



Can the Qur'an Be Recited in Different Ways? The Meaning and Wisdom of Qira'at

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Introduction

If the Qur'an is truly one timeless, unchanged book, how can it be read in multiple ways? What is the meaning behind these multiple readings (*qirā'āt*), and how many are there? Did the Prophet ﷺ use all these different readings? Is this beneficial knowledge for non-experts? Will it enrich my Qur'anic experience? This article provides a brief account of the origins and canonization of the *qirā'āt*, the nature of their differences, their number and geographical distribution, and an introduction to the concept of multi-formic Qur'anic modes of recitation and their concomitant layers of meaning.

The *qirā'āt* are not marginal phenomena irrelevant to resolving practical challenges. Rather, they have historically played an important role in accommodating Arabic dialectal differences, and currently have been drawing academic attention given their importance in accessing under-researched studies of the Qur'an. More significantly, the *qirā'āt* continue to expand and enrich readers' lived experiences with revelation. Indeed, as will become clear, the study of *qirā'āt* extends far beyond recital renditions or exegetical traditions to broach such subjects as theological conceptions of the Qur'an, its inimitability, and textual authenticity. The *qirā'āt* also critically contribute to our understanding of the Qur'an as the primary source of Islamic law.

This article demonstrates how knowledge of *qirā'āt* provides an opportunity for a deeper connection with layers of Qur'anic meanings. Part I defines the concept of the 'seven *ahruf*' and how they relate to *qirā'āt* as we know them today. Part II lists the ten canonical *qirā'āt* and introduces their imams/reciters (*qurrā'*) and their transmitters (*ruwāh*). Part III explains how all these readings are considered Qur'an and addresses the question of which reading is most authentic. Part IV documents the spread of *qirā'āt* in the Muslim world throughout history until today. Part V highlights the wisdom behind revealing and allowing different modes

of reciting the Qur'an, and provides tips for how *qirā'āt* may assist with one's *tadabbur* of the Qur'an.¹

The hadith of the seven *aḥruf* and the origins of the *qirā'āt*

Any discussion of the Qur'an's different readings is premised on understanding the term *aḥruf* (singular: *ḥarf*), which linguistically means 'seven-sided.' In an authentic hadith that reached the distinguished level of mass-transmission (*tawātur*),² the Prophet ﷺ said: "Jibrīl recited the Qur'an to me in one *ḥarf*. Then I requested him [to read it in another *ḥarf*] and continued asking him to recite in other *aḥruf* until he ultimately recited it in seven *aḥruf*." In another narration, the Prophet ﷺ says, "O Jibrīl! I have been sent to an illiterate nation among whom are the elderly woman, the old man, the boy and the girl, and the man who cannot read a book at all." Jibrīl replied: 'O Muhammad! Indeed the Qur'an was revealed in seven *aḥruf* [i.e., seven different ways of reciting]."³

The practice of reciting in various *aḥruf* was also approved by the Prophet ﷺ when 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb and Hishām ibn Ḥakīm disagreed in their recitation of *Sūrah al-Furqān*. The Prophet ﷺ commented on two different recitations by saying, "It was revealed to be recited in this way." He added, "This Qur'an has been revealed to be recited in seven different *aḥruf*, so recite it whichever way is easier for you."⁴

So what exactly, are the seven *aḥruf*? Our tradition furnishes us with a number of opinions. Three concepts encompass the overwhelming majority of them: that the seven *aḥruf* are seven dialects, seven modes (*awjuh*) of reading, or seven types of

¹ For a detailed treatment of the topic of *tadabbūr*, see Yousef Wahb and Mohammad ElShinawy, "Keys to Tadabbur: How to Reflect Deeply on the Qur'an," *Yaqeen*, April 2021, <https://yaqeeninstitute.ca/read/paper/keys-to-tadabbur-how-to-reflect-deeply-on-the-Qur'an>.

² Abū al-Khayr ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr fī al-qirā'āt al-ashr*, ed. 'Alī Muḥammad al-Ḍabbā', 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2006), 1:24.

³ *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī*, no. 2944.

⁴ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, no. 5041.

phrases. Although each concept may not independently explain the totality of the seven *aḥruf*, together they provide a holistic understanding of the ways in which different pronunciations of Qur’anic text are permitted. Irrespective of which definition of *aḥruf* is adopted, it is a matter of scholarly consensus that the seven *aḥruf* result in different, yet equally valid, readings.

In commenting on verse 4:83, “Do they not reflect upon the Qur’an? If it had been from other than Allah, they would have found within it much contradiction,” al-Jaṣṣāṣ (d. 370/981) said, “Contradictory meanings do not exist in the Qur’an at all. Rather, all [seemingly contradictory] differences are perfectly coherent in meaning, wisdom, and proof-value.”⁵ Ibn al-Jazarī also stated,

The reality, and the benefit, of the differences among the *aḥruf* established by the Prophet ﷺ is that they are differences of complementation and harmony, not contradiction or inconsistency. Indeed, [contradiction or inconsistency] is impossible to exist in the speech of Allah.⁶

The *aḥruf* hadiths established that the Qur’an is “inherently a multiform recitation,”⁷ which unleashed a massive wave of traditional and modern scholarship seeking to tease out the theological and scriptural implications of this linguistic pluralism. The significance of the concept of *aḥruf* and its surrounding discourses are reflected in four critical topics related to Divine textual authenticity: the revelatory methods of the Qur’an, the compilation of the Qur’an, the orthography of the Qur’anic codex (*rasm al-muṣḥaf*), and the *qirā’āt*.

The Prophet’s plea to ease Qur’anic recitation, as recorded in the aforementioned hadiths, was likely prompted by the particular sociocultural dynamics of Medina, where the growing Muslim population now comprised diverse tribal, dialectical,

⁵ Al-Jaṣṣāṣ, *al-Fuṣūl fī al-usūl*, ed. Jāsim al-Naṣhamī, 2nd ed, 4 vols. (Kuwait: Wizārat al-Awqāf wal-Shū’un al-Islāmiyah, 1994), 1:377.

⁶ Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Naṣhr*, 1:49–50.

⁷ Ammar Khatib and Nazir Khan, “The Origins of the Variant Readings of the Qur’an,” *Yaqeen*, August 2019, <https://yaqeeninstitute.ca/read/paper/the-origins-of-the-variant-readings-of-the-Qur'an>.

and ethnic backgrounds, while illiteracy was widespread.⁸ These dynamics caused the Muslim community to need: 1) Qur'an teachers, since the Prophet ﷺ would not be able to individually teach each new Muslim; and 2) cultural accommodations, since people's varying linguistic customs and mental capacities posed barriers to mastering the meticulous rules of recitation.

To address the first need, the Prophet ﷺ publicly identified Qur'an teachers such as 'Abdullah ibn Mas'ūd, Sālim ibn Ma'qil, Mu'ādh ibn Jabal, and Ubayy ibn Ka'b.⁹ 'Ubādah ibn al-Sāmit narrated that, "the Prophet ﷺ would get busy; when an immigrant man came to him [to embrace Islam], the Prophet ﷺ would assign one of us to teach him Qur'an."¹⁰

To address the second need, the Prophet ﷺ asked Allah to ease the recitation of Qur'an for his *ummah*. Hence, the seven *aḥruf* were the result of a prophetic request honored by Allah, which indicates that the *aḥruf* are, in part, a concession (*rukḥṣah*) to ease the reading of Qur'an for all Muslims. This means that reading in any of the seven *aḥruf* is permitted and that all of them are correct—not as variants of a fixed original text, but rather, as recitations of a singular but multiform text.¹¹ Despite the disagreement over the exact meaning of the *aḥruf*, there is widespread scholarly agreement that the *qirā'āt* were a result of the *aḥruf's* *rukḥṣah*. The number seven provides a particular number of identifiable modes of recitation.

Jibrīl's declaration that "the Qur'an was revealed in seven *aḥruf*" signifies that these *aḥruf* are divinely mandated. It also means that the primary way to learn these *aḥruf* is through transmission connected to the Prophet's direct teaching or

⁸ One narration of the hadith, reported by Ubay b. Ka'b, reported that the Prophet ﷺ was near the *adāt* (watering place) of Banū Ghifār, which is a place in Medina. Another narration states that Jibril met the Prophet ﷺ near Aḥjār al-Mīra, which is near Qubā in Madinah. However, this does not mean that only the Medinan Qur'an was permitted to be recited in seven *aḥruf*. The story of 'Umar and Hisham's argument was over *Surah al-Furqan*, which was revealed in Mecca.

⁹ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'an*, ed. Aḥmad ibn 'Alī, 4 vols (Cairo: Dār al-Hadith, 2006), 1:219–26.

¹⁰ *Musnad Aḥmad*, no. 22766.

¹¹ Some scholars noted the inadequacy of the term "variant" in describing the Qur'an or its canonical readings since there is not a singular fixed original but the original itself is multiform. See Yasin Dutton, "Orality, Literacy and the 'Seven Aḥruf' Hadith," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 23, no. 1 (2012): 1–49; also see Muhammad Mustafa Al-Azami, *The History of the Qur'anic Text from Revelation to Compilation* (Leicester: UK Islamic Academy, 2003), 154–55.

approval. The Prophet ﷺ taught the companions the Qur'an according to the *aḥruf* by reading to them (*iqrā'*) or correcting their recitation to him (*'arḍ*)¹² and occasionally approving their tribal pronunciation of certain letters or words. Most of the differences between the *aḥruf* are related to dialectal variations.

There is no doubt that the [different] tribes would visit the Prophet ﷺ and he used to translate to each in their dialect. He would elongate [the lone vowels up to] one, two, and three vowels for those whose dialect was like that. He would also perform emphatic pronunciation (*tafkhīm*) for those whose dialect was like that, perform softening (*tarqīq*) for those whose dialect was like that, and inclination *imālah* for those whose dialect was like that.¹³

This affirmation is also supported by the event which al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) narrated from the successor Abū 'Āliyah al-Riyāhī that several people representing different tribes recited Qur'an to the Prophet ﷺ and every one of them “differed in the language [in which they recited]. The Prophet ﷺ approved the reading of all of them. Banū Tamīm were the most eloquent (*a'rab al-qawm*).”¹⁴

The canonization of the *qirā'āt*

Qirā'āt, as we know them today, are reflections of the *rukḥṣah* of the seven *aḥruf*. They are not synonymous with the *aḥruf*. Rather, they are systemized recital modes that preserved many *aḥruf* and accommodated dialectal diversity in line with the Prophet's Qur'anic teachings and the compiled copies of his companions. However, concerns that the *rukḥṣah* might be fluidly interpreted or haphazardly applied prompted the companions to compile the Qur'an for a third and final time. The companions' and successors' early efforts to establish systematic criteria ensured a methodological foundation to the variants.

¹² Yousef Wabb, “An Introduction to ‘*Ulūm al-Qur'an*: The Field of Qur'anic Studies,” *Yaqeen*, April 2022, <https://yaqeeninstitute.org/read/paper/an-introduction-to-ulum-al-quran-the-field-of-quranic-studies>.

¹³ Aḥmad ibn 'Abdulkarīm al-Ashmūnī, *Manār al-hudā fī bayān al-waqf wal-ibtidā*, 2nd ed. (Cairo: Mustafā al-Bābī al-Halabī, 1973), 7–8.

¹⁴ Abū Ja'far al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'an*, ed. 'Abd Allāh al-Turkī, 26 vols. (Cairo: Dār Hajar, 2001), 1:40. The report is *mursal* since al-Riyāhī, a *tābi'ī* who did not meet the Prophet ﷺ, attributed it directly to him.

Given the limited introductory scope of this article, the history of *qirā'āt* can be summarized in the following chronological, yet overlapping, stages:

- 1) 1st century: the final compilation of the Qur'an
- 2) 1st-2nd century: *ikhtiyār*: standardizing the *qirā'āt* selection process
- 3) 3rd century: establishing criteria for authentic readings
- 4) 4th century: the standardization of seven readings
- 5) 5th century: the ten *qirā'āt* and their transmitters

1st century (622 – 719 CE): The final compilation of the Qur'an

The process of compiling the Qur'an in written form developed across the time of the Prophet ﷺ himself (who had expert-scribes), and the caliphates of his successors Abū Bakr, 'Umar, and 'Uthmān. The compilation was finalized during the time of 'Uthmān, with the companions unanimously¹⁵ approving his decision to destroy, or correct, all other copies of the Qur'an. This final compilation is distinguished from its predecessors by its motivating factor: the concern over the fluidity of the *aḥruf*. The need to protect the Qur'an from potential distortion triggered 'Uthmān's decision to standardize the Qur'anic codex¹⁶ and to regulate the *rukḥṣah* of seven *aḥruf* by limiting their vast dialectal scope. Hence, it is possible that some of the seven *aḥruf* were not included in the 'Uthmānic codex, according to many Qur'anic scholars.¹⁷ Through their knowledge of the final

¹⁵ Some companions, mainly Ibn Mas'ūd, initially refused to adopt some of the 'Uthmānic *muṣḥaf* renditions that contradicted their personal copies. Abū Bakr 'Abdullah ibn Abī Dāwūd, *Kitāb al-maṣāḥif*, ed. Muḥib al-Dīn Wā'iz, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Bashā'ir al-Islāmiyyah, 1995), 1:179–92. Later, Ibn Mas'ūd approved of 'Uthmān's compiled text upon moving back to Medīna and meeting with 'Uthmān. Ibn Abī Dāwūd, *Kitāb al-maṣāḥif*, 1:193–94 (the chapter on Ibn Mas'ūd's approval of 'Uthmān's compilation of *maṣāḥif*). 'Imād al-Dīn ibn Kathīr, *al-Bidāyah wan nihāyah*, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2015), 9:139–140; Abū Bakr ibn Mujāhid, *al-Sab'a fī al-qirā'āt*, ed. Shawqī Dayf (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1979), 67.

¹⁶ See for example, Abū Shāma al-Maqdisī, *al-Murshid al-wajīz ilā 'ulūm tata'allaqu bi-l-kitāb al-'azīz*, ed. Ibrāhīm Shams al-Dīn (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2003), 94.

¹⁷ Khatib and Khan, "Origins of the Variant Reading." Also see Waleed al-Meneese, *The Fourteen Qur'anic Readings Impact on Theology and Law*, trans. Abu Zayd (Bloomington: Islamic University of Minnesota and Qur'an Literacy Press, 2021), 26.

review, their proximity to the Prophet's recitation of the Qur'an, and their attentiveness to his sayings and practices, the companions identified the abrogated *ahruf*, the abandoned *ahruf*, and the explanatory materials, all of which they intentionally excluded from their compiled 'Uthmānic codex.

The preservation of the Qur'an relied on a combination of oral as well as written transmission. However, the companions did not merely rely on their memorization and personal codices (despite being written with the permission of, and sometimes, under the supervision of, the Prophet ﷺ). In Abū Bakr's stage of compiling the Qur'an, 'two witnesses' were required for each verse to be included in the codex. The two witnesses requirement is understood to mean either two companions or the combination of memorization and written documentation.¹⁸ Moreover, the skeletal script of the 'Uthmānic codex (without vowel markings or dotting) accommodated multiple readings in which the companions recited and taught in the presence of, and with the approval, of one another.

1st-2nd century (719 CE – 816 CE): *Ikhtiyār* (Standardizing the *qirā'āt* selection process)

Biographies of the companions and their successors indicate that hundreds of them were Qur'an teachers distributed across the Muslim world.¹⁹ Some of the dedicated *qurrā'* from the companions had numerous students and became common links in thousands of chains of Qur'anic transmission: "The transmission authority of those companions solidified the ordering of the variant *qirā'āt* and synchronized the structure of the subsequent system-readings (*ikhtiyār*) attributed to different *qurrā'*."²⁰ The *ikhtiyār* phenomenon dates back to the companions' students (*tābi'ūn*) and is even attributed to a few companions.²¹

¹⁸ Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, 1:188–9.

¹⁹ Abū al-Qāsim al-Hudhalī, *al-Kāmil fī al-qirā'āt* (Sharjah: Mu'assasat Samā, 2007), 1:128.

²⁰ Wahb, "Ulūm al-Qur'an Primer."

²¹ Ghānim Qadūrī al-Ḥamad, *Aṣālat al-naṣṣ al-Qur'ānī: Waḥyan wa rasman wa lughatan wa qirā'atan*, 1st ed. (Istanbul: Dār al-Ghawthānī lil-Dirāsāt al-Qur'āniyah, 2020), 213.

An *ikhtiyār* was named after a reciter (*qārī*) if he systemized a mode of phonetic principles (*uṣūl*) regarding articulation, inclination, assimilation, lengthening lone vowels, etc., as well as the elocution of certain words in individual passages (*farsh*). Thus, a reading of so-and-so does not mean that the *qārī* after whom it is named invented it. Rather, it means that he narrated the Qur'an from many companions or successors, mastered dialectal pronunciations, and, eventually, systemized a mode to adopt and teach. The method of *ikhtiyār* evolved for the sake of practicality and consistency, since each of the early *qurrā'* learned from several teachers but sought to teach their students in a uniform manner.

3rd century (816 CE – 913 CE): Establishing criteria for authentic readings

As numerous *ikhtiyārs* emerged towards the end of the 1st century and in the 2nd century, the majority of *qurrā'* upheld the same set of qualifications for any *ikhtiyār* to be deemed an authentic reading of the Qur'an: "Strong conformity with grammar, conformity with the *rasm* of 'Uthmān's codex, and the agreement of the majority of *qurrā'* on it."²² The first scholar who explicitly stated these conditions and applied them to his collection of *qirā'āt* was Abū 'Ubayd al-Qāsim ibn Sallām in the 3rd century.²³ Al-Ṭabarī also stated,

everyone who adopted a *ḥarf*, from the recognized imams who are known for their [commitment to the] *sunnah* and their following of the past *sharia* scholars, based his *ikhtiyār* on [those three criteria]... whoever did not abide by any of the three conditions in his *ikhtiyār*, it was not accepted nor deliberated on by the people of *al-Sunnah wal-Jamā'ah*.²⁴

²² Abū Muḥammad Makkī ibn Abī Ṭālib, *al-Ibāna 'an ma'ānī l-qirā'āt*, ed. 'Abd al-Fattāh Ismā'īl Shalabī (Cairo: Dār Nahḍat Miṣr, 1960), 89.

²³ Al-Ḥamad, *Aṣālat al-naṣṣ al-Qur'anī*, 239.

²⁴ Muḥammad 'Abd al-Malik al-Manturī, *Sharḥ al-Durar al-lawāmi' fī aṣl maqra' al-Imām Nāfi'*, ed. al-Siddīqī Fawzy (Casablanca: Matba'at al-Najāh al-Jadīdah, 2001), 864.

In the ongoing process of standardizing *qirā'āt*, Ibn al-Jazarī further systemized these three conditions for any *ikhtiyār* to be considered Qur'an: 1) authentic chain of transmission (*isnād*), 2) conformity with the *rasm* of 'Uthmān's codex and 3) conformity with the rules of Arabic grammar. An *isnād*'s lack of credible transmission or conformity with the 'Uthmānic *rasm* and Arabic grammar would de-canonize a reading, rendering it anomalous (*shādh*).²⁵

4th century (913 CE – 1009 CE): The standardization of seven *qirā'āt*

Although only a handful of companions were widely known for their dedication to Qur'anic teaching, the number of *ikhtiyārs* kept increasing due to the increasing demand for such teaching by the rapidly growing Muslim population. Hence, early *qirā'āt* works documented a large number of canonical readings, with one of the earliest by Ibn Sallām including 25 readings. By the 4th century, Qur'anic scholars sought to standardize the various *ikhtiyārs* based on popularity across ritualistic practices (e.g., prayer) as well as teaching spheres and other avenues of public recitation.

Most *ikhtiyārs* represented five regional Qur'anic schools: Medina, Mecca, Basra, the Levant, and Kufa. These regional schools represent the most authentic Qur'anic authorities since “they are the regions from which the knowledge of prophethood of Qur'an, *tafsīr*, hadith, and *fiqh* pertaining to both inward and outward practices, as well as the rest of religious sciences originated.”²⁶ Out of sincere commitment to Ibn al-Jazarī's conditions of legitimation, Muslims began to limit the number of readings to the popular *ikhtiyārs* of the righteous knowledgeable imams.²⁷

²⁵ Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr*, 1:9.

²⁶ Abū al-Abbās Aḥmad ibn Abū Bakr al-Qaṣṭalānī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārā li funūn al-qirā'āt*, ed. Markaz al-Dirasat al-Qur'aniyah, 10 vols. (Saudi Arabia: Wizārat al-Awqāf wal-Shū'un al-Islāmiyah, 2012), 1:155.

²⁷ Makkī ibn Abī Ṭālib, *al-Ibāna*, 86–87.

Ibn Mujāhid, the leading *qirā'āt* authority of his time and “the master of the discipline,”²⁸ was the first to limit the number of canonical readings to seven. In explaining his methodology and motives in standardizing the readings, he said,

the Qur'anic reading adopted by the people of Medina, Mecca, Kufa, Basra, and *Shām* is the reading which they orally received from their predecessors. One man from each of these regions, who learnt from the successors, was committed to that reading and all of the public and the elite agreed on his reading, followed his mode of recitation, and abided by his methodology.²⁹

Ibn Mujāhid named his book *al-Sab'ah* [The Seven] which, due to an erroneous association between the seven *aḥruf* and the number of *qirā'āt*, implied that any other reading is not Qur'an. This association may have caused confusion regarding the number of canonical *qirā'āt*. However, following Ibn Mujāhid's methodology, scholars in the late 4th and the 5th century added three more *qirā'āt* which originated from the same localities and which generally belong, in their *ikhtiyār*, to several of the original seven *qirā'āt*.

5th century (1009 CE – 1106 CE): The ten *qirā'āt* and their transmitters

The standardization of these ten *qirā'āt* does not mean their eponymous readers were the only experts of such caliber. In fact, hundreds of other prominent *qurrā'* existed throughout history. However, the systemization process eventually settled on ten *qurrā'* who were the most advanced students of various companions and successors, notable jurists, and pious saints, all of whom devoted most of their lives to the Qur'an.

Below is a list of the ten *qurrā'* known across the Muslim world, listed in the disciplinary order presented to *qirā'āt* students today. The list briefly provides their

²⁸ Abū al-Khayr ibn al-Jazarī, *Ghāyat al-nihāya fī ṭabaqāt al-qurrā'*, ed. Gotthelf Bergsträsser, 1st ed, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2006), 1:139.

²⁹ Ibn Mujāhid, *al-Sab'a*, 45.

names, backgrounds, Qur’anic learning experiences, accounts of their righteousness, and where their readings were most popular. Notably, only three of the 10 *qurrā’* are descendants of pure Arab lineage, with the rest descending from non-Arabs who belonged to the tribal association institution as clients (*mawālī*; sing *mawlā*) of several Arab clans.³⁰ The scholarly communities of various Islamic disciplines have historically been quite diverse, and the field of Qur’anic transmission was no different.³¹

1. Nāfi‘ (Medina – Isfahan Persian descendant: d. 169/785) was a Black public inspector known for his sense of humor. Imam Mālik called him the “Imam of the People” in Qur’anic recitation.³² Nāfi‘ described his method of developing his mode of recitation: “I read the Qur’an to 70 from the *tābi‘īn* and I scrutinized [them]; what two of them [or more] agreed on, I adopted it, and what was transmitted by only one of them, I abandoned it.”³³ While reciting the Qur’an, the smell of musk would reportedly emanate from his mouth. He denied perfuming his mouth and explained that the scent started appearing after a dream in which he saw the Prophet ﷺ reciting into his mouth.³⁴
2. Ibn Kathīr (Mecca – Persian descendant: d. 120/737)³⁵ was a tall, brown-skinned apothecary and scholar of hadith and law appointed as a judge in Mecca. According to Ibn Mujāhid (d. 324/936), the people of Mecca agreed on adopting Ibn Kathīr’s reading. Among the Prophet’s companions who Ibn Kathīr met and directly learned from are ‘Abdullāh ibn al-Zubayr, Anas ibn Mālik, and Abū Ayyūb al-Anṣārī. Imam al-Shāfi‘ī

³⁰ The term *mawālī*, despite its common reference to freed slaves or tribal allies, was also used to reference the descendants of non-Arabs. None of the 10 *qurrā’* was a freed slave nor were any of their ancestors.

³¹ To illustrate how non-Arabs played a critical role in Islamic scholarship, “a random sample of over one thousand scholars who died in or before the year of 400 AH/1010 CE, covering the five main branches of Islamic learning (*hadith*, *tafsīr*, *qirā’a*, *naḥw*, and *fiqh*), found that 51% of scholars were Arabs and 49% were non-Arabs.” Emad Hamdeh, “Mawali: How Freed Slaves and Non-Arabs Contributed to Islamic Scholarship,” *Yaqeen*, 2021.

³² Shams al-Dīn al-Dhahabī, *Ma’rifat al-qurrā’ al-kibār ‘alā l-ṭabaqāt wa-l-a’ṣār*, ed. Bashshār ‘Awwād et al., 1st ed. 2 vols. (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 1988), 1:108.

³³ Ibn Mujāhid, *al-Sab’a*, 62.

³⁴ Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr*, 1:112.

³⁵ Ibn Kathīr, the *qārī*, is different from Ibn Kathīr, the famous author of *tafsīr*.

adopted Ibn Kathīr's reading and said, "Whoever seeks perfection [in reciting], let them recite by Ibn Kathīr's reading."³⁶ Ibn Kathīr's teaching style was to prepare students by admonishing them, in order for the Qur'an to have the most effect on them.³⁷

3. Abū 'Amr (Basra – native Arab from Banū Ḥanīfa: d. 154/770) was a leading scholar of hadith and Arabic. He was known among the *qurrā'* as the one who traveled the most with the largest number of diverse teachers. Abū 'Amr read the Qur'an with another three of the ten *qurrā'*: Ibn Kathīr, 'Āṣim, and Abū Ja'far. Sufyān ibn 'Uyaynah related that he saw the Prophet ﷺ in a dream and asked him as in which reading he should recite and the Prophet ﷺ answered, 'The reading of Abū 'Amr.'³⁸
4. Ibn 'Āmir (Damascus – native Arab and a descendant of Yaḥṣub: d. 118/736) was known in the Levant as 'The Imam.' He was born, arguably, a few years after the Hijrah. Although he did not see or meet with the Prophet ﷺ, he obtained the highest Qur'anic *isnād* among the ten *qurrā'*, with only one link to the Prophet. He learned directly from the companions including al-Mughīrah ibn Shihāb al-Makhzūmī and Abū al-Dardā'. Ibn 'Āmir ranked highly among Abū al-Dardā''s 1600 students and assumed Abū al-Dardā''s teaching position after his death. As a result, Ibn 'Āmir became the imam and the chief *qārī* of the Umayyad mosque in Damascus during the time of 'Umar ibn 'Abd al-'Azīz, who used to pray behind him. Ibn 'Āmir was also appointed as the judge of the city, then the capital of the Caliphate.
5. 'Āṣim (Kufa – *mawlā* of the clan of Banū Asad: d. 127/745) was born during the Prophet's life and had met 24 companions. He was blind and had one of

³⁶ Abū Shāma al-Maqdisī, *Ibrāz al-ma'ānī min Ḥirz al-Amānī fī al-Qirā'āt al-Sab'ah*, ed. Ibrāhīm 'Awad (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2002), 6.

³⁷ 'Alam al-Dīn al-Sakhāwī, *Jamāl al-qurrā' wa-kamāl al-igra'*, ed. 'Alī Ḥusayn al-Bawwāb, 1st ed, 2 vols. (Mecca: Maktabat al-Turāth, 1987), 2:448.

³⁸ Abū al-Ḥasan ibn Ghalbūn, *al-Tadhkirah fī al-qirā'āt*, ed. Sayyid Za'imah, (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 2001), 18.

the best voices of recitation. His reading was influenced by the readings of Ibn Mas‘ūd and ‘Alī, because he would review with a primary student of Ibn Mas‘ūd, Zirr b. Ḥubaysh, after his session with a primary student of ‘Alī, al-Sulamī.³⁹ ‘Āṣim inherited the teaching position of Abū ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī, the chief *qārī* of Kufa for 40 years from the time of ‘Uthmān to the governorship of al-Ḥajjāj. According to ‘Āṣim’s student Shu‘bah, who witnessed ‘Āṣim on his deathbed, ‘Āṣim kept repeating the verse, “Then all are restored to Allah, their true protector” while fainting and waking.⁴⁰ Shu‘bah said, “I knew that the recitation of the Qur’an was just a natural quality of his.”⁴¹

6. Ḥamzah al-Zayyāt (Kufa – *mawlā* of the clan of Taym: d. 156/722) was a merchant of oil (hence the title *al-Zayyāt*) and the leading *qārī* in Kufa after al-A‘mash and ‘Āṣim. Sufyān al-Thawrī, praising Ḥamzah’s reading, attested that “he did not read a single *ḥarf* without depending on transmission.”⁴² His reading was reportedly the most common reading in the mosques of Kufa.⁴³ Imām Abū Ḥanīfa, a contemporary of Ḥamzah, testified that he was superior to him in *qirā’āt* and inheritance law.⁴⁴ Ḥamzah never accepted any compensation for Qur’anic teaching, a principle he said was grounded in his pursuit of the *firdaws* (highest level in *Jannah*).⁴⁵ A student once offered him cold water on an extremely hot day, but Ḥamzah rejected it because he was teaching him Qur’an.⁴⁶

7. Al-Kisā’ī (Kufa – Persian descendant and *mawlā* of the clan of Banū Asad: d. 189/804) was a leading grammarian appointed as the chief *qārī* of Kufa after Ḥamzah, who was his teacher and with whom he did ‘*arḍ*’ of the Qur’an four times. Countless students would attend Al-Kisā’ī’s classes, where he

³⁹ Both al-Sulamī and Ibn Ḥubaysh read to ‘Alī and Ibn Mas‘ūd.

⁴⁰ Al-Dhahabī, *Ma‘rifat al-qurrā’*, 93.

⁴¹ Al-Dhahabī, *Ma‘rifat al-qurrā’*, 93.

⁴² Ibn Mujāhid, *al-Sab‘a*, 76.

⁴³ Ibn Mujāhid, *al-Sab‘a*, 76.

⁴⁴ Ibn Mujāhid, *al-Sab‘a*, 1:261.

⁴⁵ Ibn Mujāhid, *al-Sab‘a*, 1:261.

⁴⁶ Abdulfattāh al-Qādī, *Tārīkh al-qurrā’ al-‘asharah*, 1st ed. (Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Azhariyyah lil-Turāth, 2002), 46.

would sit on his chair and read the entire Qur'an while students corrected their reading and pronunciation according to his recitation.⁴⁷ Al-Kisā'ī was seen in a dream after his death and was asked, "What did Allah do to you?" He replied, "He forgave me for [the sake of] the Qur'an." Then, he was asked, "What did He do to Ḥamzah?" He said, "He is in *'illiyyīn* [the most exalted places]. We do not see him except as we see the stars."⁴⁸

8. Abū Ja'far (Medina – *mawlā* of the clan of Makhzūm: d. 130/747) was one of the earliest *qurrā'* and Nāfi' 's teacher. He was known as the Imam and chief *qārī* of Medina who learned Qur'an from Ibn 'Abbās and Abū Hurayrah. As a child, he reportedly visited Umm Salamah, the Prophet's wife, who wiped over his head and made *du'ā'* for him to be blessed by Allah.⁴⁹ Imām Mālik said, "Abū Ja'far, the *qārī*, was a righteous man who gave *iftā'* to the people of Medina."⁵⁰ Nāfi' related that when Abū Ja'far's body was washed upon his death, his neck and chest appeared as a page of the *muṣḥaf*. "No witness [of the incident]," recalled Nāfi', "doubted it was [due to] the light of the Qur'an."⁵¹
9. Ya'qūb (Basra – *mawlā* of the Ḥadramī clan: d. 205/820) became the chief *qārī* of Basra after Abū 'Amr. He was one of the experts on *aḥruf* and its differences, and he authored books on *qirā'āt*.⁵² Among the many *qurrā'* he learnt and transmitted from were Ḥamzah and al-Kisā'ī. The extent of his focus and *khushū'* in prayer is captured by a report that he did not notice his garment being removed from his shoulder and returned to him while praying.⁵³

⁴⁷ Al-Qādī, *Tārīkh al-qurrā' al-'asharah*, 51.

⁴⁸ Al-Qādī, *Tārīkh al-qurrā' al-'asharah*, 52.

⁴⁹ Al-Dhahabī, *Ma'rifāt al-qurrā' al-kibār*, 1:73.

⁵⁰ Ibn al-Jazarī, *Ghāyat al-nihāya*, 2:382–83.

⁵¹ Al-Dhahabī, *Ma'rifāt al-qurrā' al-kibār*, 1:75–76.

⁵² Shams al-Dīn Aḥmad ibn Abī Bakr ibn Khallikān, *Wafayāt al-a'yān wa-anbā' abnā' al-zamān*, ed. Iḥsān 'Abbās, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār Sādir, 1968), 6:391.

⁵³ Al-Dhahabī, *Ma'rifāt al-qurrā' al-kibār*, 1:158.

10. Khalaf (Baghdad – native Arab from Banū Asad: d. 229/843) was a seed merchant (*bazzār*) but disliked that title and preferred to be referred to as a ‘Qur’an teacher’ (*muqri*). He is one of the ten canonical *qurrā*’ and also one of the two canonical transmitters of Ḥamzah. As a *qārī* of the ten, he is often called ‘Khalaf the tenth.’ His *isnād* is connected to Ḥamzah and ‘Āṣim, and his reading closely resembles the other Kufan *qārīs*. So dedicated was he to seeking knowledge that he once spent 80,000 dirhams to fully comprehend a single grammatical inquiry.⁵⁴

Nāfi‘	Medina – Isfahan Persian descendant: Died in 169 AH / 785 CE
Ibn Kathīr	Mecca – Persian descendant: Died in 120 AH / 737 CE
Abū ‘Amr	Basra – Native Arab from Banū Ḥanīfa: Died in 154 AH / 770 CE
Ibn ‘Āmir	Damascus – Native Arab and a descendant of Yaḥsub: Died in 118 AH / 736 CE
‘Āṣim	Kūfa – <i>Mawlā</i> of Asad clan: Died in 127 AH / 745 CE
Ḥamzah al-Zayyāt	Kūfa – <i>Mawlā</i> of the clan of Taym: Died in 156 AH / 722 CE
Al-Kisā’ī	Kūfa – Persian descendant and <i>mawlā</i> of Asad clan: Died 189 AH / 804 CE
Abū Ja‘far	Medina - <i>Mawlā</i> of the clan of Makhzūm: Died 130 AH / 747 CE
Ya‘qūb	Basra – <i>Mawlā</i> of the Ḥadramī clan: Died in 205 AH / 820 CE
Khalaf	Baghdad : Died 229 AH / 843 CE

⁵⁴ Al-Dhahabī, *Ma‘rifat al-qurrā’ al-kibār*, 1:209.

As introduced above, “the ten canonical readings were systemized via chains of narration, all of which are associated with a group of *qurrā*’ from the companions through proper *isnād* requirements.”⁵⁵ Among the most famous companions who read the entire Qur’an with the Prophet ﷺ and memorized it are ‘Uthmān, ‘Alī, Ubayy, Zayd ibn Thābit, Ibn Mas‘ūd, Abū Mūsā al-Ash‘arī, and Abū al-Dardā’. The chart below illustrates the *isnād* connection between the ten *qurrā*’ and these seven companions.⁵⁶ The extrapolation of these connections relies on the available historical data and does not necessarily imply that these *isnāds* are the only ones existing in the chains of *qirā’āt* transmission.

The list is ordered according to the number of *qurrā*’ who read to the following companions:

1. Ubayy → Nāfi‘, Ibn Kathīr, Abū ‘Amr, ‘Āṣim, Al-Kisā’ī, Abū Ja‘far, Ya‘qūb, and Khalaf.
2. ‘Uthmān → Ibn ‘Āmir, ‘Āṣim, Ḥamzah, Al-Kisā’ī, and Ya‘qūb.
3. ‘Alī → Ibn Kathīr, ‘Āṣim, Ḥamzah, Abū ‘Amr, and Ya‘qūb.
4. Ibn Mas‘ūd → ‘Āṣim, Ḥamzah, Al-Kisā’ī, Ya‘qūb, and Khalaf.
5. Zayd → Ibn Kathīr, Abū ‘Amr, ‘Āṣim, and Ya‘qūb.
6. Abū Mūsā al-Ash‘arī → Abū ‘Amr.
7. Abū al-Dardā’ → Ibn ‘Āmir.

Each *qārī* of the ten is designated, by *qirā’āt* scholars, two canonical transmitters (*rāwīs*) who were the most popular of their students. This explains the difference between a reading (*qirā’ah*) and a narration (*riwāyah*). When we read the Qur’an, we usually reference the *riwāyah*, not the *qirā’ah*. For example, ‘Āṣim’s two canonical *rāwīs* are Shu‘bah and Ḥafṣ. Hence, when we assign a mode of reading we say, ‘reciting according to Ḥafṣ from ‘Āṣim’. *Riwāyahs* of the same *qārī* may differ in both their *uṣūl* and *farsh*; each *rāwī* adopted a consistent mode from his teacher. Below is a list of the 20 *rāwīs* assigned to each *qārī*.

⁵⁵ Al-Dhahabī, *Ma‘rifat al-qurrā’ al-kibār*, 1:209.

⁵⁶ This *isnād* tree is based on Professor Muḥammad Jabal’s work in *Wathāqat naql al-naṣṣ al-Qur‘anī min Rasūl Allah ilā ummatih* (Tanta: Dār al-Sahābah, 2001), 23–28.

1. Nāfi' → Qālūn (d. 220/835) & Warsh (d. 197/812)
2. Ibn Kathīr → Al-Bazzī (d. 250/864) & Qunbul (d. 291/903)
3. Abū 'Amr → Al-Dūrī (d. 246/861) & Al-Sūsī (d. 261/874)
4. Ibn 'Āmir → Hishām (d. 245/860) Ibn Dhakwān (d. 202/818)
5. 'Āṣim → Shu'bah (d. 193/809) Ḥafṣ (d. 180/796)
6. Ḥamzah → Khalaf (d. 229/843) Khallād (d. 220/835)
7. Al-Kisā'ī → Abū l-Ḥārith (d. 240/854) Al-Dūrī (d. 246/861)
8. Abū Ja'far → Ibn Wardān (d. 160) & Ibn Jammāz (d. 170s)
9. Ya'qūb → Ruways (d. 238) & Rawḥ (d. 254)
10. Khalaf → Ishāq al-Warrāq (d. 286) & Idrīs al-Ḥaddād (d. 292)

<i>Qārī'</i>	<i>Rāwī</i>
Nāfi'	Qālūn: Died in 220 AH / 835 CE
	Warsh: Died in 197 AH / 812 CE
Ibn Kathīr	Al-Bazzī: Died in 250 AH / 864 CE
	Qunbul: Died in 291 AH / 903 CE
Abū 'Amr	Al-Dūrī: Died in 246 AH / 861 CE
	Al-Sūsī: Died in 261 AH / 874 CE
Ibn 'Āmir	Hishām: Died in 245 AH / 860 CE
	Ibn Dhakwān: Died in 202 AH / 818 CE
'Āṣim	Shu'bah: Died in 193 AH / 809 CE
	Ḥafṣ: Died in 180 AH / 796 CE
Ḥamzah al-Zayyāt	Khalaf: Died in 229 AH / 843 CE
	Khallād: Died in 220 AH / 835 CE
Al-Kisā'ī	Abū l-Ḥārith: Died in 240 AH / 854 CE
	Al-Dūrī: Died in 246 AH / 861 CE
Abū Ja'far	Ibn Wardān: Died in 160 AH
	Ibn Jammāz: Died in 170s AH
Ya'qūb	Ruways: Died in 238 AH
	Rawḥ: Died in 254 AH
Khalaf	Ishāq al-Warrāq: Died in 286 AH
	Idrīs al-Ḥaddād: Died in 292 AH

Just as the canonical dual *rāwī*-system was developed for the *qurrā'*, another system for the *rāwīs'* students developed and is known as *ṭarīq* (pl. *ṭuruq*). *Ṭuruq* were synthesized as channels to preserve every authentic mode of recitation or nuanced point of articulation. It is beyond the scope of this article to cover the independent sub-disciplines developed by *qirā'āt* scholars that investigate and systemize *riwāyahs* and *ṭuruq*. Suffice it to say,

every [recital] variation attributed to one of the ten readers *qurrā'* which his students agreed upon is considered a reading (*qirā'ah*). Every variation attributed to a reader's transmitter, *rāwī*, [transmitting it from that reader] is considered a narration; (*riwāyah*). Every variation attributed to a transmitter's student, regardless of the length [of the chain of transmitters to the *rāwī*], is considered a *ṭarīq*.⁵⁷

Are they all Qur'an?

Although the number of *qirā'āt* attaining the level of *tawātur* was always known to be seven, late *qirā'āt* and *uṣūl* scholarship agreed on the inclusion of three more *qirā'āt* since their differences are, for the most part, already included in the renditions of the aforementioned seven. *Qirā'āt* scholars also argued that all conditions of 'authentic readings' (the three conditions of sound *isnād*, and conformity with the 'Uthmānic *rasm* and Arabic grammar) also apply to the three readings of Abū Ja'far, Ya'qūb, and Khalaf. The discussion remains technical since it relates, mainly, to the definition of *tawātur* and the boundaries of legal certainty (*yaqīn*)—what qualifies to be absolutely Qur'an with no chance of doubt. Nonetheless, multiple scholars held that the seven *qirā'āt* are the most authentic representation of the Qur'an as canon transmitted through an uninterrupted *tawātur*. This intricate issue is thoroughly addressed in the books of *uṣūl* and *qirā'āt*.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ 'Abdul Fattāḥ al-Qāḍī, *al-Budūr al-zāhirah fī al-qirā'āt al-'ashr min ṭarīqai al-Shātibiyah wal-Durrah* (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 2010), 9–10.

⁵⁸ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Maḥallī, *al-Badr al-tālī fī ḥall jam' al-jawāmi'*, ed. Murtaḍā al-Dāghistānī, 2 vols. (Beirut: Risala Foundation, 2012), 1:172–78.

The preponderant opinion regarding the *tawātur* of *qirā'āt* differentiates between phonetics that bear no impact on the meaning and the variations that do. With respect to phonetics that bear no impact on the meaning, it is not necessary to trace each unique pronunciation of each of the hundreds of combinations of phonetics back to the Prophet ﷺ to establish an uninterrupted *tawātur isnād*. For example, the concepts of *imālah* (inclination), *madd* (lengthening lone vowels), or *takhfīf al-hamzah* (a lightened articulation form of the letter *hamzah*) are established through *tawātur* to the Prophet ﷺ. However, the technical differences regarding the duration of *madd* or the degree of *imālah* may not necessarily be transmitted through *tawātur*.

It should be noted that our inability to document the *isnād* past the *qurrā'* and to the Prophet ﷺ does not mean that such *isnād* do not exist. Indeed, the popularity of the *qirā'āt* and their transmitters, irrespective of their degrees of canonicity, and the rigorous documentation of their every difference, strongly evidences their links to the early compilers and systemizers of Qur'anic readings.

Intriguingly, a legal hypothesis was once raised to al-Nawawī regarding a person who forswears by divorce (*ḥalafa bil-ṭalāq*) that Allah “spoke” the Qur'an in the seven *qirā'āt*. Al-Nawawī issued a *fatwa* that this individual's oath would not be broken.⁵⁹ The same applies if a man swears that Allah did not “speak” in the anomalous (*shādhah*) readings.⁶⁰ Al-Ashmūnī cited al-Nawawī's *fatwa* (after acknowledging the hyperbolic hypothetical it addressed) and added, that the readings of Abū Ja'far, Ya'qūb, and Khalaf complete the ten canonical readings since they are also mass-transmitted (*mutawātir*) and can be recited inside and outside the prayer.⁶¹

Are some readings preferred over others?

⁵⁹ 'Alā al-Dīn ibn al-'Attār, *Fatāwā al-Nawawī: al-Masā'il al-manthūrah*, ed. Muḥammad al-Hajjār, 6th ed. (Beirut: Dār al-Bashā'ir al-Islāmiyyah, 1996), 197.

⁶⁰ Al-'Attār, *Fatāwā al-Nawawī*.

⁶¹ Al-Ashmūnī, *Manār al-hudā*, 7.

The fact that traditional scholarship gave preference to some *qirā'āt* over others did not stem from a disagreement over the preservation of the Qur'anic text or the authenticity of canonical *qirā'āt*. Instead, most of these discussions relate to the dialectics of *qirā'āt*—tracing and authenticating historical accounts from the masters of language, and examining phonetic, grammatical, and rhetorical analyses of their variances. For example, Makkī ibn Abī Ṭālib said, “Scholars might prefer what both ‘Āsim and Nāfi‘ agreed on since the readings of these two imams are the most credible, authentic, and eloquent. After these two, in eloquence, rank the readings of Abū ‘Amr and al-Kisā’ī”.⁶² Al-Sakhāwī after declaring a similar opinion, said “if the variant acquires high standards of eloquence, compatibility with the *muṣḥaf*, and the approval of the majority of Qur'an readers (*al-‘āmmah*) [usually referencing the readers of Medina and Kufa, but occasionally the readers of Mecca and Medina], it will be the chosen reading for most of them.”⁶³

Given *qirā'āt*'s critical role in defining and transmitting the Qur'an, they necessarily intersected with the discipline of *fiqh*. Although no school of law (*madhhab*) officially adopted a particular reading, the founders of the *madhāhib* and their succeeding jurists did explicitly favor certain readings over others. For example, Imam Mālik reportedly considered Nāfi's reading ‘Sunnah.’ Imam al-Shāfi‘ī described Ibn Kathīr's as “our reading.”⁶⁴ Imam Abū Ḥanīfa's adopted reading and *isnād* resembles the reading of ‘Āsim, especially his *rāwī* Ḥafṣ. However, the later widespread reading of Abū ‘Amr led some late Ḥanafīs, such as Ibn ‘Ābidīn, to consider his reading “our reading and the reading of our teachers.”⁶⁵ Different narrations from Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal show preferences for ‘Āsim, Ḥafṣ, and Abū ‘Amr.⁶⁶

⁶² Makkī b. Abī Ṭālib, *al-Ibāna*.

⁶³ Al-Sakhāwī, *Jamāl al-qurrā*, 2:440.

⁶⁴ Ibn al-Jazarī, *Ghāyat al-nihāya*, 2:86.

⁶⁵ Muḥammad ibn ‘Umar ibn ‘Ābidīn, *Radd al-muḥtār ‘alā al-durr al-mukhtār sharḥ Tanwīr al-Abṣār*, ed. ‘Alī Mu‘awwad and ‘Ādil ‘Abd al-Mawjūd, 14 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 2011), 1:541.

⁶⁶ There are different narrations regarding Aḥmad's preference for Nāfi‘, ‘Āsim through Shu‘bah, Abū ‘Amr, or “the readings of Hijāz.” See Ibn Muflīḥ, *al-Furū*, ed. Ḥāzim al-Qāḍī and Usāma ‘Abd al-Majīd, 6 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1997), 1:370.

‘*Urf* (custom) informs jurists’ preference for one reading over another. If the masses are not familiar with a reading, some jurists may render public recitation of that reading reprehensible (*makrūh*) lest it cause confusion (*fitnah*) regarding the Book of Allah among Muslims. The Ḥanbalī jurist Ibn Muflīḥ states that, “it is *makrūh* in the [Ḥanbalī] school to recite in an unfamiliar reading to the ‘*urf* of the locality.”⁶⁷ Mosques’ imams “should not drive the masses to what may ruin their religion [by reciting in unfamiliar readings]... even though all *qirā’āt* and *riwāyahs* are authentic and eloquent.”⁶⁸

Of course, ‘*urf* is but one legal factor and does not determine the preferred reading in all circumstances. Every letter of the Qur’an is worth 10 good deeds (*ḥasanāt*), so Ibn Muflīḥ did not deem it *makrūh* to deliberately choose a reading with more letters for its greater reward.⁶⁹ For example, Ibn Kathīr, unlike the other nine *qurrā’*, reads with an additional preposition ‘from’ (*min*), in 9:100, “*tajrī min taḥtiḥā al-anḥār*,” gardens beneath which rivers flow. Accordingly, a congregation can learn new readings while being educated on their divine nature and historical origination.

In the introduction of his *tafsīr*, the late exegete Ibn ‘Āshūr (d. 1393/1973) said, “The ten canonical mass-transmitted *qirā’āt* may vary in terms of what some of them include in terms of special rhetoric or eloquence, multiplicity of meanings, or popularity; [however], all of these are convergent variations.”⁷⁰ After citing scholars who upheld the validity of preferring some *qirā’āt* over others, he showed how these preferences relate to syntax, dialects, and principles of authentic transmission that do not negate the authenticity of Qur’an nor the canonicity of its ten readings.⁷¹ Al-Qaṣṭalānī also affirmed that such preponderances are “accorded to what is more eloquent, popular or common among the Arabs. Otherwise, Qur’an

⁶⁷ Ibn Muflīḥ, *al-Furū*, 1:370.

⁶⁸ Ibn ‘Ābidīn, *Radd al-muḥtār*.

⁶⁹ Ibn Muflīḥ, *al-Furū*, 1:370–71.

⁷⁰ Muḥammad al-Tāhir Ibn ‘Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr wal-tanwīr*, 30 vols. (Tunisia: al-Dār al-Tūnusiyyah lil-Nashr, 1884), 1:61. For an English summary of Ibn ‘Ashūr’s *qirā’āt* introduction of his *tafsīr*, see Gibril Haddad, “Tropology and Inimitability: Ibn ‘Ashūr’s Theory of *tafsīr* in the Ten Prolegomena to *al-Taḥrīr wal-Tanwīr*,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 21, no. 1 (2019): 69–71.

⁷¹ Ibn ‘Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr wal-tanwīr*, 1:62.

is inherently one, its uniform and multiform parts, without preferential association.”⁷²

Ibn ‘Āshūr then poses a fundamental question: does the preponderance of some *qirā’āt* imply that their counterparts are weaker in establishing the Qur’an’s inimitability (*i’jāz*)?⁷³ He answered that the core of *i’jāz* is the way the speech of scripture conforms to the context of its addressees. Such contextual conformity is not susceptible to any kind of discrepancy. However, some readings may contain additional rhetorical or eloquent characteristics not present in others. It is also possible that some *qirā’āt* were canonized by way of the Prophet ﷺ permitting a *qārī* to read a synonymous word, so that the original word remains the highest form of rhetoric while the other is a *rukḥṣah* close to that level.⁷⁴ This issue may be further discussed under two other Qur’anic Studies topics: whether some parts of the Qur’an are superior to others⁷⁵ and whether *i’jāz* is established by every verse of the Qur’an.⁷⁶

The spread of *qirā’āt* in the Muslim world throughout history and today

The spread of *qirā’āt* and their geographical distribution across the Muslim world has varied over time. In the 5th/11th century, while Kufa transitioned from the *riwāyahs* of Ḥafṣ and Shu‘bah to the reading of Ḥamzah, Basra settled for that of Ya‘qūb. Shām, meanwhile, landed on Ibn ‘Āmir’s reading (although the region was later dominated by Abū ‘Amr’s reading).⁷⁷ Since Warsh (d. 197/812), the canonical *rāwī* of Nāfi‘, lived in Egypt and ranked as its chief *qārī*, his *riwāyah* prevailed in Egypt until the 5th/11th century.⁷⁸ Iraq, Ḥijāz, Yemen, Shām, Egypt, Sudan and East

⁷² Al-Qaṣṭalānī, *Laṭā’if al-ishārāt*, 1:356. Similar opinions were reported from early and later scholars including Abū al-‘Abbās Aḥmad ibn Yaḥyā Tha‘lab (d. 291/904), Abū Ja‘far al-Naḥḥās (338/950), Abū Shāmah (d. 665/1266), and al-Kawāshī (d. 680/1194). See al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, 1:247.

⁷³ Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, 1:247.

⁷⁴ Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, 1:63.

⁷⁵ Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, 4:405–14.

⁷⁶ Al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqān*, 4:315–16.

⁷⁷ Ibn al-Jazarī, *Ghāyat al-nihāya*, 1:265.

⁷⁸ Alī al-Dabbā’, *al-Idā’ah fī bayān usūl al-qirā’ah* (Cairo: ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd Aḥmad Ḥanafī, 1938), 72.

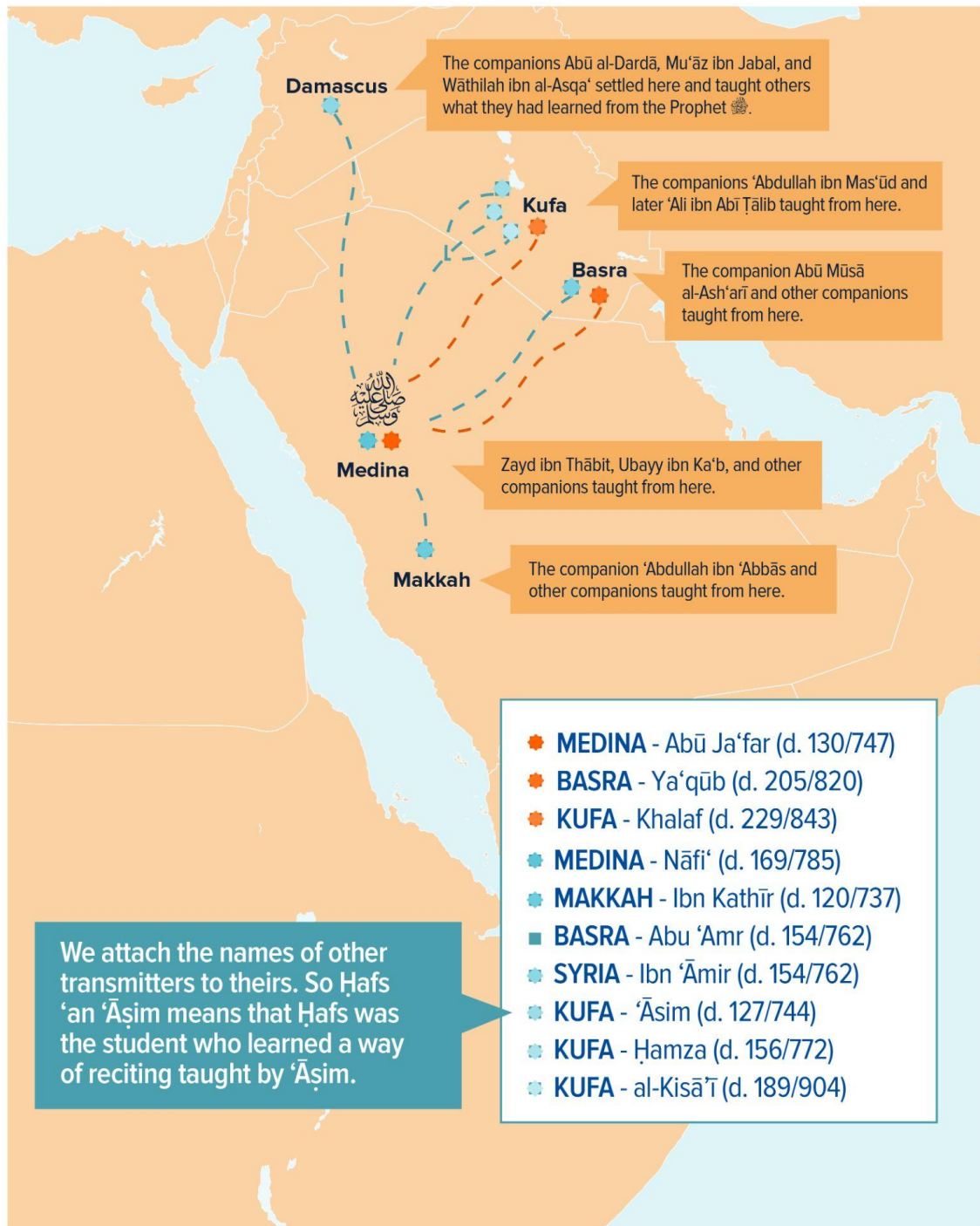
Africa were later dominated by the *riwāyah* of Dūrī, the canonical *rāwī* of Abū ‘Amr, until the 10th/16th century (in Egypt until the 12th/18th century). Intriguingly, Shu‘bah ibn al-Ḥajjāj (d. 160/777) predicted that Abū ‘Amr’s reading “will be the strongest common *isnād* among people.”⁷⁹ In attesting to the accuracy of this prediction, Ibn al-Jazarī affirmed that across Shām, Yemen, Ḥijāz, and Egypt, “You do not find anyone teaching Qur’an except with his [Abū ‘Amr’s] reading.”⁸⁰

According to Ibn ‘Āshūr, the most common readings in the Muslim world today are Nāfi‘, in the *riwāyah* of Qalūn (in Tunisia, some parts of Egypt, and Libya); the *riwāyah* of Warsh (in some parts of Tunisia, some parts of Egypt, Algeria, all the far West of Africa, and Sudan); and the reading of ‘Āṣim (in all of the East, including most of Egypt, India, Pakistan, Turkey, and Afghanistan).⁸¹ Modern *qirā’āt* studies have not yet determined why Ḥafṣ, ‘Āṣim’s transmitter, is so prevalent today. Limited are the historical records documenting the massive transition from the readings that had once dominated much of the Muslim world, including its educational institutions, to Ḥafṣ.

⁷⁹ Ibn al-Jazarī, *Ghāyat al-nihāya*, 1:265.

⁸⁰ Ibn al-Jazarī, *Ghāyat al-nihāya*, 1:265.

⁸¹ Geographical changes in some of these lands over different modern eras should be noted. Ibn Ashur also said, “I have heard that the reading of Abū ‘Amro is common in parts of Sudan on the border with Egypt.” Ibn ‘Āshūr, *al-Taḥrīr wal-tanwīr*, 1:63.



A common, yet historically unverified, argument attributes the current dominance of Ḥafṣ to the Ottomans' appointments of Ḥanafī judges, legal scholars (*muftīs*), and *qurrā'*. While the Ottomans certainly enforced the Ḥanafī school, their enforcement did not necessarily extend to the field of *qirā'āt*. Surveying *qirā'āt*

works written during the Ottoman era reveals that Abū ‘Amr’s reading declined only in Yemen, Sudan, and a few other African regions. West African countries remained committed to Nāfi‘ as well as to the Mālikī school. It is possible, of course, that they did not transition to Ḥafṣ due to the lack of full Ottoman control in these regions. However, Abū ‘Amr’s reading remained popular in regions not conquered, or fully dominated, by the Ottomans such as Malaysia, Yemen, Indonesia, Iran, India, and Turkestan.

Moreover, there is no evidence of the supposed Ottoman stipulation requiring candidates for religious positions to read in Ḥafṣ. Ibn al-Jazarī, who lived during the Ottoman dynasty, did not relate any particular observations about their alleged policy of imposing Ḥafṣ. Despite sharing legal cultures and political circumstances with the Ottomans, the preceding Seljuk dynasty did not adopt Ḥafṣ. Thus, inheriting the Ḥanafī culture, which prefers ‘Āṣim and Abū ‘Amr, does not adequately explain the dominance of one *riwāyah* over others.

Qirā’āt as a discipline (‘Ilm al-Qirā’āt)

During and after the standardization process, the discipline of *qirā’āt* developed in relation to, yet independent from, the rest of the Qur’anic sciences. Muslim scholars developed a framework known as ‘The Ten Essentials’ (*al-mabādi’ al-‘asharah*) to define and introduce any discipline.⁸² The Ten Essentials help understand “how not only knowledge is constructed within that discipline but its significance, technical terms, key concepts, historical development and pioneers over time,”⁸³ as well as the legal ruling (*ḥukm*) related to learning and teaching it. This framework empowers students to holistically appreciate the coherency and scope of a discipline as well as its relevance to both inquiry and application. Below is a summary of some of The Ten Essentials of the discipline of *qirā’āt*.

⁸² These ten essentials are the following: (1) the definition of the discipline, (2) its subject matter, (3) its results, (4) the merits and virtues of learning it, (5) its relation to other disciplines, (6) the pioneers of the field, (7) the name by which the discipline is identified, (8) the sources that formed it, (9) the legal ruling (*ḥukm*) of learning and teaching it, and (10) its core topics and issues.

⁸³ Aḥmad ibn Mustafā Taskoruzade, *A Treatise on Disputation and Argument: Risālat al-Ādāb Fī ‘Ilm al-Baḥth wa’l-Munāẓara*, trans. Safaruk Chowdhury, 1st ed. (England: Dar al-Nicosia, 2020), 14.

Qirā'āt, as a discipline, is defined as the “knowledge of the exact manner of articulating the words of the Qur'an and their variations as attributed to [each of] their transmitters.”⁸⁴ This definition excludes the scope of *tafsīr*, grammar, and other linguistic sciences in their treatment of Qur'anic words. The merit of the *qirā'āt* discipline lies in preserving the Qur'an, protecting it from alteration, and deepening our understanding of it.

The subject matter of the discipline of *qirā'āt* has been listed as seven means (*wasā'il*) in al-Biqā'ī's *al-Ḍawābiṭ wal-ishārāt li-ajzā' 'ilm al-qirā'āt* [The Rules and Indications of the Components of the Discipline of *Qirā'āt*].⁸⁵ Al-Qaṣṭalānī provided a lengthy commentary on these seven topics in his *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt li funūn al-qirā'āt* [The Subtle Allusions to the Disciplines of *Qirā'āt*] in the following order:

1. *Isnād*: scrutinizing the credibility of the chain of authorities preserving the Qur'an, including its authenticity, length, and proximity to the Prophet ﷺ as well as the early *qurrā'*, and the authoritative texts of *qirā'āt*. This topic also examines the methods of oral transmission.⁸⁶
2. Linguistics: syntax, phonetics and articulation.⁸⁷
3. Pausal and resuming (*waqf* and *ibtidā'*) modes and their impact on signified meanings.⁸⁸
4. The number of Qur'anic verses that require an examination of orthographical styles of certain letters and the positioning of a verse (*āyah*) and its end (*fāṣilah*).⁸⁹
5. Orthography and the examination of the *ras* of Qur'anic words according to the 'Uthmānic codex.⁹⁰

⁸⁴ Abū l-Khayr Ibn al-Jazarī, *Munjid al-muqri' in wa-murshid al-ṭālibīn*, ed. 'Alī b. Muḥammad al-'Imrān (Mecca: Dār al-Fawā'id, 1998), 49.

⁸⁵ This work was originally part of al-Biqā'ī's history book. Ibrāhīm ibn 'Umar al-Biqā'ī, *Iḥḥār al-'asr li-asrār ahl al-'asr*, ed. Muḥammad al-'Uḥfī, 1st ed. (Cairo: Hajar, 1992), 1:271.

⁸⁶ Al-Qaṣṭalānī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, 1:360–80.

⁸⁷ Al-Qaṣṭalānī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, 2:381–422.

⁸⁸ Al-Qaṣṭalānī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, 2:490–519.

⁸⁹ Al-Qaṣṭalānī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, 2:520–41.

⁹⁰ Al-Qaṣṭalānī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, 2:542–88.

6. *Isti'ādhah*; introducing its textual foundation from the Qur'an and the Sunnah, determining its phrase and explaining how it should be recited, the *ḥukm* of reading it out loud (*jahr*) or in secret (*isrār*), and its pausal modes.⁹¹
7. *Al-Takbīr*; explaining the Sunnah of *takbīr* (saying “*Allāhu akbar*”) after reciting certain chapters of the Qur'an before commencing the next chapter and their pausal and resuming modes, tracing its *isnād* to the early *qurrā'* and the Prophet ﷺ, stating its exact phrase.⁹²

With respect to the legal ruling (*ḥukm*) of learning and teaching the discipline of *qirā'āt*, it is part of the communal obligation (*farḍ kifāyah*) of preserving and memorizing the Qur'an.⁹³ This shared responsibility means that “if the obligation is fulfilled—by whatever number of moral agents (*mukallaḥīn*) it takes—all community members are free of the religious responsibility of that obligation. If no one fulfills the obligations, then all members of the particular community will be held accountable.”⁹⁴ To meet this obligation of preserving the Qur'an, including the *qirā'āt*, a minimum number of memorizers and reciters qualifying for *tawātur* must be maintained.⁹⁵

Additionally, Qur'anic scholars delineated ranks for different levels of scholarship. For example, the *muqri'* is

the scholar of readings who transmits them orally. If he memorizes the book of *al-Taysīr* [an authoritative *qirā'āt* text by al-Dānī], for instance, he is not allowed to teach it except if he learned it directly from the one who taught him continuously [in a uniform transmission], because part of *qirā'āt* cannot be mastered except through direct hearing and oral transmission⁹⁶

⁹¹ Al-Qaṣṭalānī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, 2: 289–616.

⁹² Al-Qaṣṭalānī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, 2:617–38.

⁹³ Al-Qaṣṭalānī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, 1:357.

⁹⁴ Yousef Wabb, “*Farḍ Kifāyah*: The Principle of Communal Responsibility in Islam,” *Yaqeen*, 2021, <https://yaqeeninstitute.ca/yousef-wabb/fard-kifayah-the-principle-of-communal-responsibility-in-islam>.

⁹⁵ Al-Qaṣṭalānī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, 1:357.

⁹⁶ Ibn al-Jazarī, *Munjid al-muqri'*, 49.

The beginner *qārī* studies individual readings until they have learned at least three. The advanced *qārī* is the one who masters most of the *qirā'āt*, including the most popular ones.⁹⁷

The wisdom of *qirā'āt*: How can *qirā'āt* strengthen my connection with the Qur'an?

According to Imam al-Qaṣṭalānī, “Scholars never ceased to extract, from every reading of a *qārī*, meanings not found in other readings.”⁹⁸ Such is the divine wisdom manifest in the *qirā'āt*, which perform a variety of functions that ultimately enrich our experience of the Qur'an. A few of those functions, as determined by scholars, are the following:

1. Easing Qur'anic recitation and memorization for Muslims who come from different tribal and dialectal backgrounds. This easing may also help non-Arabs by allowing them to recite in a manner befitting their learning capabilities.
2. Accommodating the dialectal diversity of historic Arabs to soften their hearts towards accepting the message of Islam.
3. Honoring the *ummah* of the Prophet ﷺ by revealing the Qur'an in different *ahruf* and allowing Muslims to recite it accordingly. The Qur'an is the only Divine book that was revealed in this manner.
4. Demonstrating that, just as Allah promised, the *ummah* did not fail to preserve the Qur'an in all its precise forms of pronunciation. No other *ummah* was granted this blessing.
5. Increasing opportunities for reward by diversifying our types of engagement with the Qur'an.
6. Showcasing how the Qur'an's brevity is of such eloquence that it somehow generates a universe of kaleidoscopic meanings. These meanings are conveyed through same-verse variations rather than multiple verses.

⁹⁷ Ibn al-Jazarī, *Munjid al-muqri'īn*, 49.

⁹⁸ Al-Qaṣṭalānī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, 1:356.

7. Proving the transcendent nature of the text by facilitating different modes of recitation without contradiction. *Qirā'āt* variations complement rather than contest one another, working in tandem to represent one essential form.
8. Assisting with legal interpretation of verses by clarifying their meanings, and expanding or restricting their applicability.

Examples of *qirā'āt* differences and their impact on meaning

Some of the aforementioned wisdoms behind the *qirā'āt* variations—especially the sixth, seventh, and eighth points—illustrate the breadth of *qirā'āt*'s relevance to *tafsīr*. The *tafsīr* tradition is full of discussions on *qirā'āt* and how they augment the meaning of the Qur'an. These discussions derive from diverse interdisciplinary scholarship on divergent meanings (*tawjīh*), syntactic case-endings (*i'rāb*), preponderance of dialects and readings (*tarjīh*), and others. Ibn al-Jazarī categorized the differences of *qirā'āt* into three:

- 1) difference in wording without a change of meaning. For example, the word *ṣirāṭ* (صِرَاطٌ - سِرَاطٌ = 'path') in *Sūrah al-Fātiḥah* (1:6-7) is pronounced with *sīn* (س) and *ṣād* (ص). The difference in this example is purely dialectical.
- 2) difference in both wording and meaning with the possibility of both meanings being simultaneously applicable. For example, *mālik* and *malik* (مَالِك - مَلِك) in *Sūrah al-Fātiḥah* (1:4); both words (i.e., master and king) indicate Allah.
- 3) difference in both wording and meaning with only one meaning applying at a time, though they are harmonious in perspective without contradiction.⁹⁹ For example, in 12:110, “until the Messengers despaired and **they assumed they were lied to,**” *kudhibū* (كُذِّبُوا), or “**they were certain they were rejected,**” *kudhhdhibū* (كُذِّبُوا). According to the former reading, without a geminate double-consonant sound (*shaddah*) on the *dhāl* (ذ), it is only an assumption and the pronouns reference the people to whom the prophets were sent (they

⁹⁹ Al-Qaṣṭallānī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, 1:73.

assumed that the prophets had lied to them about their prophethood and what they informed them of Allah's punishment). According to the second reading, with a *shaddah* (ّ), it is a certain belief and the pronouns reference the Messengers (they were certain that they had been rejected by their people).¹⁰⁰ Both meanings provide a multi-dimensional account of the stories of the Prophets.

From a *tafsīr* lens, the first category of intonational variations which do not change verse meanings is less relevant, while the second two categories of variations that influence verse meanings are more important.¹⁰¹ An exegete (*mufasssir*) is tasked with illustrating the differences of *qirā'āt* because one reading may explain its counterpart: "their differences often enrich the meanings of the verse."¹⁰² Instead of conveying meaning through multiple verses, the revelation can concisely provide multiple meanings for the sake of polysemy.¹⁰³ This Qur'anic phenomenon is the equivalent of various native Arabic rhetorical styles and devices such as incorporation (*taḍmīn*), dissimulation (*tawriyah* or *tawjīh*) in the science of meanings (*ilm al-ma'ānī*), and corollaries (*mustatba'āt al-tarākīb*) in the science of embellishment (*ilm al-badī'*).¹⁰⁴ That said, an exegete (*mufasssir*) "should illustrate the differences of the mass-transmitted *qirā'āt* because their differences often enrich the meanings of the verse."¹⁰⁵

The Qur'an may further explicate a verse's meaning in a different verse. For example, the calf Prophet Ibrāhīm عليه وسلم offered his guests from the angels was described in 51:26 as fat (سَمِين) and described in 11:69 as roasted (حَنِيد). Similarly, Prophet Mūsā's عليه وسلم miraculous serpent was described in 7:107 and 26:33 as manifest (مُبِين)—meaning big in size—while in 27:10 and 28:31 it was described as *jānn* (جَان), a male serpent that rapidly slithers. These verses exemplify how different complementary meanings can be ascertained from the text without relying

¹⁰⁰ Al-Qaṣṭallānī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, 1:73. For more details on the meanings resulting from these two different readings, see 'Abduḥakīm 'Abduḥakīm, *Mu'jam al-qirā'āt*, 1st ed, (Damascus: Dar Sa'd al-Dīn, 2002), 4:355-8.

¹⁰¹ Ibn 'Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr wal-tanwīr*, 1:51-6.

¹⁰² Ibn 'Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr wal-tanwīr*, 1:51-6.

¹⁰³ Polysemy is the association of one word with multiple meanings.

¹⁰⁴ Ibn 'Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr wal-tanwīr*, 1:51-6.

¹⁰⁵ Ibn 'Ashūr, *al-Taḥrīr wal-tanwīr*, 1:56.

on *qirā'āt*. The following examples, listed in the order of the *muṣḥaf*, illustrate how the Qur'an may also explicate a verse's meaning without additional verses through *qirā'āt*.

Example #1: An alternation (*ibdāl*) of two consonants

In *Sūrah al-Baqarah* (2:219), Allah says, “They ask you about wine and gambling. Say, ‘In them is **great** sin and benefits for people. But their sin is greater than their benefit.’”

يَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الْخَمْرِ وَالْمَيْسِرِ قُلْ فِيهِمَا إِثْمٌ كَبِيرٌ [كَثِيرٌ] وَمَنَافِعُ لِلنَّاسِ وَإِثْمُهُمَا أَكْبَرُ مِنْ نَفْعِهِمَا

Eight of the ten *qurrā'* read it *kabīrun* (كَبِيرٌ) = ‘great.’ However, Ḥamzah and al-Kisā'ī read it, *kathīrun* (كَثِيرٌ) = ‘much.’ This variant type is an alternation (*ibdāl*) of two consonants, (b → th). The sin (*ithm*/إِثْمٌ) of drinking wine, according to the first reading, is ‘great.’ The second reading adds the meaning that ‘**there is much sin in it.**’

In discussing the first reading (*kabīrun* = great), al-Farrā' said that the great sin of drinking wine is obvious that it causes animosity and hatred, referencing 5:91, and impairs one's rational faculty which, in turn, affects their understanding of the rights of Allah.¹⁰⁶ In discussing the second reading (*kathīrun* = much), Abū Ḥayyān said that describing the sin to be ‘much’ can be understood in three ways. First, it might refer to the sinners (i.e., drinking causes sinning among people and every consumer of it is sinful). Second, it might refer to the consequences of drinking (i.e., the deviant actions and sayings of a drunk person). Third, it might refer to all the individuals involved in its manufacturing and distribution (based on the hadith, “Allah has cursed wine, its drinker, its server, its seller, its buyer, its presser, the one for whom it is pressed, the one who conveys it and the one to whom it is conveyed.”)¹⁰⁷ The four layers of meaning in this verse, collectively, provide

¹⁰⁶ Abū Zakariyyā al-Farrā', *Ma'ānī l-Qur'an*, eds. Muḥammad 'Alī al-Najjār and Aḥmad Najātī, 3 vols. (Beirut: 'Ālam al-Kutub, 1983), 1:292.

¹⁰⁷ *Sunan Abū Dawūd*, no. 3674. See Muḥammad ibn Yūsuf Abū Ḥayyān al-Andalusī, *Tafsīr al-baḥr al-muḥīṭ*, eds. 'Ādil 'Abd al-Mawjūd and 'Alī Mu'awwaḍ, 8 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1993), 2:157.

different perspectives without rendering any one reading wrong or inauthentic. Ultimately, “both readings are the speech of Allah so it is not allowed to prefer parts of it over others by our mere judgments; all of that is the speech of Allah.”¹⁰⁸

An alternation (*ibdāl*) of two consonants

يَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الْخَمْرِ وَالْمَيْسِرِ قُلْ فِيهِمَا إِثْمٌ كَبِيرٌ
[كَبِيرٌ] وَمَنَافِعُ لِلنَّاسِ وَإِثْمُهُمَا أَكْبَرُ مِنْ نَفْعِهِمَا

“They ask you about wine and gambling.
Say, ‘In them is **great** sin and benefits for people.
But their sin is greater than their benefit.’”

Surah al-Baqarah (Quran 2: 219)

kathīrun (كَبِيرٌ) = ‘much’
(Reciters: Ḥamzah and al-Kisā’i)

kabīrun (كَبِيرٌ) = ‘great’
The rest of the ten *qurrā*

Drinking wine is a **great sin** for its heinous consequences. There is also **much sin** in it since it causes sinning among people, every consumer of it is sinful, it causes deviant actions, and it includes in the sin every individual involved in the entire process of its consumption.

Example #2: Different vowels

In Sūrah al-Kahf (18:55), Allah says, “And nothing has prevented the people from believing when guidance came to them and from seeking their Lord’s forgiveness except that there [must] befall them the [accustomed] precedent of the ancients or that the punishment should come upon them **in many types**.”

¹⁰⁸ Al-Andalusī, *Tafsīr al-baḥr al-muḥīṭ*, 2:185.

وَمَا مَنَعَ النَّاسَ أَنْ يُؤْمِنُوا إِذْ جَاءَهُمُ الْهُدَىٰ وَيَسْتَغْفِرُوا رَبَّهُمْ إِلَّا أَنْ تَأْتِيَهُمْ سُنَّةٌ الْأَوَّلِينَ أَوْ يَأْتِيَهُمُ الْعَذَابُ قُبُلًا [قَبَلًا]

‘Āṣim, Ḥamzah, al-Kisā’ī, and Abū Ja‘far read the end of the verse with the diacritic mark *ḍammah* on the *qāf* and the *bā*, *qubulan* (قُبُلًا) = ‘in many types.’ The rest of the *qurrā*’ read the *qāf* with *kasrah* and the *bā* with *fathā*, *qibalan* (قِبَلًا) = ‘face to face.’ The different vowels allow us to interpret the verse as stating that people do not believe nor ask for forgiveness until they directly face the punishment of former communities, or until they experience diverse forms of punishment.

Different vowels

وَمَا مَنَعَ النَّاسَ أَنْ يُؤْمِنُوا إِذْ جَاءَهُمُ الْهُدَىٰ
وَيَسْتَغْفِرُوا رَبَّهُمْ إِلَّا أَنْ تَأْتِيَهُمْ سُنَّةٌ الْأَوَّلِينَ أَوْ
يَأْتِيَهُمُ الْعَذَابُ قُبُلًا [قِبَلًا]

“And nothing has prevented the people from believing when guidance came to them and from seeking their Lord’s forgiveness except that there [must] befall them the [accustomed] precedent of the ancients or that the punishment should come upon them **in many types**.”

Surah al-Kahf (Q.18:55)

with *ḍamma* on the *qāf* and the *bā*,
qubulan (قُبُلًا) = ‘**in many types**’.

(Reciters: ‘Āṣim, Ḥamzah, al-Kisā’ī, and Abū Ja‘far.)

the *qāf* with *kasrah* and the *bā* with *fathā*,
qibalan (قِبَلًا) = ‘**face to face**’.

The rest of the ten *qurrā*’

People do not believe nor ask for forgiveness until they **directly face** the punishment of former communities, or until they experience **diverse forms** of punishment.

Example #3: Alternation (*ibdāl*) of two consonants

In *Sūrah al-Takwīr* (Q. 81:24), Allah says, “And Muhammad is not a **withholder** of [knowledge of] the unseen.”

وَمَا هُوَ عَلَى الْغَيْبِ بِضَنِينٍ [بِظَنِينٍ]

Ibn Kathīr, Abū ‘Amr, al-Kisā’ī, and one of two canonical transmitters of Ya‘qūb, Ruays, read *bi-ẓanīnin* with ẓ (بِظَنِينٍ) = accused. The rest read it *bi-ḍanīnin* with ḍ (بِضَنِينٍ) = stingy. The alternation (*ibdāl*) of two consonants, ($\mathfrak{d} \rightarrow \mathfrak{z}$) in this verse results in distinct but complementary meanings. While the former reading means that the Prophet ﷺ is not accused of withholding the knowledge of the unseen, the latter means that the Prophet ﷺ does not stingily withhold the knowledge of the unseen.¹⁰⁹

Alternation (*ibdāl*) of two consonants

وَمَا هُوَ عَلَى الْغَيْبِ بِضَنِينٍ [بِظَنِينٍ]

“And Muhammad is not a **withholder** of [knowledge of] the unseen.”

Surah al-Takwīr (Q. 81:24)

bi-ẓanīnin with ẓ (بِظَنِينٍ) = ‘accused’.

(Reciters: Ibn Kathīr, Abū ‘Amr, al-Kisā’ī, and one of two canonical transmitters of Ya‘qūb, Ruays)

bi-ḍanīnin with ḍ (بِضَنِينٍ) = ‘stingy’.

The rest of the ten *qurrā’*

The Prophet ﷺ is not **accused of withholding** the knowledge of the unseen nor does he **stingily withhold** the knowledge of the unseen.

¹⁰⁹ Al-Farrā’, *Ma‘ānī l-Qur‘an*, 2:293.

Examples for *qirā'āt* legal applications

The layered meanings generated by the *qirā'āt* influence the derivation of legal rulings by confirming an agreed-upon opinion, giving preference to one opinion over another, reconciling between conflicting opinions, offering additional circumstantial rulings, or clarifying an ambiguous meaning intended by the lawgiver. Moreover, the *qirā'āt* have triggered theoretical debates pertaining to reducing the legal authority of non-canonical readings by equating them to verdicts of the Prophet's companions (*qawl al-ṣaḥabī*) as secondary sources of law and synthesizing textual additions (*ziyādah 'alā al-naṣṣ*) of non-canonical readings as signals for abrogated verses (*naskh*). These debates paralleled evolving discourses of the epistemic principle of 'true report' (*khavar al-ṣādiq*) and the hadith concept of *tawātur*, denoting boundaries of legal certainty.¹¹⁰

Example #1: Active → passive verb forms

In Sūrah al-Baqarah (2:229), Allah says, “And it is not lawful for you to take anything of what you have given them unless **both fear** that they may not be able to maintain the limits of Allah.”

وَلَا يَجِلُّ لَكُمْ أَنْ تَأْخُذُوا مِمَّا ءَاتَيْتُمُوهُمْ شَيْئًا إِلَّا أَنْ يَخَافَا [يُخَافَا] أَلَّا يُقِيمَا حُدُودَ اللَّهِ

Ḥamzah, Abū Ja'far, and Ya'qūb read the verb *yukhāfā* (يُخَافَا) in the passive form. The rest read it *yakhāfā* (يَخَافَا) in the active form unless they both fear. The verse discusses rulings of a contractual marriage dissolution agreement between the husband and the wife in which the wife fiscally compensates the husband (usually by dropping her right to the deferred *mahr*) in exchange for her release from the marriage bond (*khul'*). The verse warns the parties involved against pressuring the wife to give up her right to the *mahr* in order to facilitate the breakup. The verse establishes that this kind of breakup is legitimate if there is a risk of violating the limits of Allah by the husband and the wife.

¹¹⁰ Badr al-Dīn Al-Zarkashī, *al-Baḥr al-muḥīt*, ed. 'Abdullah al-Ānī, 2nd ed. 6 vols. (Kuwait: Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs, 1992), 1:466–70.

The variation of passive-active verb forms in the above two readings provides insights on who is entitled to decide that the rights of Allah will be violated if the couple do not break up. The first reading, *yukhāfā* (يُخَافَا), means ‘unless it is feared that they [the husband and the wife] may not maintain the limits of Allah’ which grants the authority to decide on *khul’* to a third party. Since the verse does not explicitly identify the subject of the passive verb, the context of family law implies that it is the judiciary. The second reading, *yakhāfā* (يَخَافَا), means ‘unless they both fear that they may not be able to maintain the limits of Allah’ which vests both spouses with the authority to decide on the situation.¹¹¹ *Khul’* procedures are extensively detailed under Islamic family law.

¹¹¹ Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li-aḥkām al-Qur’an*, ed. ‘Abd Allāh al-Turkī, 24 vols. (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risāla, 2006), 4:74–76.

Active → passive verb forms

وَلَا يَحِلُّ لَكُمْ أَنْ تَأْخُذُوا مِمَّا ءَاتَيْتُمُوهُمْ شَيْئًا
إِلَّا أَنْ يَخَافَا [يُخَافَا] أَلَّا يُقِيمَا حُدُودَ اللَّهِ

“And it is not lawful for you to take anything of what you have given them unless **both fear** that they may not be able to maintain the limits of Allah.”

Surah al-Baqarah (Q. 2:229)

yukhāfā (يُخَافَا) in the passive form
= ‘**unless it is feared that**’.

(Reciters: Ḥamzah, Abū Ja’far and Ya’qub.)

yakhāfā (يَخَافَا) in the active form
= ‘**unless they both fear that**’.

The rest of the ten qurrā’

yukhāfā (يُخَافَا), means ‘unless **it is feared that** they [the husband and the wife] may not maintain the limits of Allah’ (i.e. the judiciary). yakhāfā (يَخَافَا), means ‘unless **they both fear that** they may not be able to maintain the limits of Allah’ which vests both spouses with the authority to decide on the situation.

Example #2: Verb conjugation:

In *Sūrah al-Rūm* (30:39), Allah says, “And whatever you **give in ribā** to **increase within** the wealth of people will not increase with Allah.”

وَمَا ءَاتَيْتُمْ [أَتَيْتُمْ] مِّن رَّبًّا لِّيَرْبُوَا [لِيَرْبُوا] فِي أَمْوَالِ النَّاسِ فَلَا يَرْبُوا عِنْدَ اللَّهِ

This verse which talks about usurious gain (*ribā*), lit. ‘increase’, contains two *qirā’āt*:

First, Ibn Kathīr reads the verb *ataytum* (أَتَيْتُمْ) without a long vowel *ā* after the *hamzah* = ‘whatever type of *ribā* you engage with.’ The rest read *ātaytum* (ءَاتَيْتُمْ) with *ā* after the first *hamzah* = whatever you give in *ribā*. The variation in the

conjugation of the perfect verb ($a \rightarrow \bar{a}$) reflects a pronounced change of pattern (*wazn*) in two verbs sharing the same root. While the latter reading, *ātaytum* (ءَاتَيْتُمْ), unequivocally prohibits the giving of interest, the former expands the explicit prohibition to any type of engagement with *ribā*, including both giving and taking. Hence, the two readings are ultimately convergent in meaning.¹¹²

Verb Conjugation

وَمَا ءَاتَيْتُمْ (أَتَيْتُمْ) مِّن رَّبًّا لِّيَرْبُوَ فِي أَمْوَالِ
النَّاسِ فَلَا يَرْبُوا عِنْدَ اللَّهِ

“And whatever you **give for** *ribā* to increase within
the wealth of people will not increase with Allah.”

Surah al-Rūm (Q. 30:39)

Ataytum (أَتَيْتُمْ) without a long vowel *ā*
after the *hamzah* = ‘**whatever way of *ribā*
you engage with**’.

(Reciters: ibn-Kathīr.)

Ātaytum (ءَاتَيْتُمْ) with *ā* after the first
hamzah = ‘**whatever you give for *ribā***’.

The rest of the ten qurrā’

Ātaytum (ءَاتَيْتُمْ) prohibits **the giving of interest** and
ataytum (أَتَيْتُمْ) expands the explicit prohibition to
**any type of engagement with *ribā*, including both
giving and taking.**

¹¹² Abū Zur‘ah ‘Abdulrahmān ibn Zanjalah, *Hujjat al-qirā’āt*, ed. Sa‘eed al-Afghāni, 5th ed. (Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risāla, 1997), 558–9.

Second, Nāfi‘, Abū Ja‘far, and Ya‘qūb read *li-turbū* (لِتَرْبُوا) = ‘so that you increase it through people’s money’ as a reference to the addressees of the consumers of *ribā*. The rest read *li-yarbuwa* (لِيَرْبُوا) = ‘so that the money increases within people’s money’ as a reference to the money itself.¹¹³ The variation in the prefix conjugation determining the pronouns of the imperfect verb (*ya* → *tu*) changes the subject of the verb. In the first reading, the subject is the person dealing in *ribā* (which associates the prohibition with the intention of accruing interest) while the subject in the second reading is the *ribā* itself (which generalizes the prohibition irrespective of intention).

This verse, out of four verses revealed regarding the prohibition of *ribā*, showcases part of the wisdom behind its prohibition. The verse draws an intriguing comparison between seeking the increase of wealth from people’s money through *ribā* and gift-giving, even with unequal exchange, or *zakāh*. The rest of the verse reads, “But what you give in *zakāh*, desiring the countenance of Allah—those are the multipliers.” The comparison explains the rational and spiritual disparity between *ribā* transferring the wealth from the poor to the rich and *zakāh* doing exactly the opposite.

¹¹³ Zanjalah, *Hujjat al-qirā’āt*, 558–9.

Verb Conjugation

وَمَا ءَاتَيْتُمْ مِّن رِّبَا لِّيَرْبُوَ (لِتَرْبُوا) فِي أَمْوَالِ
النَّاسِ فَلَا يَرْبُوا عِندَ اللَّهِ

*“And whatever you give for ribā to **increase within**
the wealth of people will not increase with Allah.”*

Surah al-Rūm (Q. 30:39)

Li-turbū (لِتَرْبُوا) = ‘so that you increase
it through people’s money’ as
a reference to the addressees
of the consumers of ribā.

(Reciters: Nāfi’, Abū Ja’far, and Ya’qūb.)

li-yarbuwa (لِيَرْبُوا) = ‘so that the money
increases within people’s money’ as a
reference to the money itself.

The rest of the ten qurrā’

In the first reading, the subject is the person
dealing in *ribā* (which associates the prohibition
with the intention of accruing interest) while in
the subject in the second reading is the *ribā* itself
(which generalizes the prohibition irrespective of
intention).

Conclusion

In diverse societies teeming with dialects ranging from the common to the obscure, we should not automatically assume that everyone reciting the Qur'an unlike ourselves is reciting it incorrectly. The Prophet ﷺ recited and taught the Qur'an in multiple ways. All readings were authentically systemized by generations of pious predecessors. This grounding in tradition clearly permits our continued use of the *qira'at* to not only recite the holy text in a dialect that is easier on our tongues, but also to better understand its spectrum of meanings and range of legally coherent interpretations.

Muslims of all stripes, then, can use the *qirā'āt* to connect (or reconnect) with the text of our holy book, finding in its every word a bottomless well of inspiration. The *qirā'āt*, ultimately, are how the Qur'an fulfills its promise of speaking not just to a particular people in a particular place at a particular time, but to all of humanity, right up until the fateful day when the trumpet is blown.