liberal approach to the number of modes of reading the Qur’ān engenders other problems of major proportions and betrays the orthodox attempts to present a uniform Qur’ān. The issue has very close bearing to the notion of informed reasoning/*ijtihād* by virtue of which innumerable non-canonical readings have to date survived, and it requires a more detailed and extensive study.

The literary compositions authored by various figures until Ibn Mujāhid’s time, namely the early 10th century CE, attest to the fact that the subject of variant readings was hotly debated among them and the number of variant readings was never fixed. Probably the earliest collector of religiously acceptable readings was Abū ‘Ubayd al-Qāsim b. Sallām (d. 224/838-39) who accounted for a total number of 25 readings which allegedly also included the seven modes (*al-aḥruf al-sab'a*). Ṭabarī, the editors of a recent study demonstrated, collected over 20 variant readings that were in compliance with the ‘Uthmanic *rasm*.³⁰ Abī Shāma reported from Makkī b. Abī Ṭālib that before Ibn Mujāhid, some scholars composed books on five variant readings commensurate with the number of copies that ‘Uthmān produced, and some others authored

²⁸ See for this and for a more detailed medieval study on *al-aḥruf al-sab'a*, Abī Shāma al-Maqdisī, *al-Murshid al-wajīz*, 77-111; and also Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi’/Tafsīr al-Qurṭubī*, 1/71-83.

²⁹ Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi’/Tafsīr al-Qurṭubī*, 1/71-83.

³⁰ Abū Ḥafṣ Sirāj al-Dīn ‘Umar b. Zayn al-Dīn Qāsim b. Muḥammad b. ‘Alī al-Anṣārī al-Nashshār, *al-Budūr al-zāhira fī al-qirā’āt al-‘ashr al-mutawātira*, ed. ‘Alī Muḥammad Mu’awwaḍ, (Bairut: ‘Ālam al-Kutub, 2000), 1/11-12.

compositions that collected eight readings; he added: “this is an immense topic (*hādhā bāb wāsi*)”.³¹ Makkī further stated the names of some individuals whose “choice” of readings that differed from that of Ibn Mujāhid continued to exist after the death of the latter up to his own time, namely to the middle of 11th century.³² The editors of *al-Budūr al-zāhira* provided a historically ordered list of compositions according to which some scholars even after Ibn Mujāhid, authored works that accounted for 50 variant readings.³³

The preceding examples indicate almost beyond doubt that although ‘Uthmān introduced an official codex and ordered the remainder of all other codices to be burnt and destroyed, the Muslim community continued to recite the Qur’ān in modes of reading that differed from the ‘Uthmanic Codex not only in seven modes, but in an unspecified number of modes.³⁴ The traditional account itself confirms this phenomenon. And it seems that it was not Ibn Mujāhid who first attempted to limit the number of readings, but several other scholars had already undertaken such attempts, though the number that they wanted to limit the readings to varied. What distinguishes Ibn Mujāhid’s attempt from that of his predecessors are two significant factors: one is the fact that he secured political backing, second is the fact that he chose to limit the readings to seven. Instances of political enforcement of Ibn Mujāhid’s seven readings are already mentioned in historical sources.³⁵ As for Ibn Mujāhid’s limiting the acceptable/canonical readings to seven, some scholars stated that he only did so on account of the fact that ‘Uthmān, according to some varying accounts, had made seven copies to be sent to seven major geographic centers around which the majority of the Muslim community had settled. Ibn Mujāhid based his limitation on the number of copies ‘Uthmān produced and each of these copies bore differences which Ibn Mujāhid attempted in his choice of seven readings to reflect. But since no one had reported any reading from Yaman and Baḥrayn, the two other centers that ‘Uthmān is said to have sent copies to, Ibn Mujāhid chose instead two additional reciters from Kūfa.³⁶ Makkī must have felt compelled to come up with such an explanation because of the fact that he did not subscribe to the notion of identifying *al-aḥruf al-sab’a* with Ibn Mujāhid’s seven readings. Another rationale of accounting for Ibn Mujāhid’s choice was that the number seven was to be identified with the number seven in *al-aḥruf al-sab’a*. The significance of numerology in religious contexts can never be overstated. Though traditional sources tell us that Ibn Mujāhid never expressly stated that he personally meant to identify his choice of seven readings with *al-aḥruf al-sab’a*, circumstantial evidence indicates that it was received so. Makkī tried to explain it away by saying that the canonical seven readers chosen by Ibn Mujāhid were identified with *al-aḥruf al-sab’a* “figuratively”.³⁷ It seems certain that Ibn Mujāhid’s choice was identified with *al-aḥruf al-sab’a*, but someone needed to qualify this identification and such reception as being figurative. We cannot help questioning if they were really identified with *al-aḥruf al-sab’a* “figuratively” or this is how Makkī wished it were the case. At any rate, the fact that they were so received remains a historical truth.

³¹ Abī Shāma al-Maqdisī, *al-Murshid al-wajīz*, 125.

³² Abī Shāma al-Maqdisī, *al-Murshid al-Wajīz*, 124.

³³ Nashshār, *al-Budūr al-zāhira*, 1/13.

³⁴ I use the word “mode” to refer to both the technical term “*ḥarf*” as it was used in “*al-aḥruf al-sab’a*” and the mode of reading that differed in recitation but matched the ‘Uthmanic Codex.

³⁵ See for example, Ignaz Goldziher; with an introduction on Goldziher and ḥadīth from “Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums” by Fuat Sezgin, *Schools of Koranic Commentators*, ed. and translated by Wolfgang H. Behn, (Wiesbaden: In Kommission bei Harrassowitz Verlag, 2006), 30-31; and also, Leemhuis, “Readings of the Qur’ān”, 4/353-366; and cf. ft. 17 above.

³⁶ Abī Shāma al-Maqdisī, *al-Murshid al-Wajīz*, 125-127.

³⁷ Abī Shāma al-Maqdisī, *al-Murshid al-Wajīz*, 123.

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The three criteria mentioned earlier, which were inferred to have been established for the validity of canonical readings by Ibn Mujāhid, did not run the gamut of historical facts. Some of these canonical readings seem to fail to meet some of these criteria. Prior to the introduction of three additional readings to the list of seven canonical readings, authoritative transmission was understood by the majority of scholars to mean the transmission by way of *tawātur* (multiply attested and/or a transmission that is alleged to yield epistemological certainty).³⁸ But historically it did not reflect the reality; al-Zarkashī (d. 794/1392) problematized it and verified that the claim of *tawātur* can only be established up to the Imāms with whom these seven canonical readings were identified; but then back to the Prophet, the transmission link does not go beyond being individually attested (*aḥād*, a way of transmission that yields only probable knowledge)³⁹. Realizing the fact that the condition of *tawātur* cannot be met by all the seven canonical readings, Abī Shāma al-Maqdisī sought to reconcile this discrepancy by stating that *tawātur*, *per se*, was not a prerequisite and the sound transmission which comprised the individually attested transmissions (*akhbār āḥād*) can also be deemed authoritative.⁴⁰ Ibn al-Jazarī (d. 833/1429), a very famous late medieval verifier in the field of Qur'ānic readings who, early in his scholarly career, viewed the criterion of transmission by way of *tawātur* as an indispensable characteristic of variant readings, also finally determined that the ten canonical readings were not actually transmitted by way of *tawātur*.⁴¹ Furthermore, the category of transmission by way of *tawātur* was also a subject of foundational discourse among the various disciplines of Muslim scholarship. While the *uṣūlīs*/the legal theoreticians admitted this category as one of the criteria for assessing oral transmissions, the *muḥāddithūn/hadīth* scholars rejected it on account of its extreme rarity of occurrence.⁴² Hallaq's recent study on the categories of *ḥadīths* yielded the fact that while early eminent scholars of *ḥadīth* could only ascertain one or two *mutawātir ḥadīths*, some late and post classical era scholars were able to add only a few more, bringing the total amount of verifiable *mutawātir* transmissions to no more than ten in number.⁴³

The criterion of compliance with the 'Uthmanic *Muṣḥaf* also created other problems of its own. There are a number of well-known expressions in the 'Uthmanic Codex that are recorded in script in a particular way but read and/or recited differently. For example, the word *al-ṣalw(t)*, and *al-zakw(t)*, or *al-ḥayw(t)* for that matter, all are written with *wāw* but read with an elongated "ā". Ibn Abī Shāma attempted to explain that such instances were probably either the remnants of *al-aḥruf al-sab'a* or that what was meant by compliance with the 'Uthmanic *rasm* was limited to inadmissibility of a different word in its entirety, or the absence of a known word and/or expression, or the replacement of a word with another that is synonymous, the likes of which are abundantly found in the codices of Ibn Mas'ūd and Ubayy b. Ka'b. The discrepancies related to individual letters and their fashioning in a particular way, the author continued, did not matter much. However, being unconvinced, Abī Shāma al-Maqdisī felt compelled to discard

³⁸ Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, ed. Abī al-Faḍl al-Dimyāfī (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 2006), 222.

³⁹ For a study of the characteristics of various ways of transmission, see Hallaq, "The Authenticity of Prophetic Ḥadīth", 75-90.

⁴⁰ Abī Shāma al-Maqdisī, *al-Murshid al-wajīz*, 133.

⁴¹ See his *al-Nashr*, 1/18; He even therefore had to reject the criterion of transmission by way of *tawātur* for what may be deemed Qur'ān, a premise that had been established by the legal theoreticians (*uṣūlīs*) for the admissibility of a given Qur'ānic expression, variant or otherwise.

⁴² For a comparative study of *tawātur* between the *uṣūlīs* and *muḥāddithūn*, see Nasser, *The Transmission of the Variant Readings of the Qur'ān*, 66-76.

⁴³ See: Hallaq, "The Authenticity of Prophetic Ḥadīth", 87-88.

the criterion of compliance with the ‘Uthmanic *rasm* and sufficed himself with the two criteria of sound transmission and compliance with Arabic language.⁴⁴

Furthermore, the condition of agreement with the linguistic requirement of Arabic language is another loose end that Abī Shāma al-Maqdisī was unable to reconcile but surrender. He presented many instances of traditionally accepted/canonical readings that did not agree with the language of Arabs. It should suffice to mention only the verse where Ḥamza, one of the three Kūfan readers of the seven canonical readers, read “*famā ’sttā ’ū*”⁴⁵ with double “*t*”, an instance where two *sukūns* (non-vowelled two consonants) are cluttered in a single word.⁴⁶ Zajjāj (d. 310/922) dismissed this reading as being solecism (*lahn*) and reported that all the grammarians viewed it so.⁴⁷ Sībawayh (d. 180/796) deemed it impossible [to pronounce].⁴⁸ The traditionalists, however, attempted to encounter Zajjāj’s claims that the reading was transmitted in *tawātur* and, therefore, must be accepted.⁴⁹ Abī Shāma, typical of him, came up with his ubiquitous explanation that such a reading was probably a remnant of *al-aḥruf al-sab’a*,⁵⁰ a pretended solution that leads to a lot of other problems.

We have previously mentioned that Ibn Mujāhid did not personally state that the criterion of transmission by way of *tawātur* was a prerequisite for the acceptability of a given reading, and that he instead used a more broader term of “sound transmission” which in the end led Muslim scholars as well as modern western studies to infer that sound transmission was one of his criteria. However, Nasser’s study compels us to question this inference and revise the current scholarly opinion on this topic. Circumstantial evidence indicates that sound transmission was not as important a criterion as the the criterion of the consensus of the variant readers. Nasser demonstrated that while Ibn Mujāhid was aware of readers whose transmissions were just as equally sound as the established canonical readers, he dismissed them on account of a more solid criterion that reflected the consensus of a community of readers in a given setting. For example, Ibn Mujāhid chose Ibn Kathīr from the city of Makka as one of the seven not because his transmission was sound, but because of the reason that the community of readers in the city of Makka had agreed to adopt and adhere to Ibn Kathīr’s reading. The reading of Makkan Ibn Muḥaysin (d. 123/740), one of the four after ten, was rejected by Ibn Mujāhid not on account of reasoning that his transmission was not sound, but merely because his reading disagreed with the reading of the majority of readers of the city of Makka. The case of the city of Madina was no different than Makka. The reading of Abū Ja’far Yazīd b. al-Qa’qa’ (d. 130/747), one of the three after seven, was rejected by Ibn Mujāhid not because his reading was not transmitted in sound manner but on account of the fact that according Ibn Mujāhid the community of readers in Madina adopted the reading of Nāfi’ (d. 169/785) and not that of Abū Ja’far.⁵¹ Nasser’s proposition allows us to make better sense of why Ibn Mujāhid chose three readers from the city of Kūfa alone whereas he limited his choice of readers from other cities to only one. The answer probably lies in the complex realities of the city of Kūfa during the eighth century. There was no single reader in the city of Kūfa whose reading was adopted and adhered to by the majority of the community of readers. He therefore chose three readers from

⁴⁴ Hallaq, “The Authenticity of Prophetic Ḥadīth”, 84.

⁴⁵ al-Kahf 18/97.

⁴⁶ Hallaq, “The Authenticity of Prophetic Ḥadīth”, 85.

⁴⁷ Ibn Ishāq al-Zajjāj, *Ma’ānī al-Qur’ān wa i’rābuh*, ed. ‘Abd al-Jalīl ‘Abdo Shalabī (Bairut: ‘Ālam al-Kutub, 1988), 3/312.

⁴⁸ ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-Khaṭīb, *Mu’jam al-qirā’āt*, (Damascus: Dār Sa’d al-Dīn, 2000), 5/311.

⁴⁹ Khaṭīb, *Mu’jam al-qirā’āt*, 310.

⁵⁰ Abī Shāma al-Maqdisī, *al-Murshid al-wajīz*, 135.

⁵¹ See: Nasser, *The Transmission of the Variant Readings of the Qur’ān*, 54-61.

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the city of Kūfa in order to make up for the absence of the criterion of consensus there. 'Āsim (d. 128/745), for example, one of the seven and one of the three Kūfan readers, was probably the least agreed upon reader among the other Kūfan readers some of whom would later make into the list of ten and/or fourteen canonical readers. Ḥamza (d. 773), one of the seven and another one of the three Kūfan readers, was disliked and his reading was dismissed by many eminent Muslim scholars of his time. And as for al-Kisā'ī (d. 189/804), one of the seven and the third of the Kūfan readers, though he was not widely received by the community of readers, his solid hold on Arabic grammar could not be surpassed. So, the criterion of consensus that Ibn Mujāhid adopted in his choice of readers from the cities other than Kūfa could not be enforced in Kūfa in a way that would not compromise on the other two criteria. It seems that Ibn Mujāhid chose these three Kūfan readers on account of the fact that their readings alone from among the other readers of Kūfa could be reconciled with the other two criteria of compliance with the 'Uthmanic Ductus and Arabic grammar.⁵²

Scholarly opinions converge on the fact that the canonical readings identified with the seven individuals were the result of personal choices made by those seven individuals. Prior to Ibn Mujāhid's time there had been numerous variant readings, some of which were probably the continuation or the remnants of *al-aḥruf al-sab'a* and some others were borne out by the *scriptio defectiva*. Abī Shāma al-Maqdisī related from Makkī that the generation of scholars of the 4th/10th century wanted to stem the unmanageable effects of increasing disputes and conflicts resulting from the subject of variant readings, and for practical reasons and as exigency warranted, and chose from central settings a famous *imām* (a prominent/leading authority) who was pious, trustworthy, knowledgeable, well-received, and respected in public, and whose choice of reading complied with the 'Uthmanic *Muṣḥaf*. According to Makkī's account then, as well as those of several other scholars who are mentioned in various sources, a canonical reading that is identified with an *imām*/eponymous reader was the personal choice of that *imām*.⁵³ Others had also attempted to limit the number of canonical readings before Ibn Mujāhid or, more correctly, composed on variant readings according to their own personal choices. For example, Ṭabarī chose 22 readings, Ibn Jubayr (d. 259/871-72) went with five, and others preferred eight.⁵⁴ Several other scholars also noted that there were some readings that did not make into Ibn Mujāhid's list but still met the three criteria mentioned above. These other readings were the choice of other scholars in their compositions on variant readings.⁵⁵

Ibn al-Jazarī, in whom the medieval scholarship on variant Qur'ānic readings seems to have culminated, related the following from Abu al-'Abbās Aḥmad b. 'Ammār al-Mahdawī (d. 430/1038-39), a famous scholar in Qur'ānic sciences and exegesis:

“The limitation to Nāfi', Ibn Kathīr, Abī 'Amr, Ibn 'Āmir, 'Āsim, Ḥamza, and al-Kisā'ī by the people of their respective cities was adopted by some late-comers for the purpose of condensing (*ikhtiṣār^{am}*) and on account of choice (*ikhtiyār^{am}*). Then the public took it to mean as obligatory (*al-fard al-maḥtūm*) so that if they heard anything differing from them, they faulted and apostatized its reader despite the fact that it was probably clearer and better-known. Then some of those who were deprived of soundness and examining skills limited the transmitters from those readers to only two transmitters and any other person other than those two transmitting from them was also faulted while and even if the latter transmission was probably better-known (*ashhar*). Truly, the *musabbi'*/the septutlist (Ibn Mujāhid who limited the number of canonical readings to seven) of those seven did something he ought not to

⁵² Nasser, *The Transmission of the Variant Readings of the Qur'ān*, 58-60.

⁵³ See for a group of scholars that expressed the same view, Abī Shāma al-Maqdisī's *al-Murshid al-wajīz*, 123-128, and Ibn al-Jazarī's *al-Nashr*, 1/34-37.

⁵⁴ Abī Shāma al-Maqdisī, *al-Murshid al-wajīz*, 125-126, and Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr*, 35-37.

⁵⁵ Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr*, 33-38

have done and confounded the community to the degree that they grew negligent of what they ought not to have been negligent of, and those who were of little understanding fancied that those seven were the same as mentioned in the prophetic *ḥadīth*. They confounded the understanding of succeeding generations too. Only if he (Ibn Mujāhid) would have condensed the number he would have condensed either to a higher or a lower number than seven.”⁵⁶

Not only does al-Mahdawī intimate that the seven readings established by Ibn Mujāhid were the result of personal choice by leading Qur’ānic readers, but he also takes him to task for excluding readings that in thorough examination were no less acceptable or even more deservedly so, and also for limiting the number of acceptable readings to seven. We also need to note that Ibn al-Jazarī, after four centuries, would not quote al-Mahdawī if he did not agree with him.

2. Abū al-Su’ūd’s Handling of Variant Readings in *Irshād*

We chose Abū al-Su’ūd for the assessment of the historical developments on various Qur’ānic readings mainly for the purpose of demonstrating that even after Ibn al-Jazarī the liberal attitude towards the fluidity of oral features of the Qur’ān continued unabatedly. Abū al-Su’ūd is important for another reason: He attempted to compose a Qur’ānic commentary to rival the Qur’ānic commentaries of al-Zamakhsharī and al-Bayḍāwī, the commentaries that were the textbooks for the *madrassa* curriculum in the discipline of *tafsīr*; thence, the significance of the reach that Abū al-Su’ūd’s *tafsīr* is expected to enjoy. We touch upon the theoretical background in Abū al-Su’ūd’s commentary for the purpose of not only demonstrating that there is not any, but also for the purpose of demonstrating that the current research is built on feebly constructed presumptions on the theoretical foundations of Qur’ānic readings and applied with a reconstructionist perspective.

Practical examples from Abū al-Su’ūd’s Qur’ānic commentary provide ample evidence that the traditionally set criteria for the oral characteristics of Qur’ānic text fail to meet the expectations of the Qur’ānic commentators and, also, curtail and obfuscate the fluid nature of Qur’ānic expression. Through Abū al-Su’ūd’s commentary, We would like to intimate, as it were, that the Qur’ānic commentators continuously strove to contest the Qur’ānic readers in ascertaining the oral characteristics of the Qur’ān.

2.1. Theoretical Context

Now we would like to investigate Abū al-Su’ūd’s handling of variant readings in his Qur’ānic commentary in light of the preceding historical development of the subject. A conspicuous feature of Abū al-Su’ūd’s Qur’ānic commentary is that it teems with instances of mentioning the variant readings of a given Qur’ānic word. Aydemir was able to determine some four thousand instances of mentioning variant readings in *Irshād*.⁵⁷ A number of studies have attempted to tease out a methodological feature that Abū al-Su’ūd might have observed, however to no avail. “His methodological approach seems to be so varying that it defies homogeneity” one researcher comments, and also states that he was not interested in variant readings as a separate discipline. The author was of the conviction that Abū al-Su’ūd either merely wanted to enrich his commentary with the sporadic and unsystematic mentioning of variant readings or he simply propounded them in order to bolster his commentarial views on a given Qur’ānic verse. The same study also ascertained that Abū al-Su’ūd tackled the variant readings in one of four ways:

⁵⁶ Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr*, 1/35.

⁵⁷ Abdullah Aydemir, *Büyük Türk İslam Bilgini Şeyhulislām Ebussuud Efendi ve Tefsirdeki Metodu* (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı Yayınları, 1968), 192.

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1. He would mention only a number of all known variant readings of a given word/expression and grammatically justify and examine each one of them;
2. He would examine and justify only some of the number of all known variant readings he mentions;
3. He would justify and predicate some instances of variant readings he mentions in comparison to other grammatical instances from various other parts of the Qur'ānic usage;
4. He would simply mention a variant reading without offering any foundation or justification.⁵⁸

Our own survey of the secondary literature on the variant readings in *Irshād* led us to conclude that their assessments and results are informed by the modern orthodox mindset that now views the topic of variant readings as the established and unchanged premise from the time immemorial and disregards the fact that the criteria for the validity of a given reading was still a point of controversy at least up to the middle of 9th/15th century.

The very first instance that we encounter in *Irshād* about the variant readings is on the commentary of *Basmala*, the formulaic expression uttered at the beginning of sūras or verses, or considered to be the heading for each individual sūra.⁵⁹ After propounding several juridical opinions about whether or not the *Basmala* is a verse, independent or otherwise, Abū al-Su'ūd mentions the consensus that it is recorded in the codices (*maṣahif*) and whatever is in the codex (*bayn daffatayn*) is the word of God.⁶⁰ In this instance Abū al-Su'ūd considered the existence of a particular reading within the *Muṣḥaf* to be the evidence of its validity and/or Qur'ānicity, or for the veracity of the way it is supposed to be recorded. At the beginning of chapter two where he comments on the way some individual letters of the Arabic alphabet (*al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭa'āt*) are written, he states that the *rasm* of the codex cannot be rejected merely on account of the fact that it contradicts linguistic analogy. Even though conjoined in writing, these letters are read individually, whereas linguistic analogy would require that they be written separately and/or written by their names. But the unusual orthography is accepted by Abū al-Su'ūd on account of the fact that it is how it was recorded in the codex, which constituted the veracity and Qur'ānicity of such orthography.

In al-Fātiḥa 1/5, on the word “*al-ṣirāf*”⁶¹, the letter “*ṣ*” was also canonically read as “*s*”, considered to be the original form, and/or “*z*” which somehow drove the current recorded orthography closer to the original letter in sound. Abū al-Su'ūd viewed the first reading as the most eloquent and the one that is transcribed in the codex, and based it on the fact that it reflected the dialect of Quraysh. Though the author justified a particular variant reading in this instance on account of the fact that it was the one that conformed to the *rasm*, he also, in the same verse, mentions another variant reading “*arshidnā*” in the reading of Ibn Mas'ūd for the expression “*ihdinā*”. Not only is “*arshidnā*” non-canonical, but it contradicts the orthography of the 'Uthmanic codex. The author does not say anything further about this non-canonical reading nor does he elaborate on whether he confirms it or repudiates it on account of the fact that it

⁵⁸ See: Khālīd Khujayl Aḥmad al-Duhaysāt, “al-Tawjīh al-naḥwī li al-qirā'āt al-qur'āniyya fī tafsīr Abī al-Su'ūd al-Imādī (*Irshād al-'aql al-salīm ilā mazāyā al-Kitāb al-Karīm*)”, (Unpublished PhD dissertation, The University of Mu'ta, 2011), 15, and for instances in *Irshād* of the abovementioned occurrences, see 16-38.

⁵⁹ There is an unending discussion on whether or not the *Basmala* is a verse and/or part of the sūra that it is headed with it, or a single and independent verse that is considered to be the heading of each sūra, or merely a non-Qur'anic formulaic expression that is intended for the purpose of seeking blessing; See for a brief discussion, Nasser, *The Transmission of the Variant Readings of the Qur'ān*, 88-96.

⁶⁰ Abū al-Su'ūd Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Imādī, *Irshād al-'aql al-salīm ilā mazāyā al-Kitāb al-Karīm* (Bairut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, n.d.), 1/9.

⁶¹ al-Fātiḥa 1/5.

does not comply with the *rasm*.⁶² Based on the three preceding early examples, it is rather difficult to make sense of how Abū al-Su‘ūd tackled one of the criteria—compliance with the ‘Uthmanic *rasm*—traditionally accepted to be a yardstick for the admissibility or inadmissibility of a given variant reading; however, concrete examples should shed some light into the consideration that guided Abū al-Su‘ūd in tackling variant Qur’ānic readings.

2.2. Practical Approach

In Yūsuf 12/32, the phrase “*wa layakūn(an)*”⁶³, with the light emphatic *nūn* (*nūn al-tawkīd al-khafīfa*), is rendered in the reading of a group of readers⁶⁴ “*wa layakūnann(a)*” with the heavy *nūn* of emphasis (*nūn al-tawkīd al-thaqīla*). Abū al-Su‘ūd, as well as Zajjāj and Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1143) before him, chose the first reading on account of the fact that the *nūn* of emphasis is always recorded in the form of light one throughout the *Muṣḥaf*. In this instance as well, the criterion of compliance with the *Muṣḥaf* seems to have constituted a guiding principle for the admissibility or inadmissibility, or the preference of one reading over another for that matter, of a given reading.

In al-Mā’ida 5/114, the expression “*takūn(u)*”⁶⁵ is read by al-A‘mash (d. 147/764), one of the four after ten, Ibn Mas‘ūd, and al-Muṭawwa‘ī as “*takun*” in the jussive case and was deemed deviant and/or isolated (*shādhdh*).⁶⁶ Since the orthography of this *shādhdh* variant reading did not contradict the written codex and it did not contradict the Arabic linguistics grammatically, the reason that it was deemed *shādhdh* must have been some sort of weakness in the way it was transmitted. This *shādhdh* reading was compared to another in the Qur’ān, Maryam 19/5, where the expression “*yarith(u)nī*”⁶⁷ in the nominative case was also read “*yarithnī*” in the jussive/vowelless case, where the same linguistic rules applied and the orthography did not change, and was received as canonical on account of the fact that it was transmitted by way of *tawātur*. Grammarians reasoned that in Maryam 19/5 the expression “*yarithnī*” in the jussive was in accordance with the rules of Arabic and syntactically analyzed it as the apodosis for the protasis of the conditional expression “*fa-hab lī*” at the beginning of the verse. The same reasoning can also be applied to the first verse, al-Mā’ida 5/114, where “*takun*” in the jussive can be rendered grammatically as the apodosis of the protasis “*anzil*” at the beginning of the verse and thus can be admitted linguistically just as canonical. Though Abū al-Su‘ūd labeled the variant reading in the first instance as *shādhdh*, he did not provide any further explanation as to what that term warrants. His wording that the variant reading in the second instance, Maryam 19/5, was transmitted by way of *tawātur* whereas the variant reading in the first instance, al-Mā’ida 5/114, was transmitted by way of *shādhdh* may somehow indicate that he viewed the criterion of sound transmission, by way of *tawātur* in this particular instance, as another valid criterion for the admissibility or inadmissibility of a given variant reading. Both Zamakhsharī and Bayḍāwī pointed to the same variant reading in the first instance and drew the same analogy with the second instance without further elaborating on the admissibility or inadmissibility of the first variant reading, or without terming it *shādhdh* and/or the second one *mutawātir*. Zamakhsharī’s wording, however, that he viewed nothing wrong with the analogy between the two instances and Bayḍāwī’s short linguistic justification for the first instance, and also the fact

⁶² Abū al-Su‘ūd al-‘Imādī, *Irshād al-‘aql al-salīm*, 1/18.

⁶³ Yūsuf 12/32; Case markers are usually omitted in western scholarly conventions of transliterating Arabic words; however, since some variant readings involve permutations in case markers, we here indicate them in parentheses.

⁶⁴ We have been unable to identify the readers of this reading in the sources available during this study.

⁶⁵ al-Mā’ida 5/114.

⁶⁶ Khaṭīb, *Mu‘jam al-qirā’āt*, 2/372.

⁶⁷ Maryam 19/5.

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that neither Zamakhsharī nor Bayḍāwī mentioned any technical label for either instances may be taken as indicative of them for the admissibility of the non-canonical reading in the first instance. We would like to note our reservation that Abū al-Su'ūd viewed the variant reading in the first instance inadmissible not merely because he deemed it *shādhdh*, for in several other instances he mentions variant readings that are deemed *shādhdh* by tradition because of weakness in their transmission, but mentions them without stating their inadmissibility or without explaining why they ought to be viewed *shādhdh*. In another instance, al-Nisā' 4/140, Abū al-Su'ūd drew a similar linguistic analogy with another instance, al-Dhāriyāt 51/23. While the variant reading in al-Nisā' 4/140 is deemed by tradition and by Abū al-Su'ūd *shādhdh*, the one in al-Dhāriyāt 51/23 made it into the list of canonical readings. In both instances Abū al-Su'ūd provides a linguistic justification for both variant readings, a phenomenon that may be taken as corroborative of our preservation about whether *shādhdh* was outright dismissed by the author or not. The variant *shādhdh* readings in al-Mā'ida 5/114 and in al-Nisā' 4/140 did not keep Abū al-Su'ūd from using them in interpreting the respective verses based on the *shādhdh* readings. However the fact that Abū al-Su'ūd termed the variant readings in both instances *shādhdh*, despite the fact that both instances can on the same linguistic grounds be justified, may indicate that sound transmission had more weight for Abū al-Su'ūd than did the criterion of linguistic compliance.

In al-A'rāf 7/10, the word “*ma'āyish*”⁶⁸ in the reading of the majority of canonical readers is rendered *ma'ā'ish*, “y” being replaced by *hamza*/the glottal stop, by Ibn 'Āmir, one of the seven, as well as in the readings of other non-canonical transmitters from Nāfi', also one of the seven.⁶⁹ Abū al-Su'ūd mentioned the reading of Ibn 'Āmir, which is deemed just as canonical as the first reading by tradition, but also stated that it is the reading of the majority, *ma'āyish*, that has a foundation linguistically—*al-wajh fī qirā'atih ikhlāṣ al-yā'*. Zajjāj dismissed the reading of Ibn 'Āmir on account of the fact that it had no linguistic foundation.⁷⁰ Zamakhsharī also stated that the sound reading (*al-wajh*) was the one that rendered *ma'āyish* with “y”, and al-Bayḍāwī, who attributed the variant reading to Nāfi' via a non-canonical transmission, also viewed the reading of the majority to be the correct one. However, the justification provided for the canonical reading of Ibn 'Āmir, or Nāfi' according to Bayḍāwī, Zamakhsharī, and Abū al-Su'ūd is telling: they thought that Ibn 'Āmir must have presumed a similarity between this word and others that are like it, such as *ṣahā'if* and *madā'in*.⁷¹ Though they did not unequivocally state it, their wording clearly indicates that this reading was the result of Ibn 'Āmir's personal reasoning (*ijtihād*) and they indirectly accused him of committing a linguistic

⁶⁸ al-A'rāf 7/10.

⁶⁹ Khaṭīb, *Mu'jam al-qirā'āt*, 3/8-9; Though the eponymous canonical readers had several students who transmitted from them innumerable variant readings, some of which are now deemed non-canonical by the traditional orthodox view, only two of those students' transmissions were deemed canonical; thence the tradition of two canonical *rāwīs*/transmitters from the eponymous readers. For example, Nāfi', one of the seven canonical readers in Ibn Mujāhid's rendering, had 15 students who all transmitted from Nāfi' innumerable variant readings, canonical and non-canonical alike, but only the transmission of two of his students/transmitters, namely Warsh (d. 812) and Qālūn (d. 835), were received and deemed canonical. Therefore, it is commonly encountered within the literature of Qur'anic readings that are transmitted from the eponymous readers but are deemed non-canonical on account of the fact that they are not transmitted by the two canonical *rāwīs*.

⁷⁰ Zajjāj, *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān wa i'rābuh*, 3/321-22.

⁷¹ See: Jār Allah Abī al-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. 'Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf 'an ḥaqā'iq ghawāmiḍ al-Tanzīl wa 'uyūn al-aqāwīl fī wujūh al-ta'wīl*, ed. 'Ādil Aḥmad 'Abd al-Mawjūd, (Riyād, Maktabat al-'Ubaykān, 1998), 2/325; Nāṣir al-Dīn Abī al-Khayr 'Abd Allah b. 'Umar b. Muḥammad al-Bayḍāwī, *Anwār al-Tanzīl wa asrār al-ta'wīl*, ed. Muḥammad 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Mar'ashlī, (Bairut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, n.d.), 3/6.

mistake. Al-Wāhidī explained in length, seven pages in the print edition of his encyclopedic Qur'ānic commentary *al-Basīṭ*, how the reading of *ma'ā'ish* was linguistically incorrect, but in the end admitted the fact that the existence of linguistic mistakes by individuals of a given language was a factual phenomenon.⁷² Though Abū al-Su'ūd did not label any of these readings as canonical or otherwise, or *shādhdh* or *mutawātir*, he deemed a traditionally admitted reading as incorrect on account of the fact that it did not meet the linguistic requirements. The way he seemed to have justified the linguistically incorrect variant reading implies that according to him some readings, a canonical one in this particular instance, may have been engendered by personal reasoning/*ijtihād*.

In Āl 'Imrān 3/30, the verb “*tawadd(u)*”⁷³, in the present nominative tense, is rendered *waddat*, in the past nominative tense, in the non-canonical reading of Ibn Mas'ūd.⁷⁴ Abū al-Su'ūd did not reject Ibn Mas'ūd's reading but preferred the canonical one on account of the fact that it is more effective in meaning (*aqwā ma'nān*) which is more effectively rendered by the better-known reading (*al-qirā'a al-mashhūra*). Here the author did not reject a non-canonical reading that did not comply with the orthography of the codex, but preferred the canonical one because of the meaning it rendered. Abū al-Su'ūd neither mentioned that this non-canonical reading of Ibn Mas'ūd was deemed *shādhdh* nor did he explain that it did not comply with the 'Uthmanic Ductus. It seems that in this instance in particular, Abū al-Su'ūd was guided by the principle of meaning that a given reading entailed.

He uses a broad spectrum of terms when he makes preferences among the readings, canonical or non-canonical. Some of these terms that dot the pages of his commentary *Irshād* are *afṣaḥ* (more eloquent) (al-Fātiḥa 1/6; al-A'rāf 7/137; Hūd 11/81), *aqwā* (stronger) (al-Baqara 2/177; al-Rūm 30/54), *ablagh* (more eloquent) (al-Baqara 2/25, 132; Yā Sīn 36/19; al-Zumar 39/5; al-Naba' 78:37), *awjah* (sounder/better/more reasonable) (al-Anfāl 8/59; al-Tawba 9/1), *aṣaḥḥ* (sounder/more correct) (Hūd 11/88), *awfaq* (more convenient/more fitting/more deserving) (Āl 'Imrān 3/147; al-Ra'd 13/4), *aẓhar* (more apparent) (al-A'rāf 7/82; al-Fajr 89/27), *a'kad/ākad* (more completing/more confirming/more solid) (al-Nahl 16/126; al-Jāthiya 45/21), and several other similar terms in other instances. His preferences seem to have been based on linguistic measurements. He does not make a difference between canonicity or non-canonicity of a variant reading in his preference of a linguistically better reading, and sometimes prefers a canonical reading over a non-canonical one, while at other times he expresses his preference of a canonical reading over other equally canonical readings. Moreover, at other times, he considers a non-canonical reading to be better, more fitting, sounder, more eloquent, stronger, more solid and/or more deserving etc. We have seen in the previous example, Āl 'Imrān 3/30, how he preferred a canonical reading over a non-canonical one by rendering it *aqwā* in terms of the more effective meaning that resulted from it.

In Āl 'Imrān 3/54, as an example where he expressed his preference of a canonical reading over equally canonical other readings, the word “*ḍa'f*”⁷⁵ is also read as *ḍu'f*, a canonical reading which Abū al-Su'ūd deemed more solid and stronger (*aqwā*). He justified his preference on account of a tradition which states that the Prophet had read it *ḍu'f*. Collections on variant readings note that “*ḍa'f*” is the reading of Ḥamza, 'Āṣim (the two Kūfan readers of the seven), and Ibn Mas'ūd, and that *ḍu'f* is the reading of Ibn Kathīr, Nāfi', Abū 'Amr, Ibn 'Āmir, and al-Kisā'i, the remainder of the seven. The former is in the dialect of the tribe of Tamīm,

⁷² Abī al-Ḥasan 'Alī b. Aḥmad al-Muḥammad al-Wāhidī, *al-Tafsīr al-Basīṭ*, ed. Muḥammad b. Šāliḥ b. 'Abdullah al-Fawzān, (Riyād: Jāmi'at al-Imām Muḥammad b. Su'ūd al-Islāmiyya, 2009), 9/30-37.

⁷³ Āl 'Imrān 3/30.

⁷⁴ See: Khaṭīb, *Mu'jam al-qirā'āt*, 1/474.

⁷⁵ Āl 'Imrān 3/54.

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and the latter is in the dialect of Quraysh.⁷⁶ The fact that the former was also read by Ibn Mas'ūd whose reading accorded with the readings of the other two canonical readers of Kūfa should allow us to presume that the copy sent to Kūfa was, at least in this instance, written/read in non-Qurayshī dialect. Ibn Mas'ūd hailed from the tribe of Tamīm and it would only make sense that he read this specific word as “*ḍa f*”. Also the fact that the other two Kūfan readers read it the same way would only reinforce our assessment that their choice was based on a non-Qurayshī dialect.

There are also instances where Abū al-Su'ūd preferred a non-canonical reading over the canonical ones on account of the fact that he viewed the former to be *ablagħ*. In Ṣād 38/5, the word “*ujāb*”⁷⁷ in all the ten canonical readings was also read with doubled “j”, *ujjāb*, but was considered *shādhdh* by the tradition. This *shādhdh* reading was reported from 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib and several other early scholars and non-canonical transmitters.⁷⁸ Abū al-Su'ūd, as well as Zamakhsharī and Bayḍāwī before him, viewed the *shādhdh* reading as more eloquent but said nothing further.

In al-Baqara 2/84, “*fa-yaghfir(u) li-man yashā'(u)*”⁷⁹ is rendered in a canonical reading by Ya'qūb [al-Ḥaḍramī], one of the three after seven, in a way that conjoined (*bi-al-idghām*) “r” at the end of “*yaghfir(u)*” into the “l” in the next word “*li*”, which resulted in the reading of *fa-yaghfil-li man yashā'(u)* in clear contradiction to the linguistic rules of Arabic, and Abū al-Su'ūd viewed it as solecism (*lahn*). Zamakhsharī expressed the same view about linguistic discrepancy on this reading which he attributed to Abī 'Amr, one of the seven, but in a non-canonical transmission, and went on a tirade against the transmitter that reported it from Abī 'Amr and accused him of being negligent in Arabic. The fact that he also viewed it as a detested dialect should actually indicate that he viewed it nevertheless as a dialect.⁸⁰ Abū Ḥayyān took him to task and related from Sībawayh that this sort of usage was encountered in Arabic.⁸¹ We are not sure what Abū al-Su'ūd meant to convey when he considered a canonical reading to be *lahn*. He does not expressly state in instances like this that a *lahn* reading is admissible or not.

In another instance, al-Tawba 9/12, the word “*a'imma*”⁸² is also canonically read *ayimma*. In this instance again Abū al-Su'ūd, like his predecessors of Zamakhsharī and Bayḍāwī, viewed it as *lahn*. As a matter of fact, Abū al-Su'ūd related it from al-Farrā' who viewed it as *lahn*; but he would not have mentioned it so unless he himself agreed with him. In al-Tawba 9/90, for another example, the expression “*al-mu'adhahirūn*”⁸³ is rendered *al-mu'adhahirūn* with doubled 'ayn by one Maslama in a non-canonical reading. Abū al-Su'ūd, like other earlier exegetes, also viewed it as *lahn*. He does not even use the technical term *shādhdh*, which may constitute clear evidence that it may be viewed as a reading accommodated by Arabic linguistics. May we suggest that when he says *lahn* he means that it is in violation of Arabic linguistic rules?

An interesting case is also found in al-Kahf 18/97 on the expression of “*famā- 'stā'ū*”⁸⁴. Abū al-Su'ūd mentioned a canonical reading, by Ḥamza, one of the seven, with the doubling of

⁷⁶ Khaṭīb, *Mu'jam al-qirā'āt*, 7/175-76.

⁷⁷ Ṣād 38/5.

⁷⁸ Khaṭīb, *Mu'jam al-qirā'āt*, 8/80-81.

⁷⁹ al-Baqara 2/84.

⁸⁰ Khaṭīb, *Mu'jam al-qirā'āt*, 1/431; Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 1/518-19.

⁸¹ Muḥammad b. Yūsuf Abū Ḥayyān al-Andulūsī, *Tafsīr al-Baḥr al-muḥīṭ*, ed. 'Ādil Aḥmad 'Abd al-Mawjūd et. al. (Bairut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1993), 1/557.

⁸² al-Tawba 9/12.

⁸³ al-Tawba 9/90.

⁸⁴ al-Kahf 18/97.

“t”, *famā-’sittā’ū*, and noted that it warranted the unprecedented cluttering of two consonants with no vowels, which here is rendered against the requirements of Arabic language. It is difficult to infer any indication from his wording as to whether he dismissed it or not, nor did he use any technical term such as *shādhdh* or *lahn*. His predecessors had no qualms in dismissing such a reading as being *lahn*. Zajjāj rejected this canonical reading as being mere solecism and reported that all the grammarians viewed it so.⁸⁵ Sībawayh deemed it impossible [to pronounce/read]. The traditionalists however, attempted to counter Zajjāj’s claims that the reading was transmitted by way of *tawātur* and, therefore, must be accepted.⁸⁶ How Abū al-Su’ūd accepted such a reading, if he did at all, is not clear, though the probability that he viewed such readings, as did Abī Shāma long before him, as remnants of *al-ahruf al-sab’a* cannot be excluded.⁸⁷ Al-Wāhidī, on the other hand, explained at length again how the majority of Baṣran linguists mounted poignant attacks against Ḥamza in this canonical reading of his and how Ibn al-Anbārī somehow disqualified these attacks by providing similar examples from other parts of the Qur’ān which did not similarly cause the Baṣran linguists to raise doubts about them.⁸⁸

In a canonical reading the phrase “*wa-makra al-sayyi’(i)*”⁸⁹ in Fāṭir 35/43 is rendered *wa-makra al-sayyi’* without the genitive inflection at the end of the second term of the construct phrase (*idāfa*). Zajjāj viewed it as *lahn*. Abū al-Su’ūd, and Zamakhsharī before him, were able to accommodate such a reading on account of their conviction that the transmitter must have committed a minor mistake: it was probably read with *ikhtilās* (whereby the reader would lower his voice at the end of the phrase in a way that the inflection or the vowel will not be clearly heard) or the end of this phrase was considered a full stop, whereby the reader is not supposed to vocalize the ending inflection and/or the vowel. In either probability the fact that the reader must have made a mistake remains a factual assessment.

“*Akun*”⁹⁰, in imperfect jussive, in al-Munāfiqūn 63/10 is also rendered *akūn(a)*, in imperfect subjunctive, by al-Ḥasan, al-A’mash, and Ibn al-Muḥaysin (d. 123/741), three of the four after ten, and Abū ‘Amr (d. 154/771), one of the seven, and several other companions whose readings were deemed non-canonical. But *akūn(u)*, in imperfect indicative, is only read by ‘Ubayd b. ‘Umayr and was deemed *shādhdh* by the tradition. Abū al-Su’ūd mentioned all these readings without calling any one of them either *shādhdh* or otherwise, and without seeing a problem with any of them.⁹¹ Similarly in al-Wāqī’a 56/22, “*wa-ḥūr(in) ’iyn(in)*”⁹² in the genitive was rendered *wa-ḥūr(an) ’iyn(an)* in the reading of Ibn Mas’ūd and ‘Ubayy. Abū al-Su’ūd mentioned this reading and saw no problem with its validity. He founded it on a valid linguistic ground, and, since the meaning did not change, he treated it as equally valid as the recorded canonical reading. Zajjāj dismissed this variant reading on account of the fact that it differed from the *Muṣḥaf*.⁹³ Since the first copies of ‘Uthmanic *Muṣḥaf* did not have vocalization marks, Zajjāj must have drawn on the late and vocalized copy of the ‘Uthmanic *Muṣḥaf*.

A’mash, one of the four after ten, Ibn Mas’ūd, and ‘Ubayy read “*allā yasjudū*”⁹⁴ in al-Naml 27/25 as *halā/hallā yasjudūn/tasjudū/yasjudū*, all of which are considered *shādhdh*.⁹⁵

⁸⁵ Zajjāj, *Ma’ānī al-Qur’ān*, 3/312.

⁸⁶ See: al-Khaṭīb, *Mu’jam al-qirā’āt*, 5/310-11.

⁸⁷ Abī Shāma al-Maqdisī, *al-Murshid al-wajīz*, 135.

⁸⁸ Wāhidī, *al-Tafsīr al-Basīṭ*, 14/151-158.

⁸⁹ Fāṭir 35/43.

⁹⁰ al-Munāfiqūn 63/10.

⁹¹ See for the name of the readers for a number of variances, Khaṭīb, *Mu’jam al-qirā’āt*, 9/479-80.

⁹² al-Wāqī’a 56/22.

⁹³ Zajjāj, *Ma’ānī al-Qur’ān*, 5/111.

⁹⁴ al-Naml 27/25.

⁹⁵ See: Khaṭīb, *Mu’jam al-qirā’āt*, 6/506-507.

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Since these traditionally considered *shādhdh* readings in this verse can be justified linguistically, as reported from other famous Companions, the meaning rendered by them can be accommodated religiously; since, as a general rule, the *hamza* in the *Muṣḥaf* can be rendered into “h” in recitation, these readings were considered to be in compliance with the *Muṣḥaf*, Abū al-Su'ūd neither dismissed them nor termed any of them as *shādhdh*.

In al-A'rāf 7/105, the phrase “*ḥaqīq(un) 'alā an lā aqūl(a)*”⁹⁶ is rendered in *shādhdh* readings as *ḥaqīq(un) bi an lā 'aqūl(a)*, and *ḥāqīq(un) an lā aqūl(a)*. While the first *shādhdh* reading is attributed to Ibn Mas'ūd, 'Ubayy, and al-A'mash, the second is only attributed to the former two. Both *shādhdh* readings contradict the 'Uthmanic *rasm*: the first replaces “*'alā*” with *bi*, and the second discards “*'alā*” without replacing it with anything else. Abū al-Su'ūd founded the first *shādhdh* reading on a well-known Arabic usage for the purpose of emphasis but provided no explanation for the second one. However, he did not deem either variant reading as being *shādhdh*, a fact that should indicate that he accepted them.

In another variant reading that did not comply with the 'Uthmanic *rasm* but which Abū al-Su'ūd mentioned and did not reject, we find the article “*anna*” conjoined with the third person object pronoun, “*annahā*”⁹⁷, rendered *la'allahā* in 'Ubayy's reading and was deemed *shādhdh* by tradition in al-An'ām 6/109. But Abū al-Su'ūd thought that this reading could be accommodated in this verse linguistically as well as in terms of the meaning it renders. Though it contradicted the *rasm* as well, he did not reject it nor did he term it *shādhdh*.

In al-A'rāf 7/3, “*lā tattabi'ū*”⁹⁸ is also read *lā tabtaghū* in a non-canonical reading. Abū al-Su'ūd mentioned this reading and grounded it on the meaning of another verse, namely Āl 'Imrān 3/85. Here the justification for the admissibility of a non-canonical reading is not predicated on linguistics, but on mere meaning. Abū al-Su'ūd, and Zamakhsharī whom he follows in this verse, seems to have exercised *ijtihād* and focused solely on the meaning. According to this reasoning then, if the meaning can be supported by another verse, and/or a reading does not contradict the meaning of another verse, and is reported by way of sound transmission, it should be admitted at least for the purpose of elucidating the meaning of the verse. There are prophetic traditions that attest to the permissibility of a variant reading measured against the criterion of meaning. In a tradition reported in the collection of Abū Dāwūd, one of the ḥadīth collections that are deemed canonical by Sunni orthodoxy, the angel (probably Gabriel) allowed Muḥammad to read freely as long as he did not confuse a verse indicating mercy with a verse indicating punishment.⁹⁹ This report clearly indicates that reading variantly was allowed as long as the meaning did not change or as long as it could be corroborated in another part of the Qur'ān.

In al-Baqara 2/148, “*wa-li-kull(in) wijhat(un)*”¹⁰⁰ is rendered in 'Ubayy's reading *wali-kull(in) qiblat(un)*. Though this reading is considered *shādhdh* by tradition, probably because it contradicted the *rasm*, Abū al-Su'ūd neither mentioned 'Ubayy nor that it was *shādhdh*. Other instances where the non-canonical readings that did not comply with the 'Uthmanic *rasm* but were however mentioned by Abū al-Su'ūd and not clearly rejected by him can also be seen in al-Baqara 2/46, al-Zukhruf 43/61, and throughout other sūras in the Qur'ānic commentary of the author.

There are historical reports indicating that when the 'Uthmanic codices were written, 'Uthmān examined them and realized that they included instances of *lahn*, but felt assured that

⁹⁶ al-A'rāf 7/105.

⁹⁷ al-An'ām 6/109.

⁹⁸ al-A'rāf 7/3.

⁹⁹ See: Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi'*, 1/74.

¹⁰⁰ al-Baqara 2/148.

the Arabs would rectify it in their reading. Some of these instances are also mentioned in these reports and they were taken to be mistakes committed by the scribes of the 'Uthmanic *Muṣḥaf*.¹⁰¹ The phrase “*al-muqīmīn*”, in the genitive or accusative case, *al-“ṣalwt(a)”*¹⁰² is one of those instances in al-Nisā' 4/162. The said reports mentioned by Ibn Abī Dāwūd (d. 316/929) indicated that this reading and the way it was recorded in the 'Uthmanic *Muṣḥaf* was a scribal mistake, and that it was *lahn*, and the correct form was supposed to be *al-muqīmūn* in the indicative case. We are not sure what *lahn* may have meant back then, but there are also reports in the same section of Ibn Abī Dāwūd's *Kitāb al-maṣāḥif* which indicate that the term simply meant dialect.¹⁰³ But this explanation engenders another problem: why then did 'Ā'isha for example, the Prophet's wife and one of the Companions from whom such reports had been transmitted, as well as several others, view such reading as problematic? No valid disagreement on the acceptability of different dialects has been reported. And if it was a dialect, why did the succeeding generations of Muslims go to great lengths trying to provide justificatory and conciliatory explanations for a reading that could otherwise simply be justified on account of its being a dialect? Zajjāj and Zamakhsharī, for example, painstakingly tried to explain in their commentaries on this verse that there can be no *lahn* in the *Muṣḥaf*. But they had no qualms about stating in several other instances in the Qur'ān that some readings, canonical or otherwise, were *lahn*. It is clear that neither Zajjāj nor Zamakhsharī took the word *lahn* to mean simply dialect. The fact that several exegetes attempted to justify this apparent linguistic discrepancy in this phrase should indicate that they all interpreted *lahn* to mean mere solecism. The verse in its entirety runs:

“But those who are firm in knowledge from among them and the believers believe in that which is revealed unto you, and that which was revealed before you, and *al-muqīmīn al-ṣalwt(a)* (the diligent in performing the prayer), and those who pay the poor due, and the believers in Allāh and in the Last Day; upon those we shall bestow immense reward.”¹⁰⁴

Zajjāj, Tha'labī, Wāḥidī, Zamakhsharī all rendered the phrase in their first interpretation of a number of other potential interpretations as accusative, *al-muqīmīn*, on account of the fact that those that are indicated in this phrase are praised and/or distinguished. Tha'labī clearly stated that it was one of a number of expressions that 'Ā'isha considered to be the mistake of the scribes; however, he did not feel compelled to repudiate such a claim or such a report. Another explanation advanced by some grammarians was that it was conjoined (*ma'tūf*) to “from among them (*minhum*)”, in which case the verse would read: “and from among those who diligently perform the prayer”, was dismissed by Zajjāj on account of the fact that this type of conjoining was detested by the majority of grammarians. Another explanation mentioned by Tha'labī and Zamakhsharī was that *muqīmīn* was conjoined to “that which was revealed unto you” and the meaning would then be rendered: “and that which was revealed unto those who diligently perform the prayer”. The question that naturally arose was who are those that diligently performed the prayer and received the Revelation? And the ready answer was that they were the prophets. Wāḥidī alone among the abovementioned early exegetes did not mention anything about this phrase in this verse being viewed as *lahn* and said nothing to repudiate it. He must have been content with the first interpretation that it was the direct object of an elided

¹⁰¹ See for such reports, Ibn Abī Dāwūd al-Sijistānī (d. 316/929), *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif*, ed. Muḥibb al-Dīn 'Abd al-Subḥān Wā'iz (Bairut: Dār al-Bashā'ir al-Islāmiyya, 2002), 1/227-237.

¹⁰² al-Nisā' 4/162.

¹⁰³ Ibn Abī Dāwūd al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif*, 1/227.

¹⁰⁴ al-Nisā' 4/162.

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praise verb, a phenomenon that, according to Wāhidī, is widely encountered in Arabic.¹⁰⁵ Abū al-Su'ūd on the other hand mentioned all of the abovementioned explanations, except for the tradition which attested to the fact that 'Ā'isha viewed it as *lahn*. He also mentioned, as did Zamakhsharī and Bayḍāwī before him, that it was also read in nominative case, *al-muqīmūn al-ṣalwt(a)*, in the reading of Ibn Mas'ūd along with several other readers who were deemed non-canonical¹⁰⁶ but whose readings must have circulated widely nonetheless. This non-canonical reading of Ibn Mas'ūd would have complied with Arabic linguistics and would have engendered no discussion grammatically. We are unable to offer at this moment any explanation as to why Abū al-Su'ūd did not tackle the aspect of this phrase's being viewed as *lahn*. The fact that he had no qualms about using the term *lahn* in several other instances should outright exclude the probability that he strove to walk an orthodox line. May we suggest that he was not completely satisfied with any of the previous explanations and was thus unable to accommodate the current canonical reading, and therefore merely glossed over the topic entirely? Ibn Rufayda viewed *Irshād* as mere replication of the contents of previous *tafsīr* works, especially *al-Kashshāf* and *Anwār al-Tanzīl*, but this instance in particular tends to repudiate such a general claim.¹⁰⁷

Assessment and Conclusions

What we can make of the preceding instances in *Irshād* is now in order. The way Abū al-Su'ūd handled the variant readings in his commentary indicates that he did not consistently observe the traditionally set criteria for the admissibility or inadmissibility of them. Sometimes he justified a given reading on the ground that it complied with the *Muṣḥaf* but in other instances he freely utilized the ones that did not accord with the *rasm*. Some variant readings, canonical or non-canonical, were justified and/or dismissed by him on account of their compliance or discord with the linguistic requirements of the Arabic language. It is rather difficult to make sense of the criterion of sound transmission in *Irshād*, but it seems that if a variant reading could be established in an acceptable way of transmission, whether it be *mutāwātir*, or *mashhūr*, or *aḥād*, and it did not constitute further discrepancy with the *rasm* of the text, or, at times, with the meaning rendered by it, Abū al-Su'ūd did not outright reject it and was content with its utilization at least for exegetical purposes. Some researchers that studied the variant readings in *Irshād* concluded that Abū al-Su'ūd was rather inconsistent with his observation of the three criteria set by tradition, and they even disparaged him for being negligent in the topic.¹⁰⁸ Some other researchers attempted even to demonstrate, by “selectively” choosing a number of variant readings from *Irshād*, that Abū al-Su'ūd actually did abide by the traditionally set three criteria and observed them throughout his Qur'ānic commentary.¹⁰⁹

We have previously mentioned that most of these studies invariably reflect a mindset that is informed by our modern day understanding which operates under the premise that the three traditionally set criteria had been set at least since the time of the collection of Qur'ān by

¹⁰⁵ See Zajjāj, *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*, 2/130-32; Abū Ishāq Aḥmad al-Tha'labī, *al-Kashf wa al-bayān 'an tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad b. 'Ashūr (Bairut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-'Arabī, 2002), 3/414; Wāhidī, *al-Tafsīr al-Basīṭ*, 7/192; Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 2/178.

¹⁰⁶ Khaṭīb, *Mu'jam al-qirā'āt*, 2/198-99.

¹⁰⁷ Ibrāhīm 'Abd Allāh Rufayda, *al-Naḥw wa kutub al-tafsīr*, (Trablus/Tripoli: al-Mansha'a al-Āmma li al-Nashr wa al-Tawzī' wa al-I'lān, 1982), 2/986-993.

¹⁰⁸ See for example, al-'Arabī Shāwish, “Tafsīr Abī al-Su'ūd: ṭarīqatuh fi al-'amal bi al-riwāya wa manhajuh fi tawzīf al-qirā'āt” *Majallat Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ḥasaniyya* 15 (Rabat: Dār al-Ḥadīth al-Ḥasaniyya, 1418-19/1997-98), 212-229; also see, Duhaysāt, “al-Tawjīh al-naḥwī”, 14-51.

¹⁰⁹ See Süleyman Molla İbrahimoglu and Kadir Taşpınar, “Ebussuud Efendi'nin Tefsirinde Kıraat Tasavvuru” *Recep Tayyip Erdoğan Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 9 (2006), 117-152.

‘Uthmān, and proponents of this mindset fail to see, or turn a blind eye to, the historical and diachronic developments undergone by the phenomenon of variant readings. We have provided ample evidence above for how ‘Uthmān’s collection of the Qur’ān into *Muṣḥaf* did not keep other companions and their successors from entertaining readings that were in discord with it, how Ibn Mujāhid’s attempts failed to limit the canonical/acceptable readings to seven, and how a considerable number of scholars still kept debating after ‘Uthmān and after Ibn Mujāhid about the criteria against which the admissibility or inadmissibility of a given variant reading could be measured. These debates and discussions seemingly culminated towards the end of 14th or the beginning of 15th century in the literary work of inarguably one of the most famous figures in late medieval Islamic history in Qur’ānic readings, Ibn al-Jazarī. The close reading of Ibn al-Jazarī’s *al-Nashr fī al-qirā’āt al-‘ashr* leaves one with the undeniable impression that the topic was still being hotly debated among the scholars until at least the beginning of the 15th century and the fact that though Ibn al-Jazarī himself wanted to limit the variant readings to ten, he also accepted the idea that other readings beyond ten could equally be entertained as canonical was also observed.

When the famous ‘Irāqī scholar of Qur’ānic reading Abū Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abd al-Mu’min al-Wāsiṭī (d. 741/1341) came to Damascus and read in ten variant readings, some scholars who did not accept other than the seven took offense and attempted and sought political backing in order to drive him away from the city, but some other scholars accommodated him. Very interestingly, one of the scholarly figures who was accommodative of Wāsiṭī was none other than Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328), the champion of traditionalism. Because of the significance of Ibn Taymiyya as the figurehead of traditionalism we here would like to give his response to the situation in its entirety:

“There is no disagreement among the acknowledged scholars that *al-aḥruf al-sab’a* in which the Prophet said the Qur’ān was revealed are not the well-known seven variant readings. But Ibn Mujāhid is the first one that collected the seven variant readings with the intention of matching the *ḥurūf*/modes in which the Qur’ān was revealed, and not out of conviction on his part or on the part of other scholars that those seven variant readings are the same as *al-aḥruf al-sab’a* or those identified seven readers are the ones whose readings should not be violated and/or no other reading should be allowed. For this reason, some of the leading scholars in Qur’ānic reading said: had Ibn Mujāhid not before me identified Ḥamza [one of the seven], I would have identified al-Ḥaḍramī [Ya’qūb, one of the three after seven] instead... and for this reason also no scholar of early Islam disagreed on the fact that it cannot be adjudicated on the inadmissibility of a reading in other than those [seven] readings in all the cities of Muslim community. On the contrary, whoever can determine the veracity of al-A’mash’s reading [one of the four after ten and at the same time Ḥamza’s teacher], or Ya’qūb al-Ḥaḍramī’s reading or someone else in their stature in the same way they determine Ḥamza’s and/or al-Kisā’ī’s (d. 189/805) [readings], they are allowed to adopt those readings without disagreement by the acknowledged scholars. Furthermore, most of the Imām Scholars like Sufyān b. ‘Uyayna (d. 198/815), Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855), the eponymous founder of the Ḥanbalī school and the father of the modern day salafī school, and Bishr b. al-Ḥārith (d. 227/850) all knew about Ḥamza’s reading but chose to follow and adopt the reading of someone else such as Ja’far b. al-Qa’qa’ (d. 130/747) [one of the three after seven] and Shayba b. Naṣṣāh (d. 130/747) [a non-canonical reader but also a teacher of Nāfi’], both of whom are from Madina, or the readings of Baṣrans such as the teachers of Ya’qūb [al-Ḥaḍramī] and others over Ḥamza and al-Kisā’ī...for this reason the Imāms of the ‘Irāqī community determined the ten readings or “eleven readings” (the emphasis is mine) to be the same in canonicity as the seven readings. And on this foundation as well they continued collecting/composing books and

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continued exercising these readings “during ritual prayers” (the emphasis is mine) as well as outside of them, a phenomenon that all scholars agreed and none repudiated them.”¹¹⁰

It is clear that at least during Ibn Taymiyya's time, 8th/14th century, scholars still continued debating, accommodating and/or repudiating readings that went beyond the confines of seven or even ten variant readings. It is this fact, in light of which the Qur'ānic commentaries that were seemingly imbued with a liberal approach vis-à-vis the variant readings at least up to and through middle of 8th/14th century should be viewed and assessed. That an exegete in the stature of Zamakhsharī may have never felt compelled to comply with an established tradition on the variant readings should allow us to seriously question the presumed veracity of the establishment of such tradition. It is our conviction, therefore, that the number of canonical variant readings and/or the identity of canonical readers were in a rather fluid form, and the criteria for the canonicity of a given reading continued to be the topic of debate and discussion among not only the scholars of Qur'ānic reading but the exegetes as well. Even though the discipline of variant readings is today considered a separate field of study that is solely appropriated by the scholars of Qur'ānic readings, the exegetes of classical and medieval period seem to have stood their ground and contested them in determining the Qur'ānicity of a given reading. Zamakhsharī primarily and Bayḍāwī and Abū al-Su'ūd after him engaged in their Qur'ānic commentaries with the topic of variant readings selectively only in order to point out to the discrepancies that the attempts of establishing a conclusive tradition involved. Though at instances they, primarily Zamakhsharī and Abū al-Su'ūd, measured some variant readings against the criteria of 'Uthmanic *Muṣḥaf*, or the requirement of Arabic linguistics, and/or the condition of the quality of transmission, they also allowed for the utilization of readings that in one way or another contradicted with one of these criteria.

We do not either believe that the liberal approach to variant readings was the purview of the Qur'ānic exegesis alone, and in liturgy only canonical readings were attested to have been in practice according to the prevalent Muslim narrative. Some literary evidence, especially the legal rulings of eminent jurists, entitles us to question the limitation of this liberal approach to exegetical endeavors alone. We should also seriously consider revising the current understanding that the exegetes liberally approached the variant readings and incorporated them, canonical and non-canonical ones alike, into their Qur'ānic commentaries for the sole purpose of enriching their hermeneutical explanations. The editors of Abū Ḥayyān's *al-Baḥr* covered the topic of permissibility of non-canonical readings during ritual prayers and it seems that some acknowledged scholars did not view anything wrong with it. Among some of the scholars that permitted recitation in non-canonical readings during ritual prayers are Mālik b. Enes (d. 179/795), the eponymous founder of the Mālikī school, and some well-known Ḥanafī scholars.¹¹¹ Ibn Taymiyya, in the abovementioned note, condoned the readings that went beyond even ten readings even in ritual. Nor do we encounter in the commentary of Abū al-Su'ūd anything resembling a distinction between exegetical and liturgical purposes, and we strongly believe that neither Abū al-Su'ūd nor Zamakhsharī, or other exegetes whose commentaries can be characterized similarly, established such a distinction between liturgical reading and exegetical reading either. It is rather our modern scholarship's understanding of how and why some exegetes more liberally covered the topic of variant readings in the Qur'ānic commentaries or how and why they based some of their commentaries on traditionally non-canonical readings.

¹¹⁰ See it in Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr*, 1/37.

¹¹¹ See Abū Ḥayyān al-Andulūsī, *al-Baḥr al-muḥīt*, 1/87-89.

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Etik Beyan / Ethical Statement:

Bu çalışmanın hazırlanma sürecinde bilimsel ve etik ilkelere uyulduğu ve yararlanılan tüm çalışmaların kaynakçada belirtildiği beyan olunur / It is declared that scientific and ethical principles have been followed while carrying out and writing this study and that all the sources used have been properly cited.

Yazar(lar) / Author(s):

Halil ŞİMŞEK

Finansman / Funding:

Yazar bu araştırmayı desteklemek için herhangi bir dış fon almadığını kabul eder. / The author acknowledges that he received no external funding in support of this Research.

Çıkar Çatışması / Competing Interests

Yazarlar, çıkar çatışması olmadığını beyan ederler. / The authors declare that they have no competing interests.