

- **Contextual embeddedness:** keeping the poetry bound to its martyrial, liturgical, and Qurʾānic sources of authority.

In the final analysis, Ḥallāj is not a literary artifact to be dissected but a burning voice to be listened to, tremblingly. To hear him truly is to feel the nearness of the Divine speaking through a throat prepared for both poetry and the sword.

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Key Terms of the Qurʾān: A Second Critique

Nicolai Sinai: *Key Terms of the Qurʾān* • Princeton: Princeton University Press • 2023 • ISBN 978-0691241319.

In a previous review of *Key Terms of the Qurʾān: A Critical Dictionary*, it was noted that the work might have become a major contribution to Qurʾānic studies had its content fulfilled the promise of its title.¹ The dictionary was announced as “a historically oriented dictionary of key Qurʾānic terms and phrases,” yet much of it devolves into old and tiring discussions of pre-Qurʾānic precedents and Biblical parallels through Sinai’s inconsistent engagement with the classical Arabic lexicons, whose treatment of Qurʾānic roots forms the bedrock of premodern semantic analysis. While *Key Terms of the Qurʾān* gestures toward semantic history and occasionally cites lexicographical authorities such as al-Khalīl b. Aḥmad (d. 175/791) or Ibn Fāris (d. 395/1004), these references remain selective and largely subordinated to a self-constructed ad hoc framework of modern historical linguistics. There is little sustained engagement with the semantic principles operative in works like *Maʿānī al-Qurʾān*, *Kitāb al-ʿAyn*, or even *Mufradāt al-fāz al-Qurʾān*, despite the fact that these works—often acknowledged as foundational in Qurʾānic contextualization—represent the earliest and most conceptually proximate efforts to articulate Qurʾānic

1. *Islamic Sciences*, Vol. 16 (Winter 2023) No. 2, pp. 168-171; https://jisarchive.cis-ca.org/_media/pdf/2023/2/jis_16_2_key_terms.pdf, accessed April 22, 2025.

meanings of the Arabic terms.

Sinai's preference for diachronic reconstruction over synchronic internal coherence sometimes leads to strained semantic claims that would be challenged by even a cursory cross-reference to the lexica. For instance, his treatment of *samāʿ*, *shāʿa*, or *ṭahara*, show no familiarity with root-branch discussions that are central to early lexicographical method; he simply bypasses them in favor of a more minimalist sense-development model. In doing so, Sinai undercuts the deep entwining of Qurʾānic semantics with pre-Islamic and intra-Qurʾānic word-worlds as articulated by the lexicographers. This lacuna is especially notable in a work that seeks to illuminate “key terms” of the Qurʾān, where precision of semantic range and fidelity to Qurʾānic usage would ideally be grounded in both historical and traditional resources.

The structure is in place, but the substance is absent. That critique offered *ṣabr* as an example of the project's limitations. The present review expands the previous critique by focusing on one of the longest entries in the *Key Terms*: “Allah” (pp. 59–77). The results are no more encouraging.

Sinai begins the entry “Allah” with an imprecise figure—“well over 2,500 times”—for the number of occurrences of the word *Allāh* in the Qurʾān, though the actual count is 2,697, found in 85 *sūras*, excluding Q 9 and the *basmala*. This kind of imprecision would be minor were it not the first sign of a larger issue: methodological looseness. Immediately afterward, he conflates the name *Allāh*—referred to in the Islamic tradition as the *ism al-dhāt* (“Name of the Divine Essence”)—with two of the most frequently occurring divine attributes: *al-Raḥmān* and *Rabb*. This homogenization not only obscures the foundational distinction between essential and attributive names, but also misrepresents the theological hierarchy within the Qurʾān. He even renders *al-Raḥmān* inaccurately as “the Merciful” instead of the superlative “the Most Merciful.” Such imprecision in translation signals a persistent flattening of the semantic richness of Qurʾānic theology.

In the section “Etymology and Epigraphic Attestations,” Sinai conflates two separate domains of inquiry. He relies on Abū Ishāq al-Thaʿlabī (d. 425/1035) to assert that *Allāh* is a contraction of *al-ilāh*, attributing this to the Kufan school. However, he quotes selectively, omitting the wide range of views documented in *al-Kashf waʾl-bayān*. Nor does he cite other major sources such as *Jawāmiʿ al-bayyināt* by al-Rāzī, which documents the extensive theological debates on this point, or al-Suyūṭī's *Nawāhid al-abkār wa-shawāriḍ al-afkār*, which lists thirty opinions on the etymology of *Allāh*.

The majority of scholars, including Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 150/767), al-Shāfiʿī (150–204/767–819), al-Zamakhsharī, al-Ghazālī (450–505/1058–1111), al-Bayḍawī (d. 685/1286), and al-Suyūṭī, regard *Allāh* as an underived proper

noun (*‘alam ghayr mushtaq*). This view is affirmed in multiple sources.³ That Sinai omits this dominant position, and its intellectual rationale, renders his treatment of the term partial and misleading.

A comparative glance at the article on Allāh in the *Integrated Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān (IEQ)* can be instructive.² The *IEQ* entry begins with a precise lexical profile, proceeds to grammatical and morphological questions, and surveys classical positions across the linguistic, theological, and mystical disciplines. It includes Sibawayh (d. ca. 180/796), who famously declared Allāh “the most definite of all definites” (*aʿraf al-maʿārif*), as well as major exegetes and grammarians from the 2nd/8th to the 14th/20th centuries. It discusses the relationship of the name Allāh with Beautiful Names of Allah, its function in Qurʾānic composition, and its philosophical implications within kalām and *taṣawwuf*. Sinai’s entry, by contrast, relies largely on epigraphy, secondary Western scholarship, and comparative theology, with scant regard for the disciplines that have actually preserved and developed the concept over 1,400 years.

A further set of methodological and theological concerns arises in Sinai’s treatment of the uniqueness of the divine, particularly with regard to the question of God’s visibility, materiality, and ontological status. In the subsection titled “Is the Qurʾānic God invisible and immaterial?”, Sinai begins by acknowledging the transcendental language of verses such as *laysa kamithlihi shayʾun* (Q 42:11) and *lā tudrikuhu l-absār wa-huwa yudriku l-absār* (Q 6:103), which have long served as doctrinal pillars for the affirmation of divine incomparability (*tanzīh*) and ontological otherness within classical Islamic theology. Yet he quickly moves to problematize what he calls “Platonising construals” of the divine in Islamic tradition, ultimately concluding that “from an inner-Qurʾānic perspective, it is unwarranted to understand God as immaterial and invisible” (p. 68). This claim is both theologically contestable and philologically precarious.

First, Sinai’s framing implicitly treats the doctrine of divine immateriality as a post-Qurʾānic theological construct that emerged through external philosophical influences (e.g., Platonism or early kalām theology). By tracing the earliest articulation of God’s immateriality to Jahm b. Ṣafwān (d. 128/745–6), Sinai presents this ontological transcendence as a later rationalist inference rather than a directly Qurʾānic affirmation. But this narrative occludes the ways in which classical exegetes—well before the formalization of rational theology—derived precisely such ontological conclusions from the Qurʾānic text itself. For instance, early tafsīr traditions, including those preserved

2. *Integrated Encyclopedia of the Qurʾān (IEQ)*, Volume 1, pp. 3-34. <https://icquran.com/index.php>

by al-Ṭabarī and al-Māturīdī, interpret Q 6:103 not merely as a statement about the limits of human sensory perception but as an affirmation of divine transcendence that renders Allah categorically beyond spatial or corporeal apprehension. The verse does not merely say “eyes do not see Him” (*lā tarāhu l-abṣār*) but that “eyes do not attain Him” (*lā tudrikuhu l-abṣār*), employing the verb *adraka*—a verb of epistemic and metaphysical grasp—to signal the utter incommensurability of the divine. To dismiss this as an unwarranted theological projection overlooks the rich hermeneutical reasoning embedded in early tafsīr.

Second, Sinai’s reluctance to admit divine immateriality as a Qur’ānic teaching seems driven by a reluctance to attribute to the Qur’ān any fully developed metaphysics. While methodologically consistent with his non-Qur’ānic approach, this stance invites theological distortion, for it implies that the Qur’ān merely gestures toward transcendence without affirming it ontologically. This is a subtle but consequential move: by treating the divine *tanzīh* as a rhetorical or ethical strategy rather than a statement of being, Sinai risks reducing a foundational element of Islamic theology to the status of literary emphasis. The long-standing consensus across the major theological schools—Ash’arī, Māturīdī, and Mu’tazilī alike—that Allah is not a body (*laysa bi-jism*) and does not inhere in space or time is not simply the result of external philosophical imposition but a natural development of rigorous reflection on precisely such Qur’ānic verses.

This brings us to another, and even more far-reaching, issue: Sinai’s claim that the Qur’ān does not possess the vocabulary to express a Platonic bifurcation of reality between a material and immaterial realm. He argues that terms such as *al-ghayb* and *al-shahāda* (often rendered “the unseen” and “the visible”) are “squarely epistemological rather than ontological” (p. 68). While it is true that these terms primarily denote the limits of human knowledge—what is accessible to direct perception versus what lies beyond—it is an overcorrection to insist that they have no ontological import. In Islamic tradition, *al-ghayb* is not merely the unknown but the realm in which Allah, the angels, the Last Day, and all metaphysical realities reside. The Qur’ān itself links belief in *al-ghayb* with piety in its opening verses: *alladhīna yu’minūna bi’l-ghayb* (Q 2:3), suggesting that the unseen is not only a cognitive category but the very field in which divine realities operate.

Classical tafsīr corroborates this point abundantly. Al-Rāzī, for example, in his commentary on Q 2:3, affirms that belief in *al-ghayb* entails belief in those aspects of existence that are neither perceived nor corporeal—*wujūd ghayr mashhūd wa-lā maḥsūs*. Al-Ṭustarī and al-Qushayrī similarly read *al-ghayb* as the veiled domain of divine knowledge and being, not simply as the

as-yet-unobserved. Indeed, the Qurʾān associates *al-ghayb* with the exclusive knowledge of Allah (*ilm al-ghayb*), reinforcing the sense that it is a realm not simply inaccessible but ontologically distinct, under the sovereign domain of the divine. Sinai's refusal to read ontological weight into this contrast not only diminishes the metaphysical density of the Qurʾān's cosmology but also places him at odds with nearly the entire exegetical tradition, from early grammarians to Sufi metaphysicians.

Moreover, by rejecting any dualism in the Qurʾān between corporeal and incorporeal reality, Sinai finds himself unable to account for a vast array of verses that point precisely to such a distinction—not in Platonic terms, to be sure, but in robust Qurʾānic categories. The repeated affirmations that everything upon the earth shall perish and only the *face of your Lord shall remain* (Q 55:26–27), or that *He is with you wherever you are* (Q 57:4), while being above His throne (Q 20:5), all speak to a divine mode of being that transcends corporeality, spatial location, and temporality. These are not merely “epistemological” contrasts but ontological markers that shape the Qurʾān's metaphysics.

It is instructive that Sinai's rejection of divine immateriality and his reduction of *al-ghayb* to an epistemic term converge on a shared methodological bias: the privileging of diachronic, historical-linguistic reconstructions over the cumulative theological grammar generated by 1400 years of Qurʾānic reflection. While this approach rehearses earlier philological misinterpretations, it bypasses the inner coherence of the Qurʾān as it was received, understood, and systematized by the Islamic tradition itself. The result is a Qurʾān reconstructed in the image of academic secularism—stripped of its ontological aspirations, disembedded from its doctrinal architecture, and rendered as a text of ethical gestures rather than metaphysical affirmations.

This is not merely a matter of theological disagreement; it has implications for the epistemology of Qurʾānic studies as a field. To dismiss divine invisibility and immateriality as post-Qurʾānic dogma is to impose a restrictive historicism that underestimates the Qurʾān's own metaphysical claims. To frame *al-ghayb* as a merely epistemological category is to miss the ways in which the Qurʾān insists upon the radical transcendence of Allah and the structured reality of an unseen world. That Sinai entertains these readings only to bracket them as later developments or speculative overextensions reveals a methodological fault line between the historical-critical approach and the interpretive logic that has guided the Islamic tradition for over a millennium.

In this respect, *Key Terms of the Qurʾān* exemplifies both the promise and the peril of contemporary Qurʾānic philology. Its analytical rigor and sensitivity to semantic nuance are undeniable, yet its theological reticence—its

unwillingness to allow the Qurʾān to speak metaphysically on its own terms—ultimately limits its usefulness for those seeking a fuller understanding of Qurʾānic ontology. By treating the Qurʾān’s divine discourse as linguistically rich but conceptually austere, Sinai offers a truncated vision of the very reality the Qurʾān seeks to unveil.

This methodological gap—between decontextualized philology and the embedded Islamic tradition—is the central failing of *Key Terms*. The entry on Allāh reveals Sinai’s dependence on outdated orientalist assumptions and a restricted range of sources. His account lacks grammatical precision, theological clarity, and historical depth. Most importantly, it is not grounded in the Qurʾān’s own epistemological and metaphysical categories. Its guiding method seems to be comparative linguistics and surface-level hermeneutics, not immersion in the Qurʾān’s world or the traditions of reflection that emerged from it.

In sum, *Key Terms* remains, at best, a skeletal framework for future work. To become a serious reference for Qurʾānic vocabulary, it must engage the Islamic intellectual tradition, not evade it. It must draw on the tools of tafsīr, kalām, uṣūl al-dīn, and Arabic linguistics, not simply Western philology. Until then, its terms will remain, ironically, keyless.

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