

one of the most consequential houses in Islamic history once more to silence.

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Key Terms of the Qur'an—A Third Review

Nicolai Sinai: *Key Terms of the Qur'an* • Princeton: Princeton University Press • 2023 • pp 840 • ISBN 978-0691241319.

This third review of Nicolai Sinai's *Key Terms of the Qur'ān* is not an isolated response to a single author nor a continuation of some academic fixation. It is part of a broader concern: why does so much Western Qur'ānic scholarship remain unable to grasp the internal logic, conceptual architecture, and hermeneutical sophistication of the Islamic scholarly tradition? The first review surveyed the work's structural promises and its pervasive superficiality; the second examined the entry on "Allah"—the heart of Qur'ānic theology—and showed how the methodological framework of the *Key Terms* project is incapable of accommodating the Qur'ān's metaphysical grammar. This third review takes a single term of immense significance, Guidance (*hudā*)—together with its opposite, Misguidance (*ḍalāl*)—in order to expose, with concrete illustration, the deeper epistemic traps and inherited habits of interpretation that continue to plague Western academic approaches to the Qur'ān.

Among the conceptual constellations of the Qur'ān, guidance occupies a privileged place. It lies at the heart of Qur'ānic anthropology, cosmogony, prophecy, and soteriology; it involves divine will, human response, moral responsibility, and eschatological culmination. An entry on *hudā* in a critical dictionary of Qur'ānic concepts should illuminate these dimensions. Sinai's entry begins with a promising nod in this direction: he notes that guidance and misguidance belong to the Qur'ān's pervasive moral polarities, linked conceptually to belief and repudiation, sightedness and blindness, moral health and moral sickness. One anticipates a careful mapping of the Qur'ān's internal semantics, its metaphysical commitments, and its multi-layered portrayal of divine and human agency. Instead, what follows is the familiar descent into the methodological crucible that has shaped Western Qur'ānic studies for over three centuries: Sinai's entry opens with "Guidance in pre-

Qurʾānic poetry and the Biblical tradition!”

This is not a harmless preamble; it is the decisive misframing that determines everything that follows. To begin the study of *hudā* with Safaitic inscriptions, scattered lines of pre-Islamic poetry, and an array of Biblical terms is to place the Qurʾānic concept within a genealogy that the Qurʾān itself neither recognizes nor inhabits. One may trace linguistic parallels, but a Qurʾānic concept cannot be defined by them. The Qurʾān’s own semantic world is grounded in Arabic linguistic roots as understood by early lexicographers, shaped by the scripture’s unfolding discourse, and systematized in the exegetical, legal, and theological traditions. To begin instead with Biblical analogues is to repeat a nineteenth-century historiographic habit—visible in Nöldeke and the philological school that followed him—of approaching the Qurʾān through the lens of antecedent scriptures and late antique religiosity. In this paradigm, the Qurʾān becomes an object to be traced backwards, not a revelation that constructs its own semantic universe.

After this misframing, Sinai’s analysis unfolds predictably. We are told that the Qurʾān uses *hadā* in “two senses”: a “presentational” sense, in which divine guidance is objectively offered; and a “successful” sense, in which humans internalize and accept that guidance. With these two categories, the entire architecture of the Qurʾānic discourse on guidance is collapsed into an anemic binary: God shows the way; some people follow it; others do not. The problem is not merely that this is reductive, but that it misconceives the Qurʾānic concept from the ground up.

The Islamic tradition has long offered a substantive semantic framework for *hudā*—one that is far richer, more coherent, and far more faithful to the Qurʾān’s own usage. The locus classicus for this framework is Rāghib al-Aṣḥāhānī (d. 502/1108), whose *Mufradāt al-fāz al-Qurʾān* establishes a fourfold typology of guidance that later exegetical and theological works adopt, refine, and transmit. This typology is not an invention of scholastic theology; it is a crystallization of the Qurʾān’s own vocabulary.

First is the primordial guidance that Allah grants to every morally responsible being—*ʿaql*, natural discernment, and the intuitive knowledge without which accountability cannot stand. This is grounded in verses such as Q 20:50 (*Our Lord is He who gave each thing its creation, then guided it*), where guidance refers to the ontic orientation that every creature receives. Second is the guidance communicated through prophets and scriptures: the external disclosure of the path, exemplified in *We made from among them leaders who guide by Our command* (Q 21:73). Third is the inner divine assistance (*tawfīq*) granted to those who respond to the prophetic summons, as in *And those who are guided—He increases them in guidance* (Q 47:17) and *Whoever believes*

in Allah—He guides his heart (Q 64:11). Fourth is eschatological guidance: the final deliverance into the Garden, as in *He will guide them and set right their condition* (Q 47:5), or the grateful confession of the saved, *Praise be to Allah who has guided us to this* (Q 7:43).

These four levels are not arbitrary divisions; they form a hierarchy. Each presupposes the previous. Without the first, one is not morally accountable; without the second, one cannot respond; without the third, one cannot persevere; without all three, one does not reach the fourth. This typology reveals the Qurʾān’s sophistication: guidance is not a single act but an entire economy of divine-human interaction operating across creation, revelation, moral psychology, and eschatology. Once this structure is seen, Sinai’s “two senses of *hadā*” appear not merely incomplete but conceptually untenable.

A similar and even more striking flattening appears in Sinai’s parallel entry on *ḍalāl*, to which he devotes just under two pages. Here again, the Qurʾānic concept is immediately displaced into a Biblical frame: he begins by aligning *ḍalla* and *aḍalla* with an array of Hebrew and Syriac verbs—*šāgā*, *hišgā*, *tāʿā*, *hiʿā*—before suggesting that Arabophone Christians likely used *ḍalla* to translate these terms prior to the Qurʾān (p. 486). The Qurʾān’s own semantic architecture thus never becomes the starting point; rather, the conceptual lens is inherited from Biblical philology and late antique translation practices. Even when Sinai turns to Qurʾānic verses, he offers only a loose catalogue of occurrences and a brief note that divine leading astray might have “deterministic implications,” which he immediately tempers by invoking Räsänen’s claim that those led astray “deserved this fate” (p. 485). What is entirely absent is any engagement with the Qurʾān’s own distinctions between *ḍalāl* and *ghayy*, between human straying and satanic enticement, between divine sealing and divine *idllāl*, or with the exegetical literature that treats these as distinct moral and metaphysical categories.

Most importantly, Sinai never explains why the Qurʾān uses different terms for different types of misguidance, nor how these distinctions structure the Qurʾānic view of moral responsibility. The rich discourse on *inkisār al-qalb*, the sealing of the heart (*khatm*), and the moral prerequisites for divine guidance—which occupies entire sections in classical *tafsīr*—is reduced to a set of lexical glosses and Biblical parallels. The result is not merely thin; it leaves the reader with no sense that *ḍalāl* in the Qurʾān is a morally stratified, theologically charged, and metaphysically patterned concept. What remains is an emptied shell: a term presented as if the Qurʾān had borrowed it, not formed it.

Sinai’s handling of predestination is symptomatic of the same methodological problem. Because his framework eschews theological

reasoning, he is forced to interpret Qurʾānic statements about divine will through literary and counterfactual categories, supplemented by comparative material from Romans 9:17–18. The result is a confounding oscillation: verses that emphasize divine sovereignty appear “predestinarian,” while verses that tie guidance to moral disposition appear “non-predestinarian.” For the Islamic tradition, however, this is not a paradox: divine omnipotence and human responsibility are held together through the distinction between potentiality and actuality, the role of human acquisition (*kasb*), and the hierarchy of guidance noted above. None of this is accessible within a framework that treats the Qurʾān’s theological statements as rhetorical flourishes rather than metaphysical claims.

What emerges from Sinai’s entry is not simply an incomplete analysis of *hudā* but a case study in the structural limitations of his entire project. The *Key Terms* approach promises conceptual precision but operates with a lexically impoverished method; it promises theological sensitivity but refuses to take the Qurʾān’s theological grammar seriously; it gestures toward conceptual networks but remains captive to a philological horizon shaped by Biblical comparison and pre-Islamic fragments. It is not that Sinai is inattentive or ungifted; rather, he works within a paradigm that predetermines what he can see. The Islamic tradition—lexical, exegetical, theological, mystical—has spent fourteen centuries articulating the meanings, layers, and implications of the Qurʾān’s key concepts. To continue to ignore this tradition is not an act of neutrality; it is an act of methodological impoverishment.

Using Sinai’s entries on *Guidance* and *Misguidance* as examples to showcase poverty of Western Qurʾānic Studies is therefore not a matter of academic point-scoring. It is a way of directing readers to the real gold: the conceptual richness of the Islamic disciplines that Western scholarship has too often bypassed. When one compares Sinai’s thin scaffolding with the interlocking structures of meaning preserved in the classical lexicons, the exegetical tradition, and the theological literature, the glitter of the former is revealed for what it is—an attractive surface with little substance beneath. The Qurʾān invites readers into a vast universe of meaning; that universe already has its mapmakers. One need only consult them.

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