The greatest achievement of ʿUthmān
uniting the Ummah with a single Muḥāf

adapted from
ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān: His Life and Times
by
Dr. Ali M. Sallabi

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The greatest achievement of ʿUthmān
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Stages in the writing down of the Holy Qurʿān

1. The first stage at the time of Rasūl

It is definitely proven that the Rasūl of Allah enjoined the writing down of the Qurʿān that was revealed to him, and it is proven that he had a scribe or scribes who wrote down the waḥī (revelation). Zayd ibn Thābit acquired the nickname of Kātib al-Nabī or Scribe of Rasūl because he specialised in writing down the waḥī. Al-Bukhārī entitled a chapter in The Book of the Virtues of the Qurʿān (in his Ṣaḥīḥ): Chapter on the Scribes of Rasūl, in which he quoted two aḥādīth:

The first narrates that Abū Bakr said to Zayd: You used to write down the waḥī for the Rasūl of Allah.

The second was narrated from al-Barā’ who said:

When the verse:

لَا يَسْتَوِی الْقَاعِدُوْنَ مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِیْنَ
Not equal are those of the believers who sit [at home]...

was revealed, Rasūl said:

أَدْعُ لِیَ زَیْدًا وَلْیَجِئْنِيْ بِاللّوْحِ وَالدَّوَاةِ
Call Zayd for me, and let him bring the tablet and inkpot and (camel’s)

1 Al-Bukhārī, Kitāb Fadā’il al-Qurʿān, no. 4686
2 Sūrah al-Nisā': 95
shoulder-blade, or the (camel’s) shoulder-blade and inkpot.¹

Rasūl also used to have the Qur’ān written down in Makkah, before the hijrah. One of those who wrote for him was ‘Abd Allāh ibn Sa’d ibn Abī al-Sarḥ, then he apostatised, then he became Muslim again in the year of the Conquest. That is a well-known story that we have discussed elsewhere. It is well known that the four Rightly Guided Khulafā’ were literate men, so perhaps they used to write down the Qur’ān in Makkah. Another indication that the Qur’ān was written down in Makkah is the story of how ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb became Muslim, when he entered upon his sister and she had a sheet in her hand on which Sūrah Ṭāhā was written. Allah has stated in the Qur’ān that it is compiled in pages, in the verse:

ऱसूलः मः लल्लः येत्लुः सूच्हा मः मः तेहः

A Messenger (Muḥammad) from Allah, reciting purified pages [the Qur’ān].²

When the Rasūl of Allah passed away, the entire Qur’ān was written down, but it was not all put together in one place. It was written on palm leaves and flat stones, and was memorised in the hearts of men, but although it was preserved on pages and in people’s hearts, Jibra’il still reviewed the Qur’ān once every year, and he reviewed it with him twice in the year in which he passed away.³

It may be that Rasūl did not compile the Qur’ān in a Muṣḥaf because he was still expecting some abrogation of some of its rulings or recitation. When the revelation ended with his death, Allah guided the Rightly Guided Khulafā’ to do that, in fulfilment of His true promise to this ummah to protect it.⁴

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¹ Al-Bukhārī, Kitāb Tafsīr al-Qurʿān, no. 4593, Ibn Abī Shaybah 4/232 (19511)
² Sūrah al-Bayyinah: 2
³ Al-Bukhārī, Kitāb Fadāʿil al-Qur’ān, no. 4998
2. The second stage at the time of Abū Bakr

Among the Muslim martyrs who fell at al-Yamāmah were many of those who had memorised the Qurʾān. As a result of that, Abū Bakr, in consultation with ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, compiled the Qurʾān by collecting it from the skins, bones and palm leaves on which it was written, as well as from the hearts of men.\(^1\) Abū Bakr gave this important mission to the great Ṣaḥābī Zayd ibn Thābit al-Anṣārī.

Zayd ibn Thābit narrated:

Abū Bakr sent for me because so many had been killed at al-Yamāmah, and I found ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb with him too. Abū Bakr said: “ʿUmar came to me and said: ‘Too many of the reciters of the Qurʾān were killed on the day of al-Yamāmah, and I am afraid that many more reciters will be killed in other battles, and much of the Qurʾān will be lost. I think you should issue orders that the Qurʾān be compiled.’ I said to ʿUmar: ‘How can I do something that the Rasūl of Allah did not do?’ ʿUmar said: ‘By Allah, this is a good thing.’ He kept pushing the issue until Allah opened my heart to that to which He had opened ʿUmar’s heart, and I thought of it as ʿUmar did. You are a wise young man, and we trust you. You used to write down the waḥī for the Rasūl of Allah, so seek out the Qurʾān and compile it.” Zayd said: “By Allah, if they had ordered me to move a mountain it would not have been a heavier burden than that which they ordered me to do of compiling the Qurʾān.”

I sought out the Qurʾān from the palm-leaves, flat rocks, men’s hearts, animal skins and shoulder blades (on which it had been preserved), until I found the last part of Sūrah al-Tawbah with Abū Khuzaymah al-Anṣārī, and

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1 Ḥurūb al-Riddah wa Bināʾ al-Dawlah al-Islamiyyah, by Aḥmad Saʿīd, p. 145
2 This is referring to the battle of al-Yamāmah against the liar Musaylamah and his supporters. (Author)
3 This may be understood as meaning that he did not compile the Qurʾān in a Muṣḥaf. (Author)
4 These are the qualities which made Zayd more suited than others for this task. (Author)
5 i.e., from the things that was with me and with others. (Author)
I did not find it with anyone else:

لَقَدْ جَآءَكُمْ رَسُوْلٌ مِّنْ اَنْفُسِكُمْ عَزِیْزٌ عَلَیْهِ مَا عَنِتُّمْ حَرِیْصٌ عَلَیْكُمْ بِالْمُؤْمِنِیْنَ رَءُوْفٌ رَّحِیْمٌ

Verily, there has come unto you a Messenger [Muḥammad ] from amongst yourselves. It grieves him that you should receive any injury or difficulty. He [Muḥammad ] is anxious over you; for the believers [he is] full of pity, kind, and merciful.¹

until the end of the Sūrah.

The pages were kept with Abū Bakr during his lifetime, until he passed away, then with ʿUmar until he passed away, then with Ḥafṣah bint ʿUmar .²

From this second stage of the compilation of the Qur‘ān we may sum up the following:

a. That the compilation of the Holy Qur‘ān came about as the result of fear that it might be lost due to the deaths of many of the reciters during the riddah wars (wars of apostasy). This indicates that the reciters and scholars at that time were in the forefront of taking action in jihād to support Islam and the Muslims with their ideas, conduct and swords, and they were the best nation ever brought forth for mankind, so all those who come after them should follow their example.

b. The compilation of the Qur‘ān was based on the principle of al-maslaḥah al-mursalah. Nothing is more indicative of that than the words of ʿUmar to Abū Bakr , when he asked him; “How can we do something that the Rasūl of Allah did not do?” ʿUmar said: “It is a good thing.” In some reports it is narrated that he said: “By Allah it is a good thing and it is in the interests of the Muslims. This is the same answer that Abū Bakr

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¹ Sūrah al-Tawbah: 128
² Al-Bukhāri, no. 4986
gave to Zayd ibn Thābit when he asked the same question.

Whether the report which mentions the interests of the Muslims is sound or not, describing it as a good thing implies the same meaning, which is that the Muslims’ best interests in compiling the Qur’ān was initially based on al-maslaḥah al-mursalah. Then there was consensus on this point after they all agreed to it by approving of it explicitly or by implication. This indicates that al-maslaḥah al-mursalah may be used as the basis for consensus on sharī rulings, as is established in the books of ʿuṣūl al-fiqh (basic principles of jurisprudence).

c. This incident also shows us how the Ṣaḥābah used to discuss matters in a calm atmosphere in which love and respect prevailed. Their aim was to achieve that which would serve the interests of all the Muslims, and they would adopt the correct view and open their hearts to it after discussing it and reaching the conclusions. Once they were convinced of the opinion, they would defend it as if it had been their own opinion from the outset. In this spirit it was possible to reach consensus about many rulings that were subject to ijtihād.¹

What were the basic qualifications that enabled Zayd ibn Thābit to undertake this mission?

Abū Bakr chose Zayd ibn Thābit for this important mission because he saw that he had the basic qualities for doing such a task, namely:

a. He was young, as his age was 21 years, so he had the energy to do what was asked of him.

b. He was more qualified, because he had more knowledge in addition to the wisdom that Allah had bestowed upon him.

¹ ʿAl-ʿIjtihād fi al-Fiqh al-Islāmī, by ʿAbd al-Salām al-Sulaymānī, p. 127
c. He was trustworthy and was not under any kind of suspicion, so his work would be readily accepted by the people, as they had confidence in him.

d. He had been a scribe of the waḥī, so he had prior experience in this field; he was not a stranger to this work.¹

e. In addition to that, he was one of the four who had compiled the Qurʾān at the time of the Rasūl  الرسول al-Rasūl. It was narrated that Qatādah said: I asked Anas ibn Mālik al-Anṣārī: Who compiled the Qurʾān at the time of Rasūl  الرسول al-Rasūl? He said: Four men, all of whom were from among the Anṣār: Ubayy ibn Kaʿb, Muʿādh ibn Jabal, Zayd ibn Thābit, and Abū Zayd.²

As for the method that Zayd  الزائد al-Zayd followed in compiling the Qurʾān, he did not accept anything of the Qurʾān unless it had been written down in the presence of Rasūl  الرسول al-Rasūl and had been memorised by some of the Ṣaḥābah. He would not accept memorisation unless it had also been written down, lest there be some mistake or error in the memorisation.

Moreover, he did not accept anything that anyone brought unless he also had two witnesses who could testify that this written material had been written down in the presence of the Rasūl of Allah  الرسول al-Rasūl and that it was one of the recitations in which the Qurʾān had been revealed.³ Based on this method, Zayd  الزائد al-Zayd continued to compile the Qurʾān, checking it with precision and caution.⁴

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1 Al-Tafawwq wa al-Najābah ‘alā Nahj al-Ṣaḥābah by Hamād al-ʿAjamī, p. 73
2 Siyar Aʿlām al-Nubalā’, by Imām al-Dhahabī, 2/431
3 Al-Tafawwq wa al-Najābah ‘alā Nahj al-Ṣaḥābah, p. 74
4 Al-Inshirāh wa Rafʿ al-Dīq bi Sīrah Abī Bakr al-Ṣiddīq, by al-Sallābi, p. 206
The difference between that which was written at the time of Rasūl and that which was written at the time of Abū Bakr

The difference between that which was written at the time of Rasūl and that which was written at the time of Abū Bakr is that the Qurʾān was written down at the time of Rasūl but it was scattered on pages, tablets, palm-leaves, stones and other materials, and the Sūrahs were not all compiled in one place. As for that which was done at the time of Abū Bakr, the Qurʾān was written on pages with every Sūrah having its verses put in order, in pages that followed the order of the verses as they had memorised them from the Rasūl of Allah. So the mission of Zayd ibn Thābit was to write what had been written at the time of Rasūl on pages, putting every Sūrah on a page with its verses in the order in which they had been revealed.¹

3. The third stage in the compilation of the Qurʾān at the time of ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān

The motive for compiling the Qurʾān at the time of ʿUthmān

It was narrated from Anas ibn Mālik that Ḥudhayfah ibn al-Yamān came to ʿUthmān when he was on campaign with the people of Syria and the people of Iraq in the conquest of Armenia and Azerbaijan. Ḥudhayfah was very alarmed by the differences in their recitation, so Ḥudhayfah said to ʿUthmān:

O Amīr al-Muʾminīn, save this Ummah before they differ concerning the Book as the Jews and the Christians did.

ʿUthmān sent word to Hafṣah saying:

Send us the manuscript so that we may make copies of it, then we will return it to you.

¹ Al-Madīnah al-Nabawiyyah Fajr al-Islam wa al-ʿAṣr al-Rāshidi, 2/241
So Ḥafṣah sent it to ʿUthmān, and he ordered Zayd ibn Thābit, ʿAbd Allāh ibn Zubayr, Saʿīd ibn al-ʿĀṣ and ʿAbd al-Raḥmān ibn al-Ḥārith ibn Hishām to make copies of it.

ʿUthmān said to the three Qurayshī men:

If you and Zayd ibn Thābit differ concerning anything of the Qurʾān, then write it in the dialect of Quraysh, for it was revealed in their dialect.

So they did that, until they had made many copies, then ʿUthmān returned the manuscript to Ḥafṣah, and he sent a copy of the muṣḥaf to every region and ordered that all other Qurʾānic material, whether it was manuscripts or entire copies, be burnt.¹

We learn a number of things from this ṣaḥīḥ ḥadīth, including the following:

a. The reason that motivated ʿUthmān to compile the Qurʾān, even though it had been compiled in the proper order in the manuscript of Abū Bakr, was the differences between the Muslim reciters in their recitations, which could have led to great confusion about the Book of Allah, which is the basis of sharīʿah and the pillar of religion, the social, political, and moral foundation of the ummah. Some of them even said to one another, my recitation is better than yours.

Ḥudhayfah was alarmed by that, and he hastened to speak of his concern to the khalīfah and leader of the Muslims, asking him to save the ummah before the differences among them went out of control and became very serious, and the Qurʾānic text got tampered with and distorted, as happened among the Jews and Christians where each community was divided against itself with regard to its Book.

b. This Ṣaḥīḥ ḥadīth definitely states that the noble Qurʾān was compiled in a

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¹ Al-Bukhārī, Kitāb Fadāʿil al-Qurʿān, no. 4987
manuscript that was put together and sewn with one thread. The ummah was unanimously agreed that what was in this manuscript was the Qur’ān as it had been received from Rasūl the last time it was reviewed with Jibra’īl, and that this manuscript had remained in the care of the first Khalīfah Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq, then after him it passed into the care of the second khalīfah ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb.

Then when ‘Umar knew he was dying, he did not appoint anyone in particular to become khalīfah after him, rather he left the matter to the shūra committee composed of people with whom the Rasūl of Allah, was pleased when he passed away, and he left instructions for the manuscript to be kept with his daughter Ḥafṣah, the Mother of the Believers. ‘Uthmān relied on that manuscript when he compiled the Qur’ān, and from it he transcribed his “official” Muṣḥaf.

He issued orders to four of the reciters among the Ṣaḥābah who were famous for their precision in memorising the Qur’ān, their knowledge of the various recitations, their skill in reciting and their understanding of the Qur’ān and its language - three Qurayshīs and one Anṣārī who was Zayd ibn Thābit, who had undertaken the first compilation at the time of Abū Bakr at the suggestion of ‘Umar. According to some reports, the ones whom ‘Uthmān ordered to write the Muṣḥaf were twelve men, among them Ubay ibn Kaʿb and others from among Quraysh and the Anṣār.¹

We may understand from this that the conquests at the time of ‘Uthmān were undertaken with the permission and on the command of the khalīfah, and that military decision-making was done in Madīnah, and the Islamic provinces were all subject to the command of the khalīfah ‘Uthmān at that time. Rather there is evidence that there was consensus

¹ ‘Uthmān ibn ‘Affān, by Ṣādiq ‘Arjūn, p. 171
among the Ṣaḥābah and Tābi‘īn in all regions, accepting ʿUthmān ʿUthmān I as khalīfah.

The fact that Ḥudhayfah ibn al-Yamān  came to Madīnah to sort out the issue of the people’s dispute about the recitation of Qur’ān indicates that the major reference point for shar‘ī matters was consultation with the khalīfah in Madīnah, and that Madīnah was still the centre for the Sunnah and the place where the fuqahā’ of the Ṣaḥābah were concentrated.¹

Consulting the Ṣaḥābah with regard to the compilation of ʿUthmān

ʿUthmān ʿUthmān I assembled the Muhājirīn and Anṣār and consulted them about this matter, among whom were the prominent figures of the ummah and the leaders and scholars among the Ṣaḥābah, at the head of whom was ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib ʿAlī. ʿUthmān ʿUthmān I presented this issue for discussion to the elite of the ummah and its guided leaders, and they exchanged views and discussed the matter, until he was aware of their views and they were aware of his.

They responded frankly to his views and left no room for doubt in Muslim hearts, and it was clear to people throughout the earth what was the conclusion of their meeting. No dissent was known at that time and no one objected to what they agreed to. The status of the Qur’ān is not something that could be hidden from an ordinary individual, let alone the scholars and a’immah.²

ʿUthmān, ʿUthmān did not introduce an innovation by compiling the Qur’ān, rather that had been done before him by Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq. Similarly, it was not his own idea, rather he did it after consulting the Ṣaḥābah Ṣaḥābah, when they approved of this action and said: What a good idea. They also said: He did well (i.e., in what he did with regard to the Muṣḥafs).³

¹ Al-Madinah an-Nabawiyyah Fajr al-Islam wa al-ʿAṣr al-Rāshidi, 2/244
² ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān, by Ṣādiq Ṣādiq Arjūn, p. 175
³ Fitnah Maqtal ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān, 1/78
Musʿāb ibn Saʿd met the companions of Rasūl  ﷺ, when ʿUthmān  ﷺ burned the muṣḥafs, and he saw that they approved of this action on his part.  

ʿAlī  ﷺ rebuked anyone who criticised ʿUthmān  ﷺ for that and said:

O people, do not go to extremes with regard to ʿUthmān, and do not say anything but good about him, for by Allah he did not do what he did - with regard to the Muṣḥaf - until after he had consulted all of us - i.e., the Ṣaḥābah – and by Allah, if I were the khalīfah I would have done what he has done.

After this consensus of the part of these virtuous people who were among the best of creation on this blessed action, it becomes clear to everyone who is not influenced by whims and desires that every Muslim must approve of and accept this action done by ʿUthmān  ﷺ, by means of which the noble Qurʾān was preserved.

Al-Qurṭubī said in al-Tafsīr:

This action was done by ʿUthmān  ﷺ after he had assembled the Muhājirīn and Anṣār and most of the prominent Muslims, and consulted them about that, and they agreed to compile it on the basis of what was proven to be sound of the well-known recitation that was narrated from Rasūl  ﷺ and they dispensed with all others. They approved of his view, and it was the correct view.
The difference between the compilation of Abū Bakr and the compilation of ʿUthmān

Ibn al-Ṭīn said:

The difference between the compilation of Abū Bakr and the compilation of ʿUthmān is that the compilation of Abū Bakr came about because he was afraid that something of the Qurʾān might be lost with the loss of its bearers, because it had not been compiled in one place. So he compiled it in pages, with the verses of each Sūrah in the proper order, as dictated by Rasūl.

The compilation of ʿUthmān came about because of the variety in recitations, as each person read it in his own dialect, of which there were many. That led to each person saying that the others were wrong, and he was afraid that the matter would get out of control, so he had these manuscripts copied into a single Muṣḥaf, with the Sūrahs in order, and he adopted the dialect of the Quraysh in exclusion to all others, on the grounds that it had been revealed in their dialect, even though that was room for reciting it in other dialects too, so as to ward off hardship from the beginning, as he saw that there was no longer any need for the variant readings, so he limited it to one dialect.

Al-Qāḍī Abū Bakr al-Bāqilānī said:

Abū Bakr did not aim to put the whole Qurʾān together between two covers; rather he aimed to unite them in following the proven recitations that were known from Rasūl and cancel out all others. He forced them to adopt a Muṣḥaf in which there was no change in the order of verses and no commentary written alongside what had been revealed, and no abrogated verses written alongside what had not been abrogated, lest that lead to any corruption or confusion to those who came after them.
Al-Ḥārith al-Muḥāsibī said:

What is well known among the people is that the one who compiled the Qur’ān was ʿUthmān I, but that is not the case; rather ʿUthmān I made the people adhere to one recitation based on the choice made by him and those of the Muhājirīn and Anṣār who were present, when there was the fear that fitnah might result from differences between the people of Iraq and Syria with regard to which dialect should be used when reading Qur’ān. But prior to that, the books containing Qur’ān were readable in all seven dialects in which the Qur’ān had been revealed. The first one to compile it was Abū Bakr I, and ʿAlī I said: If I were to become khalīfah, I would adopt the Muṣḥafs that were written at the time of ʿUthmān I.¹

Al-Qurtubī said:

If it were said: ‘Why did ʿUthmān I compel all the people to adopt his Muṣḥaf when Abū Bakr I had already done that and finished with it? The answer is that ʿUthmān I did not intend to compile the Muṣḥaf do you not see that he sent word to Ḥafṣah Js saying: Send us the manuscript so that we may make copies of it, then we will return it to you. ʿUthmān I only did that because the people had begun to differ in their recitation due to the Ṣaḥābah spreading through different lands. The matter was only getting worse and the disputes about recitation were only becoming more intense. Everyone was adamant that his recitation was correct, and the incident took place between the people of Syria and Iraq, as was narrated by Ḥudhayfah.²

The number of Muṣḥafs that ʿUthmān sent to the regions

When ʿUthmān I finished having the Muṣḥafs copied, he sent a Muṣḥaf to every region, and ordered them to burn every Muṣḥaf that was not in accordance with the Muṣḥaf that he sent out. They differed as to the number of Muṣḥafs that

¹ ʿUthmān ibn ʿAffān, by Ṣādiq ʿArjūn, p. 178
² Al-Jāmiʿ li Aḥkām al-Qurʿān, 1/87
was sent out to the different regions. It was said that there were four, and this is
the view of the majority of scholars. And it was said that there were five, or six, or
seven, or eight. As for the view that there were four, it was said that one was left
in Madīnah and the others were sent to Syria, Kūfah and Basrah.

As for the view that there were five, it was said that one went to each of the places
mentioned, and the fifth was sent to Makkah. As for the view that there were
six, it was said that five were sent to the places mentioned, and they differed
concerning the sixth; it was said that Ṭūthmān ibn ʿAbbās kept it for himself, or that he
sent it to Bahrain. As for the view that there were seven, six went to the places
mentioned, and the seventh was sent to Yemen. As for the view that there were
eight, seven were sent to the places mentioned and the eighth was Ṭūthmān’s copy
that he used to read, and it is the one that he was holding when he was killed.¹

With each Muṣḥaf, Ṭūthmān ibn ʿAbbās sent teachers to teach the people how to read it
in accordance with the way it is written and in accordance with recitations that
are narrated in sound, mutawātir reports. Ṭāb-Allāh ibn al-Sāʿib went with the
Muṣḥaf that went to Makkah; Mughīrah ibn Shihāb went with the Muṣḥaf that
went to Syria; Abu Ṭāb al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī went with the Muṣḥaf that went to
Kūfah; Ṭāʾīr ibn Qays went with the Muṣḥaf that went to Basrah, and Ṭūthmān
told Zayd ibn Thābit to teach the people using the Muṣḥaf that remained in
Madīnah.²

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¹ Adwa’ al-Bayān fi Tārīkh al-Qurʿān, p. 77
² op cit., p. 78