The Qur'an's Self-Image: Books, Writing and Authority in Muslim Scripture

Daniel A. Madigan
Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001. 272 pages.

This is a well-researched and carefully thought out book on the highly complex issue of the Qur'an's self-referential terms to its own status as Scripture. Particularly illuminating are the author, Daniel Madigan's, clear and profound engagements with the semantic content of key Qur'anic words like

kitab, mushaf, qur'an, dhikr, tanzil, and *wahy,* and his discussion of the inter-relatedness of these terms. Madigan successfully problematizes particularly the key terms *kitab* and *Qur'an* since, as he shows, their meanings can be fairly fluid and their essence cannot be easily and crudely reduced to a rigid demarcation between orality and "writtenness" alone.

A central focus of his book is indeed the tension between the orality and the written nature of Islam's sacred scripture, already suggested in the name given to it, *al-Qur'an*, which itself may be translated as "the Recitation," and "the Reading." Madigan stresses the primacy of the oral nature of the Qur'an; in his (rather brief) discussion of the terms *kalam Allah* (the speech of God) and *kitab Allah* (the book of God), he states,

> ... the focus on the ontological status of the Qur'an [as represented in the usage of the term *kalam Allah*] may be not merely the result of speculation but rather an attempt to recover something that was lost when the concepts of *kitab Allah* and *Qur'an* were collapsed into the content of the *mushaf*.

Chapters 2 – 4 provide a fine and nuanced exposition of the Qur'anic conception of *kitab*, which, as Madigan persuasively suggests, has to do with divine, timeless authority becoming manifest in the human, time-bound world. The difference between *Qur'an* and *kitab* is therefore, not merely a question of display or storage, through the medium of the human voice in the former and through written composition in the latter, but has to do rather with the Qur'an's origin, that is, "its author and the source of its composition."

In saying this, Madigan takes issue with some of the conclusions of Toshihiko Izutsu in his work *God and Man* regarding the term *kitab* in particular, because of the latter's failure to see the word's relational meaning derived from overlapping semantic environments. This is a fair and important observation on Madigan's part. Many of the medieval Arabic sources suggest the shifting valences attached to some of these key terms in different social contexts and semantic environments. Although this is a point duly recognized by the author, he does not always adequately develop it. For example, it is still not completely clear where exactly *kalam Allah* would fit in this schema of key concepts; the juxtaposition (or contraposition) of the terms *kalam Allah* and *kitab Allah* certainly suggests a dichotomous understanding of the oral and written natures of the Qur'an, the implications of which are not fully explored in this work. Is this perhaps a later understanding? Then in what historical and social contexts might this understanding have emerged? A more

thorough engagement with these sorts of questions would have better contextualized the provenance and trajectory of these terms.

The bibliography lists few primary sources in Arabic, which regrettably limits the range of his discussion. His familiarity with secondary sources is quite sound, although Versteegh's *Arabic Grammar and Qur'anic Exegesis in Early Islam* should have been in the bibliography. Madigan's otherwise erudite foray into such an important topic would have benefited considerably from consulting works such as the *Kitab al-Masahif* of Ibn Abi Dawud and the early *Fada'il al-Qur'an* works of Abu `Ubayd and Ibn Durays. These works have much light to shed particularly on the reception of the Qur'an among the early Muslims.

On this issue, the larger historical and social contexts in which this discourse of reception unfolded needed to be more exhaustively engaged. As my own research has shown, the works cited above suggest that the discourse about the textual sacrality and orality of the Qur'an appears to have arisen against the backdrop of the rise and eventually the consolidation of a class of professional scholars who were wedded to the written text, while the *qurra'*, to be understood in many contexts as referring to non-professional reciters of the Qur'an, emphasized the primacy of the Qur'an's oral aspect. These tussles, born out of a politics of piety as it were, which invoked one's relationship to the Qur'an as a marker of piety, had larger implications for the overall organization of the early Muslim polity. Madigan notices the importance of the *qurra'* but misses the emotive significance of this term in diverse contexts, the discussion of which would have added considerably to his exposition.

These observations should not detract from the overall value of this book and one need not agree with all of Madigan's conclusions to benefit from his learned work; there is much food for thought here. Like Izutsu's earlier acclaimed research into the key concepts of the Qur'an, the present work demonstrates the intrinsic value of engaging the Qur'anic vocabulary on its own terms. Both Qur'anic studies as a specific field and the larger field of scriptural studies are enhanced by such a close and perceptive analysis.

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