

Ageless Qur'an Timeless Text

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Ageless Qur'an
Timeless Text

A Visual Study of Sura 17 Across 14 Centuries and 19 Manuscripts

M.M. Al-Azami

I dedicate this book to my beloved wife who for sixty years shared my life of good days and bad days, and perhaps a word from her changed the course of my life. We were blessed with three children: Aqil, Fatima and Anas. All three have actively participated in completing this work, and are graceful examples of children honoring their parents. May Allah bestow His mercy on them and their families as He does to all His believers. Ameen.

بِسْمِ اللّٰهِ الرَّحْمٰنِ الرَّحِیْمِ

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PREFACE

All thanks and praise is due to Allāh, we seek His help and forgiveness. We seek refuge in Allāh from the evil within ourselves and the consequences of our evil deeds. Whoever Allāh guides will never be led astray, and whoever Allāh leads astray will never find guidance. I bear witness there is no God but Allāh, alone without any partners, and I bear witness that Muḥammad is His servant and His Messenger.

Since childhood I have always been keen on mathematics. In school it was the only subject that I paid attention to. As fate changed my course in life to the subject of Islamic studies, I still managed to make use of basic mathematical concepts and logic in some of my work. And this work is no exception. In mathematics, a proof without words is a proof of an identity or mathematical statement which can be demonstrated as self-evident by a diagram without any accompanying explanatory text. There is a beautiful visual proof that the sum of positive odd numbers is a perfect square, or that the Pythagorean Theorem holds true (again, without words). This book follows suit. It is about proving the integrity of the Qurʾānic text without words, a visual proof. It is a perfect companion to my other book on the subject, *The History of the Qurʾānic Text, from revelation to compilation*.

Why such a book? This work is meant for all people, Muslim and non-Muslim, believer and skeptic. I relate it to Prophet Ibrāhīm's story with the birds, a tale quoted in the Qurʾān which evokes a theme, a feeling, that touches the soul of everyone who seeks a kind of reassurance and satisfaction as part of the natural human desire to simultaneously attain both belief and proof.

وَإِذْ قَالَ إِبْرَاهِيمُ رَبِّ أَرِنِي كَيْفَ تُحْيِي الْمَوْتَىٰ قَالَ أَوْ لَمْ

تُؤْمِنُ قَالَ بَلَىٰ وَلَئِن لَّا يَظْمِنُ قَلْبِي قَالَ فَخُذْ أَرْبَعَةً مِّنَ
الطَّيْرِ فَصُرْهُنَّ إِلَيْكَ ثُمَّ اجْعَلْ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ جَبَلٍ مِّنْهُنَّ جُزْءًا
ثُمَّ ادْعُهُنَّ يَأْتِينَكَ سَعْيًا وَاعْلَمْ أَنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٢٦﴾¹

And Prophet Ibrāhīm asked: “My Lord, show me how You give life to the dead.” He [Allāh] said, “Do you not believe?” He said, “I do! But just to reassure my heart.” He said, “Then take four birds and draw them to you. Then place a part of them on each mountain. Then call them; they shall come to you in a rush. And know that indeed Allāh is overpowering, all-wise”

Over the course of this project I came across many wonderful people who helped me in myriad ways. Among the many names, here I wish to thank Sheikh al-Qāḍī Ismāʿīl al-Akwaʿ (Yemen); Prof Dr Recep Şentürk of ISAM and İbn Haldun Üniversitesi, Dr Nevzat Kaya and Emir Eş, former directors of Süleymaniye and satellite libraries, and Dr Tayyar Altikulaç, all from Istanbul (Turkey); Dr Abū Saʿd Işlāḥī of Reza Library, Rampur (India); Dr Raḥmat ʿAlī of Salar Jung Museum, Hyderabad (India); Dr Murād Rammāh, former director of Musée national d'art islamique de Raqqāda (Tunisia); Dr ʿAbdullāh al-Manīf of King Fahd Library, Riyadh (Saudi Arabia); and Wasīm Ḥabbāl, Beirut (Lebanon).

Special thanks to Prof Dr Amir Bakhsh Channa, my personal physician and essential friend for taking care of me in my frail health; Dr Azhar Farooqui, a young cardiologist; the consultants, doctors and staff of the

¹ Qurʾān 2:260.

ICU, CCU, and Internal Medicine ward at King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center in Riyadh where lately I have been a frequent patient. To Mr Islam Habib Khan, former neighbor and a long time friend who helped me with references whenever he traveled abroad; Dr Khālid al-‘Ujaimī, for correcting my Arabic at different parts in the Introduction; Dr ‘Abdullāh aṣ-Ṣubaiḥ, for his many advices; Sr Sawsun for sharing her qira’at reading certificate; and Ibrāhīm aṣ-Ṣulaiḥ, my loyal neighbor. The generous support of Sheikh Nizām Ya‘qūbī of the Kingdom of Bahrain to shoulder the printing costs cannot be forgotten. Without him and his friend ‘Abdullāh from Jeddah (who prefers to remain anonymous), this work may still be collecting dust.

I must also extend tremendous gratitude to my family for their unwavering assistance throughout the many stages of this work’s fifteen year journey: to my elder son Aqil for his initial experiment with the manual collate process, then in spearheading the development of the software for the task, writing the draft copy of the English Introduction, and dealing with all communications; to my daughter Fatima for her work in the initial parts of the project; to my younger son Anas who did much of the diligent task of ‘peeling’ the words from different manuscripts, and thereafter editing the English texts as necessary; to my daughter-in-law Ruqaiyya Akbar for her work with typing observational notes from many different sources; and to my grandson Omar for his work in preparing some of the collate output and his work on the jacket design. And a particular tribute to my wife for tolerating me through sixty years of marriage and suffering through the many sacrifices she has had to bear with extraordinary patience and a loving smile. May Allāh reward all of them for their kindness and generosity.

Finally, my deepest gratitude to Almighty Allāh for providing me with this vision, as well as the opportunity and privilege of completing it. Whatever faults are present in this book are entirely my own, and what-

ever pleases Him is for His Glory alone. I pray that He will accept this work as a sincere effort on His behalf.

The reader may perceive that I have generally dispensed with the phrases of glorification or invocation that follow certain names, such as ﷻ (illustrious be His Majesty) after Allāh, ﷻ (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) after the Prophet Muḥammad, or ﷺ (may Allāh be pleased with him) after any of the Companions. My purpose was to maintain the text’s flow as much as possible, with the hope that the reader will mentally insert these phrases into the text as appropriate. Some of greatest scholars adhered to this same practice in fact, Imām Aḥmad bin Ḥanbal, and though subsequent writers saw fit to add all such phrases explicitly into the text, the eye is just as capable of slotting them in by instinct. I followed this practice in my book, *The History of Qur’ānic Text*.

Lastly, this work is a culmination of over fifteen years of my life. Allāh alone knows all the hindrances and difficulties that my family and I encountered along the lengthy and the bumpy road leading us up to this point. To reflect on the situation, I will quote a statement attributed to ‘Emād al-Aṣfahānī,

I have seen that no man writes a book in his day except to say the next day: if this was changed, it would have been best; if this was added, it would have been improved; if this was moved, it would have been better; and if this was left out, it would have been nicer. And this is among the greatest evidences of the wholesale shortcomings of mankind.²

MMA
Ramadān 1438/June 2017

² Yāqūt, *Mu‘jam al-Udabā’*. Meaning that perfection belongs to Allāh alone.

INTRODUCTION

I. THE FRAMEWORK

Memory and Continuity

Imagine a not-too-distant future where books are outlawed while society distracts itself with trivialities. A totalitarian regime has taken over. A few people choose to hide their books in an attempt to resist, but are countered by fierce “firemen” and their lethal robots who are tasked with seeking them out and incinerating their belongings, their furnishings—indeed the entire houses of all those who dare harbor the written word. Such is the dystopian setting of *Fahrenheit 451*, Ray Bradbury’s 1953 novel which takes as its title the temperature at which paper autoignites. Towards the end of the story the protagonist, himself a fireman who has grown disillusioned with all the burning and is now a wanted criminal on the run, happens upon a commune of intellectuals who have set up camp beyond the city. These renegades, feeling that a time will come when society will regain its senses and again thirst for that which it is now happy to burn, pave the way for this future by memorizing books. Each individual commits a book to memory and thus becomes the living embodiment of that book. Though the book is then physically destroyed to prevent attracting the authorities, it lives on in that individual and by verbally transmitting it to subsequent generations, it can carry on until the time comes when it is ready to be committed again to paper.

Imagine if such a regime escapes the confines of fiction and becomes our reality. Mass confusion, an overwhelming haze, a hysteria grips every corner. Printed books are indeed set ablaze, articles and works are wiped clean from the internet, the memory of what things were like quickly

fades. Can any book hope to survive and outlast such a catastrophe?

Some people will recall select passages from the Bible, some will remember choice lines from Macbeth or Faust, a vivid scene from Tolstoy or a witty exchange by Austen. Few people will remember full texts, and for most works the number will be none. For the majority of people there will be a smattering of catchphrases that have made it into popular culture, retained only faintly and slowly receding into oblivion. But there is a text which can endure such a calamity, and endure it easily and in its entirety: a Book of considerable length, memorized with precision from its very first letter to its very last without a single dropped word, backed by the memories of hundreds of thousands if not more who have committed it to heart and have done so for nearly one and a half millennia. This study is about that Book.

Setting the Scene

This work is a visual catalog and record, a collation of seventeen Qur’ānic manuscripts focusing on one sūrah but spanning all the centuries of Islam,³ from the time when the evening sun cast long shadows of gently swaying palm trees upon the fields of Madinah while the Companions of the Prophet made their way through the alleyways to the Prophet’s Mosque and set down to work, their fine tipped quills glistening with ink as they carefully etched each letter of the Qur’ān upon parchment, mere inches or less from the very spot where the Prophet received guests and instructed his scribes earlier, to fourteen centuries later where a modern, digital

³ Seventeen different Muṣḥafs were used for the visual collation. Two more were added later in the study and are featured in Tables 1 and 2.

printing press residing in the selfsame city hums along, its numerous machines whirring with energy and purpose, producing hundreds of pages every few seconds to be bound into Muṣḥafs and distributed upon the shelves of mosques and homes across the globe.

These seventeen Qurʾānic manuscripts are laid out in a framework known as a collation. According to the dictionary definition, this means to set side by side to facilitate spotting similarities and differences. By aligning the texts word by word the reader is better able to discern each word, each letter, each verse as it echoed throughout the centuries and to do so in a visual manner that is easy enough to pick up yet rich in details and the subtleties of stylistic evolution that reverberate across time.

Prior Episodes

This is not my first experience of collating text, for there were two prior episodes which prepared me for this work. The first came when I was reconstructing a long lost book, Maghāzī ʿUrwah b. az-Zubayr (d. 93/712), the earliest work on the Prophet’s Sīrah as it even predates the sīrahs of Mūsā b. ʿUqbah (d. 141/759), and Ibn Ishāq (d. 150/767). The second time was during my work on the Muwaṭṭaʾ of Imām Mālik.

Maghāzī of ʿUrwah b. az-Zubayr

Dotted by rocky hilltops standing guard over precious desert wells, the valley of Badr in the second year of Hijra served as the first battlefield between the nascent Muslim state and a vastly better equipped enemy three times their number. Amongst the most celebrated of all Muslim victories and one that is directly referenced by name in the Qurʾān, the battle of Badr is a mainstay of every Sīrah that is written. So it was years ago that I happened across two early narrations of this battle. One came from ʿUrwah (22-93/643-712), a famous Successor and jurist who authored the earliest known Sīrah, the other from Mūsā b. ʿUqbah (d. 141), who had

penned his own Sīrah but was relating from a student of ʿUrwah. What lay before my eyes was something I wanted to share with my readers. The chains of transmission were different, yes, but the actual texts depicting the battle were almost word-for-word and indistinguishable and this was a clear sign of a common written source. So by dividing my pages into top and bottom halves, one for each narrative, and giving the lines of each the same numbering, I let the texts flow for a full ten pages and the conclusion was self-evident.⁴

Muwaṭṭaʾ of Imām Mālik

Nearly a quarter of a century later I again happened upon collation as the ideal vehicle for proving a point. One of the brightest stars in the constellation of Muslim jurists, Imām Mālik (93-179/712-795) was the focus this time along with his greatest work, the Muwaṭṭaʾ, which survives in several recensions. A particular scholar, having edited one recension, debased his own subject matter by claiming that the variances between recensions would themselves require an entire volume to enumerate. At the time I happened to be editing another recension and was taken aback by this person’s brazen remark. Through my own background readings I knew this was not possible. So as an aside to my editing efforts I began to collate, except that instead of placing the texts in half-pages I instilled each word directly above its counterpart for easier comparison. For the length of 36 pages I ran the two recensions together, tightly-knit, and by the end it was exceedingly obvious that that person’s criticism was patently false.⁵

⁴ M.M. Al-Aʿzamī, *Maghāzī ʿUrwah b. az-Zubayr* (in Arabic), Riyadh: Maktab at-Tarbiyah al-ʿArabī li-Duwal al-Khalīj, 1401/1981.

⁵ M.M. Al-Aʿzamī, *Muwaṭṭaʾ of Imām Mālik* (in Arabic), 8 volumes, Abu Dhabi, UAE: Zayed Charitable Foundation, 1425/2004.

Challenges and Lessons

With these experiences under my belt I began to contemplate other paths. Since my formative years the hadith, and the accompanying pleasures of tracing back the deeds and words of the final messenger, had been my life's pursuit. But with mounting global interest in the Qur'ān (both positive and negative) I found myself drawn down a new avenue and slowly, by grasping what other projects were ongoing in the world, came to decide on setting up a collation of Qur'ān manuscripts. The general outline of this venture crystallized in my mind long ago, the overall look of it, the scope, the selection of Sūrah Isrā' because of the known phenomenon that manuscripts are more apt to lose folios from the edges rather than the middle. This was the idea; next came the implementation and with it the usual assortment of obstacles that drip from unexpected corners. The most glaring of these were firstly technological, which were dealt with much like a climber scouring a rock face in search of firm footing, step by step, and secondly what I will call political shortcomings.

As an example of this second category: In summer 2002 I was among a number of guests at Prof Sergio Nosedá's seaside retreat in Italy. We had never met before but, as Professor of Arabic at the Catholic University of Milan, he was keenly drawn to Qur'ānic manuscripts and this was one of several aspects where our professional interests overlapped.⁶ Curiosity led me to thumb through his collection and I was startled at the sheer volume of high quality images he had of precious Qur'ānic fragments from the treasure trove in Ṣan'ā', Yemen. He confided his secret, that his first audience upon reaching Ṣan'ā' had not been with the library director but with someone much higher up, the Italian ambassador. Conveying his interests to the ambassador, the two of them then set out to meet the

⁶ I came to know him through his work in printing the facsimile edition of Arabe 328a, a famous Qur'ānic manuscript kept in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (BnF) in Paris.

highest rung on the ladder, the then-president of the Republic of Yemen himself, 'Alī 'Abdullāh Ṣāliḥ. There amidst the opulence of the presidential palace they put forward their petition. A royal decree was issued on the spot and with it Prof Nosedá was free to acquire whatever fragments interested him. I admired this political savvy of his. My own experience in Yemen a few years earlier (April 1999) had been much less fruitful. As someone with a taste for the academic but not the political I had contacted no ambassadors or royal dignitaries but instead the late Sheikh al-Akwa', former director of the library and a generous friend, and despite his backing and connections I ran into much seesawing and haggling from various corners and ultimately walked away with a mere handful of images, rushed, improperly lit, some out of focus, none of professional quality.⁷ In similar ways I believe that we sometimes happen upon doors that remain closed, or barely nudge open, because the buttons we need to push are not the ones that are most obvious to our temperament.

Rendering the Idea

The gestation period of this work has been unusually long, owing to the above and to my own fluid health, and during this time I became aware that others had also published collations of sacred texts. Proceeding chronologically, the earliest such work I am aware of concerns a copy of the Hebrew Pentateuch found in Malabar, India and collated in Cambridge in 1812.⁸ The page is split into triplicate columns. In the first is an English

⁷ Although I encountered similar experiences in most locales there are two exceptions that I must highlight, Dr M. Rammāḥ of Musée national d'art islamique de Raqqada, Tunisia, and Dr A.S. Iṣlāḥī of Reza Library in Rampur, India. In both instances, I met an openness and warmth, and a genuine interest in my endeavors, which sharply contrasted with the coldness and suspicion that I had at times witnessed elsewhere.

⁸ T. Yeates, *Collation of an Indian Copy of the Hebrew Pentateuch, with Preliminary Remarks: containing an exact description of the manuscript and a notice of some others, (Hebrew and Syriac) collected by the Rev. C. Buchanan, D.D., in the year 1806, and now deposited in the public library,*

rendering of the Malabar Pentateuch, the middle is the text as it is in Hebrew, and the last is the English translation of the Septuagint (a widely-used latter day Greek translation of the Pentateuch). Here we are looking at one translation alongside an independent translation of a second translation. Like comparing an object to a shadow of that object which falls upon a mirror at the bottom of a pool, every act of translation is also one of forfeiture, a loss of fidelity and subtlety, and so a comparison of these columns is not necessarily a straightforward way of determining which text was more “authentic”, but the idea of a collation is there. Another work is in the Syriac language.⁹ The most comprehensive of these is a series by Reuben Swanson from 1995, one book for each of the four New Testament gospels.¹⁰ In each book a group of well-established Greek manuscripts is laid out vertically and the variances are highlighted against Codex Vaticanus, which is taken as the standard. The work is meticulous but, as with the others, it is all typed out.

In all these books, regardless of the century or language we are delving into, what we see is someone else’s reading of the original manuscript splayed out in printed form. We ourselves never see the original manuscript, the flourish of the quill as it traced its inky path upon parchment, the uncertainty caused by a scribe’s poorly formed letter, the millennia of damage and dirt caking over everything and sometimes

Cambridge; also a collation and description of a MS. Roll of the Book of Esther; and the Megillah of Ahasuerus, from the Hebrew copy originally extant in Brazen tablets of Goa, on the Malabar coast, with an English translation, Cambridge, 1812.

⁹ G.A. Kiraz, *Comparative Edition of the Syriac Gospels: Aligning the Sinaiticus, Curetonianus, Peshitta and Harklean Versions*: 4 volumes. New Testament Tools and Studies, Vol 21/1-4. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996.

¹⁰ R. Swanson, *New Testament Greek Manuscripts: John; variant reading arranged in horizontal lines against Codex Vaticanus*, William Carey Int'l Univ Press, 1998. The author has edited similar books for the gospels of Matthew, Luke, and Mark.

compounding the uncertainty. We never get the chance to make the comparisons for ourselves, as if the fragments or scrolls or tomes were laid out before us to see, and that was my point of departure in setting up this work.

II. TEXT AND TRANSMISSION

The Two Compilations

Over the course of twenty-three years, ten in Makkah and the remainder in Madīnah, the Qur’ān was communicated to the Prophet in fragments, portion by portion and verse by verse, often expounding on situations that were unfolding at that very moment, till it was complete.¹¹ At the time of the Prophet’s death there was no single unified compendium sitting upon a shelf which lay claim to the title of “official copy”. Instead the Qur’ān was scattered in small fragments and parchments in the possession of numerous Companions—some writing it with their own hands and others enlisting the help of friends—as well as in the memories of all Muslims for it was impossible to perform prayers without at least some knowledge of verses. Just a year later, the battle of Yamāmah (12/633) claimed the lives of many Companions who had committed the Qur’ān in its entirety to heart;¹² their martyrdom spilled this precious resource and safeguard into

¹¹ Canonization, or the apportioning of legal status, occurred instantaneously as each verse was revealed. There was no delay in implementation and we can discern this, for example, in the well-known narration about the streets of Madīnah flowing with spilled wine the day alcohol was forbidden [Ibn Ḥajar, *Fathul Bārī*, v:112]; or the congregation which was informed mid-prayer of the switch in qiblah and shifted *en masse* to face Makkah, lending the Masjid al-Qiblatain (Mosque of two Qiblahs) its unique name.

¹² There is no real consensus on the number of Muslims who were martyred at Yamāmah. One estimate puts the figure at 600 to 700 [al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li Aḥkām al-Qur’ān*, i:50; also *ibid*, pp. 38-39], while Ibn Kathīr favors 450 [*al-Bidāya wa an-Nihāya*, vi:340].