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THE EMERGENCE OF THE *QIRĀʾĀT*: THE DIVINE PERMISSION HYPOTHESIS

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INTRODUCTION

The topic of *qirāʾāt*, the textual variants of the Qurʾān, is a difficult, sensitive and contentious one. Yet, it has had enduring influence on Muslim understanding of the Qurʾān—Bauer did not go too far when he wrote that 'the discipline of the Quranic readings has led to an intensive reflection on the nature of the Quran'.[1] This paper is an attempt to revisit this topic. It focuses, out of various domains of *ʿilm al-qirāʾāt*,[2] on the issue of the divine origin of the variant readings. In asking whether *all* the variant readings were considered by Muslim scholars to be of divine origin, it takes on the question of what they understood the source of the variants to be. It aims to show that, according to

* Author's note: My thanks to the anonymous readers of this Journal for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper. All translations herein are mine except where stated otherwise.

[1] Thomas Bauer, *A Culture of Ambiguity: An Alternative History of Islam* (transl. Hinrich Biesterfeldt and Tricia Tunstall; New York: Columbia University Press, 2021), 37; Bauer, *Die Kultur der Ambiguität: Eine andere Geschichte des Islams* (Berlin: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2011), 64.

[2] For accounts of the *qirāʾāt* and the different trajectories in the scholarship, see Theodor Nöldeke, Friedrich Schwally, Gotthelf Bergsträsser, Otto Pretzl, *The History of the Qurʾān* (ed. and transl. Wolfgang Behn; Leiden: Brill, 2013), 471–584; Ahmad ʿAli Al-Imam, *Variant Readings of the Qurʾan: A Critical Study of Their Historical and Linguistic Origins* (Herndon, VA: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2006); Shady Hekmat Nasser, *The Transmission of the Variant Readings of the Qurʾān: The Problem of Tawātur and the Emergence of Shawādhdh* (Leiden: Brill, 2013). See also, more recently, the surveys in Suheil Laher, 'Between dogmatism and speculation: a critical assessment of *Qirāʾāt* studies', *Journal of College of Sharia and Islamic Studies*, 38/1 (2020): 176–90; and Mustafa Shah, 'The corpus of Qur'anic readings (*qirāʾāt*): history, synthesis, and authentication' in Mustafa Shah and Muhammad Abdel Haleem (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020): 194–216.

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eminent classical Muslim scholars,[3] *not all* the variant readings were regarded as divinely initiated; *some* of them were not necessarily initiated by God. This position did not seem, in their view, to pose any threat to their theology, nor to their understanding of the Qurʾān being divinely protected and preserved (Q. 15:9). The question of whether or not eminent Muslim scholars *believed* that some of the variant readings fell short of a divine status[4] leads into an exploration of how that belief could be deployed to deal with some of the issues to which the existence of the *qirāʾāt* gave rise.

Before I begin, a number of preliminaries need attention. First of all, the *qirāʾāt*, *qua* variants, are by and large, minor, not substantive, differences: 'Regardless of how and when variant readings emerged, there is no denying that the differences among these variants are miniscule, to the extent that they could often be inconsequential at the hermeneutical level'.[5]

Secondly, I should stress here the importance of distinguishing between two things: the emergence of the *qirāʾāt* as envisaged by the tradition, the concern of this study, and the actual emergence of the *qirāʾāt* as it happened historically, for which a (different) study of material evidence and manuscripts is necessary.[6] What the tradition believed happened and what 'really' happened are not necessarily the same. The contention here is that eminent scholars until at least the

[3] This paper mainly focuses on a sample of scholarly opinions until Ibn al-Jazarī (d. 833/1429), though it does also present briefly the views of some modern scholars. Ibn al-Jazarī is the cut-off point given that his system of *qirāʾāt* became the standard model, and has remained prevalent to this day. See Shady Hekmat Nasser, *The Second Canonization of the Qurʾān (324/936): Ibn Mujāhid and the Founding of the Seven Readings* (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 7–8. (Study of the discourse between Ibn al-Jazarī and the modern period must be deferred to a future paper.)

[4] To this end, I am following the general idea of Shahab Ahmed, *Before Orthodoxy: The Satanic Verses in Early Islam* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), 1–10.

[5] Nasser, *The Second Canonization of the Qurʾān*, 184. Likewise, Benham Sadeghi and Mohsen Goudarzi ('Ṣanʿāʾ 1 and the origins of the Qurʾān', *Der Islam*, 87 [2012]: 1–129, at 19) note that whereas 'most variants do not affect the meaning significantly', only a 'small fraction of the variants do make a difference in meaning'. John Burton (*The Collection of the Qurʾān* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977], 171) makes a similar point: 'no major differences of doctrine can be constructed on the basis of the parallel readings based on the 'Uthmānic consonantal outline, yet ascribed to muṣḥafs other than his . . . None of these variants is of great import'.

[6] See, for example, the recent attempt by Marijn van Putten, *Quranic Arabic: From its Hijazi Origins to its Classical Reading Traditions* (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

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ninth/fifteenth century appear to have accepted the proliferation of *qirāʾāt* based on the divine permission hypothesis; they do not appear to have given much consideration to the difficulty of interpreting the bare consonantal skeleton of the text (*rasm*) as a factor in the rise of variant readings.[7] This study is framed within what the *qirāʾāt* tradition said about the emergence of the variants. Thus one could simultaneously maintain that the tradition upheld what I have called 'the divine permission hypothesis', while seeking and coming to a different account of why, and when, the *qirāʾāt* emerged.[8] Alternatively, one could make a more moderate claim that the hypothesis could account for *some* of the *qirāʾāt*. The point is that this paper does not necessarily stand in opposition to the growing body of work on Qurʾānic manuscripts and linguistics in relation to the emergence of *qirāʾāt*.

Thirdly, and to clarify the direction and scope of this paper, it is worthwhile stating what this paper will *not* be discussing. This paper is not about *tawātur* (transmission of a report 'by many through many', i.e., by multiple narrators through multiple lines of transmission).

[7] Nevertheless, there are a few reports from which one might infer that some *qirāʾāt* were thought to have resulted from scribal errors. For instance, al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) records a report claiming that, in Q. 13:31, Ibn ʿAbbās read *yatabayyan* instead of *yayʾas*, and that he (Ibn ʿAbbās) rejected the latter reading by saying that the scribe wrote it while drowsing (*kataba l-kātibu l-ukhrā wa-huwa nāʿis*). See Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr al-Ṭabarī: Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān* (eds. ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī *et al.*; Riyadh: Dār ʿĀlam al-Kutub li-l-Ṭibāʿa wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzīʿ, 26 vols., 2003; cited hereafter as *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*), xiii, 537. This report is rejected by some scholars as 'weak'; for example, Maḥmūd al-Ālūsī, *Rūḥ al-maʿānī fī tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm wa-l-sabʿ al-mathānī* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 30 vols., n.d.), xiii, 156.

[8] For example, one can take the view, based on manuscript evidence, that some variants resulted from imperfect dictation. However, this is not a view that can be confidently attributed to the overwhelming majority of classical scholarship on *qirāʾāt*. Similarly, the literature advocating a post-canonization emergence of the *qirāʾāt* (i.e., arguing that the dialect(s) of the reading traditions differ(s) from the original dialect of the Qurʾān) cannot be projected onto the *qirāʾāt* tradition. For these and related issues, see Benham Sadeghi and Uwe Bergmann, 'The codex of a Companion of the Prophet and the Qurʾān of the Prophet', *Arabica*, 57/4 (2010): 343–436; Benham Sadeghi, 'Criteria for emending the text of the Qurʾān' in Michael Cook, Najam Haider, Intisar Rabb, and Asma Sayeed (eds.), *Law and Tradition in Classical Islamic Thought: Studies in Honor of Professor Hossein Modarressi* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013): 21–41; Marijn van Putten and Phillip W. Stokes, 'Case in the Qurʾānic consonantal text', *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes*, 108 (2018): 143–79; Pierre Larcher, 'Une «rime cachée» dans Cor 23, 12–14? Histoire du texte et histoire de la langue', *Arabica*, 68/1 (2021): 36–50.

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Although *tawātur* is very much intertwined with *qirāʾāt*, and discussions on the latter normally involve the former, an exposition of *tawātur* is not necessary for our purposes: the emergence of *qirāʾāt* is one thing, the transmission mechanism another. *Tawātur* could equally transmit divine or non-divine texts and is, to some extent, not directly relevant here. Furthermore, whether and what change and development the divine/non-divine *ur-qirāʾāt* underwent after their emergence is outside the scope of this paper. The foremost concern here is the emergence, not a diachronic analysis. This paper also does not look into the question of *ikhtiyār*, selecting and amalgamating variant readings from an *existing* pool.[9] An acquaintance with this topic is necessary for understanding the *qirāʾāt* issue as a whole[10] but has no direct bearing on the emergence of the variant readings. Only once the *qirāʾāt* are in place does *ikhtiyār*, in its technical sense, begin. For the same reason, the paper does not enter into the ʿUthmānic codex debate in any detail; its scope relates to the pre-standardization phase.

I do not pretend to be advancing a novel view in this paper. Its contribution to the academic scholarship on *qirāʾāt* is to restore and shed new light on an explanatory model that has been present for a long time in the Islamic scholarly tradition. The paper is set out as follows: after a brief survey of views on the origins of the *qirāʾāt*, I begin with the divine permission, *al-idhn al-Ilāhī*, which I take to be central to understanding the emergence of *qirāʾāt* and which enables us to solve a number of outstanding problems about them; it is the kernel of the paper. Next, I argue that the divine permission was not absolute; it was restricted within semantic parameters. Following this, I question the separation of Qurʾān and *qirāʾāt*. I argue that theorizing the Qurʾān and *qirāʾāt* as practically one and the same thing allows us to understand how some Muslim scholars were able to accept, even if implicitly, that here and there the Qurʾān might include what, in however insignificant a way, was not expressed exactly as sent down from God. The general findings of the study are presented in the conclusion. To reiterate, my aim here is

[9] I am adopting, to some extent, Bergsträsser's interpretation of the old definition of *ikhtiyār*: 'The older technical meaning of the word refers to a reader who is mainly following an older authority, but departs from it in some isolated instances and follows his own way'. Nöldeke *et al.*, *The History of the Qurʾān*, 486.

[10] On the concept of *ikhtiyār*, see al-Imam, *Variant Readings of the Qurʾan*, 92–111; Yasin Dutton, 'The form of the Qur'an: historical contours' in Shah and Abdel Haleem (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies*: 182–93, at 188–92. For a detailed exposition, see Amīn Idrīs Fallāta, *al-Ikhtiyār ʿinda al-qurrāʾ mafhūmuh wa-marāḥiluh wa-atharuh fī al-qirāʾāt* (Riyadh: Kursī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm wa-ʿUlūmih, Jāmiʿat al-Malik Saʿūd, 2015).

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to explore to what extent it was *accepted* and *thinkable*, especially by the Companions and subsequently by the scholars of *qirāʾāt*, that some *qirāʾāt* did not have explicit divine authority.

THE EMERGENCE OF THE *QIRĀʾĀT*

The generally accepted Sunni view is that the *qirāʾāt* constitute holy writ; their source is God. The *locus classicus* of this doctrine, which states that multiple versions of the Qurʾān were introduced by the Prophet, is the 'seven *aḥruf*' ḥadīth.[11] To this effect, Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889) writes: 'And all these modes of reading are the speech of God' (*wa-kullu hādhihi l-ḥurūfi kalāmu Llāh*),[12] and al-Dānī (d. 444/1053) follows suit: '[the *qirāʾāt*] were *all* sent down from God' (*kānat kulluhā min ʿindi Llāh*

[11] A standard explanation of this tradition and related issues is provided by Abū al-Khayr Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr fī al-qirāʾāt al-ʿashr* (ed. ʿAlī Muḥammad al-Ḍabbāʿ; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2 vols., n.d.), i. 23–33. Contemporary scholarship on this ḥadīth includes ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ al-Qāriʾ, *Ḥadīth al-aḥruf al-sabʿa dirāsa li-isnādih wa-matnih wa-khtilāf al-ʿulamāʾ fī maʿnāh wa-ṣilatih bi-l-qirāʾāt al-Qurʾāniyya* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 2002). A summary of the versions of the ḥadīth, and a useful conspectus of Ibn al-Jazarī's explanation is provided in Yasin Dutton, 'Orality, literacy and the "seven *aḥruf*" ḥadīth', *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 23/1 (2012): 1–49, at 18–30.

[12] ʿAbd Allāh Ibn Qutayba, *Taʾwīl mushkil al-Qurʾān* (ed. al-Sayyid Aḥmad Ṣaqr; Cairo: Maktabat Dār al-Turāth, 2006), 94. It is by no means a straightforward task to decide how some of the Arabic terms relating to *qirāʾāt* should be rendered in English. The same Arabic word can bear more than one meaning, and indeed a writer may use a word with two different meanings in the course of the same discussion. That said, I try to offer the closest rendering in English for the Arabic usage in its context, and to translate the same usage consistently whenever possible. I will give two cases. The Arabic *lisān* can be translated, depending on context, as 'tongue', 'language', 'lexicon', or 'dialect'. In this paper, I have translated (*bi-lisān quraysh*) as 'in the dialect of Quraysh' although 'in the lexicon of Quraysh' is also plausible. A further complication is that when the *qirāʾāt* manuals use, for example, *bi-lisān quraysh* or *lisān Rasūl Allah*, they could be intending *both* lexical variations *and* variants in pronunciation/vocalization—so a single English term (dialect/lexicon) might not capture the nuance of the discourse in Arabic. Another example concerns the term *ḥarf* (pl., *ḥurūf/aḥruf*) which can mean 'phoneme', 'letter', 'word-form', 'style of reading', among others. When the context is that of the seven *aḥruf*, I render *ḥurūf* as 'modes of reading' in full awareness that a choice has to be made and in a given instance alternative renderings are possible. In sum, my translations of these terms should be understood as approximations.

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munazzalatan).[13] Similar statements are not uncommon in contemporary *qirāʾāt* manuals and introductory works.[14]

A markedly different picture is drawn in a number of Western academic studies on the Qurʾān. According to Nöldeke, the *qirāʾāt* are attributable to a number of factors: the process of oral transmission; mistakes of copyists; differences in interpreting the consonantal forms;[15] as well as free judgment and discretion.[16] Influenced by Nöldeke, Goldziher submitted that the *qirāʾāt* resulted from attempts to make

[13] Abū ʿAmr al-Dānī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān fī al-qirāʾāt al-sabʿ al-mashhūra* (ed. Muḥammad Ṣadūq al-Jazāʾirī; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2005), 29. It is also well established in the secondary literature that this is the mainstream position in (Sunni) Islam. For instance, we find in Nöldeke *et al.*, *The History of the Qurʾān*, 487: 'In the science of Koranic variant readings different possibilities exist *a priori*, which, according to the prevalent dogma, are all equally divine'. Similarly, Nasser (*The Transmission of the Variant Readings*, 10): 'the mainstream view of Muslims is that the variant readings of the Qurʾān are of a divine nature', and Laher ('Between dogmatism and speculation', 178): 'Many Sunnīs (and Zaydīs) . . . assert . . . that the variations between the readings are of divine origin'. A reiteration of the traditional Muslim position is also presented by Muḥammad Muṣṭafā al-Aʿẓamī, *The History of the Qurʾānic Text from Revelation to Compilation: A Comparative Study with the Old and New Testaments* (Leicester: UK Islamic Academy, 2003), 152–5.

[14] For example, both ʿAlī Muḥammad al-Ḍabbāʿ (*al-Iḍāʾa fī bayan uṣūl al-qirāʾa* [Cairo: ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd Aḥmad Ḥanafī, 1938], 4) and ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ al-Qāḍī (*al-Budūr al-zāhira fī al-qirāʾāt al-ʿashr al-mutawātira min ṭarīqay al-shāṭibiyya wa-l-durra* [Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1981], 7) state, without considering other possibilities, that the *qirāʾāt* can be traced back to the Prophet. And also note the word '*al-mutawātira*' in al-Qāḍī's title. In the same manner, Aḥmad Khālid Shukrī, Muḥammad Aḥmad Mufliḥ al-Quḍāh and Muḥammad Khālid Manṣūr (*Muqaddimāt fī ʿilm al-qirāʾāt* [Amman: Dār ʿAmmār, 2001], 23) assert that all the *qirāʾāt* were sent down.

[15] Nöldeke *et al.*, *The History of the Qurʾān*, 474. I include oral transmission as a source of *qirāʾāt* according to Nöldeke on the basis of his statement: 'Naturally, it is conceivable that multiple versions of the text appeared when orally transmitted'. That oral transmission was a source for many of the *qirāʾāt* is also held by Christopher Melchert, 'Ibn Mujāhid and the establishment of seven Qur'anic readings', *Studia Islamica*, 91 (2000): 5–22, at 15.

[16] Nöldeke *et al.*, *The History of the Qurʾān*, 475. This 'discretion' is, however, sometimes restricted by certain parameters such as agreement with the consonantal text (476). It is not clear to me whether Nöldeke accepts—in addition to the above-mentioned factors—the possibility that some variant traditions could be traced back to the Prophet. However, Laher ('Between dogmatism and speculation', 179) writes that Nöldeke 'appears to acknowledge that some variant readings are "genuine" in the sense that they are transmissions of oral recitations from early generations'.

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out the deficient skeletal text of the Qurʾān,[17] and also from hermeneutical and exegetical considerations.[18] On the same lines, Jeffery remarked the role of the ʿUthmānic codex in the emergence of the *qirāʾāt*.[19] Other suggestions include Burton's that many forms of the *qirāʾāt* were later inventions fabricated by the schools of *fiqh* to provide proof-texts for their legal doctrines.[20] Common to many of these views is that the *qirāʾāt* belong to the post-standardization period.

Between these two broad approaches, there are also a number of dissenting voices in the classical Muslim tradition. In his important monograph, *The Transmission of the Variant Readings*, Nasser rightly noted that al-Ṭabarī[21] and al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144)[22] rejected some canonical readings and preferred some of them over the others. On this basis he concluded:

> For both scholars, it seems that the canonical Readings were being stripped of their divine nature, and their origin was not attributed to the Prophet himself, but to the Qurʾān readers and transmitters, i.e. to their own selectivity in reading and understanding (*ijtihād*) of the ʿUthmānic consonantal outline supported by the context of the Qurʾānic verse.[23]

Nasser further argues that Ibn Mujāhid (d. 324/936) did not hold all the readings to have divine authority: for Ibn Mujāhid, 'the status of the variant readings of the Qurʾān was similar to the status of the legal rulings (*aḥkām*)', and 'he did not consider the seven Readings to be of divine and absolute value'.[24] The case Nasser makes here ultimately depends on his inference that Ibn Mujāhid treated the differing *qirāʾāt* as akin to

[17] Ignác Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung* (Leiden: Brill, 1920), 3–4.

[18] Ibid, 5.

[19] Arthur Jeffery, *The Qurʾān as Scripture* (New York: R. F. Moore Co., Inc., 1952), 97.

[20] Burton, *The Collection of the Qurʾān*, 43, 165–86.

[21] al-Ṭabarī's approach to *qirāʾāt* has received considerable attention, especially as he is the author of *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, a major work of Sunni *tafsīr*. For a detailed study, see Zayd b. ʿAlī Mahdī Muhārish, *Manhaj al-imām al-Ṭabarī fī al-qirāʾāt wa-ḍawābiṭ ikhtiyārihā fī tafsīrih* (Riyadh: Dār al-Tadmuriyya, 2012).

[22] On al-Zamakhsharī's treatment of *qirāʾāt* in his exegesis, see Muḥammad Maḥmūd al-Dūmī, 'al-Qirāʾāt al-mutawātira fī tafsīr al-Zamakhsharī; dirāsa naqdiyya' (PhD diss., Yarmouk University, 2004); Andrew J. Lane, *A Traditional Muʿtazilite Qurʾān Commentary: the Kashshāf of Jār Allāh al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144)* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 121–7; Kifayat Ullah, *al-Kashshāf: al-Zamakhsharī's Muʿtazilite Exegesis of the Qurʾān* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017), 90–3.

[23] Nasser, *The Transmission of the Variant Readings*, 7.

[24] Ibid, 230.

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disagreements in the *fiqhī* domain of *aḥkām*. As for his treatment of al-Ṭabarī, some comments are in order. Nasser's conclusion is that al-Ṭabarī, among other scholars, 'attributed the Qurʾānic variants to human origins; either to the reader's *ijtihād* in interpreting the consonantal outline of the Qurʾān or simply to an error in transmission'.[25] This is not an accurate account of al-Ṭabarī's position if we base the account on the evidence to hand.

First of all, al-Ṭabarī accepts, in principle, that the Qurʾān was revealed in more than one mode of reading.[26] This entails that he considered at least some of the variants to be divine. Secondly, I was unable to find in the introduction to al-Ṭabarī's *Jāmiʿ al-bayān* any statement to the effect that his own opinion was that the variants resulted from the reciters' interpretation of the ʿUthmānic consonantal outline or from an error in transmission. If I missed something, I stand to be corrected. The reasoning Nasser attributes to al-Ṭabarī may be due to projecting onto him some contemporary academic views.[27] It would have been more

[25] Ibid, 77.

[26] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, i. 41–59, clearly states that the Qurʾān was sent down in different modes of reading (*aḥruf*), which included phrasal variations (*innamā huwa khtilāfu alfāzin*).

[27] Nasser, *The Transmission of the Variant Readings*, 40 n. 17, adds that Ibn ʿAṭiyya (d. 546/1151) states that the seven readings originated due to the deficiencies of the ʿUthmānic *muṣḥaf*. I disagree with this reading of Ibn ʿAṭiyya, for although he does say that the *muṣḥaf* was not vocalized (*ghayru mashkūlin*), nowhere does he unequivocally say that this deficiency gave rise to the seven readings. Perhaps the source of Nasser's reading is Ibn ʿAṭiyya's confusing statement that 'the readers in the metropolises sought the differences that were transmitted to them, especially those that adhered to the text of the *muṣḥaf*, and read that according to their interpretation (*thumma inna l-qurrāʾ fī al-amṣār tatabbaʿū mā ruwiya lahum mini khtilāfātin lāsiyyamā fīmā wāfaqa khaṭṭa l-muṣḥaf fa-qaraʾū bidhālika ḥasaba jtihādātihim*)'. It seems that Nasser took the antecedent of *bidhālika* to be the *muṣḥaf*; I maintain, however, that it refers back to 'what was transmitted to them' (*mā ruwiya lahum*). In this sense, the reciters were practising their *ijtihād* in selecting from that which was transmitted to them; and this is presumably a reference to the notion of *ikhtiyār*. What supports my reading is that Ibn ʿAṭiyya wrote in that same sentence that the readers sought what was transmitted to them (*mā ruwiya lahum*), and hence it was primarily a matter of transmission. Secondly, Ibn ʿAṭiyya states very clearly, on the preceding page, that the *qirāʾāt* were spread from the Prophet (*intasharat ʿan Rasūli Llāh*). See ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq Ibn ʿAṭiyya, *al-Muḥarrar al-wajīz fī tafsīr al-Kitāb al-ʿazīz* (ed. ʿAbd al-Salām ʿAbd al-Shāfī Muḥammad; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 6 vols., 2001), i. 47–8. This statement is inconsistent with Nasser's reading which requires the *qirāʾāt* to be a post-Muḥammadan phenomenon, that is, a consequence of (the difficulties with) the later ʿUthmānic codex.

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accurate to say that al-Ṭabarī believed that *some* of the variant readings were not of divine origin, rather than to generalize. How, then, did these non-divine, humanly originated variants emerge according to al-Ṭabarī? Part of the task of this paper is to suggest a possible answer without claiming that this is an explanation particular to the stance of al-Ṭabarī. Rather, this paper offers a more general framework within which the positions of various early Muslim scholars may be understood.

Before moving on, it is pertinent to draw attention here to a useful point made by Yasin Dutton, one that seems to be in line with the general trajectory of my argument. In an effort to hold the differences in the variants together 'with the theological position that there is only one Qurʾān which has never changed and will never change',[28] Dutton makes a case for looking at the *qirāʾāt* through the lens of orality theory. On the premise that the Qurʾān is an oral phenomenon, he argues that 'a limited amount of "variation" was not only accepted but also expected, if it was even noticed; it was, in a sense, built in to the very text'. It follows that 'the variant readings are predominantly an expression of the Qurʾān's oral, and thus "multiform", nature',[29] indeed the Qurʾān 'was a typically "multiform" phenomenon at the beginning of its life'.[30] The upshot is that, in the reception of the Qurʾān, the Companions were given some sort of discretion. Dutton makes this more plain where he writes:

> It also seems to me possible that, in the intervening time between the death of the Prophet and ʿUthmān's decision some twenty or so years later, some Companions were reciting parts of the revelation using the same sort of variation that they had heard and witnessed the Prophet using and allowing others to use, and which they thus assumed they had ongoing Prophetic authority for.[31]

Combining Dutton's argument with what we established above, namely that eminent scholars in the Muslim tradition—al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamakhsharī, and (according to Nasser) Ibn Mujāhid, to name but three—believed that some of the variants did not hold absolute divine authority, the remainder of the paper suggests an alternative paradigm through which we can understand the foundation underlying these dissenting yet authoritative voices.

[28] Dutton, 'Orality', 30.
[29] Ibid, 34.
[30] Ibid, 42. The relevance of orality is also stressed in Bauer's discussion of *qirāʾāt*: *Die Kultur der Ambiguität*, 63, 65–6, 75–7.
[31] Dutton, 'Orality', 43.

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AN ALTERNATIVE PARADIGM: THE DIVINE PERMISSION (*AL-IDHN AL-ILĀHĪ*)

Goldziher suggested that there was 'freedom' (*Freiheit*) in early Islam with regard to the composition of the Qurʾān,[32] which I partially agree with but for reasons different from his. This 'freedom', I suggest, was a response to what I shall call a 'divine concession', or 'divine permission' (*al-idhn al-Ilāhī*). When the Qurʾān was sent down, its first recipients were permitted some discretion as to its recitation with some variation. They were informed, through the Prophet, that they were allowed to introduce some (minor) variations in reciting the words of the Qurʾān, perhaps to facilitate the experience of reciting it aloud and thereby enable a wider circulation of its message among people of varied dialectal background.[33] When verses of the Qurʾān were sent down and then taught by the Prophet, the believers were informed, whether explicitly there and then or through the general directives of the seven *aḥruf* ḥadīth, that it was permissible for them to read the verses (slightly) differently. The consequence is that the *qirāʾāt* were primarily taught by the Prophet and partly initiated by its first recipients. Therefore, when it comes to the emergence of the *qirāʾāt* we have, according to the classical Muslim tradition, as we shall see, two sources: the Prophet first and foremost, and, secondarily, his Companions on the basis of his indirect authority, that is, his permission for them to recite differently from himself and from each other within a parameter to be discussed below. The Muslim scholarly tradition refers to many traditions to the effect that the *qirāʾāt* were conveyed by the Prophet.[34] As for the divine permission hypothesis, this can be reconstructed from some classical Muslim texts. Doing so will enable us to better appreciate the occasionally critical

[32] Goldziher, *Die Richtungen*, 33.

[33] The rationales given for the existence of the *qirāʾāt* commonly include *taysīr*, ease—the removal of hardship—of recitation and of further transmission (*taysīru naqlih*) of the Qurʾān. See Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr*, i. 52–3.

[34] The classic reference for this traditional belief is the incident of ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb and Hishām b. Ḥakīm where they disagreed about how to recite Sūrat al-Furqān (Q. 25). What is notable, for the topic here, is that each attributed his recitation to the Prophet: Hishām said that the Prophet taught him that recitation (*aqraʾanīhā Rasūlu Llāh*), and likewise ʿUmar (*Rasūlu Llāh qad aqraʾanīhā ʿalā ghayri mā qaraʾta*). This is a clear indication that the Prophet, it was believed, was the *source* for (at least, some of) the *qirāʾāt*. For this version of the ḥadīth, see al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Liechtenstein: Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation, 3 vols., 2000), iii. 1049 [ḥadīth 5043]. (Printed within the multi-volume set *Jamʿ jawāmiʿ al-aḥādīth wa-l-asānīd wa-maknaz al-ṣiḥāḥ wa-l-sunan wa-l-masānīd*.)

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attitudes of Muslim scholars towards the *qirāʾāt*. It will, moreover, provide supporting evidence for Dutton who hints at this notion of divine permission when he says, referring to the reconstruction of the *ur*-Qurʾān, that it is not possible to 'reconstruct all of what was at one time or another recited as part of the seven *aḥruf* of the Qurʾān (or perhaps we should say, that was allowed to be recited as part of the seven-*aḥruf* nature of the Qurʾān)',[35] and when he avers that the options *not* included in the ʿUthmānic codex *also* had either direct Prophetic authority, or, and this is crucial, 'the indirect authority of the Prophet behind them, in the sense that he had allowed others to recite, or read, them that way'.[36]

What are the possible scenarios for the divine permission? I envisage two main possibilities. The first is that the Companion(s) would recite to the Prophet, and the Prophet would *authorize* that recitation. Its authority derives from the fact that it received divine assent via the Prophet.[37] Even so, this reading originated, narrowly speaking, from a performance of the Companion(s), and not from God. Another possible scenario is that the Companion(s), on the basis of the sufficiency of the *general* divine permission mediated by the Prophet, would recite with some variations without necessarily going back to the Prophet.

[35] Dutton, 'Orality', 35.

[36] Ibid, 42–3. The possibility of the Prophet endorsing some of the *qirāʾāt* is also noted by Sadeghi and Bergmann ('The codex of a Companion of the Prophet and the Qurʾān of the Prophet', 413): 'If the scribes recited the text back to the Prophet—and we do not know whether this happened—one wonders if the Prophet tacitly endorsed some of these differences, relatively small as they generally seem to be. If so, that would not negate the fact that one version better represented what the Prophet himself actually recited; but which one?'

[37] The reasoning is that the Companion recitation, which has no normative force *per se*, is raised through the Prophet's approval into some form of revelation. Underpinning this proposition are two connected issues. The first is the notion that the Prophet's authority to pronounce the Qurʾān in additional (unrevealed) ways amounts, in the final analysis, to divine authority. This is in line with the mainstream Sunni view of the twofold nature of revelation, that is, the authority of the Sunna with that of the Qurʾān. See, on this question, Aisha Y. Musa, *Ḥadīth as Scripture: Discussions on the Authority of Prophetic Traditions in Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). Secondly, this scenario where the Companion would read, and the Prophet would approve (or, at least, would not disown) the reading could be understood within the framework of *iqrār*, the Prophet's acquiescence in what was said or done in his absence or his presence. *Iqrār* is usually discussed in *uṣūl al-fiqh* literature: see Abū al-Maʿālī al-Juwāynī, *al-Burhān fī uṣūl al-fiqh* (ed. ʿAbd al-ʿAẓīm al-Dīb; Qatar: n.p., 2 vols., 1399 [1979]), i. 498–502; Mannāʿ al-Qaṭṭān, *Tārīkh al-tashrīʿ al-Islāmī: al-tashrīʿ wa-l-fiqh* (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Maʿārif li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzīʿ, 2nd edn., 1996), 124–31.

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In sum, there are different shades for the divine authority of the words of the Qurʾān for its first recipients. They may be arranged within a continuum of divine authority, with those *qirāʾāt* taught by the Prophet, recited by him, appearing at the upper end of the continuum, and those originated by the Companion(s) on the basis of the general divine permission placed at the lower end. Between these two lie the recitations originated by the Companion(s) and explicitly approved by the Prophet.[38]

I turn now to the principal concern of the paper, namely to explore whether classical Muslim scholars *believed* in the divine permission hypothesis. My argument is in two parts; first, scholarly discussions that *imply* the divine permission, and, second, discussion in which scholars all but *explicitly* state the divine permission hypothesis. Thus, I will be proceeding from weaker inferences to stronger evidence.

THE DIVINE PERMISSION HYPOTHESIS IMPLIED IN THE ISLAMIC SCHOLARLY TRADITION

Consistent with the mainstream tradition, al-Ṭabarī held that the seven *aḥruf* ḥadīth meant that the Qurʾān came down in different *lughāt* (dialects).[39] He contrasts this position with the view of an imagined learned interlocutor that the ḥadīth indicated differences in meaning (*annahū nazala bi-sabʿati maʿānin*),[40] variations in content as opposed to

[38] One could also envisage a scenario where a Companion would come to the Prophet and suggest a variation with regard to a particular expression, and the Prophet would allow him to apply this variation to other similar expressions in the Qurʾān, though he would not have heard the latter from the Prophet nor recited them in his presence. For example, he may read a single word with an *imāla* (fronting the /ā/ vowel towards /ī/) for dialectal ease, and take permission from the Prophet to apply it, by analogy, to similar words. A similar process was suggested by Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013), *al-Intiṣār li-l-Qurʾān* (ed. Muḥammad ʿIṣām al-Quḍāh; Amman: Dār al-Fatḥ li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzīʿ, 2 vols., 2001), i. 346, in the context of Gabriel's Qurʾānic instruction to the Prophet. For example, he suggests that it might be possible that Gabriel taught the Prophet to read *ʿalayhim* (without terminal vowel) and *ʿalayhimū* (with a long vowel, *ū*) but did not go over with him all the instances of *ʿalayhim* (and its *qirāʾāt*-cognates, *ilayhim* and *ladayhim*) in the two forms. Rather, the Prophet was instructed to apply this rule wherever the form appeared.

[39] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, i. 42.

[40] Ibid, 49.

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variations in word-forms. Moreover, he objects to another opinion, spelled out by the same interlocutor, namely that the seven *aḥruf* are dispersed through the whole Qurʾān (*annahā sabʿu lughātin mutafarraqatin fī jamīʿi l-Qurʾān*).[41] What is common between these two views, to which al-Ṭabarī objects, is that they reject the possibility of having different expressions conveying the same meaning. Whereas he holds that a verse may be revealed in different versions, advocates of the two other views do not allow this. For positing that the seven *aḥruf* are semantic variations rules out their being merely linguistic variations and, likewise, saying that the seven *aḥruf* are dispersed throughout the Qurʾān does not allow for one word to be expressed in different ways—the dispersed multiplicity view excludes simultaneous multiplicity.[42] The upshot of these two opinions is that the Qurʾān was revealed, language-wise, in one version—and al-Ṭabarī will not accept this.

The relevance of this discussion for the divine permission hypothesis can be cued from an observation made by al-Ṭabarī's interlocutor. This imagined discussion partner says that the proponent of the dispersed multiplicity view—that the seven *aḥruf* are dispersed in the Qurʾān—holds that the Qurʾān came down in one of two readings, for example, either '*ṣayḥa*' or '*zaqya*' (*alladhī nazala bihī al-Qurʾān ʿindahū iḥdā al-qirāʾatayn*). This is problematic, in the eyes of the interlocutor, since this contradicts the evidence invoked for it: there is no coherence between the opinion and its evidence.[43] Detailed clarification of this view is not particularly an issue for us. What is of interest here are its implications,

[41] Ibid, 51–2.

[42] If one takes the statement of Ibn Qutayba (*Taʾwīl mushkil al-Qurʾān*, 91) that the seven *aḥruf* represent seven dispersed dialects (*ʿalā sabʿati awjuhin mina l-lughāti mutafarriqatin fī al-Qurʾān*) at face value, it would appear that he was endorsing the second view discussed by al-Ṭabarī's imagined interlocutor. However, the examples Ibn Qutayba gives of the seven modes of reading include instances where one word admits more than one linguistic variation (93), and he clearly declares that all the seven *aḥruf* were sent down (95). Therefore, I lean towards the view that the dispersed multiplicity described by al-Ṭabarī's imagined interlocutor is different from that of Ibn Qutayba who seems to allow for a simultaneous multiplicity. It is possible that al-Ṭabarī's interlocutor is pointing to Ibn Sallām (d. 224/838) who clearly stated that the ḥadīth does not mean that a single word could be read in seven modes (*wa-laysa maʿnā tilka l-sabʿati an yakūna l-ḥarfu l-wāḥidu yuqraʾu ʿalā sabʿat awjuh*), but that the Qurʾān was revealed in seven Arabic dialects dispersed in the Qurʾān (*nazala ʿalā sabʿi lughātin mutafarriqatin fī jamīʿi l-Qurʾān*). See Abū ʿUbayd al-Qāsim Ibn Sallām, *Faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān wa-maʿālimuh wa-ādābuh* (ed. Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Wāḥid al-Khayyāṭī; al-Muḥammadiyya: al-Mamlaka al-Maghribiyya: Wizārat al-Awqāf wa-l-Shuʾūn al-Islāmiyya, 2 vols., 1995), ii. 168–9.

[43] al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*, i. 51–2.

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namely that the Qurʾān was sent down in one mode. This leads to the question: How did the advocates of this view—of whom Ibn Sallām might have been one—account for the other *qirāʾa* (or *qirāʾāt*)? If only as a tentative inference, I suggest the divine permission hypothesis as a possible explanation.

Another promising way to derive that hypothesis is to consider the concept of 'first reader', the first person to read a particular variant, or the first to introduce a *qirāʾa* into the pool of *qirāʾāt*. To explore this concept, which follows from the divine permission hypothesis, let us turn to Ibn Abī Dāwūd al-Sijistānī's (d. 316/929) *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif*. In looking at the variant readings in Q. 1:4, '*māliki*' and '*maliki*', he lists reports to the effect that the Prophet read both.[44] However, and this is relevant to the hypothesis, he also records a tradition, on the authority of al-Zuhrī (d. 124/742), saying that whereas the Prophet, Abū Bakr, ʿUmar and ʿUthmān read '*māliki*', Marwān (d. 65/685) was the first to read '*maliki*' (*wa-awwalu man qaraʾahā maliki Marwān*).[45] The historical veracity of this piece of information—this includes the reliability of the tradition and whether or not al-Zuhrī was right—is not the question here. Indeed, there are reports to the contrary—that the Prophet read '*maliki*' too—which Ibn Abī Dāwūd also records. The pertinent issue is that Ibn Abī Dāwūd records the concept of 'first reader' in the first place. The fact that he included it in his book implies that the concept was *not unthinkable* for him—that a reciter may originate a new *qirāʾa*. We find this same tradition in other books of *qirāʾāt*[46] as well as later *tafsīr*s.[47] Yes, they might dispute the reliability of the *riwāya* on the basis that other reports equally attribute '*maliki*' to the Prophet, and therefore deem the report factually incorrect,[48] but—and this is crucial—they do not seem to be concerned with the conceptual question of 'first reader'—that a *qirāʾa*

[44] Ibn Abī Dāwūd al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif* (ed. Muḥibb al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Subḥān Wāʿiẓ; Beirut: Dār al-Bashāʾir al-Islāmiyya, 2 vols., 2002), i. 388–96.

[45] Ibid, 390.

[46] For example, Abū ʿAlī al-Fārisī, *al-Ḥujja fī ʿilal al-qirāʾāt al-sabʿ* (eds. ʿĀdil Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Mawjūd, ʿAlī Muḥammad Muʿawwaḍ and Aḥmad ʿĪsā Ḥasan al-Maʿṣarāwī; Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 4 vols., 2007), i. 108.

[47] See Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Ibn ʿĀshūr, *Tafsīr al-Taḥrīr wa-l-tanwīr* (Tunis: al-Dār al-Tūnisiyya li-l-Nashr, 30 vols., 1984), i. 175.

[48] Thus, they might try to reconcile al-Zuhrī's statement by qualifying it to mean Marwān was the first to recite '*maliki*' in his time or place (*fī dhālika l-ʿaṣri awi l-balad*): see Ibn ʿAṭiyya, *al-Muḥarrar al-wajīz*, i. 69. This does not seem to be challenging the 'first reader' concept itself; it is basically an attempt to harmonize al-Zuhrī with other reports. What is being problematized is, essentially, the *factual value* of al-Zuhrī's report, not the *concept* underlying the report.

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may be 'introduced' by other than the Prophet.[49] How can we explain this attitude? Again, I suggest that they were, possibly but not necessarily, operating within the divine permission paradigm and accordingly took the concept of 'first reader' in al-Zuhrī's report for granted.

A third argument for the divine permission hypothesis could be made from the discussion on the Qurʾānic dialect: was the Qurʾān revealed in the dialect of Quraysh, in a different dialect, or in a combination of dialects? It is not my purpose here to answer these questions—they form part of a different enquiry.[50] Rather, and more simply, my purpose is briefly to review the classical debate on Qurʾānic dialects for what it can tell us about the divine permission hypothesis. To this end, I analyse two traditions and underline their bearing on our understanding of the emergence of the *qirāʾāt*.

The first tradition is attributed to ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb. It is related in Ibn Jinnī's (d. 392/1002) *al-Muḥtasab* and al-Zamakhsharī's *al-Kashshāf* that ʿUmar heard a person reading '*ʿattā ḥīnin*'—in place of '*ḥattā ḥīnin*'—and inquired: 'Who taught you [this recitation]?' The person answered that it was Ibn Masʿūd (d. 32/652). Thereupon, ʿUmar wrote to Ibn Masʿūd: 'God sent down this Qurʾān and made it Arabic (*fa-jaʿalahū ʿarabiyyan*), and He sent it down in the dialect of Quraysh (*wa-anzalahū bi-lughati quraysh*), so teach people in the dialect of Quraysh, not that of Hudhayl'.[51] If one accepts both the reliability of the tradition—that ʿUmar actually said it—and the factual content—that the Qurʾān was indeed sent down in the dialect of Quraysh, and that Ibn Masʿūd was teaching in a different dialect—it supports the divine permission hypothesis in the sense that Ibn Masʿūd, unlike ʿUmar, believed that although the Qurʾān was sent down in one dialect, it was

[49] To clarify, I am not assuming that the inclusion of these reports in those collections means that their respective authors agreed to the contents of the reports—that they did not criticize the 'first-reader' reports is not evidence of approval. My point is that the concept was, at least, *thinkable* even if not approved by them. (My thanks to an anonymous reader of an earlier draft of this paper for their comment on this point.)

[50] The Islamic tradition is itself not clear on this question. Various views on the issue are advanced, some conflicting. For an overview, see Rafael Talmon, art. 'Dialects' in Jane Dammen McAuliffe (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān* (Leiden: Brill, 6 vols., 2001–2006), i. 529–31; Ghānim Qaddūrī al-Ḥamad, *Abḥāth fī al-ʿArabiyya al-fuṣḥā* (Amman: Dār ʿAmmār, 2005), 67–77.

[51] Abū al-Fatḥ Ibn Jinnī, *al-Muḥtasab fī tabyīn wujūh shawādhdh al-qirāʾāt wa-l-īḍāḥ ʿanhā* (eds. ʿAlī al-Najdī Nāṣif, ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm al-Najjār and ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ Ismāʿīl Shalabī; Istanbul: Dār Sazkīn li-l-Ṭibāʿa wa-l-Nashr, 2 vols., 1986), i. 343; Jār Allāh al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf ʿan ḥaqāʾiq ghawāmiḍ al-tanzīl wa-ʿuyūn al-aqāwīl fī wujūh al-taʾwīl* (Beirut: Dār al-Maʿrifa, 2009), 515.

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permissible to read in a different dialect, one that was not as sent down but selected for by the reciter, in this case Ibn Masʿūd. This, I think, is a consequence of the divine permission being present in Ibn Masʿūd's mind.[52] If one were to reject the report as unreliable or fabricated and its matter inaccurate, the divine permission hypothesis will not necessarily be ruled out. The existence of this report in the classical sources shows that the idea was present in the Muslim scholarly memory and not something unthinkable. Furthermore, we note that Ibn Jinnī and al-Zamakhsharī include it in their works without objecting to it, which might imply some degree of acceptance of the idea.

The same reasoning can be applied to a tradition attributed to ʿUthmān. In the process of instructing the committee on how to compile the Qurʾān, and in his attempt to limit the variants, he is reported to have said: 'If you disagree with Zayd b. Thābit on a point related to the Arabic of the Qurʾān (*fī ʿarabiyyatin min ʿarabiyyati l-Qurʾān*), then write it in the dialect of Quraysh (*bi-lisāni Quraysh*), for the Qurʾān was sent down in their dialect (*bi-lisānihim*)'.[53] On the face of it, ʿUthmān appears to accept that the pool of variants in circulation includes those which do not belong to the dialect of Quraysh and, consequently, includes variants that were not revealed—they were 'generated' by the reciters themselves.[54] This perhaps points to the divine permission hypothesis and the initial fluidity of the *qirāʾāt*.

[52] Moreover, it would not be wrong to say that ʿUmar's instruction does not necessarily mean that he was objecting to the permissibility of reciting in a non-revealed *qirāʾa*. Rather, he was instructing Ibn Masʿūd to refrain from teaching in the dialect of Hudhayl because of his (ʿUmar's) preference (*ikhtiyār*) for the dialect of Quraysh, not because what Ibn Masʿūd was doing was wrong in principle. An explanation could be drawn from Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *al-Tamhīd li-mā fī al-Muwaṭṭaʾ min al-maʿānī wa-l-asānīd* (vol. 8 ed. Muḥammad al-Fallāḥ; [Rabat]: Wizārat al-Awqāf wa-l-Shuʾūn al-Islāmiyya, 26 vols., vol. 8: 1980), 279. However, it appears that Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr's own view was that Ibn Masʿūd was choosing from within what was divinely revealed—thus, his position and mine are not the same. Alternatively, one could say ʿUmar believed that Ibn Masʿūd was going beyond the limits of what was permissible, stretching the divine permission too far. Yet a third possibility is to view ʿUmar's objection not as a point of doctrine on his part, but as an administrative decision with an eye to stabilizing the text, akin to ʿUthmān's later codex. On these grounds, we can maintain that ʿUmar did not, in principle, object to the divine permission hypothesis.

[53] al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, iii. 1047 [ḥadīth 5035].

[54] I say 'on the face of it', given that ʿUthmān's statement could be interpreted in other ways. For example, it could be understood to mean that *most* of the Qurʾān was revealed in the dialect of Quraysh: see Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī ʿulūm*

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THE DIVINE PERMISSION HYPOTHESIS BECOMING EXPLICIT IN THE ISLAMIC SCHOLARLY TRADITION

The three arguments presented above in support of the divine permission hypothesis are tentative inferences. In this section, I provide the stronger evidence, in the form of almost-explicit statements, for my argument that some scholars in the Muslim tradition *believed* the hypothesis to be true.

I first consider Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭaḥāwī (d. 321/933). His treatise *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār* contains useful discussions and reports on the emergence of the *qirāʾāt*. On the divine permission, al-Ṭaḥāwī writes that, because the Companions were required to recite the Qurʾān in ritual prayer and to understand their religion through it, they were allowed to read the Qurʾān according to its meanings (*an yatlūhu bi-maʿānīh*) even if their expressions differed from those recited to them by the Prophet (*wa-in khālafat alfāẓuhumu l-latī yatlūnahū bi-hā alfāẓa Nabiyyihim ṣalla Llāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam al-latī qaraʾahū bi-hā ʿalayhim*).[55] Al-Ṭaḥāwī makes it clear that it was allowed on account of their need to do that (*li-ḍarūratihim ilā dhālik*), even if what was sent down to the Prophet was a single expression (*wa-in kāna l-ladhī nazala ʿalā l-Nabiyyi ṣalla Llāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam innamā nazala bi-alfāẓin wāḥida*).[56] In another formulation, al-Ṭaḥāwī repeats the distinction between what the Companions were reading under the authority of the concession and the Prophet's single mode of reading. Eventually, al-Ṭaḥāwī argues, the concession was lifted and the Companions' ways of reciting the Qurʾān reverted to the dialect of God's Messenger (*ḥattā ʿādat lughātuhum ilā lisāni Rasūli Llah ṣalla Llāhu ʿalayhi wa-sallam*).[57] Given al-Ṭaḥāwī's clear distinction between what was sent down to the Prophet and what the Companions were allowed to read, it is safe to say that he implicitly recognized the divine permission hypothesis.

al-Qurʾān (ed. Markaz al-Dirāsāt al-Qurʾāniyya; Madina: Majmaʿ al-Malik Fahd li-Ṭibāʿat al-Muṣḥaf al-Sharīf, 7 vols., 1426 [2005]), iii. 931.

[55] Abū Jaʿfar al-Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār* (ed. Shuʿayb al-Arnaʾūṭ; Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 16 vols., 1994), viii. 118.

[56] Ibid, 124.

[57] Ibid, 125. For a useful exposition of al-Ṭaḥāwī's opinion, see ʿAmmār al-Khaṭīb, '*Taḥrīr madhhab al-Imām al-Ṭaḥāwī fī maʿnā al-aḥruf al-sabʿa*', available at https://tafsir.net/article/5351/thryr-mdhhb-al-imam-at-thawy-fy-m-na-al-ahrf-as-sb-h (last accessed 14 November 2021). (My thanks to an anonymous reader of an earlier draft of this paper for drawing my attention to al-Ṭaḥāwī's opinion.)

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After al-Ṭaḥāwī, al-Bāqillānī, the author of *al-Intiṣār li-l-Qurʾān* declares a strong 'conservative' line on the emergence of the *qirāʾāt*. He writes, for instance, that all seven *aḥruf* emerged from the Prophet (*ẓaharat wa-stafāḍat ʿani l-Rasūl*),[58] and that the Prophet did not die until he had taught all seven *aḥruf* (*fa-lā yakhruju ʿalayhi l-salām mina l-dunyā ḥattā yuqriʾa jamīʿahā*).[59] Nevertheless, in his response to a question about the Prophetic tradition (reported on the authority of Ubayy) allowing one to substitute, for example, '*raḥīm*' for '*ghafūr*', one of the solutions al-Bāqillānī offers is to say that—if the report is authentic and established in the first place (*idhā ṣaḥḥat wa-thabatat*)—it is possible that in the beginning of Islam Muslims were allowed to substitute single words (*wa-yajūzu an yakūna qad shurriʿa fī ṣadri l-Islāmi an yujʿala makāna l-ḥarfi l-wāḥidi khilāfuh*) as long as the opposite of the intended meaning was not obtained (*fa-ammā an yujʿala makānahū ḍidduhū … fa-lam yakun dhālika jāʾizan bi-l-ijmāʿ*). Thereafter, this was abrogated (*thumma nusikha min baʿdi dhālik*).[60] From this, it appears that al-Bāqillānī held a limited version of the divine permission hypothesis. For him it was a time-limited concession granted by divine authority that ceased to exist by virtue of, apparently, another divine command.

A clearer statement of the divine permission hypothesis is found in Abū Shāma's (d. 665/1267) widely quoted *al-Murshid al-wajīz*. He devotes a chapter to the seven *aḥruf* ḥadīth in which the notion of permission (*ibāḥa*) recurs with noticeable frequency. Let us consider three of his statements. In one passage, Abū Shāma quotes some scholars as saying: 'God revealed the Qurʾān in the dialect of Quraysh and those eloquent Arabs in their vicinity, and then made it permissible for the Arabs (*thumma abāḥa li-l-ʿarab*)—who are addressed by it, and to whom it was revealed—to read it in their dialects to which they were accustomed (*an yaqraʾūhu bi-lughātihim*)'.[61] Abū Shāma concurs with that view (*wa-hādhā kalāmun mustaqīmun ḥasan*), and then adds that God made it permissible (*abāḥa Llāhu taʿālā*) to read in seven *aḥruf* those Qurʾānic phrases which accept being read in seven modes of reading, and in less than seven those phrases which admit fewer modes of reading.[62] Similarly, he adds, a couple of lines later, that to read in a dialect

[58] al-Bāqillānī, *al-Intiṣār li-l-Qurʾān*, i. 60.

[59] Ibid, 336.

[60] Ibid, 370.

[61] Abū Shāma al-Maqdisī, *al-Murshid al-wajīz ilā ʿulūm tataʿallaqu bi-l-Kitāb al-ʿazīz* (ed. Ṭayyār Āltī Qūlāj; Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1975), 95.

[62] Ibid, 96. Further support for Abū Shāma (and the scholars he was quoting and approving) is found in al-Qasṭallānī, *Laṭāʾif al-ishārāt li-funūn al-qirāʾāt* (ed. Markaz al-Dirāsāt al-Qurʾāniyya; Madina: Majmaʿ al-Malik Fahd li-Ṭibāʿat

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other than that of Quraysh was permitted in order to make it convenient for the Arabs (*innamā ubīḥa an yuqraʾa bi-ghayri lisāni quraysh tawsiʿatan ʿalā al-ʿarab*).[63] Third, Abū Shāma comments on one version of the seven *aḥruf* ḥadīth that it means that the recipients of the Qurʾān were given the concession to use substitute-words (*rukhkhiṣa lahum fī ibdāli alfāẓihī bi-mā yuʾaddī maʿnāhā*) whereby their meanings are effectuated.[64] These statements, as well as some other views that he cites,[65] seem to indicate that Abū Shāma held a more accommodating conception of the divine permission than al-Bāqillānī. However, earlier on in the chapter, he comments on the use of substitute-words, mentioned above, by saying that the substitution of words was allowed before the Companions compiled the *muṣḥaf* (*wa-kāna hādhā sāʾighan qabla jamʿi l-ṣaḥābati l-muṣḥaf*), and that they understood that the dispensation was no longer required when those who had memorized the Qurʾān proliferated.[66] One may conclude from this that Abū Shāma was of the opinion that the divine permission was still operative after the Prophet's death, and remained so until curtailed by the *muṣḥaf* project, though he does not specify which one. Thus, the permission eventually came to an end. On the basis of these statements, it is safe to say that Abū Shāma endorsed the divine permission hypothesis in principle.[67]

But any discussion of *qirāʾāt* remains incomplete without engaging Ibn al-Jazarī. To him we now turn. In *al-Nashr* we find (at least) three allusions to the divine permission hypothesis. Following his account of the ʿUthmānic compilation, and the distribution of the *maṣāḥif*, he

al-Muṣḥaf al-Sharīf, 10 vols., 1434 [2013]), i. 70–1, where he observes, on the basis of a ḥadīth, that the seven *aḥruf* concession was made after the Prophet emigrated to Madina; in particular, it was communicated to the Prophet while he was in Madina in a location known as Aḍāt Banī Ghifār.

[63] Abū Shāma, *al-Murshid al-wajīz*, 97.

[64] Ibid, 126.

[65] See, for example, ibid, 102.

[66] Ibid, 89.

[67] The hypothesis appears in another work of Abū Shāma, his commentary on the didactic poem, *al-Shāṭibiyya*, an abridgement and versification of al-Dānī's *al-Taysīr*. In it Abū Shāma notes that the authentic *qirāʾāt* are divided into what the Prophet read and what he allowed (*annahū qaraʾahū aw adhina fīh*). See Abū Shāma al-Maqdisī, *Ibrāz al-maʿānī min ḥirz al-amānī* (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1349 [1931]), 4. Although one might argue that what the Prophet 'allowed' denotes cases in which a Companion reads and the Prophet approves, and hence there is a divine approval via the Prophet, this does not, I think, put the Prophet's readings on a par with those initiated by his Companions and subsequently approved by him. There is, as I have suggested above, a hierarchy of divine authority for the different variant readings.

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wrote: 'and the inviolable nation agreed upon what was contained in these codices, and on leaving out what was inconsistent with them—in the form of addition, omission, and substituting one word for another—from what was allowed' (*mimmā kāna maʾdhūnan fīh*). He then adds that the ʿUthmānic codices were devoid of vocalization in order to allow for what was soundly transmitted and what the Prophet certainly recited (*mā ṣaḥḥa naqluhū wa-thabata tilāwatuhū ʿani l-Nabī*).[68] Two observations can be made here. The first is that Ibn al-Jazarī is explicit that the readings excluded from the ʿUthmānic project belong to the permissible category. Secondly, he seems to make a distinction between what the Prophet recited and what was being read under the authority of the divine permission. He does not use the concept of permissibility in a pejorative manner. All he is saying is that ʿUthmān decided to include only those variants lying at the upper level of the divine authority continuum—those that the committee was certain the Prophet recited. Moving on, Ibn al-Jazarī looks at the question of why there are seven modes of recitation instead of some other number. One of the opinions he includes is that the ḥadīth is not meant to indicate an exact number. Rather it indicates ease (*al-murādu l-saʿa wa-l-taysīr*), and the permissibility of reading the Qurʾān in any Arabic dialect on the basis—and this is important for us—that God has given permission to do so (*min ḥaythu inna Llāhā taʿāla adhina lahum fī dhālik*).[69] The third occurrence of the divine permission hypothesis in *al-Nashr* appears in Ibn al-Jazarī's discussion of whether or not all seven *aḥruf* are contained in the *muṣḥaf* of ʿUthmān. He gives two views. Whereas the first holds that the ʿUthmānic codices contain all of the *aḥruf*, the second opinion, attributed to the majority of scholars, maintains that the ʿUthmānic codices contain only the *aḥruf* which the consonantal skeleton can support (*mushtamilatun ʿalā mā yaḥtamiluhu rasmuhā*).[70] Ibn al-Jazarī then proceeds to highlight some of the responses given by the latter group to the objections made by those who hold the first opinion. Here, mention of the divine permission notion appears two times. The first is when the second group defends its position by positing that reading in all the seven modes was not obligatory; 'rather, that was something that was permitted to them as an allowance [*wa-innamā kāna dhālik jāʾizan lahum wa-murakhkhaṣan fīh*], and they were allowed to choose whichever *ḥarf* they wished to recite, as is mentioned in various authentic *ḥadīth*s'.[71] A second mention is in the

[68] Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr*, i. 7.
[69] Ibid, 25–6.
[70] Ibid, 31.
[71] Ibid, 31. The translation of the quote is Dutton's, 'Orality', 29, with the addition of the Arabic words.

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following statement of Ibn al-Jazarī: 'Some people say that the allowance to recite according to seven *aḥruf* [*inna l-tarkhīṣa fī al-aḥrufi l-sabʿa*] was valid at the beginning of Islam, because of the difficulty involved in having to recite only according to one *ḥarf*'.[72]

These statements, whether Ibn al-Jazarī's own or quoted by him, seem to give the impression that he accepted the divine permission hypothesis. However, his position is not straightforward. The complication arises from the fact that, a couple of lines later, he writes: 'he who says that some of the Companions, like Ibn Masʿūd, allowed reading [the Qurʾān] according to sense, has misrepresented him' (*fa-qad kadhaba ʿalayh*). In contradistinction, Ibn al-Jazarī's own position was that Ibn Masʿūd was inserting exegesis in his recitation, or that Ibn Masʿūd's reading was subsequently abrogated.[73] Under the latter reasoning, if I have understood him correctly, Ibn al-Jazarī is attempting to make a case that *all* Ibn Masʿūd's readings were received from the Prophet, though some of them were later abrogated in the final review (*al-ʿarḍa al-akhīra*)—Ibn Masʿūd was not 'creating' readings.[74] Admittedly, this somewhat undermines the divine permission hypothesis which rests on reading according to sense (*al-qirāʾa bi-l-maʿnā*). So, should we suppose that Ibn al-Jazarī accepted the hypothesis, or may we assume, on the basis of his interpretation of Ibn Masʿūd, that he rejected it? I have no unequivocal answer to offer. But I will adduce another work of Ibn al-Jazarī, his earlier

[72] Ibid, 32. Again I have relied on Dutton's translation ('Orality', 29), adding some of Ibn al-Jazarī's wording to give a more accurate picture.

[73] Ibid, 32.

[74] Several reports relate that Gabriel would recite the Qurʾān with the Prophet every Ramaḍān, and that he did this twice in the year before the Prophet's death. This gave rise to what has been known as the final review, or final recitation, *al-ʿarḍa al-akhīra*. The tradition is then split on who attended the final review. Some reports say that Zayd b. Thābit was present, while others maintain that Ibn Masʿūd attended. See al-Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ mushkil al-āthār*, vii. 138–42; Abū Shāma, *al-Murshid al-wajīz*, 68–9; Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr*, i. 32. (An anonymous reader of an earlier draft of this paper alerted me to the possible bearing of this debate on the divine permission hypothesis, suggesting that the reports may imply a tension between advocates of the codex of Ibn Masʿūd and those of the codex of ʿUthmān. This, according to the reader, weakens the hypothesis because, if the early Muslims held that hypothesis, they would not be committed to prioritizing their favoured codices. However, even if we accept that a tension existed and that it gave rise to these competing reports, it need not rule out the divine permission hypothesis. It can be argued that the concern of each group was to place their readings at the higher end of the divine authority continuum. This is because, as explained earlier, readings that were taught directly by the Prophet or approved by him are more authoritative than those generated by the Companions without explicit Prophetic assent.)

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short monograph *Munjid al-muqriʾīn*, which refers to this hypothesis. On the question of what was included in the Companions' compilation, Ibn al-Jazarī supports the view that they unanimously agreed on writing the Qurʾān according to the final review, adding: 'and [the Companions compiled the *muṣḥaf*] according to what God sent down, not what He had permitted (*wa-ʿalā mā anzala Llāhu taʿālā dūna mā adhina fīhi*).[75] In this statement, Ibn al-Jazarī is unequivocal that the Qurʾānic variants in the pre-canonization phase belonged to one of two categories: what God sent down and what He permitted.

Having presented evidence that the divine permission hypothesis, was (implicitly or explicitly) believed by eminent Muslim scholars until at least the ninth/fifteenth century, it will be useful to review contemporary thinking on the *qirāʾāt* in two works particularly worthy of notice. The first is ʿAbd al-Ṣabūr Shāhīn's (d. 2010) discussion in his *Tārīkh al-Qurʾān*. His chapter on the seven *aḥruf* begins by noting that the problem of *qirāʾāt* is a function of the dispensation allowed by the Prophet (*atharun min āthāri tilka l-rukhṣa*).[76] Reflecting on the seven *aḥruf* ḥadīth, he makes a number of observations, and asks: did every mode of reading issue from the Prophet (*fa-hal kāna kullu wajhin mina l-wujūhi l-mukhtalifati ṣādiran min Rasūli Llāh*)? He acknowledges that he could not provide a definitive answer and distinguishes, based on what he was able to gather from the context of the seven *aḥruf* traditions, three types of *qirāʾāt*: those issuing directly from the Prophet; those approved by him in the sense that he might hear a Companion reading and approve that reading; and, third, readings arising due to the general concession (*fa-inna mina l-ḥurūfi mā kāna mansha'uhu l-rukhṣata l-ʿāmma*). Shāhīn is clearly recognizing that a form of the divine permission hypothesis was entailed in this practice. However, the concession though general was by no means unrestricted or absolute. Shāhīn holds that it ended with ʿUthmān's compilation, though the spirit of it endures (*anna rūḥa hādhihi l-rukhṣati lā tazālu bāqiya*) in the form of the different accents in which Muslims read the Qurʾān today.[77]

Shāhīn also makes a useful observation, one that I have not seen in earlier works, about the terminology of the seven *aḥruf* ḥadīth. He notes that the two verbs that appear in the different versions of the ḥadīth, '*unzila*' and '*iqra*'', have different connotations. Whereas '*unzila*',

[75] Abū al-Khayr Ibn al-Jazarī, *Munjid al-muqriʾīn wa-murshid al-ṭālibīn* (eds. Muḥammad Ḥabīb Allāh al-Shinqīṭī and Abū al-Ashbāl Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir; Cairo: Maktabat al-Qudsī, 1350 [1932]), 22.

[76] ʿAbd al-Ṣabūr Shāhīn, *Tārīkh al-Qurʾān* (Cairo: Nahḍat Miṣr li-l-Ṭibāʿa wa-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzīʿ, [2005] 2007), 49.

[77] Ibid, 68.

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according to Shāhīn, signifies that the *aḥruf* were sent down by God, the term '*iqra*" does not necessarily indicate this; rather, it signifies that the seven *aḥruf* can be obtained directly via the Prophet's reading, or (indirectly) through his allowance on the basis of permissibility and choice.[78]

Another important contribution on the *qirāʾāt* is that of Muḥammad Ḥasan Ḥasan Jabal (d. 2015), a scholar of Arabic and the Qurʾān who taught in al-Azhar's Kulliyyat al-Qurʾān al-Karīm li-l-Qirāʾāt wa-ʿUlūmihā in Tanta. Toward the end of his life Jabal published on the major issues in the science of *qirāʾāt* a book that can be considered a culmination of his decades-long study of the Qurʾān. In the course of his argument that the Qurʾān was revealed in the dialect of Quraysh, Jabal records around ten quotations from eminent scholars (most of them taken from Abū Shāma's *al-Murshid al-wajīz*) to the effect that the Companions were allowed to read in their own dialects.[79] He concludes that the majority of those eminent scholars did not qualify the permissibility of reading in one's own dialect with the requirement that the *qirāʾa* be acquired directly from the Prophet (*aghfalū qayda l-talaqqī*). Rather, he says, the Prophet's concession permitting reading in one's own dialect is to be regarded as a general permission (*idhnan ʿāmman*).[80] He argues further that those who hold that a reading should have been acquired directly from the Prophet fall into two errors: they renounce the making easy, which was the whole point of allowing the *qirāʾāt* in the first place, and they ignore the fact that it was practically impossible for the Prophet, given his duties and responsibilities, to teach in various dialects.[81] However, Jabal understands this general permission to apply only narrowly, only for dialectal variations, such as fronting a letter (*imāla*), as opposed to changing letters and words. Thus, while Jabal allows variations in what are commonly described as the *uṣūl* (general principles pertaining mainly to dialectal variations in pronunciation), he regards changes to letters and words to be permissible only as revealed and taught by the Prophet.[82] Another difference between Jabal and previous works is his view that the dialectal general permission was operative from the Prophetic era until the time of the ten readers (*al-aʾimma al-ʿashara*).[83] In contrast to Abū Shāma, for example, this is a considerable extension of the operative period of the divine permission.

[78] Ibid, 82.

[79] For some of the original quotes paraphrased here, see Muḥammad Ḥasan Ḥasan Jabal, *Min al-qaḍāyā al-kubrā fī al-qirāʾāt al-Qurʾāniyya* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Ādāb, 2012), 62–4.

[80] Ibid, 73.

[81] Ibid, 60–1.

[82] Ibid, 76–7.

[83] Ibid, 73.

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So, on the one hand, Jabal construed the permission for the *qirāʾāt* more narrowly while, on the other, he furnished it with a longer life. It is also worth mentioning that, for Jabal, the fact that the first generation of Qurʾān reciters read in their own dialects, without going back to the Prophet for his endorsement, is something obvious and does not even require to be substantiated by recourse to previous authorities. Jabal also seems to have found it troubling that his students at Kulliyat al-Qurʾān al-Karīm struggled with this issue.[84] In a different work, Jabal expressed the view that the dialectal variations introduced by the reciters were needed (*ḍarūrī*).[85] Thus, Dutton and Jabal seem to converge here; for Dutton also, writes that some limited variation is 'in a sense, built in to the very text'.[86]

To recapitulate the argument thus far: it is safe to say that some Muslim scholars held the divine permission hypothesis to be true—it is clearly present in the Islamic scholarly tradition. We found that the permission was variable in form and scope. According to one of its forms, which could be inferred from al-Bāqillānī, the permission was granted by the Prophet and subsequently abrogated by him during his lifetime. According to another form of the hypothesis, which seems to be more common, the permission was granted by the Prophet and remained in place until the compilation of the *muṣḥaf*, whether by Abū Bakr or ʿUthmān. Yet another form suggests that the permission granted by the Prophet remained in place until the canonization of the ten readings. Clearly there is a degree of ambiguity surrounding the topic of variant readings. First of all, it must be emphasized that the permission remains a hypothesis. Secondly, we note the arbitrary cut-off dates set by the scholars, which raises a number of questions: on what basis does al-Bāqillānī advance the view that the Prophet himself abrogated the permissibility of substituting synonyms? Is there any evidence, for Abū Shāma and others, that ʿUthmān annulled the permission? Could it be said that although ʿUthmān limited the available options, he did not rule out the permission completely? Is it even justifiable to curtail a divine permission on the basis of an alleged consensus, *ijmāʿ*, in favour of that curtailment?[87] And is there any sound basis for arguing that the

[84] Ibid, 61.

[85] Muḥammad Ḥasan Ḥasan Jabal, *Wathāqat naql al-naṣṣ al-Qurʾānī min Rasūl Allāh ṣallā Allah ʿalayhi wa-sallam ilā ummatih* (Tanta: Dār al-Ṣaḥāba li-l-Turāth, n.d. [2001]), 154.

[86] Dutton, 'Orality', 34.

[87] Cf. ibid, 42: 'So ʿUthmān's decision was not only caliphal but also effectively one of *ijmāʿ*, consensus, i.e. the consensus of the Companions, which is why, as al-Ṭabarī points out, and as Mālik's judgements and Ibn Mujāhid's legal decisions

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permission was operative until the ten readings were canonized? It appears that there is some room for speculation here. The questions are difficult to answer and remain far from resolved. Such issues notwithstanding, I hope that the paper has shown that the hypothesis was recognized and discussed in the Muslim intellectual tradition.

I now move on to the qualitative limits of the permission: was it absolute or did the Prophet place restrictions on it, and if so, what were they?

READING ACCORDING TO SENSE AS A SEMANTIC CONTROL

Reading according to sense, *al-qirāʾa bi-l-maʿnā*, has received considerable attention with a range of opinions, explanations and rejoinders available in the literature.[88] There is no need to go over that ground in this paper. My concern here is to show that the *qirāʾa bi-l-maʿnā* concept can (and should) be understood as closely linked to the divine permission hypothesis, specifically as a restriction on or control over that permission. In support of that, I reflect on two versions of a tradition attributed to the Prophet.

The tradition appears in a number of ḥadīth collections, including the *Musnad* of Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) and the *Sunan* of Abū Dāwūd (d. 275/889). Aḥmad's version, which is reported on the authority of Abū Bakra, includes: 'Read it [the Qurʾān] in accordance with seven modes of reading (*ʿalā sabʿati aḥruf*), each of which is healing and sufficing (*kulluhā shāfin kāfin*), provided that you do not end a verse of mercy with [one of] punishment, or a verse of punishment with [one of] mercy'.[89] The version of Abū Dāwūd, on the authority of Ubayy b. Kaʿb, reports that the Angel increased the concession up to seven modes

indicate, it is an act of obedience for the Muslims to abide by it, and an opening of the door of *fitna* and conflict to do anything else'.

[88] See Ibn Jinnī, *al-Muḥtasab*, i. 296; Nöldeke *et al.*, *The History of the Qurʾān*, 463–7; Goldziher, *Die Richtungen*, 33–6; ʿAbd al-Jalīl ʿAbd al-Raḥīm, *Lughat al-Qurʾān al-karīm* (Amman: Maktabat al-Risāla al-Ḥadītha, 1981), 155–75; Muḥammad Muḥammad Abū Shahba, *al-Madkhal li-dirāsat al-Qurʾān al-karīm* (Riyadh: Dār al-Liwāʾ li-l-Nashr wa-l-Tawzīʿ, 1987), 201–12; Shāhīn, *Tārīkh al-Qurʾān*, 119–35; Ṣubhī al-Ṣāliḥ, *Mabāḥith fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿIlm li-l-Malāyīn, 1977), 107–8.

[89] Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal* (vol. 34 eds. Shuʿayb al-Arnaʾūṭ, ʿĀdil Murshid and Haytham ʿAbd al-Ghafūr; Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 50 vols., 1993–; vol. 34 1999), 70–1 [ḥadīth 20425].

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of reading and, directly after that, reads: 'there is not in these modes of reading anything except what is healing and sufficing (*laysa minhā illā shāfin kāfin*); if you say [God is] Most Hearing, Most Knowing [in place of/or if you say] Most Mighty, Most Wise (*in qulta: samīʿan ʿalīman ʿazīzan ḥakīman*), [to do so is permissible/equally healing and sufficing] so long as you do not end a verse of punishment with [a word of] mercy, or a verse of mercy with [a word of] punishment'.[90]

Al-Zuhrī, in this context, allowed reading according to sense. It is reported that when he was asked about reversing the order of phrases in ḥadīth, he said that, given this (reversal) was permitted with the Qurʾān, it should be so with ḥadīth (*inna hādhā yajūzu fī al-Qurʾān fa-kayfa bihī fī al-ḥadīth*), if the meaning is rendered correctly (*idhā uṣība maʿnā al-ḥadīth*). Likewise, al-Shāfiʿī (d. 204/820), in the course of his discussion of why there are various formulas for the *tashahhud* in the ritual prayer, refers to the *qirāʾa bi-l-maʿnā* issue. After citing the incident of ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb and Hishām b. Ḥakīm (referred to above), he says that God revealed the Qurʾān in seven modes of reading, out of His mercy, knowing that human memory can fail (*maʿrifatan minhu bi-anna l-ḥifza qad yazillu*), and made it lawful for people to read the Qurʾān in different expressions as long as the meaning is not affected (*li-yuḥilla lahum qirāʾatahu wa-ini khtalafa l-lafzu fīhi mā lam yakun fī khtilāfihim iḥālatu maʿnan*). Al-Zamakhsharī also makes this same point.[91]

We see from both versions of the Prophetic tradition that the authorization of the seven *aḥruf* appears in conjunction with the concept of *al-qirāʾa bi-l-maʿnā*. The juxtaposition of the two seems to indicate that they are interrelated and intended to be taken together. While not

[90] Abū Dāwūd al-Sijistānī, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd* (vol. 2 eds. Shuʿayb al-Arnaʾūṭ and Muḥammad Kāmil Qara Balalī; Beirut: Dār al-Risāla al-ʿĀlamiyya, 7 vols., 2009), 602 [ḥadīth 1477]. Another way to render the ḥadīth would be something like: 'each one of them is healing and sufficing whether you say: [God is] Most Hearing, Most Knowing [or] Most Mighty, Most Wise'. My clarificatory insertions partly draw on Abū al-Ṭayyib Muḥammad Shams al-Ḥaqq al-ʿAẓīmābādī, *ʿAwn al-maʿbūd: sharḥ Sunan Abī Dāwūd* (ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad ʿUthmān; Madina: al-Maktaba al-Salafiyya, 2nd edn., 14 vols., 1968–69), iv. 350–1.

[91] Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī, *Siyar aʿlām al-nubalāʾ* (vol. 5 ed. Shuʿayb al-Arnaʾūṭ; Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 25 vols., 1996), 347; Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfiʿī, *al-Risāla* (ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir; Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1938–40), 273–4; al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, 1003. I learned about the views of al-Zuhrī, al-Shāfiʿī, and al-Zamakhsharī from the useful paper by Ammar Khatib and Nazir Khan, 'The origins of the variant readings of the Qur'an', available at https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/the-origins-of-the-variant-readings-of-the-Qurʾān#ftnt100 (last accessed 14 November 2021).

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altogether discounting the plausibility of some scholars' efforts to explain away the authorization of the *qirāʾa bi-l-maʿnā* in the ḥadīth,[92] I venture to say that *qirāʾa bi-l-maʿnā* is a function of the seven *aḥruf* concession—it is there because the concession is. Indeed, the rationale of the ḥadīth suggests that they were both authorized together. It follows that the ending of the seven *aḥruf* concession entails the ending of the concession to read in accordance with sense.

Further, I suggest that the *qirāʾa bi-l-maʿnā* mentioned in the second part of the ḥadīth, serves as a control over the divine permission given in the first part, namely for the seven *aḥruf*. Whereas the first part contains the concession in respect of the seven *aḥruf*, the second part sets the general limits to this concession by subjecting it to a semantic control, namely the *qirāʾa bi-l-maʿnā*. I therefore suggest seeing this control as a mechanism enabling the functionality of the seven *aḥruf* concession. It is a necessary control accompanying the divine permission; otherwise, we would have, so to speak, a door without hinges—one liable to fall out and leave an unregulated opening, or liable, in order to prevent that, to be forcibly sealed up. The *qirāʾa bi-l-maʿnā* parameter was, therefore, not a problem; it was a solution in anticipation of the proliferation of *qirāʾāt*. The regulatory principle established for the first audience of the Qurʾān was that, although some degree of fluidity here and there was permissible, the *meaning* should not be compromised. This is a wide control—simply saying that the meaning should be maintained does not offer a close control. Where do the believers draw the line?[93] While I concede that the ḥadīth sets only a *general* semantic control,

[92] For example, some have suggested that the ḥadīth only refers to God's names at the conclusion of verses, and hence the *qirāʾa bi-l-maʿnā* is restricted in two ways: it *only* applies to substituting God's names and *only when they appear in verse endings*. It has also been suggested, in another attempt to circumvent the problem, that the substitution is restricted to the individual addressed in the ḥadīth, namely the Prophet. See al-ʿAẓīmābādī, *ʿAwn al-maʿbūd*, iv. 351, and for expanded discussions, see the literature cited in n. 88. The latter explanation becomes difficult when the practice of the Companions is taken into account: it is mentioned in Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Fatḥ al-bārī bi-sharḥ al-Bukhārī* (eds. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz Ibn Bāz, Muḥammad Fuʾād ʿAbd al-Bāqī, and Muḥibb al-Dīn al-Khaṭīb; Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Salafiyya, 3rd edn., 13 vols., 1987), ix. 27, that a number of Companions were reading with synonyms even though they had not heard those readings from the Prophet (*thabata ʿan ghayri wāḥidin mina l-ṣaḥāba annahū kāna yaqraʾu bi-l-murādif wa-law lam yakun masmūʿan lah*).

[93] This point was raised by Ibn al-Anbārī (d. 328/940). See Muḥammad al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām al-Qurʾān* (vol. 21 eds. ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī and Muḥammad Riḍwān ʿIrqsūsī; Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 24 vols., 2006), 329–30.

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in the larger scheme of things, the historical record of the *qirāʾāt* stands as evidence that the first and later generations understood and knew how to apply that control. The minor variations in recitation were permitted, accepted, *and* they were, or *because* they were, faithful to the meanings of the Qurʾān—the *qirāʾa bi-l-maʿnā* parameter achieved its 'delimiting' task.

THE QURʾĀN AND THE *QIRĀʾĀT*—DOES THE DISTINCTION HOLD?

In this last section I consider the distinction between the Qurʾān and the *qirāʾāt*. In what appears to be an effort to distance the Qurʾān from the problems associated with the *qirāʾāt*, some scholars have sought to distinguish them as separable. One of the sources in which this differentiation is *explicit* is al-Zarkashī's (d. 794/1392) *al-Burhān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān*. Al-Zarkashī explains that the Qurʾān and the *qirāʾāt* are two different realities (*wa-ʿlam anna l-Qurʾān wa-l-qirāʾāt ḥaqīqatān mutaghāyiratān*) by arguing that whereas the Qurʾān is the revelation sent down upon the Prophet, the domain of the *qirāʾāt* concerns the expressions of the Qurʾān.[94] This distinction was picked up by al-Suyūṭī (d. 911/1505),[95] among others, and found its way into modern works on the *qirāʾāt*.[96] However, there is no consensus on this matter; some scholars dispute this distinction.[97] An alternative take on this issue is to say that Qurʾān and *qirāʾāt* are the same thing.

[94] Muḥammad al-Zarkashī, *al-Burhān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān* (ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm; Cairo: Maktabat Dār al-Turāth, 4 vols., n.d.), i. 318.

[95] al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān*, ii. 523.

[96] See, for example, Shāhīn, *Tārīkh al-Qurʾān*, 40; Jabal, *Min al-qaḍāyā al-kubrā*, 80–1.

[97] On this view, see Muḥammad Sālim Muḥaysin, *al-Qirāʾāt wa-atharuhā fī ʿulūm al-ʿArabiyya* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Kulliyyāt al-Azhariyya, 2 vols., 1984), i. 10. Shukrī, al-Quḍāh, and Manṣūr, *Muqaddimāt*, 49, also dispute this distinction although they try to find a way out for al-Zarkashī. They quote al-Zarkashī's *al-Burhān* to the effect that he did not deny the interrelatedness of the Qurʾān and *qirāʾāt*. However, this statement does not appear in *al-Burhān*. Additionally, its language is far from what an eighth-/fourteenth-century scholar might have written. This statement, which recurs in other modern works too, appears to have been misattributed to al-Zarkashī—at least, it is not found in the printed editions of *al-Burhān*. Another scholar who seems to object to this distinction is Al-Imam, *Variant Readings of the Qurʾan*, 88, as he writes, after quoting al-Zarkashī: 'In

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But before I explain that alternative, it is worth noting that an *explicit* separation of the *qirāʾāt* from the Qurʾān marks a break with, at least the majority of, the scholarship on *qirāʾāt* before al-Zarkashī. In the fourth century AH Ibn Abī Dāwūd gave to the chapter on Prophetic readings in his *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif* the following title: 'The readings reported from the Prophet are to be treated as his codex' (*mā ruwiya ʿani l-Nabiyyi mina l-qirāʾāti fa-huwa ka-muṣḥafih*).[98] Here Ibn Abī Dāwūd equates the *qirāʾāt* with a hypothetical Prophetic *muṣḥaf*. This *muṣḥaf* and the *qirāʾāt* are not seen as separate; rather, the *qirāʾāt* are seen as constitutive of the *muṣḥaf*. The inseparability of Qurʾān and *qirāʾāt* can also be inferred from al-Rāzī's (d. 606/1210) comments on the variants in Q. 20:63. He writes that the notable scholars ruled that the 'irregular variants' in Q. 20:63—meaning those not transmitted by *tawātur*—should not be accepted, for if we allow any addition to the Qurʾān by way of isolated mono-transmitted reports, we cannot definitively say that what we have to hand is the complete Qurʾān. That is because, he adds, if these 'irregular readings' are accepted as part of the Qurʾān (*maʿa kawnihā mina l-Qurʾān*), even though they were not transmitted to us by *tawātur*, then the same claim could be made for yet more 'irregular readings' too,[99] and open the door to the destabilization of the Qurʾān. What is most relevant here is that al-Rāzī treats the *qirāʾāt* as *mina l-Qurʾān*, 'in and of' the Qurʾān. Indeed, it is precisely because *qirāʾāt* are *mina l-Qurʾān* that controls such as ruling out 'irregular readings' are applied by al-Rāzī and the scholars he is quoting. This lends more weight to my contention that the line between the Qurʾān and *qirāʾāt* is blurred.

We can now look more closely into the distinction between Qurʾān and *qirāʾāt*. For those who adopt the view that all the *qirāʾāt* are divinely inspired/authorized, the distinction cannot stand inasmuch as every *qirāʾa* is then a building block of the Word of God. The position of those who hold that the *qirāʾāt* were later inventions is consistent with a distinction between the Qurʾān and the *qirāʾāt* on the ground that their authorship is distinct—and this position is coherent with the view of those who assume the existence of an *ur*-Qurʾān.[100] However, the

fact, no major difference exists between the authentic recitations and the Qur'an, and the relation between them is that of the parts to the whole'.

[98] Ibn Abī Dāwūd, *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif*, i. 388.

[99] Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Tafsīr al-Fakhr al-Rāzī: al-mushtahir bi-l-Tafsīr al-kabīr wa-Mafātīḥ al-ghayb* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 32 vols., 1981–85), xxii. 75.

[100] For a discussion on the *ur*-Qurʾān, see Fred Donner, 'The Qurʾān in recent scholarship: challenges and desiderata' in Gabriel Said Reynolds (ed.), *The Qurʾān in Its Historical Context* (London: Routledge, 2008): 29–50, at 31–43, and the rejoinder in Dutton, 'Orality', 44–9.

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either/or option is not the only one. The view that some of the *qirāʾāt* are *not* divinely inspired entails that there is some distance between *qirāʾāt* and Qurʾān, a partial distinction. If the divine permission hypothesis is accepted, how should we regard, on the one hand, the *qirāʾāt* initiated by the Companions and approved by the Prophet and, on the other, those *qirāʾāt* initiated by the Companions under the general permission but without reverting to the Prophet for explicit divine assent? Although these are moot points, it could be said that the *qirāʾāt* initiated by the Companions which received Prophetic approval are 'in and of' the Qurʾān. As for the *qirāʾāt* that emerged under the general permission without specific Prophetic authorization, I am less confident. However, I would conjecture that they were deemed to be 'in and of' the Qurʾān in the eyes of the Companions inasmuch as they presumably recited those *qirāʾāt* in their ritual prayer. At least for the first generation, I would think, there was in practice no distinction between the Qurʾān and the *qirāʾāt*.

CONCLUSION

Various theories for the emergence of the *qirāʾāt* have been suggested. This paper has proposed an alternative, the divine permission hypothesis. Its core argument is that eminent scholars until at least the ninth/fifteenth century believed that from its inception the Qurʾānic revelation was accompanied by a divine permission allowing the first recipients of the Qurʾān some flexibility in reading it. What followed from this permission is the circulation of variant readings that did not have one and the same divine authority. They ranged from those directly taught by the Prophet, to those approved by him, to those generated by the Companions under the general divine permission but without any referral to the Prophet. It was also believed, by some of the scholars who endorsed the divine permission hypothesis, that this flexibility, controlled within strict semantic boundaries, was lifted during the Prophet's lifetime, by others of them that it lasted up to the time of the ʿUthmānic codex, even though that codex is said to have included only the *qirāʾāt* at the upper end of the divine authority continuum—those explicitly taught by the Prophet and confirmed to him during the final review (*al-ʿarḍa al-akhīra*).

While the divine permission hypothesis may not be the only tenable account of the emergence of the *qirāʾāt*, it does have the merit of satisfactorily accounting for many of the problems connected with the *qirāʾāt*

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and, more widely, the history of the Qurʾān. Its explanatory efficacy is evident in a number of areas:

it allows us to take much more of what is said in the Islamic tradition at face value;

it is able to accommodate the statements of ʿUmar and ʿUthmān that the Qurʾān was revealed in the dialect of Quraysh;

it is consistent with the *qirāʾa bi-l-maʿnā* traditions;

it streamlines our understanding of the so-called 'Companion codices' problem;

it offers a useful perspective on the discomfort of some Companions with some *qirāʾāt*;

it accounts for the existence of an unlimited number of variants in early Islam (*al-ṣadr al-awwal*) as Ibn al-Jazarī points out;[101] and, finally,

it enables a more charitable interpretation of the line of *qirāʾāt* critique associated with such towering figures in the history of Qurʾānic scholarship as al-Ṭabarī and al-Zamakhsharī[102]—for, as I have suggested, the permission hypothesis is a way to understand their general argument and their particular criticisms.

That said, I do not claim that the divine permission hypothesis resolves all the questions associated with the emergence of the *qirāʾāt*. Rather, it leaves a number of questions unanswered that offer directions for future research. Among these are—how to distinguish between the *qirāʾāt* that the Prophet actually recited and those that he tacitly endorsed;—how and by what criteria to identify, if one both accepts the permission hypothesis *and* attributes *qirāʾāt* to difficulties with the *rasm*, the variants resulting from these different prompts; —can it be convincingly demonstrated that the divine permission lasted beyond the stabilization of the text as a *muṣḥaf*, beyond the generation of the Companions. Finally, it would be of the highest interest to

[101] Ibn al-Jazarī comments on the view espousing that the widely transmitted variants are unlimited (*lā ḥadda lahā*) by saying that if it is meant by that view the first generation of Islam, then it is possible. See Ibn al-Jazarī, *Munjid al-muqriʾīn*, 16. Clearly, then, Ibn al-Jazarī does not see a problem with saying that there were numerous, in fact unlimited, variants in the formative period of the *qirāʾāt*.

[102] This is to say that their criticisms of the *qirāʾāt*, understood in light of the divine permission hypothesis, could be taken as a criticism of the variants which they thought were initiated by the Companions, not the divinely inspired variants.

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be able to understand how and when, and for what reasons, the dominant emphasis among believers came to be that the Qurʾān is and always was entirely and exclusively God's speech dictated to God's Messenger. Many of the issues around the formative history of the Qurʾān remain, for the present, unresolved, and may well be unresolvable, but they undoubtedly deserve further reflection and research.

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