

Book Review

Daniel Alan Brubaker, *Corrections in Early Qur'ānic Manuscripts: Twenty Examples* (Lovettsville: Think and Tell Press, 2019), xxv + 102 pp.
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This book is a popular-level publication containing material from Daniel Alan Brubaker's PhD dissertation (Rice University, 2014); it is aimed at both the general reader and the scholar. Its stated purpose is to introduce the audience to a facet of textual criticism of the Quran, namely scribal corrections, through a series of examples from early Quranic manuscripts. The first of its kind, Brubaker's book represents the sole accessible work on scribal changes in manuscripts and one of only a few on Quranic manuscripts as a whole. It is therefore frustrating that it suffers from a number of critical flaws in methodology, analysis, and discussion.

It is not lost on anyone remotely familiar with Quranic manuscripts that the field is going through a transformative period. The plethora of early manuscripts at our disposal combined with digital technologies making them accessible has reawakened a fervor among both scholars and the public. Radiocarbon dating

of Quranic fragments has also pushed some manuscripts back to the mid-first/seventh century or before, giving us an unprecedented window into the scripture as it was written, handled, and received by the earliest generation of Muslims. We are told that a survey of these manuscripts in a little more than a hundred pages will "challenge the traditional assertions about the transmission of the Quran in several ways" (p. xxi) and have much to say about the "pious enhancement of the Quran's textual history" (p. xxii). Unfortunately, the bold claims are left unsubstantiated.

Apart from a twenty-five-page introduction and a ten-page conclusion, the bulk of this book is dedicated to enumerating, in very systematic fashion, scribal changes found throughout various Quranic manuscripts. There is very little to fault in the presentation of the material; manuscript photographs are provided for each example along with the corresponding text from the Cairo edition, and the accompanying

descriptions focused on word and letter placement, ink color, and paleography are very thoughtful and easy to follow. The author also provides a material description of the change, precisely how the original or corrected text differs from the Cairo edition, and, in some instances, an explanation of the change in meaning. The inclusion of useful “trivia” for most of the featured manuscripts, such as the folkloric attribution of the Topkapı *muṣḥaf* to the caliph ‘Uthmān (p. 28), is also a very nice addition. Since scribal changes are the focal point of this book, I follow its structure closely in this review. My assessment of both the broader context and the thesis set forth in this work is followed by a detailed appraisal of the scribal changes, grouped by similarity. In light of my reevaluation, I revisit Brubaker’s thesis, which I have not found convincing.

Brubaker introduces Quranic manuscripts by mentioning some of the major nineteenth- and twentieth-century figures largely responsible for the major manuscript collections in Western institutions. He also provides useful context to explain why manuscripts from the first/seventh century have survived until today—primarily because of the use of parchment as writing material and because of political circumstances. In contrast to the scripture of the early Christian community, he correctly states, the Muslim

scripture enjoyed an elevated status under a dominant political hegemony from an early period and thus was not subject to censorship or destruction.

Discussing manuscript dating, Brubaker highlights the importance of paleography and, in particular, the classification of scripts by François Déroche, adding the important caveat that script classifications do have overlapping timelines. However, he erroneously states that some of the earliest Quranic manuscripts, and in particular those in the Hijazi style, were written without diacritical marks (p. 5). This is a common misconception, due not least to medieval Muslim scholars, who attributed the invention of such marks and their addition to *muṣḥafs* to several prominent figures.¹ In reality, the very earliest Hijazi manuscripts contain occasional diacritical marks.² Brubaker then makes the strange and equally incorrect assertion that the later development of script grammar allows for precise disambiguation of identical archigraphemes in lieu of diacritics. “Script grammar,” a concept introduced by Thomas Milo, defines how the letters of a given script are drawn, how they stack, and how denticle heights of adjacent letters vary. However, it cannot disambiguate a single undotted word form; it can only distinguish similar skeletal forms from one another.³ Brubaker also discusses two

1. See ‘Abū ‘Amr al-Dānī’s (d. 444/1053), *al-Muḥkam fi ‘ilm naqṭ al-maṣāḥif*, ed. Ghānim Qaddūri al-Ḥamad (Damascus: Dār al-Ghawthānī li-l-Dirāsāt al-Qur’āniyya, 2017), 57ff., where the author dedicates to this subject an entire chapter, entitled “Discussion of *muṣḥafs* and how they used to be free of dots.”

2. Marijn van Putten, “Hamzah in the Quranic Consonantal Text,” *Orientalia* 87, no. 1 (2011): 95.

3. The precise term is archigrapheme. See Thomas Milo, “Towards Arabic Historical Script Grammar through Contrastive Analysis of Qur’ān Manuscripts,” in *Writings and Writing: Investigations in Islamic Text and Script in Honour of Dr. Januarius Justus Witkam*, ed. Robert M. Kerr and Thomas Milo, 249–92 (Cambridge: Archetype, 2013), and Thomas Milo, “Arabic Typography,” in *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*, ed. Lutz

other forms of dating, codicology and radiocarbon dating, the latter of which he calls “not foolproof.” This skepticism towards radiocarbon dating is reminiscent of the discussion regarding the Dead Sea scrolls; there we find that the consensus has indeed converged on the method being foolproof.⁴

The introduction to consonantal variants contains significant errors, which will undoubtedly leave the novice with a confused distinction between the *rasm* (consonantal text) and the reading traditions that interpret it. Brubaker states that “the readings are different from the *rasm* and in most cases the one is not affected in the least by the other” (p. 8). The distinction between the two is important to point out, but it is incorrect to state that they are entirely independent. The reading traditions are exactly that: different traditions for reading the same consonantal text. Although there is a degree of tension between the two, evident in some instances as slight deviations from the standard *rasm*, the reading traditions are in large part dependent upon the consonantal text.⁵

It is all the more surprising that Brubaker makes this distinction between

the readings and *rasm* explicit since he proceeds to conflate the two⁶ when discussing several *muṣḥafs* edited by Tayyar Altıkulaç. He states that these codices do not reflect a single reading, leading their editor to describe them in terms of adherence to the various readings. What Altıkulaç is actually referring to are the consonantal (read: *rasm*) differences between the regional *muṣḥafs* and not the reading traditions. In fact, the Cairene *muṣḥaf* mentioned is not vocalized, which is necessary for identification of the reading.

Before presenting the evidence, Brubaker prematurely asserts that the thousands of corrections he has documented appear to have nothing to do with the reading tradition literature and thus must be explained by another phenomenon, such as a greater degree of perceived flexibility in the Quranic text in the early centuries (p. 9). However, one does not expect that mere scribal errors would be featured in the reading tradition literature, and the same applies to orthographic variants that do not affect pronunciation (of which there are many). Brubaker makes no mention of these two reasonable possibilities,

Edzard, Rudolf de Jong, Ramzi Baalbaki, James Dickins, Mushira Eid, Pierre Larcher, Janet Watson, et al. (Leiden: Brill Online), http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/1570-6699_eall_EALL_SIM_000043.

4. See R. E. Taylor and Ofer Bar-Yosef, *Radiocarbon Dating: An Archeological Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2014), 38ff., esp. 41. On the dating of Quranic manuscripts using ¹⁴C and its consistency with paleography, see Michael J. Marx and Tobias J. Jocham, “Zu den Datierungen von Koranhandschriften durch die ¹⁴C-Methode,” *Frankfurter Zeitschrift für islamisch-theologische Studien* 2 (2015): 9–43.

5. See Yasin Dutton, “Orality, Literacy and the ‘Seven Aḥruf’ Ḥadīth,” *Journal of Islamic Studies* 23, no. 1 (2011): 1–49, and Yasin Dutton, “Two ‘Ḥijāzī’ Fragments of the Qur’an and Their Variants, or: When Did the *Shawādhdh* Become *Shādhdh*?” *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 8, no. 1 (2017): 1–56.

6. He is not alone, however. See Yasin Dutton, “Some Notes on the British Library’s ‘Oldest Qur’an Manuscript’ (Or. 2165),” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 6, no. 1 (2004): 43–71, for an example of conflating manuscript *rasm* with the reading of Ibn ‘Āmir, and Intisar A. Rabb, “Non-Canonical Readings of the Qur’an: Recognition & Authenticity,” *Journal of Qur’anic Studies* 8, no. 2 (2006): 84–127, for a corrective response.

leaving the reader with the impression that there are thousands of heretofore unknown yet consequential orthographic variants in early *muṣḥafs*—a claim that, if true, is significant enough to demand substantiation.

Brubaker’s general observations on manuscript corrections in the introduction contain perhaps the most significant methodological flaw that permeates his book. He notes that most often, changes in manuscripts result in “conformity of that manuscript at the point of correction with the *rasm* of the now-standard 1924 Cairo edition” (p. 10). Brubaker sees this as a pattern, which shows “a general movement over time toward conformity, though not immediate complete conformity” (p. 10). There are two major problems with this conclusion.

The first is the evident anachronism of centuries-old manuscripts corrected to conform to a text from 1924 (in all cases the corrections predate the Cairo edition). In effect, this is a teleological argument for an end goal that did not exist at the time. The second is the presupposition that whatever standard the 1924 Cairo edition is based on differs from the standard that existed at the time the early manuscripts were written. However, corrections apparently in the direction of conformity to the Cairo edition are not evidence of a changing standard, but evidence of the

existence of a standard in the first place! Demonstrating the evolution of a standard over time is another matter entirely.

Both of these problems stem from Brubaker’s apparent lack of understanding of the nature of the Cairo edition. In the edition’s postface we find that its editors relied on works by two figures, Abū ‘Amr al-Dānī (d. 444/1053) and his student Abū Dāwūd b. Najāḥ (d. 496/1103), to fix its orthography, with preference given to the latter in the event of conflict. It becomes immediately apparent that (a) variations in Quranic orthography exist within the Muslim tradition and (b) the orthography of the Cairo edition is dependent on a choice made by a committee in 1924 to give precedence to one text over another. Furthermore, a cursory examination of Quranic manuscripts across the centuries reveals the rapid classicization of the text’s orthography.⁷ By contrast, the Cairo edition’s reliance on *rasm* works results in a text that is substantially more archaic and indeed more archetypal than many manuscripts over a millennium older. Therefore, the Cairo edition in fact breaks away from the orthographic standard of classical Arabic that characterized nearly all *muṣḥafs* prior to its conception. Recognizing this aspect of the Cairo edition, which belies its use as a standard toward which Qurans evolved, makes

7. Classicization is an orthographic reform toward classical Arabic standards that includes hamza and *scriptio plena*. The classicization of Quranic orthography early on was recognized by Muslim jurist Mālik b. Anas (d. 179/795), who was asked about the commission of a new *muṣḥaf*: “Should it be written according to the orthographic practices [*hiḥā*’] people have innovated?” His response: “No, I do not see that as appropriate. Rather, it should be written in the original manner [*‘alā al-katba al-ūlā*].” Abū ‘Amr al-Dānī, *al-Muqni‘ fī ma‘rifat marsūm maṣāḥif ahl al-amṣār*, ed. Bashīr al-Ḥimyarī (Beirut: Dār al-Bashā’ir al-Islāmiyya, 2016), 1:352–353.

apparent the anachronistic nature of the approach adopted by Brubaker.⁸

The book also presents a brief survey of difficult issues relating to different aspects of the Quran, including an apparent disconnect between the topography of Mecca and descriptions within the text, archeological problems with Mecca as an ancient center of civilization, and the *qibla* (direction of prayer) of the early Muslim community. Given the latter issue's irrelevance to Quranic manuscripts and their transmission, Brubaker's raising of it is surprising, as is the length at which he discusses it in comparison to other issues raised and his reliance on Dan Gibson's work to the exclusion of that of David King, who is a specialist in early Muslim *qiblas* and who has written at length to debunk the thesis advertised by Gibson.⁹ As the work is primarily focused on scribal changes in Quranic manuscripts and aimed at a general audience, more care should have been put into not misrepresenting the state of Western scholarship on matters ancillary to the primary focus of the book. Once again, in raising the well-known and important issue of the reliability of the

prophetic biography and hadith, Brubaker makes no reference to the work of Gregor Schoeler or Harald Motzki, both of whom have made seminal contributions in these areas.

The final difficulties that Brubaker addresses concern the 'Uthmānic standardization. Given the monumental nature of the 'Uthmānic project, he contends, "it is odd that no copy existing today has been reliably identified as one of these actual authoritative copies" (p. 19). Why is it odd that of the thousands of *muṣḥafs* that surely existed in the first/seventh century, most of which were lost to time, four very specific ones did not survive? Moreover, if one were to concede the traditional narrative concerning the 'Uthmānic project involving the large-scale destruction of other *muṣḥafs*, the sheer amount of traffic and handling that the regional exemplars would have received from subsequent copying efforts would almost certainly have compromised their integrity. However, one does not have to concede the traditional narrative. Harald Motzki has analyzed reports of this event and dated them to the late

8. One might raise the objection that the works used for the Cairo edition are from the fifth century AH. However, no two *rasm* works are in complete agreement, there is no evidence that any standard existed in the fifth century despite the composition of these *rasm* works, and manuscripts continued to diverge from the 'Uthmānic standard through the Ottoman period. A second possible objection might concern the degree of variation: *rasm* works are largely (though not exclusively) concerned with orthographic variants, whereas the monograph under review is concerned with more substantial variation. However, if one wishes to argue for the development of a later standard, one must also explain an apparent conundrum. Scribes across the entire Muslim world, for centuries prior to the 1924 Cairo edition, were entirely comfortable with orthographic fluidity yet somehow managed to refrain from making more significant changes. In other words, as orthography continued to diverge, substantive variation simultaneously continued to converge.

9. David A. King, "The Petra Fallacy: Early Mosques Do Face the Sacred Kaaba in Mecca but Dan Gibson Doesn't Know How" (unpublished paper, December 1, 2018), https://www.academia.edu/37957366/KING_2018_-_The_Petra_fallacy_-_Early_mosques_do_face_the_Sacred_Kaaba_in_Mecca_but_Dan_Gibson_doesnt_know_how, and David A. King, review of Early Islamic Qiblas, by Dan Gibson, *Suḥayl* 16–17 (2018–2019): 347–66, https://www.academia.edu/40110039/KING_2019_-_Review_of_GIBSON_Earliest_Qiblas.

first/early eighth century.¹⁰ Nicolai Sinai has evaluated the evidence for various positions regarding the codification and concludes that the traditional dating of 30/650 or earlier “ought to be our default view.”¹¹ Additionally, both Theodor Nöldeke¹² and later Michael Cook¹³ (whose work is cited by Brubaker elsewhere in the book) have analyzed in greater detail reports of regional variants from the purported ‘Uthmānic exemplars and find that the pattern in the variant data forms a “family tree” known as a stemma.

The fact that these shared variants form a neat stemma lacking signs of contamination leads Cook to conclude that “this must count against any suggestion that the variants were invented.... We can accordingly infer that we have to do with genuine transmissions from an archetype.”¹⁴ Marijn van Putten has recently demonstrated that a series of orthographic idiosyncrasies in the earliest Quranic manuscripts can be explained only as the results of copying from a single archetype.¹⁵ Given that the Codex Parisino-Petropolitanus is dated to the third quarter of the first/seventh century¹⁶ and contains

these orthographic idiosyncrasies, the standardization must have taken place before that time. In a forthcoming article, I further show that data collected from many of the same manuscripts surveyed by Brubaker produce a stemma that predicts four regional exemplars, consistent with the findings of Cook and Nöldeke. This is to say that by all indications, the manuscript evidence is consistent with the traditional narrative regarding the ‘Uthmānic standardization. The utility of the ‘Uthmānic exemplars to the early Muslims, rather than some inconsistency with a backprojected notion of veneration as suggested in Brubaker’s book, is most likely responsible for their loss.

In his additional comments on the ‘Uthmānic standardization, Brubaker appears unaware of the scholarly history on the text’s standardization; he is seemingly informed more by modern Muslim apologetics than by knowledge of the Arabic sources. He tells the reader that the presence of later corrections in otherwise finely produced manuscripts challenges “the notion that there was strict uniformity and widespread agreement

10. See Harald Motzki, “The Collection of the Qur’an: A Reconsideration of Western Views in Light of Recent Methodological Developments,” *Der Islam* 78, no. 1 (2001): 1–34.

11. See Nicolai Sinai, “When Did the Consonantal Skeleton of the Quran Reach Closure?,” part II, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 77, no. 3 (2014): 509–521, and part I, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 77, no. 2 (2014): 273–292.

12. Theodor Nöldeke, *The History of the Qur’ān*, trans. Wolfgang H. Behn (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 392–402.

13. Michael Cook, “The Stemma of the Regional Codices of the Koran,” in *Graeco-Arabica 9–10: Festschrift in Honour of V. Christides*, ed. George K. Livadas, 89–104 (Athens: Institute for Graeco-Oriental and African Studies, 2004).

14. *Ibid.*, 103–104.

15. Marijn van Putten, “‘The Grace of God’ as Evidence for a Written Uthmanic Archetype: The Importance of Shared Orthographic Idiosyncrasies,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 82, no. 2 (2019): 271–288.

16. François Déroche, *La transmission écrite du Coran dans les débuts de l’islam: Le codex Parisino-petropolitanus* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 177.

about every detail, every word and letter, such as one would expect to find if there were widespread agreement upon a standard from a very early date, such as the time of 'Uthmān's caliphate" (p. 19). Although this is not an uncommon notion among modern-day lay Muslims, when it comes to scholarly works, as early as we can peer into the Islamic past, we find widespread recognition of orthographic variation among *muṣḥafs*. Al-Farrā's (d. 207/822) *Ma'ānī al-Qur'ān* is brimming with reports of regional and nonregional *rasm* variants. Abū 'Ubayd (d. 224/838) traveled the Muslim world collecting such differences first-hand; these find their way into his *Faḍā'il al-Qur'ān* and later works. Ibn Abī Dāwūd's (d. 316/928) *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif* is dedicated to collecting reports of so-called Companion codices and other orthographic idiosyncrasies. The canonical hadith collections also make note of contentious *rasm* variants, with several disagreements attributed to Companions themselves. What Brubaker does, then, instead of elaborating the scholarly perspective, is to set up a straw man, which he attempts to reinforce with the false notion that anything short of printing press-level agreement constitutes evidence against early standardization.

The second chapter represents the majority of the book's contents, containing the titular examples of corrections in early Quranic manuscripts. Immediately before these examples, Brubaker provides readers with a helpful series of questions to help them think through scribal changes: What was changed? Is there a simple explanation for the change? Does the pen

used for the change match the original writing? Can we identify the original text if it was overwritten? And so on. A glaring omission here is a discussion of the various causes of scribal errors. The lay reader is unlikely to appreciate the challenges involved in hand-copying manuscripts, which are different from those that attend the modern production of printed books. In terms of the manuscripts featured, Brubaker draws on a wide selection of *muṣḥafs*, including several famous ones such as the Codex Parisino-Petropolitanus, the Topkapı *muṣḥaf*, the Umayyad Fustat codex, and the Ḥusaynī *muṣḥaf*.

Brubaker's observations are generally sound, with the exception of a few oversights including example 6 (p. 52), where Brubaker describes the secondary addition of an *alif* to *wa-ʿamilū* in Q 5:93, which itself is part of an interlinear scribal insertion in the manuscript. The relevant portion of the verse, with square brackets marking the insertion, reads, *idhā ma ttaqaw wa-āmanū [wa-ʿamilū l-ṣāliḥāti thumma ttaqaw wa-āmanū] thumma ttaqaw wa-aḥsanū*, which translates to "so long as they are reverent and believe, [and perform righteous deeds, then are reverent and believe,] and then are reverent and virtuous." Needless to say, the repetition in the verse can be very confusing. The inserted portion was squeezed between two lines, and within it the phrase *wa-ʿamilū* appears to have had its otiose *alif* added in later with a different pen. This *alif*, however, actually belongs to the word *wa-anfaqu* from the line below, which has been retouched.¹⁷ Given the spatial constraints and repeated

17. There are already two *alifs* to the left of the supposed insert: one for the plural *wa-ʿamilū* and the other for the definite article of *al-ṣāliḥāt*; counting the third would yield one too many.

shapes, overlooking one of them is not an unexpected mistake. The other oversights I address later.

Along with the issues associated with conceiving of the Cairo edition as a targeted standard for the changes surveyed in the book—an issue that is brought up in nearly every example—the second major problem has to do with Brubaker’s analysis of the changes themselves. Apart from a few interesting variants, which I highlight later, the majority of the changes are best explained as scribal errors. Even those that can be considered intentional still, as I demonstrate below, do not indicate late standardization. I have done my best to explain each example as clearly as possible and relegated more technical matters to the footnotes, but as Brubaker notes, this is inherently a highly technical subject. The most important points to glean from the examples below are the causes of the errors I elaborate; these causes offer alternative explanations for the scribal changes to those proposed by Brubaker.

I begin with assimilation of parallels, which refers to the assimilation of the wording of one passage to the slightly different wording in a parallel passage.¹⁸ Given the highly formulaic nature of the Quran, such errors are relatively common. Example 1 shows a missing *huwa* in the verse-end formula *dhālika huwa l-fawzu l-‘aẓīm* (“that is the great triumph”) of Q 9:72 in the Topkapı *muṣḥaf*. There are exactly six verses containing the precise formula with *huwa* and another six without

(*dhālika l-fawzu l-‘aẓīm*).¹⁹ Earlier *muṣḥafs* containing the standard text include Saray Medina 1a, Wetzstein II 1913, Arabe 328a, and BL Or. 2165. Example 7 shows Q 23:86 in Arabe 327 with the nonstandard word *al-arḍ* crossed out and the addition of *al-sab‘* above the line. Whereas the standard verse reads, *qul man rabbu l-samāwāti l-sab‘i wa-rabbu l-‘arshi l-‘aẓīm* (“say, ‘who is the lord of the seven heavens and the lord of the great throne?’”), the phrase *qul man rabbu l-samāwāti wa-l-arḍ* (“say, ‘who is the lord of the heavens and the earth?’”) occurs in Q 13:16, and more generally in the non-interrogative *rabbu l-samāwāti wa-l-arḍ* (“lord of the heavens and the earth”) in ten other locations. The standard text with *al-sab‘* occurs in every other manuscript I could find. If Brubaker wishes to make the point that there was early fluidity and that manuscripts move toward the standard text over time, he would have to explain why the standard text is ubiquitous in manuscripts that are evidently paleographically older as well as those that are newer. Example 19 shows Q 34:27 in Marcel 5, where the words *huwa llāhu* (“he is God”) are written over an unidentifiable erasure. The original gap is small enough that it is reasonable to expect that it originally contained *huwa* alone; this is suggested in the book (p. 82). What is not suggested however, is the cause: the formula *huwa l-‘aẓīzu l-ḥakīm* (“he is the mighty, the wise”) occurs more than a dozen times throughout the Quran, and this is the only

18. Bruce M. Metzger and Bart D. Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press; 2005), 257ff. For assimilation of parallels and other scribal errors within the context of the Quran, see Behnam Sadeghi and Uwe Bergmann, “The Codex of a Companion of the Prophet and the Qur’ān of the Prophet,” *Arabica* 57, no. 4 (2010): 343–436.

19. Verses with *huwa*: Q 9:72, Q 9:111, Q 10:64, Q 40:9, Q 44:57, and Q 57:12. Verses without *huwa*: Q 4:13, Q 5:119, Q 9:89, Q 9:100, Q 61:12, and Q 64:9.

instance where there is an additional *allāh*, making such a mistake entirely expected.

A number of errors best explained as omissions due to eye skip (usually from inadvertently looking to the side), known as parablepsis, are also apparent in the chosen examples. The last subexample of example 3 involves the omission of *allāh* from Q 9:78 in DAM 01-20.4. Brubaker states that the omission of *allāh* from the phrase *wa-anna llāha 'allāmu l-ghuyūb* gives the reading “and that *he* knows fully the things that are unseen” (emphasis his), but this is incorrect. The omitted *allāh* does not have in its place the pronominal *wa-annahū*, but rather the original *wa-anna* is maintained—rendering the phrase ungrammatical. Therefore, the best explanation is parablepsis. Example 6 is rightly recognized as homeoteleuton, eye skip due to a repeating *wa-āmanū*, and I have already mentioned the mistake in the associated discussion above.

Example 11 is remarkable in demonstrating the lengths to which Brubaker goes in order to avoid suggesting scribal error as an explanation. In the Topkapı *muṣṣhaf*, the phrase *tūbū ila llāhi tawbatan naṣūḥā* (“repent to God with sincere repentance”) in Q 66:8 is missing the *lām lām hā'* graphemes of *allāh*, with only its initial *alif* written at the end of a line; the next line begins with *tawbatan*. Brubaker starts considering alternative readings of the consonantal text²⁰ before conceding: “It is not clear to me what was intended by the original version, or whether it could have been read viably” (p. 65). It

seems pretty reasonable to me that the scribe wrote the first letter of *allāh*, began a new line, and accidentally forgot to complete the word. That such a scenario is not suggested deprives the reader of a perfectly valid and indeed better explanation.

Examples 8 and 16 are parablepses that may also be assimilations of parallels. In both examples, the verse-ending formula *inna llāha kāna* (“truly God is”) is missing *kāna*, and example 8 appears to have been corrected by the original scribe, as acknowledged in the book (pp. 58–59). There are many verses that end in this common prototypical formula, either with or without *kāna*, depending on the rhyme. Importantly, *kāna* takes its predicate in the accusative, whereas otherwise the predicate would be nominative, so its omission renders the formula ungrammatical.²¹ Brubaker seemingly recognizes this in his explanation of example 8, but he then proceeds to imply that the insertion of *kāna* serves no function other than to conform to the standard *rasm* (p. 59). Example 16 presents an identical issue, and here Brubaker explicitly and incorrectly states that *kāna* “is not grammatically necessary” (p. 76). Its ungrammaticality is the obvious reason Brubaker “found no mention of an issue at this spot in the *qirā'āt* literature” (p. 59). Ironically, another interesting example that *is* mentioned in the *qirā'āt* literature (discussed below) does not receive any attention.

20. Brubaker notes that alternative readings are difficult to propose because of the dotting of the *bā'* in the word *tawbatan*, which does not afford a lot of flexibility (p. 65).

21. For example, in Q 4:148, the standard text is *fa-inna llāha kāna 'afuwwan qadīran*. Without the correction we would have the ungrammatical *fa-inna llāha 'afuwwan qadīran* rather than *fa-inna llāha 'afuwun qadīrun*.



Figure 1: BnF Arabe 328, fol. 8r²²

Examples 9 and 18 are also standard parablepses, with the former omission resulting in a severe disruption in rhyme and a break in a standard formula, as Brubaker acknowledges (pp. 60–61). The latter omission of *al-sāʿa*, “the hour,” in Q 6:40 results in a redundant, nonsensical sentence (square brackets mark omission):

qul araʾaytakum in atākum ʿadhābu llāhi aw atakumu [l-sāʿa]

“Think to yourselves: were the punishment of God to come upon you or were [the hour] to come upon you.”

Example 12 is an interesting case of parablepsis in which multiple changes can be seen, and I have reproduced an image of the relevant passage above.

The text of Q 3:171 (with the erasure in brackets) reads:

yastabshirūna bi-niʿmatin mina llāhi wa-faḍlin [wa-llāhu] wa-anna llāha lā yuḍīʿu ajra l-muʾminīn

“They rejoice in blessing and bounty from God [and God] and that God does not neglect the reward of the believers.”

What appears to have taken place here, as can be seen in the image above, can be described in the following steps:

1. The scribe writes *wa-faḍlin wa-llāhu*, accidentally skipping *wa-anna*.
2. Rather than squeeze in the forgotten word, the scribe decides to rewrite the phrase *wa-faḍlin wa-anna llāh* after the mistake.
3. The erroneous *wa-faḍlin wa-llāhu* is erased, leaving a gap.

An alternative scenario is also possible:

1. The scribe writes *wa-faḍlin wa-llāhu*, accidentally skipping *wa-anna*.
2. The scribe inadvertently repeats the phrase (known as a dittography), but this time correctly, as *wa-faḍlin wa-anna llāh*.
3. After proofreading, the scribe realizes the mistake and erases it, leaving a gap.

At a later stage, after either of these two scenarios, someone then erases the *ḍād* and the *lām* of the word *faḍl* and draws an elongated *ḍād* to cover up the gap, likely for cosmetic reasons.²² We can tell this

22. There are numerous examples throughout this manuscript in which the scribe with the black ink erases and rewrites sections for purely cosmetic reasons. This is apparent since the erased text is perfectly readable and matches the rewritten text.

took place from the clear difference in the scraping of the original mistake, which was much more thorough and less precise, and the later erasure. None of this is discussed by Brubaker nor is a reading of the original text offered.

The presentation of example 14 as described in the book is entirely unconvincing. Brubaker asserts that Q 4:167 in the Topkapı *muṣḥaf* has an erasure that takes the verse away from conformity with the standard text. He then opines that “the reason for this erasure is unclear, but its precision in taking out the selected words is evident” (p. 71). There are several reasons to question this conclusion, not the least of which is a total lack of precision in the supposed erasure. The first relevant line ends in *wa-ṣaddū ‘an sabīli* (“and who turn from the way of”) with an additional erased *alif* belonging to the next word, *allāh*.²³ The second line, which is partially and unevenly faded (in brackets) but still readable, continues: [*llāhi qad*] *ḍallū ḍalālan ba‘īdā* (“[God have certainly] wandered far astray”). The faded passage, which includes part of the *ḍād* of the word *ḍallū*, contrary to Brubaker’s claim of precision erasure, simply appears to have been worn out.²⁴

Examples 4, 15, and 20 are instances in which the significant degree of erasure makes it effectively impossible to know what was originally written. In example 4, Brubaker makes some suggestions to fill a gap left in Q 30:9 between *‘āqibatu* and *alladhīna*.²⁵ Since the gap is at the end of the page and the size of the gap is a good match for *alladhīna*, a dittography is a sensible proposition: the scribe accidentally wrote the word twice, once at the end of the first page and again at the beginning of the second. The expression *kayfa kāna ‘āqibatu lladhīna* is a common Quranic formula, which makes it even more unlikely that the erased word was something else. Although Brubaker makes no suggestion for the gap in example 15, the space and context are also consistent with a dittography. The phrase *ḥattā yughnihimu llāhu min faḍlih* (“until God enriches them from His bounty”) in Q 24:33 is followed by an erasure. Since the preceding verse contains the exact same phrase and then ends with the formula *wa-llāhu wāsi‘un ‘alīm* (“and God is all-encompassing, all-knowing”), it is quite possible that the scribe accidentally reproduced this formula in the next verse. Example 20 shows Q 8:3 in MIA.2014.491

23. This practice of splitting a word between lines is a feature of *scriptio continua* and common in early *muṣḥafs*.

24. It is only the *alif* on the first line that seems to have been erased, possibly by someone who did not want to retouch the *muṣḥaf* but at the same time did not want to confuse the reader. This is not a farfetched suggestion, since we can see the vocalization on both the clear and the faded words as *‘an sabīli llāhi*. We learn two things from the vocalization: (a) the fading occurred after vocalization and (b) if someone had intended to eliminate the words *allāh* and *qad*, it is odd they did not adjust *sabīli* to *sabīlin*. Without this second adjustment, the reading is ungrammatical. In addition, the translation offered in the book for the passage without the faded words reads, “... and hinder from the way have strayed into error” (p. 71), but this is not supported by the text because of the lack of a definite article on *sabīl* and the absence of *qad*. A more accurate translation of the remaining text would be, “... and hinder from a way, wandered far astray.”

25. Two of the suggestions made by Brubaker are not grammatical, since the possessor of the construct, *‘āqiba*, is genitive. Also, *kullu min* should be *kullin min* and *kathīran min* should be *kathīrin min*.

with an entire line erased and overwritten with the standard *wa-mimmā razaqnāhum yunfiqūn* (“and spend from that which we have provided them”). As Brubaker notes, “the different writing on this line is somewhat stretched out to fill the space, an indication that what was first written here was longer” (p. 83). The space is consistent with an assimilation of parallels error involving the addition of *wa-yu’tūna l-zakāh* (“and give alms”). The correction is in the Kufic B.II script, which matches the original and indicates that the change was made not long after the initial writing, although the ink is distinct, pointing to a different scribe.

Brubaker’s description of the correction of *ni‘mata llāh* (“grace of God”) in example 17 is inaccurate. Despite what is stated in the text, there is no erasure, and the original text has simply been overwritten. Beneath the additions, one can clearly read *ni‘ma*, as opposed to *ni‘matahū*, which Brubaker proposes.²⁶ This makes it far more likely that the original scribe forgot the word *allāh*, rather than that he replaced it with the pronominal form. It is also apparent that the original correction was done much earlier and then was retouched later in black ink (best seen on the *alif* of *allāh*). In examples 2 and 13, it is simply impossible to know whether the existing text was written deliberately by the original scribes or whether it reflects inadvertent errors. Example 2 from Q 42:21 in Codex Parisino-Petropolitanus, an early manuscript from the first/seventh century, has the singular *lahū* in place of the plural *lahum* in *am lahum shurakā*²⁷

(“or do they have partners”), and example 13 has the singular *wa-qāla* in place of the plural *wa-qālū* (“and they said”) in a third/ninth-century Kufic B.II manuscript.

The broader issue behind these two examples is their implication for Brubaker’s thesis. He insists that every deviation from the standard *rasm* encountered in a manuscript is a deliberate one. This stance leads him to conclude, based on the evidence I have reviewed, that the perception of the standard *rasm* changed over time, or that the standardization later became more thorough—though the meaning and mechanics of the alleged shift are not entirely clear. He also speculates that the extent of the flexibility may have varied between regions, but that it *did* exceed the bounds of what is reported in the *qirā’āt* literature (p. 95).

The problem is that the two elements necessary to demonstrate the early textual fluidity asserted by Brubaker are missing. First, one would have to show that the incidence of orthographic deviations is greater in earlier manuscripts than in later ones. A survey of Qurans copied after the fourth/tenth century would tell us whether there are fewer mistakes or deviations in these Qurans compared to earlier ones. Ignoring this necessary step, as Brubaker does in his book, would lead one to conclude, for example, that the recently auctioned Quran from ninth/fifteenth-century Mamluk Egypt, which contains a haplography resulting in the omission of multiple verses, is evidence of even later fluidity.²⁷

26. More precisely, he suggests *ni‘matihi*, which is incorrect as the word is the object of the preceding verb and therefore should be in the accusative.

27. Image 6 in the auction listing at <https://www.christies.com/lotfinder/books-manuscripts/quran->

Second, one should show multiple attestations of the same variant in different manuscripts. Otherwise, as with examples 2 and 13, mentioned above, in which the cause of error is inconclusive, one cannot make the case that an intentional deviation is more likely than a mistake. Therefore, even though example 13 occurs in CPP, which is a very early manuscript, the fact that no other manuscript, even among those from the same deposit, contains this variant makes it impossible to prove that the difference was intentional. We also find that other first/seventh-century manuscripts contain the text as found in the Cairo edition today.²⁸ Example 2, of course, occurs in a third/ninth-century Quran, while there are many earlier *muṣḥafs* containing the standard text.

This is not to say that nonstandard *rasm* variants do not exist, only that Brubaker has not demonstrated their existence. Alba Fedeli has written about the word *ṭuwā* in Q 20:12, which appears as *ṭāwī* in multiple early manuscripts²⁹ and is also recorded as such in *qirā'āt* literature. Yasin Dutton has also studied the evolution of noncanonical *rasm* variants in early manuscripts.³⁰ Example 10 is possibly an instance of such variance, with the variant *āmanū bimā* (“believe in that”) present in Q 2:137 in Arabe 331 rather than the standard *āmanū bi-mithli mā* (“believe

in that which is similar to”), but this possibility goes unmentioned. This variant is recorded as being found in the *muṣḥafs* of the Companions Ibn Mas'ūd and Anas b. Mālik and the Successor Abū Ṣāliḥ. Ibn 'Abbās is also reported to have disliked the 'Uthmānic reading, which contains *bi-mithl*, as he considered God to have “no equivalent (*laysa laḥū mathīl*).”³¹

Brubaker reaches a similarly frustrating conclusion regarding standardization in example 3, a collection of nine scribal insertions involving the word *allāh*, one of which I have already addressed. The first seven subexamples belong to the same famous Umayyad Fustat codex. The omissions of *allāh*, Brubaker states, highlights “the apparent late standardization of a number of instances of *allāh*” (p. 36). Yet in subexamples 6 and 7 from the same codex, the omission of *allāh* results in ungrammatical phrases. So clearly an accidental omission should be considered the most likely explanation, and it is unclear why Brubaker refuses to acknowledge this possibility. Brubaker also tells us in example 17, which comes from the same codex, that “this particular fragment has a very high density of corrections” (p. 77). Given the frequency of corrections in this manuscript, the resultant ungrammatical phrases in two of the examples, and the fact that *allāh*

signed-tanam-al-najmi-al-maliki-al-ashrafi-mamluk-6195211-details.aspx shows Q 47:25–31 inserted in the margin. An eye skip resulted in the scribe jumping from Q 47:24 to Q 47:32, which, like Q 47:25, starts with *inna lladhīna*.

28. Early manuscripts containing the standard *lahum* in Q 42:21 include BL Or. 2165, Wetzstein II 1913, Saray Medina 1a, and DAM 01-25.1.

29. Alba Fedeli, “Relevance of the Oldest Qur'ānic Manuscripts for the Readings Mentioned by the Commentaries: A Note on Sūra ‘Ṭā-Ḥā,’” *Manuscripta Orientalia* 15, no. 1 (2009): 1–10.

30. Dutton, “Two ‘Hijāzī’ Fragments.”

31. See Abū al-Faṭḥ Ibn Jinnī, *al-Muḥtasab fī tabyīn wujūh shawādhidh al-qirā'āt wa-l-īdāh 'anhā*, ed. Muḥammad 'Aṭā (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, 1998), 1:113.

is a high-frequency word, what reason do we have to suppose that this is more than just the work of a sloppy scribe? It behooves Brubaker, if he wishes to prove that more than carelessness is at work, to show us that the frequency of corrections involving *allāh* relative to the frequency of the word's occurrence in the manuscript exceeds that of corrections involving other words or phrases. Until such evidence is produced, the only reasonable explanation is accidental omission, as I have stated. It is also obvious by this point that the standard text, with *allāh*, is present in multiple earlier and contemporary manuscripts.³²

The remaining example, no. 5, comes from a truly fascinating manuscript held at the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, which contains multiple significant deviations from the standard text. In the single page featured, Brubaker identifies eight points at which the *rasm* diverges and five later corrections. What is particularly interesting is that despite later changes, the page is still not in conformity with the standard text. This fact raises many questions: Is the divergence the result of dictation from faulty memory, a sloppy scribe, or a deliberate deviation from the ʿUthmānic text? Alternatively, does it represent a pre-ʿUthmānic tradition? The manuscript itself certainly postdates

standardization, but the written tradition it represents may be more ancient. Are any of the variants present attested in the Muslim tradition? Are they attributed to Companion(s)? For comparison, we know that many of the variants in the undertext of the Sanaa palimpsest correspond to ones reportedly found in various Companion codices.³³ Although these questions may well lie beyond the scope of an introductory book, this example certainly leaves the reader wanting more and looking forward to a follow-up.

In addition to the points made above, there are a number of other errors throughout the book. Under example 7, Brubaker notes the addition of an *alif* to *li-llāh* in Q 23:87 to yield *allāh*, which, he says, “comports with Abū ʿAmr’s reading (and another)” (p. 56). Brubaker then cites Michael Cook as observing that this reading aligns with the codex sent by ʿUthmān to Basra, which was one of the four regional exemplars. Brubaker also states that al-Dānī ascribes the insertion to al-Ḥajjāj. Both of these statements are inaccurate: Cook explicitly rejects this variant as belonging to the Basran exemplar,³⁴ while al-Dānī very strongly rejects reports of this variant being a later addition.³⁵ Nowhere in this discussion is al-Ḥajjāj

32. Q 33:18 and Q 33:24 have the standard *allāh* in BL Or. 2165, Tübingen Ma VI 165, DAM 01-27.1 (upper text), and Saray Medina 1a. Q 33:73 has the standard *allāh* in Saray Medina 1a, BL Or. 2165, DAM 01-29.1, and Tübingen Ma VI 165. Q 41:21 has the standard *allāh* in Saray Medina 1a, Wetzstein II 1913, BL Or. 2165, DAM 01-25.1, and DAM 01-27.1 (upper text). Q 22:40 has the standard *allāh* in Saray Medina 1a, Wetzstein II 1913, BL Or. 2165, Arabe 328c, DAM 01-29.1, and Tübingen Ma VI 165. The two remaining examples are ungrammatical.

33. Behnam Sadeghi and Mohsen Goudarzi, “Ṣanʿāʾ 1 and the Origins of the Qurʾān,” *Der Islam* 87, no. 1–2 (2012): 1–129. See esp. 115ff.

34. Cook, “Stemma of the Regional Codices,” 94.

35. Al-Dānī, *al-Muqniʿ*, 2:317–318.

mentioned.³⁶ On the basis of the stemma and a number of reports in *al-Muqni'*,³⁷ it seems most likely that this variant was not in the original Basran exemplar and was a later addition; I discuss the variant in more depth in a forthcoming publication. Brubaker cites the Sanaa palimpsest and a second Birmingham palimpsest as examples of highly nonstandard texts (p. 96). However, it is not clear what he means by the Birmingham palimpsest. Half of a folio of the Mingana-Lewis palimpsest is housed in the University of Birmingham library, but its text is standard.³⁸ The other possibility is the claim by Qasim Al-Samarrai that Birmingham 1572a is a palimpsest. However, this claim has not been accepted by the scholarly community, and no actual text has been uncovered or produced.

Brubaker's addendum, discussing coverings identified in the Cairene *muṣḥaf*, is also problematic. He notes that in many instances, the text beneath the tape extends beyond it so that it can be read, and that it conforms with the standard text (pp. 86–87). He also mentions that he did not inspect the manuscript in person and is reliant on photographs, which do not permit careful investigation. It is therefore puzzling that Brubaker includes this example only to suggest that “the tape might be serving another purpose, such as selective concealing of

something that is written on the page” (p. 87). The photographs included in the book very clearly show the irregularity of the coverings, which often obscure letters only partially and rest in between lines of text. Such taping could well be the result of improper storage or conservation, and it is irresponsible to suggest otherwise when (a) concealment of nonstandard text would be a significant discovery in such a (relatively) late manuscript, and (b) the author has given no indication that he has attempted to contact the curator to ascertain further information about the coverings.

If the objective of Brubaker's book is to demonstrate the humanity of the scribes involved in transmitting the Quranic text, it certainly succeeds. It is well presented and accessible, and does an admirable job guiding the reader through a nuanced and technical subject using a series of photographs and clear descriptions. Where it falls short, however, is in its methodology and analysis. Although Brubaker states that he always gives scribal error first consideration, this is not apparent from the book. In fact, the vast majority of examples in the book are best explained through simple scribal error. The main thesis, namely, that the flexibility of the Quranic text persisted centuries beyond its standardization (p. 95), remains unproven. That is not to say that cataloging and

36. An unreliable report attributing this variant to al-Ḥajjāj is found in Abū Bakr Ibn Abī Dāwūd, *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif*, ed. M. al-Sayyid and J. Sharīf (Tanta: Dār al-Ṣaḥāba li-l-Turāth), 347. The issue is also discussed in Omar Hamdan, “The Second Maṣāḥif Project: A Step Towards the Canonization of the Qur'ānic Text,” in *The Qur'ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*, ed. Angelika Neuwirth, Nicolai Sinai, and Michael Marx, 795–835 (Leiden: Brill, 2011). This may be the source of the confusion.

37. Al-Dānī, *al-Muqni'*, 2:317–318.

38. A transcription of the Quranic undertext by Alba Fedeli can be found here: <http://cal-itsee.bham.ac.uk/itseeweb/fedeli/start.xml>.

presenting these scribal changes is without merit. Brubaker rightfully recognizes the importance of stemmatics in reconstructing relationships between manuscripts (p. 97), and that requires meticulous documentation of orthographic

variations. Nevertheless, tantalizing manuscripts such as MS.474.2003 and the promise of more such finds to come leave one hoping that upcoming works will be based on a sounder methodological footing.