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The Ark of the Covenant's Spelling Controversy: A Historical Linguistic Perspective

<https://doi.org/10.1515/islam-2024-0017>

Abstract: This article examines a famous element in the reports on the canonization of the Qur'ānic text under the auspices of Uthman, in which the committee of scribes that were to write the standard text came to a disagreement on how to write the Qur'ānic word for *at-tābūt* “Ark.” After examining the different versions of the report that contain this episode, and concluding that the report of this episode goes back to the common link of Ibn Šihāb al-Zuhri (d. 124/741–2), it is shown that early on the linguistic details of this disagreement were no longer understood. However, by examining how Aramaic and Classical Ethiopic loanwords that end in stem-final *-ūt* or *-ōt* are treated, this report can be understood as referring to two competing adaptations of this foreign word into Arabic. On the one hand *at-tābūt*, the form that ends up in the standard text, and on the other hand *at-tābāh* (or more precisely: *at-tābōh*), which shows a similar strategy of adaptation as several other central loanwords in the Qur'ān such as *aṣ-ṣalāh* “prayer” and *az-zakāh* “alms.”

Keywords: Qur'ānic studies, Qur'ānic Arabic, loanwords, Ark of the Covenant, Ibn Šihāb al-Zuhri, Hadith

Introduction

There are a number of traditions about the collection and writing down of the official Qur'ānic text under the auspices of 'Uṭmān, which MOTZKI has shown all go back to the common link of the major traditionist Ibn Šihāb al-Zuhri (d. 124/741–2).¹ The major partial link, Ibrāhīm b. Sa'd (d. 162/779 or 163/780) as well as the versions transmitted by 'Umārah b. Ġaziyyah (d. 140/757–8) and Yūnus b. Yazīd al-Ayli (d. 152/769 or 159/776) all contain mention of an episode where the scribe tasked with

1 MOTZKI 2001.

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collecting and writing down the Uthmanic text, Zayd b. Ṭābit al-Anṣārī (d. 45/665), has a disagreement with his Qurashī assistants over how to write the word *at-tābūt* “ark.” The conflict is eventually resolved by ‘Uṭmān in favor of the Qurashīs. While this episode is specifically of linguistic relevance, it has not yet received a proper linguistic evaluation. In this paper, I examine the different reports and then provide a novel proposal on how the two competing spellings (Zayd’s التابوة versus the Qurashī التابوت) should be understood.

The Reports

As pointed out by MOTZKI, there are four partial common links that transmit the report of al-Zuhrī about the ‘Uṭmānic collection, that of Ibrāhīm b. Sa’d, Yūnus, Šu’ayb, and ‘Umārah b. Ġazīyyah, but not all of these partial common links include the relevant portion of the report. I believe only the Ibrāhīm b. Sa’d and ‘Umārah b. Ġazīyyah recensions can be identified with certainty as partial common links that contain the portion that discusses the relevant word *at-tābūt*.

All the versions transmitted from Ibrāhīm b. Sa’d are very similar. The main difference ultimately comes down to whether, after ‘Uṭmān expresses a judgment on which spelling the committee should adhere to, what the precise wording of his reasoning is. This vacillates between explicitly expressing that the Qur’ān was revealed in the language of Quraysh, to simply saying that the spelling is to be preferred because it is Qurashī, or simply giving no such endorsement at all.

The relevant passage as related in Ġāmi’ al-Tirmidī² and Ibn Abī Dāwūd’s *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif*³ (Muḥammad b. Baššār ← ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Mahdī ← Ibrāhīm b. Sa’d ← Ibn Šihāb al-Zuhrī), Ibn Šabbah’s *Ta’rīḥ*⁴ *al-Maḍīnah* (Sulaymān b. Dāwūd al-Hāšimī ← Ibrāhīm b. Sa’d ← Ibn Šihāb al-Zuhrī) goes as follows:

fa-ḥtalaḥū yawma’dīn fī التابوت *wa-*التابوة *fa-qāla* [n-nafaru l-qurašīyyūna (Ibn ‘Abī Dāwūd)]/l-qurašīyyūna (al-Tirmidī)/bnu z-zubayri wa-sa’idun wa-’abdu r-raḥmāni (Ibn Šabbah)⁵ التابوت *wa-qāla zaydun* التابوة *fa-rufi’a ḥtilāfuhum ‘ilā ‘uṭmāna fa-qāla ktubūhu* التابوت *fa-innahū* [nazala (al-Tirmidī)] *bi-lisāni qurayšin*.

One day, [the committee tasked with standardizing the Qur’ān, consisting of Zayd b. Ṭābit and three Qurashī men] disagreed on التابوت or التابوة. The Qurashīs said that it is التابوت whereas

² Al-Tirmidī, *Ġāmi’* (1996), 182.

³ Ibn Abī Dāwūd, *al-Maṣāḥif* (2002), 199.

⁴ Ibn Šabbah, *Ta’rīḥ* (n.d.), 1000–1001.

⁵ In the Ibn Šabbah version, Zayd’s opinion is mentioned before the three Qurashīs.

Zaid said it was التابوه. So their disagreement was brought to 'Utmān, and he said: "write it as التابوت, for it is (revealed) in the speech of the Quraysh."

The recension of 'Umārah b. Ġaziyyah as related in the version of al-Ṭabarī in his *Ġāmi' al-Bayān*⁶ (Aḥmad b. 'Abdah al-Ḍabbī/Nu'aym b. Ḥammād ← 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Muḥammad al-Darāwardī ← 'Umārah b. Ġaziyyah ← Ibn Šihāb al-Zuhrī) is a bit more elaborate:

Qāla zaydun: fa-amaranī 'uṭmānu bnu 'affānin an aktuba lahū muṣḥafan wa-qāla: "innī mudḥi-lun ma'aka raḡulan labīban faṣīḥan fa-mā ḡtama'tumā 'alayhi fa-ktubāhu wa-mā ḥtalaftumā fīhi fa-rfa'āhu ilayya. Fa-ḡa'ala ma'ahū abāna bna sa'īdi bni l-'āṣi. Qāla: fa-lammā balaḡā "inna āyata mulkihi an yātiyakumu t-tabūtu" qāla zaydun: fa-qultu التابوه wa-qāla abānu bnu sa'īdin التابوت fa-rafa'nā ḡalika ilā 'uṭmāna fa-kataba التابوت.

Zayd said: "Uṭmān b. 'Affān ordered me to write for him a Muṣḥaf, and he said: 'I will have an intelligent and eloquent man join you. Whatever you two agree on write it down; and whatever you disagree on bring it to me.'" So he assigned Abān b. Sa'īd b. al-'Āṣ to him. [al-Zuhrī] said: "when the two of them arrived at the Āyah 'Indeed the sign of his authority will be that the Ark (التابوت) will come to you.'" (Q 2:248) Zayd said: "I said that it is التابوه and Abān b. Sa'īd said it is التابوت, so we brought that to Uṭmān and he wrote التابوت."

There is one transmission in Ibn Šabbah's *Ta'rīḥ*⁷ through al-Layṭ b. Sa'd that MOTZKI thinks is a version of the partial common link Yūnus (but this is not explicit in the text), which includes this episode but this time with Ubayy b. Ka'b as the one of the people opining on the spelling:

wa-kāna ḥīna ḡam'i l-qur'āni ḡu'ila zaydu bnu ṭābitin wa-'ubayyu bnu ka'bīn yaktubāni l-qur'āna, wa-ḡu'ila ma'ahum sa'īdu bnu l-'āṣi yuqīmu 'arabiyyatahū. Fa-qāla bnu ka'bīn-i التابوه wa-qāla sa'īdu bnu l-'āṣi innamā huwa التابوت. Fa-qāla 'uṭmānu raḡiya ḷḷāhu 'anhu ktubūhu kamā qāla sa'īdun fa-katabū التابوت.

It was at the time of the collection of the Qur'ān that Zayd b. Ṭābit and 'Ubayy b. Ka'b were assigned to write the Qur'ān, and appointed with them was Sa'īd b. al-'Āṣ to correct its Arabic. So Ubayy b. Ka'b said التابوه and Sa'īd b. al-'Āṣ said it is only ever التابوت. So Uṭmān said: write it like Sa'īd has said it, and they wrote التابوت.

The second version related by Ibn Šabbah is worded quite differently, although still clearly related to the al-Zuhrī version (despite being transmitted through another chain: Ibn Wahb ← 'Umar b. Ṭalḥah al-Layṭī ← Muḥammad b. 'Amr b. 'Alqamah ← Yaḥyā b. 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Ḥāṭib):⁸

6 Al-Ṭabarī, *Ġāmi'* (1954), 59–62.

7 Ibn Šabbah, *Ta'rīḥ* (n.d.), 1002.

8 Ibn Šabbah, *Ta'rīḥ* (n.d.), 999.

Qāla salamatū bnu ‘abdi r-raḥmāni: amara ‘uṭmānu raḍīya l-lāhu ‘anhu fityānan minā l-‘arabi an yaktubū l-qur’āna wa-yumliya ‘alayhim zaydu bnu ṭābitin, fa-lammā balaḡū التابوت *qāla zaydu bnu ṭābitin-i ktubūhā* التابوت *wa-qālū: lā naktubu illā* التابوت *fa-ḍakarū ḍālika li-‘uṭmāna fa-qāla ktubū* التابوت *fa-innamā anzalahu l-lāhu ‘alā raḡulin minnā bi-lisānin ‘arabiyyin mubīnin.*

Salamah b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān said: ‘Uṭmān ordered young men from among the Arabs to write the Qur’ān, and Zayd b. Ṭābit was dictating to them, but when they reached التابوت Zayd b. Ṭābit said: write it التابوت and they said: We only ever write it التابوت so they mentioned that to ‘Uṭmān and he said: write it التابوت, after all, God sent it down to a man among us in a pure Arabic tongue.

The partial common link of most of the above reports is clearly Ibrāhīm b. Sa’d who transmits from Ibn Šihāb al-Zuhrī, while a notably different version that nevertheless clearly relates the same event is transmitted from ‘Umārah b. Ġaziyyah, who likewise transmits from al-Zuhrī. Finally, there is a version from Yūnus that rewrites the details of the people involved in the writing of the Muṣḥaf but likewise transmits from al-Zuhrī. It therefore stands to reason that the report of the spelling controversy about the word for “Ark” at least goes as far back as the lifetime of al-Zuhrī (58–124/677–8–741–2).

As we will see, it is specifically the linguistic feature that caused the controversy that carries significant realism for having come from the early Islamic period, although the linguistic implications were soon forgotten in the Islamic tradition. This further corroborates the early date of this report.

Issues with the Traditional Understanding

In the above, I have kept the vocalization of the two versions of the words التابوت and التابوت untranscribed because it is exactly the precise vocalization whose significance has been lost over time. Modern print editions, when they vocalize these forms at all, consistently vocalize them as *at-tābūtu* and *at-tābūhu*. This understanding seems to be quite old since as early as al-Farrā’ (d. 209/822) we see that the controversy is understood this way; in *Luḡāt al-Qur’ān*⁹ he says the following:

Wa-l-‘arabu ḡamī’an ‘alā t-tābūtu bi-t-tā’i, ‘illā l-anṣāra, fa-innahum yaqūlūna “at-tabūh” bi-l-hā’i. Ḥaddaṭani bi-ḍālika ṣayḥun ‘an qatādata qāla: “t-tabūhu” luḡatu l-anṣāri.

All Arabs pronounce *at-tābūt* with a *tā’* except for the Anṣār, for they say *at-tabūh* with a *hā’*. A Sheikh on the authority of Qatādah told me about that, saying: *at-tabūhu* is the dialect of the anṣār.

⁹ Al-Farrā’, *Luḡāt* (2014), 43.

But the reading of *at-tabūh* is linguistically rather unlikely. We must first recognize that the form historically had a final *t*, as it must derive from Aramaic *tēbūṭā* “chest, ark,”¹⁰ most likely through the intermediary of Classical Ethiopic *tābot* “ark of Noah, Ark of the Covenant”¹¹ on account of the shared idiosyncrasy between Arabic and Classical Ethiopic of unexpectedly having *ā* as an initial vowel rather than Arabic *ay* or Classical Ethiopic *ē* that one would have expected as approximations of the original *ē* in the Aramaic word.¹²

As such, we would have to assume that the dialect of the Anṣār (i. e., Medina) would have undergone a *a-t > -h* shift. While such a shift would not be unusual in a pausal position, the report as we have it seems to suggest this shift even happened in a non-pausal position. Moreover, had such a shift indeed taken place in a central Hijazi dialect such as that of the Anṣār, we would expect other words with a similar ending in *-ūt* to have likewise be reported with this shift, but words like, for example, عنكبوت *‘ankabūt* “spider,” الطاغوت *aṭ-ṭāgūt* “false idols,” and ملكوت *malakūt* “kingdom” are, to my knowledge, never reported to undergo such a shift, pausally or otherwise.

At the same time, if we take these reports to reflect any amount of truth at all, the *hā’* reported cannot simply be an alternative way of writing the final *tā’* either as in that case the two words would become homophonous, while most reports discussed above seem to imply that there was a linguistic difference between the way these two were pronounced rather than being a purely orthographic difference.

A New Proposal

The common understanding that Zayd b. Ṭābit (one of the Anṣār) would have pronounced the word for “Ark” as *at-tābūh(u)* therefore creates a problem, and the linguistic reality that lies behind this report has been obscured. I would like to make a proposal that resolves this conundrum. To get a better understanding of this situation, we must examine the strategies that we see in Qur’ānic Arabic when adopting Aramaic and Classical Ethiopic words that have a stem that ends in *-ūt* or *-ōt*. Qur’ānic Arabic attests a number of words that either come from Aramaic directly, from Aramaic through Ethiopic, or from a native Ethiopic word that in these languages end in *-ūt* and *-ōt*. In the reading traditions of the Qur’ān, we find that there are two distinct solutions to adapting such words, which are moreover orthographically distinct in the Qur’ānic Consonantal Text (QCT). Table 1 provides an overview.

¹⁰ SOKOLOFF 2002, 1203; SOKOLOFF 1990, 580.

¹¹ LESLAU 1987, 570.

¹² NÖLDEKE 1910, 49.

Table 1: Loanwords of Aramaic and Ethiopic words the end in *-ūt/-ōt*.

Aramaic	Ethiopic	QCT	Reading Tradition
<i>malḵūtā</i> “kingdom”	<i>malakōt</i> “Godhead”	e.g., Q 6:75 ملكوت	<i>malakūtu</i> “kingdom” ¹³
<i>ṭā’ūtā</i> “error; a spirit”	<i>ṭā’ōt</i> “idol, ungodliness”	e.g., Q 2:256 الطغوت	<i>aṭ-ṭāḡūtu</i> “false idol” ¹⁴
<i>ṣlōṭā</i> “prayer”	<i>ṣalōt</i> “prayer, vow, intercession”	e.g., Q 2:3 الصلوة	<i>aṣ-ṣalātu</i> “prayer” ¹⁵
<i>zākūtā</i> “merit” ¹⁶	–	e.g., Q 2:43 الزكوة	<i>az-zakātu</i> “alms” ¹⁷
–	<i>maskōt</i> “window”	Q 24:35 كمشكوة	<i>ka-miškātin</i> “niche” ¹⁸

As we can see in Table 1, Aramaic and Ethiopic words that end in *-ūt* or *-ōt* are borrowed either with word-final *-ūt* or with what in the reading traditions of the Qur’ān (and Classical Arabic) is the feminine form *-āt-* (pausal *-āh#*). In all of these cases the long vowel that precedes the feminine suffix is spelled with a *wāw*.

This standard Classical Arabic feminine singular ending *-āt-* (pausal *-āh#*) is used in native vocabulary for final weak roots, regardless of whether this final root consonant is *wāw* or *yā’*. In Classical Arabic orthography these are spelled with *alif* followed by the *tā’ marbūṭah* (ةـ), but in Qur’ānic orthography there is a distinction depending on the final root consonant. When the final root consonant is *wāw*, it is spelled وة, and when the final root consonant is *yā’*, it is spelled ية. The former in all reading traditions is pronounced *-āt-* (pausal *-āh#*), but there are clear indications that these were once pronounced with a more backed vowel *-ōt-* (pausal *-ōh#*) at the very least among reciters of the Hijaz.¹⁹ The latter is pronounced *-ēt-* (pausal *-ēh#*) or *-āt-* (pausal *-āh#*) in the reading traditions that retain a phonemic distinction between *ā* and *ē*. Table 2 gives an overview of the native words with these two feminine endings that occur in the Qur’ān.

13 SOKOLOFF 2002, 681; LESLAU 1987, 344; NÖLDEKE 1910, 33.

14 SOKOLOFF 2002, 509; LESLAU 1987, 584; NÖLDEKE 1910, 35.

15 SOKOLOFF 2002, 964; LESLAU 1987, 557; NÖLDEKE 1910, 36.

16 SOKOLOFF 2002, 412.

17 JEFFERY 2008, 153.

18 LESLAU 1987, 365; NÖLDEKE 1910, 51.

19 Sibawayh reports such readings as being acceptable in the recitation of the Qur’ān, stating explicitly that the people of the Hijaz would pronounce *aṣ-ṣalāt*, *az-zakāt*, and *al-ḥayāt* with an *alif at-taḥḥīm* “a backed *ā*,” i. e., something akin to *ō* (Sibawayh, *Kitāb* (1988), iv, 432). For a discussion on the historical origins of these forms, see AL-JALLAD 2017, VAN PUTTEN 2017, and VAN PUTTEN 2022, 29–30, 124.

Table 2: The reflexes of *-awat- and *-ayat- in native Arabic words

QCT	Reading Traditions ²⁰	Qur'ānic Arabic
الحَيوة "life"	e.g., Q 2:85 <i>al-ḥayāt</i> (-āh#)	<i>al-ḥayōh</i>
النَجْوَة "refuge"	Q 40:41 <i>al-nağātī</i> (-āh#)	<i>al-nağōh</i>
مَنْوَة "Manāt"	Q 53:20 <i>manāta</i> (-āh), <i>manā'ata</i> (-ā'ah#)	<i>manōh</i>
بِالْغَدْوَة "in the morning"	Q 6:52; Q 18:28 <i>bi-l-ğadāti</i> (-āh#), <i>bi-l-ğudwati</i> (-ah#)	<i>bi-l-ğadōh</i>
مُزْجِيَه "trivial (f.)"	Q 12:88 <i>muzğētin</i> (-ēh#), <i>muzğātin</i> (-āh#), <i>muzğātin</i> (-āh#)	<i>muzğēh</i>
تَقِيَه "as a precaution"	Q 3:28 <i>tuqētan</i> (-ēh#), <i>tuqātan</i> (-āh#), <i>tuqātan</i> (-āh#), <i>taqiyyatan</i> (-ah#)	<i>tuqēh</i>

The loanwords that we discussed above that in Classical Arabic had the pronunciation with *-āt-* are likewise to be understood as having had the feminine ending *-ōt/-ōh#*, as is made explicit for *aş-şalōh* and *az-zakōh* by Sibawayh, and can safely be extended to *miškōh* as well.

We therefore find that Qur'ānic Arabic employed two different strategies to borrow the Aramaic *-ūt/-ōt-* and Classical Ethiopic *-ōt*: it was either borrowed with the ending *-ūt-* (e. g., *malakūt*, and *aṭ-ṭāğūt*) or it was borrowed with *-ōt/-ōh#*, which in the Classical Reading traditions ends up being pronounced as *-āt/-āh#* (e. g., *aş-şalōh*, *az-zakōh* and *miškōh*). It is exactly this ambivalent strategy that can help us understand the specific linguistic difference that is being addressed in the report about the conflict over the spelling of "Ark" of the borrowing of the Classical Ethiopic *tābōt*. Both *at-tābūt* and *at-tābōt-* (pausal *at-tābōh#*) would have been natural ways of borrowing this word, and the expected orthographies for the two borrowing strategies of this word would have been التابوت and التابوه, respectively, that is, exactly the spelling that we find to have been the point of contention between the Anṣārī scribe Zayd b. Tābīt and his Qurashī colleagues. The difference in dialect between Zayd and his Qurashī colleagues, then, was clearly not that the former pronounced it *at-tābūh* and the latter *at-tābūt*. Instead, Zayd appears to have pronounced it *at-tābōh* (in line with loanwords like *aş-şalōh*, *az-zakōh* and *miškōh*) rather than as *at-tābūt* (in line with *malakūt*, and *aṭ-ṭāğūt*).

While the correct understanding of the linguistic detail was clearly lost with time – evidently no longer transparent already at the end of the second century AH, as shown by the comments from al-Farrā' – the expected orthography was well-preserved, and now with a deeper insight into the historical linguistic development of Qur'ānic Arabic and loanwords present in the Qur'ān, we can understand this conflict as concerning a rather natural and even expected point of contention in the

²⁰ Ibn al-Ğazārī, *Naşr* (2018), III, 1621, 1648, 1635–6, 1682–5; IV, 2235, 2658.

adaptation of this loanword. This fact lends considerable credibility to the archaicity of this element in the report.

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