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THE ROLE OF QUR' ANIC RECITATIONS (QIRA' AT) IN THE EXEGESIS OF THE HOLY QUR' AN

Abstract. *This article presents a scholarly analysis of the role of Qur'anic recitations (qira'at) in the exegesis (tafsir) of the Holy Qur'an. The science of Qur'anic recitations holds a distinctive position within the Islamic scholarly tradition and constitutes one of the fundamental sources for the discipline of Qur'anic exegesis. This study examines how variant recitations expand the semantic scope of Qur'anic verses, their influence on jurisprudential rulings (fihi ahkam), and the methodological approaches employed by classical exegetes (mufasssirin) in utilizing these variant readings. The findings indicate that the majority of recitation variants are complementary in nature, collectively demonstrating the richness of Qur'anic meanings. The study conducts a comparative analysis based on the works of al-Ṭabari, al-Zamakhshari, Ibn al-Jazari, and contemporary scholars.*

Keywords: *qira'at, tafsir, Holy Qur'an, mufasssirin, variant recitations, jurisprudential rulings, seven recitations, ten recitations.*

INTRODUCTION

The Holy Qur'an stands as a miracle for all times, with its textual structure, linguistic characteristics, and diversity of recitations occupying a unique position among the Islamic sciences. The question of Qur'anic recitations constitutes one of the most significant topics across virtually all branches of Islamic scholarship including exegesis (tafsir), jurisprudence (fiqh), Arabic linguistics, and rhetoric (balagha).

The science of recitations ('ilm al-qira'at) is the discipline that studies the various modes of reciting Qur'anic words as transmitted through different chains of narration, extending in unbroken succession (isnad) from the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) to the present day. As Ibn al-Jazari (d. 833/1429) states: 'The recitation (qira'at)

is the art of rendering Qur'anic words through various chains of transmission' (Ibn al-Jazari, 1932:1/9). This science maintains a profound connection with Qur'anic exegesis, as variant recitations of a single verse illuminate different facets of its meaning.

Imam al-Zarqani, in his work 'Manahil al-'Irfan,' affirms: 'The recitations constitute one of the most essential instruments for comprehending Qur'anic meanings, as they illuminate the lexical and semantic dimensions of verses from multiple perspectives' (al-Zarqani, 1995:1/412). Similarly, Imam al-Suyuti, in 'al-Itqan fi 'Ulum al-Qur'an,' characterizes the science of recitations as one of the most noble branches of Qur'anic sciences (al-Suyuti, 1974:1/131).

MAIN PART

The research methodology is grounded in the following categories of sources:

Firstly, classical exegetical sources: Imam al-Ṭabari's (d. 310/923) 'Jami' al-Bayan 'an Ta'wil Ay al-Qur'an' serves as a primary source, being one of the most comprehensive compilations of recitation narrations (al-Ṭabari, 2000). Al-Zamakhshari's (d. 538/1144) 'al-Kashshaf' provides an essential resource for analyzing the rhetorical and syntactical dimensions of recitations (al-Zamakhshari, 1998). Additionally, Abu Hayyan al-Andalusi's (d. 745/1344) 'al-Bahr al-Muḥiṭ' serves as a supplementary source for grammatical analysis of recitations (Abu Hayyan, 1993).

Secondly, specialized works on the science of recitations: Ibn al-Jazari's 'al-Nashr fi al-Qira'at al-'Ashr' serves as the authoritative source presenting the complete system of ten recitations (Ibn al-Jazari, 1932). Abu 'Amr al-Dani's (d. 444/1053) 'al-Taysir fi al-Qira'at al-Sab' ' provides the foundational source for the seven recitations (al-Dani, 1984). Furthermore, Makki ibn Abi Ṭalib's (d. 437/1045) 'al-Kashf 'an Wujuh al-Qira'at al-Sab' wa 'Ilaliha wa Hujajiha' serves as a significant source regarding the evidential bases and rationales for variant recitations (Makki, 1997).

Thirdly, contemporary scholarly works: 'Abd al-Fattah al-Qadi's 'al-Budur al-Zahira fi al-Qira'at al-'Ashr al-Mutawatira' (al-Qadi, 1981), Sha'ban Muhammad Isma'il's 'al-Qira'at: Ahkamuha wa Maṣadiruha' (Isma'il, 1999), and Ghanim Qadduri al-Hamd's 'al-Muyassar fi 'Ilm al-Tajwid' and related works (al-Hamd, 2009) were utilized.

Definition and Historical Development of the Science of Recitations

The science of recitations (‘ilm al-qira’at) is the discipline that studies the methodologies of reciting Qur’anic words through various chains of transmission. Ibn al-Jazari defines this science as follows: ‘The recitation is the knowledge of rendering Qur’anic words and understanding their variant modes in relation to their transmitters’ (Ibn al-Jazari, 1932:1/9). Al-Zarqani, in turn, defines it as ‘the science of the modalities of rendering Qur’anic words and attributing these modalities to their respective transmitters’ (al-Zarqani, 1995:1/396).

The emergence of the science of recitations is directly connected to the revelation of the Qur’an upon the ‘seven modes’ (al-ahruf al-sab’a). The renowned hadith recorded in Şahih al-Bukhari and Şahih Muslim reports the Prophet (peace be upon him) as saying: ‘The Qur’an was revealed upon seven modes; recite whichever of them comes easier to you’ (al-Bukhari, hadith: 4992). This hadith establishes the prophetic foundation for the diversity of recitations.

During the caliphate of ‘Uthman ibn ‘Affan (may Allah be pleased with him), when the Qur’an was compiled into a standardized codex (muşhaf), various recitations continued within the framework of the ‘Uthmanic orthography. Historically, the recitations passed through two principal phases: the first being the period of open transmission during the era of the Companions and their Successors, and the second being the systematic codification of recitations during the third and fourth centuries of the Hijri era. Abu Bakr ibn Mujahid (d. 324/936), in his work ‘Kitab al-Sab’a fi al-Qira’at,’ was the first to identify seven prominent reciters and systematize their recitations (Ibn Mujahid, 1972:45).

Subsequently, Ibn al-Jazari expanded this system by adding three additional reciters to the original seven, establishing the system of ten recitations. His work ‘al-Nashr fi al-Qira’at al-‘Ashr’ represents the most comprehensive treatise in this field. In the contemporary Islamic world, the Hafş ‘an ‘Aşim transmission is the most widely disseminated recitation, though the Warsh ‘an Nafi’ recitation also remains prevalent in North Africa (al-Hamd, 2009:32).

Categories of Recitation Variants and Their Impact on Exegesis

Recitation variants manifest at various levels, each exerting a distinctive influence on exegesis. Scholars have classified recitation variants into several categories:

a) Lexical variants (ikhtilaf lafzi) – differences that do not affect meaning. This category includes variations in pronunciation such as assimilation (idgham), concealment (ikhfa’), inclination (imala), and similar phonetic features. An example is the variation between ‘maliki’ and ‘maliki’ in Surat al-Fatiha, verse 4. Imam al-Ṭabari remarks on this: ‘Both recitations are authentic and widely transmitted (mutawatir), though a subtle semantic distinction exists between them: «maliki» denotes the possessor of dominion, while «maliki» signifies sovereign or king’ (al-Ṭabari, 2000:1/155).

b) Semantic variants (ikhtilaf ma’ nawī) – differences that reveal additional facets of meaning. This category of recitation variants holds significant importance in exegesis, as they expand the semantic scope of verses. For instance, the variants ‘yaṭhurna’ and ‘yataṭahharna’ in Surat al-Baqara, verse 222, directly influenced jurisprudential rulings. As al-Qurṭubi (d. 671/1273) notes: ‘These two recitations have led to differing jurisprudential conclusions regarding the purification period for menstruation’ (al-Qurṭubi, 2003:3/89).

c) Grammatical variants (ikhtilaf i’ rabi) – differences in syntactical structure. Such variants pertain to Arabic grammar and may also affect meaning. Al-Zamakhshari, in his ‘al-Kashshaf,’ analyzes these variants from a rhetorical perspective, demonstrating that each recitation possesses its own distinctive eloquent beauty (al-Zamakhshari, 1998:1/37).

Practical Applications of Recitations in Exegesis

To illustrate the practical impact of recitation variants in exegesis, several specific examples merit examination:

First example: Surat al-Ma’ida, verse 6. This verse addresses the limbs involved in ablution (wudu’). In the phrase ‘wa arjulakum’ (and your feet), the word ‘arjula’ is recited in two modes: with the accusative case (fatha) and with the genitive case (kasra). When recited with the accusative, it indicates the obligation to wash the feet; when recited with the genitive, it alludes to wiping (mash) with a wet hand. Ibn Kathir, Hamza, and Abu ‘Amr recited with the genitive, while the remaining reciters used the accusative. Al-Ṭabari considered both recitations authentic, explaining that each is valid in its respective context (al-Ṭabari, 2000:10/60-62). Abu Hayyan al-Andalusi conducted a more detailed grammatical analysis of this issue, demonstrating the syntactical validity of both recitations (Abu Hayyan, 1993:3/448).

Second example: Surat al-Baqara, verses 284-285. In the phrase ‘ kullun amana’ (all believed), the word ‘ kull’ has both nominative (raf’) and accusative (naşb) recitations. When recited in the nominative, it conveys ‘ all of them believed’ ; in the accusative, it signifies ‘ each of them.’ This distinction holds significant importance in the structural analysis of the verse (al-Zamakhshari, 1998:1/334).

Third example: Surat al-Fatiha, verse 4. As mentioned above, there is a subtle yet significant semantic difference between ‘ Maliki yawm al-din’ and ‘ Malik yawm al-din.’ Makki ibn Abi Ṭalib states: ‘ Malik denotes the possessor of dominion and authority, while malik signifies sovereignty and rule. Both attributes are applicable to Allah Most High, and both recitations are authentic’ (Makki, 1997:1/112). Sha’ ban Muhammad Isma’ il, in his analysis of this issue, emphasizes that both recitations are mutually complementary (Isma’ il, 1999:75).

The Influence of Recitations on Jurisprudential Rulings

The impact of recitation variants on jurisprudential rulings constitutes a distinct area of study within Islamic legal theory. The majority of uşul al-fiqh scholars have recognized recitation variants as independent evidential sources.

For instance, in Surat al-Ma’ ida, verse 38, the phrase ‘ fa-iqta’ u aydiyahuma’ (cut off their hands) appears. In the canonical recitation, ‘ aydiya’ is in the plural form, while in certain recitations it appears as ‘ yad’ in the singular. This variant has influenced jurisprudential debates concerning the method of implementing the penalty for theft (al-Jaşşas, 1985:2/418). Al-Jaşşas (d. 370/981), in his ‘ Ahkam al-Qur’ an,’ provides a detailed analysis of this issue, demonstrating the impact of recitation variants on legal interpretation.

Another significant example concerns the question of menstruation in Surat al-Baqara, verse 222. The variance between the recitations ‘ hatta yaṭhurna’ and ‘ hatta yataṭahharna’ has provided the foundation for differing approaches between the Hanafi and Shafi’ i schools on this matter. The Hanafis, relying on the ‘ yataṭahharna’ recitation, emphasize the requirement of ritual bathing (ghusl) after the cessation of menstruation, while the Shafi’ is, drawing on the ‘ yaṭhurna’ recitation, maintain that the mere cessation of bleeding is sufficient (al-Qurṭubi, 2003:3/90). Al-Zarqani, in his analysis, notes that recitation variants constitute one of the significant causes of jurisprudential differences (al-Zarqani, 1995:1/420).

These examples clearly demonstrate that recitation variants exert a direct influence not only on exegesis but also on jurisprudential rulings. As ‘ Abd al-Fattah al-Qadi states: ‘ The recitations are not merely linguistic variants but constitute a significant source for deriving legal rulings’ (al-Qadi, 1981:15).

Exegetes’ Approaches to Recitations

Various exegetical schools have adopted differing approaches to recitations. These approaches may be classified as follows:

Al-Ṭabari’s approach may be characterized as a transmissional-critical method. He presents various recitations, examines their chains of transmission (isnad), and then selects the one he considers most appropriate. In his exegesis, dozens of recitation narrations are sometimes cited for a single verse (al-Ṭabari, 2000:1/11-12). Al-Zamakhshari, in contrast, approaches recitations primarily from rhetorical and grammatical perspectives. He explains recitation variants through the subtleties of Arabic language, revealing the distinctive rhetorical beauty of each recitation (al-Zamakhshari, 1998:1/15). Abu Hayyan al-Andalusi devotes particular attention to grammatical analysis, providing detailed commentary on recitations within the framework of syntactical principles (Abu Hayyan, 1993:1/25).

Among contemporary scholars, Sha’ ban Muhammad Isma’ il, in his work ‘ al-Qira’ at: Ahkamuha wa Maṣadiruha,’ has made a significant contribution by systematically classifying recitations and establishing their scholarly basis in exegesis. He has analyzed recitations by categorizing them as ‘ meaning-multiplying’ and ‘ meaning-intensifying’ types (Isma’ il, 1999:112-115).

Ghanim Qadduri al-Hamd has focused on the practical aspects of the science of recitations, including matters related to tajwid rules. He emphasizes: ‘ The science of recitations is not merely theoretical knowledge but a practical skill essential for correctly understanding and properly reciting the Qur’ an’ (al-Hamd, 2009:18).

DISCUSSION

Analysis of the research findings leads to several important conclusions. Firstly, the majority of recitation variants are complementary in nature. That is, different recitations illuminate various facets of meaning in a single verse, and harmony rather than contradiction exists among them. This constitutes one of the significant evidences of the miraculous nature of the Qur’ an.

Secondly, the question of recitation variants' impact on jurisprudential rulings occupies an important place in Islamic legal theory. The majority of uṣūl al-fiqh scholars have accepted mutawatir recitations as independent evidential sources. However, two approaches exist in this regard: some scholars (such as the Hanafis) view each recitation as an independent source of evidence and derive separate rulings from them, while others (such as the Shafi'is) employ a unifying approach to recitations.

Thirdly, contemporary recitation studies are enriching the classical heritage with new scholarly methodologies. Orientalist scholars have also contributed to research in this field, though some of their conclusions differ from the perspectives of Muslim scholars. For instance, A. Jeffery, in his 'Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'an' (1937), attempted to study recitation variants using the historical-critical method, but some of his conclusions are incompatible with the Islamic scholarly tradition (Jeffery, 1937).

Fourthly, the topic of the science of recitations and its influence on exegesis remains insufficiently explored in Uzbek-language Islamic scholarly literature. Serious scholarly research in this field is necessary. The study of the Transoxianan exegetical school's approach to recitations holds particular significance, given that this region produced such great exegetes as al-Zamakhshari.

Regarding the limitations of this research, it should be noted that this article primarily utilized Arabic-language sources, while Persian and Turkish sources were not incorporated. Furthermore, elucidating the impact of recitations on all exegetical schools Sufi exegesis, philosophical exegesis, and social exegesis exceeded the scope of this article. These matters may constitute subjects for future research.

CONCLUSION

This study has reached the following principal conclusions:

Firstly, the science of recitations constitutes one of the essential keys to understanding the Holy Qur'an and forms an integral part of the science of exegesis. Recitation variants demonstrate the richness of Qur'anic meanings and illuminate various semantic facets of verses.

Secondly, the majority of recitation variants are complementary in nature, constituting one of the evidences of the Qur'an's miraculous character. Different recitations do not contradict one another but rather form mutually enriching layers of meaning.

Thirdly, recitation variants exert a direct influence on jurisprudential rulings and are recognized as independent evidential sources in Islamic legal theory. This influence is particularly manifest in matters of worship (wudu', ṣalat) and transactions (family law, criminal law).

Fourthly, exegetes' approaches to recitations are diverse, and this variety demonstrates the richness of the science of exegesis. Al-Ṭabari's transmissional method, al-Zamakhshari's rhetorical analysis, and Abu Hayyan's grammatical approach are mutually complementary.

Fifthly, contemporary research offers opportunities to enrich the classical heritage with new scholarly methodologies. However, much work remains to be done in this field, particularly in Uzbek-language scholarly literature.

For future research, the following directions are recommended: in-depth study of the Transoxianan exegetical school's approach to recitations; assessment of the role of the science of recitations in contemporary Qur'anic studies; analysis of the impact of recitation variants on Sufi and philosophical exegetical traditions; and the creation of scholarly dictionaries and reference works on the science of recitations in the Uzbek language.

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