

## Uthman and the Recension of the Koran

### Leone Caetani

THE KORAN WAS NOT COLLECTED during the Prophet's lifetime; this is clearly stated by good authorities. Those who are enumerated as collectors can certainly have collected only a part, for otherwise there is no explanation of the great pains to which the three caliphs, Abu Bakr, 'Umar and 'Uthman, put themselves after Muhammad's death to produce the single official text of the Prophet's revelations.

The tradition of the first compilation in the reign of Abu Bakr is usually accepted without questioning, but an examination of the account quickly betrays certain contradictions. Thus, if the death of so many Muslims at al-Yamamah endangered the preservation of the text, why did Abu Bakr, after making his copy, practically conceal it, entrusting it to the guardianship of a woman? Hafsah's copy seems, in fact, to be an invention to justify the corrections of that subsequently compiled under 'Uthman. I allow, however, the probability that in the time of Abu Bakr and 'Umar, quite independently of the battle of al-Yamamah, a copy of the Koran was prepared at Medina, perhaps at 'Umar's suggestion, exactly as others were compiled in the provinces, those, namely, which were afterwards destroyed by order of 'Uthman. It may be that the copy in Medina had a better guarantee of authenticity; while the statement that in the text prepared by Abu Bakr and 'Umar no verse was accepted which was not authenticated by at least two witnesses, who declared that they had themselves heard it from the Prophet, leads us to suppose that already in the first Koranic compilation other verses were suppressed which had not the required support.

If this statement can be accepted as authentic, it would indicate - as is perfectly natural and possible - that even while Muhammad lived, or at least immediately after his death, there were in circulation verses either apocryphal or erroneously attributed to the Prophet. It seems to me equally likely that in the texts made in the provinces (those, that is to say, that were destroyed by 'Uthman) there should have crept in apocryphal or insufficiently authenticated verses, or others which the Prophet and his most interested friends and Companions did not want to see preserved. Muslim traditionists for obvious reasons have tried to eliminate every kind of suspicion in this direction, for that would open an enormous field for dangerous insinuations and conjectures in countries so fertile in invention as the East. They try, accordingly, to make out that the divergences were solely in minutiae of the text or in single letters, so as not to compromise the text as it stands today or admit the existence of other verses either lost or suppressed. The small number of verses which tradition will allow to be doubtful seem to me little pieces of traditionist fraud, adduced to show the scrupulous exactness of the first compiler and the absolute security of the official text.

The official canonical redaction undertaken at 'Uthman's command, was due to the uncertainty which reigned in reference to the text. It is clear that in the year 30 A.H. no official redaction existed. Tradition itself admits that there were various "schools," one in Iraq, one in Syria, one in al-Basrah, besides others in smaller places, and then, exaggerating in an orthodox sense this scandal, tries to make out that the divergences were wholly immaterial; but such affirmations accord ill with the opposition excited by the caliph's act in al-Kufah. The official version must have contained somewhat serious modifications.

These general observations, however do not touch on the political and moral aspect of the official compilation of the Koran under 'Uthman. In point of fact; this act, though apparently of a purely religious nature, was intimately bound up with matters of the highest importance in the history of

Islam. To explain how this can be, we must first examine the origin and position of a new class of the Islamic community, those known as the Qurra, or Koran-readers.

It is greatly to be deplored that tradition is so dumb on the subject of how this new and singular class of Muslims first sprang into existence. They were the principal agitators in the revolt against 'Uthman, and in the civil strife which dyed Islam with blood only five and twenty years after the Prophet had passed away. If we knew with greater precision what they really were, how they were constituted, and how they acquired such influence over the people, we should have in our hand the key that would at once unlock the door of many mysteries connected with the tragedy in Medina in the year 35, with the arbitration of Adhruh in 38, and with the first Kharijite revolts. Unfortunately the knowledge we have is very vague.

The origin of the Readers reaches back to the Prophet, and springs from some practical system (though passed over in silence by tradition) by which Muhammad created a category of persons specially instructed in Koranic revelation. The silence of tradition on these first steps in Koranic doctrine is due to the slight importance attached by Muslims themselves to such mental exercises so long as the Prophet lived, who, as the prime source of all divine knowledge, could easily give light to any it. In the Prophet's time there was no real work of proselytism or Koranic propaganda in the sense intended by Muslim missionaries in later times. Hence we are forced to mistrust much of what traditions have to say on this. Muhammad's agents in the various parts of Arabia had functions specially political, fiscal or economic, military and diplomatic, and only in part religious. To be assured of this we need only remember that to Eastern Arabia Muhammad sent 'Amr b. al-'As and al-'Ala b. al-Hadrami, two political Companions, in no way remarkable for religious practice or knowledge of the Koran. The traditions on the mission to the Yemen, correctly interpreted, lead to the same conclusion, though it may be that Muhammad's representatives there, owing to the special nature of the population, had more minute instructions with regard to religious matters than the others. We must never lose sight of the fact that the traditions of later times have given an intensely religious color to all the memories of primitive Islam, and so have transformed into missionaries of Islam many of those who in reality were only ambassadors, spies, or political agents, exactors of tribute on behalf of the Lord of Medina. Muhammad regarded propaganda as his own peculiar work, and did not care for others to assume in that regard any delegation of his highest functions. Hence came about the numerous embassies from the tribes to Medina. Islamic truth must be learned immediately from the mouth of the Prophet and for the rest a formal adherence and the payment of certain fiscal dues sufficed for the tribe to be unquestionably considered as Muslim.

On the Prophet's death all this was radically changed through the fear which the surviving Companions felt of losing the sacred Koranic text, which was the foundation of Islam as a political, as well as a religious, institution. The spectacular triumphs of Muslim arms and the astounding extension of their rule were regarded as the direct effects of the Prophet's own work and teaching, which accordingly elicited a keen interest both among nominal Muslims, converted as they were for the most part in name only, and among those who found their place in the community simply as subjects. The political, moral and financial advantages which the name of Muslim conferred drew the attention of all conquered, so that what during the lifetime of Muhammad and the revolt of the tribes in the Riddah had been considered a burden and a humiliation was magically elevated into an honorable estate, the coveted sign of political power. Islam was changed into a moral and religious emblem which all Arabs became proud to wear. With their public adherence to Islam, the Arabs implicitly affirmed themselves to be masters of that region of Western Asia. The moral force of this sentiment, which constituted a valuable bond of union and cohesion in the anarchic unity of Arabia, was dimly foreseen by the sagacity of the first caliphs, especially 'Umar, who aimed by his political injunction at establishing the sentiment that Muslims constituted one great and single family. To this sentiment, therefore, it was necessary to supply a more secure and lasting moral foundation, as to



prevent it from vanishing away after the first intoxication of victory; it was necessary to create a doctrine and a rite, to act as instruments for the preservation of social discipline and moral unity among the Muslims.

So long as Muhammad lived his daily example and his word supplied every need. When he was gone, the heads of the community were forced to take steps to supply the great lack. We are so accustomed to regard Islam as an institution in itself, powerfully constituted, independent of any personal control like that of a pope, that we are apt to go astray in estimating the earliest period of transition. We do not sufficiently bear in mind that the Islam of Muhammad was a creation of an absolutely personal description, concentrated in and founded almost entirely upon his own individuality, upon his continual, daily, personal support. In his Koranic revelations he made no real provision for the future of the community, or for the moment in which the founder or master would disappear. Muhammad's successors were thus called upon to undertake the immense task of transforming Islam into an autonomous, impersonal institution, based upon the consensus of all the members of the community itself. The story of the caliphates of 'Uthman, 'Umar, and 'Ali is the story of this initial and most difficult process of transformation, and of the gloomy experiences by which the gaps in the Prophet's ordinances were filled up and the mistakes of his first successors corrected. Thus it was necessary to provide a head of the community, to fix his prerogatives and the relations which were to hold between him and the other members of the community; in fact, to create out of nothing a grand state-administration. The task would have been difficult enough if the Islamic rule had remained confined to the little kingdom of Medina as Muhammad left it; the difficulty was a hundredfold increased with the conquest and foundation of an immense empire. Everything had to be improvised, from minutiae to the greatest matters. Among other things the functions of governors in distant provinces, where the Arabs had established themselves, had to be defined. It had to be determined what these governors must accomplish to keep alive the Islamic sentiment and moral unity of their dependents. Thus the Friday assembly, which had been a personal weekly function on the part of the Prophet, was transformed into a regular, public, impersonal function, at which it was the duty of the governor in the absence of the caliph, to preside. A special ceremonial, therefore, had to be devised whereby the governor first assumed and then exercised his controlling function in the administration. As the Friday service was also a religious function formerly presided over by Muhammad, so also in the provinces the governor, taking the place of the Prophet, must preside over the collective prayers. To the political was indissolubly united the religious function of the community.

The general lines of these functions of the governorship may indeed have been indicated by the Prophet himself to his Companions when he sent them on an expedition; but the instructions were incomplete because the command of expeditions, or Muhammad's lieutenantcies in Medina when he was absent on a war were exceptional creations and lasted but for a short period. Everyone returned before long to Medina, and only in the presence of the Prophet was the true and complete Friday ceremony. The conquest, transforming as it did the expedition of a few days or weeks into a permanent occupation and emigration, brought into being new exigencies of which Muhammad had never dreamed. Not only the caliphs, but the greater part of the Muslim society, felt keenly the immediate need of an internal and moral organization of Islam as a ceremonial doctrine. Precisely from such need sprang the special class of persons who, under the name of al-Qurra, assumed the task of spreading the knowledge of Islamic doctrine, of the precedents established by the Prophet, and more than all, of the Koran, the one base of the new doctrine since the disappearance of the founder.

Around the person of Muhammad there had arisen in Medina a class of men who had acquired, thanks to their being continually with the Prophet, a fairly complete knowledge of the Koranic revelations and of all the customs and rules of life, culled from the reformer. On Muhammad's death,

each of these naturally established himself as a teacher of whatever he knew and remembered. Wherever Arabs settled, there migrated naturally some of these reciters, who served not only to instruct the Arab masses gathered under the banner of Islam without ever having seen the Prophet, but also to educate other Qurra, and to form small separate schools in every important settlement of Arabs in the conquered provinces.

At first the work of propaganda and systematic instruction, given almost always by the oral method, was carried on in a sufficiently ordered manner under the sole direction of the caliph, who kept an eye on all. They were Companions who, in the interest of the community, performed this work as a sacrifice for the social welfare. Then, however, with the dazzling growth of the empire, with the astounding multiplication of Islamic centers and the increased need of these instructors, there grew up a special class of men, pupils of the first, who, while inferior to them, were inspired more or less with sincere religious sentiment, but at the same time were bent on availing themselves of their learning to assure themselves an easier sustenance than they could get from their pension alone. Among good and sincere men there crept in hypocrites, agitators, adventurers, who acted each for himself, looking to his own interest, or to what from his own particular point of view was the interest of the community. An institution good in its inception quickly became a danger for the concord and political unity of the Muslims.

Not only did local and particularist tendencies appear, not only did these propagators of Islam assume an independent and rebellious attitude toward the central authority, believing themselves authorized to criticize and to dictate laws to the caliph himself and to his governors, but also in their instructions there appeared discrepancies in ritual; variations in the sacred text, which very few knew perfectly, began to assert themselves on every side.

The Readers must not, however, be considered as a class of people wholly distinct from others, marked off by their profession; there was no closed circle of specialists. Anyone who had some knowledge, even superficial or partial, of the text, could act as Reader for such part as he knew. They did not form a political party, for they were found in every class and in every place, among the Syrians as much as the men of Iraq. Still, owing to the special condition of Muslim society at this early period, the Qurra acquired a social influence and importance which was not retained in succeeding generations, when Islamic culture had spread far and wide and there had arisen so many other kinds of doctors and teachers of the people. The number of those who dedicated themselves to this profession, the influence which they acquired over the masses, and the direction which they gave to the general discontent, quickly became a source of serious preoccupation in Medina. The knowledge they claimed of the sacred text gave them a prestige which in many cases may even have raised them in the estimation of the populace above the caliph's governors, who, for the most part, were uncultured men, living continually under arms and ignorant of the Koran. We need only mention the famous Khalid b. al-Walid, who made a boast of his ignorance of the Koran.

At the moment of which we speak, the leaders of the secret agitation against the government were precisely al-Qurra, making use of their pretended culture as a weapon for opposition and criticism against the actions of the governor, so giving the movement a general and democratic character, which rendered it peculiarly difficult to watch and keep in check.

The caliph 'Uthman and his counselors were not slow to discern all the danger of the new internal situation. The number and variety of these schools of the sacred text and of their dogmas threatened the unity of doctrine, inclination, and sentiment which was indispensable for the future success of the Muslim society. In the Koran discrepancies appeared which were bound to be increased by time. Between the people and the governor there was thus interposed a class of men who arrogated to



themselves rights and a moral preeminence, the effect of which was a kind of independence from political authority.

In short, availing themselves of the doctrine which they claimed to possess in a greater and better measure than the representatives of the caliph, they excited the populace against the executive power, and were the first to denounce, exaggerate, and even invent the errors of 'Uthman and his agents.

It was 'Uthman's unhappy lot to be called upon not only to seek a remedy for the financial blunders of his great predecessor 'Umar, but to oppose himself to all the moral consequences of the faulty direction which Islamic society was taking under the stress of adversity and bitter disappointments. It is our duty as impartial historians to affirm that even if 'Uthman was unable to grapple with the intricate political situation, if he was unfortunate in the choice of his governors and failed in his attempt to prop up the ruined finances of the empire, yet he was entirely in the right when he tried to forestall the incipient doctrinal anarchy which threatened the Islamic community, by taking energetic steps to prevent the multiplication of versions of the sacred text. The measure adopted by 'Uthman was a radical and bold one, and stands out in contrast to the reputation for weakness which tradition attaches to him in other acts of his administration.

'Uthman ordered the compilation of a single official text of the Koran, and the violent suppression, the destruction by fire of all other copies existing in the provinces. Such an act called for considerable political courage, for it was an open challenge to the whole class of the Readers and an effectual attempt to put an end to the monopoly of the sacred text that they claimed. The central government asserted its authority in this matter as well, and implicitly branded as falsifiers all who did not recite the Koran in a form identical with the official text. 'Uthman's edict was carried out with the greatest precision, for not a single copy antecedent to this official one has survived. The action raised the bitterest resentment of the Readers, and no doubt increased the ill-feeling against the caliph; but tradition, which would dearly have liked to speak evil of 'Uthman in this regard also, has prudently abstained here from making even the slightest insinuation against him. The subject is too delicate, and 'Uthman's action was too closely conformed to the whole spirit of later times for it to venture to protest. It should be added that even if all the existing copies of the Koran could not be traced to 'Uthman's official copy, anyone who cast aspersions on 'Uthman's action would be liable to the charge of raising doubts about the foundation of all Islam, for the Islamic world from one end to the other lives in the conviction that the text existing today represents the true, eternal, immutable word of God.

Tradition stands obviously at a disadvantage with regard to this delicate point, for it is bound to recognize that the official canonizing of the sacred text is due to the caliph, about whom for other reasons it has so much evil to say in the effort to excuse the conduct of his successor Ali, the Benjamin of orthodox tradition. These considerations explain the anxiety of traditionists to invent a previous compilation of the sacred text during the reign of the unimpeachable Abu Bakr, the perfect and saintly caliph, for in this way 'Uthman appears only as the copier of the text left by Abu Bakr.

The steps taken by 'Uthman and his effort to strike boldly at a powerful class of his subjects in a period of political effervescence strongly tinged with religious passion show up his rule in a new light. He is not the timid man who gives way first to his relations and then to the crowd of malcontents, but the sovereign who, for reasons of his own, issues an injunction and sees that it is completely carried out in the face of a strong agitation. We come, therefore, indirectly to infer that tradition has traversed the character of the caliph, and that though he may have been weak toward his own family and in some circumstances of minor import, he was, on the other hand, a man of valor and energy in a way that has not as a rule been recognized. His administration no longer appears as

though dictated by the mind of a decrepit old man; it was rather an honest and courageous attempt to face an internal revolution which was well matured and finally burst out not through the errors of the caliph and his friends and relations, but as the result of previous irretrievable blunders which 'Uthman had had no opportunity to control.

---

Some Points Concerning the Origin of Islam, The Muslim World 5 (1915): 380-90.

---

Articles and Books by Leone Caetani  
The Text of the Qur'an  
Answering Islam Home Page

درفش کاویانی



<http://derafsh-kavivani.com/english/>

derafsh-kavivani.com

