

Daniel A. Madigan, *The Qurʾān's Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), xv+236 pp, cloth, ISBN 0-691-05950-0 2001

Islam is frequently characterized as a “religion of the Book”. Many scholars consider it the most developed example of this kind of religion, probably because the words of scripture occupy a more central position in the faith and practice of Muslims than in other religions. Yet, there is no physical book at the center of Islamic rituals. Muslims’ approach to their scripture is almost totally oral. Many recite the whole sacred text from memory, and it was years after the Prophet’s death that it was first put in book form. What does the Qurʾān mean, then, when it insistently calls itself *kitāb*, a term that is usually translated as ‘book’ or ‘scripture’? In order to answer this question, Daniel Madigan reexamines this key term, *kitāb*, as it occurs in the Qurʾān’s own discourse about itself. The main task of *The Qurʾān's Self-Image* is, hence, to bring to light the complex connotations of the Qurʾān’s ‘book’ and ‘writing’ language as “it is allowed to interpret its own concepts and speak for itself” (p. 9).

To discern the Qurʾān’s particular conception of *kitāb*, Madigan adopts a dual strategy: to reevaluate a consensus long held both by Muslim and Western scholars of Islam about the way the Qurʾān views itself, and to outline an alternative approach not only for the expert in the study of Islam but also for anyone interested in the comparative study of scripture and hermeneutics. From the outset, Madigan makes it clear that he treats the Qurʾānic text as a coherent whole “because that is the way it functions within the community that canonizes it and that looks to it for guidance. The notion of *kitāb* is the overarching theme that proclaims and maintains that coherence” (p. 11).

Overall, Madigan adopts a critical approach. He regards with skepticism straightforward renderings of the words derived from the Arabic root *k-t-b* and takes into consideration as much evidence as can be found, both within the Qurʾānic text and in selected parts of the Muslim tradition as to their earliest field of meaning. He starts by noting that the Qurʾān uses words derived from the root *k-t-b* mostly to refer, not to the Qurʾān itself, but to different phenomena, such as the recording of all that is pre-ordained (e.g., *al-ʿimrān*: 145; *al-Mujādalah*: 21); divine decrees (e.g., *al-Anʿām*: 12, 54); the inventory of what exists (e.g., *Yūnus*: 61; *Hūd*: 6); the registers of an individual’s

good and bad deeds (e.g., *al-ʿimrān* :181; *Yūnus*: 21). Many scholars read into these categories what they had learned about similar notions on other religious contexts and thus understood them as separate writings. However, Madigan contends that this approach to the categories of writing fails to recognize that the notion of writing evidenced in the Qurʾān exhibits an extraordinary fluidity. Part of what God writes is legislative, some of it consists of judgments, while other writing is merely descriptive; a great deal concerns the revelation and explanation of the nature of things; in yet other instances, God reveals something of His nature by revealing what He has “written” for Himself. Within all this variety, however, there is an indisputable unity to the notion of divine writing. According to Madigan, the very use of the single term *kitāb* to describe so many aspects of the phenomenon, itself points to a unity “that goes deeper than some idea of a heavenly library or archive” (p. 6). Thus, he concludes that the commonly accepted translation “book” cannot do justice to the complexities of the Qurʾānic term *kitāb*. Madigan suggests instead, the translation “writing”, albeit with some qualifications.

A book, inherently, purports to be bound, complete as well as structured and ordered. It is the incongruity of this implicit claim with the actual form of the Qurʾānic text that prompted many Western authors to presume that the production of the envisaged ‘book’ was left unfinished and incomplete. In chapter 1, Madigan demonstrates how this assumption about the structure and form appropriate to the Qurʾān does not arise from the Qurʾānic revelation itself, but rather from what scholars know of the structure and function of other scriptures. According to these scholars, for “the Book” to function as the complete record of revelation and as a code of legislation for the community, it should have a more orderly structure. However, Madigan finds no hint, in either the text or the tradition, that there is anything incomplete about the Qurʾān or that its structure was in any way problematic at the time of the Prophet’s death. Madigan quotes Wilfred Cantwell Smith who maintained that “Muslims, from the beginning until now are that group of people that has coalesced around the Qurʾān” (p. 52). He further notes that “the evidence indicates that they coalesced around it while it was still incomplete, still oral, still in process. They committed themselves to believe in a God who had initiated a direct communication with them. They

gathered around the recitations as the pledge of God's relationship of guidance to them rather than as a clearly defined and already closed textual corpus" (p. 52).

The second chapter focuses on the Qur'an's own rejection of the proof value of heavenly writings and on its refusal to behave as an already closed and codified text. It also emphasizes the Qur'an's insistence on remaining open and responsive, functioning as voice of God's continuing address to humanity. Furthermore, Madigan asserts that the Qur'an's *kitāb* cannot be mistaken for a book because its boundaries are not fixed: it is not made completely clear whether this text—the Qur'an—is the whole *kitāb* or part of it, one of several *kutub* or the only one. Indeed the Qur'an does not even identify itself with the *kitāb*, to which it refers in the third person when proclaiming, defending, and defining it. Yet the Qur'an does not speak of the *kitāb* simply as something already fixed and separate, for the Qur'an 'reciting' is the very mode by which the *kitāb* is made manifest and engages with humanity. Thus, Madigan concludes that the Qur'an is interested not so much in writing as a mere description of the form of the divine word as in the source of its composition, authority and veracity. The Qur'an's claim to being a *kitāb* is a claim to authority and knowledge rather than a simple statement about the form of its eventual storage.

Chapter 3 deals with the task of mapping the semantic field of "writing" language in the Qur'an in view of understanding precisely how symbol of *kitāb* functions in the Qur'anic discourse. Madigan first lays the ground by examining the background of semantic field analysis and analysing some of its applications in the context of Qur'anic studies.

In the next three chapters, Madigan presents a compelling semantic analysis of the Qur'an's self-awareness. He argues that the Qur'an views itself not as a completed book, but as an ongoing process of divine writing and re-writing; as God's active engagement with humanity. He also demonstrates the pervasiveness of the phenomenon of *kitāb* in the Qur'anic discourse, while asserting its elusive character. In fact, the seventh chapter explores how this elusiveness is also the reason the *kitāb* cannot be understood as a fixed, closed corpus.

Once a book is produced, it exists independently of its author. The Muslim community, however, has always had a lively sense that the

kitāb's Author remains engaged with his audience. The concluding chapter attempts to identify the ways this richer and broader conception of the *kitāb* has remained operative in Islam in spite of the Muslims' preponderant concern for the closed corpus of the Qur'ān. Madigan astutely remarks that the appeal of tradition to *kalam Allah* as the key to understanding revelation is probably a means to escape the term *kitāb*, which became often associated with the *mushaf*. The term *kalam* offers the flexibility, freshness and responsiveness that *kitāb* has in the Qur'ānic text, but no longer in the tradition.

The Qur'ān's Self-Image constitutes a major contribution in studying the Qur'ān and Islam's self-understanding. The author, Daniel Madigan, has grounded his conclusions on a cogent reading of the Qur'ān and other primary texts. His focus on the key-term *kitāb* is well founded, for it plays a crucial role in defining not only the nature of sacred texts but also the mission of the Prophet, the characteristic way of God's interaction with humanity, the relationship between the Creator and creation and the relationship of Islam to other religions.

Although now it is widely accepted that the Qur'ān is not textually dependent on the earlier scriptures, it is still often assumed that it knew their content at least partially. What is rarely suggested is that the Qur'ān could mirror the role that other scriptures played within their own communities at the time and place of Islam's emergence. Madigan's approach to the Qur'ān sheds light on how the Qur'ān actually can provide insight into the way it saw the *ahl al-kitāb* relating to their *kutub*. In the appendix, Madigan turns to the revelations, in which terms the Qur'ān defines itself, to see whether the notion of *kitāb* emerging from his semantic analysis would have made sense to the other people who were defined by the phenomenon of the *kitāb*. It is hoped that this attempt to read *from* the Qur'ān what the Muslims were learning from the *ahl al-kitāb* with whom they had contact, will pave the way for a new and positive dialogue between these religions.

Moreover, Madigan's emphasis on the understanding of the *kitāb* as a token of access to the totality of God's address to humanity rather than a static and fixed book is extremely important, because the implicit claim to totality and the completeness contained in the word 'book' may open the way to a 'fundamentalism', which identifies the limits of God's *kitāb* with the boundaries of the received text. Such understanding may become dangerous, for if one imagines oneself to be in possession of complete wisdom and knowledge, rather than

having access to the knowledge of God, one may claim hegemony over the understanding of revelation.

Madigan's well-researched approach to the complex issue of the Qur'an's self-referential terms is not really a new reading of the text. It is rather an attentive reading predicated upon the idea that a unity underlies the Qur'an's use of the root *k-t-b*. Such a reading may appear as a radical departure from the traditional Muslim approach. However, the latter in many ways implicitly supports the position advanced by Madigan.

The Qur'an's Self-Image successfully unravels the characteristic self-awareness of the Qur'an: It observes and discusses the process of its own revelation; it asserts its own authority and claims its place within the history of revelation. Grasping this dynamic dimension of the Qur'an is crucial to understanding Islam and Islamic identity. From this point of view also, Madigan's book is a very useful source not only to the expert in the study of Islam but also to anyone who is interested in the study of scripture and hermeneutics.

To conclude, *Qur'an's Self-Image* is a significant breakthrough not only in the area of Qur'anic studies but more importantly in the hermeneutics of sacred texts. In its content, it is a challenge not only to traditional Western scholarship on Islam but also to the works written by Muslim scholars.

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