

The Quran and its Message

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Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

THE SEVEN AHRUF, RECITATIONS (QIRAAT), HAFS AND WARSH

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Within Muslim thought, it is widely accepted that the Quran was revealed in **seven** variants* (**ahruf - singular harf**) and that of **seven** recitations (**qiraat**).

This belief is solely based on the testimonies of the [Islamic secondary sources](#). **They have no basis in the Quran.**

These assertions were not canonised into the [Islamic secondary source](#) literature until **centuries** after the death of the Prophet.

* Throughout Islamic history, the actual definition of 'ahruf' in this context has been the subject of much academic debate. Some scholars have been left baffled as to its actual meaning in the context it has been cited. Some refer to 'ahruf' as dialects, others as synonyms, different types of teachings (wa'd, muhkam, mutashabih, halal, haram, wa'id, imthal), different pronunciations, variant readings, different manuscript codices etc.

For the purpose of this article, the generic English term '**variants**' will be used to indicate a difference **of some nature** that the phrase 'seven ahruf' implies. It is interesting to note that the Quranic use of the word 'harf' appears in different forms. In its noun form, it means a margin or an edge (22:11) and its verb form can mean to alter, pervert, or to tamper with. (2:75, 4:46, 5:13, 5:41).

A brief introduction will be given after which the matter will be assessed through a Quranic perspective.

SEVEN VARIANTS (AHRUF)

In support of the seven variants (ahruf) in which the Quran was **allegedly** revealed, isolated reports are usually cited from such canonical works as Malik's Muwatta. Please see an example below.

Book 15, Number 15.4.5:

Yahya related to me from Malik from Ibn Shihab from Urwa ibn az-Zubayr that Abd ar-Rahman ibn Abd al-Qari said that he had heard Umar ibn al-Khattab say, "I heard Hisham ibn Hakim ibn Hizam reciting Surat al-Furqan (Sura 25) differently from me, and it was the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, who had recited it to me. I was about to rush up to him but I granted him a respite until he had finished his prayer. Then I grabbed him by his cloak and took him to the Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, and said, 'Messenger of Allah, I heard this man reciting Surat al-Furqan differently from the way you recited it to me.' The Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, 'Let him go.' Then he said, 'Recite, Hisham,' and Hisham recited as I had heard him recite. The Messenger of Allah, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, said, 'It was sent down like that.' Then he said to me, 'Recite' and I recited the sura, and he said, 'It was sent down like that. This Qur'an was sent down in seven (different) ways, so recite from it whatever is easy for you.' " [1]

It is usually understood that the seven variations (ahruf) were reduced to one form during the ministry of Caliph Uthman.

As we will note later in the article, the claim of any variation (ahruf) of the Quran's revelation whatsoever, is **completely unsupported** from the Quran's own testimony.

SEVEN RECITATIONS (QIRAAT)

The Qiraat is generally understood as the manner of **pronunciation** of the Quran during recitation. However, there are some differences between them which we will discuss later in the article. Seven different recitations are commonly referred to by Muslim academics. However, there are more recitations known which all have their support in [Islamic secondary sources](#).

The main recitation used throughout the Muslim world is known under the name of its **alleged** reciter, **Abu Bakr 'Asim** (born circa 1st century AH). However, it appears that none of the recitations have the intention to alter the message of the Quran and they certainly are not '**different versions**' of the Quran as commonly alleged by Muslim polemics. This can be seen demonstrated in the popular recitation video below of Surah Fateha.

<http://www.youtube.com/embed/jqtj50FUuZE>

It is **alleged** that it was Abu Bakr Ibn Mujahid (d. 936CE) that established the 'seven **acceptable** recitations' (**qiraat**) of the Quran which he chose from a selection of other works which alleged a number of different recitations. (Ten were noted in the video above)

This was approximately **300 years after the death of the Prophet**.

Even in modern critical scholarship, Ibn Mujahid's methods seem to remain questionable. Whilst dealing with a study of Ibn Mujahid and the establishment of the seven Quranic recitations, scholar Dr. Christopher Melchert of the University of Oxford writes:

"Ibn Mujahid appears to have been careless about chains of transmission, himself, omitting to mention intermediary links in his account of his own chosen seven. (50) Also, he did not assert that the seven readings of his choice were the product of integral transmission. For example, the reading of Nafi' was said to be his personal synthesis of five earlier Medinese readings, the reading of al-Kisa'i his personal synthesis of the readings of Hamzah and others. (51) Such systematic mixing and matching has no analogue in hadith transmission" [2]

However, a close examination of the chains of narrations for the support of the various recitations has left some scholars a little dubious about their veracity, as they are based on isolated reports.

As we will note later in the article, the claim of different recitations (qiraat) of the Quran's revelation is **also completely unsupported** from the Quran's own testimony.

THE CONFUSION BETWEEN 'AHRUF' AND 'QIRAAT' BASED ON THEIR NUMBERS

Some Muslims have been led to believe that the seven recitations (qiraat) were based on the seven variants (ahruf) because of their similarity in number. This is certainly not the case as we have noted above.

While referring to Al-Sayuti, Christopher Melchert notes:

"He even quotes a reader of the earlier eleventh century, al-Mahdawi, as wishing that Ibn Mujahid had chosen some other number than seven in order to prevent confusion with the hadith report." [3]

WHAT IS HAFS AND WARSH?

Hafs and Warsh are two 'transmissions' of the Quran from **allegedly** two different 'recitations' (qiraat). It is asserted that the 'Hafs' transmission reaches us in the name of the reciter, Abu Bakr 'Asim and the 'Warsh' transmission, in the recitation of 'Nafi'. Both transmissions are recited in the Muslim world today.

Hafs (in the abbreviated name of the **alleged** transmitter - Hafs al-Asadi al Kufi) is the transmission of the Quran recitation (that of Abu Bakr 'Asim) that the **majority** of the Muslim world is familiar with. This is the **universally accepted** transmission of the Quran.

Warsh (in the name of the **alleged** transmitter - Uthman Ibn Sa'id al-Qutbi) is the transmission of the Quran recitation (that of Nafi) that **isolated parts of the Muslim world** such as the North African countries are familiar with.

Both printed versions of the transmissions (Hafs and Warsh) are available today.

"Little significance, however, should be attached to the Qur'an being known according to transmitters belonging to a century and a half after the Prophet. As ibn Khaldun said, they are merely single names representing whole schools, and in no way are to be considered initiators" [4]

THE RECITOR (Source of the Qiraat)	THE TRANSMISSION (In the abbreviated name of the Transmitter)	LOCATION	% OF THE MUSLIM WORLD
* Abu Bakr 'Asim	HAFS	THE MUSLIM WORLD IN GENERAL [5]	95% [5]
* Nafi	Warsh	Algeria, Morocco, parts of Tunisia, West Africa and Sudan [6]	3% [6]
	* Second transmitter - Qalun	Libya, Tunisia and parts of Qatar [7]	0.7% [7]
* Abu 'Amr al-Ala	* Al-Duri	Parts of Sudan and West Africa [8]	0.3 % [8]
* Ibn 'Amir	* Hisham		
	* Second transmitter - Ibn Dhakwan	Parts of Yemen [9]	1% [9]

* Alleged on the basis of [Islamic secondary sources](#)

To claim that there are absolutely no differences between the two transmissions (Hafs and Warsh) is academically incorrect and amounts to intellectual dishonesty. Such claims are either based on ignorance or sadly, deliberate obfuscation.

However, to acknowledge differences, regardless of how insignificant, does not lead one to conclude that they are different scriptures or that they conflict with verse 15:9 of the Quran in which God

takes responsibility to protect the 'message'. Such a myopic conclusion could not be further from the truth.

The majority recitation based on the Hafs transmission remains fully intact. There are no differences between the copies themselves which affect the meaning of the text. In other words, a Hafs copy is consistent with all the Hafs copies and the Warsh copy is consistent with all the Warsh copies. Any differences between the copies themselves (Hafs-Hafs, Warsh-Warsh) simply concern orthography (spelling) or recitation manner.

"Most of the variations simply concern orthography or recitation, and it must be said at the outset that none has any effect on the meaning of the text. **Within a given transmission, such as Hafs', that never varies.** It must also be said that there is no clear dividing line between reading and chanting, so some variations are purely recitative." [10]

"The variations simply concern orthography or recitation, and it must be said at the outset that none has any effect on the meaning of the text. **Within a given transmission, such as Wars', that never varies.** Variations in script have been mainly discussed above in chapters 4 and 5. That many of these variations have been covered by those between Hafs copies obviates the need for extensive description here. In general, it was found that, the printed Wars copies and many North-West African manuscripts of the Qur'an, notably here Edinburgh New College ms.1*, belong to a scrupulously adhered-to Tradition." [11]

Furthermore, no sincere scholar would ever claim that the 'message' of the Quran is different between the Hafs and Warsh transmissions either. Rather, the message of the Quran is the same with insignificant differences which make no difference to the overarching text.

The differences between the **two transmissions (Hafs and Warsh)** have been comprehensively studied by such scholars as Dr. Adrian Brockett who writes in his PhD thesis:

"The simple fact is that none of the differences listed in Chapters 9 and 10 has any great effect on the meaning. Many are differences with no effect on the meaning at all, and the rest are differences with affect on the meaning of the immediate context, but without any significant, wider effect on Muslim thought" [12]

Therefore, a Muslim in Morocco or Algeria, will not be reading a different Quran with extra verses, missing verses, different religious edicts or directives. The Quran will essentially be the same.

"...Thus, if the Qur'an had been transmitted only orally for the first century, sizeable variations between texts such as in the hadith and pre-Islamic poetry would be found, and if it had been transmitted only in writing, sizeable variations such as those in different transmissions of the original document of the Constitution of Medina would be found. But neither is the case with the Qur'an. There must have been a parallel written transmission limiting variation in the oral transmission to the graphic form, side by side with a parallel oral transmission preserving the written transmission from corruption. The oral transmission of the Qur'an was essentially static, rather than organic.

There was a single text, and nothing, not even allegedly abrogated material, could be taken out, nor anything be put in..." [13]

The nature of the differences between the two transmissions can be comprehensively studied in the PhD thesis mentioned above. A link to the thesis can be found below:

[Thesis link](#)

The **Hafs transmission** remains the widely accepted transmission in the Muslim world today which is attested not only by consensus (and mutawwatir propagation) but also early Quranic codices.

THE QURAN'S OWN TESTIMONY

The Quran, the primary source of guidance for a believer, **categorically negates** the basis of any allegations for multiple recitations (qiraat) or variants (ahruf).

The Quran confirms that only **one recitation** was revealed to the Prophet based on **one collection**. It was this recitation that the Prophet was instructed to follow.

075:17-18

"Indeed, Upon Us is its **collection (Arabic: jam'ahu)** and its **recitation (Arabic: qur'anahu)**. And when We have recited it (**qaranahu**) then follow its recitation (Arabic: qur'anahu)"

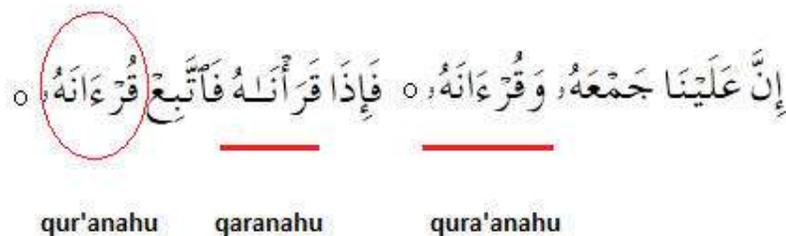


Illustration - Joseph Islam

The Quran was also revealed in the native tongue of the Prophet.

019.097

"And We make (this Scripture) easy in **your tongue (Arabic: bilisanika)**, only so that you may bear good tidings with it to the righteous and warn with it a people hostile / contentious"

All previous revelations were sent in the native tongues of the chosen messengers.

014.004

"And We did not send any messenger **but with the language of his people**, so that he might explain to them clearly; then God lets go astray whom He wills and guides whom He wills and He is the Mighty, the Wise"

Therefore, the claim of variant readings or multiple recitations has absolutely **no basis** in the Quran. The Quran was simply revealed in the **prophet's vernacular without any variations and in one manner of recitation**.

The Quran has also been transmitted 'mutawwatir' with the consensus of the Muslim community generation after generation from the time of the Prophet.

It is only the **majority / universal recitation** that can be accepted as the original recitation and indeed even today the Muslim community is agreed on one **universal** recitation which remains in the Prophet's vernacular.

Indeed, some isolated parts of the Muslim world such as parts of Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria may use a slightly different recitation method, but the differences are so insignificant that they do not intend to alter the message of the Quran.

039:018

"Those who listen to the Word (the Quran) and follow the **best meaning in it / best of it (Arabic: fayattabi'una ahsanahu)** those are the ones whom God has guided and those are the one's endowed with understanding (Arabic: Albabi)

039.055

"And follow **the best of what is revealed to you from your Lord**, before the penalty comes to you suddenly while you do not perceive!"

FINAL THOUGHTS

Based on the testimony of the Quran which only ratifies the existence of **one recitation** (75:17-18), all other testimonies alluding to multiple recitations or any inherent variants of the Quran, have absolutely **no basis**.

They are simply a product of **later discourses** canonised into late [Islamic secondary sources](#). This includes all the details with which they appear, such as the name of the reciters and transmitters.

There was only **one Quran** that left the Prophet primarily as an oral tradition and backed up by a written tradition. This was transmitted **en masse** by the Muslim community during the Prophet's ministry. Please see related article (1) below.

As Dr. Andrew Brockett noted:

"There was a single text, and nothing, not even allegedly abrogated material, could be taken out, nor anything be put in..." [13]

Despite the insignificant differences between the Hafs and Warsh transmissions that we know of today, only the universal recitation of the Quran which is recited today by approximately **95%** (Hafs) of the Muslim world can be acceptable from a Quranic perspective.

As the Quran's propagation was en masse from the time of the Prophet, it has continued its propagation in the same manner. Therefore, only such a majority recitation as the one recited today in 95% of the Muslim world would be reconcilable with verse 15:9 which confirms God's own protection of the message.

This is the Quran that left the Prophet's vernacular.

015.009

"Surely We have revealed the reminder (Arabic: Dhikr) and We will most surely be its guardian (Arabic: Hafizun)"



Illustration - Joseph Islam

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[11] Ibid, Variations between Wars Copies, page 77

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[12] BROCKETT. Adrian Alan, Studies in Two Transmissions of the Qur'an, University of St. Andrews, Department of Arabic Studies. PhD Thesis 1984, Chapter 12, Page 137

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Related Article:

(1) [The Compilation of the Quran](#)

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