Examining Burton's Stance on the Differences Among the Recitations of the Qur'ān

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ABSTRACT

Orientalists have conducted extensive studies on the reasons for differences among the Qur'ān recitation modes. One of these figures is John Burton, the British Qur'ān researcher. He believes the Qur'ān that exists today has been compiled during the lifetime of the Prophet (s) and by His Majesty. In his view, the topic of «recitation differences among the Companions' copies of the Qur'ān» is a pretext to delete the Prophet's (s) role in the compilation of the Qur'ān. That is, the topic of «recitation differences among the Companions' copies of the Qur'ān» is not a reality. Rather, it was fabricated by some jurists who tried to use it in their debates with other jurists to support their jurisprudential decrees not supported by the current copy of the Qur'ān. If it were said that the Prophet (s) had compiled the qur'ānic verses as one copy of the Qur'ān, then those jurists could not suggest the recitation differences among the Companions' copies. Thus, they concluded that if they fabricated some narrations, they could remove the role of the Prophet (s) in the compilation of the Qur'ān and present its compilation as something that happened after his demise. Despite some positive points in Burton's theory, there exist some major criticisms against the principles of his theory.

1. Introduction

Orientalists have presented the results of their studies on qur'ānic discussions in the form of articles, books, and encyclopedias. Precise understanding of the orientalists' opinions in their works is an undeniable necessity, as some colonial and missionary purposes lurk behind some of these works (Riḍāyī Haftādur, 2020). Moreover, among the discussions presented in these works, there are some doubts and criticisms against the qur'ānic discussions. The necessity of a true understanding of Western qur'ānic studies is doubled when we remember that past Muslim scholars always believed in their obligation to answer the Judaist and Christian criticisms and objections to Islam. For example, noble Shī'a Imāms such as Imām Ṣādiq (a) and Imām Riḍā (a) were pioneers of debating with opponents of Islam and followers of other religions. They attended debate sessions and answered doubts and questions posed by the People of the Book and atheists.

In the Qur'ān sciences, various topics are studied. One of them is the history of the Qur'ān. This topic involves subtopics such as the manner of Qur'ān's revelation, occasions of revelation, and differences among Qur'ān recitations. Orientalists have paid great attention to the topic of differences among Qur'ān recitations. John Burton, the British Qur'ān researcher, is one of these orientalists. He has carried out extensive studies on the Qur'ān recitation differences. As far as we know, his stance on the Qur'ān recitation differences has not been examined in any other study. Therefore, this study set out to examine Burton's view on the Qur'ān recitation differences and criticisms against his view. To this end, we used a descriptive-analytical method.

2. Burton's view

According to Burton, the Qur'ān that exists today was compiled during the lifetime of the Prophet and by His Majesty (Burton, 1977). He believes that narrations about the compilation of the Qur'ān after the demise of the Prophet have been fabricated by some Muslim jurists.

In order to support some jurisprudential decrees that could not be supported by the current copy of the Qur'ān, they relied on forged recitation differences among the Companions' copies. However, doing this needed to remove the role of the Prophet from the compilation of the Qur'ān and to show that the compilation happened after his demise. Therefore, the topic of «recitation differences among the Companions' copies of the Qur'ān» is a cause that has prevented the attribution of the compilation of the Qur'ān to the Prophet (s). (Ibid: 18-19, 134, 160-166, 174-187, 197-199)

2-1. Recitation differences among the Companions' copies of the Qur'ān as the reason for the removal of the role of the Prophet in the compilation of the Qur'ān

According to Burton, some jurists, in their jurisprudential debates with other jurists, tried to somehow support some of their jurisprudential decrees for which there was no support in the current copy of the Qur'ān (Ibid: 9-11, 16). To solve their problem, they first stated that the memorization of the exact statements in a unique recitation of the Qur'ān was difficult for Muslims. Therefore, the Prophet – who was the Place of Revelation – never insisted on any single recitation of the Qur'ān. Rather, he permitted reciting the Qur'ān in different ways – under certain conditions – to facilitate the task for Muslims. (Ibid: 37, 39, 152)

These jurists used the foregoing argument to prove the existence of recitation differences during the lifetime of the Prophet (Ibid: 150-154, 187-189). To verify that, they fabricated some narrations. Some of these narrations are given in the following lines.

a) It has been narrated that a person recited the Qur'ān before 'Umar, and 'Umar pointed out a mistake in his recitation. That person got angry and claimed that the Prophet had not pointed out any mistake in his recitation. They took their debate to the Prophet of Allāh (s). When His Majesty verified that he had taught that recitation to that person, a doubt was formed in 'Umar's mind. Figuring this out, the Prophet (s) hit 'Umar's chest and said with surprise, «May the Devil leave»! The Prophet then explained, «All recitation modes are correct unless they turn a mercy verse into a punishment verse or vice versa». (Burton, 1977)

b) Ubayy entered the mosque. Upon hearing a man's recitation, he asked, «Who has taught you»? The man responded that the Prophet had taught him. Ubayy went after the Prophet (s). When the man recited the Qur'ān, His Majesty said, «It is correct». Ubayy complained, «But you taught me to recite such and such». His Majesty verified Ubayy's recitation, too. Hearing the

statement «It is correct, it is correct», Ubayy sank into bewilderment. The Prophet (s) hit him on the chest and prayed, «O Lord! Remove doubt from him». Ubayy was flooded with sweat, and his heart was filled with fear. [Then] the prophet (s) revealed a secret to him. His majesty said that two angels came to him. One of them told him to recite [that verse of] the Qur'ān with that letter, and the other advised other letters. That event happened several times. Finally, the first angel told him, «Recite it with [each of the] seven letters». The Prophet (s) said, «Each of these letters is a grace, and all of them are valid unless they turn a mercy verse into a punishment verse or vice versa». (Ibid: 148-149)

The foregoing jurists then took the second step. They stated that each of the Companions recorded the qur'ānic verses in his own copy based on the different recitations they had learned from the Prophet (s). This led to the appearance of an issue called «the Companions' copies of the Qur'ān». (Ibid: 41-44, 155-157, 167-168)

According to Goldziher's correct opinion, these copies were not historically accurate and only had a hypothetical identity (Ibid: 211). The forgers of the topic of «the Companions' copies of the Qur'ān» designed some coordinates for them to make them seem real (Ibid: 174-187). Some of these are differences in recitation (Ibid: 155, 217-218), differences in the order of chapters (Ibid: 155, 214-217), and differences in the volume (Ibid: 220-224).

In the third step, the foregoing jurists used the Prophet's (s) permission to undertake different recitations of the Qur'ān and the recitation differences among the Companions' copies. They exploited these to support some of their jurisprudential decrees for which there was no support in the current copy of the Qur'ān. To do this, they fabricated a new recitation through a forged ḥadīth. They designed the fabricated recitation such that it verified and supported their intended jurisprudential decree that was not supported by the current copy of the Qur'ān (Burton, 1977). Then they attributed that fabricated recitation to one of the Companions' copies. The owners of those copies were among high-ranking Companions of the Prophet (s) and had high credibility in the eyes of Muslims (Ibid: 42-45, 166, 199). By such attributions, those jurists intended to exploit the high-ranking Companions' credibility among Muslims to validate their fabricated recitations. Through those recitations, then, they supported some of their jurisprudential decrees that were not supported by the current copy of the Qur'ān. (Ibid: 12-14, 30-42, 44-46, 217-218)

Using these recitation differences among the Companions' copies, some jurists succeeded in their debates with other jurists to support some of their jurisprudential decrees that could not be supported by the current copy of the Qur'ān. Then, however, they faced a new challenge: the Prophet had been involved in the compilation of the Qur'ān. That is, if the Prophet had collected the Qur'ān into a copy, then talking about the differences among the Companions' copies was groundless. So, those recitation differences could not be used to support their jurisprudential decrees. The reason is that if the Prophet (s) collected the qur'ānic verses into a copy, his Companions – who were committed to following him in every matter – would follow him in this issue and would copy his version of the Qur'ān. As a result of such copying of the Prophet's version of the Qur'ān, all Companions' copies would be the same. So, there would be no room for recitation differences among the Companions' copies of the Qur'ān to be used for the verification of some jurisprudential decrees.

Therefore, the foregoing jurists set out to prevent questioning the recitation differences among the Companions' copies, a question that might stem from the compilation of the Qur'ān by the Prophet (s) into a unique copy. To do this, they concluded that they should remove the role of the Prophet (s) from the compilation of the Qur'ān at any cost. Thus, they fabricated some narrations that suggested the Qur'ān was not compiled during the lifetime of the Prophet (s) but rather was compiled after his demise. (Ibid: 160)

In some of these narrations, using the recitation differences among the Companions' copies of the Qur'ān, they designed a motivation for 'Uthmān's act to compile the Qur'ān. They deem him as one of the compilers of the Qur'ān. (Ibid: 141-143, 199-202)

2-1-1. Compiling the Qur'ān during 'Uthmān's reign
We said earlier that some jurists suggested recitation differences existed during the Prophet's lifetime. They did so to lay the grounds for suggesting the recitation differences among the Companions' copy of the Qur'ān. To verify this, they fabricated some narrations, a number of which were mentioned in

the previous lines. From these jurists' viewpoint, recitation differences that started from the lifetime of the Prophet continued and reached their pinnacle during 'Uthmān's reign. These recitation differences that stemmed from the Companions' copies of the Qur'ān had led to conflicts among Muslims. It was feared that such conflicts would break the ties of unity among Muslims and bring about disunity to their solid community. One of the Companions of the Prophet named Ḥudhayfa b. Yamān, who witnessed Muslims' conflicts over Qur'ān recitation differences, started to panic about the outcome of such conflicts. He went to 'Uthmān, the then caliph of Muslims, and told him, «O the Commander of the Faithful! Think about [a solution for the problem of] this nation before they get into disagreement over their [Sacred] Book, as did Jews and Christians». (Burton, 1977)

Ḥudhayfa's advice and 'Uthmān's own observation of the conflicts among Medina Muslims over Qur'ān recitations moved him to act. He decided to reconsolidate Muslims based on a unique text of the Qur'ān and prevent further disunity among them (Burton, 2001). To this end, he compiled a unique text with the help of some Companions of the Prophet, and then distributed it among Muslims. Next, he destroyed the Companions' copies of the Qur'ān (Burton, 1977). The reason was that those copies reflected recitation differences that led to conflict and disunity among Muslims. (Ibid: 141)

To validate this action, the inventors of 'Uthmān's act fabricated some narrations. The forged narrations mentioned that some high-ranking Companions of the Prophet verified and praised his initiative to compile the Qur'ān. For example, they forged a quotation from His Highness 'Alī (a), «If I were in power, I would do the same about the compilation of the Qur'ān as 'Uthmān did» (Ibid: 144). Via a profound analysis of the narrations about 'Uthmān's compilation of the Qur'ān, the following points are achieved.

A. 'Uthmān's motivation to compile the Qur'ān was his panic over the spread of the Qur'ān recitation differences among Muslims. He feared that those recitation differences would disunite Muslims over their sacred book, something that had already happened to Jews and Christians. (Ibid: 141-143, 146-147, 207)

B. 'Uthmān observed that the lack of a unique copy of the Qur'ān among Muslims had led to disunity. To bridge this gap, he set out to publish the texts compiled by Abū Bakr. Of course, 'Uthmān did this publication after some revisions. For example, he ordered the chapters in the way seen in the Qur'ān today. Also, he limited the recitation of the Qur'ān to one accent, i.e., the Quraysh accent. This accent was chosen following the argument that the Qur'ān had been revealed in it. It is noteworthy that up until 'Uthmān's era, reciting the Qur'ān in non-Quraysh accents was permissible so as to make the task easy for Muslims. However, observing the recitation differences, 'Uthmān figured it out that the continuation of such freedom in the recitation domain is a dangerous practice that should be addressed. The reason was that each important part of the Islamic empire insisted on a certain recitation and deemed other recitations invalid. The continuation of this issue would lead to disunity among Muslims. Therefore, 'Uthmān introduced that limitation to recitations of the Qur'ān. In fact, by publishing a unique text that was the result of the efforts of some Companions of the Prophet, he united different copies of the Qur'ān into one unique copy. (Burton, 1977)

Shawālī believes that 'Uthmān's copy is nothing but an exact reproduction of Ḥafṣa's copy of the Qur'ān. However, in light of the aforementioned characteristics of 'Uthmān's act, Burton takes Shawālī's opinion as completely incorrect. (Ibid: 158-159, 226)

C. The story of 'Uthmān's compilation of the Qur'ān that has not really occurred in history is fabricated by some local jurisprudential schools. In their debates with other jurisprudential schools over some jurisprudential decrees, they decided to fabricate some support for those decrees from the Qur'ān. By doing this, they intended to overcome their opponents. Since there was no support for those jurisprudential decrees in the current copy of the Qur'ān, they fabricated recitations of the Qur'ān that supported those decrees. They attributed those recitations to the Companions' copies. This way, they forged qur'ānic support for their jurisprudential decrees.

These jurisprudential schools have been asked why those copies of the Companions have not reached us so that they can be scientifically investigated. In response, they talk about 'Uthmān's initiative to destroy the Companions' copies in particular and the issues related to his compilation of the Qur'ān in general. (Ibid: 166-171, 174-187, 176, 197-202, 228-229, 239)

3. Criticizing Burton's viewpoint

We noted earlier that Burton claims that the current Qur'ān has been collected during the Prophet's lifetime and under the supervision of His Majesty (Ibid: 230-240). This viewpoint can be accepted, but not based on the reasons he insists upon in his works. Rather, we can accept this stance based on arguments and evidence provided by some Muslim scholars in this regard. Some Muslim researchers – such as Sayyid Murtaḍā, Sayyid Ja'far Murtaḍa 'Āmilī, and Āyatullāh Khuyī – believe in the compilation of the Qur'ān during the Prophet's lifetime. Such scholars have provided intellectual, historical, narrative, and qur'ānic evidence and arguments to prove their claim ('Āmilī, n.d.; Bāqillānī, n.d.; Darwaza, n.d.; Ḥujjatī, 2005; Ibn Ṭāwūs, 1984; Ja'farīyān, 1994; Khūyī, 2015; Mīr Muḥammadī, 1979; Mūsawī, 1995; Rāmyār, 2001; Ṭabrisī, 1994). However, the most important problems with Burton's viewpoint about the Qur'ān recitation differences are as follows.

3-1. Examining Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī as the oldest written source

Burton believes that narrations about the Qur'ān recitation differences first appeared in the first half of the third century AH. The premise of this viewpoint is that the appearance time of a narration can be determined by finding the date of the written source in which the narration is observed for the first time. According to Burton, Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī (d. 256 AH) is the oldest source that contains those narrations.

We can counter this argument by both the sources that were available by 1977 and by the ones that have been edited and published later. This shows that taking Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī as the oldest source of narrations on the Qur'ān recitation differences is false (Motzki, 2001). The reason is that those narrations have been mentioned in sources older than Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī as well. These sources are as follows.

1. Musnad Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal (d. 241 AH)
2. Faḍā'il al-Qur'ān Abū 'Ubayd Qāsim b. Sallām (d. 224 AH)
3. Tafsīr 'Abd al-Razzāq (d. 211 AH)
4. Musnad Ṭayālisī (d. 204 AH)
5. Jāmi' 'Abd Allāh b. Wahb (d. 197 AH). (Abū Ubayd, 1994; Ibn Ḥajar 'Asqalānī, 2000; Ibn Ḥanbal, 1995; Ṣan'ānī, 1990; Ṭayālisī, 1903)

According to the fifth author's demise time and disregarding the chains of transmission of narrations on the Qur'ān recitation differences, we can date those narrations to the last quarter of the second century AH (Motzki, 2001). Motzki takes the time further back in history. Using document and text analysis, he dates the narrations on the recitation differences among the Companions' copies back to the late years of the first century AH. Therefore, based on all these points, Burton's opinion – that those narrations have first appeared in the first half of the third century AH – is rejected. (Ibid: 21-31)

3-2. Lack of historical facet in Burton's research

Burton's research on the narrations of Qur'ān recitation differences is completely void of historical evidence. He classifies various narrations to suggest there has been a conflict among Muslim scholars. He maintains that the conflict existed for a long time among them. Burton takes some narrations as a reaction to others. Burton holds that although the depicted conflicts are seemingly justifiable, they are largely fabricated and unreal. Information provided by Burton in his studies suggests that narrations on the Qur'ān recitation differences have developed and evolved in the third century AH. However, he has not presented any source that can prove his depiction of the evolution of these sources. (Motzki, 2001)

3-3. Influenced by Goldziher and Schacht

In the eyes of Burton, narrations on the recitation differences among the Companions' copies are fabricated. Examining his arguments demonstrates that the bases of this viewpoint are Goldziher's doubts against historical validity of narrations related to early days of Islam and Schacht's opinions about the fabricated nature of traditions' chains of transmission. (Burton, 1977; Madelung, 1979; Motzki, 2001)

These bases, however, are not supported scientifically. Some Muslim and non-Muslim Ḥadīth researchers have criticized the evidence of this doubtful approach to Islamic traditions. Interested

readers can refer to these works to examine criticisms against Goldziher's and Schacht's doubtful opinions about Islamic traditions. (q.v. Aʻzami, 1978; id. 1996; Abbot, 1967; Fueek, 2004; Horovitz, 2004; Robson, 2004; Schoeler, 2004; Sezgin, 2001)

4. Conclusion

Bruton's stance on the Qur'ān recitation differences can be summarized as follows.

- The Qur'ān that exists today has been collected by the Prophet in his lifetime.
- The topic of «recitation differences among the Companions' copies of the Qur'ān» is the reason for the removal of the Prophet's role in the compilation of the Qur'ān.
- The topic of «recitation differences among the Companions' copies of the Qur'ān» is not real. It has been fabricated by some jurists to be used in their debates with other jurists. They did so to support their jurisprudential decrees that were not supported by the current copy of the Qur'ān. If it were said that the Prophet of Islam had collected the qur'ānic verses in the form of a manuscript, then those jurists could not talk about recitation differences among the Companions' copies. So, they concluded that they should remove the role of the Prophet in the compilation of the Qur'ān and attribute the compilation to the time after his demise. Then they did so.

Burton's view that the Qur'ān was compiled during the Prophet's lifetime can be accepted. However, the arguments he insists upon in his research are not acceptable. Rather, his view can be accepted based on arguments and evidence provided by some Muslim scholars in this regard. Some Muslim scholars believe in the compilation of the Qur'ān during the lifetime of the Prophet. Such scholars have provided intellectual, historical, narrative, and qur'ānic evidence and arguments for their stance. Reflection on Burton's words reveals an interesting point about his approach to the analysis of the narrations on the Qur'ān recitation differences. In his approach, he takes the Qur'ān as the first and foremost source of the extraction of legal and jurisprudential teachings needed by Muslims. Therefore, unlike other Western researchers, Burton's approach to the examination of the recitation differences is not based on the premise that the Qur'ān is merely an undying literary work.

Information that Burton has provided in his studies shows that narrations on the Qur'ān recitation differences have developed and evolved during the third century AH. However, according to several meticulous studies, these narrations have existed in the works of the first two centuries AH as well. Aside from this, he has not tried to explain that if any source verifies his depiction of the evolution of these narrations from a historical perspective or not. This is the most important criticism against Burton's research on the Qur'ān recitation differences.

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