

American Orientalists on Collection and Compilation of the Qur'an: An analysis of Robert Spencer's Views

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Abstract

Orientalists have criticized Holy Quran for the satisfaction of their sinister and multifarious motives since dawn .There has been a great difference of opinion between Muslim scholars and the Orientalists on the preservation of book of Allah. They have refuted the services of companions in collection and compilation of the Quran. Robert Spencer is included in the list of those Orientalists who have completed their Quran commentaries and presented their views about this particular topic. This paper studies approach of Robert Spencer towards the preservation and compilation of the Qur'an. Like other western scholars and Orientalists, he claims that the existing Qur'an is not identical with the one that was offered by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) to his followers. He views that it was compiled by Muhammad's companions after his death and in the process of compilation, Qur'an lost its originality. After the analytical study this paper reveals that the aforesaid stance is based on prejudice or willful ignorance about the textual history of the Qur'an. In fact, Qur'an was revealed by Allah Almighty and is completely preserved without even a minor change or disruption.

Key words: Orientalists, Qur'an, Spencer, Compilation

Introduction

Almost all orientalists are of the view that the revelation of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was only on oral basis. He himself had not thought to compose it in book shape.¹ He did not order to write the Qur'an nor did he manage to save it in written form. Some of his companions made their private codices on behalf of material which they had obtained from Prophet (PBUH).² It was not put together in written form until well after Muhammad's (PBUH) death.³ During Hazrat Muhammad's (PBUH) lifetime verses were written on palm-leaves, stones and any material that came to hand. Their collection was completed during the caliphate of Hazrat Umar (R.A), the second Caliph and an authorized version was established during the caliphate of Hazrat Uthmān (R.A).⁴ Almost all orientalists are of the same view.

Arthur Jeffery (1892-1959) said that Hazrat Uthman (R.A) omitted various parts of Qur'an during its final editing and he also added some material in it for his political purposes. According to orientalists the version of Qur'an now we possess is not the text compiled by Hazrat Zayd (R.A). They view that with the passage of time various corruptions occurred in the text. They opine that they can find numerous mistakes made by the copyists. For instance James A. Bellamy in his "Some Proposed Emendations to the Text of The

Koran” gave several examples of this hypothesis when he writes, “Hasab occurred in 21:98 is a mistake of copyist. The original word is hatab.”⁵ He also mentioned that Ummah, Abb, Sijjil, hittah, surhunna, Sabun minal-mathani, tamanna, Illa amaniya, sibghat Allah and ashab al-aaraf are wrongly cited by copyist.⁶

Robert Spencer’s⁷ Views about Collection and Compilation of the Qur’an

Robert Spencer narrates the revelation of the Quran in his Quran commentary in these words: “According to Islamic tradition, Gabriel first began visiting Muhammad and giving him sections of the Qur’an, a perfect copy of the “mother of the book” (43:4) that has always existed in Paradise with Allah, in the year 610. Over the next twenty-three years, Gabriel delivered Qur’anic revelations to Muhammad piecemeal. Some were written down, others memorized by various followers of Muhammad. According to Islamic tradition, the Qur’an was not collected together when Muhammad died in 632, and early Muslims were reluctant to do so, since Muhammad had not done it himself.”⁸

He further writes that when some of those who had memorized portions of the Qur’ān were killed in battle, some Muslims “began to press for its collection, the rejection of variant readings, and the codification and distribution of the agreed-upon text”.⁹

He further shows his theory when he writes:

“That is, again according to Islamic tradition, supposed to have taken place in the year 653, under the direction of the caliph Uthman, the third successor of Muhammad. However, this account, however widely accepted, lacks any contemporary attestation and is likely to be more legend than historical fact.”¹⁰

Robert Spencer also denies the efforts of Hazrat Uthman in this regard when he writes:

“Although Uthman is supposed to have distributed his Qur’an to the various Muslim provinces, virtually no trace of the book, such as quotes or even mentions of its existence, exist from the time it is supposed to have been completed (632), or from when it is supposed to have been distributed throughout the Islamic world (653).”¹¹

Compilation of the Qur’an in the light of the Islamic Sources

The Qur’an had been compiled during the life of Prophet (PBUH). A brief history of the compilation of Qur’an is being given here.

Compilation of the Qur’an in the Life of Prophet (PBUH)

Allah Almighty says, “Yet they say: Fables of ancient times which have caused to be written down, so that they might be read out to him at morning and evening.”¹² al-Furqan is a Makkan Surah. The words (he has caused to be written down) are a sufficient proof of Jama al-Qur’an in writing since its very beginning. It was accepted by the contemporaries of Prophet as we have seen in the above mentioned verse. So it is clear that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) had scribes whom he ordered to write down the revelation of the Qur’an on materials available at time. Whenever the prophet (PBUH) received a verse or verses, he commanded one of his scribes immediately to write down the revelation and arrange it on its place in Suras of Qur’an.¹³ Several traditions support this view, that every revealed verse was written down immediately then it was put in a pre-ordained order and kept in a safe place.¹⁴

Some scribes were assigned permanently to write down the revelation, being given the title of katibin al-Wahi. Whereas some scribes were called to write down revelations occasionally.¹⁵ Many scholars tried to count the number of scribes by using the sources. Ibn Kathir (1300 – 1373) count the number of scribes twenty-

two¹⁶, and as a general opinion it is accepted that the number of scribes exceed to 40. Most famous scribes are Uthman (R.A.), Ali, Ubai b. Kab, Zayd b. Thabit (R.A)..¹⁷ Later Hazrat Zaid was known as Katib an Nabi and Katib al-Wahi.¹⁸

The Prophet said: “Call Zayd for me and let him bring the board, the inkpot and the scapula bone (or the scapula bone and the inkpot). Then he said: write: la yastawi.”¹⁹ It is also reported that material upon which the revelation had been written down was kept in the house of Prophet (PBUH).²⁰

To ensure that the Qur’an would not be confused with his own utterances, the Prophet (PBUH) is reported to have ordered his companions to write nothing except the Qur’an and who have written down anything other than Qur’an erase it.²¹

As a result the entire revelation is said to have been gradually secured, kept in written form in a pre-ordained order and stored in the prophet's house.

The Prophet permitted to a number of companions to have their own copies of Qur’an (in form of fragments) in addition to memorizing Qur’an.²² The most famous among them, who are said to have taught many others are the following: Uthman, Ali, Ubai b. Kaab, Abu ad-Darda, Zayd b. Thabit, Abd Allah b. Masud, Abu Musa al-Ashari, Salim (the maula of Hudhayfa), and Muaadh b. Jabal (R.A).²³ Thus the Qur’an was memorized by many companions and was all written down in the form that has come down to us (i.e., the same verses and as in the very same order).²⁴

It is clear now that whole Qur’an was written down in the life of prophet (PBUH). It was safe and secure not only in written form but orally also. Dr. Hamidullah says:

“It was the custom of the Prophet (PHUH) that immediately after dictating he would ask his companions to memorize the text and repeat it daily during the two prayers – at that time only two prayer were ordained. It was only after the Ascension that five prayers became obligatory and people began to repeat the verses of the Qur’an Five times during their daily prayers. Indeed, it was the Prophet (p.b.u.h.) who, for the first time, ordered the memorizing, together with the writing of the scripture, i.e. the Qur’an.”²⁵

The allegation of Robert Spencer that the Prophet himself had no idea to write down a book or to save the revelation is entirely baseless. The verse mentioned above proves it.

There is no ambiguity now that what has been written by the scribes it was read out to Prophet (PBUH). One of the Hadith also supports this fact: “The Prophet has disallowed the carrying along of the Qur’an in enemy’s land...”²⁶

Some other historical evidences shed light on the written form of Qur’an. The well known report about Hazrat Umar (R.A) conversion shows that large passages of the revelation had already been written down even at a very early time, in Makka, long before hijra. Another report informs us that when people came from Madina to learn about Islam, they were provided with copies of the Surahs of Qur’an, to read and learn them by heart.²⁷ More over during his last pilgrimage, at the sermon to the large gathering of Muslims, the Prophet said: “I have left with you something which if you will hold fast to it you will never fall into error – a plain indication, the book of God, and the practice of his Prophet.”²⁸

These words indicate towards a written document. So the hypothesis of Robert Spencer that Qur’an was not saved in written form and that is was written fifty years later than the death of Prophet has no basis at all. Interestingly, the most celebrated orientalist William Muir attests that the Qur’an was written down and was secured in the life of Prophet (PBUH).²⁹

Reign of Hazrat Abū Bakr (R.A)

The Companions and their followers relied on memorizing the Qur'an. In addition, they had their personal manuscripts. Although the Qur'an was completed in the life of Muhammad (PBUH) but it was not bound in a book shape. People have the copies of Qur'an and they did not face any problem in this respect. In 12 A.H, when seventy of Huffaz were killed in Yamama's battle fighting against Musaylma.³⁰ Forty huffaz and possibly seventy had been killed earlier in the battle of Bir Mauna. Hazrat Umar (R.A) got worried and he came to Abu Bakr ((R.A)) with the suggestion that the Qur'an should be compiled in a single book as a safeguard against the loss of some parts of the records or the death of the Huffaz.³¹

Hazrat Abu Bakr (R.A) hesitated to do so but after a while he took the matter carefully and agreed with Hazrat Umar (R.A).He called Zayd b. Thabit (R.A) because he was the well-known scribe of Prophet and Hafiz of the Qur'an. He had checked through the text with the Prophet (PBUH) after the Prophet (PBUH) had recited it in presence of Jibrail (A.S).He was also skilled at writing the Qur'an.³² Imam Bukhari has quoted the tradition of this compilation in detail in his book.

Zayd was afraid of carrying out this task because he felt that he could not do something that the Prophet had not ordered him to do. Abu Bakr (R.A) finally persuaded him, and he started the work by comparing the Prophet's record with the memorized and written versions of those of the Huffaz who were available in Madina. He then wrote out the entire text in book form and presented the mushaf to Hazrat Abu Bakr (R.A).

The mushaf remained with Abu Bakr (R.A) until he died, then with Umar (R.A) until the end of his life, and then with Hazrat Hafsa (R.A), the daughter of Umar (R.A) and the wife of the Prophet, who was the executor for her father, and was herself a Hafiza.³³ This was because Hazrat Umar (R.A) had died before the final nomination of the third caliph.³⁴ At this time disputes arose about the reading of the Qur'an among the Qurra (i.e., readers) because some of the Companions and the followers were teaching students in the cities they were sent to in versions that differed in various ways and also because the Companions were reciting the Qur'an in the seven ahruf they were permitted to use.

Reign of Hazrat Uthman (R.A)

By the time of Hazrat Uthman (R.A), disputes among the readers became so heated that they were accusing each other of unbelief (kufr). Many complaints were brought before Uthman (R.A)., urging him to take action to avert fighting and division among the Muslims. Such disputes occurred in many places: Madina to Kufa, Basra, Syria, and the military camps. Hudhayfa b. al Yaman was in the battle zones of Armenia and Azerbaijan and he witnessed these disputes among Muslims. He got annoyed and hastened to Madina to suggest to Hazrat Uthman (R.A) a unified reading of the Qur'an. He addressed him saying: "O Chief of the Believers! Save this Umma before they differ about the Book as the Jews and the Christians did before".³⁵

Consequently, Hazrat Uthman (R.A) called the Muhajirun and Ansar for consultation. All of them agreed and encouraged him to unify the reading of the Qur'an.³⁶ Imam Bukhari narrated further actions as: "Uthman (R.A) sent a message to Hafsa saying Send us the manuscript of the Qur'an, so that we may compile the Qur'anic materials in perfect copies and return the manuscript to you. Hafsa sent the manuscript to Uthman (R.A). Uthman (R.A) then ordered Zayd b. Thabit, Abd Allah Ibn az Zubayr, Said bin al Aa, and Abd ar Rahman bin Harith b. Hisham (R.A) to write the manuscripts in perfect copies. Uthman (R.A) said to the Qurayshi men, If you disagree with Zayd b. Thabit on any point in the Qur'an, write it in the dialect (lisan) of Quraysh as the Qur'an

was revealed in their tongue. They did so and when they had written many copies, Uthman (R.A) returned the original manuscript to Hafsa (R.A). To every Muslim region, Uthman (R.A) sent one copy and ordered that all the other Qur'anic materials, whether whole of fragmentary manuscripts, be burnt."³⁷

The Companions, the learned men, and the leading figures agreed with Uthman (R.A) and approved the decision he had made, including Hazrat Ali (R.A). He is reported as having said:"...he did nothing without the consolation and consent of all Companions, and, furthermore, that if he was in Uthman's position he would have done the same thing."³⁸

Hazrat Ali (R.A) is reported to have confronted those who rebelled against Uthman (R.A) and said to them that Uthman (R.A) burnt only the maṣāḥif that varied from the final revelation and preserved that which was agreed upon.³⁹

In fact, Muslims in general admired Uthman's action and agreed to it unanimously (with exception of Ibn Masud) because Hazrat Uthman (R.A) united them on one mushaf, cleansed from any abrogated versions, and freed it from any aahaad reading or any interpretation that may have been added to the text.⁴⁰

Only Ibn Masud (R.A) is reported to be angry with this action of Uthman (R.A). It is said that he refused to give his mushaf back to Uthman (R.A) to be burnt and to have told his students to do the same.⁴¹ Some reasons of his behavior are mentioned by scholars as follows:

“Ibn Masud is said to have felt ignored or insulted when he was not asked to join the committee set up to compile the Qur'an. He is quoted as having said that he had been taught seventy Suras by the Prophet (PBUH), while Zayd b. Thabit was a young boy playing with children.”⁴²

The reason Hazrat Uthman (R.A) did not include Ibn Masud is discussed by al Asqalani, who points out that Ibn Masud was not in Madina at the time when Uthman (R.A) urgently appointed the committee. He was in Kufa at that particular time. Furthermore, Uthman (R.A) did nothing more than reproduce the pages compiled by the command of Abu Bakr into one mushaf. In the times of Abu Bakr and of Uthman, Zayd bin Thabit (R.A) had the privilege of being the scribe in charge of compilation.”⁴³

Conclusion

Historical evidences shed light on the fact that the general approval i.e. Ijma and confidence of the companions accorded the Uthmanic text. Companions followed in the particulars of Qur'anic recitation. All the material we find in commentaries and other books attributed to companions as their reading, has been preserved only because of its explanatory value or as a precious scholarly inheritance attributed to the most remarkable and respected figures of Islamic history. There is no doubt that sooner or later all the companions declared their approval to Uthmanic text, so variation or authenticity of Uthmanic text is only a hypothesis of orientalists. They have no authentic material to present as a proof of their so-called research.

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3 James Kritzeck, Anthology of Islamic Literature, 1st ed (New York,. 1966), 33

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- 4 John, L. Esposito, *Islam the Straight Path*, (London: Oxford University Press 1988), 20
- 5 James A Bellamy, “Some Proposed Emendations to the Text of the Koran” in *What the Koran Really Says*, ed. Ibn Warraq (New York: Prometheus 1999), 489
- 6 James A. Bellamy, Some Proposed Emendations to the Text of the Koran , *Journal of the American Oriental Society*. 113, no. 4 (Oct. – Dec 1993):491-505.
- 7 Robert Spencer is an American anti-Islamic writer. He was born in 1962 and has a background in Catholic Christianity. He got his Master Degree from University of Chapal Hill. He is a Director of the website Jihad Watch. He has published more than twenty books on Islam, Quran and other themes. His two books have been the New York Times best seller books. He also wrote a Quran commentary, “*Blogging the Quran*”. He has published his new Quran commentary, “*The Critical Quran: The key Islamic commentary and Contemporary Historical Research*” in November 2021
- ⁸ Robert Spencer, *The Critical Qur’an: Explained from Key Islamic Commentaries and Contemporary Historical Research* (New York: Post Hill Press, 2021), 15.
- 9 Spencer, *The Critical Qur’an*, 15.
- ¹⁰ Spencer, *The Critical Qur’an*, 15.
- ¹¹ Spencer, *The Critical Qur’an*, 16.
- 12 Al-Furqan, 25:5
- 13 Muhammad Husain al-Baghawi Masud, *Sharh as-Sunna*, ed. Zuhair ash-Shawish, (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islami 1997), 4: 522
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- 18 al-Asqalani, *Fathul Bari*, 9:16-18
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- 35 Bukhari, al-Jami, 433
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- 37 Bukhari, al-Jami, 433

38 Bukhari, al-Jami, 433

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