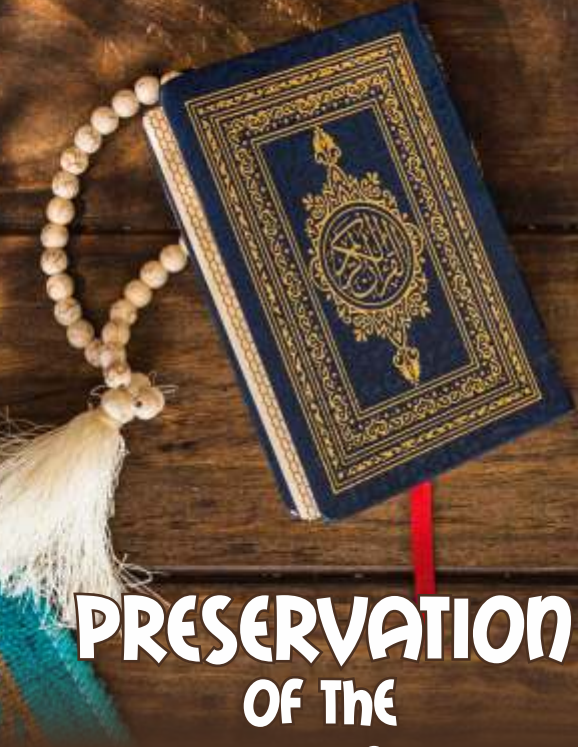


Search of Truth, Series-25



PRESERVATION OF THE QUR'AN



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PRESERVATION OF THE QUR'AN

The Glorious Qur'an was revealed in Arabic to the Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, through the angel Gabriel. The revelation occurred piecemeal, over a period of twenty-three years, sometimes in brief verses and sometimes in longer chapters. The revelation started on 17th August, 610 AD and completed in March 632 AD, 3 months prior to the Prophet's demise.

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

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

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

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

THE ORAL FORM

The Prophet encouraged his Companions to learn each verse that was revealed and transmit it to others. The Qur'an was also required to be recited regularly as an act of worship, especially during the daily meditative prayers (*salah*). Through these means, many repeatedly heard passages from the revelation recited to them, memorised them and used them in prayer. The entire Qur'an was memorised verbatim (word for word) by some of the Prophet's Companion. Among them were Zaid ibn Thabit, Ubayy ibn Ka'b, Muadh ibn Jabal, and Abu Zaid, etc.

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

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

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

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

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

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

seldom been fully appreciated in the West.”

The Qur'an is the only book, religious or secular, that has been memorised completely by millions of people. Leading orientalist Kenneth Cragg reflects that:

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

THE WRITTEN FORM

The entire Qur'an was however also recorded in writing at the time of revelation from the Prophet's dictation, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, by some of his literate Companions, the most prominent of them being Zaid ibn Thabit. Others among his noble scribe were Ubayy ibn Ka'b, Ibn Mas'ud, Mu'awiyah ibn Abi-Sufiyan, Khalid ibn Waleed, and Zubair ibn Awwam. The verses were recorded on leather, parchment, scapulae (shoulder bones of animals) and the stalks of date palms.

The codification of the Qur'an (i.e. into a 'book form') was done soon after the battle of Yamamah (11 AH/633 CE), after the Prophet's death, during the Caliphate of Abu Bakr. Many Companions became martyrs at that battle, and it was feared that unless a written copy of the entire revelation was produced, large parts of the Qur'an might be lost with the death of those who had memorised it. Therefore, at the

suggestion of Umer to collect the Qur'an in the form of writing, Zaid ibn Thabit was requested by Abu Bakr to head a committee which would gather together the scattered recordings of the Qur'an and prepare a *mus'haf* – loose sheets which bore the entire revelation on them. To safeguard the compilation from errors, the committee accepted only materials which had been written down in the presence of the Prophet himself, and which could be verified by at least two reliable witnesses who had actually heard the Prophet recite the passage in question. Once completed and unanimously approved by the Prophet's Companions, these sheets were kept with the Caliph Abu Bakr (d. 13 AH/634 CE), then passed on to the Caliph Umar (13-23 AH/634-644 CE), and then Umar's daughter and the Prophet's widow, Hafsa.

The third Caliph Uthman (23-35 AH/644-656 CE) requested Hafsa to send him the manuscript of the Qur'an which was in her safekeeping, and ordered the production of several bounded copies of it (*mus'ahif*, sing. *Mus'haf*). This task was entrusted to the Companions Zaid ibn Thabit, Abdullah ibn Az-Zubair, Sa'eed ibn As-As, and Abdur-Rahman ibn Harith ibn Hisham. Upon completion (in 25 AH/646 CE), Uthman returned the original manuscript to Hafsa and sent the copies to the major Islamic provinces.

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

“... the text which has come down to us in the form in which it was organised and approved by the Prophet.... What we have today in our hands is the *mus'haf* of Muhammad.”

Kenneth Cragg describes the transmission of the Qur'an from the time of revelation to today as occurring in "unbroken living sequence of devotion." Schwally concurs that:

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

The historical credibility of the Qur'an is further established by the fact that one of the copies sent out by the Caliph Uthman is still in existence today. It lies in the Museum of the city of Tashkent in Uzbekistan, Central Asia. According to the Memory of World Program, UNESCO, an arm of the United Nations, 'it is the definitive version, known as the *Mus'haf* of Uthman.' This manuscript, held by the Muslim Board of Uzbekistan, is the earliest existent written version of the Qur'an.

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

The Institute of Koranforschung, for

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

THE RETAINED BOOK

Thus due to the efforts of the early Companions, with God's Grace, the Qur'an as we have it today is recited in the same manner as it was revealed. This makes it the only religious scripture that is still completely retained and understood in its original language. Indeed as Sir William Muir states, **“There is probably no other book in the world which has remained for twelve centuries [now almost fifteen] with so pure a text.”**

The evidence above confirms God's promise in the Qur'an:

“Verily, We have revealed the reminder, and verily We shall preserve it.” (Qur'an 15:9)

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

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