

Are There Scribal Errors In The Qur'an?

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Assalamu-alaikum wa rahamatullahi wa barakatuhu:

In the following article, we contemplate giving some clues in answer to the strange claims made by Mr. Newton at:

<http://debate.domini.org/newton/scribal.html>

In short, the author of that page notices rightfully that the spelling of many words in the Holy Qur'an does not match their spelling in **modern literature**. He wishes to prove that the Qur'an is not miraculous and uses scribal peculiarities to support his claims. He, of course, seems to be unaware of the way the Arabic script developed due to many reasons, the primary one being the correct pronunciation of the letters in the Qur'an.

The Rise & Development Of The Qur'anic Script

Let us first deal with the idea of introduction of vowel signs in the Qur'an and the need for them. These signs are called *tashkeel* in Arabic and they help to determine the correct pronunciation of the word and to avoid mistakes. When the Islamic state expanded, more and more Muslims of non-Arab origin and also many ignorant Arabs studied the Qur'an, thus faulty pronunciation and wrong readings began to increase. Abu 'Ubaydah narrated about Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali:

Abu al-Aswad derived grammar from 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, for whom may there be peace, but he did not disclose to anyone what he had learned from 'Ali, whose countenance may Allah honour, until Ziyad appointed him for the composition of something to serve as a guide to the people, so that they could understand the book of Allah. Abu al-Aswad asked to be excused from this task, until one time when he heard a reader recite, *Allah is quit of the idolators and of His Apostle* (Qur'an 9:3 should have been read as *Allah is quit of the idolators and so is His Apostle*). Then he said, "I never supposed that the condition of the people would come to this!" So he returned to Ziyad and said, "I will do what the Emir has ordered. Let there be sought for me a scribe who is intelligent and obedient to what I say". They brought, therefore, a scribe from the 'Abd al-Kays Tribe, but he

[Abu al-Aswad] was not satisfied with him. Then they came with another one, about whom Abu al-Abbas al-Mubarrad said, "I regard him to be one of those [who are intelligent]." So Abu al-Aswad said [to the new scribe], "If you see that I open my mouth in pronouncing a letter, place a mark above, on top of it. If I close my mouth [making a u sound], place a mark in front of the letter, and if I split [my lips] double the mark." So this was the marking system of Abu al-Aswad. [[1], pp. 87-88]

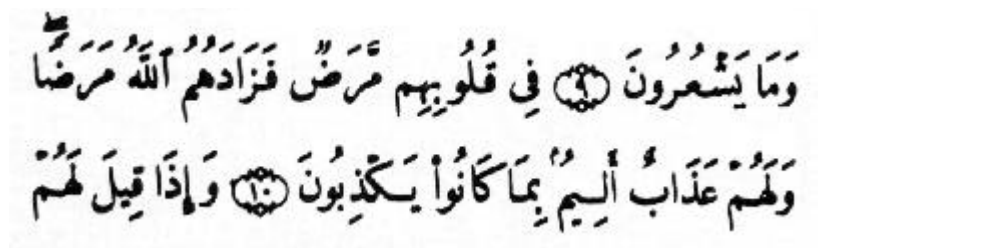
It is interesting to note that the early manuscripts and parchments of the Qur'an as well as the inscriptions are devoid of vowel signs.

On the issue of Qur'anic manuscripts and parchments, Nabia Abbott writes:

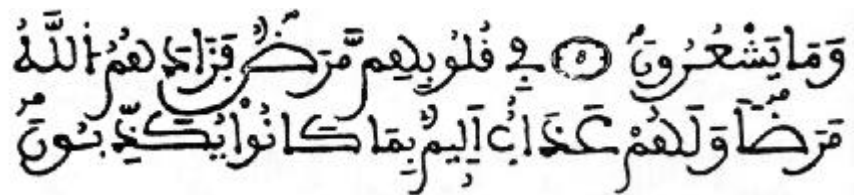
When we come to consider the vowel signs, 1st century manuscripts are of no aid, since no such signs appear in any secular document of that date. However, Kur'an manuscripts credited to the period show a consistent vowel system in which a single red dot above, below, or to the side of a letter stood for the vowels A, I, and U respectively, and two such dots indicated the *tanwin*. The text of early Kur'ans, however, is never completely voweled, the vowel sign for one or more of the letters of a given word being used only where it was essential for a correct reading. The Arabic traditions place the introduction of the system early in the Muslim era, in fact crediting 'Ali with it. Whether 'Ali deserves the credit or not makes little difference for the date in question, for the majority of the sources credit a contemporary of 'Ali, Abu al-Aswad al-Du'ali, with the system. They tell how, having at first refused to introduce the system at the request of Ziyad Ibn Abihi, governor of Irak, he finally did so when he heard the Kur'an being wrongly recited. The system could not have been widely spread or generally used, for we find Hajjaj facing the same problem in Irak and ordering Nasr Ibn Asim to safeguard the pronunciation of the Kur'an; Nasr, so the story goes, introduced the double dots for the *tanwin*. even this did not establish the general use of the system, for again we find Yahya Ibn Ya'mar given credit for it, which credit is likewise shared by Hasan al-Basri. Still these efforts and their results proved insufficient, for again Khalil Ibn Ahmad is credited with introducing the hamzah and the *shaddah*, the *raum* and the *ishmam*, as he is also credited with the vowel signs that are still in use for A, I, and U. The last were originally miniatures of the letters alif, y and w, respectively. [[2], pp. 39]

The above quotes clearly mention that the reasons for the introduction of *tashkeel* and as well as *tanween* signs was, to facilitate the correct reading of the Qur'an. A superfluous change in the script does not mean it is corrupted.

An excellent example which shows how the Arabic script progressed is the writing of the letter **qaf** on the Dome of the Rock. The letter **qaf** is marked by one stroke below it five times on the Dome of the Rock, whereas today, **qaf** is written with two dots on top. Examples of this kind can only be found in early copies of the Qur'ans. For details of inscriptions on the Dome of the Rock, see reference [3].



(a)



(b)

Comparative study of the Qur'an scripts adopted in the (a) Middle East and (b) North Africa (except Egypt).

*The cursive script of North Africa is called Maghribi script. Notice the dot position for **qaf** and **fa** in Maghribi script as well as the verse numbering system! This is from Surah al-Baqarah.*

Another important example would be the Maghribi script which is used in North Africa. Before the practice of marking **fa** with one dot above and **qaf** with two dots above was established, both these letters were marked by one sign (dot or stroke) only. This usage still persists in Maghribi script, which has **fa** with a dot below and **qaf** with a dot above. In early times, however, the opposite way of marking, i.e., **fa** with a dot above and **qaf** with a dot below is also attested.

Sometimes, it is also advisable to stop and reflect...

The Alleged Scribal Errors

The script of any language (not only Arabic) is subject to many changes and amendments agreed upon by the users of that language throughout history.

Writing being a communication tool, the script must be devoid of ambiguity so that the information carried gets from the sender to the recipient without ambiguity. Once in a while, linguists decide to change certain scribal rules in order to simplify the script. For instance, a recent amendment in Arabic script occurred in the middle of the 1980's. It concerned the rules of drawing the **hamzah**. Originally, in some cases, the **hamzah** was drawn on a **waaw** letter and was followed by a long vowel **waaw**, thus putting two consecutive **waaws** in the same word. In this regard, Arab linguists decided to eliminate the first **waaw** and draw the **hamzah** either on the line or on a hook (**nabirah**) followed by the second **waaw**. Here is the illustration of this recent rule:

The following is the spelling of the word/name **ra'oof** before the mid-80's:

رَوَّوْف

The following is the spelling of the same word **after** 1985:

رَعَوْف

The same applies to many other words like **mas'ooliyyah** (i.e., responsibility) or **sho'oon** (i.e., concerns). So, what do we have here? If the argument of the critic was acceptable then the Arabic literature published before 1985 would be full of errors! Actually, the script being a matter of conventions, one cannot say that books older than 1985 are full of misspelled words while the ones published after that date are correct. In reality, both are correct given the **scribal conventions prevailing in their time**. It doesn't make sense to judge written material based on conventions other than the ones in which it was written.

It is noteworthy that the Qur'an is written according to the 'Uthmanic scribal conventions (**rasm**) and not according to the modern conventions. After learning the conventions of the 'Uthmanic script (it is as easy as any alternative convention), any reader is able to read the Holy Qur'an correctly. This means that the message of the Qur'an is entirely transmitted from the hardcopy to the reader without ambiguity. It is also noteworthy that the **modern script still bears many anomalies** that could be amended later. For example, words like **dhaalik** or **laakin** ought to be written with **alef** letters but, according to the modern scribal conventions, they are written without **alef**. This is to say that:

لكن

(i.e., **laakin**) ought to be written

لاكن

and the word

ذلك

(i.e., **dhaalik**) ought to be written

ذالك

But even in the modern script those anomalies are not corrected. In the aforementioned elaboration, we have conclusively established that the position of the critic is both unreasonable and ill-founded. One question may remain: **Why don't Muslims abandon the 'Uthmanic script and adopt the modern script?** This question needs a separate exposition and may be too lengthy for the purpose of this article. We will discuss about it briefly, *inshallah*.

The Qur'anic Orthography

The discussion in this section is adapted from [Qur'anic Orthography: The Written Representation Of The Recited Text Of The Qur'an](#) by M A S Abdel Haleem, *Islamic Quarterly*, pp.171-192, 19xx.

In the 'Uthmanic copies, the Qur'an was written in a particular **rasm** (orthography) which became to known as **al-rasm al-'Uthmani** (The 'Uthmanic way of writing of the text of the Qur'an) also referred to as **rasm al-mushaf**. As the copies of the Qur'an made by the order of 'Uthman were meant to be authoritative, it is no wonder that their **rasm** assumed authority as the correct way of writing the Qur'an.

As we have seen above, the Arabic orthography in the first century of hijra was not yet developed in the way we have known for centuries, particularly in two important areas. There was no distinction between the letters of the alphabet of similar shape and there were no vowel marks. This may indicate that such a system must have given rise to great confusion in reading. This was not actually the case because the morphological patterns of the words in Arabic enable readers to read even very unfamiliar material without the short vowels being marked. More important, however, as far as the Qur'an was concerned, was the fact that learning and reading relied above all on oral transmission. In the Islamic tradition, writing remained a secondary aid; nevertheless to ensure correct reading of the written texts of the Qur'an, particularly those coming after the first generation of Muslims, steps were taken gradually to improve orthography. This started with the two above

mentioned areas by introducing dots to indicate different vowels and nunation and these were put in different coloured ink from that of the text. There were also dots to distinguish between consonants of similar shape. This work was carried out chiefly by three men: Abu-l-Aswad al-Du'ali (d. 69/688), Nasr Ibn 'Asim (d. 89/707) and Yahya Ibn Ya'mur (d. 129/746). Understandably there was some opposition at first to adding anything to the way the Qur'an was written. Ibn 'Umar (73/692) disliked the dotting; others welcomed it, clearly because it was, in fact, doing no more than ensuring proper reading of the Qur'an as received from the Prophet, and this view was accepted by the majority of the Muslims through out the different parts of the Muslim world, from the time of the **tabi'un**. The people of Madinah were reported to have used red dots for vowels - **tanwin, tashdid, takhfif, sukun, wasl** and **madd** and yellow dots for the **hamza**, in particular. **Naqt** (placing the dots on words in the mushaf), became a separate study with many books written on it.

Al-Khalil Ibn Ahmad (d.170/786) introduced the traditional vowel signs into Arabic orthography instead of the dots, but the dotting system continued in the writing Qur'anic material. Eventually, the traditional vowel signs were adopted for the Qur'an.

Alongside the development of studies in Arabic grammar, Arabic orthography also developed for linguistic and literary material, and although the 'Uthmanic **rasm** was one of the sources of orthography the latter began to differ from 'Uthmanic **rasm** of the Qur'an. The question was asked whether it was admissible to write the Qur'an itself in the new orthography. Malik (179/795) was asked and said: No, the Qur'an should be written only in the way of the first writing. He was also asked whether the additional waw and alif should be deleted since they were not pronounced and said no. Similarly, Ibn Hanbal (244/858) said it was unlawful to deviate in writing the mushaf in **waw, ya, alif** or any other way. In line of such views, it is seen that adherence to the Qur'anic **rasm** has persisted up to the present.

Conclusions

In principle, the 'Uthmanic script bears more significance than what we may imagine. In fact, not only is it the script in which the first copies of the Holy Qur'an were written but it bears many references to the [Science of Qira'at \(Science of Readings\)](#) as well. Shifting to the modern script would make the Qira'at aspect a specialist's affair and would deprive "normal" Muslims from even noticing it. The next step would be that the Muslims who are not familiar with Qira'at will become easy prey for anti-Islamic propaganda, the kind of groundless criticism we are rebutting right now. For a short introduction about Qira'at, the readers may *inshallah*, refer [here](#).

In short, the claim of so-called scribal errors in the Qur'an is not only ridiculous but also a fanciful imagination of an extremely ignorant person.

And Allah knows best.

References

- [1] [The Fihrist of al-Nadim](#), 1970, Bayard Dodge (Editor and Translator), Columbia University Press.
- [2] [The Rise of The North Arabic Script & Its Kuranic Development](#), 1939, Nabia Abbott, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- [3] ['Abd al-Malik's Inscription In The Dome Of The Rock: A Reconsideration](#), 1970, Christel Kessler, [The Journal Of The Royal Asiatic Society](#), pp. 2-14.