Ibn Mujāhid's Seven Readings, *Sab'ati Ahruf*, and Their Proposed Application as a Qur'ān Hypertext
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The reasons for the Qur'ān[1] existing as an oral recitation are obvious, in that this was the original medium by which revelation was delivered, namely through Muhammad orally; but, why is the Qur'ān a book? Partly, the answer is that it needed to be recorded in a manner other than memorization. "At the time when Muhammad made his appearance, a major revolution in this technology [the codex] was well advanced in the Near East," recounts Michael Cook, writer of *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction* (51). While the early Christians adopted this medium, the first Muslims likely had it at their disposal already; "by the time of Muhammad it was the normal format for writings of any length" (52). In most cases, it has remained bound to this medium throughout the ages, a stability that reflects nicely on the Qur'ān's own permanence. "The transmission of the Qur'ān after the death of Muhammad was *essentially* static, rather than organic"

(Brockett 44, my emphasis). This adverbial qualifier is noted so as to not overlook the history of the Qur'ān's transmission; while it has remained "essentially static," it is difficult to agree with the claim of Fethullah Gulen, who says, "its text is entirely reliable. It has not been altered, edited, or tampered with since it was revealed." Some tailoring, even if only to right errant, wandering transmissions, has been chronicled in the Qur'ān's history. As, while the Qur'ān might be a closed corpus in that it welcomes no further additions, Asma Barlas deftly notes, "insofar as all texts are polysemic, they are open to variant readings" (5).

Returning to the original question at hand, perhaps it should be restated as: Why is the Qur'ān *still* a book? Understand, please, that this is not about the message or validity of the Qur'ān; the exploration being undertaken by this paper is concerned, rather, with the suitability of the Qur'ān's written medium and what has been both lost or gained in its name. As Barlas further states, "If emphasizing the Qur'ān's textual polysemy allows me to argue against interpretive reductionism, however, it merely reiterates modern definitions of the text and also a well-known historical fact; it says nothing specific about the Qur'ān itself" (5). Of course, here, the issue is not "interpretative reductionism" but instead a sort of "mediative reductionism." As a product of both oral and textual traditions combined, is the Qur'ān, particularly in regard to its history of varied recitations, best suited for print?

"The Qur'ān was recorded in a medium very different from the digital world," states Gary Blunt in his book *Virtually Islamic: Computer-mediated Communication and Cyber Islamic Environments* (19). Does this mean, though, that it is ill-suited to the digital world? Sounding similar to Barlas, Jay David Bolter, author of *Writing Space: The Computer, Hypertext, and the History of Writing*, assesses, "It is an

almost impossible task for the reader to remain open in a medium as perfected as print" (143). Though there have been a number of ergodic print works that resemble the basic linking concept to online hypertext, "electronic writing restores a balance between the production and the performance of the text, a balance that has been lost in the age of print" (Bolter "Rhetoric" 273). Therefore, after a review of the events leading to Ibn Mujāhid's Seven Readings (*sab'ati ahruf*) and a brief overview Islam's presence online, this investigation will attempt to reconcile the applicability and potential need for the Seven Readings' revitalization by proposing that their significance is best presented in a multicursal, digital medium alongside – parallel to – the traditional printed text.

The Seven Readings

There already exists a tension, better documented and debated elsewhere, between the Qur'ān being the direct, unaltered words of Allah and claims of its existence as an edited, amalgamated mix of Muhammad's wisdom only claiming such authenticity. Rather than wade in to this debate, accepting that the former stance is that which practitioners of Islam believe maintains the focus of this particular discussion, overall. That is, the Qur'ān should first concern its adherents, then its critics. Thus, it would be antithetical to reject or scrutinize "the predominant Muslim belief that the Qur'an was protected from any loss or addition in the Prophet's memory and in the subsequent process of transcribing it" if one's purpose is to further explore Muslim culture's own history and dogma (Esack 80). Rather, the position of this paper will be to accept the former premise wholly and assume that, whatever events followed Muhammad's death, did so by the grace and guidance of Allah.

That said, a number of righting procedures are documented to haven taken place between the final revelation by Muhammad and the proposal of the Seven Readings. While the third Caliph 'Uthmān is

credited with the 7th century collection of the Qur'ān – and prescribing the destruction of all other deviating materials – Cook says this edition did "not seem to have acted as a textual authority of last resort for posterity" (62). Adrian Brockett, in his essay "The Value of the Hafs and Warsh Transmissions for the Textual History of the Qur'ān," locates a source of the further disparities that would eventually arise: "For Muslims, who see the Qur'ān as an oral as well as written text, however, these differences are simply readings" (34-35). Even with the same 'Uthmān-approved core text, differences in regional dialects would produce new variations.

By the 10th century, the burgeoning variety of Qur'ānic recitations would compel Muslim scholar Ibn Mujāhid to revise 'Uthmān's codex into *sab'ati ahruf*, "seven acceptable variants or readings (*qirā'āt*) of the Qur'an beyond which no reader might go" (Melchert 5). Yet, the criteria by which Ibn Mujāhid selected his corpus – Nafi through Warsh and/or Qalun, Ibn Kathir through al-Bazzi and/or Qunbul, Ibn Amir through Hisham and/or Ibn Dhakwan, Abu Amr through al-Durri and/or al-Susi, Asim through Hafs and/or Abu Bakr, Hamza through Khalaf and/or Khallad, and Al-Kisa'I through al-Duir and/or Abu al-Harith (Esack 96-97) – remain opaque. While "each of the seven traditions selected by Ibn Mujāhid was that of a prominent reciter of the eighth century" (Cook 73), Christpher Melchert, in his essay "Ibn Mujahid and the Establishment of Seven Qur'anic Readings," comments, "It is remarkable that most of Ibn Mujāhid's Seven Readings themselves did not, for the most part, come from notable traditionalists" (7). That is, Ibn Mujāhid, "who notoriously did not travel" (9), was located exclusively in Baghdad, and, at that time, "Baghdadi traditionalism was still quite extreme" (7). Rather, "he was personally much closer to the traditionalists' semi-rationalist adversaries [, ...] evidently sympathetic to the Shāfi'i school" (5). All

this is to say that his approach likely employed "the rational techniques of *kalām*" (6), the pursuit of knowledge through religious dialectic, rather than scripture alone.

Ibn Mujāhid's selections were hardly random, for, by some accounts, they were preordained by Muhammad himself. Melchert reports, "Ibn Mujāhid argue[d] that it is a blameworthy innovation to read any variant that agrees with the unpointed text, regardless of whether a previous authority has so read" (15). For instance, when choosing between the two diacritical options given by Cook regarding *aya* 163-166 of Al-Araf concerning the Sabbath-breakers (73), one should not select arbitrarily. Some look to exegetical accounts of Muhammad to explain Ibn Mujāhid's selection of the seven – "the hadith report that the Qur'an had been revealed in seven *ahruf*" (Melchert 19). John Gilchrist chronicles several of those explanations and their sources in his book *Jam' Al-Qur'an – The Codification of the Qur'an Text*:

> The Qur'an has been revealed to be recited in seven different ways, so recite of it that which is easier for you. (*Sahih al-Bukhari*, Vol. 6, p.510)

> When [Umar and Hisham ibn Hakim] came before the Prophet of Islam he confirmed the readings of both companions, adding the above statement that the Qur'an had been revealed *alaa sab'ati ahruf* – "in seven readings."

> Ibn Abbas reported Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him) as saying: Gabriel taught me to recite in one style. I replied to him and kept asking him to give more (styles), till he reached seven modes (of recitation). Ibn Shihab said: It has reached me that these seven styles are essentially one,

not differing about what is permitted and what is forbidden.

(*Sahih Muslim*, Vol. 2, p.390) (Gilchrist)

Though these explanations spread, they were likewise met with debate and suspicion. "There was a Shī'ite view that they were simply the fault of the transmitters" (Cook 73). Melchert seems to agree with wariness in linking Ibn Mujāhid's Seven Readings to those of the hadith report (19), and Gilchrist, after reviewing the accounts themselves, is inclined to concur. "There are no other records in the earliest works of Hadith and Sirat literature to give any indication as to what the seven different readings actually were or what form they took," thus "the hadith records about the *sab'at-i-ahruf* are really quite meaningless," and "the figure 'seven' has, thus, no relevance at all to what we are considering" (Gilchrist). Of the writings reviewed, Farid Esack, in his *The Qur'an: A User's Guide*, seems the only author to remain at all open this connection (93).

The specific Seven Readings themselves are not as significant here as the cultural urgency Ibn Mujāhid saw for them:

> When someone asked Ibn Mujāhid why he had not himself chosen one reading, he said, "We need to engage ourselves in memorizing what our imams have gone over more than we need to choose a variant for those after us to recite." This might point to a realization that it was impossible to achieve absolute uniformity. It still seems to me more indicative of a perceived need to put a stop to the multiplication of readings, hence limiting the burden of qur'anic scholarship. (Melchert 18)

Like 'Uthmān, Ibn Mujāhid was looking to control the integrity of the Qur'ān by means of written text, not recitation. As Melchert points out in 'Uthmān's approach, "Muslims would not have believed it unless they had been accustomed to relying on writing for the transmission

of the Qur'an" (15). Despite the mixed oral/textual Muslim culture of even the 10th century, Cook supports Melchert's proposition that a written Qur'ān held dominion as early as the 7th century: "[I]n general, we can safely think of the Koran as a codex from the time of its collection" (52).

The varied readings – and any future deviations they might catalyze – could be stabilized by means of putting them into canonized writing. While "they were never formally ratified or even universally accepted," says Melchert (22), Cook affirms that Ibn Mujāhid's selection nevertheless acquired a kind of canonical status" (73). The more pressing question, which this paper will later address, is what traditions of recitation, like 'Uthmān's *ayah*, did Ibn Mujāhid have to sacrifice in order to arrive at his Seven Readings?

Islam Online

True to his name, Blunt makes the singularly direct observation, "The Qur'ān in cyberspace does not physically resemble the Qur'ān on my desk" (*Virtually* 1). The world of the codex and the world of the hypertext are widely and obviously two very different realms. Thus, the problem suggested by Cook, "how to dispose of a worn-out or disintegrating Koran" (60), finds a solution with "electronic copies of the Koran [proving] a marked simplification" (61).

Another obvious statement would be to say that the Internet and digital media drastically alter the shape of community, communication, and even religion and textuality. "There is no single Cyber Islamic identity of community" (Blunt *Virtually* 133), yet, true to the paradoxical nature of the online experience, "Cyber Islamic Environments are in a transition period" (139). That is, just as the Internet may promote individuality, it can also generate community. For instance, at *IslamOnLine.com*, they see the Internet as having "opened in the opportunities for communication, and we pledge to use

them to achieve the highest levels of integrity and precision in content and in creative professionalism in design" ("About Us"). Therefore, even as they aim "to present a unified and lively Islam that keeps up with modern times in all areas" ("About Us"), sites like *Islam Question & Answer* features Sheihk Muhammed Salih Al-Munajjid stating, "There are in fact many down sides in the Internet, which contain great evil and this is what pushes one to think of the necessary ways to fix the ills on the Internet" (Al-Munajjid).

In keeping with the spirit of hypermedia, Muslims, like any modern global religion, have a multiplicity of views and stances both online and about being online. "One webmaster in the United Arab Emirates noted...'There are serious risks too involved in propagation through the Web'" (Blunt *Virtually* 8-9), such as terrorism sites as well as Muslim smear campaigns; "a non-Muslim platform [SuraLikeIt] establishing a site based around fabricated verses from the Qur'ān caused controversy in 1998" (9), and it would not be the last. On the other hand, as a tool for teaching and guidance, the Internet is an almost unsurpassed invention. Sermons can be expressed online to a wider community; "Nobody need see the imām in order to follow him" (104). Likewise, "E-fatwas are certainly challenging the roles and duties of some imams" (Blunt "Beyond"). As with any new and vital technology, there are risks, obviously, for misuse, but that should not hold back its careful utilization. With its strength and legacy, the Qur'an, a work that has already endured shifts between media, is not itself in jeopardy by going digital.

The Internet, however, is not a wholly transparent medium despite its pervasiveness, thus these "e-fatwas," as Blunt calls them, oftentimes must address issues specific to Muslims now being online. For instance, according to Mufti Ebrahim Desai of *Ask-Imam.com*, "The Nikah performed through the internet is not valid" ("Is online"), yet

"divorce takes place" if a husband types out his desire to separate from his wife four times through an online chat system ("if the husband"). It is permissible, says Desai, to chat online with a non-Muslim of the same gender – "however they should not be made close friends ("Is it permissible") – even though he is "aware of many such people who have caused ruin to their lives especially by chatting on the internet" ("As chatting").

How should a digital Qur'ān be regarded? Even in codex form, the exact and precise mandates for using the Qur'ān are still somewhat uncertain. Lines 77-80 of *Al-Waqia* are interpreted variously to determine who might properly touch the Qur'ān; Cooks notes, "One eighth-century scholar is said to have allowed the ritually impure to touch the *margins* of a copy of the Koran, but not the writing itself" (56). However, Blunt comments, "In a sense, an online Qur'ān cannot be physically touched – although, in reality, pages can be downloaded, printed and integrated into other textual forms which may not be seen as appropriate by some" (*Virtually* 18). Therefore, any iteration of the Qur'ān online carries with it a good deal of perceived precariousness. Even when providing three alternate English translations, the Muslim Students Association of the University of Southern California still included the "warning that 'ANY translation of the Qur'ān will most definitely contain errors'" (23). Despite its first appearance online circa 1994 (22), and its first online audio recitation in 1997 (26), the definitive online translation of the Qur'ān is yet to be published, if such a thing is even possible. "The Qur'ān can be accessed (and copies manipulated) by anyone with a modem. Members of different religions (and those without allegiance) can explore and discuss the sacred texts online" (15).

Even without a definitive English iteration online, the Qur'ān as an online text exists and, therefore, must be properly regulated.

Returning to Ebrahim Desai momentarily, he judges, "It is not permissible for a female in the state of menses to recite the Qur'aan in any way. That includes reciting through the computer or internet" ("Please clear"). Likewise, "It is permissible to have the Quraan on the mobile phone though it is discouraged...If one has loaded the Quraan on the mobile, it will not be permissible to take the mobile into the toilet" (Desai, Muhammed).[2] *IslamOnline.net* consults with two separate scholars, both of whom provide elaborate qualifications, to determine whether verses from the Qur'ān may be used with photos in a digital Flash media environment ("Qur'anic Verses"). There are few simple answers as to how a digital translation of the Qur'ān is to be used, much less how it is to be constructed. Again, the issue that remains unposed is what such a version of the Qur'ān might do that its written brethren cannot.

Digital Seven

Returning now to the Seven Readings, it would seem that Ibn Mujāhid's agenda might have been too successful: Instead of capping the variety of recitation to seven, the number of legitimate versions appears to be dwindling further. "Today, the sub-tradition 'Hafs from 'Āsim is in effect the standard text of the Koran" reports Cook (75), while Brockett adds, "The Hafs transmission is found in printed Qur'ān copies from everywhere but West and North-West Africa, where the Warsh transmission is employed" (31). Gilchrist predicts, "[I]n time this [Hafs] version is likely to become the sole reading in use in the whole world of Islam."

While Brockett sees this as having no discernible impact – "The simple fact is that none of the differences, whether vocal or graphic, between the transmission of Hafs and the transmission of Warsh has any great effect on the meaning" (37) – Gilchirst sounds much more concerned:

> [Maulana] Desai claims that Uthman eliminated six
> of the readings and retained just one in the interests
> of standardising a single text of the Qur'an. On whose
> authority he reduced the Qur'an to just one of seven
> different forms in which it was said to have been revealed
> Desai does not say. (Gilchrist)

Therefore, to lose additional variations that grew out of 'Uthmān's severely pruned text extinguishes any hope, from an anthropological or cultural religion perspective, of fully appreciating the customs, readings, and linguistics of culled texts.[3] In many ways, this paring came as a result of its analog medium – a result of static *writing* – but need not do so now. As Gilchrist notes, "Ibn Mujahid's determination to canonise only seven of the readings then in circulation" was conducted "at the expense of the others" (Gilchrist). With the built-in multiplicity of the Internet or the stand-alone completeness of hypertext CD-ROM data, for instance, such an expense need not be sacrificed with modern and emerging technologies.

If the goal was to maintain the tradition of all Seven Readings yet also have one – or the most – definitive Qur'ān, then the multicursality of hypertext would be a potential solution. By "multicursal," the term is being adopted from its use by digital theorists and hypertext critics such as Bolter and Epsen J. Aarseth, who explores this terminology as it pertains to multilinear fiction, or stories which have any number of paths and conclusions:[4]

> But what to make of the term *multilinear*? And whose lines
> are they anyway – the producer's, the work's, or the user's?
> Clearly, a topology of nodes and links is not linear (or
> unilinear) if there's more than one possible path between
> node *A* and node *B*. The question is, then, which of the
> two terms, *nonlinearity* and *multilinearity* is better suited to

describe such a network…If we refer to courses, *multicursal* would be a much more accurate term than *multilinear* , indicating that the lines are produced by movement rather than drawn in advance. (44)

Admittedly, the "courses" Aarseth has in mind are from one hypertext lexia to another – from link to link. However, for this 'multicursal Qur'ān,' they can be repurposed to see each of the Seven Readings as its own course, with a linking mechanism to move between them fluidly. His use of "topology," though, still pertains nicely to the Qur'ān, especially, but not only, when being translated out of the Arabic:

Topographic writing challenges the idea that writing should be merely the servant of spoken language. The writer and reader can create and examine signs and structures on the computer screen that have no easy equivalent in speech. (Bolter "Rhetoric" 285)

In his book *Writing Space*, Bolter further qualifies, "All our topographic writers in print (Sterne, James Joyce, Borges, Cortázar, Saporta) are 'difficult' writers, and the difficulty is that they challenge the reader to read multiply" (143).

Given that the Qur'ān, in various forms, already exists online and is often treated as a legitimate, functional iteration of the text even in cyberspace, then the leap towards multicursality for the Seven Readings is not a chasmal. In fact, a number of hypertextual properties already exist within the Qur'ān, thanks to its unique nature and organization. For instance, with perhaps the exception of the *Yussif* surah, the disconnected-yet-repeating nature of the Qur'ān's narratives make it fertile ground for "the little-known figure of *ploce*…A à B à A, where episode A is now changed in some way as the result of a visit to episode B" (Bolter "Rhetoric" 285). Thus, reading about Moses initially changes based on the text that in encountered between the first

and next ayah addressing his tale. Likewise, the Qur'ān, with its reverse-chronological order and aforementioned split-narrative structures, also exhibits elements of hyperbaton; "it is any departure from conventional order…In this sense hyperbaton is a defining quality of hypertext" (277). While there have been a number of Qur'ān online *in* hypertext, there is yet to be one available *as* hypertext.

Would a multicursal Qur'ān hypertext be accepted by Digital Age Muslims? Nothing is certain, of course, but reflecting on the words of William Graham, from his book *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion*, proves useful:

> Instead of an argument for the displacement of the written Qur'ān by the spoken one, I am putting forward one for the functional primacy of the oral text over the written one – but always alongside it, not in competition with it. Both are dimensions of the same sacred reality for the Muslim: the presence and accessibility of God's very word in the created world. (110)

Likewise, one would hope that a Qur'ān hypertext could also stand beside the written, tangible codex, neither seeking to replace nor marginalize it. Shaikh Al-Islam Taqiud-Din Abul-'Abbas Ahmad bin Taymiyah authorizes an education in each of the various recitation styles as "a kind of respectable effort." "Bearing all this in mind, the one who is knowledgeable in the field of the methods of recitation and practices them is better than the person who knows only one method of recitation" ("Fatwas Subjects"). To this, one can only add that, if these multiple methods are approved and commended, perhaps multimedia would be as well.

Notes

¹ The various sources quoted for this paper spell and punctuate "Qur'ān" in any number of ways; there has been no attempt made to correct them or create a consistent format for this, out of respect to the authors and their traditions.

² The Mufti of *IslamToday.Com* might disagree in regards to PDAs: "Such devices do not take the same ruling as a printed Qur'ân because the text has to be interpreted from a different format before it can be read. The format in which the text is recorded is a digital format that needs to be interpreted by a specific program in order to be displayed on the screen in a recognizable character set. Bear in mind that this digital code only displays the Qur'ân in conjunction with a compatible program. Without that program, the code will not necessarily display the Qur'ân on a screen." ("Holding")

³ Unless, of course, this is what Allah wills.

⁴ This is not to be confused with the term "multiform" as employed by Janet Murray in *Hamlet on the Holodeck*: "I am using the term *multiform story* to describe a written or dramatic narrative that presents a single situation or plotline in multiple versions, versions that would be mutually exclusive in our ordinary experience" (30).

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