

QUR'ANIC STRATEGY IN ITS OWN PRESERVATION

FATEMAH MEGHJI

ABSTRACT: For Muslims, the Qur'an is the unchallengeable word of God. Its inimitability, eloquence, outstanding use of the Arabic language, and scientific accuracies has been the subject of many discussions among Muslims and non-Muslim scholars alike. And given the issue of alteration in other divine scriptures, the discussion of *tahrif* (alteration) has also been examined. Has the Qur'an been changed like other divine books? Moreover, how is God a preserver over the Qur'an? As God challenges human beings to bring forth a text that resembles the Qur'an, is this due to its magnificent nature, or that humans are incapable due to God's divine intervention at every endeavour? This paper explores the practical measures taken to ensure the Qur'an's survival as an unadulterated text, exploring the following areas to display these strategic stylistic methods, namely 1. The odd placement of controversial verses, and 2. The omission of names of contemporaries of the Prophet Muhammad. Part two of this paper will explore the Qur'an's easy and accurate memorization, omission of details, and scientific ambiguity.

Preamble

The miraculous nature of the Qur'an has been a topic that has captured the minds of Muslims for the past fourteen centuries. Its

inimitability, eloquence, magnificent use of the Arabic language, and scientific accuracies have been the subject of many discussions of Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike. For most Muslims, there is no doubt that it is the immutable word of God, the peak of eloquence, and in the words of Ayatullah Muhammad Hadi Ma'rifat, it "has the splendour of poetry, the freedom of prose, and the beauty of rhyming prose. These astonishing features have been obvious to Arab rhetoricians and verbalists from the very beginning."¹

Of the many aspects of its miraculous nature, is that it is inimitable, and this is proven through its challenge to mankind to bring something forth resembling it. No human is capable of bringing forth a chapter like it, and as such, nothing can be added to the Qur'an. Save for a few exceptions, the vast majority of Muslims and their scholars agree that the Qur'an, in its current form, is the preserved and precise word of God. God has protected the Qur'an from the distortions and alterations that plagued the Old and New Testaments, and this is a source of pride for many Muslims. Unlike previous divine books, the Qur'an is universal and for all time; it is the protected word of God: indisputable and miraculous on many levels. However, due to a precedence of alteration in other divine scriptures, the discussion of *tahrif* (alteration) is a discussion that has taken place in Qur'anic sciences over the centuries and amongst Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike. Has the Qur'an been altered and tampered with like the other divine books of its Abrahamic predecessors? Do differences in *qira'at* (recitation) substantiate the

¹ Muhammad Hadi Ma'rifat, trans. Salim Rossier & Mansoor Limba, *Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'an, Volume 2* (Tehran: Samt Publications, 2014), 232-233.

existence of *tahrif*? This question has been explored time and time again, and is certainly a question worth exploring. Of the many reasons postulated over the absence and/or unlikelihood of *tahrif* are historical reasons or observations. For example, the Muslims were incredibly sensitive towards the idea that their divine book may be altered and as such, were over-protective over it. With this extra care and precision, it was not likely that the Qur'an could have been altered. Several other reasons are also given that describe the historical context and situation as one that was conducive towards preserving the Qur'an.²

The Qur'an also speaks of God's protection over it, in Surah al-Hijr:

إِنَّا نَحْنُ نَزَّلْنَا الذِّكْرَ وَإِنَّا لَهُ لَحَافِظُونَ

Indeed We have sent down the Reminder, and indeed We will preserve it. [15:9]

This begs the question: how is God a preserver over the Qur'an? There is another interesting discussion with regards to the inimitability of the Qur'an and that is whether the concept of *I'jaz*, (the idea that humans are incapable of imitating the Qur'an), means that human beings are incapable of bringing forth a piece of literature that resembles the Qur'an due to its magnificent nature, or whether humans are capable of such a feat, but have just been rendered incapable due to God's divine intervention at every attempt.³ This poses the question: is the inimitability of the Qur'an a tangible feat due to its lofty eloquence or is its inimitability intangible, due to

² For a more in-depth discussion on the alteration of the Qur'an, see *Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'an, Volume 2*.

³ Ibid, 228.

God's intervention in the material world? Scholars, like Ayatullah Hadi Ma'rifat have concluded that it is not that God renders individuals incapable, but rather it is that humans themselves are incapable of bringing forth something that can match the Qur'an.⁴

A parallel can be drawn here as to how the Qur'an has been protected from *tahrif* by God. Has he miraculously protected the Qur'an from alteration through divine intervention at attempts to alter it, or have there also been practical measures that have been taken, ensuring its protection? In traditional discussions on *tahrif*, practical measures taken by human beings, i.e. the Muslims, have been explored in depth. Their precision and struggles in writing the Qur'an and preserving every word of it has been noted in history, such that arguments ensued between the companions of the Prophet over a few words.⁵ But what of the practical measures taken by God (or the writer of the Qur'an if we are to take this from the perspective of a non-believer) to ensure its survival as an unadulterated text? This is the topic that I would like to explore in this paper and these are the methods by which the Qur'an has been strategically written in a way that has ensured, in a very tangible and believable way that it would not be altered by the hands of people. These observations and thoughts necessitate the belief that the Qur'an has not been altered; the absence of significant *tahrif* is a premise to the proposals being

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ More on this discussion can be found in Ayatullah Sayyid Abu Al-Qasim Al-Musawi Al-Khu'i trans. Abdulaziz A. Sachedina, *The Prolegomena to the Qur'an*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998).

brought forth.⁶ Further, we will be approaching this study from the perspective of a Twelver Shi'i, and as such will be accepting their general opinions with regards to various verses and the authority that they believe is vested in the family of the Prophet.

The reason that we have chosen to come from this perspective is by applying a characteristic of God that is often spoken about in the Qur'an, and that is His perfection in planning and measuring: *makara* and *qadara*. These two concepts are usually spoken of in a way that describes the path that humanity is treading on: everything has been created in a perfect way, and God's planning is so precise that He even turns the plots of His enemies in ways that it will ultimately benefit Him and His religion, rendering their efforts useless.

وَمَكَرُوا وَاللَّهُ خَيْرُ الْمَاكِرِينَ

Then they plotted, and Allah also devised, and Allah is the best of devisers. [3:54]

This does not necessitate that humans lack free-will, rather it necessitates that God, with all of His knowledge is capable of using human free-will to His advantage and decreeing perfectly whilst taking into consideration the free-will of humans. He is the perfect measurer; the one who calculates destiny and decree.⁷ However, what of this precision and planning in light of the book that He has

⁶ Even if one were to entertain the idea that minor alterations and omissions were made, as some have, it would not be far-fetched to say that God implemented these strategies in order to limit the amount of tampering to an insignificant amount.

⁷ The discussion of *qadr* and *qadha* has been discussed by Ayatullah Muhammad Taqi Misbah Yazdi, trans. Mirza Muhammad Abbas Reza, *Theological Instructions*, (Qom: Imam Khomeini Institute for Education and Research, 2009).

written? Beyond its Arabic grammar (an area that has been explored considerably in depth) and linguistic excellence, what strategies have been used to ensure that nobody would be able to alter the Qur'an, to preserve it in its current form? After all, if He creates with precision and measure, and is the best of planners, should this not reflect itself in His book, the Qur'an?

Of course, God has not explained his strategy in words that are so clear, but there is no denying that it exists. For this discussion, we are simply making observations and postulating possible strategies that seem to have been implemented in the Qur'an and seem to have decreased reasons to tamper with the Qur'an. One of ways in which we have hypothesized how it could have been altered, is by comparing it with previously altered texts, namely, the Old Testament. By comparing the literary structure of these texts to the Qur'an, we may be able to conjecture how the Qur'an has strategically been written in a way that ensured that people would not be tempted to alter it as they did previously.

As a lot of work has not been done in this specific area, the references used in this piece are far fewer than would have been ideal, and a lot of these thoughts are simply my own observations, and what I would hope are educated guesses. Some of the ideas were brought forth by the professor for my class, Agha Javan Arasteh, and they inspired further thought process on the subject. The stylistic methods of the Qur'an are such that it has removed any possible inclination towards alteration, either due to the whims or the forgetfulness of mankind. I have chosen to explore the following areas in order to show these strategic stylistic methods:

1. Odd placement of controversial verses

2. Omission of names of contemporaries of the Prophet
3. Easy and accurate memorization
4. Omission of details
5. Scientific Ambiguity

These strategies are very tangible and pragmatic, and support the idea that God has strategically written the Qur'an in a way that has removed any possible reason that a person would have to tamper with the Qur'an. Some proponents of *tahrif* have claimed that the Qur'an has been tampered with due to the omission of names like Ali's, due to vested political interests. However, would not God, the all-Knowing know when, where, and why people would tamper with the Qur'an? With all of His foresight and knowledge of the human race, could He not write a scripture in the most strategic of ways, such that nobody would be led or tempted to tamper with it? From this angle, it could be argued that He implemented practical strategies to ensure that nobody would attempt to tamper with the Qur'an. He removed their reasons to tamper as He knew what their reasons would be.

1. Odd Placement of Controversial Verses

The first group of verses seem to suggest a strategic placing of verses to avoid future tampering with the Qur'an, or the intentional misplacement of verses so as to serve certain political interests. Before entering this discussion however, it is important to note the difference of opinion with regards to the placement of verses in the Qur'an and whether or not this was divinely sanctioned. There are two opinions in this regard: 1. That the Prophet ordered the placement of the verses by divine command or 2. That the Muslims, after the death of the Prophet, generally placed verses within a

chapter in the order of the revelation but with exceptions. Most scholars have come to accept that generally speaking, verses within a chapter are ordered chronologically, even if the chapters themselves are not chronologically ordered by revelation. However, there are exceptions to this, and some verses do not exist in their order of revelation. Ayatullah Hadi Ma'rifat has gone through these purported exceptions in his work *al-Tamhid*. Taking this into consideration, either God, by directly commanding His Prophet, ordered certain verses to be strategically placed, or the Muslims placed them there, leading to what could be argued as a strategic placement of the verse, i.e. it worked in the favour of the preservation of the Qur'an. There are hadith to the effect of both and different scholars have supported both views throughout history.

Two verses that could be argued to have a strategic placement, (adopting a Twelver Shi'i perspective) would be Q5:3 and Q33:33, known as the verse of *Ghadir* (also known as *ikmal al-din*) and the verse of *Tathir*. The first verse appears as follows:

حُرِّمَتْ عَلَيْكُمُ الْمَيْتَةُ وَالْدَّمُ وَلَحْمُ الْخِزْيِرِ وَمَا أَهْلًا لغيرِ اللَّهِ بِهِ وَالْمُنْخَنِقَةُ
وَالْمَوْفُوذَةُ وَالْمُتَرَدِّيَةُ وَالنَّطِيحَةُ وَمَا أَكَلَ السَّبُعُ إِلَّا مَا ذَكَّيْتُمْ وَمَا ذُبِحَ عَلَى
النُّصَبِ وَأَنْ تَسْتَقْسِمُوا بِالْأَزْلَامِ ذَلِكَ فِسْقُ الْيَوْمِ الْبَاطِلِ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ
دِينِكُمْ فَلَا تَحْشَوْهُمْ وَاخْشَوْنَ الْيَوْمَ أَكْمَلْتُ لَكُمْ دِينَكُمْ وَأَتَمَمْتُ عَلَيْكُمْ نِعْمَتِي
وَرَضِيْتُ لَكُمْ الْإِسْلَامَ دِينًا فَمَنْ اضْطُرَّ فِي مَخْمَصَةٍ غَيْرِ مُتَجَانِفٍ لِإِثْمٍ فَإِنَّ
اللَّهَ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ

You are prohibited carrion, blood, the flesh of swine, and what has been offered to other than Allah, and the animal strangled or beaten to death, and that which dies by falling or is gored to death, and that which is

*mangled by a beast of prey—barring that which you may purify —and what is sacrificed on stone altars [to idols], and that you should divide by raffling with arrows. All that is transgression. **Today the faithless have despaired of your religion. So do not fear them, but fear Me. Today I have perfected your religion for you, and I have completed My blessing upon you, and I have approved Islam as your religion.** But should anyone be compelled by hunger, without inclining to sin, then Allah is indeed all-forgiving, all-merciful. [5:3]*

It is reported through different narrations that the bolded section of this verse (*Today, the faithless...*) was revealed on the day of *Ghadir*, where the Prophet informed the Muslims that Ali was to be his successor and leader after his death. This was a matter of controversy after the death of the Prophet, where other companions of the Prophet ended up taking control of the Muslim nation. If the verse was indeed revealed on the day of *Ghadir*, then the placement of this sentence, which is grammatically and contextually very different to what surrounds it, is very strange. It seems odd to insinuate that the perfection of religion lied with the eating of lawful of meat. Further, the verse switches from speaking about meat to speaking about the completion of religion and then returns to the topic of meat. It is a peculiar verse, and many commentators have commented on its distinctiveness. The split of the Muslim nation with regards to who should have led it after the death of the Prophet continues to be a matter of contention. It is a verse of sectarian significance, and it is not far-fetched to suggest that it may have been removed due to sectarian interest if it were obvious that the verse was speaking about

the day of Ghadir and the appointment of Ali. Had the context of the verse been a little more conspicuous, many may have more easily noticed its significance with relation to the leadership of 'Ali. To support the idea that the placement of the verse was strategic, Allamah Tabatabai in *Tafsir al-Mizan* notes a hadith that has been narrated in *al-Durru 'l-manthūr*. This narration seems to indicate that the verse was placed in its current location by the Prophet himself. The hadith is narrated from 'Abd ibn Hamīd from al-Sha'bī who said "The verse: *This day I have perfected for you your religion* . . . , was revealed to the Prophet while he was in 'Arafāt; and when any verses much pleased him, he used to put them in the beginning of the chapter.' He also said, 'And Jibrāil used to teach him how to do it.'"⁸

The second verse that can be argued to have a strategic placement is the verse of *tathīr*, which has been attributed to denoting the purification of the household of the Prophet, namely five individuals, the esteemed *Ahl al-Kisā* (Muhammad, 'Alī, Faṭimah, Hasan, and Husayn). The occasion of revelation which is the famous *Hadith al-Kisā* indicates that it was revealed with regards to these five individuals. The verse reads as follows (note the bolded portion as the verse of *tathīr*):

وَقَرْنَ فِي بُيُوتِكُنَّ وَلَا تَبَرَّجْنَ تَبَرُّجَ الْجَاهِلِيَّةِ الْأُولَىٰ وَأَقِمْنَ الصَّلَاةَ وَآتِينَ
 الزَّكَاةَ وَأَطِعْنَ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ إِنَّمَا يُرِيدُ اللَّهُ لِيُذْهِبَ عَنْكُمُ الرِّجْسَ أَهْلَ
 الْبَيْتِ وَيُطَهِّرَكُمْ تَطْهِيرًا وَادْكُرْنَ مَا يُثَلَّىٰ فِي بُيُوتِكُنَّ مِنْ آيَاتِ اللَّهِ
 وَالْحِكْمَةِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ لَطِيفًا خَبِيرًا

⁸ Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn al-Tabatabai trans. Sayyid Saeed Akhtar Rizvi, *Tafsir al-Mizan, Volume 9*, (Tehran: WOFIS, 2000), 230.

*Stay in your houses and do not flaunt your finery like the former [days of pagan] ignorance. Maintain the prayer and pay the zakat, and obey Allah and His Apostle. **Indeed Allah desires to repel all impurity from you, O People of the Household, and purify you with a thorough purification.** And remember what is recited in your homes of the signs of Allah and wisdom. Indeed Allah is all-attentive, all-aware. [33:33-34]*

If the verse was revealed about these five individuals, then again, the placement of the bolded portion of the verse is odd given that the beginning of the verse is speaking about the wives of the Prophet—none of whom are contended to be of these *Ahl al-Kisā*. The beginning of the verse uses the imperative form of the female plural (*kunna*). However, the verse (and the section that is attributed to be speaking of the *Ahlul Bayt*) switches to the second-person general plural (*kum*) which indicates that it is either a completely male audience, or a mixed-gender audience. After this sentence, it again switches to the imperative female plural. This denotes a change in topic and in who is being addressed. However, the placement of the verse makes the context more obscure. If it were clear that the verse were speaking of only these five individuals, and was placed somewhere else in the Qur'an, it may have been less obscure and more likely to have been removed by those with other vested political interests against the family of the Prophet. After all, all of them played important and controversial political roles after the death of the Prophet. Nevertheless, the verse lies unsuspectingly amongst verses speaking of the Prophet's wives, women who the Muslim nation held in high regard.

With regards to the placement of this verse, some have postulated that it was put here, either by companions who thought this was an appropriate place for it, or that it was done intentionally, as it may have benefited certain companions on a political front to have it surrounded by verses that seemingly have little to do with it. This idea is brought forth by Allamah Majlisi in *Bihar al-Anwar*:

فلعل آية التطهير أيضا وضعوها في موضع زعموا أنها تناسبه أو أدخلوها
في سياق مخاطبة الزوجات لبعض مصالحهم الدنيوية و قد ظهر من
الأخبار عدم ارتباطها بقصتهن فالاعتقاد في هذا الباب على النظم و
الترتيب ظاهر البطلان.

*And likewise, perhaps, the location of the verse of tathīr in its place was intentional as it seemed appropriate, or it was put in the context of the addressees being the wives, due to certain worldly benefits. Certainly, it is apparent from the narrations that there is a lack of connection to the story, so it can be ascertained that the organization and order of this is incorrect.*⁹

However, like the previous verse of ghadir, it can also be argued that this ended up working in the Qur'an's favour and that it was actually strategic for the preservation of this verse in the Qur'an. It lies protected through its obscurity and can only be distinguished if one pays close and careful attention in order to realize the subtleties of its misplacement.

⁹ Translation rendered by myself. Allamah Majlisi, *Bihar al-Anwar*, Volume 35, 234, accessed February 17th, 2015, <http://www.noorlib.ir/view/fa/book/bookview/text/13531/1/1>.

2. Omission of Names of People Contemporary to the Prophet

Although the Qur'an mentions the names of several individuals from previous nations, it does not mention the exact identity of those it speaks about with as much detail compared to its Abrahamic predecessors. A quick perusal through the Old Testament makes this point clear, there are passages of names and genealogies in detail, including the names of the children of various Prophets even if they have an insignificant part to play in the history being narrated. The Qur'an on the other hand, although it mentions names of Prophets and other individuals, it also narrates several stories where names have been omitted. The identity of several individuals has not been made clear, and in several instances, these individuals have been named through the *ahadith* literature or through similar stories in the Old Testament. More interestingly is that with regards to individuals contemporary to the Prophet, besides the Prophet himself, only two individuals are mentioned by name: Abu Lahab and Zayd. These two are the exception to the general pattern of the Qur'an in refraining from mentioning names of those contemporary to the Prophet. The hypocrites of Medina, Abu Sufyan, and other antagonists were never mentioned by name or revealed publically. Further, neither were the names of any of the companions, the *Ahlul Bayt*, the names of the daughters of the Prophet or 'Ali ibn Ali Talib. When the Qur'an describes the migration to Medina, it does not bring the name of Abu Bakr who is narrated to have accompanied him, rather, the Qur'an says:

إِلَّا تَنْصُرُوهُ فَقَدْ نَصَرَهُ اللَّهُ إِذْ أَخْرَجَهُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا ثَانِي اثْنَيْنِ إِذْ هُمَا فِي
الْغَارِ إِذْ يَقُولُ لِصَاحِبِهِ لَا تَحْزَنْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ مَعَنَا

[9:40] If you do not help him, then Allah certainly helped him when the faithless expelled him, as one of two [refugees], when the two of them were in the cave, he said to his companion, 'Do not grieve; Allah is indeed with us.'

It simply notes him as a 'companion'. This is true of many occasions in the Qur'an, and who is being spoken of can usually be determined by the context or revelation of the verse. The verse of *wilayah* is a cornerstone of Shi'i beliefs and it does not mention Ali ibn Abi Talib by name. It reads:

إِنَّمَا وَلِيُّكُمُ اللَّهُ وَرَسُولُهُ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا الَّذِينَ يُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ
وَهُمْ رَاكِعُونَ

Your guardian is only Allah, His Apostle, and the faithful who maintain the prayer and give the zakat while bowing down [5:55].

With regards to this verse, according to many scholars, it was revealed after Ali ibn Abi Talib gave charity to a beggar while he was bowing down in prayer. Several other verses that are clearly in reference to the actions of Ali ibn Abi Talib do not include his name, for example, when he slept in the Prophet's bed as the Prophet escaped to Medina. Stories about the daughter of the Prophet, Fatimah, also do not mention her name. This is despite the fact that the majority of commentators, Sunni and Shia alike, mention many of these incidents in relation to these individuals as the *asbab al-nuzul* (reason for revelation). With regards to the omission of their names, especially the likes of Imam Ali and his status in the eyes of the Shi'a as an Imam, people have reacted in different ways. Some *akhbari*

scholars, in response to questions about the omission of these names, decided that there must have been a type of *tahrif* in the Qur'an where words or verses were deleted. The infamous book *Faṣl al-Khitāb*, by Muhaddith Nūrī, alleging that *tahrif* had occurred, was actually written in response to a query from India as to why the names of the *Ahlul Bayt* did not exist in the Qur'an.¹⁰ Other scholars, like Ayatullah Khu'i, responded by narrating hadith from the Imams that responded to the same type of query. In *The Prolegomena to the Qur'an (Al-Bayān fī Tafsīr al-Qurān)*, Ayatullah Khui narrates a hadith which he believes to be authentic that responds to the inquiry of a companion. It is narrated from Shaykh al-Kulayni by Abu al-Basir and says: "How come 'Ali and his family are not [specifically] named in the Book of God?' He [Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq] said "... tell them that the prayer was revealed to the Prophet, and in it there was no [specific] mention of three or four [units] until the Prophet was the one who explained that to them."¹¹

There is no doubt that the authority and *wilayat* that was vested to the *Ahlul Bayt* was a matter of controversy and was a sensitive, politically-charged issue. Because of this, some scholars have claimed that their names were later dropped off due to political interests. However, Ayatullah Khu'i makes an interesting point and this is that if the names were there in the initial revelation, why didn't the Imams use this as an argument to prove their authority? Going a step further, if this were the case, that individuals omitted their names to serve certain political interests, would not God, the all-Knowing, have

¹⁰ Ma'rifat, 331.

¹¹ Al-Khu'i, 159.

had knowledge of their future actions and intentions to alter the Qur'an? Muhaddith Nuri also mentions the idea that the names of the *Ahlul Bayt* "would have been mentioned in the Old and New Testaments."¹² We also know from the Qur'an itself that words were changed in the previous scriptures. Knowing that they would try to alter the Qur'an, as people did to the previous scriptures, why would God choose to include them again? If He were writing a Qur'an in a way that would ensure that it remained safe from alteration, why would he, the all-Wise, choose to include names that would later be removed due to the whims of mankind? If He had included their names, they would have attempted to remove them regardless. The point here is that perhaps it was strategic to omit the names to begin with; knowing that this was a politically sensitive issue and that people were not going to be inclined to follow it, he removed their reason to alter the Qur'an, and in effect, the omission of their names was actually a strategy in the long-term preservation of the Qur'an.

¹² Ma'rifat, 331.