

Preservation of the Quran: Memorization

The Glorious Quran, the Muslims' religious Scripture, was revealed in Arabic to the Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, through the angel Gabriel. The revelation occurred piecemeal, over a period of twenty-three years, sometimes in brief verses and sometimes in longer chapters.^[1]



The Quran (lit. a “reading” or “recitation”) is distinct from the recorded sayings and deeds (Sunnah) of the Prophet Muhammad, which are instead preserved in a separate set of literature collectively called the “Ahadeeth” (lit. “news”; “report”; or “narration”).

Upon receiving revelation, the Prophet engaged himself in the duty of conveying the message to his Companions through reciting the exact words he heard in their exact order. This is evident in his inclusion of even the words of God which were directed specifically to him, for example: “Qul” (“Say [to the people, O Muhammad]”). The Quran’s rhythmic style and eloquent expression make it easy to memorize. Indeed, God describes this as one of its essential qualities for preservation and remembrance (Q. 44:58; 54:17, 22, 32, 40), particularly in an Arab society which prided itself on orations of lengthy pieces of poetry. Michael Zwettler notes that:

“in ancient times, when writing was scarcely used, memory and oral transmission was exercised and strengthened to a degree now almost unknown.”^[2]

Large portions of the revelation were thus easily memorized by a large number of people in the community of the Prophet.

The Prophet encouraged his Companions to learn each verse that was revealed and transmit it to others.^[3] The Quran was also required to be recited regularly as an act of worship, especially during the daily meditative prayers (salah). Through these means, many repeatedly heard passages from the revelation recited to them, memorized them and used them in prayer. The entire Quran was memorized

verbatim (word for word) by some of the Prophet's Companions. Among them were Zaid ibn Thabit, Ubayy ibn Ka'b, Muadh ibn Jabal, and Abu Zaid.[4]

Not only were the words of the Quran memorized, but also their pronunciation, later which formed into a science in itself called Tajweed. This science meticulously elucidates how each letter is to be pronounced, as well as the word as a whole, both in context of other letters and words. Today, we can find people of all different languages able to recite the Quran as if they are Arabs themselves, living during the time of the Prophet.

Furthermore, the sequence or order of the Quran was arranged by the Prophet himself and was also well-known to the Companions.[5] Each Ramadan, the Prophet would repeat after the angel Gabriel (reciting) the entire Quran in its exact order as far as it had been revealed, while in the presence of a number of his Companions.[6] In the year of his death, he recited it twice.[7] Thereby, the order of verses in each chapter and the order of the chapters became reinforced in the memories of each of the Companions present.

As the Companions spread out to various provinces with different populations, they took their recitations with them in order to instruct others.[8] In this way, the same Quran became widely retained in the memories of many people across vast and diverse areas of land.

Indeed, memorization of the Quran emerged into a continuous tradition across the centuries, with centers/schools for memorization being established across the Muslim world.[9] In these schools, students learn and memorize the Quran along with its Tajweed, at the feet of a master who in turn acquired the knowledge from his teacher, an 'un-broken chain' going all the way back to the Prophet of God. The process usually takes 3-6 years. After mastery is achieved and the recitation checked for lack of errors, a person is granted a formal license (ijaza) certifying he has mastered the rules of recitation and can now recite the Quran the way it was recited by Muhammad, the Prophet of God.



The image is a typical license (*ijaza*) issued at the end of perfecting Quran recitation certifying a reciter's unbroken chain of instructors going back to the Prophet of Islam. The above image is the *ijaza* certificate of Qari Mishari ibn Rashid al-Afasy, well known reciter from Kuwait, issued by Sheikh Ahmad al-Ziyyat. Image courtesy of (<http://www.alafasy.com>.)

A.T. Welch, a non-Muslim orientalist, writes:

“For Muslims the Quran is much more than scripture or sacred literature in the usual Western sense. Its primary significance for the vast majority through the centuries has been in its oral form, the form in which it first appeared, as the “recitation” chanted by Muhammad to his followers over a period of about twenty years... The revelations were memorized by some of Muhammad’s followers during his lifetime, and the oral tradition that was thus established has had a continuous history ever since, in some ways independent of, and superior to, the written Quran... Through the centuries the oral tradition of the entire Quran has been maintained by the professional reciters (*qurraa*). Until recently, the

significance of the recited Quran has seldom been fully appreciated in the West.”[\[10\]](#)

The Quran is perhaps the only book, religious or secular, that has been memorized completely by millions of people.[\[11\]](#) Leading orientalist Kenneth Cragg reflects that:

“...this phenomenon of Quranic recital means that the text has traversed the centuries in an unbroken living sequence of devotion. It cannot, therefore, be handled as an antiquarian thing, nor as a historical document out of a distant past. The fact of hifdh (Quranic memorization) has made the Quran a present possession through all the lapse of Muslim time and given it a human currency in every generation, never allowing its relegation to a bare authority for reference alone.”[\[12\]](#)

The entire Quran was however also recorded in writing at the time of revelation from the Prophet’s dictation, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, by some of his literate companions, the most prominent of them being Zaid ibn Thabit.[\[13\]](#) Others among his noble scribes were Ubayy ibn Ka’b, Ibn Mas’ud, Mu’awiyah ibn Abi-Sufyan, Khalid ibn Al-Waleed and Az-Zubayr ibn Al-Awwam.[\[14\]](#) The verses were recorded on leather, parchment, scapulae (shoulder bones of animals) and the stalks of date palms.[\[15\]](#)

The codification of the Quran (i.e. into a ‘book form’) was done soon after the Battle of Yamamah (11AH/633CE), after the Prophet’s death, during the Caliphate of Abu Bakr. Many companions became martyrs at that battle, and it was feared that unless a written copy of the entire revelation was produced, large parts of the Quran might be lost with the death of those who had memorized it. Therefore, at the suggestion of Umar to collect the Quran in the form of writing, Zaid ibn Thabit was requested by Abu Bakr to head a committee which would gather together the scattered recordings of the Quran and prepare a mushaf - loose sheets which bore the entire revelation on them.[\[16\]](#) To safeguard the compilation from errors, the committee accepted only material which had been written down in the presence of the Prophet himself, and which could be verified by at least two reliable witnesses who had actually heard the Prophet recite the passage in question[\[17\]](#). Once completed and unanimously approved by the Prophet’s Companions, these sheets were kept with the Caliph Abu Bakr (d. 13AH/634CE), then passed on to the Caliph Umar (13-23AH/634-644CE), and then Umar’s daughter and the Prophet’s widow, Hafsa[\[18\]](#).

The third Caliph Uthman (23AH-35AH/644-656CE) requested Hafsa to send him the manuscript of the Quran which was in her safekeeping, and ordered the production of several bounded copies of it (masaahif, *sing.* mushaf). This task was

entrusted to the Companions Zaid ibn Thabit, Abdullah ibn Az-Zubair, Sa'eed ibn Al-'As, and Abdur-Rahman ibn Al-Harith ibn Hisham.[19] Upon completion (in 25AH/646CE), Uthman returned the original manuscript to Hafsa and sent the copies to the major Islamic provinces.

A number of non-Muslim scholars who have studied the issue of the compilation and preservation of the Quran also have stated its authenticity. John Burton, at the end of his substantial work on the Quran's compilation, states that the Quran as we have it today is:

“...the text which has come down to us in the form in which it was organized and approved by the Prophet.... What we have today in our hands is the mushaf of Muhammad.[20]

Kenneth Cragg describes the transmission of the Quran from the time of revelation to today as occurring in “*an unbroken living sequence of devotion.*”[21] Schwally concurs that:

“As far as the various pieces of revelation are concerned, we may be confident that their text has been generally transmitted exactly as it was found in the Prophet's legacy.”[22]

The historical credibility of the Quran is further established by the fact that one of the copies sent out by the Caliph Uthman is still in existence today. It lies in the Museum of the City of Tashkent in Uzbekistan, Central Asia.[23] According to Memory of the World Program, UNESCO, an arm of the United Nations, ‘*it is the definitive version, known as the Mushaf of Uthman.*’[24]



This manuscript, held by the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan, is the earliest existent written version of the Quran. It is the definitive version, known as the Mushaf of Othman. Image courtesy of Memory of the World Register, UNESCO.

A facsimile of the mushaf in Tashkent is available at the Columbia University Library in the US.[25] This copy is proof that the text of the Quran we have in circulation today is identical with that of the time of the Prophet and his companions. A copy of the mushaf sent to Syria (duplicated before a fire in 1310AH/1892CE destroyed the Jaami' Masjid where it was housed) also exists in the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul[26], and an early manuscript on gazelle parchment exists in Dar al-Kutub as-Sultaniyyah in Egypt. More ancient manuscripts from all periods of Islamic history found in the Library of Congress in Washington, the Chester Beatty Museum in Dublin (Ireland) and the London Museum have been compared with those in Tashkent, Turkey and Egypt, with results confirming that there have not been any changes in the text from its original time of writing.[27]

The Institute for Koranforschung, for example, in the University of Munich (Germany), collected over 42,000 complete or incomplete ancient copies of the Quran. After around fifty years of research, they reported that there was no variance between the various copies, except the occasional mistakes of the copyist which could easily be ascertained. This Institute was unfortunately destroyed by bombs during WWII.[28]

Thus, due to the efforts of the early companions, with God's assistance, the Quran as we have it today is recited in the same manner as it was revealed. This makes it the only religious scripture that is still completely retained and understood in its original language. Indeed, as Sir William Muir states, "*There is probably no other book in the world which has remained twelve centuries (now fourteen) with so pure a text.*"[29]

The evidence above confirms God's promise in the Quran:

"Verily, We have revealed the Reminder, and verily We shall preserve it." (Quran 15:9)

The Quran has been preserved in both oral and written form in a way no other book has, and with each form providing a check and balance for the authenticity of the other.

Footnotes:

[1] Muhammad Hamidullah, Introduction to Islam, London: MWH Publishers, 1979, p.17.

[2] Michael Zwettler, The Oral Tradition of Classical Arabic Poetry, Ohio State Press, 1978, p.14.

[3] Saheeh Al-Bukhari Vol.6, Hadith No.546.

[4] Saheeh Al-Bukhari Vol.6, Hadith No.525.

- [5] Ahmad von Denffer, *Ulum al-Quran*, The Islamic Foundation, UK, 1983, p.41-42; Arthur Jeffery, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Quran*, Leiden: Brill, 1937, p.31.
- [6] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari* Vol.6, Hadith No.519.
- [7] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari* Vol.6, Hadith Nos.518 & 520.
- [8] Ibn Hisham, *Seerah al-Nabi*, Cairo, n.d., Vol.1, p.199.
- [9] Labib as-Said, *The Recited Koran*, translated by Morroe Berger, A. Rauf, and Bernard Weiss, Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1975, p.59.
- [10] The Encyclopedia of Islam, 'The Quran in Muslim Life and Thought.'
- [11] William Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p.80.
- [12] Kenneth Cragg, *The Mind of the Quran*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973, p.26.
- [13] Jalal al-Din Suyuti, *Al-Itqan fee 'Uloom al-Quran*, Beirut: Maktab al-Thiqaafiyya, 1973, Vol.1, p.41 & 99.
- [14] Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, *Al-Isabah fee Taymeez as-Sahabah*, Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 1978; Bayard Dodge, *The Fihrist of al-Nadeem: A Tenth Century Survey of Muslim Culture*, NY: Columbia University Press, 1970, p.53-63. Muhammad M. Azami, in *Kuttab al-Nabi*, Beirut: Al-Maktab al-Islami, 1974, in fact mentions 48 persons who used to write for the Prophet (p).
- [15] Al-Harith al-Muhasabi, *Kitab Fahm al-Sunan*, cited in Suyuti, *Al-Itqan fi 'Uloom al-Quran*, Vol.1, p.58.
- [16] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari* Vol.6, Hadith Nos.201 & 509; Vol.9, Hadith No.301.
- [17] Ibn Hajar al-'Asqalani, *Fath al-Bari*, Vol.9, p.10-11.
- [18] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*, Vol.6, Hadith No.201.
- [19] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari* Vol.4, Hadith No.709; Vol.6, Hadith No.507
- [20] John Burton, *The Collection of the Quran*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977, p.239-40.
- [21] Kenneth Cragg, *The Mind of the Quran*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973, p.26.
- [22] Schwally, *Geschichte des Qorans*, Leipzig: Dieterich'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1909-38, Vol.2, p.120.
- [23] Yusuf Ibrahim al-Nur, *Ma' al-Masaahif*, Dubai: Dar al-Manar, 1st ed., 1993, p.117; Isma'il Makhdam, *Tarikh al-Mushaf al-Uthmani fi Tashqand*, Tashkent: Al-Idara al-Diniya, 1971, p.22ff.
- [24] (<http://www.unesco.org>.)
- I. Mendelsohn, "The Columbia University Copy Of The Samarqand Kufic Quran", *The Moslem World*, 1940, p. 357-358.
- A. Jeffery & I. Mendelsohn, "The Orthography Of The Samarqand Quran Codex", *Journal Of The American Oriental Society*, 1942, Volume 62, pp. 175-195.
- [25] *The Muslim World*, 1940, Vol.30, p.357-358
- [26] Yusuf Ibrahim al-Nur, *Ma' al-Masaahif*, Dubai: Dar al-Manar, 1st ed., 1993, p.113
- [27] Bilal Philips, *Usool at-Tafseer*, Sharjah: Dar al-Fatah, 1997, p.157
- [28] Mohammed Hamidullah, *Muhammad Rasullullah*, Lahore: Idara-e-Islamiyat, n.d., p.179.
- [29] Sir William Muir, *Life of Mohamet*, London, 1894, Vol.1, Introduction.