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THE VARIANT READINGS IN ISLAMIC LAW

Abstract: The accepted variant readings (*qirā'āt*) of the Qur'ān have often been characterized as those that may be recited in the course of the ritual prayer. However, it appears on examination that premodern juridical handbooks laying out the rules governing the ritual prayer rarely discuss textual variants. When they do, it is almost always to rule out variants reportedly recited by Companions before the caliph 'Uthmān promulgated a single orthodox text. Also contrary to what some scholars continue to allege, it is doubtful whether the acceptance of seven, ten, or any other number of accepted variant readings has been effected by judicial rulings or fatwas from jurists backed by state power. What constrained specialists to restrict themselves to widely accepted variants was evidently fear not of the state but of disapproval from fellow specialists.

There has been a good deal of loose talk, including from me, to the effect that the crucial criterion for an acceptable variant reading of the Qur'ān is that it may be recited in the course of the ritual prayer. In fact, however, premodern juridical handbooks laying out the rules governing the ritual prayer rarely discuss textual variants (*qirā'āt*). When they do, it is almost always to rule out variants reportedly recited by Companions before the caliph 'Uthmān promulgated a single orthodox text. Contrary to what (notably) Shady Hekmat Nasser has alleged, what constrained specialists to restrict themselves to widely accepted variants was not state power but majority views among fellow specialists, whose disapproval they hoped to avoid.

What handbooks of the different schools say

In the period before Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. Mūsā b. Mujāhid (d. 324/936), famous for identifying seven preferred readings, suitability for recitation at the ritual prayer does come up in the juridical literature. Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795) reportedly said that if the prayer leader recites according to the reading of Ibn Mas'ūd, one is to leave and make up the prayer elsewhere.¹ Abū Yūsuf Ya'qūb ibn Ibrāhīm (d. 182/798?) reportedly said, “If a reciter recites

¹ Saḥnūn, *al-Mudawwanah al-kubrā* (16 vols., Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Sa'ādah, 1323), 1.84 = ed. Ḥamdī al-Damardāshi Muḥammad (9 vols., Beirut: al-Maktabah al-'Aṣriyyah, 1419/1999), 1.207.

in his prayer according to the variant readings (*hurūf*) of Ubayy or Ibn Mas‘ūd what is not in our *maṣāḥif*, the prayer is not permissible.”² Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241/855) related of the Basran ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Maḥdī (d. 198/814), “If I prayed behind someone reciting Ḥamzah’s reading, I would repeat the prayer.”³ However, most of our earliest systematic handbooks of Islamic law ignore the question. For example, Muḥammad b. Idrīs al-Shāfi‘ī (d. 204/820), *al-Umm*, calls for the prayer leader not to be a *lahḥān* (here, probably, one who does not pronounce the vowels and consonants correctly), moreover that the prayer must be repeated if his mispronunciation is such as to change the meaning of *Umm al-Qur’ān* (Q al-Fātiḥah 1), although not for other chapters.⁴ This is not to comment directly on the question of variant readings, but it is to allow much grosser variation than normally distinguishes what the literature of *qirā’āt* reports.

As for the handbooks of the schools, let me begin with the Ḥanafī tradition. Abū’l-Ḥasan Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Qudūrī (d. 428/1037) discusses in turn al-Shāfi‘ī’s requirement of reciting the Fātiḥah in the ritual prayer, which he rejects, whether the *basmalah* is part of the Fātiḥah, whether any particular passages are required in any of the sets of bowings of the prayer, and whether one led needs to recite the Qur’ān or say *āmīn* aloud.⁵ He reports that it is permissible to recite the Qur’ān in Persian according to Abū Ḥanīfah, not according to Muḥammad al-Shaybānī and Abū Yūsuf unless one is incapable in Arabic.⁶ He does not discuss acceptable readings. Later in the century, Shams al-A’immah

² Also, by an alternative *isnād*, “Whoever recites after the reading of Ibn Mas‘ūd in the ritual prayer, his prayer is spoilt”: Burhān al-Dīn b. Māzah, *al-Muḥīṭ al-burhānī fī al-fiqh al-nu‘mānī*, ed. ‘Abd al-Karīm Sāmī al-Jundī, (9 vols., Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 2004/1424), 1.325.

³ Ibn Hānī’ al-Naysābūrī, *Masā’il al-imām Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal*, ed. Zuhayr al-Shāwīsh (2 vols., Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1400), 2.174. Aḥmad himself is quoted in disapproval of Ḥamzah’s reading but not as going this far. See Christopher Melchert, “Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal and the Qur’ān,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 6/2 (2004): 22–34, at 25.

⁴ Al-Shāfi‘ī, *K. al-Umm*, ed. Rif‘at Fawzī ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib (11 vols., al-Manṣūrah: Dār al-Wafā’, 1422/2001; 2nd printing 1425/2004), 2.251.

⁵ Al-Qudūrī, *al-Mawsū‘ah al-fiqhiyyah al-muqāranah* al-Tajrīd, ed. Muḥammad Aḥmad Sarraj and ‘Alī Jum‘ah Muḥammad (12 vols., Cairo: Dār al-Salām, 1425/2004), 1.485–492, 2.499–514.

⁶ Al-Qudūrī, *Sharḥ mukhtaṣar al-Karkhī*, ed. ‘Abd Allāh Nadhīr Aḥmad ‘Abd al-Raḥmān (9 vols., Kuwait: al-Asfār, 1443/2022), 1.451–454. On the juridical problem of reciting the Qur’ān in Persian, see also Travis Zadeh,

Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Sarakhsī (d. 483/1090–1091?) adds that al-Shaybānī accepted the call to prayer in Persian if the people understand what it is. In support of allowing recitation of the Qur’ān in Persian, Abū Ḥanīfah adduced a report by which the Persians wrote to Salmān asking him to write the Fātiḥah in Persian for them to recite until their tongues should be capable of Arabic. Moreover, the Qur’ān is the uncreated speech of God, whereas languages have appeared in time (are *muḥdath*); therefore, it is impossible to say that the Qur’ān is in a particular language.⁷ Finally, if someone professes belief in Persian, he becomes a believer, and it is acceptable to slaughter in Persian.⁸ Al-Sarakhsī also does not discuss acceptable readings; but if the Qur’ān can be validly recited in Persian, it is hard to see what salience the question of Arabic variants might have. Other Ḥanafī handbooks likewise defend recitation in Persian without discussing variant readings; for example, Fakhr al-Dīn ‘Uthmān b. ‘Alī al-Zayla‘ī (d. 743/1342).⁹ Admittedly, there was some disagreement within the school. Burhān al-Dīn ‘Alī b. Abī Bakr al-Marghīnānī (d. 593/1197) reports that some say Abū Ḥanīfah retracted his approval.¹⁰

Burhān al-Dīn Muḥammad (Maḥmūd) b. Aḥmad b. Māzah (d. 616/1219–1220) reviews at length the pronunciation of different letters and which are liable to be confused. Most shaykhs would say that by analogy it spoils the prayer to recite, for example, *fa-ammā ‘l-yatīma fa-lā tak’har* (cf. Q al-Ḍuḥā 93:9, *taqhar*). However, others excuse it on the plea of

The Vernacular Qur’an: Translation and the Rise of Persian Exegesis, Institute of Ismaili Studies Qur’anic Studies Series 7 (Oxford: Univ. Press, 2012), chap. 1.

⁷ There was a controversy from at least the ninth century as to whether the speech of God was a language. Al-Sarakhsī here seems to make out Abū Ḥanīfah as siding with the traditionalists in denial, for which see *Une doxographie Sunnite du IV^e/X^e siècle: ›Kitāb al-Maqālāt d’Abū ‘l-‘Abbās al-Qalānīsī*, ed. and trans. Ziad Bou Akl, *Scientia Graeco-arabica* 33 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2021), 35, 79–80.

⁸ Al-Sarakhsī, *K. al-Mabsūt*, ed. Muḥammad Rāḍī al-Ḥanafī (30 vols., in 13, Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Sa‘ādah, 1324–1331), 1.36–37.

⁹ Al-Zayla‘ī, *Tabyīn al-ḥaqā’iq* (6 vols., Bulaq: al-Maṭba‘ah al-Kubrā al-Amīriyyah, 1313–1315), 1.109–111.

¹⁰ Al-Marghīnānī, *Al-Hidāyah*, trans. Imran Ahsan Khan Nyazee (2 vols. Bristol: Amal Press, 2006–8), 1.111. Al-‘Aynī says that retraction was reported by Abū Bakr al-Rāzī and others, but al-Jaṣṣāṣ al-Rāzī’s reworking of al-Ṭaḥāwī’s survey of juridical disagreement reports only that Abū Ḥanīfah accepted recitation of the Qur’ān in Persian: Badr al-Dīn al-‘Aynī, *al-Bināyah sharḥ al-Hidāyah*, ed. Ayman Ṣāliḥ Sha‘bān (13 vols., Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1420/1999), 2.179; al-Jaṣṣāṣ al-Rāzī, *Mukhtaṣar Ikhtilāf al-‘ulamā’*, ed. ‘Abd Allāh Nadhīr Aḥmad (5 vols., Beirut: Dār al-Bashā’ir al-Islāmīyah, 1416/1995), 1.211.

necessity, since many of the general, even Arabs, regularly transpose *kāf* and *qāf*. A few pages later, he refers to *balwā al-‘āmmah*, “the necessity of the general”, they not recognizing the difference between *al-ḥamdu li-‘llāh* (Q 1:1) and *al-hamd*.¹¹ However, he upholds higher standards for someone leading a group in prayer, disqualifying one who lisps or pauses inappropriately. We are commanded to recite the Qur’ān, he concludes, but we are not certain that what is in Ibn Mas‘ūd’s *muṣḥaf* is *qur’ān* on account of (lacking) the condition of *tawātur*, recurrent transmission on such a scale as to preclude error and fraud. He is careful to add that Ibn Mas‘ūd’s own prayer according to it was licit, since he had heard it from the Prophet.¹²

In the late Mamluk period, Badr al-Dīn Maḥmūd b. Aḥmad al-‘Aynī (d. 855/1451) reports that Abū Yūsuf said it spoiled one’s prayer to recite non-‘Uthmānic variants but then proposes as his own view that it is sounder to say it does not, qualified only by saying this should not become habitual.¹³ His contemporary Kamāl al-Dīn Muḥammad b. al-Humām (d. 861/1457) says a great deal about mispronunciation of the Qur’ān.

A reciter’s mistake is in one of the case endings, letters, words, and verses. In the letters it is one of putting one letter in place of another, moving forward or delaying, and adding or subtracting. As for the case endings, if it does not change the meaning, it does not spoil (the prayer), since changing it by mistake cannot be guarded against and so is excused. If it changes grossly, such that believing it is unbelief, as in (reciting) *al-bāri’u ‘l-muṣawwar* [cf. Q al-Ḥashr 59:24] assigning a *fathah* to the *wāw*. God is afraid only for his servants the *‘ulamā’*, for removing the high prestige of the *‘ulamā’* will cause corruption according to early (authorities).

¹¹ Ibn Māzah, *Muḥīṭ* 1.317–320. Related to *‘umūm al-balwā*, a common term in legal writing for widespread inadvertent error in performing duties, mentioned in a similar connection by Hekmat Shady Nasser, “The Grammatical Errors of Qur’ān Reciters: *Zallat al-qāri’* by Abū Ḥafṣ al-Nasafī (d. 537/1142),” *Journal of Abbasid Studies* 2 (2015): 1–37, at 10–11.

¹² Ibn Māzah, *Muḥīṭ* 1.325. Many other examples in Shady Hekmat Nasser, “(Q.12:2) We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur’ān: Praying behind the Lisper,” *Islamic Law and Society* 23 (2016): 23–51.

¹³ ‘Aynī, *Bināyah* 2.177.

Recent (authorities) have disagreed. Ibn Muqābil,¹⁴ Muḥammad b. Sallām,¹⁵ Abū Bakr b. Saʿīd al-Balkhī,¹⁶ al-Hinduwānī,¹⁷ Ibn al-Faḍl,¹⁸ and al-Ḥulwānī¹⁹ say it does not spoil (the prayer). The position of the early (authorities) is more cautious, since if one intended so it would constitute unbelief, and what constitutes unbelief is not of the Qurʾān. One is speaking rather the talk of unbelieving people by mistake, which spoils (the prayer) just like speaking people's talk forgetfully, even what is not unbelief, so how when it is unbelief? The position of the recent (authorities) is more lenient, since people do not distinguish the varieties of case endings. This is plain from the position of Abū Yūsuf, since he does not consider case endings

This is connected to doubling or not doubling letters. Most of the shaykhs hold that omitting prolongation and doubling letters are like making mistakes in case endings. For this reason, many have held that it spoils to pronounce without doubling *rabi 'l-ʿālamīn* and *iyāka naʿbudu* [cf. Q 1:2, 5], since the meaning of *iyā* without doubling is the Sun. The better position is that it does not spoil (the prayer), it being a rare linguistic variant, as transmitted by some recent grammarians. According to the recent (authorities), one does not need this [i.e., it is a harmless mistake regardless of whether it can be justified as acceptable Arabic]

As for letters, if one puts one letter in place of another, either by mistake or from inability, the first is that it does not change the meaning If one says *qayyāmūna bi-l-qisṭ* [instead of *qawwāmūna*, Q al-Nisāʾ 4:135] or *wa-l-tayyābīna* [instead of *al-tawwābīna*, Q al-Baqarah 2:222] or *al-ḥayyu 'l-qayyām* [instead of *al-qayyūm*, Q 2:255, Āl ʿImrān 3:2, Ṭahā 20:111], according to the two of them (Abū Ḥanīfah and al-Shaybānī) they do not spoil (the prayer). According to Abū Yūsuf, they do spoil (the prayer). If corrected, they do spoil (the prayer) according to the two of them, likewise according to Abū Yūsuf if there is not the like of them in the Qurʾān [making them non-qurʾānic]. If one reads *aṣḥābu 'l-shaʿīr* with *shīn* [instead of *al-saʿīr*, Q Fāṭir 35:6, al-Mulk 67:10], it is spoilt by agreement

It is likewise for shortening: if it does not change the meaning, it does not spoil (the prayer); for example, *jāʾahum* in place of *jāʾatʾhum*. If it does change (the meaning), then it does spoil (the prayer); for example, *wa-l-nahāri idhā tajallā mā khalaqa 'l-dhakara wa-l-unthā* without *wāw* [cf. Q al-Layl 92:2–3]. As for omitting a letter of a word, in the *Fatāwā* of Qāḍī Khān,²⁰

¹⁴ This presumably should be Muḥammad b. Muqātil (d. 246/860–861), qadi for Ray, on whom see al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-islām*, ed. ʿUmar ʿAbd al-Salām Tadmūrī (52 vols., Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, 1407–1421/1987–2000), 18.472, with further references.

¹⁵ Abū Naṣr al-Balkhī (d. 305/917–918), on whom see Ibn Abīʿl-Wafāʾ, *al-Jawāhir al-muḍīyyah*, ed. ʿAbd al-Fattāḥ Muḥammad al-Ḥulw (5 vols., Cairo: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Kutub al-ʿArabiyyah, 1398–1408/1978–1988, repr. Giza: Hajr, 1413/1993), 3.171–172, 4.92–93.

¹⁶ D. 328/939–940, on whom see Ibn Abīʿl-Wafāʾ, *Jawāhir* 3.19.

¹⁷ Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Balkhī (d. 362/973), on whom see Dhahabī, *Tārīkh* 16.298.

¹⁸ Most likely Abū Bakr Muḥammad (d. 381/991), on whom see Ibn Abīʿl-Wafāʾ, *Jawāhir* 3.300–302.

¹⁹ Most likely Shams al-ʿAʿimmah ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz b. Aḥmad al-Ḥalwāʾī (d. 446/1054?), on whom see Dhahabī, *Tārīkh* 30.397–399.

²⁰ Abūʿl-Maḥāsīn Ḥasan b. Maṣṣūr al-Bukhārī (d. 589/1193 or later), on whom see Dhahabī, *Tārīkh* 41.397–398.

if it is a root letter of the words and changes the meaning, it spoils (the prayer) according to the position of Abū Ḥanīfah and Muḥammad (al-Shaybānī); for example, *razaqnāhum* without *rā'* or *zāy* or *khalaqnā* without *khā'* or *ja'alnā* without *jīm* As for the like of *mā khalaqa 'l-dhakara wa-'l-unthā*, they say that by analogy with the position of Abū Yūsuf that does not spoil (the prayer), since what is recited is in the Qur'ān

As for reciting one word in place of another, if they are close in meaning and the like of it is in the Qur'ān, like *al-ḥakīm* in place of *al-'alīm*, it does not spoil (the prayer) by agreement. If the like of it is not found, like *al-fājir* [never in the Qur'ān with the definite article] in place of *al-athīm* (Q al-Dukhān 44:44), or *ayyāh* in place of *awwāh* (Q al-Tawbah 9:114, Hūd 11:75), it is the same in the opinion of the two of them. There are two reports of Abū Yūsuf's position. If they are not close or similar, it spoils (the prayer) by agreement . . . even if it is in the Qur'ān, being something belief in which constitutes unbelief, such as *ghāfilīn* in *innā kunnā fā'ilīn* (Q al-Anbiyā' 21:104). Most shaykhs agree that this spoils (the prayer) by agreement, although some of them have said that by analogy with the position of Abū Yūsuf it does not spoil (the prayer). This was the opinion given by Ibn Muqātil. The sound doctrine of Abū Yūsuf is that it does spoil (the prayer).²¹

Shorter versions of this discussion are found in other Ḥanafī handbooks.

It appears that, mindful of the difficulty of qur'ānic Arabic for most Muslims and disliking to pronounce most Muslims' prayers invalid, the jurists needed to consider and excuse much greater deviations from the standard than, say, whether Q 1 begins *al-ḥamdu lillāh* (all of the Ten Readers) or *al-ḥamdi lillāh* (the choice of al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī alone among the Fourteen and of some later scholars).²² Indeed, the Ḥanafī tradition is so unconcerned with restricting qur'ānic recitation that it reports some three dozen variants, some non-'Uthmānic, preferred by Abū Ḥanīfah al-Nu'mān b. Thābit (d. 150/767) himself; for example, *inna 'l-bawāqira tashshābahu 'alaynā* instead of *inna 'l-baqara tashābaha*

²¹ Ibn al-Humām, *Sharḥ Faṭḥ al-qadīr lil- 'ājiz al-faqīr* (9 vols., Bulaq: al-Maṭba'ah al-Kubrā al-Amīriyyah, 1316, repr. 10 vols., Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1415/1995), 1.331–332.

²² See Aḥmad Mukhtār 'Umar and 'Abd al-'Āl Sālim Mukram, *Mu'jam al-qirā'āt al-qur'āniyyah* (8 vols., Kuwait: Dhāt al-Salāsīl, 1402–1405/1982–1985, repr. n.p.: Intishārāt-i Uswah, 1412–1413/1991–1992), 1.5. The philologist al-Farrā' (d. 207/822–823) describes *al-ḥamdi li-'llāh* as a variant heard from bedouins: *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān*, ed. Aḥmad Yūsuf Najāfī, Muḥammad 'Alī al-Najjār, and 'Abd al-Fattāḥ Shalabī, with 'Alī al-Najdī Nāṣif, Turāthunā (3 vols., Cairo: Maṭba'at Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyyah, al-Hay'ah al-Miṣriyyah al-'Āmmah li-'l-Kitāb, 1955–1972), 1.3–4, *ad* Q 1:1. Shady Hekmat Nasser has remarked jurists' usual disapproval of letting a *badawī* lead the prayer (“(Q. 12:2)”, 45n), but this is evidently about persons from the country, as in the usual rule (justified by explicit Prophet hadith) that a *ḥadīr* (city person) may not trade with a *bādin* before he has entered the city and found out current prices. Al-Farrā', by contrast, would be thinking of desert nomads whose speech was presumptively pure. See also Nasser, “Grammatical Errors,” 2–3.

‘*alaynā*, “All cattle are much the same to us” (Q. al-Baqarah 70, Jones translation).²³ It justifies most of them by citing some ancient authority who likewise preferred that variant, such as Zayd b. ‘Alī (d. 120/738?) for *inna ‘l-bawāqira tashshābahu ‘alaynā*. Some appear to have started as malicious misattributions, notably *min sharri mā khalaq*, “evil he did not create,” instead of *sharri mā khalaq*, “the evil of what He has created” (Q 113 al-Falaq 2); that is, denying against the Sunnis that God could create evil.²⁴ Yet the biographer defends it by offering alternative interpretations (e.g. that *mā* is in apposition to *sharr*, so that the meaning is “an evil, something he created”) rather than denying the attribution.²⁵

In the Māliki tradition, Abū ‘Umar Yūsuf b. ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abd al-Barr (d. 463/1071) quotes a lenient opinion of Mālik through Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh b. Wahb (d. 197/813): “Mālik was asked, ‘Shall we recite the like of what ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb recited, *fa- ‘mḍū ilā dhikri ‘llāh* instead of *fa- ‘s ‘aw ilā dhikri ‘Llāh* (Q al-Jumu‘ah 62:9)?’ He said, ‘That is permissible. The Messenger of God . . . said, “The Qur’ān was sent down in seven *aḥruf* so recite of it what is easy.”’” Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr comments that this is also the reading of Ibn Mas‘ūd.²⁶ However, the Māliki tradition is generally more hostile to variant readings. Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr goes on to observe that what others of Mālik’s disciples related of him is that one is not to recite the variant of Ibn Mas‘ūd, since it differs from what is in ‘Uthmān’s

²³ Al-Qāri’ al-Harawī, *Manāqib al-imām al-a‘ẓam*, in Ibn Abī ‘l-Wafā’, *al-Jawāhir al-muḍiyyah* (2 vols., Hyderabad: Majlis Dā‘irat al-Ma‘ārif, 1332), 2.450–556, at 507–511.

²⁴ As confirmed by its attribution to ‘Amr b. ‘Ubayd (d. 144/7612?) the notorious early Mu‘tazili: ‘Umar and Mukram, *Mu‘jam* 8:277.

²⁵ Al-Qāri’ al-Harawī, *Manāqib* 2.511. Cf. al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh Madīnat al-Salām*, ed. Bashshār ‘Awwād Ma‘rūf (17 vols., Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1422/2001), 2:542, reporting complaints of a large compilation of Abū Ḥanīfah’s aberrant preferences by one Abū ‘l-Faḍl Muḥammad b. Ja‘far al-Khuzā‘ī (d. 408/1017–18).

²⁶ Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, *al-Istidhkār*, ed. ‘Abd al-Mu‘ī Amīn Qal‘ajī (30 vols., Damascus: Dār Qutaybah and Aleppo: Dār al-Wa‘y, 1413–1414/1992–1993), 8.47. Also said to be the reading of ‘Umar, Ibn ‘Abbās, Ubayy, et al.: ‘Umar and Mukram, *Mu‘jam* 7.147–148. One of the readings Ibn Shannabūdh was forced to renounce: al-Dhahabī, *Ma‘rifat al-qurrā’*, ed. Bashshār ‘Awwād Ma‘rūf, Shu‘ayb al-Arna‘ūt, and Ṣāliḥ Maḥdī ‘Abbās (2 vols., Beirut: Mu‘assasat al-Risālah, 1404/1984), 1.278. For the ḥadīth report about seven *aḥruf*, see among other sources Mālik, *al-Muwatta’*, rec. Yaḥyā, *al-ṣalāh* 133, *mā jā’a fī al-Qur’ān*, no. 540; Kristina Nelson, *The Art of Reciting the Qur’an* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1985), Appendix B; G. H. A. Juynboll, *Encyclopedia of Canonical Ḥadīth* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 343–344; and Shady Hekmat Nasser, *The Transmission of the Variant Readings of the Qur’ān*, Texts and Studies on the Qur’ān 9 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 18–31.

codex. ʿĪsā (b. Ḥammād Zughbah, d. 248/863?) related of Abū ʿAbd Allāh ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. al-Qāsim (d. 191/806–807) regarding a codex with the reading of Ibn Masʿūd, “I think one should forbid the people to buy it and beat anyone who recites according to it, forbidding him to do that.”²⁷ Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr concludes,

It is not permissible for anyone to recite in his prayer, whether supererogatory or decreed, according to other than what is in the agreed-upon codex, whether the divergent reading is attributed to Ibn Masʿūd, Ubayy, Ibn ʿAbbās, Abū Bakr, ʿUmar, or by a complete *isnād* to the Prophet.²⁸

In another work, he interprets Ibn Wahb’s and a similar report as pertaining to quotation of the Qurʾān outside the ritual prayer.²⁹ In that work also he connects the ʿUthmānic version with prayer:

The *ʿulamāʾ* have agreed that what is in the codex of ʿUthmān, which is in the hands of the Muslims today in the corners of the world wherever they are, is the Qurʾān to be memorized, which it is not permissible for anyone to go beyond. A Muslim’s prayer is not licit save with it.³⁰

His contemporary Abūʾl-Walīd Sulaymān b. Khalaf al-Bājī (d. 474/1081) explains that since the Prophet ḥadīth report allows all seven *aḥruf* to be recited, indeed commands them to be (as much as is easy), they must all be contained in the codex in people’s hands. On this account, a non-ʿUthmānic variant such as Ibn Masʿūd’s would not be excused by the Prophet’s approval of variant readings.³¹ There seems to be a consensus at this point on requiring observance of the ʿUthmānic *rasm* (consonantal outline) but not yet on variant interpretations of it.

In the next century, Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq b. Ghālib b. ʿAṭīyah (d. 541/1147?) stresses consensus of the scholars rather than directives from the Prophet:

²⁷ Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *Istidhkār* 8.47.

²⁸ Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *Istidhkār* 8.48.

²⁹ Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *al-Tamhīd*, ed. Muṣṭafā b. Aḥmad al-ʿAlawī, et al. (26 vols., Muḥammadiyyah: al-Mamlakah al-Maghribiyyah, Wizārat ʿUmūm al-Awqāf wa-al-Shuʿūn al-Islāmiyyah, 1387–1412/1967–1992), 8.293–294.

³⁰ Ibn ʿAbd al-Barr, *Tamhīd* 4.278.

³¹ Al-Bājī, *al-Muntaqā*, ed. Muḥammad b. ʿAbbās b. Shaqrūn (7 vols. in 4, Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Saʿādah, 1331–1332; repr. n.p.: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, n.d.), 1.347.

As for Ibn Mas‘ūd, he refused to abandon his codex and left. However, the ‘ulamā’ refused to recite it to prevent mischief (*li-sadd al-dharā’i*). Also, it was related that he wrote in it some things by way of commentary, which some thought part of the recitation, so that the matter became confused Then the reciters of the metropoleis followed up what was related to them by way of disagreements, especially such as agreed with the handwriting of the codex, reciting of that according to their scholarly efforts (*ijtihādātuhum*). For that reason, the Seven Readers and others became established (*tarattaba*). In time, the metropoleis fixed on the readings of the Seven. By their means one prays (*yusallā bihā*), since they are established by consensus. As for aberrant readings (*shādh dh al-qirā’āt*), one does not pray by them, since the people have come to consensus over it. As for what is related from the Companions and the learned of the Followers, it is not to be believed but that they did relate it.³²

This passage is quoted by the famous Māliki Qur’ān commentator Abū ‘Abd Allāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1273?).³³ Stress on the Seven Readers, also but less so on consensus, together testify to the influence on opinion in the Islamic West of Abū ‘Amr ‘Uthmān b. Sa‘īd al-Dānī (d. 444/1053?) and his books reviewing the Seven Readings, also al-Shāṭibī (d. 590/1194) and his didactic poem expounding them.³⁴ The Egyptian Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh b. Muḥammad b. Shās (d. 616/1219) declares that reciting an aberrant version (*al-qirā’ah al-shādh dhah*) invalidates a prayer but does not say what is aberrant, what not, presumably relying again on local consensus.³⁵

The Shāfi‘i school is generally known as the most careful about correct pronunciation.

Imām al-Ḥaramayn Abū ‘l-Ma‘ālī ‘Abd al-Malik b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Juwaynī (d. Nishapur, 478/1085) says prayer is spoilt by mispronunciation, particularly as to enunciating the letters

³² Ibn ‘Aṭīyyah, *al-Muḥarrar al-wajīz fī tafsīr al-kitāb al-‘azīz*, ed. ‘Abd al-Salām ‘Abd al-Shāfi Muḥammad (6 vols., Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1422/2001), 1.48.

³³ Al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li-aḥkām al-Qur’ān*, ed. ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī, et al. (24 vols., Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 1427/2006), 1.80.

³⁴ The *JIQSA* convention is to spell out important persons’ names in detail. This Shāṭibī’s requires some explanation. He is sometimes identified as Abū Muḥammad al-Qāsim, sometimes without a separate *kunyah*, Abū ‘l-Qāsim being both that and his *ism*. His father’s name is variously spelt but properly Fīrrah according to Ibn Ḥajar, *Tabṣīr al-muntabih*, ed. ‘Alī Muḥammad al-Bijāwī, sup’d Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Najjār., Turāthunā (4 vols., Cairo: al-Dār al-Miṣriyyah li-‘l-Ta’līf wa-al-Tarjamah, 1964?–1967, repr. Beirut: al-Maktabah al-‘Ilmiyyah, n.d.), 3.1089. For the prevalence of a seven- or eight-readings canon in Syria and points west, ten-readings to the east, see Theodor Nöldeke, et al., *The History of the Qur’ān*, ed. and trans. Wolfgang H. Behn, Texts and studies on the Qur’ān 8 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 562.

³⁵ Ibn Shās, *‘Iqd al-jawāhir fī madhhab ‘ālim al-madīnah*, ed. Muḥammad Abū ‘l-Ajfan and ‘Abd al-Ḥafīz Maṣṣūr, supervised by Muḥammad al-Jayb ibn al-Khūjah and Bakr ibn ‘Abd Allāh Abū Zayd, 3 vols (n.p.: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1415/1995), 1.133.

and doubling or not doubling as appropriate. His teacher (his father Abū Muḥammad ‘Abd Allāh b. Yūsuf al-Juwaynī, d. 438/1047) was doubtful about *ḍād* and *zā*’ but the rule must be that right pronunciation is required.³⁶ The Yemeni Abū’l-A‘lā Yaḥyā b. Abī’l-Khayr al-‘Imrānī (d. 558/1163) stresses the reciter’s ability. It is acceptable to pray behind someone who mispronounces, so long as it does not change the meaning; e.g., *ahdinā* instead of *ihdinā*, *nusta ‘īn* or *nista ‘īn* instead of *nasta ‘īn*, or *wa-lā ‘l-zāllīn* instead of *al-ḍāllīn* (Q 1). But it spoils one’s prayer if one does that deliberately while capable of correct pronunciation. If someone recites *anna ‘llāha barī’un mina ‘l-mushrikīna wa-rasūlih* instead of *rasūluh* (Q al-Tawbah 9:3), it does not spoil his prayer if inadvertent but does if deliberate.³⁷

The strongest statement I have come across in a handbook from any school is from the Syrian Shāfi‘i Muḥyī al-Dīn Yaḥyā b. Sharaf al-Nawawī (d. 676/1271):

Our fellows and others say that it is permissible to recite the Qur’ān in the prayer and elsewhere according to each of the seven readings (*qirā’āt*). It is not permissible to recite the Qur’ān in the prayer and elsewhere according to an aberrant reading (*shādhḍah*), since it is not Qur’ān, for the Qur’ān is not established save by *tawātur*. Each of the seven is *mutawātirah* Abū ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-Barr reported the consensus of the Muslims that it is not permissible to recite according to an aberrant reading and that one is not to pray behind someone who recites it. The ‘ulamā’ have said that whoever recites an aberrant version, if ignorant of it (its being aberrant) or of its being forbidden, is alerted to that. If he repeats after that or knows of it, he is severely punished until he stops that.³⁸

When he refers to *qirā’āt* rather than *aḥruf*, does he have had in mind the Seven of Ibn Mujaḥid? Yes: that would agree with the prevalence of that canon in Syria and points west in his time. No: he cites Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr, which suggests that he had in mind the seven *aḥruf* all represented (by one theory) in the ‘Uthmānic codex, since they are all that Ibn ‘Abd al-Barr discusses in *al-Istidhkār* and *al-Tamhīd*. Also, we know that severe punishment was

³⁶ Imām al-Ḥaramayn, *Nihāyat al-maṭlab fī dirāyat al-madḥḥab*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Azīm Maḥmūd al-Dīb (21 vols., Jedda: Dār al-Minhāj, 1428/2007), 2.139.

³⁷ Al-‘Imrānī, *al-Bayān*, ed. Qāsim Muḥammad al-Nūrī (14 vols., Beirut: Dār al-Minhāj, 1421/2000), 2.409.

³⁸ Al-Nawawī, et al., *al-Majmū’*, ed. Muḥammad Najīb al-Muṭī‘ī (23 vols., Jedda: Maktabat al-Irshād, n.d.), 3.358–359. Al-Nawawī says almost the same, except for the appeal to *tawātur*, in *al-Tibyān fī ādāb ḥamalāt al-Qur’ān*, ed. Muḥammad al-Ḥajjār (Beirut: Dār Ibn Ḥazm, 1414/1994), 97–98, § *qirā’atuhu bi-al-riwāyāt*.

threatened several centuries before for departing from the ‘Uthmānic text, whereas evidence has so far not been found of severe punishment for departing from the Seven of Ibn Mujāhid (more on this to come). I have not discovered any Shāfi‘i legal handbook that expressly restricts the acceptable readings to Ibn Mujāhid’s Seven.

The Ḥanbali seems to be the most relaxed of the Sunni schools of law as to acceptable readings in the ritual prayer. Muwaffaq al-Dīn ‘Abd Allāh b. Aḥmad b. Qudāmah al-Maqdisī (d. 620/1223) starts with the imam’s opinion: “One recites from ‘Uthmān’s codex He (Aḥmad) did not dislike the reading of any of the ten except for the readings of Ḥamzah and al-Kisā’ī.”³⁹ He is less sure than jurists of other schools about excluding non-‘Uthmānic variants:

As for what departs from ‘Uthmān’s codex, like the reading of Ibn Mas‘ūd and others, it is not meet for them to be recited in the ritual prayer, since the Qur’ān is established by means of *tawātur*, whereas these have not been established by *tawātur*; hence it is not established that they constitute Qur’ān. If one recites something from them soundly transmitted, with a continuous *isnād*, there are two versions concerning this. One of this is that one’s prayer thereby becomes unsound. The other is that it is sound, since the Companions used to pray with their readings in the time of the Prophet . . . and afterwards, their prayer being sound without a doubt. It is true that the Prophet . . . said, “Whoever wishes to recite the Qur’ān fresh (*ghaḍḍan*), as it was sent down, let him recite after the recitation of Ibn Umm ‘Abd.”⁴⁰

“Two versions” means two accounts of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal’s opinion. “Ibn Umm ‘Abd” means Ibn Mas‘ūd.

The non-‘Uthmānic variants are taken up again by ‘Alā’ al-Dīn ‘Alī b. Sulaymān al-Mardāwī (d. 885/1480) in his comprehensive survey of Ḥanbali opinions, *al-Inṣāf*. He initially reports agreement with his base text (Ibn Qudāmah, *al-Kāfi*) that what is recited in the ritual prayer must not depart from ‘Uthmān’s codex, since it is known by *tawātur*. He

³⁹ Ibn Qudāmah, *al-Mughnī*, ed. ‘Abd Allāh b. ‘Abd al-Muḥsin al-Turkī and ‘Abd al-Fattāḥ Muḥammad al-Hulw (15 vols., Cairo: Hajr, 1406–1411/1986–1990), 2.165.

⁴⁰ Ibn Qudāmah, *Mughnī* 2.166. For the ḥadīth report, see among other places Ibn Mājah, *al-sunnah* 11, *faḍā’il aṣḥāb rasūl Allāh*, no 138, and Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal. *Musnad imām al-muḥaddithīn* (6 vols., Cairo: al-Maṭba‘ah al-Maymaniyyah, 1313/1895), 1.7 = *Musnad al-imām*, ed. Shu‘ayb al-Arna’ūt, et al. (50 vols., Beirut: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 1413–1421/1993–2001), 1.211.

cites various earlier Ḥanbali authorities who likewise ruled out prayer with non-‘Uthmānic variants, or at least considered this the more likely rule. He acknowledges that Aḥmad was alternatively quoted as disliking but not forbidding it, since various Companions were known to have led the prayer reciting variants without objection. He then names two authorities who allowed any reading soundly transmitted. He concludes that Ibn Qudāmah’s evident meaning is that prayer is sound with anything from ‘Uthmān’s codex, “whether from among the ten (readings) or otherwise. This is sound, the preferred opinion (*al-madhhab*), expressly related from him (Aḥmad).”⁴¹ Al-Mardāwī’s conclusion is thus a little more restrictive than that of Ibn Qudāmah in *al-Mughnī*, which left some room for non-‘Uthmānic readings known by sound *isnāds*. It mentions the Ten Readings, too, taking notice of attempts to further restrict the interpretation of the ‘Uthmānic *rasm*. However, it rejects those attempts in the end.

One might expect the Shi‘ah to reject ‘Uthmān’s collection of the Qur’ān. Abū ‘Abd Allāh Ja‘far b. Muḥammad al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765) labelled Ibn Mas‘ūd a strayer (*ḍāll*) and called for reciting after the reading of Ubayy.⁴² Abū Ja‘far Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī Shaykh al-Ṭā‘ifāh (d. 460/1067?) specifies that *al-Ḥamd* (as he refers to Q 1) must be recited with the *basmalah*, that qur’ānic recitation generally must be clear and deliberate, also audible to the one praying, even if at that prayer it is not to be heard by anyone else, and must be in Arabic.⁴³ He says nothing of textual variants other than to require for a valid prayer that

⁴¹ Al-Mardāwī, *al-Inṣāf fī ma‘rifat al-rājiḥ min al-khilāf*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥāmid al-Fiqī (12 vols., Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Sunnah al-Muḥammadiyyah, 1374–1378/1955–1958), 2.58.

⁴² Al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, ed. ‘Alī Akbar al-Ghaffārī, corr’d Muḥammad al-Ākhundī, (8 vols., Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyyah, 1389, 1391, repr. Beirut: al-Fajr, 2007/1428), 2.634, k. *faḍl al-Qur’ān*, § *al-nawādir*. Al-Ṭūsī Shaykh al-Ṭā‘ifāh, having called for the recitation only of whole chapters in the required prayers, forbids that 93 (*al-Ḍuhā*) and 94 (*al-lam nashrah*) be considered separate, likewise 105 (*al-Fīl*) and 106 (*al-Īlāf*): *al-Mabsūṭ*, ed. Muḥammad Taqī al-Kashfī and Muḥammad al-Bāqir al-Bahbūdī (8 vols., in 4, Tehran: al-Maktabah al-Murtaḍawiyyah li-Iḥyā’ al-Āthār al-Ja‘fariyyah, 1347–1351), 1.107. This only partly agrees with Ibn al-Nadīm’s account of Ubayy’s codex, in which 105 and 106 are apparently run together but not 93 and 94: *K. al-Fihrist*, ed. Ayman Fu‘ād Sayyid, *Silsilat al-nuṣuṣ al-muḥaqqaqah*, 2nd edn (4 vols, London: Mu’assasat al-Furqān li-’l-Turāth al-Islāmī, 1435/2014), 1.68; Arthur Jeffery, *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur’ān: The Old Codices* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1937), 115.

⁴³ Ṭūsī, *Mabsūṭ* 1.105–106. All points confirmed by al-Muḥaqqiq al-Hillī (d. 676/1277), *Sharā‘i‘ al-Islām*, ed. ‘Abd al-Ḥusayn Muḥammad ‘Alī (Tehran: Manshūrāt al-A‘lāmī, 1389/1969), 1.81–82.

al-Hamd be recited with the verses in the correct order, letters correctly doubled or not, and case endings pronounced if one knows them. Similarly, the Ismā‘īlī al-Qāḍī Abū Ḥanīfah al-Nu‘mān b. Muḥammad (d. 363/974) offers conventional advice such as to include the *basmalah* at the beginning of the Fātiḥah, to say *āmīn* after a pause at the end, not to recite parts of chapters in the required prayers, and not to rush the recitation but takes no notice of variant readings.⁴⁴ The Zaydi imam Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Mu‘ayyad al-Ḥasanī (d. 421/1030?) discusses which passages in the Qur’ān are to be recited in different prayers but not its pronunciation or textual variants.⁴⁵ Another useful handbook of Zaydi law is that of Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā b. al-Murtaḍā (d. 840/1437). He is emphatic about the status of the initial *basmalah* as *qur’ān*, the necessity of correctly doubling letters or not in reciting the Fātiḥah, and inclusion of *al-mu‘awwidhatān* in the Qur’ān (i.e., Q. 113–114, against Ibn Mas‘ūd). However, he says nothing about variant readings identified in the eighth century.⁴⁶

Our sole surviving Zāhiri handbook, from Abū Muḥammad ‘Alī b. Aḥmad b. Ḥazm (d. 456/1064), affirms that all versions derived from the seven *ahruf* are *qur’ān*. He goes through a dozen variants involving the actual *rasm*; for example, *min* in *min taḥtiḥā ‘l-anhār*, omitted by most readers at Q 9:100 but not Ibn Kathīr and the people of Mecca, who read it with *min* in agreement with their codex. Consensus affirms their soundness. Anyone who recites the Qur’ān in translation or with verses out of order, his prayer is null and he is a reprobate (*fāsiq*).⁴⁷ Ibn Ḥazm’s hostility to inaccuracy, such as praying in another language, is in line with the Shāfi‘ī tendency. However, despite working in Andalusia, he is concerned

⁴⁴ Al-Qāḍī al-Nu‘mān, *Da‘ā‘im al-islām*, ed. ‘Āṣif b. ‘Alī Aṣghar Fayḍī (2 vols., Cairo: Dār al-Ma‘ārif, 1951, repr. 1969), 1.161–163.

⁴⁵ Al-Mu‘ayyad, *Sharḥ al-Tajrīd*, ed. Muḥammad Yaḥyā Azzān (sp.?) and Ḥumayd Jābir ‘Ubayd (6 vols., Sanaa: Markaz al-Turāth wa-‘l-Buḥūth al-Yamaniyyah, 1427/2006), 1.368–372.

⁴⁶ Ibn al-Murtaḍā, *K. al-Baḥr al-zakḥkhār*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥammad Tāmīr (6 vols., Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1422/2001), 2.404–413.

⁴⁷ Ibn Ḥazm, *al-Muḥallā*, ed. Aḥmad Muḥammad Shākir (11 vols., Cairo: Idārat al-Ṭibā‘ah al-Muniriyyah, 1347–1352), 2.253–254. On Q 9:100, see ‘Umar and Mukram, *Mu‘jam* 3.38–39.

to exclude only non-‘Uthmānic readings, not further restricting the acceptable versions to the Seven or any other number.

Restriction of acceptable readings by the state

Two books by Shady Hekmat Nasser have apparently made him the most widely recognized authority on the variant qur’ānic readings.⁴⁸ He alleges a series of five canonizations: the caliph ‘Uthmān’s promulgation of an official consonantal text; Ibn Mujāhid’s identification of Seven Readings, all versions of ‘Uthmān’s canon; the identification of two authoritative transmitters from each of the Seven Readers by al-Dānī and their popularization by him and al-Shāṭibī; the addition of three readings to Ibn Mujāhid’s Seven by Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Muḥammad Ibn al-Jazarī (d. 833/1429); and the 1920s Egyptian edition of Ḥafṣ < ‘Āṣim.

It has been the finding of the present survey that jurists seldom discussed either Ibn Mujāhid’s or anyone else’s preferred variant readings when they went over qur’ānic recitation in connection with the ritual prayer. Nasser pays some attention to juridical discussions but avoids handbooks of *fiqh* in favour of theoretical *uṣūl al-fiqh* works. Even then, he is forced to stretch points and outright misrepresent what they say in order to find support for Ibn Mujāhid’s canon of Seven Readings. He says,

It could be misleading sometimes to consider one meaning only of certain phrases in *uṣūl* manuals and ignore some of the other possible meanings. It is also inaccurate to ignore the different nuances of phrases and terms that were standardized in later periods. For example, the two terms *qirā’ah* and *ḥarf* were almost interchangeable in early works of *tafsīr*, *Qirā’āt* and *uṣūl*. *al-Ghazālī* [sic], for instance, stated that *al-Kitāb* is that which was transmitted to us within the two covers of the *maṣāḥif* according to *al-aḥruf al-sab‘ah al-mashhūrah* through *tawātur*.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Nasser, *Transmission*; idem, *The Second Canonization of the Qur’ān (324/936)* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

⁴⁹ Nasser, *Transmission*, 98–9; al-Ghazālī, *al-Mustasfā*, ed. Ḥamzah b. Zuhayr Ḥāfiẓ (4 vols., Medina: al-Jāmi‘ah al-Islāmiyyah, Kulliyat al-Sharī‘ah, n.d.), 2.9. There is some disagreement among MSS as to whether the word is *muṣṣhaf* or *maṣāḥif*.

Nasser is right that *ḥarf* is not invariably restricted to the seven revealed versions of the famous ḥadīth report, nor *qirā'ah* to subsequent interpretations of the 'Uthmānic *rasm*. However, the discussion in the *Mustasfā* of Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), accurately summarized here, is plainly about the reliability of our knowledge of the 'Uthmānic codex, for he goes on to commend the Companions' care for accurate copying. Al-Ghazālī's discussion is not concerned with the care of subsequent transmitters such as Ibn Mujāhid's Seven, as al-Nawawī's references to *qirā'āt* quoted above are probably about the 'Uthmānic codex. The manuals of *uṣūl al-fiqh* that Nasser cites do stress *tawātur* in defining what it means for a rule to be revealed in the Qur'ān, and one of Ibn Mujāhid's chief arguments for his Seven is that they are more reliably transmitted than other readings (although he does not refer to *tawātur*). However, Nasser does not manage to find any manual of *uṣūl al-fiqh* that says only Ibn Mujāhid's Seven Readings are properly *mutawātir*. (Indeed, Nasser himself has documented how far from *mutawātir* the Seven Readings appear to have been in the course of transmission between the Prophet and the Readers.⁵⁰)

Unquestionably, Ibn Mujāhid was involved in the persecution of two other scholars, Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. Miqṣam (d. 354/965) in 322/934 and Abū'l-Ḥasan Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Shannabūdh (d. 328/939) in 323/935, for reciting unacceptable variants. Questionable is whether this amounted to an endorsement of his chosen Seven Readings. The basic account of Ibn Miqṣam's trial is that of Abū Ṭāhir 'Abd al-Wāḥid b. 'Umar b. Abī Hāshim (d. 349/960), a disciple to Ibn Mujāhid, from a book called *al-Bayān* quoted by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī and subsequent biographers.

There has sprung up a shoot in our age who asserted that whatever he thought possibly sound in Arabic by way of qur'ānic variants, in agreement with the writing of the codex, was permissible to recite in prayer and otherwise
Abū Bakr ibn Mujāhid (may his face be made to shine) tried to extricate him

⁵⁰ Nasser, *Second Canonization*, chap. 3.

from his misleading innovation by asking him to repent. The judges (*ḥukkām*) and witnesses acceptable before the judges called on him to leave what had occurred to him by way of straying. After he was asked for proof (*burhān*) of the soundness of what he had advocated, he did not produce much. He had no argument (*ḥujjah*), either strong or weak. Abū Bakr (may God be pleased with him) asked to be given his chastisement from the ruler at his repentance and showing withdrawal from his innovation.⁵¹

That is, Ibn Mujāhid asked that no flogging be carried out, the mere threat of it having produced a recantation.

Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī's account of Ibn Shannabūdh's trial is from a chronicle by Ismā'īl b. 'Alī al-Khuṭabī (d. 350/961). Even leading the prayer, he begins, Ibn Shannabūdh would recite variants from the codices of 'Abd Allāh b. Mas'ūd, Ubayy b. Ka'b, and other Companions.⁵² Even better evidence of what was at stake is the recantation he signed after suffering ten lashes:

I used to recite variants that differ from what is in the codex attributed to 'Uthmān (God have mercy on him), the Companions of the Messenger of God . . . having agreed on it and on reciting it. Then it became clear to me that this was a mistake. I have repented of it and renounced it. I am innocent of it before God, for what is in 'Uthmān's codex is the truth, from which one may not turn.⁵³

These trials and their outcome have both been widely remarked in modern Qur'ān scholarship.

Less remarked till recently is a juridical opinion described in Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr fī al-qirā'āt al-'ashr*, from Tāj al-Dīn 'Abd al-Wahhāb b. 'Alī al-Subkī (d. 771/1370):

God be praised. The seven readings to which al-Shāṭibī restricted himself and the three that are the reading of Abū Ja'far, the reading of Ya'qūb, and the

⁵¹ Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh Madīnat al-Salām*, ed. Bashshār 'Awwād Ma'rūf (17 vols., Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1422/2001), 2.610; quoted by (among others) Yāqūt, *Irshād al-arīb*, ed. Iḥsān 'Abbās (7 vols., Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1993), 6.2504; Dhahabī, *Ma'rīfah* 1.308–309; Ibn al-Jazarī, *Ghāyat al-nihāyah*, ed. Gotthelf Bergsträßer (3 vols., Cairo: Maktabat al-Khānjī, 1351–1352/1932–1933, repr. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 1400/1980), 2.124–125. See also Miskawayh, *Tajārib al-umam*, ed. Sayyid Kisrawī Ḥasan (7 vols., Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 2003/1424), 5.163, also *The eclipse of the 'Abbasid caliphate*, ed. H. F. Amedroz and D. S. Margoliouth, trans. D. S. Margoliouth (7 vols., Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1920–1921), 4.324, a shorter account but including the additional information that the trial began by Ibn Miqsam's being summoned to the quarters of the chamberlain Salāmah.

⁵² Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Tārīkh* 2.103–104.

⁵³ Al-Sūlī, *Akhbār al-Rāqī wa-'l-Muttaqī*, ed. J. Heyworth Dunne (Cairo: Maṭba'at al-Ṣāwī, 1354/1935), 63. Quoted by Yāqūt, *Irshād* 5.2325–2326.

reading of Khalaf are recurrent (*mutawātirah*) and known to belong to the faith by necessity. Every variant (*ḥarf*) that just one of the Ten (advocates) is known to belong to the faith by necessity: that it was sent down to the Messenger of God No one treats anything of that arrogantly except an ignoramus. Nothing of them that is recurrent is restricted to someone who recites the versions (*riwāyāt*), rather they are recurrent among all the Muslims who say, “I testify that there is no god but God and I testify that Muḥammad is the Messenger of God.”⁵⁴

Ibn al-Jazarī has shortly before this quoted from Tāj al-Dīn’s father, Taqī al-Dīn ‘Alī b. ‘Abd al-Kāfī al-Subkī (d. 756/1355), *Sharḥ al-Minhāj*, likewise defending the orthodoxy of more than the famous Seven Readings so long as they are well known, such as the reading of Ya‘qūb al-Ḥaḍramī.⁵⁵ In his 2013 book, Nasser says of Ibn al-Jazarī, “He canonized three additional Readings and requested an official *fatwā* from Ibn al-Subkī (d. 771/1370) to proclaim the *tawātur* of the ten canonical Readings.”⁵⁶ He furthermore refers to these sets of readings as receiving state sanction.

The attempts before Ibn al-Jazarī to add more Readings to the canonical Seven, most notably Ibn Mihrān’s (d. 381/991) *al-Ghāyah* and *al-Mabsūṭ*, were neither official nor forced on the Muslim community, in the same manner Ibn Mujāhid and Ibn al-Jazarī’s canons were officially recognized and enforced through political power and issuing *fatwās* to that end.⁵⁷

In his 2021 book, Nasser says, “The *fourth Canonization* marked the ‘official’ inclusion of three more Eponymous Readings in the Canon of the Seven at the hands of Ibn al-Jazarī (d. 833/1429).”⁵⁸ The quotation marks around “official” acknowledge the dubiousness of that term in connection with a *fatwā*, an advisory opinion as opposed to a qadi’s binding *ḥukm*. Yet Nasser leaves us with a dubious term, not a sounder one that means whatever it is he intends to say.

⁵⁴ Ibn al-Jazarī, *al-Nashr fī al-qirā’āt al-‘ashr*, ed. ‘Alī Muḥammad al-Ḍabbā’ (2 vols., Cairo: al-Maktabah al-Tijāriyyah al-Kubrā, n.d., repr. Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, n.d.), 1.46.

⁵⁵ Ibn al-Jazarī, *Nashr* 1.44.

⁵⁶ Nasser, *Transmission*, 36.

⁵⁷ Nasser, *Transmission*, 36fn.

⁵⁸ Nasser, *Second canonization*, 7.

He is clearly wrong, anyway, about state recognition of Ibn Mujāhid's set of Seven Readings. It has been said before:

No account of Ibn Miqdam's trial mentions the Seven of Ibn Mujāhid. Rather, all accounts stress the issue of interpreting the consonantal outline and departing from received tradition. Likewise, no account of Ibn Shannabūdh's trial mentions the Seven. Rather, all accounts stress the issue of rare variants, *shawādh*, his own confession the issue of non-'Uthmanic [*sic*] variants in particular.⁵⁹

Abū Bakr Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn b. Mihrān indeed wrote surveys of the Ten Readings, but to characterize this as attempting "to add more readings to the canonical Seven" assumes that a canon of seven had been established before him, which needs demonstration.⁶⁰

As Nasser presents no evidence that any state officially recognized and enforced Ibn Mujāhid's Seven Readings, so he presents no evidence that Tāj al-Dīn al-Subkī's *fatwā* caused anyone to be prosecuted for reciting some other range of orthodox readings than the Ten. And of course various subsequent writers did expressly endorse other ranges of orthodox readings, notably Ibn al-Jazarī himself and Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Dimyāṭī (d. 1117/1705), who advocated fourteen (although acknowledging that the experts agreed that his last four were rare⁶¹). Among the jurists surveyed above, let me recall al-Mardāwī the Ḥanbali with his "whether from among the Ten or otherwise": he worked in Damascus and should have known of state recognition and enforcement if there was any.

Conclusion

⁵⁹ Christopher Melchert, "Ibn Mujāhid and the Establishment of Seven Qur'anic Readings," *Studia Islamica*, no. 91 (2000), 5–22, at 21–22.

⁶⁰ According to al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī, Ibn Mihrān died on 27 Shawwāl 381/6 January 992: *apud* Yāqūt, *Irshād al-arīb*, ed. Iḥsān 'Abbās (7 vols., Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 1993), 1.233. *Al-Ghāyah* and *al-Mabsūṭ* are the two works of his that have been published. *Al-Shāmil* and *al-Ghāyah* are the two stressed by the biographical tradition. According to the editor of the better edition (based on unicum in Damascus), *al-Mabsūṭ* is a commentary on *al-Shāmil* (otherwise lost, it appears): Subay' Ḥamzah Ḥākimī, introd'n to Ibn Mihrān, *al-Mabsūṭ fī al-qirā'āt al-'ashr*, ed. Ḥākimī (Damascus: Majma' al-Lughah al-'Arabiyyah, n.d.), 4. Fuat Sezgin mentions an Indian manuscript of another title, *K. al-Qirā'āt al-sab'*: Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums* (9 vols., Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1967–80), 1.15. It does not appear among the 17 titles listed by al-Ḥākim al-Naysābūrī and quoted by Yāqūt. Its attribution therefore seems doubtful.

⁶¹ *Ittafaqu 'alā shudhūdhihā*: al-Dimyāṭī, *Ithāf fuḍalā' al-bashar bi-al-qirā'āt al-arba'ah 'ashar*, ed. Sha'bān Muḥammad Ismā'īl (2 vols., Beirut: 'Ālam al-Kutub and Cairo: Maktabat al-Kulliyāt al-Azhariyyah, 1407/1987), 1.65.

As has long been widely recognized, what constrained specialists to restrict themselves to widely accepted variants, especially the Seven Readings proposed by Ibn Mujāhid and other numbers proposed by other specialists, was approval or disapproval from fellow specialists. “Majority readings tended to prevail over minority readings, thus leading towards a general consensus.”⁶² As enounced by Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Dhahabī (d. 748/1348?), “Altogether, if you see the imam in the *miḥrāb* intent on readings and devotion to obscure ones (*lahijan bi-al-qirā’āt wa-tatabbu‘ gharībihā*), know that he is without humility, loving renown and display.”⁶³ The only legal handbooks where I have discovered evident references to Ibn Mujāhid’s Seven Readings as the limit of permissible variants for liturgical recitation are from the North African Māliki school, North Africa being notable for the influence there of al-Dānī and al-Shāṭibī. At that, references to Ibn Mujāhid’s Seven apparently do not appear before the twelfth century and implicitly rest on scholarly consensus.

Enforcement by the state played almost no discernible role. So far, only two examples of prosecution have been discovered by students of the variant readings, the trials of Ibn Miqṣam and Ibn Shannabūdh. Although Ibn Mujāhid was involved in both as an expert witness, they had no connection to the Seven Readings he promoted. The readings accepted in the *qirā’āt* literature are distinguished so minutely that, had the writers of the *fiqh* literature required following any of them for an acceptable prayer, they would have to have pronounced unacceptable the actual prayers of most of the world’s Muslims. We may safely say that only some readings are identified as acceptable in the literature of qur’ānic readings. What we should not say is that they and only they may be recited in the course of ritual prayer for it to be valid. The literature of qur’ānic readings appears to belong to an élite

⁶² *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edn, s.n. “qirā’a,” by R. Paret.

⁶³ Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-islām* 9.386.

discourse remote from the ritual life of most Muslims and even from other élite discourses, notably that of jurisprudence.