NEW PERSPECTIVES ON THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF ERROR (*LAḤN*) IN SCRIPTURAL QUR'ĀN

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ABSTRACT

The concept of phenomenology in modern philosophical discourse as a study of abstractions and appearances can be traced to Emmanuel Kant (1724-1804) and the German philosopher Hegel (1770-1831). It is being applied in this study to the phenomenon called *laḥm* in Islamic scriptural discourse. The only occurrence of the word *laḥm* in the Qur'ān is in Chapter 47:30. Its exact meaning has been a subject of some serious debate in medieval exegetical and philological scholarship. The consignment of the Holy Scripture into writing and the contending legitimacy in the various reading patterns which were informed by the multiplicity of the Arabic dialects raised the issue of correctness of particular reading and orthographical traditions. This led to the characterization of particular models as 'error' and 'fault'.

The involvement of key Islamic authorities, namely 'Uthmān, the third caliph, and 'A'isha, the wife of the Prophet Muhammad in the controversy provided materials for scholars in their discourse on the language, form, and structure of the Holy Book. It also highlighted the gap between the oral and the written forms of the Book, which gap was of theological, philological, and hermeneutical value, and this is the subject matter of the essay.

Key Words: Qur'an, errors, philologists, oral and written forms.

INTRODUCTION

Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) and his *alter ego*, Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) provided the foundational significations of phenomenology as a philosophical concept to include the study of how things appear to us in different forms of conscious experience without our forming hypotheses, theories, or judgements of value about the relationship between what actually exists and what appears (Flood 2009: 455; Netton 2006: 28-30). In this essay, the intention is to apply this connotation of phenomenology in the examination of the ideational significance of the term *laḥn* in the oral and written modes of Qur'anic rendition, on the basis of anecdotal and documentary materials afforded by informed discourse among the early generations of scholars.

One of the important features from which the uniqueness of the Qur'ān derives is the canonical, or rather, the orthodox belief among the faithful that the Book is the eternal and uncreated word of God, for which reason it is not

liable to errors or mistakes of whatever sort. In the Our'an itself are several references to the sanctity and error free nature of the Book (See, for example, Qur'ān 41:42; 15:9). There is also no lack of reference to the divine responsibility for ensuring the collection, preservation and proper recitation of the Holy text (Qur'ān 75:17). However, the fissiparous community of the early Muslims was created not least by the controversy over the status, nature, and inimitability of the Book. This is a well known fact, and has indeed been treated exhaustively in existing studies, for which reason we may not allow it to detain us here. Suffice it to say, however, that a sustained and an enduring controversy over the correct reading of the Holy text, largely engendered by the multiplicity of the dialects of the reading faithful, was almost as old as the Book itself. But once the Scripture had to be consigned into writing, and this was not altogether uncommon even at the time of the Prophet Muhammad, the question of correct transcription of the text raised issues of theological and philological dimensions, particularly in relation to the probability or otherwise of incorrect rendition of the Holy text, and indeed of its consequence(s).

Verbal Qur'ān

That the Holy Book was primarily meant to be read is best established by the word Qur'an, the most popular name by which the Scripture is known. The fact that it is equally referred to as al-Kitāb, equally underscores the significance of its written form. The importance of reading and writing skills in a pre-literate society such as Arabia in which the Qur'an was revealed assumed an exceedingly remarkable value because of the predominance of orality at that point in time (Macdonald 2009). The fact that variation or lack of uniformity in the reading mode was perceived as a drawback that detracts from the sublimity of the Divine word is illustrated in a number of anecdotes, 'Abd Allāh b. Mas'ud (d. circa 33/653) complained to the Prophet Muhammad about a disciple who was reciting some expressions in the Holy Book in a way other than the one in which he, 'Abd Allah, had learned from the Prophet. The latter requested to know how both read the expressions in question. Once he heard it, the Prophet retorted: "Both of you are correct in your reading, do not disagree; those before you perished for engaging in similar controversies" (Ibn Hanbal, 1958: VI: 5). Reports about variations in the reading of the text of the Holy Book, even in the canonical prayers (salāt) are widely documented as occurring among the companions of the Prophet. A very good illustration is seen in the encounter between 'Umar b. al-Khattāb (d. 24/644) and Abū al-Dardā'. The latter had travelled to Medina and read to 'Umar a passage from the Qur'an as follows:

Idh ja'ala lladhīna kafarū fī qulūbihimu al-hamiyyah . . . wa-law hamaytum kamā hamaw la-fasada l-masjidu l-harām . . . (Qur'ān 48: 26).

'Umar was surprised about this unfamiliar reading and requested to know on whose authority it was recited as such. Ubaī b. Ka'b (d. 21/642), who had quoted the Prophet as his authority, was cited. However, when Zayd b. Thābit (d. 34/655) was consulted, he read the verse in line with the familiar text now found in available codices (Sijistānī, 1936: 155-56). These variations were not regarded as substantial or essential errors, but rather, as acceptable forms of recitation; after all the Qur'an is reported to have been revealed in seven different, albeit not contradictory, modes of reading (sab'at ahruf) (Ibn Hanbal, 1958: VI: 126-27; Bukhārī, 1985: hadith 513 & 514). According to Juynboll, the highly formalized seven different readings of the Our'an are to be interpreted as a number of ways of placing, or deleting variable diacritics and vowels in verbs and nouns, especially in their endings, or the metathesis of letters, whole words, or phrases. (Juynboll, 2002: II, 385-6; Diouk, 2005; Versteegh, 1993). It is then safe to assume that the term *lahn*, one the earliest significations of which was incorrectness or error, became closely associated with the variant readings of the Qur'an in its oral and verbal mode of rendition. At a later period when the science of proper recitation of the Qur'an was formalized as tajwīd, specifically from the third/ninth-century, reading the Qur'an without observing the rules of this science was considered a form of lahn (Suyūtī, 1935: II, 100).

But since the text of the Book was consigned to both memory and writing right from the early stage, the drawbacks often associated with the art of writing in its rudimentary and crude form, which were the lots of Arabic in the seventh-century anyway, came into play once a standard copy of the Holy Book was to be produced as the official and orthodox vulgate, and this will be clearly demonstrated in what follows.

Scriptural Qur'ān

It was said above that the preservation of the Holy Book from inception was both in the oral and written forms, the imperfections inherent in the latter notwithstanding. Two key events promoted the need for a standard, documentary, and complete copy of the Qur'ān to be in place shortly after the demise of the Prophet Muḥammad. Many of those who had memorized the Qur'ān fell in the wars against the apostates and false claimants to prophetship after Muḥammad. It was then decided that a documentary copy of the Holy Scripture should be in place in order to preserve the spiritual legacy of the community. This was the genesis of the first and complete codex of the Qur'ān, and this was achieved during the caliphate of Abū Bakr (d. 13/634) (Bukhārī, 1985: hadith 509; Nagel, 1998). It is believed that the codex prepared by Zayd established the consonantal text (*rasm*) of the Holy Book, albeit without the

¹ Bukhārī, (1985), 'Bāb unzila l-Qur'ān 'alā sab'at aḥruf'

² Bukhārī, (1985), 'Bāb Jam' al-Qur'ān'.

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diacritical marks and vowels which had to be incorporated at a later period (Leehmuis, 2001: 348). By the time of 'Uthmān (d. 36/656) the third caliph, however, the need to have official copies in the provinces became inevitable for practical and strategic purposes (Abbott 1939: 45-58). 'Uthmān gave the responsibility for producing copies of the Qur'ān to a committee headed by Zayd b. Thābit with a firm instruction that in the event of any disagreement over the correct transcription of the Holy text, the idiom of the Quraysh, the tribe of the Prophet, should be adopted, insofar as the Scripture was revealed in their dialect, or rather, in their "manner of speech", (Fr. parler, German: Redeweise) which was considered superior to others by virtue of their distance from non-Arabic speaking settlements. (Gilliot and Larcher 2003: 112). ³

Once this ductus was completed and presented to 'Uthmān he is reported to have reacted by saying 'I can see some error (laḥn) in the consonantal text (musḥaf), and this (I hope) the Arabs will rectify through their reading patterns' (inna fī l-musḥafi laḥnan fa-sa-tuqīmuhu l-'Arab bi-alsinatihā) (Farrā', n. d: II, 183). ⁴ The discourse on the hiatus in the written and oral forms of the Qur'ān is almost as old as the history of the scripture itself among the Muslims, but the consideration of textual deviations as a form of error was a later development which arose out of divisive recitational multiplicities and the imperfect, if not the highly defective, state of Arabic script as at the time "the Uthmanic vulgate", to borrow from Brunschvig, was being introduced. (Brunschvig, 2001: 285). Nevertheless, the consonantal paradigm established by this recension was generally accepted as the textus receptus throughout the Islamic empire at that time.

Issues concerning the orality of the Holy text and indeed the morphology of the Qur'an had engaged the attention of the scholars from Islamic antiquity. Early grammarians and exegetes took interest in explaining or rationalising awkward and seemingly deviant idioms or forms by recourse to a variety of grammatical modes of analysis, all in an attempt to establish some regularity of form, structure, and meaning for the scripture (Talmon, 2002; Versteegh, 1993). No less an interest was shown in issues that were considered to be verging on philological drawbacks in the divine text (Burton, 1988a). The characterization of consonantal variations as error is of both pragmatic and theological significance. Among later authorities, for example, some were of the opinion that it was inconceivable that 'Uthmān, given his enviable position and contribution to Islam, would have left such a crucial issue that touched on the very sublimity of the Holy Book to the whims and caprices of reciters. To this I intend to return later. However, it should be understood that the continual standardization of the written form of the Arabic language during the

³ See also Ibn al-Athīr, (1963), IV, 241; Ibn al- Jazarī, (1946) I, 7; Bukhārī, (1985), 'Kitab Fanā'il al-Qur'ān' ḥadīth 507.

⁴ See also *Mu'jam*, (1982), I, 54; Ibn Qutayba, (1954), 20; Bāqillānī, (1986), I, 362.

succeeding periods necessarily made the defects of the script as identified with the Qur'an intolerable for a people whose reliance was now more on the written text than on oral tradition (Jones, 1983: 241-42). I have discussed elsewhere in some detail the morpho-semantic significations of the term *laḥn* in relation to the oral delivery of the Qur'an, the hadith of the Prophet, the routine idiom of the Arab, and indeed in relation to the literary and rhetorical usages in Arabic for which reason it may be ignored here (Sanni, 2009).5 However, it is the designation of variations and deviations in the consonantal and scriptural Qur'an as error and fault that is of interest to us here, given the intensity of controversy and division it generated among the religious scholars and the generality of Muslims.

'Uthman's designation of consonantal deviations as lahn provoked and stimulated a lively discussion among religious scholars and authors. The most illustrious and outstanding contributor to this debate was probably Abū Bakr Muhammad b. al-Tayyib al-Bāqillānī (d. 403/1013). In one of his defences of the Qur'ān against speculative theologians and heresiographers, he dedicates a whole chapter to this subject, using the statement attributed to 'Uthman above as one of his points of departure. The chapter is entitled "Bab al-Kalām 'alayhim fimā ta'anū bihī 'alā l-Qur'ān wa-na ḥalūhu min al-laḥni'' (Chapter on Argument against them concerning their assault on Qur'an and that which they attributed to it of error) (Bagillānī, 1986, I: 361-91). Al-Bāgillānī's apologia for the sanctity of the Holy text and his robust argument against the allegation of lahn or corruption of the consonantal text offers a fascinating material in intellectual disputation, and I intend to subject it to a more analytical discussion at a later date. However, the specifics of the alleged faults or errors to which the observation of 'Uthman refers is provided at some other levels, and this will engage our attention in the next section.

Between 'Uthmān and 'Ā'isha: Illustrations of Errors

It is reported by al-Farra' (d. 207/822) in a chain of authorities going back to 'Ā'isha (d. 58/678), the wife of the Prophet Muhammad that she was asked concerning the correctness of the reading of the verse: "lākinni l-rāsikhuna fī l-'ilmi... wa-l-muqīmīna l-ṣalāta... " (Q. 4: 163); and of the verse: "inna hādhāni la-sāḥirāni . . . " (Q. 20: 63) to which she reacted "O my cousin, this was an error from the scribe(s) [copyists]". Al-Farra goes further to state that Abū 'Amr b. al-'Ala' (d. 154/771) [as did 'Isa b. 'Umar] read the last example as "inna hādhayni la-sāḥirāni", although he, al-Farrā', would prefer not to go against the (common) text. Other readings of the verse given by him are "in hādhāni la-sāḥirāni"; "hādhāni sāḥirāni", the latter is attributed to 'Abd Allāh b. Mas'ūd; and "in dhāni illā sāhirāni", which is attributed to Ubaī. Concluding,

⁵ See also, my paper entitled "The Discourse on lahn in Arabic Philological and Literary Traditions", Middle Eastern Literatures, forthcoming.

al- Farrā' states that the popular reading with him and his ilk, and here he was referring to other authoritative *qurrā*', namely, Nāfi' (d. 169/785), Ibn 'Āmir (d. 118/736), Ḥamza al-Kisā'ī (d. 189/804), Abū Ja'far, Ya'qūb, and Khalaf, is to read the emphatic particle as "*inna*" and the demonstrative pronoun as *hādhāni* or *hādhayni*. (al-Farrā', n. d: II, 183-84). Ibn Mujāhid (d. 334/945) confirms this same reading in respect of the first three authorities mentioned here (Ibn Mujāhid, 1972: 419). According to al-Kisā'ī, and in this he was followed by al-Akhfash al-Awsat (d. 215/820), the clan of al-Ḥārith b. Ka'b read with the emphatic "inna", while the reading attributed to Ibn Mas'ūd was "*in hādhāni sāḥirāni*", as indicated above (Kisā'ī, 1998: 193; Akhfash, 1990: II, 443-44). The same anecdote in which 'Ā'isha is the main protagonist is also given by Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889) on the authority of Ishāq b. Rāhawayhi (d. 238/852), where the third of the illustrations of the "scribe's error" highlighted by 'Ā'isha is given as, "*inna lladhīna āmanū*. . *wa-l-ṣābi'ūna*... (Q5: 69) (Ibn Qutayba, 1954: 20; al-Bāqillānī, 1986: I, 368).

John Burton has given a brilliant discussion on the contrariety of responses and elaborations by exegetes and philologists in regard to Q20: 63, and indeed the hermeneutical and critical dimensions the variant readings have generated in the intellectual discourse, for which reason we may leave this aside (Burton, 1988b; Baalabaki, 1985). However, the critical issue here is the fact that if the report and comment attributed to 'A'isha is taken at its face value and, for analysis purposes, taken as genuine, it will simply show that there was an early recognition of an hiatus between the oral and written modes of the Holy text. Also, if the comment attributed to 'Uthman is equally taken as genuine and applied to the specific illustrations allegedly adduced by 'A'isha, it will then be safe to assume that there was a tacit acceptance of the pragmatic reality that whatever imperfections were interpretable as errors in the consonantal Qur'ān, including those that verged on grammatical infractions, were amenable to correction in the oral form, as long as this was believed to be the principal mode of delivery and utilisation of the divine text. But if the insights afforded by al-Ansarī's efforts, namely, his al-Difā' 'an al-Qur'ān didd al-nahwiyyīn wa-lmustashriqin (1973), and Nazariyyat al-nahw al-Qur'ani (1984), are anything to go by (Gilliot and Larcher, 2003: 118), it will be possible to hazard the conjecture that efforts at projecting a particularity in regard to the idiom, structure and indeed the grammar of the Qur'an in a way that sets it somewhat apart from the routine Arabic have had some roots in a relative antiquity. But then the Scripture was not an isolated linguistic phenomenon, and it is in this respect that the spirited arguments and disputations of both the proponents and opponents of the "errors" in consonantal Qur'an must be contextualized.

The Intervention by al-Dānī

Given the state of imperfection of the Arabic script in terms of its orthographical finesse and the emerging grammatical tradition which embraced deviations and varieties as a matter of rule, it should not be surprising that both the proponents and opponents of errors in consonantal Qur'ān would elicit a stimulating debate in the intellectual discourse of the medieval period.

Among the most outstanding contributors to the discussion on this subject as highlighted by the comment of caliph 'Uthman, Abu 'Umar 'Uthman b. Sa'īd al-Dānī (371-444/98-1053) stands out.⁶ He challenges the veracity of the report altogether. In his view, its credibility is questionable on many grounds. First, the chain of transmitters is marked by some mix-up (takhlīt) while the report, apart from betraying some instability (idtirāb) in the wording, is anachronistic (mursal), insofar as Ya'mur and 'Akrama, the immediate tradents from 'Uthman according to the text, neither met the caliph nor heard from him. More importantly, the bland nature of the text which seems to impugn the integrity of 'Uthman further makes it improbable that such a statement would have emanated from him. Here was a man, according to al-Dānī, who took it upon himself the task disseminating an authentic, authorized, and canonical written form of the Holy Book with the collaboration of other notable companions. How conceivable was it that he could have left what was interpretable as an error (lahn) and mistake (khata') in the consonantal text for those after him to rectify? Assuming the statement was actually made by 'Uthman, argues al-Dani, what the caliph meant by lahn must have been a reference to particular ways of reciting certain expressions, (that is, *lahan* Cf. Sanni 2009) rather than errors in orthography (rasm). This is because the written forms of many expressions are different from the recited forms, and sometimes the written form may verge on negating the intended meaning, for which he gives, among other examples from the Qur'ān, the expression: aw lā adhbahannahu (or I will certainly slaughter it (O27: 21), where the emphatic particle lam is written as a particle of negation $l\bar{a}$ which, if read in that form would mean (or I will certainly NOT slaughter it). Reading the emphatic particle with a long vowel, argues al-Dānī, will obviously be an error (lahn), although the written form with the long vowel, its inherent faultiness notwithstanding, is accepted as authoritative and standard. What 'Uthmān meant therefore, concludes al- Dānī, was that those who might find it difficult to unravel this conundrum after him would be able to resolve it by recourse to the native Arabs in whose language the text was revealed and were familiar with the peculiarities of its rasm (Dānī, 1932: 124-25).

In regard to the specific illustrations highlighted and commented upon by ' \bar{A} 'isha at the instance of 'Urwa, al-D \bar{a} n \bar{i} argues that the latter was not inquiring about the letters or vocables of the *rasm*, which are subject to addition or elision, but rather, about the variant readings of those expressions, which variant readings are endorsed anyway in the generally ordained reading patterns of the Holy Book. These can by no means be

⁶ About him see, al-Ziriklī, (1997), IV, 206.

considered as errors or faults. The reason for 'Urwa's designation of the variant readings (hurūf/ahruf) as lahn and 'Ā'isha's characterization of the seemingly awkward written form (rasm) as khata' is by way of employing the elasticity (ittisā') of the language, which allows terms to be freely used for a variety of cognate phenomena (Dānī, 1932: 126-27). He submits further that some have, however, interpreted 'Ā'isha's allegation of khata' against the copyists to mean that she faulted their choice of the infelicitous at the expense of the more appropriate from among the canonical seven reading patterns (ay akhtaū fī 'khtiyāri alawlā min al-ahrufi al-sab'ah), not that what they wrote was actually faulty (Dānī, 1932: 128). It may be remarked that some have already argued that the highly formalized seven reading patterns relate only to the reading modes rather than the written form (Mu'jam, I: 13). Perhaps it may not be amiss to mention here that the parallelism between pen and tongue as instruments of communication (Gully 2008: 65) justified the equation between "errors" associated with speaking or recitation, which came to be designated as lahn, and "errors" identified with writing as khata', and this thinking became fashionable in medieval intellectual discourse, as I intend to demonstrate in an independent study at a later date. The variety of the reading mode was inevitable as long as there were various members of the new Islamic commonwealth with dialects other than that of the Ouraysh (Ibn al-Jazarī, 1946: I, 21; Pretzl, 1934). In essence, the controversy over the characterization of what were considered as infelicities, either in the reading patterns or in the consonantal text, involved matters in interpretation, transcription, and recitation rather than issues of the substance of the text itself

CONCLUSION

In the foregoing, I have tried to examine the varieties of responses to the plethora of issues engendered by the practical utilisation of the Holy text of Islam, the Qur'ān, either in its written form as a consonantal ductus (mushaf), or as a reading material for religious, educational, and other spiritual purposes in the context of the multiplicity of geographical and social dialects of the Arab reciters, the immediate recipients of the divine message. It is obvious that some took the pietistic view that whatever might have occurred in the oral or written modes of the Scripture which may be perceived or viewed as errors should be left as they are; a skein of deference to the Scripture, as long as such deviation can be accommodated by the broad principle of qirā'āt, the highly formalized reading patterns. 'Uthmān the caliph and indeed some of the scholars after him, for example, al-Farrā', stand out in this perspective, as can be gleaned from our analysis so far. In fact, the caliph is reported to have given a specific instruction against any attempt at correcting these 'deviations', as he is quoted to have said: "...lā tughayyiruhā, fa-inna l-'Araba sa-tughayyiruhā..." (Do not amend it, for

the Arabs will). (Mu'jam, I, 54). In point of fact, al-Farra and others who shared his attitude often proffer plausible and rational explanations, even for reading or written forms that appear grammatically deviant "in order not to go against the Holy Book" (Kinberg, 1996: 741) Others on the other hand, for example, Abū 'Amr b. al-'Alā', felt strongly that such "errors" must be changed to conform to the rules. But then a closer look at what is considered an error or a fault clearly raises issues of choice and preference, and indeed of a fundamental perception and acceptance of a hiatus between the consonantal text and the oral mode, as I have tried to demonstrate in the foregoing. A classic illustration of this can be seen in one of the early literate reciters of the Our'an, 'Asim al-Jahdarī (d. 128/745). Whenever he read, for example, the three illustrations in respect of which 'Ā'isha posited her theory of khata', he would recite them in a way different from the way he would write them. For example, he would read "inna hādhayni. (Q20: 63); "wa-l-muqīmūna l-salāta (Q4: 163); "... wa-lsabi'īna... (Q5: 69). He would also read "... wa-l-sābirūna fi-l-ba'sā'i... (Q2: 177). He would, however, write these as "in hādhāni.", "wa-l-muqīmīna..." wal-sābi' sabi'ūna...; and... wa-l-sābirūna... (Ibn Qutayba, 1954: 37). The distinction between the written and the spoken text of the Holy Book was not peculiar to a few individuals; it was general and commonplace. Evidence of this distinction is also found in the discussion among the avant garde in Qur'anic scholarship For example, Abū 'Amr, 'Īsā b. 'Umar, and Yūnus b. Habīb (d. 182/798) are reported to have said that whereas one reads "inna hādhayni lasāḥirāni", one writes "in hādhāni..." (Abū 'Ubaida, 1962: II, 21-22). The reason for this is not far-fetched: it is ultimately attributable to the general state of the development of the Arabic script at that point in time, and indeed to the convention among the writing class in regard to the style of transcription of the Arabic letters and phonemes (Abbott, 1939: 17-44). According to al-Sijistānī (d. 316/928), the early authorities considered alif and $v\bar{a}$ to be the same in speech, hence the oral and the written form in Q20: 63 are the same (Sijistānī, 1936: 104). The characterization of deviance in the written form as "lahn by the copyist/scribe", which statement is attributed to 'A'isha and understood in the negative light as an admission of error in the consonantal text should therefore be interpreted in the larger context of the meanings and nuances of the lemma as afforded by the totality of the Arabic language and its terminological repertoire. The word lahn has a number of denotations and connotations, as I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere (Sanni, 2009), and the view that the term could only be applied to incorrect use of grammar and not to the wrong choice of word can by no means be sustained (Gully 2008: 88), especially in regard to Qur'ānic tradition. In the context under consideration however, the employment of the word is better understood as referring to a particular pattern of reading which finds an expression in a particular pattern of writing among several available patterns in both modes, and should therefore not be understood in the opprobrious sense of fault and error (*Mu'jam*: I, 57).

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⁷ Compare Mu'jam, I, 57: "... fa-ya'nī bi-l-laḥni al-qirā'ah wa-l-lughah, ya'nī annahā lughatu l-ladhī katabahā wa-qirā'atuhū. Wa-fihā qirā'atun ukhrā."

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