

The Origin of Different Readings and Manuscripts of the Qur'ānic and Biblical Texts and Its Effect on Exegesis

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Abstract

If we assume that the textual words are issued by God and that what we call as the texts of the Qur'ān and the Bible have different readings and manuscripts, then the question that arises is that the meaning of which reading and manuscript can be taken as valid and congruent with the divine intention. Paying attention to the different readings and manuscripts of the texts of the Qur'ān and the Bible has a significant effect on understanding these texts. Therefore, the study at hand discusses the issue of different readings and manuscripts first in the Qur'ān and then in the Bible. The result is that the difference in the readings of the Qur'ānic and biblical texts is due to the absence of diacritics and vowels, and this is more frequent in the Qur'ān. However, the issue of different manuscripts exists more intensely in the Bible, because unlike the Qur'ān, the legalization of the Old Testament and the New Testament has had a gradual process.

Keywords: Qur'ān, Bible, Reading, Manuscript, Exegesis, Torah, Gospel.

Introduction

Since the Abrahamic religions are text-oriented and their followers expect to ultimately attain the divine intention through the interpretation of the Scriptures and the analysis of their referents, it seems necessary to tackle the discussion of the readings of the Qur'ān and the Bible. The issue of the authoritativeness of the text and the rate of its attributability to God can be examined from several dimensions, as it is effective on the interpretation of the text. One of the main dimensions is the origin of the different readings and manuscripts of the Qur'ānic and biblical texts. The multiplicity of the readings of the Scriptures and the variety of their manuscripts sets the ground for disagreements in understanding the Scriptures. This issue has always grabbed the attention of the Muslim and People of the Book scholars and exegetes, which shows the importance of this issue for the Qur'ān and Bible research communities. Although there have been suitable studies about the Qur'ānic aspect of this question, there has been no specific study on the Bible or the comparative study between the Qur'ān and the Bible in this regard. Thus, the article at hand – which relies on library research, uses analytical-inferential methods, and is based on religious sources – addresses the foregoing problem.

The Qur'ān and its readings

Right from the beginning of the revelation of the Qur'ān, some Muslims set out to recite and teach the Qur'ānic verses. These came to be known as “reciters.” The first level of these reciters was comprised of some of the Companions. Each of these adopted a reading

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distinctive from other readings in reciting some verses. Later on, the Successive Companions joined them as the second level of reciters and brought about various aspects of readings. This way, numerous readings appeared in the society.

When the discussion of disagreements in readings got heated in different cities during the time of ‘Uthmān, he decided to bring about a unique manuscript and reading (Mu‘addab, 1999: 171).¹ Although this decision was effective on the reduction of reading disagreements, it did not put an end to all disagreements. The main reasons for this were the primitiveness of the orthography and the lack of diacritics and points of letters in Arabic. Moreover, the reading disagreements derived from the differences in the manuscripts of different reciters should also be taken into account as one of the most important causes of reading disagreements after the revelation of the Qur’ān (Ma‘rifat, 2005, vol. 1: 398).

The different pronunciations of the qur’ānic orthography derive from various reasons, and different criteria have been suggested for the acceptance or prioritization of some of them over others. The reading disagreements sometimes affect the meaning of the verse.

For instance, if the change in a letter or diacritic sign leads to a change in meaning, it will influence the interpretation of the verse. Moreover, the reading disagreements with regard to the wording of the Qur’ān adds to the meanings of a verse and brings about various interpretations of it (Qur’ān 2:222; Ibn ‘Āshūr, 2000, vol. 1: 51-56).

The various readings of the Qur’ān within the Islamic domain lead to disagreements in reflecting, understanding, and conceiving the Qur’ān by exegetes; on the other hand, in the out-of-Islam domain and from the viewpoint of orientalists, these are used to cast doubts such as imperfection, weakness, and tensions in the qur’ānic texts, as is the case with Goldziher (Goldziher, 2004: 13; Ma‘rifat, 2005, vol. 1: 334-340). Some even have taken it as the deviation in the Qur’ān (Ghāzī, 1996: 135-137). With regard to the validity or invalidity of different readings, its principles, and its history, various discussions, viewpoints, and criteria have been suggested since the early centuries of Islam, which are elaborated on in the books on the readings science. This discussion has continued through the ensuing centuries up to now (q.v. Diyārī Bīdḡulī, 2006: 55-85).

Reading and the principles of the interpretation of the Qur’ān

There are two completely different viewpoints about the question that if the readings can be considered as the basis of the qur’ānic text or not.

The Qur’ān-ness of the readings

Some researchers believe that the Qur’ān and its readings are two realities with the same meaning. In other words, these two are not distinct, and the Qur’ān has been revealed based on the “Seven Letters”. Therefore, the Qur’ān is the very Seven Readings, and all the Seven Readings are the very divine revelation (Muḥaysin, 1993, vol. 1: 47). To prove his stance, Muḥaysin relies on two reasons. First, he suggests that the original root-word of the Qur’ān is similar to that of “qirā’at” (reading), and the plural form of “qirā’at” is “qirā’āt.” Second, he asserts that the narrations on the “Seven Letters” necessitate the unity of the Qur’ān and the readings (ibid). Of course, here the “Seven Readings” are not the same as the ones received from the Seven Reciters; rather, they are the very intention of the “Seven Letters.”

The reasons for the Qur’ān-ness of the readings

The main reasons relied upon by the proponents of this viewpoint are as follows.

1. This point has also been narrated in another form elsewhere (Ibn Ḥajar ‘Asqalānī, n.d., vol. 9: 15).

- A. The successive transmission of the Seven Readings. Some Qur'ān researchers and jurists believe that the Seven Readings are widely transmitted. Abū Shāma says, "The common theory among some later reciters and others is that the Seven Readings are widely transmitted" (Muqaddasī, 1975: 176). Zarkishī adds, "The Seven Readings are considered as widely transmitted by the dominant majority of scholars" (Zarkishī, 1990, vol. 1: 318). Therefore, in cases where different readings are suggested, we can interpret the Qur'ān based on any of these readings.
- B. The narrations on the revelation of the Qur'ān in Seven Letters. These narrations that argue based on a narration from the Prophet (s) are presented in the Sunnī tradition collections under the name of the "Seven Letters" (Bukhārī, 1999, vol. 6: 100). Some Sunnī and Shī'a scholars have relied on the content of the narration "The Qur'ān was revealed based on Seven Letters" to consider the Seven Readings as widely transmitted and authoritative. In fact, after Ibn Mujāhid's consideration of the readings to be seven, the Seven Readings issue came to be tied to the foregoing tradition in the third century LH. Ṣubḥī Ṣāliḥ writes about this tie, "Most of the reprimand in this correspondence and illusion is on the shoulders of Ibn Mujāhid who set out to collect and develop the Seven Readings out of the [various] readings of the Qur'ān in the late years of the third century [LH]. He accidentally put his hand on these seven readings; otherwise, it is clear that there have been greater, more precise, and weightier [reciters] among the leading reciters" (Ṣubḥī Ṣāliḥ, 1988: 247).

Analysis and criticism of the viewpoint favoring the successive transmission of the readings

This viewpoint is not acceptable for researchers because of the following reasons.

1. The utmost successive transmission that can be considered for the Seven Readings is their successive transmission from the aforementioned reciters. Even this is not proved and some do not consider it as true (Khu'ī, 1997: 165). However, the successive transmission of these readings at the time of the Seven Reciters and before that back to the time of the Companions and the Prophet of Allāh (s) has no valid evidence. There are only some solitary traditions in this regard that not only are not agreed upon by scholars, but also the chains of transmission of some of them are doubted (Zarkishī, 1990, vol. 1: 466). Therefore, the successive transmission of the Seven Readings can be proved at most to the time of the Seven Reciters, but their successive transmission from their time back to the era of the Prophet of Islam has no valid evidence. On the contrary, the successive transmission of the Qur'ān is proved, which makes definitive its authoritativeness.

2. For the successive transmission of the readings to be acceptable, the Qur'ān should have been revealed in some readings. This is against numerous narrations that introduce the Qur'ān as having a single reading revealed by the One God (Kulaynī, 1991, vol. 2: 593).

3. In cases where the various readings have opposing meanings¹, the acceptance of the successive transmission of the readings leads to the consideration of the existence of conflict in the Qur'ān, which is against the Qur'ānic verses, Islamic narrations, and definitive intellectual arguments (Rajabī, 2004: 47).

Therefore, the Qur'ān and the readings can be considered as unified only if these readings are widely transmitted. However, this is not proved.

Non-Qur'ān-ness of the readings

According to this viewpoint – which is the commonly accepted one – the Qur'ān is different

1. In the book *Al-Tamhīd*, 11 verses whose different readings express conflicting meanings are mentioned in a section titled "tanāquḍ fī al-qirā'āt" (conflicts in readings) (Ma'rifat, 2005, vol. 2: 76-79).

from the readings (Damyāṭī Bannā', n.d., vol. 1: 68; Zurqānī, 1988, vol. 1: 434). Qur'ān is the very divine revelation sent down by God in only one form. However, these readings have different wordings, and there are times when one word is spelled in different forms. Zarkishī writes, "The Qur'ān and the readings are two different things. The Qur'ān is the very revelation sent down onto the Prophet (s) in order to explicate the divine rules and miraculousness. However, the readings have disagreements in their presentation of revelation in terms of the written forms of the words and the quality of their pronunciation such as reduction, germination, and so on" (Zarkishī, 1990, vol. 1: 465).

Undoubtedly, Muslims agree upon the successive transmission of the Qur'ān itself, because it is the basis and foundation of Islam. Therefore, whatever entailed in the foregoing solitary narration does not intend the Qur'ān, and this issue is not related to the readings.

The correct reading of the Qur'ān

There are various ways to attain the reading of the noble Prophet of Islam (s) such as the Muslims' conduct, the commonality of a reading in every era traced back to the time of the Prophet (s) and the rarity of other readings, the successive transmission of one reading, the famousness of a reading in the early days of Islam, and the congruence of a reading with the literary, narrative, and intellectual axioms (Rajabī, 2004: 42-46).

Based on the accounts of the history of Islam and Muslims, the accepted and robust reading is the one by the Commander of the Faithful (a), which is the reading currently common among Muslims. As Imām 'Alī (a) says about his connection with the Qur'ān, "Whatever verse was revealed, the noble Prophet (s) taught me its reading; then he dictated and I wrote it ... and he prayed that I might understand and memorize those truths, and I never forgot whatever I learned after then" (Ḥākim Ḥaskānī, 1973, vol. 1: 48).

Pertaining to this discussion is a statement by Imām Khumaynī (may God have mercy on him),

The acceptable and robust reading is the current one that have been relied upon by millions of millions of Muslims during the history and called by them as the Qur'ān. Whatever there exists in the Qur'ānic sciences sources as disagreements over readings and various readings of the Qur'ān are seminary [*academic*] discussions rather than something engaged by ordinary Muslims ... [aside from the fact that] this topic was heated by an opportunist group of people who wanted to gain riches through it. This [latter case] was accompanied by ignoring the Qur'ānic sciences and reflection on the Qur'ānic knowledge and rather putting life-long times to pay attention to the rules of recitation ..." (Mahdawīrād, 2007: 55).

Therefore, such a reading has been unified with the Qur'ān, and the exegetes carry out the procedure of figuring out the divine intention in the divine verses according to it.

The Manuscripts of the Qur'ān

After examining the issue of the reading (or various readings) of the Qur'ān and its role in exegesis, it is necessary to address the issue of Qur'ānic manuscripts. Martyr Muṭahharī believes that there is no doubt that the one who delivered all verses of the existing Qur'ān is Prophet Muḥammad (s) who delivered it as the Divine Speech miracle, and no one can claim or postulate that there has been another manuscript of the Qur'ān. Aside from being the biggest miracle of the Prophet (s), the Qur'ān was not revealed all at once – which was the case with Torah and led to the question that which of its manuscripts is the original one. Rather, the verses of the Qur'ān were revealed gradually during 23 years and were recorded

and memorized by Muslims from the first day of revelation. This way, before any distortion could be made in this divine book, its verses got widely transmitted in a way that their denial or change was not possible (Muṭahharī, 1988: 12-14). Of course, it should be noted that unlike the Bible, we do not come across various manuscript of the Qur'ān; however, from time to time some Western journals publish news of newly found old manuscripts of the Qur'ān. Suchlike reports maintain that there are manuscripts that are scattered in many cities in the world, among which the main ones are said to be in the libraries of some European cities such as London, Oslo, Berlin, Belgrade, Vatican, and Paris (Qubaysī, 1980: 416-418).

The qur'ānic manuscripts are the most important of these manuscripts. An example is the manuscripts of the Sana Jāmi' Mosque in Yemen, which is outstanding in terms of quantity and antiquity. Then comes the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, which is well known for its old qur'ānic copies, among which is one that dates back to the late years of the first century LH. The third copy that has grabbed the most attention is in the British Library, which is very similar to the Paris manuscript.

As it was mentioned, one of these found cases is an ancient manuscript of the Qur'ān in Sana, which was rejected by some scholars due to some reasons after it was published. In an article by Gerd-Rüdiger Puin titled "Über die Bedeutung der ältesten Koranfragmente aus Sanaa (Jemen) für die Orthographiegeschichte des Korans" (On the meaning of the oldest Qur'ān fragments from Sana'a (Yemen) on the orthographic history of the Qur'ān), it is noted that some qur'ānic parts were found in Sana, the capital of Yemen, in 1972. A lot of these parts have been separated in the form of the qur'ānic copy, chapters, and verses. An important point about these parts is the difference in the written form. For example, out of the 900 pieces of the copies, 10 percent are written in pre-Kufan orthography, i.e., Hejaz or Ma'il orthography. Some of these writing differences such as the deletion of "Alif" (A) exist in some verses. In this manuscript, the ending point of the verses is different. In some Hejaz manuscripts, Bismala is mentioned as a separate verse at the beginning of the chapters. It is said that when 'Uthman was compiling the Qur'ān, 'Abdullāh b. Mas'ūd and Ubay b. Ka'b did not destroy their own copies after the compilation process was finished. A feature of these two copies is their different ending points for verses. Ibn Nadīm has given in the order of the chapters in these two copies. Nonetheless, no such manuscript with such an order has been seen so far. In fact, the authoritativeness of these reports is doubted in that it is claimed that the approximate place of the chapters was determined during the time of the Prophet (s) and the Rāshidūn Caliphs. In these manuscripts, such an order that is reported in the copies of Ibn Mas'ūd and Ubay b. Ka'b is seen (Kārimīniyā, 2001: 19-20). In the presence of the numerous evidences on the development of the Qur'ān during the time of the Prophet (s), we cannot trust suchlike reports. Even if we accept that the Companions kept their own manuscripts for themselves, the valid and formal manuscript of the Qur'ān was the one that was attended by Muslims and was used for recitation. In an article titled "Evidences on the early development of the Qur'ān," three historical reasons are given that confirm the development of the Qur'ān in the early years of the 1st century LH (ibid: 153-158).

Another discovery is related to the Syro-Aramaic text of the Qur'ān (the most novel finding in the Qur'ān studies domain), which is explained in an article by Banafsha Rahā as follows. Christoph Luxenberg, the German specialist in historical linguistics and philology published a book in 2000 on the language of Qur'ān titled "The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran." In his research, this specialist of the Aramaic language shows that the Syro-Aramaic has been the written language used at the lifetime of the Prophet (s) by the literate and cultured people of the region, and the Arabic language has not developed at that time into the form we see today. Therefore, studying the Qur'ān simultaneously in the two languages of Arabic and Aramaic, he concludes that many classic Arabic statements in the Qur'ān have been initially – and are

now – in Aramaic language. He writes that at the time the Prophet of Islam (s) demised (632 AC), the sacred book of Muslims, i.e., the Qur’ān, did not exist in its current form. The current form of the Qur’ān was finalized in fact at the time of the third caliph, i.e., ‘Uthmān, (644-656 AC), and was sent to other regions, and the other manuscripts or the other statements that differed from the statements that existed in the manuscript compiled by ‘Uthmān were destroyed. Despite suchlike viewpoints, the Muslim thinkers and exegetes still believe that the existing Qur’ān is its genuine version.

The Bible and its readings

With the word “reading” we mean the written form of words that are different from each other when pronounced. Since the letters were recorded in the past without letter points and diacritics, they were pronounced differently despite their similar written form. This sometimes led to the change in the meanings of the words. This issue is true to some extent about the Bible, too, because the Hebrew version of the Bible had at first only the consonants and was written without vowels, and its letters received points and diacritics later; however, this difference in the pronunciation of the words did not make dire differences in meaning. Between the years 60 to 100 CE schools made of Judaist researchers were formed in Babylon, Palestine, and Tiberias that favored adding the necessary diacritic signs to the consonants, an act that was done by that time only when the words were pronounced orally. These researchers are called Masoretes (Muḥammadiyahān, 2002: 46; Bible, 1988: 52).

With regard to the reading of the Bible (especially the Old Testament), there are two discussions that need to be distinguished, namely qirra and kitīw.

Qirra means reading and kitīw means writing. The written form of some words in the Old Testament was wrong, but they were pronounced correctly. In other words, this wrong written form did not influence the correct pronunciation of the words. Moreover, the existence of these controversial cases (at least in the majority of them) did not make any change in the meaning.

There is a list at the end of the book *Al-‘Ahd al-Qadīm al-‘Ibrī* by Būlus Fighānī in which the qirra of the words are written in Hebrew language along with their meanings in Arabic. The qirra of these words are different from their kitīwa. Using this list, we can find the kitīwa of these words in the text¹. The important point here is that although the written form of these words is different from their pronunciation, the same original meaning is recorded for them (Fighālī & ‘Awkar, n.d.: 1246).

Manuscripts of the Bible

The issue of the manuscripts of the Bible has been discussed more extensively compared to the manuscripts of the Qur’ān, because the manuscript of the Qur’ān was determined in just two decades after the demise of the Prophet (s) while the determination of the Bible text has had a gradual process and has lasted for centuries.

The most genuine and complete manuscripts of the Bible

From among the various old manuscripts of the Bible, four cases are the most complete and the most ancient.

1) The Vatican manuscript: this manuscript is probably older than the other manuscripts, because it belongs to the Vatican Church and has spent most of its known history there (Elder,

1. The letter “K” is written next to these words.

1996: 103; Riyād, 1998: 73). In the light of existing evidences such as the writing style, punctuation, etc., the experts date its writing time back to the early or middle of the 4th century CE, i.e., 325-250 CE (Miller, n.d.: 77-78; Āshtiyānī, 1989: 91).

2) The Sinai Bible: this is the second well-known manuscript, and is called so because it has been discovered in Mount Sinai. This manuscript was bought by Britain from Russia in 1993 and is kept in the British Museum now (the Bible, 1988: 52; Muḥammadiyahān, 2002: 25).

3) The Alexandria Bible: This manuscript that is newer than the two previous manuscripts is probably written in the fifth century CE. This manuscript was found in 1624 CE in Alexandria, and is kept now in the British Museum (Riyād, 1998: 72; Miller, n.d.: 77-78).

4) The Ephraim Bible: This manuscript is written in the fifth century CE and is the second copy of a book that existed before it (Elder, 1996: 106). It is claimed that the manuscript “Al-Bashā’ir wa Sifr al-A‘māl” is written in the year 250 CE. If this is the case, then this manuscript is the oldest manuscript of the New Testament that exists now (Fighālī, n.d., vol. 2: 27).

These manuscripts of the Bible can be examined through some aspects, including

1. The date the Old and New Testaments were written and formalized
2. The early manuscripts and their dates
3. The existing manuscripts and their dates
4. The differences among the manuscripts

Each of these aspects will be examined separately for the Old Testament and the New Testament.

The Old Testament

The writing and formalization date

The common belief in the Judaist tradition was that the Pentateuch was the divine book of Prophet Moses. To prove this, some parts of the Torah itself was relied upon (Sulaymānī Ardīstānī, 2003:55). It is mentioned in Talmud, “Moses received the Torah at Sinai and he transmitted it to Joshua, Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the Men of the Great Assembly” (Encyclopedia Judaica, 1996, v.15: 1311; Mishnah Avot, 1: 1).

In order to determine the writing date of the Old Testament and the formalization of its text, we should take into account the opinions of two groups, since each of them take a specific time for the writing of the Old Testament.

1. The Judaist tradition: this tradition asserts that the Old Testament is written from 1300/1400 years BC (i.e., the era of Prophet Moses (a)) to 400 years BC (Buṭrus, 1995: 971).

2. Modern critics: this group of critics say that the Old Testament has been penned down from 500 years BC to approximately 200 years BC (Şamū’īl, 1993: 205; Browning, 1997: 386).

The Torah has become formalized in 400 BC. Of course, this date is related to the Pentateuch, and the legalization dates of the three different parts of the Old Testament (Torah, Nevi’im, and Ketuvim) are different. For example, the Hebrew version of Ketuvim was finalized 100 years BC, and the reason for this is a statement by Prophet Jesus (a) who says, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets” (Book of Matthew, 5:17). This shows that he deemed the two as distinct.

The early manuscripts of the Old Testament

A) The Hebrew manuscript: No clear date has been mentioned for this old manuscript (Hīmāya, 2006: 18).

B) The Greek manuscript: this manuscript has been dated to the third century BC (Hindī, n.d., vol. 2: 429).

C) The Sumerian manuscript: this manuscript has been valid for the Sumerians and is the same as the Hebrew manuscript that entails only seven books of the Old Testament (Najīb, n.d.: 43; Muṭ‘inī, 2005: 37).

The Existing manuscripts of the Old Testament and their oldness

It is difficult to comment about the question that if there is a Hebrew version of the Hebrew Scripture. However, according to some Bible researchers, all existing Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament date back to the early 7th or 8th century CE (Fighālī, n.d., vol. 2: 31).

On the other hand, some other researchers believe that the oldest manuscript of the Hebrew Torah is related to the 10th to 12th century CE. The Hebrew Old Testament currently available is taken from the Maswariyya manuscript (Durant, 1997, vol. 1: 489). It is said that Maswariyyas (imitators) rejected the manuscripts that disagreed with their own manuscript and deemed keeping them as unlawful. Therefore, there are no Hebrew Old Testament manuscripts older than the 10th century, as they have been extinguished over time (Hawkes, 1998: 719). It should be noted that the oldest copy of the Old Testament dates back to 895 CE because the other existing manuscripts are incomplete and lack some parts – probably due to the effects of remaining under soil for long or other reasons. Therefore, we cannot give in a correct opinion about them.

Differences among manuscripts

The two old manuscripts of the Old Testament – i.e., Hebrew and Greek versions – have some differences. The main difference between these two manuscripts is the number and order of the books in them. There are seven books in the Greek manuscript without any corresponding Hebrew equivalents. These are Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, Wisdom of Sirach, Habakkuk, Maccabees I, and Maccabees II.

Moreover, some books that exist in the Hebrew manuscript have some extra parts in the Septuagint (the Greek manuscript). Jews and Christian Protestants take the Hebrew text as the legal version and consider the books of the Old Testament to be 39 ones, while Catholic and Orthodox Christians take the Septuagint manuscript as authoritative and take the number of Old Testament books to be 46 (Michel, 1998: 25).

Protestants call the extra parts of the Septuagint manuscript as Apocrypha (which means hidden and covered), while the two other Christian denominations call them “Secondary Law”, which means they attach the secondary-level validity to them.

Part of the legal rules of Judaism regards the 17 rules related to writing the Sefer Torahs. If the Torah is written correctly and well based on these rules, it is “kosher”; otherwise, it is called “pasul.” If the latter is the case, it should be separated from others and kept somewhere (Adharḥiyān, n.d.: 253-260; Rīs, 2006: 53-54).

The New Testament

The writing and legalization date of the New Testament text

The second part of the Bible only contains the Christian writings, which are called the New Testament. The New Testament has been written in Greek as the common language of that era, although the people mentioned in it have been talking in Aramaic (Lofmark, 2006: 69).

1. The Christian tradition: The writing times of the Four Gospels and their books are related to the living times of their writers. Therefore, the different parts of the New Testament have been written from 30 CE through 70-80 CE (‘Azīz, n.d.: 248).
2. Modern Critics: The writing of the New Testament started about 45 CE and finished around 100 CE (Filson, 1954: 239; Noss, 1996: 576). The writing of the New Testament lasted for half a century, unlike the Old Testament that was completed in nearly 1000 years (McDonald, 1998, vol. 1: 16).

The early manuscripts of the New Testament and their dates

There is only one main, ancient manuscript of the New Testament, which is in Greek. The reason is that the New Testament has been entirely written in Greek, except for the Gospel of Matthew that – according to the Christian tradition – was first written originally in Hebrew and was translated to Greek later, although its Hebrew version is not available (‘Azīz, n.d.: 247).

Some researchers believe that the New Testament books have been written in the middle years of the 1st century CE and a complete copy of it belonging to the 4th century is in our hands now (Riyāḍ, 1998: 67-70).

The existing manuscripts of the New Testament and their dates

The Greek manuscripts of the New Testament are older than other manuscripts and are copies of the original-language manuscripts. So far, small or big parts of 85 Greek manuscripts have been discovered with dates going back to 125 CE through 8th century CE. However, the majority of these belong to the 3rd and 4th centuries CE (Muḥammadiyān, 2002: 47). Examples include,

A) Reland manuscript: this is the oldest manuscript of the New Testament, which is written around 125 CE.

B) Beatty manuscript: this is one of the oldest manuscripts of the New Testament discovered so far.

C) Syriac manuscript: another manuscript that has been discovered later than the other manuscripts is the Syriac manuscript of the four Gospels, which was found in Saint Catherine's Monastery in Mount Sinai. This manuscript was copied from the 5th to 7th century CE from a version of the New Testament that had been translated into Syriac language in the 2nd century CE (Elder, 1996: 115-118).

Differences among manuscripts

There are two viewpoints to the disagreements among the different manuscripts of the New Testament. The first viewpoint expresses that the disagreements among the manuscripts are so insignificant that they do not damage the original words and their messages. However, the second stance believes in a complete difference among the manuscripts that can then have significant impacts on the exegesis.

We might assert about the first viewpoint that a deep examination of over three thousand Greek manuscripts of the New Testament – belonging to the 2nd century CE – reveals that the texts of the New Testament are wonderfully kept and protected from the 3rd century onward, in a way that no doctrinal teaching in them has been distorted (Muḥammadiyān, 2002: 8). Some Bible researchers believe that there is a possibility of disagreement about only 40 lines of the New Testament. Out of the 150 thousand words of the New Testament, 400 words have referential disagreements, and out of this number, only 50 words face real disagreements with none of them being about doctrinal or theological realities (Riyāḍ, 1998: 67-70).

Elder states that there are not many differences between Beatty and the existing manuscripts of the New Testament, and it is clarified once more that the scribes and translators of the New Testament have tried their best to maintain the originality of this book (Elder, 1996: 117). Some other researchers do not accept suchlike reasons for the maintenance of the originality of the Bible and criticize these justifications (Bucaille, 1993: 69).

However, according to the second viewpoint, the first Greek manuscript of the New Testament and the efforts of scholars such as Erasmus, Ximenes, and Simon de Colines proved that the various hand-written manuscripts of the New Testament are totally different from each other. Suchlike studies affected the exegesis and exegetes of the Bible greatly. It not only weakened the belief in the revealedness of the biblical words, but also paved the way for experimental studies on the authoritativeness, date of writing, and meaning of each of its Gospels (The Interpreter's Bible, 1995, v.1: 127-128).

Translation of the Bible

Tackling this issue is necessary because the Bible has been usually recited based on its translations, while its translations have had differences with each other. Moreover, this is effective on the interpretation of the Bible, because it was done in some cases based on a given translation of the Bible rather than its original text.

The first notable translator of the Bible was Jerome whose Latin translation of the Bible was used by the Church. This translation provided the basis for the famous manuscript of the Latin Bible called "Vulgate" that was compiled in the 6th century as the ultimate and standard text of the Bible (Lofmark, 2006: 83-84). This translation has been considered as the standard Bible of the Eastern Europe for the past 1000 years and has been used as the basis of other translations (Eljade, 1987, vol. 4: 16). This translation is also deemed as valid in the Roman Catholic Church and so is used as a source for interpretation. However, the accuracy and validity of this translation is doubted by some Bible researchers (McGrath, 2005: 114-115). The various forms of this text that had significant differences with each other have been transmitted from generation to generation over years. The Catholic researchers accept the "Vulgate" Latin translation of the New Testament as the official translation for general readings, theological discussions, and interpretations. This translation includes Biblical apocrypha the list of which was determined in the Council of Trent. Therefore, it is unnatural to consider such a translation so valid, while the same text in its original language is available (Ramm, n.d.: 17).

Conclusion

The texts of the Old Testament and the Qur'ān have been in diacritics- and vowel-free Hebrew and Arabic, and this has set the ground for some disagreements in their reading. With regard to the Qur'ānic readings, we might say that the existence of numerous memorizers and the widespread recitation of the Qur'ān have greatly reduced the scope of these disagreements. Nonetheless, the Qur'ān can be taken as the same as these readings only if they are widely transmitted; however, since the successive transmission of these readings is not proved, we cannot take them as the same as the Qur'ān, and among these readings, only one form is correct that should be taken into account in interpretation.

With regard to the Bible, the differences in reading have not been so widespread. However, the issue of manuscripts targets the Bible much more than the Qur'ān, because the legalization and formalization process of the Old and New Testaments had a gradual process and continued for many centuries. This poses challenges for the interpretation of these texts. On the contrary, the Qur'ān was written and developed simultaneously with its revelation, and does not face the foregoing problem.

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