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A study such as this rarely originates in a pure and disinterested desire for knowledge, but more often in the pressing questions that arise out of experiences and commitments. The origin of this work lies in an experience in Pakistan of the interaction between Muslim and Christian understandings of scripture. The emerging local Christian theology, even though often showing little appreciation of Islam, seemed to take for granted a distinctly Islamic approach to scripture and revelation. Furthermore, many Muslims took it for granted that Christians would be their allies against a secular world that was extremely skeptical of any claim to be in possession of literal divine revelation. This raised for me two questions: what was the understanding of scripture in the Muslim community’s earliest days, and why was the Qur’an so adamantly that God’s revelation is common to all?

My questions were further focused and sharpened by contact with William A. Graham’s work on the Qur’an and on the oral use of scripture in Islam as well as in other religious traditions. His investigations of the importance of orality made the prominence of the word *kitāb*—‘book’ or ‘writing’—in the Qur’an’s self-description all the more perplexing. Professor Graham has been a valued guide and mentor from the time this project began to take shape during a year at the Center for the Study of World Religions, Harvard University.

This book began as a dissertation for the religion department at Columbia University, and I owe a substantial debt of gratitude to Professor Peter Awn and to the late Professor Jeanette Wakin, who from the start treated me more as a colleague than a student. They were unfailing in their support and concern through occasionally difficult times. My thanks to colleagues who have been generous in reading chapters and offering encouragement and suggestions, particularly to Lance Laird, Paul Heck, Greta Austin, and Clark Lombardi. Carolyn Bond did a fine job of editing the manuscript and teaching me some economy of style.

Columbia University’s Department of Religion was a wonderfully congenial atmosphere in which to work; it is a place where religion is valued and considered
worthy of the most serious and careful study. The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences was very generous in its support over my years in New York and Cambridge. I see no way of repaying that debt except by a further commitment to the study and teaching of religion.

One advantage of having moved to Rome is that I have been alerted to the work of my colleague, Arij A. Roest Crollius, S.J. He made me aware of his significant but unfortunately too little-known thesis on the Qur’ān and Hindu scriptures just as this book was going to press. I regret not having discovered it earlier so as to profit from his insights and engage with them further in the course of this investigation. We take rather different starting points, and differ in methodology, but our findings bear each other out, and our conclusions as to the understanding of divine writing and the symbolic nature of the kitāb converge substantially. Fortunately the way is now open to collaboration in this area, and the issues on which we vary will provide avenues for further exploration.

No undertaking like this can ever be accomplished alone, and I am much indebted to those who gave me the encouragement to see it through to its completion, especially my dear friend Dr. Nikolaos George, and my Jesuit companions in Lahore, New York, Boston, Cambridge, Rome, Berlin, and of course Australia.

A NOTE FOR THE NON-ARABIST

At the first sight of a book so laden with quotations in the original language and script, the reader unfamiliar with Arabic may feel an apology is in order. However, let me offer encouragement rather than apologies. This book has a dual purpose: to reexamine a consensus long held by both Muslim and Western scholars about the way the Qur’ān understands itself, and to outline an alternative view for the specialist as also for those whose expertise does not lie principally in the study of Islam, but whose interest is in the burgeoning field of comparative study of scripture and hermeneutics. The extensive use of Arabic is necessary to the main argument, which engages closely with the text of the Qur’ān. However, it is not intended to exclude the non-Arabist reader. All Arabic, Syriac and Hebrew have been translated and, in places where it might be useful, have also been supplied in transliteration. For those unfamiliar with the structure of Semitic languages, I offer the following short explanation. Though it falls far short of an introduction to Arabic, it should suffice to enable the non-Arabist to follow the linguistic argument of the book.

If we examine the sets of English words sing, sang, sung, song, and ring, rang, rung, we recognize that the basic meaning is given us by the consonants, while the changing vowel indicates what part of speech the word is and its tense. This phenomenon is rather limited in English and not very regular—compare bit, bat and but, or hit, hat, hut and hot—but in Arabic this kind of pattern is of the essence of the language.

One way of conceptualizing Arabic and other Semitic languages is that almost all words are based on roots consisting of usually three consonants. These roots are often thought of as the bearers of one or more basic meanings. For example, the trilateral root َكَتَبَ (also represented in this book as َكَتَبَ) usually carries the idea of writing. Particular grammatical forms are derived from the root by affixes, infixes, doubling of the root letters and also by the arrangement of vowels linking the letters of the root. So, for example:
The root *khalqa* is connected with creation and gives rise, for example, to these words:

- **khalq** creation
- **khalqa** he created

- **yakhluqu** he creates
- **takhluqu** she creates

- **khalil** creator
- **makhlil** created

- **khalila** nature

Note that the root letters always remain in the same order.

Having observed how numerous words share a common root and hence a related meaning, now see how the pattern of non-root words gives a common grammatical form. Words that use the pattern *c̣āc̣īc̣* (where *c̣* stands for any root consonant) are all active participles of the basic verb:

- **kāthib** one who writes i.e., a scribe
- **c̣ālim** one who knows i.e., a scholar
- **khāliq** one who creates i.e., a creator
- **qātil** one who kills i.e., a murderer
- **zālim** one who misuses i.e., a wrongdoer, a-o oppressor
- **fāṭih** one who breaches i.e., a conqueror

Similarly the passive participles share a common pattern (*māc̣ūc̣*):

- **makhtūb** written
- **ma′lūm** known
- **mākhlūq** created
- **maqtūl** killed
- **maẓlūm** wronged, oppressed
- **maftūḥ** breached, defeated

This phenomenon of the combination of root letters with affix/vowel patterns is repeated throughout the language, and is easily recognized after a relatively short acquaintance with it.

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### ABBREVIATIONS

- **CSCO** Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium, Louvain.
- **JAOS** Journal of the American Oriental Society
- **JSAS** Journal of Semitic Studies
- **MIDeo** Mélanges de l’Institut Dominicain des Études Orientales
Introduction

Islam is commonly characterized as a religion of the Book, not only in popular parlance but also in scholarly circles, and is even considered by many the most fully developed example of this type of religion, which had long been emerging in the Near East.¹ This view of Islam has seemed to many scholars almost self-evident, and of course is not entirely without foundation. It is true that the words of scripture occupy a position and play a role in the faith and practice of Muslims that is much more exalted and central than perhaps in any other religion.

However, this way of approaching Islam fails to acknowledge that Islam is also characterized by an almost entirely oral approach to its scripture. One finds no physical book at the center of Muslim worship; nothing at all reminiscent of the crowned Torah scroll or the embellished lectionary. On the contrary, the simple ritual and the recitation of the Qur’ān that forms part of it are carried out from memory. Even the prodigious effort of memory required to have the entire sacred text by heart is not considered at all out of the ordinary for a Muslim. To have to consult a written copy to quote the Qur’ān is thought a failure of piety.

Yet Muslims themselves would surely not dispute the claim that the Book is at the heart of their religion. The Qur’ān uses the term kitāb (pl. kutub, usually translated as ‘book’ or ‘scripture’) hundreds of times, and for commentators it is axiomatic that al-kitāb means the Qur’ān. However, full weight must also be given to the fact that at the foundational level of Islam—in the Qur’ān itself—the precise meaning of the term kitāb is not so easily ascertained. This word kitāb is pivotal to the Qur’ān’s perceptions both of itself and of God’s dealings with humanity over the centuries. However, the term’s continuing importance in the self-understanding of Islam makes it all too easy for us to read later developments and usages back into the verses of the Qur’ān itself. That is to say, we too easily

presume that an understanding of scripture which only gradually emerged among Muslims during the centuries of their community’s development was actually present and fully enunciated in the text of the Qur’an itself.

This book intends to set aside as much as possible prior judgments about the meaning of the words derived from the Arabic root k-t-b. I will regard with some skepticism simple translations of these words and will take into consideration as much evidence as can be found, both within the Qur’an text and also in selected parts of the Muslim tradition as to their earliest field of meaning.

There are but few voices raised against the consensus among scholars, both Muslim and non-Muslim, that Muhammad intended the revelations he brought to be compiled and preserved in book form. Many related issues do remain matters of debate: the extent and character of the Prophet’s own involvement in the process, the sources (if any) on which he drew, the intended contents of the book, and the completeness of the present official text. These disputed points do not, however, undermine the central agreement.

The scholarly consensus is underpinned above all by the Qur’an’s own insistence that it be considered a kitāb of divine origin, just like the examples bestowed earlier upon Christians and Jews. The apparent similarities between some of the Qur’an’s ideas on revelation and holy writings and those found elsewhere in the Near East have been closely examined and well documented by Western writers. By the time of Islam’s emergence, it was common coinage among Near Eastern religions that divine dealings with creation, and especially with humanity, often involved writing. The Qur’an makes no claim to novelty in this regard. Indeed it uses words derived from the root k-t-b mostly to refer not to the Qur’an itself but to phenomena with which we are familiar from other religious contexts: the recording of all that is destined to happen (e.g., Q 3:145; 58:21); divine decrees binding either on humanity (e.g., Q 4:24) or on God himself (e.g., Q 6:12, 54); the inventory of all that exists (e.g., Q 10:61; 11:6); and the registers of each individual’s good and evil deeds, written either by God himself (e.g., Q 3:181) or by heavenly agents (e.g., Q 10:21). Arthur Jeffery, among others, documents similar notions in Mesopotamian religion, in biblical and post-biblical writings, and in Zoroastrian sources. The way all these are alluded to in the Qur’an makes it clear that Muhammad’s listeners were quite familiar with the idea of such divine writings.

Jeffery joins many Western scholars in understanding the categories just listed to have been thought of as separate writings. However, if we attempt to assign each reference in the Qur’an to one or other category, we find that it is not so easily done. The categories interpenetrate, and many of the references seem too general to be assigned easily to one or the other. For example, it is not at all evident that a clear distinction can be drawn between the written records of an individual’s deeds and the recorded predetermination of his or her fate—an issue sharpened by debates about the sovereignty of God and about predestination. Furthermore, the records and the inventory are both characterized as kitāb mubīn ‘a writing that makes clear’ (Q 34:3; 11:6), and this echoes a term the Qur’an uses often of itself and its heavenly source:

Tā Sin. Those are the āyāt [signs or verses] of the recitation and of a writing that makes things clear.

Sūrat al-Naml 27:1

There is an extraordinary fluidity to the notion of writing evidenced in the Qur’an. Much of what God writes is legislative (either permanently binding or only so for a particular occasion) and can be disobeyed, albeit at one’s peril; some of it consists of judgments or determinations that have already been made and that cannot be escaped (e.g., Q 3:154), while others are yet to be determined (e.g., Q 583); some writing is merely descriptive—the keeping of accounts (e.g., Q 36:12); a great deal is the revelation and explanation of the nature of things


3 Jeffery, Qur’an as Scripture, 9–12.

4 Jeffery, Qur’an as Scripture, 9–14.

5 Cf. also Q 36:12 where it is umām mubīn ‘an authority that makes things clear’.

6 Compare Q 15:1: — Alṭ Lam Rā. These are the āyāt [signs or verses] of the writing and of a recitation which makes things clear.” (Both translations are deliberately non-committal.) Indeed, clarity and explanation hold a central place in the Qur’an’s idea of its own role as a kitāb, so the words derived from b-y-n will point to an important facet of the understanding of k-t-b words.

The consonantal text of the Qur’an used in this work was made available by the Islamic Computing Centre, London. The volveling has been added following the standard Royal Egyptian text. The translations of all Qur’anic quotations in this work are my own, though in developing them I have consulted those of M. M. Pickthall, A. J. Arberry, Richard Bell, Aḥmad ‘Alī Yūsuf ‘All, and Hanna Kassis. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of non-English texts are my own.
(e.g., Q 7:145); in some instances God in effect reveals something of his nature by revealing what he has "written" for himself (e.g., Q 6:12).

There is an undoubted unity to the notion of divine writing within all this variety. However, the fluidity ultimately frustrates any attempt clearly to distinguish separate "books" of divine "writing." The use of the single term kitāb to describe so many facets of the phenomenon should encourage us to search for a unity that goes deeper than some idea of a heavenly library or archive.

Georg Widengren rejected Jeffery’s attempt to divide up the heavenly writings, and he took up with enthusiasm an insight expressed only briefly by Johannes Pedersen. Pedersen suggested that the Qurʾān envisages a single heavenly Book and he demonstrated that this book in many ways parallels the varied functions of the Babylonian Tablets of Destiny, those who try to distinguish the various celestial volumes are perhaps creating their own difficulty by understanding kitāb as book rather than more generally (and also more accurately) as writing. The material form of the writing is not the central concern. Moreover, as writing materials developed, so the physical form of the heavenly writings was envisaged differently, developing from tablets in Babylonian religion to tablets and then scrolls in Judaism, and on to codices in later Christian iconography. What remains constant is the content, and Pedersen’s observation reminds us not to place considerations of the form of the heavenly writing above its content.

Although this range of divine writ exists principally in the celestial realm, it is not confined to heaven. Among the Qurʾān’s main concerns is the way these celestial writings are the source or exemplar of the scriptures given by God through the prophets to particular communities—the Arabs having been given the Qurʾān as the most recent and most trustworthy of these. Nor is this a new idea, since Judaism had already come to think of the Torah as existing in written form with God long before the creation of the world, though it was not fully revealed until it was given to Moses, and the notion had taken root in other religious communities as well. One sees even in Christianity a wealth of iconographic evidence to suggest that Jesus was perceived as the bringer of the book of the Gospel, being depicted early on as Moses was, holding a scroll; then, later holding an often quite lavishly decorated codex. Interestingly this motif remains firmly entrenched in Christian iconography even though it is unanimously held that the gospels were written by others after Jesus’ death. The origin may lie in the fact that the scroll in pre-Christian iconography was a symbol of power. As the codex superseded the scroll as the characteristically Christian form of preserving scripture, so the form of the mark of Christ’s power and authority also changed to reflect the codex used in the liturgy.

Enlarging slightly on his point with regard to the heavenly book, Pedersen examined the Qurʾān’s phrase ahl al-kitāb, which refers to Jews, Christians and other communities with a scripture, and is usually translated as "people of the Book." He felt these groups should not be understood as "people who possess a revelation fixed in writing, but rather as the possessors of the Book (i.e., the heavenly one) which alone contains wisdom." His observation is acute. However, Pedersen fails to take account of how regularly the Qurʾān uses partitive expressions in connection with kitāb. It is not at all evident that any of the ahl al-kitāb—even the Muslims themselves—are understood to be fully in possession of the kitāb. The Tablets of Destiny, which Pedersen saw as a parallel to the Qurʾān’s kitāb, were never in the possession of the Babylonians, though it was believed that some of the contents of the tablets could be read, as it were, in the zodiac.

Instead, perhaps we should understand ahl al-kitāb as those who have been given not possession of but rather access to and insight into the knowledge, wisdom, and sovereignty of God, for which the very fluid term kitāb serves as a symbol. "Those who have been given the kitāb" are also called "those who have been given..."
given knowledge." They have learned to read the "signs" (cf. Q 45:2-7), yet it is clear that they do not actually possess all knowledge. They have, rather, been given access to the divine knowledge through God's initiative in addressing humanity through the prophets (cf. Q 20:110-14).

From this discussion it begins to become evident that a straightforward approach to "book" and "writing" language in the Qur'ān will not do justice to the complexity of its discourse about itself and about the revelations to other communities. The Qur'ān does stress its kinship with other scriptures, and we have seen some evidence of the similarity of Qur'ānic notions with those of other religious traditions. However, the rich complexity of its language demands our careful attention. We cannot presume that because we already have a clear conception of what those other scriptures are, we therefore know what the Qur'ān means when it refers to them.

My intention in the chapters that follow is first to examine critically the consensus that the Qur'ān intended itself and was intended by the Prophet to be a written corpus of scripture. This examination will begin with the evidence outside the Qur'ān text, principally from the traditions about its compilation and from commentaries. Then I will consider the evidence within the Qur'ān's own discourse, first of all by attending carefully to the polemical passages of the text where the bringing of a kitāb is the point at issue between the Prophet and his critics. This will serve to dispel some misconceptions about how the Qur'ān regards the kitāb, and so will clear the way for a more careful analysis of the semantic field of "book" and "writing" language within the Qur'ānic discourse, before that language was narrowed down by either Muslim or Western understandings imported largely from outside the text. As we have already briefly glimpsed, this root acts as a focus for an array of words and concepts. The aim is to arrive at an understanding of its range of meaning that does justice to the richness and variety of its usage.

In approaching this task, I am not discounting the relevance of the various notions of heavenly writings familiar to us from other contexts. It is important, however, to discern how they were conceived in the particular context of the Qur'ān, rather than to presume the Qur'ānic context to have been identical to the contexts either of other scriptures or of later stages of Islam. In this I will be drawing on the methodology of Toshihiko Izutsu, with some modification.15


One scarcely expects to find at the end of such an investigation that a single word is adequate to translate *kitāb*. Nor is one likely to oppose translation altogether. Rather, I hope that some of the complex connotations of the Qur'ān's "book" and "writing" language will come to light as it is allowed to "interpret its own concepts and speak for itself."16

If the claim to have discerned the Qur'ān's particular conception of *kitāb* is to be convincing, however, there should also be evidence that it has survived in the Islamic tradition. It would be merely presumptuous to claim that the Qur'ān's intent had been entirely misunderstood from the beginning by the very community that was constituted by it. For this reason, the concluding chapter attempts to show how the rich conception of *kitāb* present in the Qur'ān's discourse and the understanding of revelation and canon that it signifies have continued to exert their influence on the tradition in various ways.

In speaking for itself, the Qur'ān acknowledges that it is speaking a language already used by other groups—the *ahl al-kitāb*. It was from these people—according to tradition, the Jews of Madīna, the scattered Christian ascetics of the desert, and perhaps others as well—that the people of the Hijāz region learned the language of *kitāb* that made the Qur'ān's claims and exhortations comprehensible to them. So in the appendix, I turn to the revelations that the Qur'ān sees as its kin and to the communities that cherished them, to see whether the notion of *kitāb* emerging from our semantic analysis would have made sense to the other peoples who were defined by the phenomenon of the *kitāb*.

It remains to say something about the overall approach adopted in this study. A considerable weight of scholarship in recent years has focused on the question of the origins of Islam and its scripture, and the figure of John Wansbrough has hovered over all this work, not always named but ever present either as mentor or as adversary. Wansbrough rejects the idea that the Qur'ān was an already complete collection of the revelations of Muhammad before the time the Arabs had expanded beyond Arabia to other parts of the Middle East. According to Wansbrough, the Qur'ān did not originate in Arabia, nor indeed did Islam. What is customary considered to be the expansion of Islam was rather the expansion of a recently united and militarily powerful Arab confederation, one that had as yet no distinct religion of its own. In the process of military and economic expansion they came upon a new sectarian development within the Abrahamic and monotheist religious environment of Mesopotamia. This they adopted as their own, rewriting its history and giving it an Arab imprint in the
process. The Qur'an emerged out of a diversity of sources as part of this process, with its canonical form gradually separating itself from a body of prophetic sayings that had originated in this sectarian environment. The process was so gradual that Wansbrough would maintain that one cannot speak of a fixed version until about 800 C.E. 17

Partly because of the radical nature of his thesis and partly because of the opaqueness of his original works, it took some years before Wansbrough’s thought was fully engaged with by his critics. 18 More and more, however, Wansbrough’s critique is being seriously evaluated, though still to a large extent rejected. The rejections notwithstanding, most will recognize that Wansbrough has done a valuable service to the field of Qur’anic studies by challenging the naivety with which western scholars have approached the sources and accepted traditional accounts of the emergence of Islam and of the Qur’an’s history. Wansbrough and those who have adopted his approach have stimulated a great deal of critical and creative thought about the early history of the Qur’an. By calling for a more sophisticated approach to the traditional sources, they have opened the Qur’an text to new readings—readings less controlled by the rather too self-assured interpretations of one particular moment in Muslim tradition.

This study owes a debt to Wansbrough’s work even though it does not accept his more radical conclusions. It approaches the Qur’an text as a unity, while recognizing that this does not necessarily entail accepting that it was codified and that it achieved a position of authority in precisely the way the traditional accounts claim. The processes of collection and canonization were obviously more complex and time-consuming than they are often presented as being, and


Wansbrough’s scenario makes a good deal of the fact that we have no complete copy of the Qur’an datable earlier than the ninth century. However, there are certainly fragments which can be attributed to a much earlier period. In spite of the lateness of the extant complete transcripts, one needs to separate the question of the canonization of the text from the matter of its being widely written and copied. In the case of a sacred text that functioned and, indeed, continues to function in a predominantly oral way, the lack of a complete transcript dating from an early period is not as significant as might at first be thought. Estelle Wheeler has argued that the custom of writing Qur’ans long pre-dates the first datable texts (E. Wheeler, “Forgotten Witness: Evidence for the Early Codification of the Qur’an,” *JAOS* 118 [1998]: 1–14).

18 A small group of scholars who have followed Wansbrough’s lead (among them G. R. Hawting, Herbert Berg and Andrew Rippin) have succeeded not only in explaining his position more clearly than he originally did, but also in keeping the discussion of his approach open. Their panel at the 1996 meeting of the American Oriental Society at the University of Pennsylvania, and the special issue of *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 9 (1997) that followed from it, played no small role in spurring a new engagement with Wansbrough’s thought.
CHAPTER ONE

The Qur’ān as a Book

WESTERN SCHOLARSHIP AND THE WRITTEN NATURE OF THE QU'RĀN

One very striking feature of the Qur’ān is its insistent claim to kinship with the revelations to the Christians and Jews. This insistence that seems to be what has led most non-Muslim scholars to stress that the production of a canonical volume parallel to those of the other faith communities lies at the heart of the Qur’ān’s identity and Muhammad’s mission. The Swedish scholar Geo Widengren went so far as to claim: “That Muhammad himself, by committing his revelations to paper, purposely aimed at creating a Holy Book in competition with the Tōrāh and ‘Evangel’, is perfectly clear.” The Book had been sent down to Muhammad and now, Widengren claims, “he was going to set it down on paper, just as ‘the Book which Moses brought, a light and a guidance to man, which ye set down on paper, publishing a part, but concealing a part,’ as he reproached the Jews in Sūra 6:91.” The relevant part of the verse is:

قَلْ مِنْ آنِرَ الْكِتَابِ الَّذِي جَآءَهُ مُوسَى نُورٌ وَهَذَا لِلنَّاسِ تَجْعَلُونَهَا قَرْآَنًا يُبَيِّنُونَهَا وَمَخْفُونَ كَثِيرًا وَمَعْلُومًا مَا لَمْ يَكُنْ وَلَا آتِيَ كَذَٰلِكَ

Say, “Who was it who sent down the kitāb that Moses brought to be light and guidance for humanity and that you put on (lit., make into) parchments [or papyri] that you display, but you also conceal a great deal? You have been taught what neither you nor your forebears knew.”

Sūrat al-A‘rāf 6:91

1 Widengren, Muhammad, 150.
2 Widengren, Hebrew Prophets, 54.
Widengren’s principal concern is with the motifs of the ‘heavenly book and the apostle in Near Eastern religious history, and he more than adequately demonstrates their significance in the development of Islamic thought. The two archetypes of the messenger—one who ascends to heaven and returns with the message and the other upon whom the message descends while he remains in the human sphere—both figure prominently in the development of Muslim belief about the Prophet, even though the Qur’an presents him as being only of the second type.1 Widengren points out that much speculation about Muhammad’s night journey and ascent to heaven ignores and even contradicts the explicit doctrine of the Qur’an. However, Widengren has allowed both his own overall vision of the development of the idea of scripture in the religious history of the Near East and also his reading of the later Islamic tradition to prejudice his reading of the Qur’an itself. He sums this up at one point in his discussion: “The endeavours of Muhammad to create, as it were, an Arabic version of the Heavenly Book, as we have seen, is dictated by the pattern of the Ancient Near East, directing the Apostle to exhibit to his adherents, in a visible form, the Book he had been given by God.”2 There is no evidence at all of Muhammad’s ever having “exhibited” a visible book—in fact quite the contrary. But this fact seems not to faze Widengren in the least, so intent is he on his thesis.

The verse that Widengren quotes in support of his contention (Q 6:91) is more logically read as an indication that Muhammad might not have intended to produce a written document. We learn from it that he was certainly familiar with the Jewish custom of writing down the kitāb on qarinās (‘papyrus’ or ‘parchment’ rather than ‘paper’).3 Therefore, if he had indeed taken such a practice as his model, one would expect to find indications of that in the traditions about the written Qur’anic materials that remained after his death. But we find no reference to papyrus or indeed to anything that would suggest an intention to produce a codified document. Al-Suyūṭī lists several types of material on which, according to the traditions, fragments of the Qur’an were written: ‘ṣubub ‘the bark of palm

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2 Widengren, Muhammad, 151.

3 The term qarinās is almost certainly from the Greek papyrus, probably through the Syriac qēṭad. Cf. Jeffery, Foreign Vocabulary, 235–6. Roberts and Skeat (Codex, 54, n. 1) stress that in Greek usage in the early Christian era it meant a roll or scroll, usually understood to be of papyrus rather than parchment. Widengren most unhelpfully uses the term ‘paper’ indiscriminately with regard to writing materials that must have been papyrus, parchment or leather (e.g., Hebrew Prophets, chaps. 1–2). For a note on the Arabs’ use of paper, see Nabil A. Shami, The Rise of North Arabic Script and its Qur’ānic Development, with a Full Description of the Koranic Manuscripts in the Oriental Institute (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), 55.


5 Wensinck found only two uses of qarinās in the collections he indexed, neither of them connected with the Qur’an (Wensinck, Al-Muṣarram, 5:366). However, al-Suyūṭī quotes a tradition on the authority of Sālim b. ‘Abdallāh b. ‘Umar (a tradition allegedly from the Muwaqattāt’ that Wensinck does not record) in which qarinās is used in this connection (al-InAQīn, 1:186): ‘Alāʾ Bāk collected the Qur’an on papyrus. He had asked Zayd b. Ṭābi‘ about doing it but Zayd refused until his help was sought by (the second caliph) ‘Umar and so he did it.

6 Widengren, Muhammad, 150. He takes Noldke–Schwally to task for not considering the import of this verse with regard to Muhammad’s writing ability. However, they do see in it an indication that the revelations were being written down, though not by the Prophet. GDR 2: 1–2. 

7 Noldke–Schwally suggest this verse might indicate that Muhammad could read. GDR 1: 14.

8 A similar conclusion was drawn, with no better warrant, by G. Weil, “Mahomet savait-il lire et écrire?” in Actes du Ie Congres des Orientalistes (Florence, 1880), 357–66. Bell also believes that Muhammad actually wrote out the text himself (R. Bell, trans. The Qur’an: Translated with an Critical
greater justification, have claimed to find in it a confirmation of its literacy. This is just one of many examples of a verse that is called upon to support mutually contradictory positions to which the adherents are already committed for quite other reasons.

Noldke claims that, given the background against which the Prophet saw his mission and given the words that he used in connection with it, "it would be incomprehensible if Muhammad did not from quite early on have in mind the creation of a new record of revelation, as well as its canonization in written form." Yet all the names for the revelation behind which he discerns a suggestion of writtenness—qur’ān, kitāb, and wahy—are not as susceptible to that interpretation as he apparently hoped.

The term kitāb seems to carry the sense of writtenness clearly enough, although, as will be shown later, its meaning is far from simple and univocal. Even if one sees merit in the argument that the origin of the word qur’ān is to be found in the Syriac qar‘nā (a liturgical reading), Noldke clearly mistranslates this word as 'Lektionar,' a meaning nowhere attested in the lexicons, where a 'lectionary' is rather kitāb da-qar‘nā, literally a book of liturgical readings.12

Noldke quotes Goldziher, who draws on the pre-Islamic poets' use of the word wahy to refer to the traces of abandoned campsites, to show that wahy indicates writing.13 However, the link must be considered tenuous at best. The poets' use of wahy (usually translated 'revelation') emphasized indistinctness rather than the clarity appropriate to the kind of written document that Noldke suggests Muhammad had in mind.14 Some parallel might be found in the use of wahy as a means of communication, as in the case of an angel's message to a believer.

In the poems of the Hudhail tribe the noun wahy refers to thunder and the cognate verb awāsh is used for the 'speech' of an eagle. In the Qur'ān itself, Zechariah, after being struck dumb, "made signs" (awāsh) to the people outside the sanctuary, urging them to praise God (Q 19:12). In short, there is very little basis to assert a connotation of writtenness in the term wahy.

Noldke argues that since Muhammad understood that his revelations were to serve in place of the Bible of the Jews and Christians as "the true and unalloyed documenting of the divine will," he must have been concerned to protect these revelations from loss or change by giving them fixed written form. He summarily dismisses those, like Sprenger and Hirschfeld, who would suggest otherwise, charging that they offer no substantial proof. Yet surely the burden of proof more properly falls on anyone who would maintain that Muhammad intended to produce a written document. Given that he had not done so by the time of his death, and that according to traditional accounts such a document was not produced at all until perhaps twenty years later, more than a mere assertion that

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11 "Abs Tribe, sixth to eighth centuries A.D." (Moscow: Oriental Literature Publishers, 1995), 508. The sense of wahy is the indistinctness of age and foreignness. T. Iwatsu also lists a number of pre-Islamic examples that show that an essential part of the meaning of wahy is indistinctness or indecipherability. It does not seem necessary to understand wahy as a kind of physical writing. Take, for example, the beginning of Labid's Macalalaq where Iwatsu translates it as 'as if their rocks contained characters.' One might as well translate it as 'as if their rocks contained messages in a strange language.' "God and Man," 159-60.


14 Dāūd, 1:261.

15 Dāūd, 2:1, n. 3.
such was the Prophet's intention is required. What Muslim tradition tells us existed in written form at the time of the Prophet's death could scarcely be considered a manuscript virtually complete but for the small emendations and additions that its divine author might wish to make. Therefore, Sprenger seems quite justified in concluding that the Prophet understood the Qur'an to live not on paper so much as in the hearts of the "unlettered" to whom he was sent.

Nöldeke's certainty about the Prophet's intentions is somewhat strange, considering his description of him elsewhere. Arguing against the contention that the Prophet forewarned that shortly after his death there would be a quarrel over the letter of his revelation, he exclaims:

He, the unlearned man, who would never have thought that one might give exaggerated respect to the actual letter of a text... He left to his God the care of what was remote and surely had hardly given any more thought to the later fate of the Qur'an than he had to the choice of a successor.

Indeed, one might even turn Nöldeke's earlier argument around and suggest that, since on the evidence of the tradition Muhammad does no. seem to have been concerned to give the revelations fixed written form, perhaps he did not see their precise wording or their physical form as essential to their role as the revelation of the divine will. This will be a recurrent theme in the chapters to come.

In his work, Richard Bell seems to have become so distracted by the term al-kitāb that he takes it as referring to (among other things, of course) a document that was originally conceived of as distinct from al-qur'an, and which ultimately took its place. What is called in the text al-qur'an is, in Bell's understanding, a collection of recitations which was probably closed about the time of the battle of Badr in 624—just over half way through the twenty-year period of the revelations. Al-kitāb, according to Bell, was never completed and whatever logical framework it may have had was constantly intruded upon by the vicissitudes, both internal and external, of communal life. "The form in which it was left is probably much that of our present Qur'an." Bell understands al-kitāb to have been intended as the complete record of revelation; it was to comprise, in slightly reworked form, all the elements he had previously distinguished as characterizing the stages in the development of the Prophet's revelations: passages rehearsing God's "signs" to humanity, stories of the punishment of unbelieving nations and individuals, and al-qur'an. It was also intended to include the materials—the appeals, regulations, and exhortations demanded of him as a leader—that were unsuitable for a collection meant for recitation.

There is no disputing the neatness of Bell's scenario and the appropriateness of distinguishing among the different kinds of texts found in the document that now bears the name of Qur'an. However, in trying to sustain his position he is forced to gloss over many of those parts of the text where the terms kitāb and qur'an appear together. In these instances he suggests, less than convincingly, that kitāb refers to the heavenly Book itself rather than to the version of it brought by Muhammad. However, it is not as unusual as Bell seems to think for the two to be linked (see, for example, Q 12:2, 41:3, 43:3 and Q 56:77–8; in other places, e.g., Q 39:27–8, the connection is a little more distant, yet the link is clear). And what can Bell possibly mean by claiming that in some verses "it is clear that a Book has actually come to [Muhammad]?"
Because he manipulates the Qur’anic text to draw too strong a distinction between kitāb and qur‘ān, Bell fails to examine carefully enough what the text means by kitāb. He is correct in saying that “it is pretty clear that something similar to the Torah and the Evangel was meant.” However, this begs the question of form, since he fails to investigate what precisely Muhammad and his hearers understood by “Torah and Evangel.” That can only be learned from an attentive reading of the text and a careful sifting of the traditions.

Although clearly not as convinced as Bell that a closed canon of recitations existed before the compilation of the Book, W. M. Watt is still of little help in clarifying the matter when he reworks Bell’s *Introduction to the Qur’an*. In some respects he even adds to the confusion by stating more forcefully than Bell with reference to the early Medinan phase of Muhammad’s career, that “certainly his function is now represented not as that of warning people of punishment but as that of producing a book.” Even if it is arguable that, as time goes on, the Qur’ān becomes less concerned with stories of punishment, one is not limited in choosing merely between these two functions in describing Muhammad’s mission; for instance in such a context we should certainly take into account his role as one who reminds people of God’s mercies.

Watt bases his claim on the repeated command “wa-dhkur fi-l-kitāb” of Sūrat Maryam (Q 19:16, 41, 51, 54, 56). However, it is not clear that we should read this in the way Watt does as something like a publisher’s instruction to an author: “Mention in the Book . . .” In the first place, words derived from the root dh-k-r carry primary sense of orality. Second, they are used very much in connection with Muhammad’s mission as one who warns and with his role as the one who recalls the narratives of earlier prophets, so it would be surprising if in these few occurrences it represented something quite different. Watt and Bell both take the command to mean “In [your writing of] the Book, mention . . .” One could, perhaps with equal justification, take it to mean “In [your reciting of] the Book, mention . . .” In short, there is no clear warrant for taking this refrain as proof of an intention to produce a written text. On the contrary, even in late Medinan passages Muhammad’s function appears to be reciting (w-t-l-w) the revelations of God to the people—not producing the kitāb but rather teaching it—e.g., Q 2:129, 2:151, 3:164, 13:30, 22:72, 62:2.

Perhaps the weakest part of the scenario presented by Bell and Watt (and in this they are joined by A. T. Welch) is the idea that the task of producing the Book was left undone because of other responsibilities and demands that pressed upon Muhammad. If, as they claim, the verses about the kitāb indicate that the Prophet’s defining function was to produce such a canonical text, it is difficult to see how Muhammad could have placed any duty above this one, or how he could have kept putting it off. We are left with the impression that the Prophet’s understanding of those verses is at variance with that of Bell and Watt.

Régis Blachère is far more circumspect in his approach to this subject than Bell and Watt. He gives much more weight to the dearth of reliable evidence for the existence of a substantial written corpus of revelation at the time of the Prophet’s death: “There is no formal reason to believe that Muhammad would have personally proceeded to constitute a corpus from the Revelation. Indeed, there is serious reason to think that he had not even envisioned this task.” Blachère conjectures that in the Medinan period, as Muhammad came to know more of the use of scriptures by the Jews and Christians, the idea of fixing his own revelations in the same way would surely have presented itself more and more insistently. Therefore, Blachère rightly points out, that he did not do so requires explanation. Recognizing that any answer to this question can only be hypothetical, Blachère suggests several: creating on earth a copy of the archetypal scripture seemed sacrilegious; human memory seemed a sufficiently reliable guarantor of accurate transmission from one generation to the next; Q 75:17 (“Surely its collection [jām‘] and recitation [qur‘ān] are Our responsibility”) was taken literally to mean no human should attempt to do this; the Prophet shared in that “particularité de l’âme arabe” that is concerned always with the present and gives no thought to the future. Blachère also points out the problems posed by such a project: everyone was aware of the incompleteness of the revelation as long as Muhammad was alive, and so what could justify fixing *ne varietur* something still in process? In addition, it would mean opting decisively for one of the variant oral traditions.

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31 Watt, *Bell’s Introduction*, 141. Watt may have found warrant for such a strong statement from Bell’s preface to his translation of the Qur’ān (vii) where Bell says that during the “Book-period, beginning somewhere about the end of year II . . . Muhammad is definitely producing a Book, i.e., an independent revelation.”


36 Blachère, *Introduction*, 25–26. This is similar to Noldeke’s position (GdQ, 1: 47). Noldeke however does not generalize this peculiarity to all Arabs.
with the danger to communal unity that this would entail. He wonders, finally, whether Muhammad might not have hesitated to undertake such a codification because, after all, he was still present, and the advantages to be gained from doing so did not seem clear when compared to the disadvantages. 37

Blachère has avoided the egregious error of projecting back onto Muhammad the ultimately frustrated intention to produce the written codex that the Qur'an would eventually become. However, he still allows what he knows of the form of Christian and Jewish scriptures to control his approach to the Qur'an as scripture. He presumes that the Prophet must have considered producing a holy book like those of the Christians and Jews, but that for various reasons he eventually and deliberately decided against doing so. If such had been the case, one might have expected to encounter within the text some explanation of this decision, since Muhammad's bringing of a kitāb was often a point at issue in his confrontations with the ahl al-kitāb. As will be clear when we examine these polemical passages in detail, there is no indication that Muhammad felt the unwritten form of the revelations in any way compromised their status as the kitāb of God.

What controls all these scholars' interpretations of the Prophet's actions and intentions is not a seventh-century Hijāzī perception of the scriptural traditions of the Near East but rather their own, more historically informed understanding of those traditions. The weight of scholarship that Widengren brings to the task of interpreting the Qur'an all but submerges the particularities of its text in a flood of preconceived notions about its debt to Near Eastern religious history. Others, like Wilfred Cantwell Smith, want to see in Islam the culmination of a notion of scripture that had been developing gradually in the Near Eastern religious traditions, 38 and so they approach the text looking for corroboration. However, one needs to distinguish carefully between the Qur'an's understanding of scripture, on the one hand, and Islam's understanding of the Qur'an as scripture on the other. There is, of course, no disputing that the Muslims eventually followed the lead of other Near Eastern traditions and canonized a written sacred text. That fact, however, does not give us warrant for reading the intention to do so (or the considered decision not to do so) back into the Prophet's own lifetime.

What we are dealing with here is an issue of "intertextuality," of the way the scripture of Islam is related to other texts. Approaches to the Qur'an have too often presumed a linear relationship between it and the earlier scriptures with which it claims kinship—as if it were modeled on them or drawn from them, so

37 Blachère, Introduction, 26-27.
38 Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "Scripture as Form and Concept." As Joseph van Ess has pointed out, Islam is the first case of a religion where scripture came before tradition: "Verbal Inspiration: Language and Revelation in Classical Islamic Theology," in Wild, Qur'an in Text, 177-194, here 194.

that those who know the earlier canons in detail scour the Qur'anic text for recognizable echoes. Although now it is widely acknowledged that the Qur'an could not have been textually dependent on the earlier scriptures, it is still often assumed that it knew what they were, even if it only knew part of their content and that in a sketchy fashion. What is rarely suggested is that the Qur'an might show us something about the life of those other texts that we did not know from their wording. In its claim to kinship the Qur'an mirrors for us the role those other scriptures played and the status they enjoyed within their own communities at the time and place of Islam's emergence. So our task is to read from the Qur'an what Muhammad and the Muslims were learning from the scripted people with whom they had contact, not to read into the Qur'an what we have learned about those scriptures.

MUSLIM SCHOLARS AND THE WRITTEN NATURE OF THE QUR'AN

Muslim scholarship, too, has overwhelmingly assumed that the Prophet must have intended the Qur'an to have a codified written form, even if he did not produce such a codex himself. However, it is in the nature of the tradition that it also feels itself obliged to transmit with equal fidelity the evidence against such a conclusion. There is general agreement in Muslim, as in non-Muslim, circles that the Qur'an in its present form had not been written at the time of Muhammad's death, but that is as far as the agreement stretches. 39

TRADITIONAL ACCOUNTS OF THE WRITING DOWN OF THE QUR'AN

The traditions about the collection of the Qur'an into book form often contradict one another, and even individual accounts often find themselves at cross purposes. They insist that there was some distance between the Prophet and the production of a written text—perhaps to protect the notion that he was illiterate and thus could not have merely produced the Qur'an in imitation of what he had read of the Jewish and Christian scriptures. At the same time they wish to guarantee that there is an unbroken, widely attested (mutawwātir) oral tradition from Muhammad, checked and rechecked by Gabriel, the intermediary for the revelation. 40

Furthermore, perhaps in an effort to bolster confidence in the complete accuracy of

40 Bukhārī, 8:115 (K. al ri'āṭahān, bāḥi maṣn nābiyya yudāy-l-nda). The traditional account that Gabriel went through an annual check of the contents of the Qur'an with the Prophet and that it was done twice in the last year of Muhammad's life was taken up by exegetes and scholars in arguing
of the written Qur'an, traditions even place Zayd b. Thabit, Muhammad's most important scribe and the producer of the 'Uthmanic codex, at the final meeting with Gabriel. 41

Al-Baghdawi said in his Sharh al-Sunnah: It is said that Zayd b. Thabit witnessed the final checking, during which it was made clear what had been abrogated and what was to remain, and he wrote it down for the Messenger of God and read it back to him. He used to teach people to recite according to this until the time he died. For this reason Abū Bakr and 'Umar relied on him in the matter of the collection of [the Qur'an] and 'Uthman entrusted him with the writing of the codices.

Other traditions place 'Abdallāh b. Mas'ūd, sponsor of the Kufan 'reading' and putative owner of his own codex, at this final meeting with Gabriel. 42

From Abū Zabyān who said: Ibn 'Abbās said to us, 'Which [reading] of the Qur'an do you reckon the most important?' We said, 'The reading of 'Abdallah; our reading is the latest.' The Messenger of God had told him that Gabriel (upon whom be peace) used to check the Qur'an with him once a year in the month of Ramadān and twice in the last year of his life and from this 'Abdallāh had witnessed what had been abrogated and what had changed.

The first recension and the status of written Qur'anic material

One strong strand of tradition with several variants recounts that the first compilation of the Qur'ān materials took place after the battle of Yamāma (12 A.H.) when 'Umar came to the then Caliph Abū Bakr and urged him to gather:

about variant readings and the randā of the Qur'ān. Al-Suyūṭī recounts a number of traditions about this in his discussion of the seven al-šayrū readings' in which the Qur'ān is said to have been revealed (al-I'tiqān, 1: 176–7). See also John Burton, The Collection of the Qur'ān (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 194–6.


وفات المؤذن في شرح السنة: قال أبو الريد بن ثابت يذكى العصة الأحمر التي يب سما منهما وما فتى وكسام سول الله ﷺ وجهه عليه وكان يقرأ الناس بها حتى من أنت وذكره وأعدته أن يكون وعرف في جمعه وكلان عن كتب الصحابة

42 Kitāb al-Mabānî, 26:

عن أبي طفيل قال: قلت لنا معنس: أي القرآن تاء مجذونا أو لا؟ فلا قرآن عند الله، وإنما الذي آخر قال له رسول الله ﷺ: كان يبشر عليه جنريل عليه السلام القرآن كل سنة مرة في شهر رمضان، وله عرض عليه آخر سنة مرتين مشهدًا عليه، حسب ما وصف وما صيد.

the Qur'ān material that was in the possession (mostly in memory, though some of it in writing) of the reciters (qurrā') before more of it was lost. The story is told by Zayd b. Thabit:

Abū Bakr sent for me, at the time of the slaughter of those at Yamāma, and 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb was with him. Abū Bakr said, "Umar has come to me and said that the slaughter took a great toll on the reciters of the Qur'an 43 on the day of Yamāma and he fears lest a similar toll fall upon reciters in every place of battle and as a result much of the Qur'an be lost (fa-yadhūb min al-qur'ān kathīr). He said he thinks I should give orders for the Qur'an to be collected (j-m-ū)."

[Abū Bakr] said, "I asked 'Umar how I could do a thing that the Messenger of God (may the peace and blessings of God be upon him) had not done, 44 and 'Umar replied that, by God, it was a good thing! And he kept on at me about it until I came to be of the same opinion on the matter as he. Now, you are an intelligent young man about whom we have no doubts; moreover you used to write down the revelations (waḥy) for the Messenger of God (may the peace and blessings of God be upon him). So search out the Qur'an and collect it."

I [Zayd] said to Abū Bakr, "By God, if you had charged me with moving a mountain that would not have been more burdensome for me than what you have commanded me with regard to collecting the Qur'an! How can you do something that the Messenger of God (may the peace and blessings of God be upon him) did not do?" [Abū Bakr] said, "By God it is a good thing!" And he kept on at me about it until God opened my heart to accept that of which he had already convinced Abū Bakr and 'Umar. So I searched out the Qur'ān and collected it.

43 Whether the qurrā' were indeed the faithful guardians of the still-oral text of the Qur'ān is not at all clear, but that seems to be the understanding of this tradition. See also Muhammad Shaban, Islamic History A.D. 600–750: A New Interpretation (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 23, 50–55. More recently an interesting reassessment of this important term has been offered by the late Norman Calder. He proposes, on the basis of a study of the verb qurrā in Lisān al-ʿArab, that the root carries a sense of periodization, and that the most obvious meaning of qurrā to Qur'ānic reciters who were for some reason found in great number among soldiers, but rather to men performing a period of military service away from home. See N. Calder, "The Qur'ān and the Early Arab Lexicographical Tradition," JSS 36.2 (1991): 297–307, and the references there to other theories.

44 Another tradition from Zayd, (Kitāb al-Mabānî, 20–22), has Abū Bakr ask, "Am I to act contrary to the Messenger of God . . . or dare to do something he did not dare?" This is a much longer ḥadīth which seeks (unconvincingly, in my opinion) to reconcile the accounts of the earlier collection by Abū Bakr and the later one by 'Uthman.
from scraps of various materials (rigâ‘) from the bark of palm-branches (‘usub), from thin stones (likhâf) and from the hearts of men. We found the end of Sūrat Bara‘a from [i.e., Q 9:128-9], in the keeping of Khuzayma b. Thâbit.45

Numerous other traditions surround this basic collection account, especially concentrating on the issue of the standard of witness which was required before admitting a verse to the mushaf (pl., maṣâḥif, a codex or collection of sūhuf ‘pages of writing’),46 even ingeniously claiming that the Prophet had earlier declared Khuzayma’s witness as equal to that of two men.47 Alternately Zayd was taken to be the second required witness since he knew the verse,48 or Khuzayma was understood to possess the written corroboration of a verse that others only knew from memory.49 Yet another tradition has it that Uthmân was the second witness.50

For our purposes, it is interesting to note what seems to be a significant difference between earlier traditions and the opinions of later commentators as to the relative importance of written and oral testimony in the process of this collection. All agree in reporting the condition that there be two witnesses to a verse before it was accepted. However, the interpretation of this condition varies. Traditions tend to privilege oral testimony. For example, al-Suyûtî records a tradition from Ibn Abî Dâwûd on the authority of Yabhâ b. Sa‘îd al-Rijâmî b. Hâlib which explains that nothing anyone brought to be included in the collection was accepted until it had been sworn to by two witnesses. He goes on52

This indicates that Zayd used not to consider it sufficient merely that it exist in written form but that he waited until someone who had actually heard it [from the Prophet] testified to its genuineness—that, along with the fact that Zayd himself remembered the verse, was sufficient.

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45 Al-Suyûtî understands these to have been of leather, parchment, or paper (al-IÂqân, 1: 186).
46 Ktâb al-Madhâbî, 17-18. Al-Suyûtî uses virtually the same tradition as the authoritative account of the first collection of the text (al-IÂqân, 1: 182). Most traditions are uncertain whether it was Khuzayma or Ibn Khuzayma.
47 Al-Suyûtî, al-IÂqân, 1: 184-5.
48 Al-Suyûtî, al-IÂqân, 1: 185. “ فقال أبا كثنا فإن رسول الله ﷺ جعل شهادته شهادة رسول، فكتب "He said, ‘Write it in, for the Messenger of God declared his testimony the equal of the witness of two men.’ So he wrote it in.”
49 Al-Suyûtî, al-IÂqân, 1: 184.
50 Al-Suyûtî, al-IÂqân, 1: 184.
51 Al-Siǧistâni, Ktâb al-Maṣâḥif, in Jeffery, Materials, 11.
52 Al-Suyûtî, al-IÂqân, 1: 184.
53 Quoted by al-Suyûtî, al-IÂqân, 1: 184.
54 Quoted by al-Suyûtî, al-IÂqân, 1: 184.
56 Al-Siǧistâni, Ktâb al-Maṣâḥif, 13ff.

He used to do things in that way in order to be as thorough and careful as possible.

Later commentators, on the other hand, presume written material to have played a much greater role in the collection. They show a confidence in the testimony of the written word more appropriate to their own time than to the first Islamic century. Al-Sakhâwî (d. 643 A.H.) understood that the two witnesses were required to attest that what was written had indeed been written in the presence of the Prophet.53 Ibn Hajar (d. 974 A.H.) suggested that the two required witnesses were al-hifz wa-l-kitâb—the memory of the verse and its existence in writing.54

Given the continued precedence of oral testimony over written in the field of hadîth (pl., aḥâdîth ‘an account of a saying or action of the Prophet’) transmission even after the production and distribution of written collections in the third Islamic century,55 it would be surprising if the same had not held true for Qur’ân transmission at least for some time after the canonization of the text. Indeed many traditions make the case that those who criticized and rejected the Uthmânic recension relied for their authority on a direct oral link with the Prophet. In Ibn Abî Dâwûd al-Siǧistâni’s Ktâb al-Maṣâḥif, for example, there are numerous aḥâdîth like this one concerning Ibn Mas’ûd’s rejection of Zayd’s work of codification for Uthmân: “Abdallâh [Ibn Mas’ûd] said, ‘I was already able to recite seventy sūras from the lips of the Prophet himself when Zayd b. Thâbit was still in curls and playing children’s games.’”56

We can find evidence in the commentary tradition that the propriety of transcribing the Qur’ân’s revelations remained in question for a considerable period of time. Al-Suyûtî quotes two works that demonstrate that even in the third and fourth centuries the matter had still been under discussion, though doubt in written material was growing. The first is Ktâb fahm al-sunan by al-Hârîth b. Asad al-Muḥâṣibi [d. 243 A.H.]:

Writing the Qur’ân is not an innovation (muhdâtha), for [the Prophet] used to give orders for it to be written. However, it remained in separate parts, on scraps of various kinds, on shoulder blades, and palm bark. Then Abû Bakr ordered them to be transcribed altogether in one place and that was done on the basis of pages (bi-manzilat awrâq) that had
been found in the rooms of the Messenger of God, may the peace and blessings of God be upon him, on which the Qur’ān was set out and someone had gathered them together and tied them up with thread so that none of them would be lost.\(^{57}\)

Al-Suyūṭī also quotes al-Khaṭṭābī [d. 996 C.E.] arguing against those who claimed that the Prophet’s prohibition against writing down things he said applied also to the Qurʾān. Al-Khaṭṭābī quotes a Prophetic ḥadīth which explicitly limits the prohibition to non-qur’ānic material, and then he claims that the Qurʾān had already been written in its entirety during Muhammad’s lifetime; it required only to be gathered together and organized into sūras.\(^{58}\)

The fact that these writers had to assert that there was a written Qurʾānic tradition going back to Muhammad—in fact, that they had to address this issue at all—is significant for two reasons. First, it suggests that there was no firm historical memory of the existence of such a written tradition. Second, it indicates that the existing claims that had already been made in the canonical ḥadīth collections for an unbroken and reliable written scriptural tradition were not universally accepted and so needed to be reinforced.

*The recension of ʿUthmān and the variant codices*

The apparently complete collection that resulted from Zayd’s conscientious labors remained, so the story goes, in the possession of Abū Bakr until after his death, when it passed to ʿUmar, who in turn bequeathed it to his daughter Ḥafṣa.\(^{59}\) It seems to have played no official or public role until much later, when ʿUthmān was caliph. The reason usually given for what is supposed to be the second recension, made under orders from ʿUthmān, is the disagreement within the rapidly expanding community on exactly how to recite the Qurʾān:

 Hudhayfah b. al-Yāmān came to meet ʿUthmān from the frontier of Armenia and Ḍhūr-andayn, where the Syrians had been

\(^{57}\) Al-Suyūṭī, al-Iṣlāḥ, 1: 185:

كتاب القرآن ليست مكتوبة فلما كان نبيكم عليه السلام كتبه على عينه فكان مغرما في القراءة والكتاب، ولذا لما أمره بأمر الصمود بسبحه من مكان إلى مكان مكتوبا وكان ذلك مترأ إكرام وحدت في نيب رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم في الحياة.

\(^{58}\) Al-Suyūṭī, al-Iṣlāḥ, 1: 181:

وقد كان القرآن كتب في عيد رسول الله صلى الله عليه وسلم وغير مكتوب في نيب واحد ولا تعرفه السوا


\(^{59}\) Al-Suyūṭī, al-Iṣlāḥ, 1: 182.

campaigning together. Hudhayfah had noticed how they disagreed in their recitation of the Qurʾān, so he said to ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān, "O Commander of the Faithful, take control of this people before they disagree about the Kitāb the way the Jews and the Christians did."\(^{56}\)

We were sitting in the mosque and ʿAbdallah [ibn Masʿūd] was reciting. Hudhayfah arrived and said, "What! The reading of Ibn Umm ʿAbd [ibn Masʿūd] and the reading of Abū Mūsā al-Ashʿarī! By God, if I live long enough to meet the Commander of the Faithful ʿUthmān, then I’ll tell him to make of them a single reading.\(^{60}\)

Those who sponsored the variant readings were none too pleased that their authority and accuracy should be questioned:

I was sitting with Hudhayfah, Abū Mūsā and ʿAbdallah b. Masʿūd, and Hudhayfah said, "The Başrans recite the version (qirāʾa) of Abū Mūsā and the people of Kufans recite the version of ʿAbdallah. By God, if I could get to the Commander of the Faithful I would tell him drawn these codices!" ʿAbdallah said, "Then you would be drowned too, and not in water!"\(^{62}\)

Tradition would have it that Hudhayfah did reach ʿUthmān and that he set about trying to unify the Muslims on one reading of the Qurʾān:

ʿUthmān was frightened [by what Hudhayfah had said] and sent someone to Ḥafṣah the daughter of ʿUmar for the sheets (ṣuhūf) on which the Qurʾān had been collected. Ḥafṣah sent them to him and ʿUthmān ordered Zayd b. Thābit, Saʿīd b. ʿĀisha, ʿAbdallah b. Zubayr and ʿAbd al-Rahmān b. Hishām to copy them into codices.\(^{64}\)

The traditions surrounding the event are contradictory and inconclusive. According to some, ʿUthmān merely had the ṣuhūf of Ḥafṣah copied and sent out to all the major provincial centers. According to others he commissioned the

\(^{56}\) Al-Sijistānī, Kitāb al-Maḏahīf, 19.

\(^{57}\) Al-Sijistānī, Kitāb al-Maḏahīf, 13.

\(^{58}\) Al-Sijistānī, Kitāb al-Maḏahīf, 14.

\(^{59}\) Al-Sijistānī, Kitāb al-Maḏahīf, 20.

\(^{60}\) Kitāb al-Mahābīn, 22: Al-Sijistānī, Kitāb al-Maḏahīf, 21. If it were the case, however, that ʿUthmān’s recension was merely the provision of multiple copies of Ḥafṣah’s sheets bound in book form, then the destruction or effacement of them after her death (Kitāb al-Mahābīh, 22) seems to have served no purpose. Since they would have been identical to all the other metropolitan codices distributed by ʿUthmān, they could not have become a source of controversy and division, as the governor of Madīna feared at the time.
process of collecting, witnessing, and transcribing said to have been carried out under his predecessors (with the same Khuzayma b. Thabit saving the day once again with a missing verse from Sūrat al-Aḥzāb). Some accounts force these two incompatible notions together. Many testify to the completeness of the resultant recension.

Against this strand of tradition which emphasizes the completeness of the Uthmānic text, there is another, very significant strand that underscores first, Uthmān’s awareness of the potential difficulties arising from dialectal and orthographic differences among the members of his commission, and second, that the resulting mushaf did in fact suffer on account of those differences. There are several traditions to this effect:

On the authority of ‘Ikrima al-Ṭā‘i, who said that when the mushaf was brought to Uthmān he saw in it some cases of incorrect Arabic (laḥm) and so he said, “If the one who dictated had been of Hudhayl and the scribe from Thaqif, then these mistakes would not be there.” It seems to have been generally agreed that the text should not be changed but that the Arabs would rectify these mistakes when they recited the Qur’ān. This casualness seems all the more strange if we consider that the ostensible reason for the recension was that various groups of Arabs were indeed amending and varying the text each in their own way.

This strand of traditions further maintains that the official recension was lacking some verses that had been revealed and recited in worship and that were once recorded in now-unrecoverable codices belonging to other Companions of the Prophet, i.e., members of the first generation of Muslims. Such traditions are numerous, but a couple of examples will suffice to indicate the style and perhaps reveal the intentions of the whole:

65 E.g., from Anis in al-Suyūṭī, al-Iṣbāḥ, 1: 187.
66 Bukhārī, 6: 316 (Kitāb faḍḍāl al-qr’ān).
68 Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif, 32: 33. Other variations of such traditions are listed by Bergstraßer, GiQ, 3: 2. He discusses the mistakes in the Uthmānic mushaf in 3: 1–6.
69 Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif, 32: 33.
70 Hossein Modarressi has pointed out that the Shi‘ites have often been accused of initiating the idea that the text of the Qur’an was incomplete and had been changed by the Companions. He shows that the traditions about the incompleteness of the text originated with and were handed down by Sunni writers. He rejects the generally accepted view that the Imāmī Shi‘a believe that the text of the Qur’an was corrupted through additions, omissions, and alterations. Hossein Modarressi, “Early Debates on the Integrity of the Qur’an,” Studia Islamica 77 (1993): 5–39.

Hamida bint Abī Yūnus said, “My father recited to me when he was eighty years old from the mushaf of ‘Āishah ‘Surely God and his angels ask blessings [yusallūna] on the Prophet. O you who believe ask blessings and invoke peace upon him. ...’” She said, “That was before Uthmān changed the yughayyir the codices.”

Zirr b. Hubaysh said: “’Ubayy b. Ka‘b asked me, ‘How do you count the verses in Sūrat al-Aḥzāb?’ I said, ‘Seventy-two [or seventy-three] verses.’ He said, ‘It used to be the same length as Sūrat al-Baqara and as part of it we used to recite the stoning verse.’ I said, ‘What is the stoning verse?’ He said, ‘If the shaykh and the shaykh, commit adultery, stone both of them outright as an exemplary punishment from God. God is mighty, wise.”

Since the first of these two reports merely concerns a question of piety, it would seem to have little purpose except to call into question the completeness of the received text, and perhaps to diminish the achievement of Uthmān, who was far from universally admired. The second, however, is but one example of the many aḥādīth in which the completeness of the mushaf has much greater significance. As we shall see in the discussion that follows, it bears on the source of authority for the widely accepted stoning penalty and, by extension, on the relative authority of the Qur’an and the sunna, Muhammad’s own practice, as sources for Muslim law.

THE CRITIQUE OF THE TRADITIONAL ACCOUNTS

The mass of traditions surrounding the transcription and collection of the revelations delivered by Muhammad has long received attention in the West, but no author has provided a more sustained and coherent critique, both of the traditions and of Western approaches to them, than John Burton, and one ignores his findings at one’s own risk. Burton’s thesis, put briefly, is that the traditions concerning the collection of the Qur’an should be understood as issuing from the same source as legal aḥādīth and so should be approached with the same

71 Al-Suyūṭī, al-Iṣbāḥ, 2: 718.
72 Al-Suyūṭī, al-Iṣbāḥ, 2: 718.
74 He summarizes his conclusion in Collection, 225–40.
critical sophistication. Burton claims that, far from being historical, these traditions are an elaborately contrived part of the armory of those medieval jurists who specialized in legal theory and the principles by which Islamic law was to be derived (waṣl al-fiqh). By developing an intricate theory of abrogation, they sought to maintain the authoritativeness of the Qurʾān alone against claims for the absolute authority of the prophetic sunna.

The key issue arose in situations where a Qurʾānic text seemed to contradict a universally accepted customary law—for example, the punishment for adulterers of death by stoning. The punishment given in Q 24:2 is one hundred lashes, yet the majority of the schools of law prescribe stoning. The authority for this is generally found in Muhammad’s own practice. Yet such would indicate that the sunna was capable of overriding a clear Qurʾānic command—a position many legal theorists were not prepared to accept. So they found their authority for the practice in a verse that is not in the official text, but still carries the weight of Qurʾānic authority. This kind of abrogation they referred to as naskh al-tiḥwā dāna-l-lakhm, suppression of the text without suppression of its legal force.

Burton dismisses as inventions the many claims about variant readings and even complete codices ascribed to Companions, which formed the ostensible reason for ʿUthmān’s promulgation of a standardized text. He suggests these reports of variants were being used to “prove” that the universally acknowledged mubah does not actually contain the complete text of the Qurʾān; that is, there are verses once recited by the Prophet and his Companions that did not find their way into the final official text. This opens up the possibility that some verses with legal implications are no longer recited. If this is true, then there can be legal norms with Qurʾānic authority for which no textual evidence presently exists. The so-called “stoning verse” is one of these.

Having rejected the traditions about the need for the imposition of a standardized text, Burton goes on to dismiss the profusion and confusion of traditions which attribute the earliest collection of the Qurʾān variously to each of the Rightly-guided Caliphs, acting alone or in concert. These reports he sees as having two conflicting aims. The first was to provide the text of the Qurʾān with a chain of transmitters (īnād) that will establish its authority as a widely attested (mutawawāf) tradition going back to the Prophet. The standard of proof required for including a verse in the official text gives that text the same legal status as

widely attested Prophetic traditions. According to Burton, the second aim, perhaps surprisingly, was to cast doubt on the completeness of the existing written tradition. Such a conflict of aims exists because of the conflicting polemical needs of the proponents. On one hand was the need to defend against external critics the completeness and reliability of the new scripture. On the other was the need to be able to claim against other Muslim jurists that traditionally agreed upon legal positions lacking textual basis in the Qurʾān did somehow still rely on Qurʾānic rather than Prophetic authority.

Burton feels that most scholars have failed to see their way through the thicket of these traditions because they have failed to appreciate the distinction between the Qurʾān as document and the Qurʾān as source. Considered as canonical document for recitation, the tradition presents the Qurʾān as completely and reliably contained in the mubahif; regarded as source for law, the tradition claims that the Qurʾān is in fact more extensive than the mubahif. Burton’s contention that the Qurʾān did not come to be considered a source for law until much later—around 800 C.E.—remains less than convincing. As Patricia Crone has pointed out, it is unlikely that a text that contains such clear and specific legal injunctions could have been completely disregarded as an authoritative source of law at the same time as it was considered the very word of God spoken through the Prophet.

Burton’s insight is extremely important and worth returning to. However, because his primary interest is in law and jurists’ theories of abrogation (naskh), Burton has neglected the way the Qurʾān could have been seen, even in its earliest stages, as something much richer and broader than either simply a liturgical document, however sacred, or merely a source for deriving law.

The reader is taken somewhat by surprise when Burton arrives at his conclusion: “What we have today in our hands is the mubahif of Muhammad.” Although he has undoubtedly examined the traditions with great critical skill and care, Burton overreaches his evidence here and leaps to an unwarranted conclusion. He has argued very cogently that the reports of now-lost Companion variants/codices are not to be considered authentic but should be attributed to the legal theorists (waṣlāt), and he thereby discounts the main stated reason for ʿUthmān’s involvement in the history of the Qurʾān text. He has been equally

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75 Burton, Collection, 218-19.
76 Burton, Collection, 161-62.
77 Burton, Collection, 228-29.
78 Burton, Collection, 190-224.
persuasive in showing that the credit, variously assigned, for first collecting the text could be motivated by a concern for the *ismād* of the *mushaf*. What he has signally failed to do is explain how reports that entered the tradition so late could have entirely supplanted the historical memory of a codified text of the Qurʾān that had belonged to the Prophet himself. The usual rationalization for the absence of a final recension by the Prophet is that he consciously kept the canon open to the ever-present possibility that God would abrogate some verses.\(^{83}\) It is true, as Burton points out, that this smacks of *usūlī* inventiveness—distancing the Prophet from any lacunae that they may wish to claim are in the *mushaf*.\(^{86}\) However, there may have been other reasons why no such text existed. The accounts of the collection by the earliest Companions, however conflicting they be, may still point to a genuine historical memory that no such collection existed until after the Prophet's time. It is difficult to see the traditional accounts of the primitive condition of the written Qurʾānic material merely as intended to lend verisimilitude to unreliable accounts of Companion codices. They must have seemed scandalous to a later generation that showed more reverence for the written text of the revelation, so they could scarcely date from a much later time.\(^{85}\)

If Burton had made a slightly more modest claim—that what we have is the contents of the Qurʾān as Muhammad knew it—one might be able to agree with him. Certainly his scouring of the traditions lends some support to such a conclusion, even though the accounts fall short of proving the existence of a complete *mushaf* belonging to the Prophet. Burton's evidence does seem to support his claim that there was only ever one written codification of the Qurʾān. In spite of the elaborate stories about variant codices and the discussion of variant readings in the commentaries, there is virtually no physical evidence of any substantially different textual tradition. However, Burton has no proof that the single text that seems to have formed the basis of the standard version was prepared by Muhammad. He has only his own presumption that the Prophet would have done such a thing—a presumption we have already seen at work dictating the approaches and controlling the conclusions of other Western writers.

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\(^{83}\) Al-Khaṭṭābī is quoted to this effect in al-Suyūṭī, *al-Iṣbān*, 1: 181. He comments on a tradition from Ṣayd to the effect that at the time the Prophet died the Qurʾān had not been collected at all:

> Ṣayd b. Ḥālib rhapsodized there was a tradition (a hadith) which he composed:

> trabajo to the effect that at the time the Prophet died the Qurʾān had not been collected at all:

>都没有 he did not assemble the Qurʾān in a codex since he was keeping it open for the revelation of something that would abrogate in part its norms or its wording.”


\(^{85}\) See note 97, this chapter.
might be killed. Ibn Qutayba explained Ibn Mas‘üd’s omission of the Qur‘an’s opening sūra from his codex on the basis that he clearly thought it needed no such protection since it was short and well known:

As for his omitting the Fātiha from his mushaf, it was not because he thought that it was not part of the Qur‘an. God forbid! Rather he held that the Qur‘an had been written down and collected between two covers for fear that there would be doubt about it, that it would be forgotten, that it would be added to, or that something might be removed from it. He thought that there was no chance of any such thing happening to Sārat al-Hand [al-Fātiha] on account of its brevity and the fact that it was obligatory for everyone to know it [for the ritual prayer].

Al-Baqillānī’s defense of Ibn Mas‘üd’s choice also shows that there was no necessary connection in the community’s mind between a text’s being part of the Qur‘an and its being written down:

It is not reliably reported from ʿAbdallāh that these three chapters [Q 1, 113 and 114] are not part of the Qur‘an. Such a statement has not been reported on his authority. What he did was merely to erase those chapters and omit them from his text, since he did not approve of their being written. This does not imply that he denied they were part of the Qur‘an. The sunna in his view was that they should be recorded only what the Prophet had commanded to be recorded, and ʿAbdallāh did not have information that the Prophet had himself recorded these sūras or commanded that they be recorded.

Further to this, when the Qur‘an finally came into what we would call book form, it was referred to not as a kitāb but as a mushaf. The word mushaf should probably be rendered ‘codex’ or ‘transcript’ rather than ‘book’, since in the traditions it seems to connote principally the idea of collectedness, rather than the authority and sacredness that the word kitāb indicates in that context. Al-Suyūṭī reports as unusual or surprising a tradition to the effect that Sālim was the first to collect the Qur‘an and he gave it the name mushaf, a word he was said to have learned in (Christian) Ethiopia. Certainly the Ethiopic term mushaf (meaning both ‘book’ and ‘scripture’, from the verb ṣahafa ‘to write’) had already been borrowed into Arabic in pre-Islamic times. It was used by the Christian poet Imru’ al-Qays to describe the books of the monks. It is not clear whether in that case any distinction is implied between kitāb and mushaf. However, one must consider the likelihood of such a distinction in discourse about the Qur‘an, since it was clearly recognized that to say that the Prophet judged in accordance with kitāb Allāh was not necessarily the same thing as saying that he judged in accordance with the Qur‘an text.

The Qur‘an speaks of its revelations and preservation in quite exalted terms. For example:

\[\text{كل آية لنا ذكرها في صحة مكرمة} \]
\[\text{ولأيده سره} \]

But not! It is a reminder — and anyone who wishes keeps it in mind — on honored pages, exalted and purified, in the hands of scribes, noble and pious.

Sārat ʿAbasa 80:11–16

A messenger from God, who recites purified pages || On which are firm kutub [prescriptions?].

Sārat al-Bayyina 98:2–3

إنه لقولان كريم \[\text{في كتاب مكرمة} \] ليس له إلا المطهر

That it is a noble Qur‘an || in a kitāb kept hidden || which no one touches except those who have been purified.

Sārat al-Wāqi‘a 56:77–79

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87 Kitāb al-Mabbūn, 23: “When their Prophet was taken from them, they feared that misfortunes might befall those who had memorized the recitation and, since their number was few, that the Qur‘an would be lost to them or would lose its completeness because of the martyrdom of those who carried it in memory.”

88 Quoted in al-Suyūṭī, al-Itqān, 1: 272:

وأما إنشاها العامة من محضه، فليس لله أن ينفیه من القرآن، ممّا صنعه الله وأيده، فعثّه إلى القرآن إذا كتب وجودي بمن كتب من حفاظ القرآن والناس ورقبته، وهو أن ذلك ما دونه في سورة الحمد، لفظها وحذف اسمها على كل واحد.

89 Quoted by al-Rāzi, cited by Burton in Collection, 222.

90 The only verbal form of ʿyāḥa reported in Lisān al-ṣarḥ (11: 87–89) is ʿibaḥa, which is clearly deverbal and diminutivistic. According to Lane (1654–55) forms (II and V) meaning ‘to write’ or ‘be written wrongly’ are postclassical.

91 Al-Suyūṭī, al-Itqān 1: 183–84.

92 Faṣṣāḥat Ktūb or Mktūb, as in mushaf [codices] of monks.” Ashwardt, Divans, 160. See also Jeffery, Foreign Vocabulary, 193–94.

93 Ibn ʿArabī is quoted by Burton: “The Book of God might be the verdict of God” (Collection, 76–77).
In the traditions concerning its collection, however, we see strong evidence that the community saw no connection between such language and the physical sheets on which the revelations were recorded. 'A'isha is reported to have explained the loss of some Qur'an material in this way:

The stoning verse and the [verse about the] ten nursings had been revealed, and they were on a page under my bed at the time the Prophet was dying. When he died, while we were occupied in attending to him, a domestic animal belonging to the household got in and ate that page.94

 Tradition further has it that the famed codex of Hafsa was called for when 'Uthmân's recension was in process, and it does not seem to have been a matter of embarrassment that it was kept under her bed and was found to be worm-eaten.95 Such reports are, of course, a convenient way of keeping open the possibility of variants to the official 'Uthmânîc text, and are most unlikely to be historically reliable. Even so, several factors in the traditions nicely indicate the status of written Qur'anic material: no great scandal was attached to this apparent carelessness; nor to treatment of the Prophet's own mushaf as private inherited property rather than the prized possession of the community; nor to its being kept under the bed where animals could get at it; nor to the document's having been given into the keeping of a woman, who because of the customary laws of evidence, would not have been able to vouch on her own to its authenticity. Again, this does not rely on the traditions' being reliable: it is sufficient that those who put them into circulation and those who accepted them could conceive of such a status for those materials.

Even as late as the third century Ibn Qutayba [d. 276] defended the historical verisimilitude of such traditions against the Mu'tazila who were scandalized by them:

There is nothing at all to be surprised or shocked at in this hadith. There is nothing exceptional about the text having been written on a single sheet, which after all was the most refined of all the writing materials in use at the time, even for transcribing the Qur'an. Less noble animals than the goat (like mice and worms) do damage to copies of the Qur'an, and, if God wills to destroy something, he can use whatever it likes, large or small. Of course the page was kept under the bed because that is

94 Ibn Qutayba, Kitâb Ta'wil Muhkma'f al-Hadîth (Cairo: Maktabat al-Kulliyât al-Azhariyya, 1966), 310. This story of the domestic animal has been described as a fabrication of the Isma'îlite Shî'a. However, Modarresi points out that this tradition and others in a similar vein were reported exclusively by Sunni sources ("Early Debates," 38–39).
95 Tradition cited by Jeffery, Qur'an as Scripture, 93–96.

where ordinary people (as opposed to kings, who have treasuries and strong-boxes) put things for safekeeping.96 This illustrates clearly enough how later generations understood the nature of the early written materials.

The state of Arabic script

One of the hallmarks of a scripture is its canonicity, its fixedness and unchangeability. This calls for, almost by definition, a script adequate to the task. Discussions of the likelihood of an early transcript of the Qur'an rarely take sufficient account of the state of the Arabic writing system during the Prophet's time. The application of the term "Uthmânîc text" to the modern standardized form perhaps causes us to forget that the script as it had developed in 'Uthmân's time, quite apart from matters of vocalization, was incapable of rendering even an unequivocal consonantal text.97 For example, a single shape could represent any of the following letters: b, t, th, n, y, or l. Although some consonantal diacritics were occasionally used in pre-Islamic times to distinguish the various consonants that shared the same shape, they are found only sparingly used in the earliest Qur'an texts.98 Al-Ḥajjâj is generally credited with having improved this system and the orthography of 'Uthmân's codex during the caliphate of 'Abd al-Malik (692–705 C.E.). The introduction of vocalization is variously attributed but seems not to have predated the end of the first Islamic century. Its permisibility was not universally accepted.99 Bergsträsser points out that even in the fourth and fifth centuries different systems of bowelling were extant.100

Such underdeveloped writing could not have been of the essence of Muhammad's kitâb. One might rather say that it was the kitâb that was responsible for the development of writing, because the script was required to regulate the sounds being made in the recitation of God's speech. The traditions make clear that it was not disagreements about orthography but rather conflicts of dialect

96 Ibn Qutayba, Kitâb Ta'wil, 314. The Mu'tazila were indignant at such reports, which seemed abhorrent to reason and clearly contrary to the Qur'an's own description of itself. (Q 41:41–42): 

For I say it is a respected scripture. || Fustility cannot approach it from the front or from behind.

How, they ask, could it be 'asaz (respected, inviolate, unassailable) if it was eaten by a goat? How could God have said, "Today I have perfected your religion for you" (Q 5:3), and then have sent something to eat it? How could the revelation (wa'âf) be exposed to the risk of being eaten by a goat? (Ibn Qutayba, Kitâb Ta'wil, 310–14.)

97 Perhaps the fullest account of this is given in Abbott, North Arabic Script.
98 Bergsträsser in GDQ, 3: 257–58.
100 GDQ, 3: 263–69.
and the needs of non-native speakers of Arabic that were responsible for the development of the fuller script.\textsuperscript{105} In this sense, the writing was the servant of the kitāb's orality. Writing functioned to enable the accurate reproduction of the sounds.

The significant ambiguities that could arise from these deficiencies both of consonant and vowel representation are demonstrated in discussions of this important verse:

\begin{quote}
ما نحن ضعفهم لِنُشِّط عنهم فلا كثير بما يَدمغهم في السماوات وفلا يَعلَم أن الله تعالى كنَّا له قَدْر
\end{quote}

We do not arrogate even a verse or cause it to be forgotten, without bringing one better than it or similar to it. Do you not know that God has power over everything?

Sūrat al-Baqara 2: 106

What appears in the standard text as nunsūhā 'We cause it to be forgotten' is variously read as nunsāhā 'We forget it', tunsūhā 'you cause it to be forgotten' or tunsāhā 'you forget it'. Each of these readings presents an important theological commitment.\textsuperscript{106} Indeed, even the reading of the first consonant (which distinguishes between first person plural and second person singular) only became possible with diacritics introduced later, so the choice of those diacritics can be said to be the result of theological commitments already made. Shāfī'ī preferred to read a hamza at the end of the verb (nunsūhā) and so to make it mean 'We postpone or delay it'.\textsuperscript{107}

Even getting this far presumes that whatever text existed was legible at least within the range of ambiguity inherent in the unpointed consonantal text, the rasm. The full value of any transcript surely lies in the decipherability of the writing by someone who does not already know the text. Yet there is good reason to believe that such was not the case at the earliest stage of the Qur'ān's written existence. This is well illustrated by the case of the fawā’id, the so-called 'mysterious letters' at the beginning of various sūras. James Bellamy puts forward the most consistent and convincing suggestion as to the original nature of the fawā’id (whatever may have been made of them since). He demonstrates with great elegance that each one of these unusual groupings of letters could be understood as an abbreviation (or sometimes two) of the basmālah, the invocation bisnī-l-lāh al-rāhīm al-raftīm 'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate'.\textsuperscript{108}

Drawing on observations of the actual shapes used for the various letters in the oldest inscriptions and papyri, Bellamy argues that these early forms of letters or combinations of letters could easily have been mistaken by later copyists (or those reading the original text aloud to them) once the script had been further developed and standardized. Given the variations of script found in early inscriptions and papyri,\textsuperscript{109} it is conceivable that, for example, the combination bd’-alif could be taken as the letter tā’. Thus the combinations bd’-alif-sīn or bd’-alif-sīn-mīn—the first letters of the basmālah—could conceivably have been read as tā-sīn or as tā-sīn-mīn—two of the combinations of 'mysterious letters'—by someone not recognizing an abbreviation. An abbreviation here might not have been recognized because it might well not have been expected, given that the basmālah held a controverted status within the text of the Qur’ān.\textsuperscript{106}

Since there was no oral tradition of reciting these letters and therefore they were arguably not part of the Qur’ān,\textsuperscript{107} they first proved mysterious to the community only when early transcripts for some reason later came to prominence. No standard abbreviation had yet been adopted for this invocation of uncertain status and so each early scribe had devised his own (though several are repeated). Thus the letter combinations vary.

The importance of Bellamy's work lies not so much in his uncovering of the "original" text, for these formulas have since taken on a mystical or dogmatic life of their own quite apart from their original significance. Rather, if he is correct in his surmise, his work is a salient reminder of the further limitations of any early transcript of the Qur’ān. Given these limitations, it should be no surprise to discover that, both in the understanding of the Prophet and in the life of the

\textsuperscript{105} These have been tabulated by Abbott in North Arabic Script, table 5, and by Adolf Grohmann in Arabische Papyrikunde (Handbuch der Orientalistik, Erste Abteilung, Ergänzungsband I, Erste Halbband [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1966], 49–118; table 10. Abbott is of the opinion (p. 48) that Arabic writing was equal to the task of transcribing the revelations in the time of the Prophet. She bases this conviction upon the clearly developed script evident in the papyrius PERF nº 558—from Egypt, c. 22 A.H. (plate 4 but more clearly decipherable in Grohmann, plate 2, 1), arguing plausibly enough that, if such were the development in Egypt, then writing in the heartland of the Muslim community must have been no less developed.

\textsuperscript{106} Some schools do not number the basmālah among the verses of the Qur’ān or recite them aloud, recognizing them only as sūra dividers and blessings. See D. Carrà de Vaux, "Basmalah," in SEL, 69. In a more recent article Bellamy has made some revisions to the justifications he gave for his emendations: In the matter of the vertical stroke of the tā’; he has decided that it is more likely a cancellation mark than an 'alif'. He argues: given that in the one instance where the phrase is indisputably part of the text (in Q 27:30 at the head of Solomon's letter to the Queen of Sheba) it was written without an 'alif, an abbreviation of it is most unlikely to contain such an 'alif', James A. Bellamy, "Some Proposed Emendations to the Text of the Koran," JAOS 113 (1993): 572–73.

\textsuperscript{107} Bellamy, "Mysterious Letters," 277–78 and references, Al-Suyūtī discusses the issue under the question of the number of verses in the Qur’ān and its sūras (al-tadhbī, 1: 230–43).
Muslim community, written copies of the Qur'ān played a much less important role than one might at first expect.

Furthermore, Bellamy's insights, if true, suggest a scenario in which there may have been early transcripts of at least parts of the revelation—perhaps even the full 'Uthmānic recension as Bellamy believes—but such transcripts played little public role in the transmission and preservation of the Qur'ān, as in the case of the sūfūf of ʿAlī. They only came into play later, by which time their archaic style or the idiosyncrasies of their script were either no longer completely decipherable or had been incorrectly deciphered by early copyists. The authority bestowed on the transcripts by their antiquity demanded in the minds of a later generation that their every letter be preserved. Since the body of the sūras was either known by oral tradition or was more or less obvious to one well-versed in Arabic, it was the fawāidith that posed the greatest (though not the only) problem of comprehension for the community—a problem as yet unsolved and by now surely no longer soluble in a way that would satisfy everybody.

In addition to his work on the fawāidith Bellamy has also pointed out that several of the more puzzling parts of the Qur'ān text proper, some of them quite significant, could be clarified by emending the 'Uthmānic text to bring it into line with what he presumes was the original oral tradition of Muhammad. He is not by any means the first to suggest that scribal errors had rendered the text incomprehensible or problematic in places; a number of early Muslim suggestions for emendations have been preserved by commentators, including al-Ṭabarī, al-Suyūṭī, and al-Zamakhshāri. Bellamy's insight is important for its tantalizing clues regarding the possible relationship between the oral and written traditions as the history of the Qur'ān unfolded. If he is correct, his contention seems to indicate that, contrary to the conventional view, the oral tradition has been shaped, or perhaps reshaped, in some places by the written tradition.

The possible influence of the written Qur'ān on the oral tradition becomes clearest and most telling in the matter of the suggested emendations to the text proper. Apparently the (admittedly few) scribal errors of the 'Uthmānic text survived because of the disjunction between the oral and written traditions. By

the time the written tradition came to play a prominent role, what survived of the original oral tradition was not sufficient fully to correct the scattered scribal errors. Thus the completeness of the oral tradition, which seems so important today, may have been restored at one stage from a slightly flawed written tradition. What is being called into question here is not the importance of the oral tradition—that is very well attested—but rather the completeness of that oral tradition. By the time a concern for the completeness of the corpus arose, only the rasm (the unpointed consonantal text) could be its guarantor.

However, as we have seen there are several factors that should make us wary of attributing to early transcripts too great an ability to act as guardians of the oral tradition from the Prophet: the indecipherable fawāidith, the traditionally recognized flaws in the 'Uthmānic text, and the difficulties of comprehension (which Bellamy would attribute to scribal errors). 'Uthmān's reported reaction to the mistakes in his mūshaf is telling in this respect. According to some traditions, he commanded, "Do not change [the mistakes], for the Arabs will correct them in their pronunciation." This seems an unmistakable recognition both of the limits of the written text and of its secondary role in the community's relationship to and understanding of the Qur'ān. At the same time it points to the fact that, when the written text did finally come under scrutiny, there was "a certain givenness" to the mūshaf text that made emendation impossible, even when the written text obviously conflicted with standard grammar or was difficult to make sense of. This must have taken place well after 'Uthmān's time, since if the errors of transcription had taken place virtually in his presence, as the traditions attest, there would have been no reason for his refusing to have them corrected.

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109 Bellamy, "Proposed Emendations," presents eleven cases apart from the fawāidith where paleographical insights suggest emendations to problematic passages. Cf. also his "Fa-ummatu Hāwiyyah: A Note on Sūrah 101:9," paper presented to the American Oriental Society (Cambridge, Mass.: March–April, 1992). He suggests emending this somewhat problematic verse to read fa-ummatu ḥāwiyyatu, adding several literary and Qur'ānic parallels for such a fawād al-shafi. His case here is much less convincing, however, since the emendation involves only the pointing and not the rasm. The principle of the lecto difficilior potius would seem to support fa-ummatu as the original.
111 Gīq., 3: 1–6.
112 Gīq., 3: 2: "لا تخبروا فتى العرب سمعوها بالسند..."
113 Gīq., 3: 3.
order and a clearer structure in any document that calls itself *kitāb Allāh* and which claims to be like the other *kutub* that God has sent.

Perhaps Bell and Watt are correct in seeing a close link between structure and function. The problem, however, is that they make a presumption about the intended function and thus find the structure wanting. One should rather examine the structure (which was not found wanting by the Muslim community) and see what that might indicate about the functions it was able to serve. According to Bell, for “the Book” to function as the complete record of revelation and a code of legislation for the community, it should have a more orderly structure than the “confusion” he finds in it. However, there is no hint in either the text or the tradition that there is anything incomplete about the Qurʾān or that its structure at the time of the Prophet’s death was in any way problematic. It fulfills its proper function just as it is. The incompleteness of its transmission is something that does not touch the essential nature of the Qurʾān, and was a matter of little importance until the community perceived the text to be vulnerable—to fraudulent augmentation or diminution (as “All feared”), to partial loss because of the death of its memorizers (as ʿUmar and ʿAbd Bakr came to believe), or to manipulation that might cause discord within the community (as ʿUthmān sought to forestall). That is to say, what was at risk was the function of the Qurʾān as the community’s guaranteed connection and privileged means of access to the realm of God’s knowledge and sovereignty. The threat to its performance of that function did not lead to a change of structure but rather to a standardization of it.

This issue of structure and function receives more attention in later chapters; however, a few further comments should be made at this point. The lack at the earliest period of the kind of structure assumed appropriate to a book seems to point to an oral function. This is not surprising, given the importance of the term *qurʾān* as the text’s self-description, not just as its name. However, a strong sense remains among scholars that there is, if not a contradiction, at least a tension between the terms *qurʾān* and *kitāb*. This is most clearly exemplified by Bell’s contention that they were in fact two distinct documents with clearly different purposes and styles and belonging to different periods of Muḥammad’s ministry. This sense of tension is not fully apparent in the Qurʾān itself, where the terms are sometimes used more or less interchangeably (cf. Q 27:1 and 15:1). It comes rather from external presumptions about the difference between things oral and written. Graham has dealt with this at some length, with regard not only to Islam but also to other traditions, and has shown the importance in the history of religions of the oral use of written sacred texts. That is certainly to be reckoned with in the Muslim use of the Qurʾān; yet what we see in the text of the Qurʾān itself is not the oral use of something written but rather the intriguing phenomenon of something that remains unwritten and yet insists on calling itself *kitāb*—a writing.

Arguably, by calling itself *kitāb* the Qurʾān is doing no more than adopting an already commonly used technical term for scripture. If this is indeed the case, it would make the situation more intriguing still. The Qurʾān would then be asserting its kinship with other closed, canonized corpora even while recognizing itself as still in process, though never incomplete. It would be claiming to be of a piece with carefully guarded, lavishly appointed, and scrupulously copied sacred codices and scrolls, while itself remaining open-ended, unwritten, and at the mercy of frail human memory. This sharpens rather than solves for us the question of how the Prophet understood the relationship of writing and scriptural canonicity.

**IN MUSLIM APPROACHES TO THE QURʾĀN**

Muslim understanding of the Qurʾān has had to grapple with matters of structure and function no less than non-Muslim scholarship. It was impossible for the community to think that what they had been given through the Prophet had anything but the structure and form that God intended. This gave rise to the traditions about the regular checking of the (still oral) text by Gabriel and the assignment by Muḥammad of each new revelation to a particular position within...

114 Bell, *The Qurʾān*, vi.

115 For example, *Kitāb al-Mahdī* (39–77) devotes a chapter to the discussion of the idea that God spoke (tasallama) the Qurʾān in precisely the order we have before us today, not in the order in which it was sent down.


117 Buhkārī, 6: 314 (*Kitāb ḥadīθ al-qurʾān*).


119 The importance of the word *qurʾān* as a verbal noun and as the description of individual segments of the revelation has been clearly demonstrated by Graham, “Earliest Meaning,” 361–77.

120 Graham, “Earliest Meaning,” says any contradiction is only apparent (p. 372) but even he is inclined to see the presence of the term *kitāb* as substantially affecting the meaning of the noun *qurʾān* or the verb *qara’a* (p. 368).

121 Bell sees the existing document as neither liturgically appropriate for the name ‘recitation’ nor literary enough to be a ‘book’. It falls between the two and so must represent an intermediate stage, a kind of book-in-process that still contains some earlier liturgical material for recitation.


123 Buhkārī, 6: 319–20 (*Kitāb ḥadīθ al-qurʾān*). Al-Baqillānī is quoted as saying that Gabriel used to command, “Put such and such a verse in such and such a place” (al-Suyūṭī, *al-Iṣāqqān*, 1: 214).
Later the community accepted the structure of the Qur’an as they found it, but presumed that it was the structure ordained by God, who intended the Qur’an to be a written canon of scripture. Al-Suyūṭī quotes the Qādī Abū Bakr [al-Bāqillānī, d. 403 A.H.]:

What we hold is that the entirety of the Qur’an, which God revealed and commanded to be fixed in writing and which He did not supersede with another text and whose reading he did not withdraw following its revelation, is this which is between the two covers and which the musḥaf of Uṯmān comprises. We hold that nothing has been cut from it and nothing has been added to it. Its arrangement and order are fixed according to the order that God gave it and according to the arrangement of the verses of its surahs that His Apostle carried out. None of them was placed earlier or later than it was meant to be. The community canonized the arrangement of the verses and the position of each sura on the authority of the Prophet (may the peace and blessings of God be upon him). It also specified their contexts. Similarly it canonized on his authority the precise vowellings and readings. It is possible either that the Messenger (may the peace and blessings of God be upon him) might have arranged the sūras himself or that he entrusted that task to the community after him and did not see to it himself. [Al-Bāqillānī] said that this second possibility is more likely.

This change in the perception of the divinely intended form of the Qur’an from oral to written raised a difficulty for the community. The Qur’an’s structure is entirely appropriate to an undifferentiated sense of participation in the divine knowledge and authority—indeed, that is how the text is still used. To make the claim that every facet of the existing written structure was carefully thought out

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124 E.g., al-Suyūṭī, al-Iṣnāqūn, 1: 190.
125 Kitāb al-Mabānī, 23. Although Jefferies reads taḥliḍ and qaḥliḍa in this passage, it seems that taḥliḍ and qaḥliḍa would fit the context better. The difference is not significant for the overall meaning of the passage.

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تخليصه، مكتب و-Julouh (في الأصل، خروج) يُعرَف لأسرهم، وصيحة أن بآباه ويبعد عن بلاطه المغطى.

126 Al-Suyūṭī, al-Iṣnāqūn, 1: 196; الذي مثبته أنه جميع القرآن يكن إلهه وهم بي وهم من Бог وأهم بلاطهم وهم بيسبطه، ولن يكون من الله تامًا، ولا يمر بغيره من الله تامًا، ولا يمر بغيره من الله تامًا، ولا يمر بغيره من الله تامًا، ولا يمر بغيره من الله تامًا، ولا يمر بغيره من الله تامًا.
and arranged by God, however, becomes much more problematic. The tradition implicitly recognizes this difficulty when it pays so little attention to structure and context in its approach to the text. The commentary tradition treats the Qur’an as a set of discrete verses rather than as coherent sūras or pericopes. Concern for the interrelationship of verses is principally tied to the question of abrogation; in those cases the clues to the chronology of the Qur’an come not from within the text itself but from reconstructions of the context of each verse from the biography of the Prophet and the accounts of his Companions.

The difficulty is compounded when one projects the claim that the present structure is ideal back onto the heavenly archetype, as though the mushaf were an accurate transcript of the lawh mahfūz ‘preserved tablet’ of Q 85:22. Can God’s Book really be as fragmentary, haphazard, specific, and, one might even say, parochial as the text of the mushaf? By asserting that it is, the community argues itself into the unenviable position of having to claim that from all eternity God has been concerned about such minutiae as the domestic arrangements of the Prophet. Furthermore, the Qur’an thus understood can no longer be read as a divine engagement with humanity, calling for and responding to human action; rather it becomes entirely the predetermined of that action.

This is the problem that arises when the rich and complex notion of kitāb in Qur’anic discourse is equated with the text of the mushaf. The community eventually finds the notion too limited and too limiting, so it gradually broadens its understanding of God’s authority to include both the summa of the Prophet (as the definitive interpreter of the Qur’an) and also the bāṭin or esoteric interpretation of the Qur’an.

When the kitāb Allāh becomes too closely identified with just what is written down in the mushaf, the concept of kalam Allāh, the speech of God, defended by the orthodox as an essential attribute of the divine nature, starts to take over.


128 Ibn Ḥanbal, ‘Aqīda, 302:

And Ibn Ḥanbal used to affirm that God (may he be honored and glorified) has speech by means of which he addresses people. And it is an attribute of his in his nature, by means of which he sets himself off from dumbness, muteness and silence, and praises himself. . . . [Ibn Ḥanbal] used to say to those who ask how the Qur’an could have issued forth uncreated that God Most High speaks by means of the sounds and the syllables [when the Qur’an is recited]. . . . According to his way of thinking, anyone who maintains that the Qur’an is only an approximation to the speech of God is in ignorance and is mistaken. Both the abrogating and the abrogated verses in the kitāb of God are more than just a reflection of God’s speech or a version of it.”


And the Arabians of the Qur’an all worship and obey it, but are they not left out? When the Qur’an is recited, it is said. . . . According to his way of thinking, anyone who maintains that the Qur’an is only an approximation to the speech of God is in ignorance and is mistaken. Both the abrogating and the abrogated verses in the kitāb of God are more than just a reflection of God’s speech or a version of it.”
the lowest heaven to where they had been lowered in the night of power, and gave them to the Prophet. Other scholars have a different opinion but only God knows.\textsuperscript{130}

Graham calls this focus on kalām Allāh the giving of precedence to the Qurʾān’s “ontological or ‘essential’ status as God’s Speech over its functional or ‘accidental’ character as scripture used in worship.”\textsuperscript{131} He complains that this approach does not do justice to what he perceives to have been “the active force of Qurʾān in early (and indeed in later) Muslim life apart from speculation.”\textsuperscript{132} However, the focus on the ontological status of the Qurʾān may be not merely the result of speculation but rather an attempt to recover something that was lost when the concepts of kitāb Allāh and qurʾān were collapsed into the content of the mushaf. The rich understanding of revelation operative in very early Islam, which Graham so carefully presented in an earlier work,\textsuperscript{133} was threatened with impoverishment by a focus on the written codification of the Qurʾān text. In the speculations of the Muslim theologians, something of that richness is allowed to reemerge.

It is also possible that the importance of the integral Qurʾān text in the earliest centuries of Islam has been overestimated, and so it has been presumed that it had a form that would have allowed it to fulfill a central role. Yet there is ample reason to question this assumption of centrality. The Qurʾān certainly had an essential function in ritual prayer, yet only the first sūra really had to be known, and as Bell observed, much of the text is inappropriate to prayer-recitation. In the development of fiqh it surely played a role as well; yet here to relatively little of it was useful, and it could scarcely have been considered a major resource. The fact that in Ḥanafī’s time the Qurʾān had to fight for a position of authority over against the sunna lends support to Richard Bulliet’s “cautious hypothesis” about the relative unimportance of the Qurʾān as a source of guidance in early Islam when compared to the Companions—the fount of hadith.\textsuperscript{134} Joseph Schacht observed that “the legal subject-matter of early Islam did not primarily derive from the Qurʾān,”\textsuperscript{135} and it is clear that even where the Qurʾān may have contained an explicit ruling, that norm was not considered decisive.\textsuperscript{136} Furthermore, some of the verses claimed as authoritative in fiqh, the “stoning verse” for example, do not appear in the mushaf and were arguably never part of the Qurʾān.\textsuperscript{137}

This gap between the (relatively few) legal prescriptions in the Qurʾān and some of the actual laws that became established among the Muslims raises a serious question about the early history of the text or at least about the role it played in the community. If we add to this the gap in comprehension represented by the fawā'id, by textual difficulties, and by various terms that were no longer understood by the commentators,\textsuperscript{138} we are drawn to conclude that the full text of the Qurʾān played quite a limited role in the early decades of Islam.

According to numerous traditions, it was awareness, that the memory of the complete Qurʾān was fragile that prompted its written codification. Yet we have also seen that the written form of the revelations was not able fully to preserve the Qurʾān without the complementarity of the oral tradition, and further, that it did not in fact play the paramount role in that preservation—even if it might have become important later in reconstituting an oral tradition that had faded in parts. The persistence for centuries of different “readings” claiming (and mostly afforded) canonical status bears witness to the sense the community has had of the primacy of oral tradition over transcript.\textsuperscript{139} All the variant masāḥif, including the “official” one, relied for their authority on a Companion isnād—i.e., an attestation of their oral lineage traced back to the Prophet. Even so, most of those myriad readings claim their legitimacy not on the basis of a surviving variant mushaf but rather on the authority of an early reciter for whose reading there is no written authority.

These observations about memorization and writing might also afford some important insights into the process of the early recensions. They would bear out


\textsuperscript{131} Graham, “Earliest Meaning,” 364.

\textsuperscript{132} Graham, “Earliest Meaning,” 364.


\textsuperscript{134} Bulliet, Islam, 31.


\textsuperscript{136} See Schacht, Origins, 181, 188, 191, 224ff.

\textsuperscript{137} Patricia Crone and Michael Cook point out that Islamic law maintained a preference for stoning as the penalty for adultery even though the Qurʾān makes it clear (Q 24:2) that the penalty is to be flagellation. They take this as an indication that the Qurʾān was not widely known (P. Crone and M. Cook, Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977], 180, n. 17). That may well be the case. However, it could also be that the Qurʾān was known, but that the status accorded to it in the early period was not paramount. The arguments for the authority of the stoning punishment rest just as much on sunna as they do on qurʾān. The attempt to justify it by pointing the existence of a “stoning verse” is really an elaborate effort to avoid saying explicitly that sunna can abrogate qurʾān.

\textsuperscript{138} See Crone, "Two Legal Problems," 1–10.

the contention of some traditions that the Qur'ān was originally not memorized as a complete corpus but was in fact scattered among numerous memorizers and was thus vulnerable to loss. If, as other reports aver, the oral tradition had been preserved as a unity by some Companions up until the time of the 'Uthmānic recension perhaps some twenty years after Muhammad’s death, it is difficult to see why it would then have dwindled to the point where it became unable to correct the corruptions of a written text supposedly based upon it. This points to the possibility that the scattered revelations were collected and transcribed early; the transcripts were preserved, but only parts of the oral tradition survived intact, since very little of the Qur'ān was required for worship and only a small amount offered any practical guidance in developing a characteristically Muslim style of life. At some later time, the integrity of the oral tradition would have been restored based upon the transcripts, even with their flaws.

Thus an overestimation of the function of the Qur'ān can lead to unwarranted assumptions about what form it had. In order for all its functions to be fulfilled, there was certainly little need for the complete Qur'ān to have been carefully codified in writing. One might say that the principal function of the Qur'ān was to stand more as a reminder and as evidence that God had addressed the Arabs than as the complete record of what God had, or has, to say. In some situations, the Qur'ān is treated as though it were what anthropologists refer to as phatic communication—words and sounds intended to maintain connection and communion rather than to convey specific information. This is especially the case in the many situations where the text remains untranslated for people who know no Arabic.

To fulfill such a function, even an incomplete oral tradition would have been adequate. Indeed it still is, in practice, adequate. Wilfred Cantwell Smith maintains that “Muslims, from the beginning until now are that group of people that has coalesced around the Qur'ān.” There is a sense in which this is true, but the evidence indicates that they “coalesced” around it while it was still incomplete, still oral, still in process. They committed themselves to belief in a God who had initiated a direct communication with them, and who had thereby established a continuing relationship with them. They gathered around the recitations as the pledge of God’s relationship of guidance with them rather than as a clearly defined and already closed textual corpus.

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140 See, for example, Ibn Mas'ūd’s claim to have memorized seventy sūras learned directly from the Prophet when Zayd b. ʿAuṣ̄ was still a child, Al-Sijṣ̄hāni, Kītb al-Maṣḥūf. 199.

Muhammad evidently did not consider that the lack of a physical book or scroll or script invalidated this claim to be a bringer of kitāb. Nor apparently did he feel that an explanation of this lack was needed. More than once it is made clear that a written document would not constitute proof of anything. In this chapter, I will examine some of the passages in which the Qurʾān responds to the demands from the Meccans and the ahl al-kitāb for tangible and authoritative proof of Muhammad’s claims. I draw upon the reflections of the classical commentators as well—not to try to establish the actual context of the passages, but to see how those contexts were envisaged by those who presumed that the kitāb was at least intended to be written down.

The Demand for a Kitāb from Heaven

In what is traditionally considered the earliest passage with this kind of demand,² the Meccans insist that the Prophet establish the authority of what he has been preaching by ascending to heaven and bringing back to them, as proof of his ascent, a kitāb they can read:

أو يكون لِمَّا بَيَّنَتْ مِنْ رَحْفٍ أَوْ تَرَقُىٰ فِي السَّمَاءِ وَاللَّهُ فَضُلِّعَ لِيّ نُمُودُهُ رَفِيقًا

“Or [we would believe you] if you were to have a house of gold, or ascend into heaven; even then we will not believe you have ascended there unless you cause to descend upon us a kitāb that we can read.” Say: “My Lord be glorified! Am I anything but a human messenger?”

Sūrat al-Isrā’ 17:93

Tradition has it that this challenge took place in the Kaʿba when a group of Meccans confronted Muhammad.³ The Qurʾān reports the exchange in the context of a discussion about its own authority and inimitability (Q 17:85ff), and it seems clear that the kitāb referred to in the Meccans’ demand is distinct from the Qurʾān. Al-Tabari glosses the word this way: “A writing spread out so that we can read it; one in which we are commanded to obey you and believe in you.”⁴ The challenge is rejected, since only God can do such a thing, not a human messenger. Furthermore, the Qurʾān requires no such support, since its divine origin speaks for itself:

² Jeffery follows Bell in taking the passage as Medinan rather than Meccan as it is traditionally regarded (and as it is also in Noldke’s estimation [GalQ, 1: 139]). Jeffery, Qurʾān and Scripture, 13; Bell, The Qurʾān, 1: 262.


⁴ Al-Tabari, Tafsīr, 3: 149.

Say: “Even if mankind and the jinn should cooperate together to produce the like of this recitation, they could not produce anything like it even with one another’s help.”

Sūrat al-Isrā’ 17:88

Both of these verses seem to make a distinction between the recitations that Muhammad was bringing and an authoritative kitāb from heaven that would prove his bona fides; recitations claimed to be from God were not accorded the same authority by the Meccans as a physical document from heaven. This is significant, for it indicates that the Qurʾān was not seen primarily in written, documentary terms; the Meccans felt it should be supplemented with something in writing. Even though the Qurʾān claims the title kitāb, its authority and divine origin are somehow different from those of a physical, written heavenly document.

It is also clear that the Qurʾān’s authority does not rest on the heavenly attributes of the one who brings it. The Meccans apparently would have found it more convincing had an angel brought the revelation itself or at least accompanied this merely human messenger, “who eats food and walks in the markets”:

وَمَا نَعْلَمُ إِلَّا مَا كَانَ مَعَهُ الْهَجَمَانُ إِلَّا أَن قَالُوا إِنَّهُ اللَّهُ الَّذِي بَرَأَ عَلَى رَسُولٍ أَنُحْيَى فِي الأَرْضِ مَكْتُوبًا نَحْيَى فِي الأَرْضِ مَكْتُوبًا

And nothing prevented humanity from believing when the guidance came to them except that they said, “Has God sent a mortal as messenger?” Say, “If angels could go about on earth safely, We would have sent down to them from heaven an angel as messenger.”

Sūrat al-Isrā’ 17:94–5

However, the divine response stresses that God has always used human messengers and to demand more is mere arrogance.

وَمَا رَسَمَ الْعَرَاءُ مِنَ السَّمَانِ إِلَّا إِنْ هُمْ لَا يَكُونُونَ في الأَطْوَافِ وَيَعْلَمُهُ أَيْمَانَ الْمَكْتُوبِ

We sent no messengers prior to you who did not eat food and go about in
revelation are often dismissed as sorcery by those who will not believe. In Muhammad’s own career, charges of sorcery and possession were not uncommon. However, as Muslims traditionally assert, he offered no corroborating miracle other than the Qur’an itself.

If the kitāb that Moses brought was written down on scrolls, it seems that is because his followers rendered it so, not because God sent it in that form:

"Who was it who sent down the kitāb that Moses brought to light and guidance for humanity and that you put on (lit., make into) parchments [or papyrus]?"

It is true that God is said to have written al-alwāḥ ‘the tablets’ for Moses:

And We wrote for him on the tablets an admonition about everything and a criterion of judgment in every matter.

Yet even before these tablets were given to him, Moses was said to have brought God’s ḏiyāt ‘signs’ (e.g., Q 7:104) and to have been God’s rasūl ‘messenger’ in his dealings with the Egyptians (Q 7:105). He had already been favored by having been the recipient of God’s risālāt ‘messages’ and kālām ‘speech’ (Q 7:144); the granting of the tablets is presented as something of a bonus. So the tablets do not seem to be the essence of Moses’ prophethood, though they are clearly of a piece with it. They play a relatively minor role in the Qur’anic account of Moses’ ministry, and there is no clear indication of the relationship between these physical examples of divine writ and the kitāb that the Qur’an repeatedly says was given to Moses.6
In recounting the events of Moses’ ministry, the Qurān is seeking, of course, to draw a parallel with Muhammad. The command to recognize the newly-arrived messenger (Q 7:158–59) is inserted into the narrative of Moses and Israel that forms part of the history of prophecy presented in Sūrat Al-‘A‘rāf. If the tablets of Moses were for the Qurān the paradigm of the prophetic kitāb, then one would not expect to find there such an easy dismissal of the Meccan demand for a physical writing from heaven. If Muhammad had understood the reception of such a writing as proof of prophecy, we would expect to find some explanation of the lack of it in his case. Clearly, the Qurān’s notion of divine kitāb goes well beyond the physical.

The contrast between what Muhammad and Moses were given is raised explicitly in a challenge usually ascribed to the Meccans, though clearly with a Jewish background.¹⁰

Fālā ʿaṭālakum min ʿāmīn Allāh ʿawwal ʿāmīn, maʾāmīn Allāh muṣīn, waʾāmīn Allāh ʿabīn. Fālā ʿaṭālakum min ʿāmīn Allāh, mā sīr ʿaṭālakum min ʿāmīn Allāh ʿabīn. Mā sīr ʿaṭālakum min ʿāmīn Allāh, mā ʿaṭālakum min ʿāmīn Allāh ʿabīn. Mā ʿaṭālakum min ʿāmīn Allāh, mā lā ʿaṭālakum min ʿāmīn Allāh ʿabīn.

However, when the truth came to them from Our presence, they said, “If only he had been given something like what was given to Moses!” Did they not also disbelieve in what was given to Moses before? They said,

The response to this disbelief is telling, since it indicates once again that the standard by which a kitāb is to be judged is not its miraculous physical appearance, but rather its value as a guide for living:

Sūrat Al-Qasas 28:48

"Two bits of sorcery that back one another up.” And they said, “We do not believe in either of them.”

Sūrat Al-Qasas 28:49

The parallel is explicit: even Moses was unable to look on God (Q 7:143), so obviously he could not show God to his people; in the same way, Muhammad was unable to cause a kitāb to descend from heaven. Even if he could do so, it is implied, they still would not believe.

What then were the ahl al-kitāb demanding from him? Was it something different from what was sought by the Meccans? Al-Tabari recounts the disagreement among the traditions concerning the precise nature of this kitāb:

Some maintained that they asked him to have sent down to them a kitāb from heaven in written form (mākitāb), in the same way that Moses brought the Israelites the Tūrah in written form from the presence of God. Others maintained that rather than that they asked him to have a kitāb sent down especially for them. Still others maintained that they
demanded of him that he have kutub sent down individually upon certain men among them ordering that he be given credence and obedience.\textsuperscript{11}

Al-Tabari's own opinion is that the ahl al-kitāb were demanding "a sign (āya) such as would make it impossible (mu'jiza) for anything in creation to produce the like of it; a sign bearing witness (ghāhidah) to the trustworthiness of the Messenger of God and commanding them to obey him."\textsuperscript{12} Here he employs language (āya, mu'jiza, ghāhidah) that immediately recalls that traditionally used of the Qur'ān itself. This demonstrates the difficulty the tradition has in dealing with the verses where a kitāb from heaven is demanded, since it has become difficult to distinguish between the Qur'ān itself and this kitāb. The recitations that Muhammad brings are clearly not recognized as authoritative either by the Meccans or by the Jews and Christians, so they demand some proof of his being a prophet. To those groups a heavenly writing is an emblem of prophethood and evidence of this individual's privileged access to the realm of the divine. If he can establish his credentials, then they will take some notice of his recitations. Muhammad is consistently told by God to reject this challenge and maintain that for anyone who is familiar with God's earlier revelations, the recitations themselves should be sufficient evidence of his prophethood.

Once the community came to identify the heavenly kitāb with the recitations of the Prophet, the different manifestations of kitāb expressed in the text—especially here the miraculous writing from heaven attesting to the messenger, and the prophetic utterances recited by Muhammad and his followers—seem to have become difficult to separate. In commenting on Q 6:7, al-Ṭabarī paraphrases God's position:

Muhammad, even if the inspiration (waly) that I have sent down to you with my messenger were to be sent down on a papyrus that they could examine and touch with their hands, that they could look at and read from; even if it were suspended between earth and heaven, [testifying] to both the truth of what you summon them to and the validity of what you have brought them concerning my unicity and my revelation, still

\textsuperscript{11} Al-Ṭabarī, Taṣfīr, 4: 345-46c

\textsuperscript{12} Al-Ṭabarī, Taṣfīr, 4: 346:

Those who believe said, "If only the recitation had been sent down to him as a single complete pronouncement." It is [sent down] this way so that We may make it firm in your heart; and We have arranged it in order.

Strat al-Furqān 25:32

One wonders how the two genres can coexist, not just side by side but interwoven in a single document. How can the Qur'ān so constantly refer to...
as a unitary corpus. We have already seen indications of this in the material of chapter 1: the hesitancy about producing a volume containing the revelations; the relatively small amount that seems to have been memorized in the early years; the struggle the Qur'an had in claiming and maintaining a place of authority in fiqh over against or even alongside the sunna. The next section examines how the text itself rejects the demand that it be delivered as a corpus.

THE DEMAND FOR A "SINGLE COMPLETE PRONOUNCEMENT"

Allied with the demands for a kitāb to be brought from heaven was a further criticism, and an implicit demand. That complaint touches on the very nature of the Qur'an and is of great significance for understanding how Muhammad regarded the process of revelation. In a context once again related to Moses, the Prophet's critics demand to know why the recitation he claims is from God is being given to him only piecemeal and not in complete form:

Those who disbelieve said, "If only the recitation had been sent down to him as a single complete pronouncement." It is [sent down] this way so that We may make it firm in your heart; and We have arranged it in order. || And there is no case they can put to you about which We have not provided you with the truth, and something better by way of explanation.

Sūrat al-Furqān 25:32–33

Al-Tabari and other commentators presume that what lies behind the phrase jumlatan wahidianan 'as a single complete pronouncement' is Moses' reception of the complete Tūrāb on a single occasion. The Qur'an's response to this is significant, because it portrays the process of its own revelation as one in which the divine word comes in response to the questions, objections, complaints and pronouncements of one group or another as the Prophet encounters them. The traditions quoted by al-Tabari commenting on these verses express this quite succinctly:

From al-Hasan: About God's words «and We have arranged it in order» he said, "He used to send down a verse or two or more in response to them. When they asked about something, God would send it down in response to them and as an answer from the Prophet to what they were discussing. . . ." Ibn Jurayj also said, "The Qur'an was sent down to him in

14 Al-Tabari, Ta'rif, 1: 128–129.
15 The answer to this question proposed by Angelika Neuwirth is that only certain parts of the Qur'ān—the pericopes excerpted from the heavenly book, mostly the "alrā and recalling of prophetic history—are to be understood as belonging to the category of "book". In the Qur'ān these have been placed in a framework consisting of other materials—hymns, polemic, and affirmations of the revelation—which developed in a cultic setting. This is an attractive approach in that it seems to solve the puzzle of the Qur'ān's self-referential nature. However, it does so by oversimplifying what is in fact a much more complex relationship between the Qur'ān itself and its notion of kiṭāb. "Vom Rezitationstext," 90–91.
response to what they said, so that Muhammad would know that God would answer the people with the truth regarding what they were saying."  

Such a portrayal is perfectly consonant with the structure of a significant part of the Qur'an: the characteristic passages in which God quotes his interlocutors or recounts their deeds and attitudes, and then dictates a response.

In his analysis of the Qur'an's literary forms A. Welch refers to these as "say-statements." His comment that such passages are "scattered throughout the Qur'an," though correct, understates their significance. There are 323 occurrences of the singular imperative qul 'say' and 26 of other imperative forms of the same verb—constituting over five percent of the Qur'an's verses. In addition to these, there are innumerable cases where the qul introduces a block of several verses (e.g., Q 13:16ff) or where, though not used explicitly to introduce the response, it could still be understood, as in the verse under discussion here (Q 25:32). The expressed uses of the various forms of this root (q-w-l) number approximately 1700. This should not be taken as proof of a lack of imagination in the choice of vocabulary, but rather as an indication of the way we should approach the Qur'an.

These "say-statements" are not merely one of the Qur'an's several characteristic rhetorical devices; they demonstrate its fundamental sense of itself. It is the record of God's centuries-long address to a doubting, questioning, searching and straying humanity; the Qur'an is the place where the Arabs are finally brought into the conversation directly. Divine revelation comes, as Ibn Jurayj put it, jawaban li-qawthlim—as an authoritative response to what people are saying—so naturally it awaits its occasion. The demand for the recitation to be sent down jumlatan wāhidatan—as a single complete pronouncement—misunderstands this responsive nature of revelation and is rejected by God. One might say that jumlatan wāhidatan is a category more appropriate to written texts and canons;

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17 Al-Tabari, Taṣfīr, 9: 387:


19 This root is used so many times, indeed, that Hanna Kassis chose not to list the hundreds of perfect and imperfect forms in A Concordance of the Qur'an (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983). In doing this he rather undercuts his boast of having fulfilled to the letter Dr. Johnson's definition of a concordance as "a book which shows in how many texts of scripture any word occurs" (p. xx). Such a large omission, made without any explanation or any indication as to the number of verses involved, skews the impression of the text in a way that Kassis has otherwise sought studiously to avoid.

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they are complete and have a certain unity. In rejecting such a notion, the Qur'an is asserting its fluidity and orality, its interactive nature.

Al-Qurtubi (d. 1273 C.E.) suggests that one reason why the Qur'an was revealed piecemeal is that, unlike earlier prophets, Muhammad was unlettered (ummat) and so had to learn it by memorization because he could not be given it to read. Yet al-Qurtubi too indicates that the revelation of the Qur'an little by little mostly had to do with its responsive nature:

"[God] says, "If We had sent down the Qur'an to you as a single complete pronouncement and then they questioned you, you would not have had the answer to hand. However, we kept it in reserve for you and so when they raised a question, you could give the answer." . . . If it had been revealed with all its injunctions imposed together, it would have proven too onerous for them; God knew that the best way to reveal it was in separate parts (mutalaffarqan) so that they might have their attention drawn to it time and again. If he had sent it down jumlatan wāhidatan the aim of making them pay attention to it would not have been fulfilled."

Al-Qurtubi then points out that the matter of abrogation also comes into play here. The heavenly kitāb would presumably contain mutually incompatible expressions of the divine will which could not, of course be revealed at the same

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20 Not all of al-Tabari's own comments nor those he quotes seem as insightful as that of Ibn Jurayj. Their explanation of the need for the Qur'an to be revealed piecemeal reveals a concern with accurate memorization and canonicity only appropriate to a later generation, a concern that would scarcely have been on the mind of the Prophet during his Meccan career:

From Ibn 'Abbās: God said to send down the yāya to him and when the Prophet of God had learnt it, another yāya was sent down, so that He could teach him the kidīb by heart and firmly fix his mind on it (al-Tabari, Taṣfīr, 9: 387).

Ibn Jurayj himself falls into this way of thinking a little further on in the same passage:

As for His Word "We arranged it in order," God is saying, "Bit by bit We taught it to you until you memorized it." In recitation, "arranging" means 'taking great care' and 'paying close attention.'

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22 Al-Qurtubi, Al-Jāmiʿ ʿilā Anwar al-Qurʿān, 5: 13: 29:

بِتَابِل نَبِيِّا، مَعَ اسْمِهِ هَلْ يُقْرَأُ سَبْبَةً مَا قَامَ مَعِهِ، وَقَالَ نِعْمَةً إِنَّا مُكَافِئُونَنَّكَ، فَلَوْ نَزَلَ حَجَّةً مَا فَيَنِى مِنَ الْفَرَائِضِ كَلِلْ حَجَّةِ عَلَى عَبْدِيِّكَ...
time without leading to absurdity. The acceptance of the phenomenon of abrogation does, however, underline the necessarily interactive and time-conditioned nature of divine revelation:

Furthermore, [the Qur’an] contains both abrogating and abrogated material, so people used to observe a particular [command] up until a specific moment that God knew was right. Then he would reveal the abrogation. It would have been an undue burden on people for Him to have revealed in a single pronouncement, “Do this” and “Don’t do it.”

Ibn Kathir (d. 1373) sees it as a mark of honor for Muhammad that unlike the other prophets who were vouchsafed but a single moment of such revelation he received revelations constantly. He also recognizes the interactive nature of the divine address:

God answers them to the effect that [the Qur’an] was revealed in installments (munajjamar) over a period of twenty-three years, according to situations (waqqal-r) and events (hawâdith), and what was needed by way of legal classifications (ahlkâm). He did this in order that he might strengthen the hearts of believers with it. . . . Nor can they make any statement (qawâb) that contradicts the truth without Our answering them with the truth of that particular matter, with something clearer, more comprehensive and more eloquent than their position.

Ideas like these are very common in the commentary (tafsîr) literature. The tradition could hardly fail to recognize that the Qur’an refused to behave like an already closed and canonized text but preferred to address itself to actual situations. Commentators often quote Q 17:106 in this context:

وْفَقِّيْنَا فَرَءَئَا مَكَّةَ عَلَى النَّاسِ عَلَى مُكَذِّبِهَا وَتَزَكَّيْنَا نِيرَتَكَلَا

Al-Qurtubi, al-Jami`, 5:13: 29

And in the form of a recitation (qur’ân) that We have divided, that you might recite it to the people at intervals, and We have indeed sent it down.

Surat al-Isra’ 17:106

One of the principal traditional tools for interpreting the Qur’an text is the determination of a particular historical context for the verse. This use of asbîb al-nuzûl, as they are called, recognizes precisely the responsiveness of the revelation that we have been observing. The usual translation ‘occasions of revelation’ perhaps veils the causality implied in the term asbîb ‘reasons’. Al-Suyûti quotes al-Wâhidî: “It is not possible to know the interpretation (tafsîr) of the verse without determining its narrative context (qiṣa) and explaining its sending down.” He also quotes Ibn Taymiyya: “Knowing the reason for the sending down helps in the understanding of the verse. For knowledge of the cause (sabûb) yields knowledge of the effect (musabbab).” The commentators can, of course, maintain that it is not the verse itself that is occasioned or caused but the actual sending down of that verse, which itself is preexistent. Even so, they are still implicitly recognizing that the process of revelation is a divine response elicited by human word and action.

Over against this, however, a community that has gradually come to see its recitations as a codified canonical text cannot help but also recognize the legitimacy of the “jumlatan wahidatan” challenge. If the text of the Qur’an is, as they have come to believe, the eternal and preexistent speech of God, then surely it should be able to be displayed all at once. Ibn Kathir answers the challenge in this way:

God combined for the Qur’an both properties [of being revealed in parts and as a single pronouncement]. In the realm of the host of heaven it was sent down jumlatan wahidatan from the Preserved Tablet to the Abode of Glory in the lowest heaven. Then after that it was sent down to the earth in parts according to situations and events. Al-Nasâ`i related a tradition with its chain of transmitters going back to Ibn `Abbas: He said the Qur’an was sent down to the lowest heaven on the Night of
Divine Decree [laylat al-qadr; see Q 97:1] and then was sent down after that over the course of twenty years.30

Al-Qurtubi relates another tradition going back to Ibn `Abbás:

Commenting upon God’s word «We sent it down on the Night of Divine Decree» he said, “The Qur’ān was sent down jumlatan wāhidatān from the presence of God on the Preserved Tablet to the Noble Scribes [al-safarat al-kārimah; see Q 80:15–16] who write in heaven. Then the Noble Scribes gave it to Jibril in installments over twenty nights and Gabriel gave it to Muhammad in installments over twenty years.”31

Thus, to answer the jumlatan wāhidatān challenge, the tradition patches together in varying ways isolated parts of the text in an attempt to outline a coherent schema that could reconcile a preexistent canon with what was clearly an ad rem mode of revelation. The Qur’ān is presented as already complete in the realm of eternity; the text is preserved on a heavenly tablet (Q 85:22) and transmitted to Gabriel, who in turn parcelled it out to Muhammad according to the situation in which he finds himself. However, it is clear that the motivation for developing such a schema does not come from within the text itself, for it rejects the notion that it is somehow incomplete and that it cught to be made public in a single pronouncement in order to prove its completeness. The motivation seems rather to arise from a sense within the community that its scriptural canon must be fixed and complete by its very nature as the utterance and decree of God—kalām Allāh and kitāb Allāh.32


31 Al-Qurtubi, al-Jamā’il, 13: 29. Also see al-Tabārī’s comments on Q 80:15–16, where he reconciles traditions that maintain that the sāfara were qurāda (reciters) with those that call them kitāba (scribes) by suggesting that they are angels because angels “are the ones who read the kitab and act as go-betweens (tafsīrī) between God and his messengers” (Al-Tabārī, Tafsīr, 12: 445–46).

32 For an extensive treatment of theological positions about the status of the Qur’ān, see Wolffson, Philosophy of the Kalām, 235–303.

WRITING AND TEXTS

As the traditional commentators suspected, what seems to lie behind the jumlatan wāhidatān challenge has to do not only with the Qur’ān but with presuppositions about the nature of scripture—indeed with the nature of texts in general; therefore it is worth outlining some of the features common to texts, whether oral or written. It is a brave, some might say foolhardy, person who proposes to tackle the question of the nature of texts in the present intellectual climate, where the very notion of text seems to have become the none-too-stable hinge on which virtually everything else hangs. Nothing is more elusive these days than a text and scriptural religion arguably stands in urgent need of a more sophisticated understanding of the nature of texts. Such an investigation is certainly beyond the scope of this study, as well as the competence of the writer. However, in trying to understand a seventh-century Arabian context we may allow ourselves at least to begin with what today would seem an unacceptably naïve approach to the nature of texts. As our investigations continue in the succeeding chapters, we will perhaps see evidence of a more sophisticated approach emerging in the Muslim tradition itself.

One can distinguish four stages in the life of a text: composition, display, storage and redisplay.33 Composition constitutes textuality as it will be understood here. It may take place either in image or in word. Texts are usually displayed aurally or visually either simultaneously with or sometime after their composition, though some may never be displayed—for example, thoughts we decide for one reason or another to keep to ourselves. Until a text has been displayed in some form, it is impossible to know whether its composition is complete. For example, if a person composes a statement in her mind, it will only become clear that this text is complete when it is spoken, written, registered electronically, or otherwise displayed through gesture or sound. Very often composition and display are virtually simultaneous and are completed together—as, for example, in the case of orally composed poetry or epic. Other utterances, such as a proposal of marriage or the opening gambit of an awkward confrontation, may be composed several times in the mind long before they are displayed. Display takes place when the text is, in principle, made available in some fixed, bounded form, a form in which it can be stored.

Storage, even if only temporary, may take place in several ways: in the hearer’s or composer’s own short-term memory; on tape or other electronic form, in transcript, or in facsimile. The extent to which these can be complete and accurate

"copies" of the text is obviously a vexed question, but it need not detain us here. Storage makes possible the re-display of the text independently of the composer.

This description is an oversimplification, of course, in that it takes little account of interactions of the four stages among themselves—for example, the effect of the medium and context of display (e.g., language, script, materials, audience) on the process of composition itself. However, they can still shed some light on the matter we have been examining. Muhammad’s interlocutors wondered: if the text he was bringing was from God and was like the other heavenly texts with which they were familiar, why could it not be displayed all at once? The piecemeal display of the text suggested that its composition was still incomplete, which raised the question of whether the author could really be God.

The Qur’an’s response to this question was not only expressed in some of its statements, but also implied in its form. Each unit of revelation is complete; what was taking place in Muhammad’s ministry was not the gradual and piecemeal display of a previously composed text—though that is how the tradition would later come to see it—but rather the display of divine utterances composed by God to address particular occasions (jawâban li-qawwâlim, as the commentators would say).

The apparent lack of concern for form or order in the Qur’an strikes many a reader as strange. We search in vain for introduction, exposition, development, conclusion. When we begin Sûrat al-Baqara, it is as though we have walked into the middle of a conversation—or even an argument—one which is still under way when we reach the end of Sûrat al-Nâs. Any point in the text might serve equally well as the beginning or the end, because in a sense the Qur’an is always complete. Whatever God has to say in response to a situation is never left unsaid; God is never at a loss for words. If there is more to come, it is not so much because God is only part way through displaying an already completed text, but rather because further situations will arise that call for direct divine address. The Qur’an presents itself not so much as a corpus completed in the past, but as the voice of God in the present.

When the Messenger died, however, the initial moments of this divine address ceased and it became clear that no one would succeed him in this prophetic role. The utterances were eventually collected and canonized; they became a corpus. The commentators, guardians of that corpus, sought to show that it was composed and had existed as a corpus from all eternity. They did this, as we have seen, by making a case for its having been eternally displayed and stored. For the corpus to have been displayed and stored is for it to have been "written"—that is, to have been kitâb.

It might seem that the very word Qur’an ‘reciting’ makes it clear that Muhammad’s ministry constituted an act of display rather than of composition. However, his hearers were accustomed to the oral composition of the poet who composes in the very act of declaiming.34 Time and again the Qur’an has to insist that the Prophet is neither a poet nor a soothsayer: he recites only what is composed by God and sent down to him to convey to the people. What is at issue between Muhammad and his opponents is that the manner of display calls into question the agent of composition.

The Prophet claims to be displaying utterances composed by God. Display, as we have seen, is the defining moment of composition, the action that sets the boundaries of the text. Griffiths calls it "the moment at which the bounded text is made available."35 This is where the jumlatan wahidatan challenge is focused: until it is completely displayed, a text has no boundaries.

Both groups who challenged Muhammad had their own reasons for seeking a bounded text. The ahl al-kitâb, who were used to the idea of a corpus of divine revelation, were seeking from Muhammad a complete text (jumla wâhidah) similar to their own. The Meccans, on the other hand, were demanding a text they could inspect and comprehend, rather than the quite unpredictable utterances that issued jawâban li-qawwâlim from the mouth of the Prophet. They were trying, as it were, to cut out the middleman. They demanded that the words of heaven be delivered directly to them, rather than through the recitations of a messenger.

The Qur’an had no limits as far as they could see and so they asked for something written, that is, displayed and therefore bounded.

Since in this case his voice is the medium of display, the Prophet’s claim to authority is circular: the recitations assert his authority and reliability, yet it is he who utters (displays) the recitations. The challenges made by the Meccans and the ahl al-kitâb were an attempt to cut through this circularity by demanding a medium of display—writing, kitâb—that was somehow independent of the Prophet, something that would establish that he was not composing this text himself but was merely displaying it. The Qur’an’s repeated response is to insist that the very nature of the text should be sufficient to indicate who composed it:

34 For a discussion of the use of oral composition in the pre-Islamic poetry, see James T. Monroe, "Oral Composition in Pre-Islamic poetry," Journal of Arabic Literature 3 (1972): 1–53. Monroe summarizes the objections raised by Tahâ Hasseine and D. S. Margoliouth regarding the authenticity of pre-Islamic poetry and, drawing on the work of Milman Parry and Albert B. Lord on oral composition, examines a substantial sample of poetry attributed to pre-Islamic figures to see whether the features usually associated with oral composition are evident there. He concludes that "on the basis of internal evidence, it can be concluded that pre-Islamic poetry should on the whole be viewed as authentic, as long as it is clearly understood that what has been preserved of it is probably not an exact recording of what a great poet once said, but a fairly close picture of it, distorted by vicissitudes of an oral transmission in which both memorization and 'de-paganization' were operative and further complicated by a tradition of scribal correction" (p. 41).

Say, “Even if the sea were to become ink for the words of my Lord, the sea would run dry before the words of my Lord were exhausted, even if We brought as much again to help.”

Sūrat al-Kahf 18:309

And this recitation is not such as could ever be invented apart from God. Rather it is a confirmation of what was before it and an exposition of the Kitāb—about which there is no doubt—from the lord of the worlds.

Sūrat Yānus 10:37

As evidenced in the texts quoted in chapter 1, the Qur’ān raises serious questions about the value of any physical writing from heaven and maintains repeatedly that it should be immediately recognizable to people of good will as originating with God (cf., e.g., Q 6:114). Furthermore, it rejects the notion that it can function as a single corpus, since its role is to address people and situations as they arise.

KITĀB AS COMPOSITION, DISPLAY AND STORAGE

Because writing is able to serve as the medium for composition, display, and storage, these three categories may help in untangling some of the complexities of the notion of Kitāb in the discourse of and about the Qur’ān. Islamic tradition has shared the general Western philosophical presumption that speech has an immediacy to thought and intention—a privileged connection that writing can never have. Speech is considered logically prior to the development of phonetic writing, even though some forms of writing (Chinese characters, for example, or drawing, or algebraic formulas) can be direct expressions of thought rather than of speech. The Muslim community’s sense of this priority is best reflected in the primacy of God’s speech over God’s writing in theological discourse as well as in exegesis, where qāla-llah ‘God said’ or qawelu hu ‘His saying’ is the customary introduction to a quotation from the Qur’ān. The function of writing as a possible means of display for divine speech is evident in the Qur’ān in such verses as:

قُل لَوْ كَانَ الْبَحْرُ مِنْ وُجُودِهِ لَنَقْفَ أَبْنِيَّةَ اللَّهِ وَلَوْ جَذَّتْهَا يَدُ مَدْنَā

And the Kitāb will be put in place, and you will see the guilty fearful of what it contains. They will say, ‘Woe to us! What kind of Kitāb is this that does not leave anything small or great out of account? And they will find..."
whatever they did present there. Your Lord does wrong to no one.

Sūrat al-Kahf 18:49

کَذَّبُوا مَا فِي الْبَابِ وَلَا مِنَ الْعُذَابِ مَدًّا

No! We shall write down what he says and make the period of his punishment even longer.

Sūrat Maryam 19:79

In most verses, however, in which words from the root k-t-b are used in connection with God, writing is understood primarily as an act of composition. There is no implication that it has been preceded by any other means of composition or that the composition in question has been displayed anywhere in writing. The literal meaning ‘written’ is best interpreted as ‘prescribed’. Typical of this very common usage are these verses:

کُتِبَ عِلْيَمُ الْخَلْقِ وَهُوَ كَرِيمُ الْكُتُبِ

Warfare has been written for you, even though it is distasteful to you.

Sūrat al-Baqara 2:216

وَمَا كَانَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ أَنْ يَنْتَهِى إِلَّآ إِذْ أَيَتَّهُ اللَّهُ كُتَابًا مُّطَلِبًا

No soul can die except by God’s will in writing in advance.

Sūrat Al-Imran 3:145

قَلْ لَيْنَ صَبِيبًا إِلَّا مَا كَتَبَ اللَّهُ لَهُ مَرَّةً وَكَبَّرَةً مِّنَ الْمُؤْتَرَونَ

Say, "Nothing will ever befall us except what God has written for us. He is our protector. So let those who believe put their trust in God.”

Sūrat al-Tawbah 9:51

يَتَعَفَّرُوا الْحَكِيمُ وَيُضَحَّي وَيَعْدِلُ وَيَكُونُ الْكِتَابُ

God wipes out or makes firm whatever He chooses. With Him is the source [lit., mother] of writing.

Sūrat al-Ra’d 13:39

This kind of writing is an exercise of authority and power appropriate only to God. It is a composition that is at the same time an act of creation, since it determines the course of human affairs. In many respects it belongs to the same category as God’s authoritative and creative speech by which, as the Qur’ān often says, “when he decrees a matter, he merely says to a thing, ‘Be!’ and it is.”

Although this is spoken of as writing, it cannot be mistaken for a mere act of display or storage: it is doubtful whether one could find any written form, for example, of the prescription of warfare mentioned in Q 2:216. It is not displayed in writing but rather in the decision and command of the Prophet to go to war. This is the most common and most fundamental kind of writing spoken of by the Qur’an and its primary sense: God’s authoritative prescription for his creation. When the Qur’an calls itself kitāb, therefore, it is making a statement not so much about the medium of its display or storage, but about its origin—its authority and the source of its composition. This is the reason Muhammad can say that he is bringing kitāb Allāh without embarrassment that he has no script to show."

We have seen, however, that composition and display are closely related: the moment of display is the defining moment of composition, the point at which the bounded text becomes publicly available. So display is essential to defining and making available God’s speech—kalām Allāh—in the external forum. This is the insight the commentators had when they pieced together the schema of the preexistent written text. Given that God is eternal and unchanging, God’s will is likewise eternal and unchanging. For that reason it must be able to be eternally displayed. Yet the Qur’an does not so easily fit that schema, since it repeatedly demonstrates and insists upon its oral, responsive nature. So our understanding of kitāb must be broadened to include not only the process of authoritative composition but also the initial recitation, the act of display that constitutes the text before its audience. Each āya ‘verse’ is a publicly available “bounded text” issuing from the knowledge and sovereign will of God. Even without being transcribed it is kitāb.

It is in the matter of writing as a medium of storage that the greatest misunderstandings have arisen. With the exception of the recording of people’s deeds, virtually none of the Qur’an’s talk of kitāb has to do with storage, yet we saw in chapter 1 how influential the idea of a text stored in writing has been, especially in the minds of Western scholars. Even today among Muslims, memory, not writing, is the most valued medium of storage for the Qur’an. The choice of the term mushaf to describe the transcript of the recitations may reflect an awareness of the difference between writing as mere display and storage and writing as the much more important composition. However, the canonization of the mushaf and its gradual identification with kitāb Allāh has impoverished the very rich notions that cluster around the term kitāb in the Qur’an. As I have suggested,


39 This is also why al-Tabarî could speak of a kitāb mutakāb without any sense of redundancy. See note 11, this chapter.
this might have been what drove later Muslim thinkers to concentrate far more on *kalam Allāh* than on *kitāb Allāh*.

This chapter began by taking note of the Qurʾān’s insistence that it is of the same genre as the previous *kutub*—in some respects even a continuation of the same phenomenon. By using the term *kitāb*, the Qurʾān seems merely to have adopted the technical term for scripture used by the other religious communities with which Islam claims kinship. This in itself would be unremarkable. However, the Qurʾān also denies the value of a written format, even one originating in heaven. It certainly knows of physical writing from heaven, yet it sees no necessity for it, nor proof value in it. Furthermore the Qurʾān refuses to behave as an already codified corpus (*jumla wahida*), making clear in its form as well as in its statements that it prefers to operate as the voice of divine address to the present situation. Moreover, it retains the freedom to comment upon itself and upon the vicissitudes of its encounter with those who are slow to accept it.

This sense of itself as *kitāb* that the Qurʾān demonstrates is not just an imitation of what we are familiar with in the Jewish and Christian scriptures. It presents itself and is conscious of itself in a quite distinctive manner.

I have attempted to unravel some of the complexities of *kitāb* by examining the nature of texts and the processes that constitute them: composition, display, and storage. This allows us to distinguish among some of the varied uses of “writing” language in the Qurʾān without having to multiply books and records as Jeffery and others have done. I continue to maintain the confidence, stated in the last chapter, that by listening attentively to the Qurʾān’s own voice it is possible to discover a unified notion of *kitāb* that can make sense of the many and varied uses of this term, which is so central to the understanding of the Qurʾān. With this chapter we have taken two steps in this direction: the first by demonstrating from within the text the relative unimportance of physically written material, and the second by highlighting the Qurʾān’s resolute refusal to behave like the other *kutub*—as a closed corpus—while apparently never considering itself incomplete or unfinished.

Based on these observations it appears that *kitāb* functions in the Qurʾān’s discourse primarily as a symbol, rather than as a concrete entity. As a symbol it is multivalent and able to operate on several levels at the same time—something that has always frustrated those who have sought to specify it. This multivalence will emerge with greater clarity as we examine the interaction of the term *kitāb* with other terms, but this much is already clear: it is the primary symbol of God’s sovereignty and knowledge. The *kitāb* given to the Messenger, and through him to the people, is not (pace Pedersen) the record of God’s wisdom and judgment, but rather the point where that timeless authority and insight address the time-bound human condition. The *umm al-kitāb* ‘the source (lit., mother) of the *kitāb*’

41 is not just some larger, primordial book from which each of the scriptures derived; it is the very essence of God’s universal knowledge and authoritative will.

42 To have been given the *kitāb* is to have been given some access to that divine realm where everything is “written,” that is, known and determined. To say that a people has been given the *kitāb* is not to say they have been vouchsafed some great work of reference that contains all they need to know and act upon; rather it means that they have entered into a new mode of existence, where the community lives in the assurance and expectation (or perhaps, even the fear) of being personally addressed by the divine authority and knowledge.

For all the attempts to specify it and reduce it to manageable proportions, the Qurʾān’s *kitāb* still insists on seeing itself as the potent symbol and authoritative locus of divine address to the world through the Arabian prophet in the language of the Arabs.

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42 M. M. Pickthall brings this out when he translates it as “the source of ordinance” (Q 13:39) and “the Source of Decrees” (Q 43:4). However, in Q 3:7 he prefers the translation “substance of the Book.”
CHAPTER THREE

Semantic Analysis and the Understanding of Kitâb

Till now we have been attempting to make clear what the Qur’ân does not mean by the term kitâb. In the first chapter we challenged what seems to be the fairly widely held consensus that, if not initially, at least later, Muhammad envisaged the Qur’ân as a written, canonical document. In so doing we examined scholars’ selective use of evidence internal to the Qur’ân, the way they were influenced by Jewish and Christian parallels, and the history of ideas of scripture in the Near East. We then looked more closely at the external evidence that challenges the consensus, especially the traditional accounts of the collection of the Qur’ân, which seem to indicate that the earliest community was not aware of any intention on the part of the Prophet to codify in writing the revelations he had been receiving. The second chapter focused on the Qur’ân’s own denial of the proof value of heavenly writings and on its refusal to behave as an already closed and codified canon—its insistence on remaining responsive and open-ended, functioning not as the public record of the totality of God’s word, but as the voice of God’s continuing address to humanity.

This chapter begins the task of mapping the semantic field of “writing” language in the Qur’ân, the better to understand precisely how the symbol of kitâb functions in Qur’anic discourse. The ground is laid by an examination of the background of semantic field analysis and some examples of its use in the context of Qur’anic studies.

SEMANTIC FIELDS AND SYNCHRONIC ANALYSIS

The notion of fields emerged in linguistics in the early twentieth century as a challenge to historical semantics, which took an atomistic, diachronic approach to understanding changes in the meanings of individual words. Only following
the work of Ferdinand Saussure was the need for a synchronic approach also recognized, since single words form organic groups with related meanings and forms. The image of a mosaic was used by a number of theorists to describe how a culture is actually constituted by the way it divides up reality using words. However, much of the focus has been on distinguishing the boundaries between words, rather than recognizing how a particular word is not distinct from but is actually colored by the words around it. In this sense, the image of the mosaic is inadequate for describing semantic fields, because each word is taken to be a tile with a discernible edge. A better artistic metaphor for the kind of semantic field analysis envisioned in this project would be drawn from impressionism or perhaps post-impressionist pointillism, where it is recognized that sensations of color are produced not by a single entity but by the combined action and interaction of several constituents. Words do not find their meaning in isolation from or in contradistinction to one another but only together with the other words with which they are customarily used.

In connection with Qur’anic studies, semantic field analysis has been exploited most fully by Toshihiko Izutsu. He suggests that the best way of describing the semantic field of a given word is to ask “what features of the environment are necessary if the word is to be used properly to designate any given event. Only by attempting to answer such a question can we arrive at the correct meaning of a given word.”

A caveat should perhaps be interjected at this point. The term “correct meaning” can be dangerous. It is not intended to suggest that there is a real meaning, a precise meaning or, still less, one permanently valid meaning for each word. Izutsu’s approach is predicated on the belief that people in different cultural situations will use words to categorize and divide up reality in different ways. For this reason the topography of each word’s semantic field needs to be carefully explored. Furthermore, that topography and the relationships in the field change over time. For example, in the case we are examining, the range of connotations that one can discern within the Qur’an’s own usage is not necessarily the same range of connotations discernible even a short time later when the makeup and experience of the community is quite different. None of these layers of meaning can lay exclusive claim to being what might be called the meaning of the Qur’an. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith has pointed out, the meaning of the Qur’an is “the


2 Izutsu lays out his methodology at length in the early part of *God and Man*, and also in *Concepts*.


7 Toshihiko Izutsu, *The Concept of Belief in Islamic Theology: A Semantic Analysis of Ismā and Islam* (Studies in the Humanities and Social Relations, no. 6 (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1965).


9 This issue has been discussed in the present author’s “Reflections on Some Current Directions in Qur’anic Studies,” *The Muslim World* 85 (1995): 345–62. More recently the issue has been very well treated by David Marshall in *God, Muhammad and the Unbelievers: A Qur’anic Study* (Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 1999), 8–19.

relation to the concept of Divine Revelation, or rather various concepts having direct reference to Revelation. This relational meaning Izutsu considers far more important than the basic meaning. Once the word kitāb has entered the semantic field of revelation language in the Qur’ān, its relations to the other words in the field actually become an essential part of its meaning. He also cites the examples of the simple words yawm ‘day’ and sā‘a ‘hour’, and the relational meanings they take on in the Qur’ān’s eschatological discourse. In some situations Izutsu notes that the modifying power of the new semantic relations results virtually in the birth of a new word, as the transformation of the verb kafara from its basic meaning, ‘to be ungrateful’ (the opposite of shakara), into ‘to disbelieve’ (the opposite of amanā).

It is important to draw attention to a certain weakness in this first level of Izutsu’s analytical system: the notion that the basic meaning of a word inheres in the word itself and can remain independent of its cultural context. We have already seen that a similarly rash assumption was made by those who presumed that Muhammad intended to produce a written volume for his community. If kitāb indeed has a basic meaning, it would be ‘writing’, and only by extension ‘book’. In Arabic usage before the Qur’ān, the basic meaning of the term may well have included a quasi-magical idea of writing and perhaps even a more developed notion of scripture. It may, in fact, have been understood as a technical term even before entering into Qur’anic usage. If that is so, the word kitāb would have brought into Qur’anic discourse not only what Izutsu thinks of as the inherently basic meaning of ‘book’, but also something more complex because of the relational meanings it had already acquired in other contexts.

Similar criticisms also apply to some of his other examples. Discussing the highly charged semantic field of eschatology in the Qur’ān, he says, ‘Right into this atmosphere you put the word yawm with its proper—neutral, we might say—meaning of a “day”, which it has in normal situations; at once you see a variety of conceptual associations formed around it, and the concept of “day” tinged with a marked eschatological coloring.’ While acknowledging that there can be a simple, “neutral” meaning for the word yawm (pl. ayyām), one surely must question whether it is this everyday word that was introduced into the semantic field of eschatology, or whether it was a more complex word already colored by its connection with Arab military exploits—ayyām al-‘arab—and also by its eschatological use in Judeo-Christian discourse—the “day of the Lord.”

11 Izutsu, God and Man, 19.
12 Izutsu, God and Man, 21–22. Izutsu fails to note here the probable influence of the cognate verb in Syriac, which had carried the meaning of ‘to disbelieve’ some centuries before the Qur’ān.
13 Izutsu, God and Man, 21.

In short, Izutsu oversimplifies the distinction between basic and relational meanings in a way that can compromise his analysis by isolating the Qur’ān’s vocabulary from other semantic fields that may have been shaping it at the time. Though if we accept his insight into the importance of relational meanings, we must recognize that there can be no such thing as “the word kitāb in an ordinary context showing the basic meaning of ‘book’ pure and simple.” In an afterword to his exposition he admits that the basic meaning is a theoretical postulate that is used only to facilitate the analytical procedure, that one cannot in fact find any word existing in such a disembodied form. However, even this disclaimer fails to recognize adequately that a word can bring into a new semantic environment many of the relational meanings it has gained in other environments, or the fact that semantic environments can overlap.

With this reservation in mind, we turn to the next element of Izutsu’s system. He understands the basic conceptual structure of the Qur’ān’s worldview to be determined by a certain number of particularly important words, which he calls key-words. Though identification of the key-words is necessarily somewhat arbitrary, Izutsu feels that there will be no essential disagreement about the majority of these terms. These words do not exist in isolation but rather are “connected with one another in multiple relationships and thus form a number of largely overlapping areas or sectors.” The areas constituting by the various relations of words among themselves Izutsu calls semantic fields. Taken together, these overlapping semantic fields make up the vocabulary of the Qur’ān as subsystems within a larger system. The conceptual center of each of these semantic fields he calls a focus-word—that in terms of which a particular sub-system of key-words is set off and distinguished from the rest. Despite an unavoidable arbitrariness in designating particular key-words as focus-words, this schema remains useful as a means for exploring the worldview that the Qur’ān’s vocabulary enunciates.

Izutsu’s system can be readily visualized, and he makes considerable use of diagrams to indicate the relationships within fields. His diagram illustrating the fundamentally important field of imān ‘faith’ is shown in figure 3.1.
Figure 3.1. The semantic field of *imān* 'faith'\(^{19}\)

The focus-word, *imān*, anchors the field and delimits its broad meaning without much differentiation. The key-words that cluster around it point—either negatively (N) or positively (P)—to a specific aspect of the central phenomenon.\(^{20}\) Some of the key-words (e.g., *islām* 'submission' or *kufr* 'unbelief') are themselves important enough to qualify as focus-words in other fields. Although the name *Allāh* figures here only as a key-word because God is the object of *imān*, in fact it functions as the quintessential focus-word in the Qur'ān as a whole—and this is nothing but the semantic aspect of what we generally mean by saying that the world of the Koran is essentially theocentric.\(^{21}\)

Izutsu demonstrates how fields are related to and overlap one another by examining the semantic field of the focus-word *kufr* 'unbelief' (see figure 3.2). This is effectively an expansion of the negative side of the field of *imān*. Various of the key-words from this field also belong to other fields and this adds to the complexity of the system. For example, the word *dalāl* 'going astray', in addition to its role as a key-word in the semantic field of *kufr* 'unbelief', also has an important role in the field whose focus-word(s) would be *ṣirāt* or *sābil* 'path' (see figure 3.3).

\(^{19}\) Izutsu, *God and Man*, 30, fig. A.

\(^{20}\) Izutsu, *God and Man*, 30, referring to fig. A. "On the positive side we have, among others, words like *shukr* 'thankfulness' (the verb *shakara*), *islām* lit. 'the giving over of oneself (to God)' (the verb *aslama*), *taṣdiq* 'considering (the revealed words) truthful' (the verb *saddiq*), *Allāh* (as the object of 'belief')."

\(^{21}\) Izutsu, *God and Man*, 31.

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Figure 3.2. The semantic field of *kufr* 'unbelief'\(^{22}\)

Izutsu classifies the key-words in the *ṣirāt* field (the circle on the right) into three major groups. In the first group are words standing for concepts relating to the nature of the path itself, which the Qur'ān views as straight (*mustaqīm* and its synonyms) or crooked ("*iwayj* and its synonyms). In the second category are words relating to a person's choosing or being guided to the right way (*huda, ihtidā', rashād*, etc.). The third classification consists of the concepts of straying or wandering off the right path (*dalāl, ghāwiyah, tāih*, etc.).

Figure 3.3. The semantic fields of *kufr* 'unbelief' and *ṣirāt* 'path'\(^{23}\)

\(^{22}\) Based on Izutsu, *God and Man*, 33, figs. B and C.
DIACHRONIC ANALYSIS AND PERIODIZING THE TEXT

The style of analysis we have been describing is referred to as synchronic; that is, it concentrates on the relationships between words and fields as they appear at one particular point of a vocabulary’s history. These diagrams are cross sections, as it were, capturing only one moment of an historical process. The words that appear in such analyses may have come into use only recently or they may be quite ancient. Their importance may be only just beginning, or perhaps it is on the wane. Synchronic analyses cannot take such factors into account. Therefore Izutsu also proposes diachronic analysis: by taking a number of synchronic cross sections from different periods, one can study the historical processes at work in the evolution of thought and culture. He perhaps wisely confines himself to a comparison of pre-Islamic, Qur’anic, and post-Qur’anic configurations of vocabulary, thus avoiding the pitfalls inherent in trying to differentiate the historical stages of the Qur’anic development. Historical periodization of the revelations themselves presents a particular problem, since we have no completely reliable method for dating the different stages of the revelation. Efforts at dating very often rely on identifying shifts in vocabulary, such as the use of the title al-Rahmān for God, or the emergence of the term kitāb in what is identified as the later Meccan period. Such dating often ends in a completely circular argument.

While we must surely recognize that over the period of its composition the Qur’ān’s vocabulary developed in various ways, we must also be cautious not to overestimate the practicability of dating parts of the text according to their vocabulary. Nor indeed can we simply date them by using the biography of the Prophet and the asbāb al-nuzūl literature, which proposes to identify the occasion of each revelation. In most instances these sources are themselves based on imaginative reconstructions of a feasible context for the passage rather than on any reliable historical witness independent of the text itself. As Blachère reminds us, “it is hardly wise always to follow the Tradition, which is so quick to make precise the imprecise and to penetrate the impenetrable.”

24 Izutsu, God and Man, 36-72. His study, The Concept of Belief, is a sustained example of a diachronic analysis.

25 Blachère, Introduction, 255 suggests as another example the transition from the use of the term bānt i Israel ‘the children of Israel’ for the Jews when the Prophet was in Mecca, to the application of Yahud when he was engaged in controversy with actual groups of Jews. While it is true that the uses of al-Yahud are all polemical in nature and appear in what are traditionally identified as Madīnan sūras, the use of bānt i Israel is still common in Madīnan verses (Q 2:40, 47, 83, 122, 211, 246: 3:49, 93: 5:12, 52, 70, 72, 78, 110: 26:97). In addition there are two uses of bānt i Israel (one Madīnan, Q 2:211, and one Meccan, Q 27:76) that are polemical in tone and that clearly refer to the Jewish communities contemporary with the Qur’ān rather than to the historical Israelites.

26 Blachère, Introduction, 253. See also in this connection Patricia Crone, “Serjeant and Meccan Trade,” Arabica 39 (1992): 216-40. This is a reply to R. B. Serjeant’s review of her Meccan Trade and

The very plausibility of sketches of the Prophet’s career should perhaps make us wary, because a plausible career path is precisely what makes it possible to create an apparently historical figure out of the archaeological shards and heroic myths of a newly arrived empire: this is the burden of the critique made in various ways by John Wansbrough,27 Patricia Crone and Michael Cook,28 and it is always worth keeping in mind when considering questions of periodization and development. Even if we do not follow their radical critique of the accounts of early Islamic history, we need to utilize more than one method or criterion in assigning segments of the Qur’ān to historical periods in the career of the Prophet, and to look for congruence in their results.

Blachère argues fairly plausibly that any historical development discernible in the Qur’ān should be based on a reasonable assumption about the developing experience of the Prophet himself. Muhammad moves from his first hesitant encounters with the divine, through a realization of the kinship of his experience to that of the Judeo-Christian prophetic legacy, and then to the leadership of a powerful tribal confederation based upon his personal claim to be the heir of the divine authority once vested in the earlier messengers. Such a development would presumably reveal itself at least to some extent in the text.29

Angelika Neuwirth’s extensive work on the structure of the Meccan sūras is opening up new avenues to an appreciation of the Qur’ān’s coherence. Neuwirth also bases her periodization of its history in part on the emerging consciousness of the Prophet. However, she rightly insists that any understanding of the development of the Qur’ān must avoid attributing too much solely to the changing authorial intentions of Muhammad, and must take account of the contribution of the community and its ritual to not only the form but also the content of the text.30 In a scenario similar to those proposed by Nöldeke and Bell31 but relying more on a reconstruction of the history of ritual in early Islam, she suggests that the structure and vocabulary of the Qur’ān’s sūras developed through four phases, three in Mecca and one in Medina. Mecca, with its haram ‘sanctuary’, its history and its sacred times, provides the orientation in both time and space to the

27 See pp. 9-11 above.
29 Blachère, Introduction, 256-63. One wonders, however, about the value Blachère places upon the experience of mysticism in Europe as a guide to the reconstruction of Muhammad’s experience (257, 259).
31 Bell, Origin of Islam, 100-133, and Watt, Bell’s Introduction, 108-120.
the signs of a coherent schema governing their composition. Neuwirth suggests that in spite of their conventional schema, they have come to function only as "grab bags" (Sammelkörbe) for isolated groups of verses that resemble the classical components of earlier sūras but to which quite specific legal provisions have been added. Their length and their lack of structure make them unsuitable for liturgical use as a whole and this fact contributes to the development of the now common practice of "Perikopisierung"—treating the whole of the Qur’ān as a source for excerpting isolated verses or pericopes.  

Neuwirth’s approach is based upon extensive and minutely detailed structural analysis of the Qur’ān, and the overarching interpretation she brings to this mass of material is certainly very attractive. She, perhaps more than any other writer, has offered a persuasive scenario for the very particular forms in which the Qur’ān developed. Yet she fails to offer an entirely convincing explanation for the disappearance of the liturgy she associates with the middle Meccan period and the eventual dissolution of the sūra structure that had emerged from it. It certainly seems true that the figure of the Prophet gained in importance in the course of time. The Muslim community did move beyond a sense of themselves as merely participants in the same historical memory as the Christians and the Jews (a consciousness Neuwirth sees symbolized in the figure of the kitāb) to an awareness that God was making his definitive address to humanity in the person and ministry of their Prophet. However, the symbol of the kitāb never fades, and it remains closely linked to the Prophet. While her idea that the term kitāb only applied to parts of the text seems to offer a solution to the puzzle of the Qur’ān’s self-referential nature, it does so only at the cost of oversimplifying what is in fact a much more complex relationship between the Qur’ān itself and its notion of kitāb.

A somewhat similar though less rigid proposal for understanding the development of the Qur’ān through different periods is offered by J. Corbin, who also takes his cue from Bláhère in positing a development based on the emerging consciousness of the prophetic mission. He notes that gradually increasing originality (l’originalité croissante) is as important a criterion as style or audience for determining the dating of the sūras. He takes it as axiomatic that

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33 She counts twenty-two such "Geschichtssuren" without, however, giving a clear wording. During her treatment of them she refers to more than twenty-two, that is, sūras 7, 10-15, 19, 21, 23-28, 31, 32, 36-44, 43-45, 46, 50, 54, 67. "Vom Rezitationstext," 89-91.

34 Neuwirth, "Vom Rezitationstext," 92.

35 Neuwirth, "Vom Rezitationstext," 90-91.


38 Neuwirth, "Vom Rezitationstext," 97.
texts in which the Qurʾān makes reference to earlier scriptures in order to find confirmation of its own message are certainly earlier than those where it offers a critique of them or rejects them.

Corbon used Blachère’s periodization to outline how this criterion of increasing originality can be seen in operation. An eschatological and moral kerygma which remains within the parameters of its Jewish, Christian and Judeo-Christian sources characterizes the first Meccan period. The second Meccan period is marked by controversy with paganism and by catechesis, in which the same earlier sources are utilized liberally, though with some partiality, in order to confirm the teaching of the Prophet. The third Meccan period represents a break with both the pagans and the people of the kitāb. Originality shows itself in this period in the way the Qurʾān takes from the earlier scriptures whatever is considered valuable and rejects whatever is incompatible with Muhammad’s mission. Instead of seeking confirmation from the earlier traditions, the Qurʾān judges and confirms them: the proof comes no longer from the past but from the present. Finally, in the Medinan period the focus has definitively become the Messenger of God, and the previous scriptures are treated as suspect, if not practically ignored.\(^{43}\)

The present study does not rely much on intra-Qurʾānic periodization, though these insights and proposals do in some ways inform my approach. Where the analysis is diachronic, it is principally concerned with the development from pre-Islamic usage, which is still in evidence in the Qurʾān, to a uniquely Qurʾānic usage. Although the understanding of kitāb must have changed as it developed over the period of the Qurʾān’s genesis and the term emerged only gradually as a key to the Qurʾān’s understanding of itself, still it is striking that the symbol of the kitāb survived the vicissitudes of that development and remains a unifying focus throughout the text in its final form.

**KITĀB AS A FOCUS-WORD**

Although Izutsu has included occasional references to the term kitāb in his analyses, he treats it not as a focus-word—which anchors a whole field of meaning and whose own significance can only be understood in terms of the key-words that cluster around it—but merely as a key-word shedding light on other more important terms. I propose to view kitāb as a focus-word, however, indeed as one of the most important focus-words of the Qurʾān’s vocabulary, since it plays a significant role in defining not only the nature of the sacred text but also the mission of the Prophet, the relationship of Islam to other religions, the characteristic manner of God’s interaction with humanity, and the relationship between the creator and creation.

There is a formulaic description of the mission of the messenger that occurs in four verses that by any criterion should be considered late. The succinctness of these verses, their repetitions, and the manner in which they combine some of the most important terms and phrases in the Qurʾānic vocabulary suggests that something like a credal formula lies behind them.

The first occurrence of the formula forms part of a prayer of Abraham that appears in the context of Muslim assertions, vis-à-vis the Jews and the Christians, that they are the true inheritors of the Abrahamic faith. By placing the language of Islam on the lips of Abraham and his descendants in the verses that follow, the text furthers the claim that Islam is the true religion, predating either Christianity or Judaism.

\[\text{Our Lord! Raise up among them a messenger (rasul) of their own who will recite to them your signs (ayāt), make known to them the kitāb and the hikma, and purify them. You alone are the Mighty, the Wise.} \]

\[\text{Sūrat al-Baqara 2:129} \]

The second occurrence brings to a close the section on the change of the direction of prayer (the qibla) from Jerusalem back to the sanctuary of Mecca. It should probably be considered part of the same context as the previous example:

\[\text{So that I might complete my graciousness to you and that you, perhaps, might be guided} \]
\[\text{even as We have sent among you a messenger who is one of you, who recites to you Our signs and purifies you, and makes known to} \]

\(^{44}\) For the moment it seems better to leave this term untranslated since a discussion of its meaning will follow below.

\(^{45}\) wa-yuṣṣakhtihim: This wording has proven difficult for translators. Pickthall chooses “and to make them grow.” The simplest meaning would be “and to purify them” or “to declare them pure.” However, it is unusual to say that anyone but God purifies a person or declares a person pure (Q 2:217; 3:77; 4:49; 24:21). Because of the close connection between charitable giving (later institutionalized in the zakāt) and considerations of purity or righteousness, it would seem reasonable to opt for the translation “to impose the zakāt on them.” Bell (Commentary, 1:23–24) confesses to a temptation to translate it in this way but he resists it since he unaccountably takes the passages to be early and therefore pre-dating the institution of the zakāt. For the connection between the zakāt and purity, see J. Schacht in SeI, 654.
you the kitāb and the hikma, and makes known to you what you did not know before.

Sūrat al-Baqara 2:150-51

The third is also in a polemical setting, this time against those who refuse to fight alongside the Prophet:

God has indeed been gracious to the believers by raising up among them a messenger who is one of themselves, who recites to them His signs, purifies them, and makes known to them the kitāb and the hikma, even though before that they were manifestly in error.

Sūrat Al-İmran 3:164

The final example comes in the introduction to a sūra that takes issue with the Jews:

It is He who has raised up among the unscripted peoples a messenger who is one of them, to recite to them His signs, to purify them, and to make known to them the kitāb and the hikma, even though before they were manifestly in error.

Sūrat al-Jumu'ah 62:2

Common to all these verses is an attempt to distinguish the Muslim community from other groups and to establish it in its own right. This is done not by claiming that something novel has taken place in the mission of Muhammad as rasūl ‘messenger’, but rather by asserting that God has now done directly for the Arabs what he had already done for the Jews and Christians. These verses have a special significance because the formula they contain seems to represent a mature statement of the community’s understanding of the action of God in Muhammad’s ministry. In addition, although this formula occurs only four times, it is composed of elements that are themselves formulaic and are relatively common. Furthermore, those smaller units contain some of the most characteristic words of the Qur’ānic vocabulary. For this reason these verses can provide us with a thumbnail sketch of the semantic fields we are exploring.

AL-KITĀB WA-L-HIKMA

The paired expression al-kitāb wa-l-hikma occurs in the Qur’ān nine times. It is also used once in the indefinite, partitive form: min kitābīn wa hikmatīn (Q 3:81). These constitute half the uses of al-hikma, which is paired on other occasions with āyat Allāh ‘God’s signs’ (Q 33:34), and al-mulk ‘sovereignty’ (Q 2:251; 38:20); it is used in apposition to al-bayyini ‘explanations, clear signs’ (Q 43:63) and al-anbā’ ‘news’ (Q 54:5). Hikma is normally rendered ‘wisdom’, but this translation runs the risk of suggesting something esoteric. It fails to take account of the relationship of this word to notions of restraining, judging, ruling, confirming, and defining. It also gives little weight to the words with which hikma is paired, all of which point to clarity and order rather than to obscurity and the esoteric.

Perhaps more significant is the use in three places of the expression al-kitāb wa-l-hukm in a way virtually identical with al-kitāb wa-l-hikma — so much so that translators sometimes choose to render hukm as ‘wisdom’ rather than as the more usual ‘judgment’ or ‘government’. In these three verses, the expression is joined with al-nubūwā ‘prophecy’ and the only other uses of that word are in the expression al-nubūwā wa-l-kitāb (Q 29:27; 57:26) in the context of God’s gift to the seed of Abraham.

Two points emerge from these observations. First, our understanding of hikma should be informed by its proximity, both in its common root and in its Qur’ānic usage, to hukm. To the extent that it does connote wisdom, it is not the wisdom of the gnostic or the mystic. Rather it is the practical wisdom of the ruler, the wisdom of authority that comes from being guided by God, the wisdom to judge as God himself would judge. In Q 38:20 King David is said to have been given al-hikma wa-faṣl al-kitāb which we might translate ‘wise judgment and
decisiveness of speech'. In its discussion of the Qur'anic uses of *hikma* and *ḥukm*, the classic dictionary *Lišān al-ʿArab* notes how often the words are connected with knowledge of the right and with justice.50

Secondly, the expression *al-kiṭāb wa-l-hikma* (or *ḥukm*) should probably be read as a hendiads: that is, we are dealing here not with two separate phenomena—a book, recitations, and a collection of wise sayings—but rather with one: what the Qur'ān itself refers to in two other places as *al-kiṭāb al-hakim* (Q 10:1; 31:2).51

Both of these points are reflected in al-Ṣāḥibī’s *Kitāb al-Umm* where he cites the phrase *al-kiṭāb wa-l-hikma* in Q 62:2 to prove to those who recognize only the Qur'ān as authoritative that the authority of the *sunna* is affirmed by the Qur'ān.52 Al-Ṣāḥibī recognized the juridical rather than esoteric nature of *hikma* when he argued that the term means the explanation and specification given by the Prophet of the obligations laid down by God in a general way in the text of the Qur'ān. To al-Ṣāḥibī the *hikma* is nothing less than the *sunna* of the Prophet.53

50 *Lišān al-ʿArab*, art. *ḥukm*.

51 See also Q 43:2-4 where the *kiṭāb* is characterised as *ḥakim* and Pickthall appropriately translates it ‘decisive’. In Q 5:43 the Tūrāh is said to contain *ḥukm Allāh*.

52 It is not clear what al-Ṣāḥibī made of the meaning of *al-hikma* in 3:48, where it was taught to Jesus. Commentators quoted by al-Ṭabarī (Taṣfīr, 3:273) agree that it is the *sunna* without further comment. Al-Ṭabarī himself says: “*al-hikma* is the *sunna* that [God] communicated to [Muḥammad] in addition to the *kiṭāb*.”


His opponent at this point objected that the phrase should be read as a hendiads in the way we have suggested, but al-Ṣāḥibī himself preferred a reading that would allow him to claim Qur'ānic warrant for the authority of an extra-Qur'ānic source.54 Although al-Ṣāḥibī’s preference is for treating the *hikma* as an oral “document” separate and distinct from the canon of the Qur’ān, the text itself remains open to other interpretations. He, of course, was speaking at the end of the second Islamic century—a time when one canon had long been settled and a second was emerging, so his interpretation of the text would necessarily be colored by the controlling idea of fixed canons: in his discussions, the text of the Qur’ān was accepted without demur even by his opponents as the simple equivalent of “the Book of God,” and so al-Ṣāḥibī could easily find his emerging second canon endorsed in the first. However, in the Qur’ān itself, where, as we have seen, the *kiṭāb* resists being reduced to a closed canon, the expression *al-kiṭāb wa-l-hikma*/*ḥukm* seems more readily understandable as a hendiads.55

the obligations he wanted observed and it is He who explained the nature of them through the word of his Prophet.” He said, ‘That is possible.’ I said, ‘If you accept this line of thought, then the *ahd* have the same status as what preceded them [i.e., the Qur'ān], which you accept solely on the basis of a report on the authority of the Messenger of God (may God’s peace and blessings be upon him).’

قائَلَ قَلْتُ فِى ذِلِّلِ الْقَلَامَ تَكُّرُ الْكَلَامَ فِيْلَهُمْ أَوْلَىً مَا أَدَأَ ذِكْرَ الْعُلُوْجَ الذِّكْرَ الْكَلَامَ ذِكْرُ الْحَكْمَةِ ذِكْرٌ مُّنْهِجٌ أَوْلَىً وَقَالَ حِيَا وَخَاتِمًا قَلْتُ أَنَّ كِتَابَ النِّسَايَةِ وَالْحُكْمَةِ لَا تَهْرِيبٌ مِّنْهَا بِغِيرُ كِتَابٍ: “*The hikma, that is the sunna that [God] communicated to [Muḥammad] in addition to the kiṭāb*.”

“I [al-Ṣāḥibī] said: ‘God said, “It was he who raised among the unscripted a messenger from their own people to recite his signs to them, to purify them and to make known to them the *kiṭāb* and the *hikma*.”’ (Q 62:2)’ He said, “We already know that the *kiṭāb* is the Book of God, but what is the *hikma*?” I said, ‘It is the summa of the Messenger of God (may God’s peace and blessings be upon him).’ He [al-Ṣāḥibī’s opponent] said: ‘Is it really conceivable that He would have taught the *kiṭāb* to all of them together but taught the *hikma* only through the oral transmission of a few people—given that it consists of His *ahkām* [and therefore is necessary for all to know]?’ I answered, ‘It [the *hikma*] means that [Muḥammad] used to expound for the people on God’s authority the same thing as [God] explained to them about the broad outlines of their duties with regard to ritual prayer, the alms-tax, the pilgrimage and other things. So it is God who laid down in his *kiṭāb* some of

54 قال فَقَالَ قَلْتُ فِي ذِلِّلِ الْقَلَامَ تَكُّرُ الْكَلَامَ فِيْلَهُمْ أَوْلَىً مَا أَدَأَ ذِكْرَ الْعُلُوْجَ الذِّكْرَ الْكَلَامَ ذِكْرُ الْحَكْمَةِ ذِكْرٌ مُّنْهِجٌ أَوْلَىً وَقَالَ حِيَا وَخَاتِمًا قَلْتُ أَنَّ كِتَابَ النِّسَايَةِ وَالْحُكْمَةِ لَا تَهْرِيبٌ مِّنْهَا بِغِيرُ كِتَابٍ: “*The hikma, that is the sunna that [God] communicated to [Muḥammad] in addition to the kiṭāb*.”

55 “He said, ‘What if I were to adopt the position that this is just a case of hendiads—*takrīr al-kalām*? I [al-Ṣāḥibī] said, ‘When mention is made of the *kiṭāb* and of the *hikma*, does it make more sense that they should be two things or only one?’ He said, ‘It is conceivable that they are as you described—*kiṭāb* and *sunna*—and so two things. But it is also possible that they be only one thing.’ I said, ‘I prefer the more obvious of the two [readings].’”

Al-Ṣāḥibī, *Kitāb al-Umm*, 251.

Al-Ṣāḥibī’s citation and explanation of Q 53:34 to back up his opposition to the hendiads proposal remains unconvincing except to his imaginary interlocutor:

قَالَ قَلْتُ فِيْلَهُمْ أَوْلَىً مَا أَدَأَ ذِكْرَ الْعُلُوْجَ الذِّكْرَ الْكَلَامَ ذِكْرُ الْحَكْمَةِ ذِكْرٌ مُّنْهِجٌ أَوْلَىً وَقَالَ حِيَا وَخَاتِمًا قَلْتُ أَنَّ كِتَابَ النِّسَايَةِ وَالْحُكْمَةِ لَا تَهْرِيبٌ مِّنْهَا بِغِيرُ كِتَابٍ: "*The hikma, that is the sunna that [God] communicated to [Muḥammad] in addition to the kiṭāb*.”

“[Al-Ṣāḥibī] said, ‘In the Qur’ān there is an indication affirming what we maintain and denouncing what you maintain.” He said, ‘Where is that?’ I said, ‘It is the saying of God, ‘Remember what is recited in your houses of the *āyāt* of God and the *hikma* Surely God is kind and knowing.’ It is reported that two things were recited in their houses.” He said, ‘Well this means the Qur’ān, which is recited, but how is the *hikma* recited?’ I said, ‘The meaning of “reciting” is that [the words of] the Qur’ān are articulated and [the words of] the *sunna* are articulated as well.’ He said, ‘This [understanding of “reciting”] shows very clearly that the *hikma* is something separate from the Qur’ān.’” al-Ṣāḥibī, *Kitāb al-Umm*, 251.
Thus we have identified the first major component of the semantic field of which kitāb is the focus: the words derived from the root h-k-m and the other words that cluster around them and have to do with judgment, decision, law, control, governance. The nature of this field’s relationships will be explored more fully in chapter 4.

THE ‘SIGNS’ AND THEIR REFRAINS

The second formula that recurs in the four verses just cited is yatlū ‘alay-kum (hīm) āyāta-nā (ka-, hū) ‘he will recite to you/them Our/Your/His signs.’

The expression ‘recite the signs (āyāt) of God’ occurs often—thirty-one times in various forms including those just cited. The verb tālā ‘to recite’ is used quite often in connection with kitāb, and also with ba‘yīnāt ‘clear signs, clarifications’, ḍā‘i ‘remembrance’, ḍā‘ ‘remembrance’, qu‘ān ‘recitation’, nabā ‘tidings’, al-tawrāt ‘Torāh’ (Q 3:93) and suhuf ‘pages’ (Q 98:2). These words lie at the heart of the Qur’ānic vocabulary, and tālā is one of the main verbs that link them together. Principal among the other verbs used with āyāt are jā’a bi- ‘to bring’, atā bi- ‘to bring’, qara’a ‘read or recite’, naza‘a ‘to send down’. The verb tālā also has a functional if not a literal link with hukm, since it is used in connection with particular legal pronouncements, for example, Q 6:151: ‘Say, ‘Come I will recite what your Lord has forbidden you . . .’ Other examples are found in Q 4:127; 5:1; and 22:30.

The frequency of the word āyā (occurring 373 times, mostly in the plural) points to its centrality in the Qur’ān’s understanding of revelation, and the relationship between āyā and kitāb throughout the Qur’ān is obviously very close, though also quite complex. The basic meaning of āyā cannot give us a full appreciation of its significance. It is only when we see it in action, as it were, that its real importance as a focusing concept becomes evident. Let us consider a few examples of the quite commonly recurring verse-ending la‘alla-kum (-hum) . . . so that perhaps you (they) might . . .’ This construction appears 19 times with the word āyā (119 times in all) in a refrain that makes specific the purpose of the āyāt.62

Thus does God make clear to you His āyāt, so that perhaps you may be guided.

Sūrat al-Îmân 3:103

See how We display the āyāt so that perhaps they may understand.

Sūrat al-An‘ām 6:65

This is among the āyāt of God: perhaps they might reflect.

Sūrat al-‘ArĎf 7:26

Thus does God make clear for you His āyāt, so that perhaps you might understand.

Sūrat al-Nūr 24:61

As with other places in which term āyā is used, many of the passages of this kind refer to natural phenomena—the cycle of the seasons, the sun and the moon etc.—though some refer to past generations and prophets (e.g., Q 46:27), legal provisions (e.g., Q 2:187), or revelation (e.g., Q 24:1).63 Even in the many cases where the term āyā is not actually used along with the la‘alla-kum (-hum) . . . refrain, there is almost always mention of a natural phenomenon, an historical event, a legal provision or revelation. So the vast majority of the 118 occurrences of la‘alla—give us an indication of the purpose of the āyāt even without invoking the term. For example:

And then We gave Moses the kitāb and the furqān, so that you perhaps might be guided.

Sūrat al-Baqara 2:53


64 Q 10:61; 27:92.

Say, “Come, I will recite what your Lord has forbidden you... This has He commanded you so that perhaps you might understand.”

Sūrat Al-An‘ām 6:151

The most common verbs used to complete the clause when it refers specifically to the āyāt are: ‘aqala ‘to use one’s intelligence, to reason’,64 ta‘fakkara ‘to think over’,65 tadḥakkara ‘to recall to mind’,66 raja‘a ‘to come back’.67 Less common are shakara ‘to be grateful’ (Q 5:89; 30:46); ittaqā ‘to be God-fearing’ (Q 2:187); ihtada‘ ‘to be guided, to accept guidance’ (Q 3:103); faqīha ‘to be knowledgeable’ (Q 6:65); yaqina ‘to be certain’ (Q 13:2). A similar pattern is observable in āya-type passages even when the actual term āya is lacking.

It is striking how similar is the range of verbs found in the refrain ‘a-fa-lā... will (you, they) not then...? or ‘can (you, they) not then...?’ which occurs 43 times. For example:

أولم بهذته أتكم كم أهلكتنا من قبل هم من قبلهم من فروا لم يُشْدُونُ في مسارتهم إن في ذلك لا يابات

Are they not guided by how many generations there are that We destroyed before them, whose dwelling places they now walk among? Surely in that there are āyāt. Will they then not pay heed?

Sūrat Al-Sajda 32:26

And in the earth are āyāt for those whose are sure, and also in yourselves. Can you then not see?

Sūrat Al-Dhāriyāt 51:20–21

Although these are the only two occurrences in which the term āya is actually used, like la‘alla-kum (-hum) ... this refrain regularly accompanies āya-type passages. For example:

أفسن يُحلل كم لا يَجَلَّلُ ألا يَذْرَعُون

Is one who creates the same as one who does not create? Will you not reflect?

Sūrat Al-Nahl 16:17

64 Q 2:73, 242; 24:61; 57:37.
65 Q 2:219, 266; 7:176.
66 Q 2:221, 7:26; 24:1.
Q 7:32), or revelation (e.g., Q 2:118; 6:105). Apart from the thirty-eight times when *āya* or its plural is used with the formula *li-qawmīn*, there are also ten occasions when *li-qawmīn* follows other nouns such as *ḥudā* 'guidance', *raḥma* 'mercy', *bayyīna* 'explanation, clear sign', *basīr* 'visible proofs'. There are, in addition, a few cases of a simplified formula, *āya* or *āyāt* li-. There are signs "for those who question" (Q 12:7); "for those who believe" (Q 48:20); "for those who fear the painful punishment" (Q 51:37); and "for those who are certain" (Q 51:20).

The verbs used to complete this standard clause are for the most part the same as in the previous two refrains. The most common are *ṣaqūla*; *ṣalima* 'to come to know, to learn'; *ṭafakkara*; *ṣāmana* 'to come to faith, to believe'; and *ṣamī* 'to hear, listen.' There are also occasional uses of other verbs we have already seen *yaqīna* (Q 2:118; 45:4), *taḥākkara* (Q 6:126; 16:13), *shakara* (Q 7:58), *itiqān* (Q 10:6), and *faqīha* (Q 6:98).

It is very difficult to make sense of these verbs in the indicative mood in which they actually occur. The "signs" can hardly be intended only for the people who are already reflecting, who already know, who are already certain, who already believe, etc. Reading the refrain in this way, al-Ṭabarī, for example, ends up adopting a predestinarian understanding of the whole process: he explains that *āyāt* are those things from which we come to know about the only true God, but he goes on to say that only those people will come to know whose hearts God has not already sealed shut.69

The refrain "signs for a people who . . ." seems rather to have the same optative sense that is grammatically explicit in the other two—*la‘talla* and *a-fa‘la*.

Though it is not possible to aduce grammatical authority, for example, for reading *li-qawmīn* *yaqīla* as though it were *li-yāʾiqīla qawmīn* 'so that a people might reflect', that seems to be the force of the expression. Like the other two refrains, this one underscores the purpose and intention of the *āyāt* rather than merely cataloging the intended recipients. Its meaning seems to be that the *āyāt* are intended to challenge people to reflect, to reason, to learn, and finally to come to faith. The close connection between these refrains is exemplified by the

verse endings in the passage Q 16:11–17: *āyāt* *li-qawmīn* *yatāfakkarūna*; *āyāt* *li-qawmīn* *yaqīla*; *āyāt* *li-qawmīn* *ya‘līdha‘khara*; *la‘tallakum taḥta‘dīna*; *hum yahšadīna*; *l-a-fa‘la taḥdha‘khara*.

What is quite striking about the verbs used in these three refrains is that they are overwhelmingly intellectual—learning, reflecting, reasoning, remembering, heeding, perceiving. The *āyāt* of God, woven into nature, manifested in history, rehearsed and detailed by the Messenger, are all intended to reveal to humanity a knowledge about the nature of things that God alone possesses. However, they are not merely information; they are intended to challenge those who encounter them to reflect and to respond in faith. Once this knowledge has been granted, it is unthinkable that people should return to following their own or others' uninformed ideas (*ahwāl*) about how things are:

قُلْ إِنَّ ذَٰلِكَ الْهَيْدُوْسُ الْغَيْبُ وَلَيْنَ أَحْكَامُ الْأُمَّةِ يَعْلَمُهُ وَلَيْنَ يَكُونُ مَعَ اللَّهِ مَن كَانَ مِنَ الْعُرْفِ مِنْ يَاوِيَ وَلَا تَقْسِمُ

*Say, “The guidance of God is guidance indeed and if you were to follow their vain ideas after what has come to you by way of knowledge, then you would have no (right to) a guardian nor helper from God.”*  
*Sūrat al-Baqara 2:120*

It is the mission of the rasūl and his bringing of the kitāb that recapitulates the verbal (prophetic-historical, liturgical, and legal) and nonverbal (natural) *āyāt* of God in a single event, and presents them once again in their completeness, this time for the Arabs in their own language:

الَّذِي رَحَمَ اِلْحَرَّامَانَ الْبَيْنَيْنَ || كَتَابَ مُصَلَّت فِي أَلْبَابِ أَيْمَانِ الْقُوَّمِ بَعْدَ مَعْلُومٍ

A revelation from the Beneficent, the Merciful || A kitāb the *āyāt* of which are expounded by being recited (or to be recited) in Arabic so that people might know.

*Sūrat Fuṣṣilat 41:2–3*

A kitāb that *We have sent down to you, blessed, that they may ponder its *āyāt*, and that those possessed of a mind might reflect.*

*Sūrat Sād 38:29*

The codification and canonization of the Qurʾān text led, perhaps, to a sense that the predominant meaning of *āya* is 'verse'. Yet in many ways this step did not so much reduce the importance of the term *āya* more broadly understood, as

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وَبِهِ ذَٰلِكَ لَمْ يَكُنَّ لَهُمُ الْغُرُورُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ سَمِيعُ الْأَمْوَالِ وَخَيْرُ الْمَلِيِّمَاءِ، وَدُونَ مِنْ ذَٰلِكَ ىَلِدٌ

And with that, they are not made ashamed. For Allah is hearer of all wealth, and the best of fathers. From that, they are not freed.

74 See also Q 2:44; 3:61; 13:37.
elevate even the smallest segment of the Qur'an to the status of a self-contained divine communication of universal significance—dyā li-l-illāhim, 'a sign for the worlds'.

Yet the history of these communications has not often been a happy one. The 'a-fa-lā ...' refrain expresses openly a sense of frustration, but the same sense underlies virtually all the passages about the dyāt. Sūrat al-Shu'ārā' (Q 26) is an extended attempt to comfort the Prophet in his despair that his preaching is being rejected. Recalling the natural dyāt and rehearsing the history of prophecy, the sûra reminds him that his experience is far from new. Each section ends with the refrain:

Surely in that there is an aya, yet most of them did not become believers.

Sūrat al-Shu'ārā' 26:8, 67, 103, 121, 139, 158, 174, 196

The verbs used in recounting the response of people to God's dyāt are overwhelmingly negative. The most common are kadhdhāba ‘to call a thing a lie’; kufara bi- ‘to disbelieve in’; jahāda ‘to deny’. Others include istahzā’a/ittakhbirāna huz‘ān ‘to mock at’; jādala fi- ‘to argue about’; khabā ‘to plunge into idle talk about’; istakhkara ‘to scoff’; sā‘a fi- ‘to strive against’; insalakha ‘to slough off’; ishtāra ‘to sell’; sadafa ‘an ‘to turn away from’; zalama bi- ‘to wrong’; ʿajaza ‘to thwart’; a‘rada ‘an- ‘to turn away from’; ghafala ‘to be heedless of’; istakhbara ‘to consider oneself more important than’; alhāda ‘to blaspheme’; makara ‘to plot against’; ankara ‘to deny’; nasīya ‘to forget’.

In examining the semantic field of aya, Izutsu takes little account of this negativity. He portrays the response to the dyāt as a choice between takhdhīb ‘calling them liars’ on the one hand and tasdīq ‘recognizing their truth’ on the other, and offers a neatly balanced schema to represent this choice. Yet there is no instance in the text of the verb Saddaqa being used with aya. Although it is clear that God would hope for a response of tasdīq, the Qur'ān is much more concerned to stress how rare it is for God's dyāt to be accepted. So the dyāt takes on the aspect of a challenge, one that God knows from bitter experience will for

75 Thirty-nine times (often in conjunction with kufara): Q 2:39; 3:11; 5:10; 6:21, 27, 39, 49, 150, 157; 7:36, 37, 40, 64, 72, 136, 146, 147, 176, 177, 182; 8:54, 1017, 73, 95; 17:59; 21:77; 22:27; 23:103; 25:36; 27:83, 84; 30:10, 16, 54:42; 57:19; 62:5; 64:10; 78:28. Interestingly, this verb is used only once (Q 40:70) to describe people's reaction to the kithāb.

76 Twenty-four times: Q 2:29, 61, 73, 99; 3:4 (with infīl, tarwāt, and furgān); 19, 21, 70, 98, 101, 112; 45:140, 155; 5:10; 8:52; 17:98; 18:105; 19:27; 29:23; 39:63; 45:1; 64:10; 90:19. This verb is used only three times (Q 2:85, 89; 4:136) to refer to people's reaction to the kithāb.


78 Izutsu, God and Man, 133–39.

the most part be ignored or ridiculed. God can offer guidance but humanity often prefers error:

Those are the ones who purchase error at the cost of guidance, so their trade does not prosper, and they are not guided.

Sūrat al-Baqara 2:16

KNOWLEDGE, GUIDANCE, AND ERROR

The divine knowledge that the dyāt make available to humanity provides the link to the next key term in the formulaic verses we have been examining—allama al-kitāb ‘to make known or to teach the kithāb’. It is perhaps surprising that this expression is used of the Prophet only in these four verses, and it occurs elsewhere only three times, always in connection with Jesus. However, as Franz Rosenthal has pointed out, the derivatives of the root ʿ-l-m—knowledge, knowing and teaching (i.e., making known)—are among the most commonly used terms in the Qur'ānic vocabulary and therefore knowledge should be considered one of the fundamental concepts that the Prophet was seeking to convey to his hearers.

It might seem overly abstract to say that Muhammad was concerned with the “concept” of knowledge, yet Rosenthal's choice of words makes an important point. The Qur'ān is concerned first of all with making clear that it is God who has all knowledge and that others, whether angels, jinn or human beings, know only as much as God chooses to reveal to them. The account of the creation of Adam demonstrates this point: God teaches the man the names of created things and proves to the angels that they themselves do not know.

And He taught Adam all the names, then showed them to the angels, saying, "Inform Me of the names of these, if you are truthful."" || They said,

79 God teaches the kithāb to Jesus (Q 3:32; 5:110, and Jesus encourages others not to worship himself but rather to continue their teaching and studying of the kithāb (Q 3:39). Al-Tabari (Fāṣīr, 1; 222–3; ad Q 3:32) is of the opinion that when the Qur'ān says God will teach Jesus al-kitāb, it means God will teach him to write. Fīqih al-kitāb, 3, the advantage of writing, 3, 4.


81 The text does not specify precisely what is meant by "all the names." Commentators offer many different explanations.
"Glory to you! We have no knowledge except what you have taught us. Surely You alone are the Knower, the Wise."

Surat Al-Baqara 2:31-32

When in Q 2:151 the messenger is said to have taught the people what they did not know, the Qur’ān does not intend to suggest that all knowledge has now been given to them; rather, they have only been given a little knowledge. The following words addressed to Muhammad make this clear:

وَإِلَّا مَا نَفَقَذَ عَلَى الْمُهَدِّدِينَ يُرِيدُونَ مَا أُتِيَتْ مِنَ الْعَلَمِ أَلْفِيَةٌ

They are questioning you about the Spirit. Say, “The Spirit is my Lord’s affair, and you have only been granted a little knowledge.”

Surat Al-Iṣrā’ 17:85

As the much-treasured “throne verse” says:

بَلْ يَعْلَمُ مَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِمْ وَمَا خَلَفْتُهُمْ رَوَاءً لَّا بِعَلَمُهُمْ أَلْفِيَةٌ مِنَ الْعَلَمِ إِلَّا يَوْمَ يَتَّخِذُونَ

He knows what is before and behind them but they can grasp only as much of His knowledge as He wills.

Surat Al-Baqara 2:255

The Qur’ān is at pains, somewhat paradoxically, to make sure human beings know how little they actually know. It does not claim to teach everything. It comes bringing some knowledge but also reminds us that however much we might know, God knows more:

لِلَّذِينَ أُتِيُّ الْكُلُّ مَا أُنَّ إِلَى آدِمَ أَمْرًا بِعِلْمِهِ وَالْمَلَأِ كَسَارًا بِعِلْمِهِمْ وَكَفَّارًا بِغَيْبَةِ

But God testifies to what He has revealed to you: He has sent it down with His knowledge; and the angels also testify. And God is sufficient as a witness.

Surat Al-Nisā’ 4:166

نَزَعْتُ دِرَجَاتَ مِنْ نَشَأَةٍ عِندَ الْمَلَائِكَةِ كَلَّ ذِي مَعْلُومٍ عَلِيمٌ

We elevate by stages whomever We will, but above everyone who has knowledge there is one more knowing.

Surat Yūsuf 12:76

The goal held out to us is not to expand our knowledge to the extent that we become self-sufficient, but to recognize where true knowledge lies and so to let ourselves be guided by the one who alone knows the way. We are reminded in the formulas of Q 3:164 and Q 62:2 that before the rasūl taught the kitāb and the hikma to the people, they were fī dālālin mubinān ‘in manifest error’. They have received hudā ‘guidance’, not in the sense that they now have all the directions they need, but rather that they have accepted God as al-hādi ‘the Guide’ and adopted the status of muhtadān ‘those that agree to be guided by another’.

The adjective ‘alim ‘knowing’ is applied to God in all but six of the 140 occasions that it occurs in the Qur’ān.82 Its most common use is in the characteristic verse-ending formula, in which it is paired with another adjective such as hikam ‘wisely governing’, ‘azīz ‘mighty’, sāmi’s ‘hearing’, bāṣīr ‘seeing’, khābir ‘aware’ and wâṣīr ‘embracing’. The most common pairing is ‘alim and hikam which occur together thirty-three times.83 It might be argued that euphony was the determining factor here. However, the easy availability of a rhyme did not lead to the pairing of either alim or hikam with the most common of all the verse-ending adjectives applied to God, rahīm ‘merciful’. So we may take it that the frequent conjunction of the two terms is significant. This is borne out by a number of verses in which God says of the biblical figures of Lot (Q 21:74), Joseph (Q 12:22), Moses (Q 28:14), Solomon and David (Q 21:79), ‘ātaynāhu hikman wa-si’lman ‘We granted him authority and knowledge.’ This link between knowledge and authority brings us back once more to the kitāb, which we have already seen is bound closely to hikma/hikma.

In this chapter I have sketched the broad outlines of the semantic field of which kitāb forms the focus; each area of it is examined in more detail in the following chapters. The two major components of the field are defined by the key-words ‘ilm ‘knowledge’ and hikma/hikma ‘authority’. With the coming of the kitāb, the people were taught the true source of both knowledge and authority. The two are inseparable: the authority with which God holds sway over the universe is grounded in the fact that God alone has knowledge of all things. The kitāb in its fullest sense is the record of both God’s knowledge and the authoritative divine will. It can be read in the ayāt—the portents of nature, the history of peoples, and the laws and liturgies of the prophets. Yet the whole can never be grasped by humanity. The kitāb brought and taught by the Prophet is not the sum total of God’s knowledge and authority but an emblem of access to that realm of ‘ilm and hikma. To borrow the language of Surat Al-Fātiha (Q 1), it represents God’s act of compassion (rahma) in proffering the gift (ni’mat) of guidance (huda) to people who would otherwise live in aimless wandering (dalāl).

82 The other uses are in reference to Moses (Q 7:109; 26:34), the sorcerers of Egypt (Q 7:112; 26:37) and Abraha’s son (Q 15:53; 51:28).
83 alim is paired with sāmi’s twenty-nine times. The next most common adjective with ‘alim is mubīn (six times).
CHAPTER FOUR

The Semantic Field of Kitāb I:
Verbal Uses of the Root K-T-B

We have seen more than a little evidence that the noun Kitāb functions in the Qur'ān as a symbol for God's knowledge and authoritative will, rather than as a simple description of the process of revelation or the intentions of the Prophet to produce a volume of text. In order to explore this further, we have to examine several factors: the fields of ḥ-k-m and ʿ-l-m as they pertain to Kitāb; the synonyms for and parallels to Kitāb; the adjectives used to describe the Kitāb; plural, indefinite and partitive uses of Kitāb; and the uses of the verb kataba and its derived forms. It seems appropriate to begin in this chapter with the verbal forms for they shed important light on the Qur'ān's understanding of the noun Kitāb.

DIVINE WRITING

By far the majority of uses of verbal forms derived from the root k-t-b apply, understandably, to the activities of God or God's agents, and these can be divided into two interpenetrating but nonetheless distinguishable categories: the exercise of the divine authority, and the recording of the divine knowledge. Instances of the former are overwhelmingly from the traditionally later (Medinan) period, while instances of the latter are more scattered in time, though rarely in sūras usually considered early. The former are almost exclusively in the perfect tense; the latter are in imperfect, imperative or participial forms. The relatively small number of uses of the verb kataba (fifty-eight times in forty-six verses) makes it feasible to list them all and to give examples of each kind.
In the translations offered with each quotation, I use wherever possible the literal rendering of *kataba* as ‘to write’ or ‘to write down’. Although this does not lead to the most elegant translations, it underscores the fact that in characterizing various divine activities the Qur’ān has constantly chosen this particular verb, with its primarily physical meaning, over other verbs (e.g., *amara* ‘to command’, *farada* ‘to oblige’, *buẓza* ‘to keep in memory’, *ḥasiba* ‘to keep account’) that would not have needed a metaphorical reading. To gloss over the variations in usage of *kataba* by varying the translation would be to defeat the purpose of this particular exercise, for it is precisely in the so clearly metaphorical verbal uses of the root *k-t-b* that we find warrant and support for a similarly metaphorical approach to the noun *kitāb*.

The pattern of usage we have discerned can be formulated in this way:

I. God writes to determine
   A. obligations:
      1. of others: Q 2:178; 180; 183; 216; 246; 4:24; 66; 77; 53; 45; 57:145; 57:27.
      2. for himself: Q 6:12; 54.
   B. punishments Q 22:4; 59:3.
   C. entitlements Q 2:187; 4:127.
   E. the course of events Q 3:154; 7:157; 9:51; 58:22.

II. God writes to record
   A. good deeds Q 3:55; 5:83; 9:120; 121; 21:94.
   C. all deeds Q 36:12; 82:11.

**GOD’S DETERMINATIONS: KITĀB AS ḤUKM**

The uses of the verb *kataba* to refer to God’s exercise of authority in prescribing or imposing an obligation (I:A) or a punishment (I:B) normally employ the preposition ‘alā, so they literally mean ‘to write against’, that is, as a claim or a punishment for someone.

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1. This occurrence of the verbal noun is included here since according to some interpreters it is technically a *maṣū’il muḥālab. See Taḥārī, Taḥṣīr, 4: 10-11.

2. This verse also uses the verbal noun *kitāb* to describe the way God records: *ahṣaynahu kitāb* ‘We have recorded it in writing’.

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It is written (as a claim) on you that when death comes to one of you, if he leaves goods, that he bequeath them to parents and near relatives equitably, as a legitimate claim on the God-fearing.

*Sārat al-Baqara* 2:180

Warfare is written (as a claim) on you, even though it is something repugnant to you. It may happen that you detest a thing even though it is good for you, and it may happen that you like a thing even though it is bad for you. God knows; you do not know.

*Sārat al-Baqara* 2:216

And if God had not written expulsion (as a punishment) for them, He would have punished them in this world; they have earned in the hereafter the punishment of fire.

*Sārat al-Ḥashr* 59:3

Determinations of this kind are sometimes reported to have been documented in a revelation:

And We wrote (as an obligation) upon them in [the Tawrāh] “A life for a life, and an eye for an eye, and a nose for a nose, and an ear for an ear, and a tooth for a tooth, and wounds are a matter for compensation.” But for anyone who freely forgoes it (lit., gives it as alms), it shall be an expiation. Whoever does not judge by what God has sent down, they are the wrong-doers.

*Sārat al-Mā’ida* 5:45

In two interesting occurrences of this usage God indicates that the obligation is imposed on himself (I:A:2):

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3. Al-Ḥabarī, Taḥṣīr (ad loc.) took this to mean that God had written this in the *unūn al-kitāb*. $\text{Qāfin ma'īn as-sīsawāt wa-l-ārād qall Allāh KITĀB 'uqul fil shafā'atā lāzimmāt bīyāzikumāni}"$
fulfill the fast until night and do not have intercourse with them, but withdraw into the mosques. These are the limits imposed by God, so do not approach them. Thus does God make clear his ayāt to humanity that they might be God-fearing.

Sūrat al-Baqara 2:187

And when those who believe in Our ayāt come to you, say, “Peace be upon you! Your Lord has written mercy (as an obligation) on Himself, so to anyone among you that does evil through ignorance and then afterwards repents and makes good, He will surely be forgiving, merciful.”

Sūrat al-An‘ām 6:54

What can it mean, however, for God to impose an obligation on himself? In another place (Q 28:75) the Qur‘ān says al-haqq li-lāh—the truth is on God’s side; God is always the creditor rather than the debtor. So perhaps we should understand God’s imposing the obligation of mercy upon himself as implying that the obligation of mercy is freely chosen. That is to say, no one forces God to act out of mercy. Human action cannot lay claim to it as something God owes them. God’s determination that he will act out of mercy is an exercise of his own freedom, so divine sovereignty thereby remains paramount.

God’s determination of entitlements (I:C) and rewards (I:D) is usually marked by the preposition li-, and so literally means ‘to do for someone, i.e., to their credit’.

It is made lawful for you to go in to your wives on the night of the fast. They are a garment for you and you are garment for them. God knows that you were deceiving yourselves in this respect and he has forgiven you and excused you. So now have intercourse with them and seek that which God has written for you, and eat and drink until the white thread becomes distinguishable to you from the black thread in the light of the dawn. Then

4 Daud Rahbar has gone to great pains to show that the Qur‘ān contains no warrant for believing that God predetermines human action. Although he includes this verse in a list of those to be specifically examined (p. 381), he omits it when he comes to that point in his discussion (p. 132)
Say, “Nothing befalls us except what God has written for us. He is our patron. Let those who believe place their trust in God!”

Sūrat al-Tawba 9:51

The third instance of this use of the verb ‘to write’ expresses God’s resolve not to be defeated by his opponents. This seems a case of determination more than predetermination:

كَتَبَ اللَّهُ لَا تَفْزَقُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ غَفُورٌ

God has written, “I shall certainly be victorious—I and My messengers.”
Surely God is powerful, mighty.

Sūrat al-Mujādala 58:21

The final instance of this type is in a verse in which God is said to have written faith in the hearts of those who side with God and his messenger even against their families and clan. Rather than a predestining to faith, this is probably better understood as a reward for loyalty or a gift in the face of adversity, one that goes along with God’s strengthening them:

لاَ يَقْفُوُنَّ نَفَقَةً صَغِيرَةً وَلاَ كَبِيرَةً وَلاَ يَجْعَلُونَ رَآئِيَةً إِلَّا إِذَا أَكَابَ لَهُمْ اللَّهُ مِنْ أَحْيَا الْجَنَّاتِ وَمِنْ أَحْيَا الْجَحِيمَ

You will not find people who believe in God and the Last Day loving those who oppose God and his messenger, even though they be their fathers or their sons or their brothers or their clan. As for them, he has written (ingrained?) faith in their hearts and strengthened them with a spirit from him, and he will bring them into Gardens from under which rivers flow so that they will abide there forever. God is pleased with them, and they are pleased with him. They are the party of God. Are not God’s the party the successful?

Sūrat al-Mujādala 58:22

As we noted earlier, it would be a mistake to understand the word ‘written’ in passages like these as having to do with the production of documents. Even where a text is mentioned (Q 5:45 explicitly refers to the Tōrāh, and Q 5:32 may implicitly refer to a Talmudic text) the writing must still be considered metaphorical.5 For example, the several references to the warfare that had been

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5 In Tāj al-‘arab, katabna ‘We wrote’ in Q 5:45 is glossed faradnā ‘We made oblquatory’. Al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, no. 16 (al-Kuwayt: Mathā‘at Ḥukūmat al-Kuwayt, 1965+-), 4: 101.

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written for the community in Madīna are not about regulations contained in the text of the Qurʾān but rather about the definitive command of God expressed through the leadership of the Prophet. What is of prime significance in the use of the metaphor of writing is the authoritative source of composition, rather than the means of display or storage. This we can call kitāb as ḥukm.

GOD’S RECORDING: KITĀB AS ṢILM

Recording human actions—the second divine activity that involves writing—accounts for approximately a third of the instances of the use of the verb kataba to refer to a divine activity. This writing is a reflection of the knowledge of the secret thoughts and actions of humanity that God alone has. God’s knowledge extends beyond this, of course, but the passages that use the verb kataba are only concerned with this kind of recording. In the case of faith and good deeds (II:A) the preposition li- is used, adding the sense of accounting to someone’s credit:

فَمَنْ يَعْمَلُ مِنَ السَّلَاحِفِ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَلَا تَفْرَخُ لَعْبَهُ وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ عَلِيمًا

Then whoever performs some good works and is a believer, there will be no ingratitude for his effort. It is We who write it down to his credit.

Sūrat al-Anbiyāʾ 21:94

This accounting is intended to lead to a reward; thus it establishes a link between kitāb as ṣilm and kitāb as ḥukm:

وَلَا يَجْعَلُونَ نَفَقَةً صَغِيرَةً وَلاَ كَبِيرَةً وَلاَ يَجْعَلُونَ رَآئِيَةً إِلَّا إِذَا أَكَابَ لَهُمْ أَحْيَا الْجَحِيمَ وَأَحْيَا الْجَنَّاتِ

Nor do they contribute any amount, small or great, nor cross a valley, without its being written down to their credit, so that God may repay them better even than what they used to do.

Sūrat al-Tawba 9:121

There are two verses in which recording a person’s faith and determining of the person’s final status are not easily distinguishable:

رَبُّنَا أَنتَ السَّمِيعُ الْأُمِينُ فَأَنْصِرْنَا بِالْخَادِمِينَ

Our Lord! We have believed in what you have sent down and have followed the messenger. So write us down among those who witness.

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6 Lisrā‘ al-‘arab (s.v. kataba) comments on such usage of the verb:

أَفِي فِرْسَةِ اللَّهِ عَلَى لَسَانِهِ وَقُلُوْبِهِ: أَنْصِرْنَا بِالْخَادِمِينَ

That is, an obligation imposed by God through the mouth of his prophet; it is said that such an obligation is an indication of God’s own word.
The Qur’an also threatens in several polemical passages (II:B) that people’s evil deeds, plotting, and lack of faith are recorded by God:

And they consider the angels, who are the servants of al-Rahmān, females. Did they witness their creation? Their testimony will be written down and they will be questioned.

Sūrat al-Zukhruf 43:19

No! We shall write down what he says and make the period of his punishment even longer.

Sūrat Maryam 19:79

Al-Zamakhshari comments that this kind of writing should probably be understood as ‘taking note of’ or ‘remembering’ rather than actual writing down. The force of the future tense would be “We shall keep in mind” or “We shall take note of” rather than “We shall write down (at some later time).” This writing is also said to be carried out by God’s agents, who are called nasūrī, though obviously not referring Muhammad or the other prophets:

And when We give humanity a taste of mercy after some adversity that had afflicted them, behold they engage in some plotting with regard to Our ayāt. Say, “God is quicker at plotting. Surely our envoys write down what you plot.”

Sūrat Yāsīn 10:21

The verb kataba is used twice in speaking of the recording of all humanity’s deeds (II:C):

Surely it is We who bring the dead to life, and We write down what they present and what they leave behind. And We have kept account of everything in a clear imām.

Sūrat Yā Sin 36:12

Surely there are guardians above you, [Noble scribes] Who know whatever you do.

Sūrat al-Infiṣār 82:10–12

Four occurrences of kataba (Q 5:45; 7:145, 157; 21:105) indicate that God’s knowledge, commands, and intentions are sometimes revealed through the

7 The verb istanākha “to seek to have something inscribed” is used in a similar context (Q 45:29) with the noun katabā for such recording of evil deeds.

prophets; that is, kataba is used to signify the display of hukm and ilm. This kind of passage demonstrates the close relationship between composition and display that was noted in chapter 2. No clear distinction can be made between the act of determining and the act of displaying that determination:

And We wrote for Moses upon the tablets an admonition (maw'iza) about everything and a criterion of judgment (tafsil) in every matter. Then We said, "Hold fast to it; and command your people, 'Hold fast to the best of it. I shall show you the abode of grievous sinners.'"

Sūrat al-An'ām 7:145

And We have already written in the zabūr [scroll; Psalms?], after the reminder, that my servants shall inherit the earth.

Sūrat al-Anba' 21:105

The only instance of maktaba, the passive participle of kataba, carries the sense of 'divinely foretold'. God revealed his knowledge of the future through the scriptures given to the Jews and the Christians:

I will write mercy for those who follow the messenger, the gentle Prophet [or: Prophet to the gentiles], whom they find written in what is already in their possession, in the Torah and the Gospel...

Sūrat al-An'ām 7:157

This examination shows that the use of the verb kataba in connection with God and his agents in the relatively few instances of where it occurs, corresponds quite closely to what we have so far seen of the usage of the noun kitāb. As we shall see in the next two chapters, the occurrences of the noun can be similarly distributed between the categories of hukm—in the senses of authoritative composition—and ilm—in the sense of knowledgeable recording. Instances in both these categories are displayed for humanity in what the prophets bring.

HUMAN WRITING

Whereas in the instances of divine writing just explored human beings are, albeit indirectly, the object of the action, in seven verses they are the subject of a verb from the root k-t-b: Q 2:79, 282–83; 24:33; 25:S; 52:41; and 68:47. These also fall into the two categories we have been using so far.

Only one of these instances (Q 24:33) refers to an authoritative action—the manumission of a slave—and it is in the jā'ala form (kataba), which implies a certain mutuality in the written transaction:

And let those who cannot find a match keep chaste till God enrich them by his grace. And those [slaves] that you own who seek the write, write a decree of freedom for them if you know of anything good about them, and bestow upon them some of the wealth of God that he has bestowed upon you.

Sūrat al-Nur 24:33

The use of the definite, al-kitāb, in this verse where one might have expected an indefinite form is of interest. Given that no attempt is made to distinguish this particular kitāb from kitāb in the sense of scripture, the word in this context may have been understood as an action rather than merely a document—the authoritative action of the master emancipating the slave. This may also prove true in other places.

All the rest of the occurrences of verbs from the root k-t-b refer to recording. In one pericope concerning the recording of contracts in writing (Q 2:282–83, in which the verb kataba appears ten times) the usage is not religious, but the reminder that it was God who taught the scribe to write adds a sense of solemnity to the act of writing. Since the contract is legally binding, the act of recording it mirrors in some way God’s activity of determining matters. Since this human act of recording is also intended to be one of witnessing, it reflects something of the divine knowledge, for God knows the terms of the agreement and whether or not it is faithfully carried out:

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10 Tafsil is an important term in the Qur'an’s understanding of the kitāb. It is often translated as 'detailing', 'specifying' or 'explanation', but these fail to bring out the connotation of decisiveness present in the word. We shall see when we look more closely at the Qur'an's use of the derivatives of the root jā'a–, how closely related it is to the root j-k-m. More importantly it provides another link between hukm and ilm.

11 Perhaps we are hearing here an echo of the Matthean Beatitudes.

12 Al-nabi al-ummī—variously understood as 'the prophet who can neither read nor write', 'the unlettered prophet', 'the prophet to those who have as yet no scripture'. The translation given here is more neutral—and quite justifiable if we take ummām as equivalent to gentes. For a detailed survey of both Muslim and non-Muslim interpretations of the term, see Khalil ‘Athamina, 'An-Nabiyy al-Ummīyy: An Inquiry into the Meaning of a Qur’anic Verse,' Der Islam 69 (1992): 61–80.
The puzzle of this verse is why what these people have been writing is called "al-kitāb" if the point of the condemnation is that it is not from God but rather the work of their own hands. The most straightforward reading of the verse taken in isolation would be that it is a condemnation of those who write out a genuine revelation (whether of the Qurʾān, the Gospel or the Tūrah) and claim that it came from God in written form, i.e., that it is the kind of heavenly writing that was demanded in Q 6:7 (see chapter 2). However, the majority of commentators interpret it in the context of an anti-Jewish polemic and insist that it concerns rabbis who were accused of, one might say, rewriting the Tūrah—removing all mention of Muhammad, adding what they liked, deleting what they disliked, and twisting the interpretation of it. It seems unlikely that the charge intended to imply that these rabbis were actually rewriting their Tūrah scrolls (if, indeed, they possessed any). Muslim tradition (following Q 6:91) often speaks of people concealing rather than changing the text of the Tūrah. Although the charge of taḥriʿ ‘falsification’ or ‘willful misinterpretation’ that the commentators make is often thought to refer to the actual changing of the written text of scripture, they also use it to refer to oral misreadings of the text. The term was also used by al-Ḥasan al-Ḥāṣirī to mean misinterpreting the text of the Qurʾān rather than changing it. The Shiʿite traditionist Kālimānī charged the first three caliphs with maintaining the letter of the text of the Qurʾān but misinterpreting its strictures (ḥarrāfih ḥudūdahū). In al-Ṭabarī’s opinion, the force of the phrase bi-ʿaydīhūm ‘with their own hands’ is not so much to stress some obvious physical fact, but rather to stress that it is the rabbis themselves who are responsible for this and that it cannot be laid at the door of some unknowing agent working under their orders.

Thus the usage of the verb kataba here is principally concerned with the composition—in this case bogus—of authoritative pronouncements. It seems quite justifiable to understand its use here as metaphorical, just as it is when God is the subject. This approach may find further support in Q 29:48 where the Qurʾān chooses the verb ḥatta ‘to make lines’ (and thus ‘to write’) rather than kataba to indicate the actual transcribing of the kitāb.

14 Al-Ṭabarī, Tafsīr, 1:422–24.
15 See, for example, the traditions reported by al-Ṭabarī (Tafsīr, 3:321–22) in connection with the charge of oral falsification in Q 3:78.
16 Helmut Ritter, ‘‘Studien zur islamischen Frommigkeit I: Ḥasan al-Ḥāṣirī, ‘Der Islam 21(1933)’ 68, line 11; 69, line 19; 70, line 16.
17 Quoted in Modarresi “Debates,” 29:

13 It is significant that, in spite of the explicit nature of this verse, written evidence was not acceptable in Islamic law. This is one of the gaps between Qurʾānic law and Islamic law that raises questions about the status of the Qurʾān in the early period.
The second case of the use of the root k-t-b in a charge of falsification (Q 25:5) is no less problematic.

And they said, "Mythic tales of the ancients that he has had written down so that they are dictated to him morning and evening."

Sūrat al-Furqān 25:5

This use of iktataba, usually translated ‘to have [something] written down’, is a hapax legomenon in the Qur’ān and it is difficult to know precisely the significance of the verb, especially since the particle fa- implies that the second clause is the result or purpose of the first. Is this evidence that Muhammad was known to have used the services of scribes? If so, the verse suggests their role was providing the Prophet with a written text that would make it possible for the ‘mythic tales’ to be dictated to him over and over. However, that seems a most unlikely procedure for an Arab of that period, since techniques of oral composition and memorizing were in common use and did not involve writing.19 Or is there a reference to the morning and evening prayers of the early community in the precincts of the Ka’ba?20 That may be so. Yet there is no reason to think that they would have used written texts for their worship when these have never been known to be part of Muslim worship.

So the use of iktataba here seems to have less to do with the production of written documents than with the claim of divine authority for the words being recited. If, as al-Zabidi indicates in Tāj al-‘arāq, iktataba is equivalent to istaktaba, it could well have the sense of ‘to consider something to be kitāb’. Perhaps one could paraphrase the verse in this way: “They said, ‘These are just myths of the ancients that he claims are kitāb [i.e., composed by God], so they are recited in his presence morning and evening.’” In interpreting iktataba this way, we are taking it that this verb is not controlled exclusively by its being derived from a root that signifies simply the concept of writing, but that its meaning is also affected by the noun kitāb—in much the same way as maktaba ‘library, bookshop’

19 See Monroe, “Oral Composition,” 1–53. F. Krenkow, on the other hand, finds warrant in the pre-Islamic poets for the widespread use of writing in the preservation of their poetry during their own careers. His evidence certainly seems strong enough to indicate that writing was not unknown to them, but most of it is only reliable if we presume that the poems he quotes do in fact go back to their putative authors. Monroe’s findings suggest that at least some of the references to books and writing (especially to the definite form al-kitāb) probably entered the poems at a later date in the course of their oral transmission and elaboration. F. Krenkow, “The Use of Writing for the Preservation of Ancient Arabic Poetry,” in A Volume of Oriental Studies Presented to Edward G. Browne, ed. T. W. Arnold and R. A. Nicholson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 261–68.

20 On the early community’s worship, see Rubin, “Morning and Evening Prayers,” 40–64.
is evidently not derived simply from the notion of writing but must also comprehend the notion of ‘book’. This is quite in keeping with what we have seen of the Qur’an’s overwhelmingly metaphorical use of the verb kataba. The noun kitāb certainly bulky much larger in the Qur’an than the verb kataba. It seems likely that the dominating concept of kitāb—the command of God and the record of God’s knowledge as revealed through the prophets—controls this verbal usage, rather than vice versa. That is, the root sense of writing has been overshadowed by the metaphorical sense of decreeing and definitively recording. This may be because kitāb is in some respects a loanword. Indeed the Qur’an treats it that way, recognizing it as a technical term that defines the peoples who have been addressed by God prior to the Arabs—ahl al-kitāb, alladhīna ‘āti‘i-l-kitāb—those who through their prophets have already been given guidance as to the nature of God’s decrees and the extent of God’s knowledge.

Interestingly the noun and the verb are used together only once, in the accusation of falsification leveled against the Jews (Q 2:279, discussed earlier in this section). Otherwise the Qur’an appears consistently to avoid putting kataba and kitāb together using other verbs that denote the physical action of writing, making lines and marks—khatta (Q 29:48), raqama (Q 83:9, 20) and satara (Q 17:58; 33:6; 52:2; 54:53; 68:1). Thus there are two kinds of writing. One

21 Larcher, “Où il est montré qu’en Arabe classique la racine n’a pas de sens et qu’il n’y a pas de sens à dériver d’elle,” Arabica 42 (1995): 45-62. As the title indicates, Larcher argues that there is no basis for the custom of interpreting all Arabic words as derived from a root which is presumed to carry the fundamental meaning common to all its derivatives. He uses, among others, the example of the word maktaba (300-305) to show that words emerge not only directly from the root, or from the basic verb, but also from nouns which are themselves presumed to be derivative. Students of Arabic have, of course, long recognized the existence of denominative verbs—verbs derived from a noun—but these have usually been considered somehow secondary, since the paradigmatic approach was to consider a root as the origin. Larcher’s point is that the phenomenon of derivation from a noun or a locution is much more widespread in Arabic than is usually recognized and has been ignored by Arabists because of their attachment to the theory of roots. Even where that paradigm seems to fit, he argues that the so-called root is in fact derived from the primary verb, rather than vice versa.

22 It is sometimes thought that the enigmatic al-raqīm from the story of the sleepers in the cave (Q 18:9-22) is also derived from this root and is therefore something written—Pickthall, for example, translates it ‘the Inscription’. However, C. C. Torrey has suggested quite persuasively that the linking of this obscure term with the story of the sleepers is the result of a misreading of an Aramaic or Syriac inscription containing the name of Decius, the emperor responsible for the persecution that is the setting of the story. He suggests that surār was misread as surār, a mistake that could easily have occurred in deciphering a Syriac script: /suraːr/ /surār/. C. C. Torrey, “Three Difficult Passages in the Koran,” in A Volume of Oriental Studies Presented to Edward G. Browne, ed. T. W. Arnold and R. A. Nicholson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1922), 457-59. See also James A. Bellamy, “‘Al-Raqīm or al-Raqīq? A Note on Surah 189,” JAOS 111 (1991): 115-17.

23 In the case of satara, there is a solemnity to the action that makes its usage very similar to that of kataba. One must wonder whether this verb might not also have been shaped by an association with satara (pl. asāṭir) ‘fable’ or ‘myth’, a term used by the Meccans to dismiss Muḥammad’s recitations (asāṭir al-awwāl) ‘myths of the ancients’: Q 6:25; 8:31; 16:24; 23:83; 25:5; 27:68; 46:17; 68:15; 83:13; 100:66). These myths seem to have been understood as sacred to the ancients. Al-Tahari, (Tafsir, 9:366), discussing Q 25:5, comments that these are “their traditions (ahdāthhum), which they used to write (wuṣṭānān), in their books (fi kuthābihum)”: ‘الثناي الأسانج الأوان ما كتبوا به إلا بعدهم كتبهم’


24 Plato, Phaedrus 276d, e. I rely here and in the following citation on the translation of Hackforth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) but have amended it in some places.
and infused with spirit, of which the written discourse may with justification be called merely a shadow (eidolon).²⁶

In the Qur'ān, writing in the sense of kitāb is indeed this kind of living logos, not mere lines on a page. The kitāb of God remains immeasurably, intelligent, and active. It is powerful and needs no defender. Indeed it spends a good deal of time speaking in its own defense. In chapter 7 I shall return to this distinction between kitāb as closed text and kitāb as authoritative word, to examine how Islam's profoundly active sense of kitāb Allāh has often enabled it to escape the confining and fossilizing process through which the kitāb becomes equated with, and reduced to, the mushaf.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Semantic Field of Kitāb II: Titles and Processes

The Muslim community has recognized certain terms as being so central to the Qur'ān's self-image and its understanding of revelation that they have effectively adopted them as names for the scripture rather than as simple descriptions of it. Yet each word carries a significance that can be lost when it is treated as a proper name. In addition to these important words, there are the characteristic terms the Qur'ān uses for processes associated with revelation. It is to these names and processes of the revelation that we now turn for what they reveal about the nature of kitāb.

THE NAMES OF PARTICULAR REVELATIONS

FURQĀN

Al-furqān appears in the text seven times (Q 2:53; 185; 3:4; 8:29, 41; 21:48; 25:1) and is also one of the names given to sura 25. The word is traditionally understood to be a name for the whole Qur'ān,¹ yet it is also said to have been sent down to Moses and Aaron (Q 2:53; 21:48). Since furqān does not appear in Arabic prior to the Qur'ān,² it is at least arguable that it is a loanword rather than a neologism, and Western scholars have long conjectured that its origin is the Aramaic/Syriac purgāna 'salvation, deliverance, redemption'. Although Muslim tradition has not posited a foreign origin, it has nonetheless recognized that a simple derivation from the Arabic root f-r-q—from which comes the verb faraqa 'to separate, distinguish'—will not easily explain all the uses of furqān.

²⁶ Plato, Phaedrus, 276a (my italics). In the Philebus (38e–39e), which Derrida takes as the basis of his "The Double Session," Socrates speaks of our souls as books in which memory, sensation and feelings write words. Our ideas are the effects of this writing.

¹ Al-Suyūṭī, al-Iṣbāḥ, 1:159; al-Ṭabarī, Tafsir, 1:67.
² Bell, Origin, 118ff.
There seem to be two basic elements influencing Qur'anic usage of this term: a soteriological sense, possibly deriving from an Aramaic or Syriac origin, and the notion of separation and discernment characteristic of the Arabic verb *faraqa*. When a sense of connection to revelation and scripture is added to these two factors, the resulting semantic field becomes quite complex. The aspect of salvation is clearest in Q 829:

(O you who believe! If you fear God, he will create for you a *furqan*; He will acquit you of your evil-doing and forgive you. God is possessed of great bounty.)

Surat al-Anfâl 8:29

Al-Tabari notes that in this context authorities have interpreted the word variously as *makhraj* ‘escape’, *najât* ‘salvation’ or *faṣl* ‘separation, discernment’. Its use in connection with Moses and Aaron forms a conceptual link between salvation and scripture:

We granted to Moses the kitâb and the *furqan*. Perhaps you might accept to be guided.

Surat al-Baqara 2:53

Indeed we granted to Moses and Aaron al-¯furqan: a light and a reminder (*dhikr*) for the God-fearing.

Surat al-Anbiya’ 21:48

Since the career of Moses united the roles of liberator and bringer of revelation, and since for the Qur’an the latter role is paramount, it is not difficult to see how the emphasis in the usage of this loanword might shift from salvation to revelation. The same dual emphasis is also evident in the career of the Prophet: Q 8:41 refers to “what We revealed to our servant on the day of the *furqan*, the day when the two armies met.” The tradition almost universally recognizes this as referring to the Battle of Badr and so links the revelation of the Qur’an in the month of Ramaḍân with the divinely granted victory of the Muslims over the Meccan forces. In this verse the various levels of meaning in the word *furqan* come together: God saves (*purâna*) the small Muslim band from almost certain defeat as the hand of a large army, and a decisive break (*farq*) between Meccans and Muslims takes place. Furthermore, God’s revelation in the Qur’an distinguishes (*faraqa*) right from wrong and also differentiates (*faraqa*) the Muslims from the unscriptured and from the recipients of earlier revelations.

The sense that *furqan* refers to revelation is probably reinforced by its use on all but one occasion with the verbs *atu* ‘to grant’ and *nazzala/anazala* ‘to send down’—verbs most often connected with revelation. The dual sense of the term exemplifies how, to the extent that the Qur’an recognizes a need for salvation, it considers the salvific action of God to be the sending of prophetic guidance. Perhaps under the influence of the Arabic verb *faraqa* ‘to separate, to distinguish, to decide’, the term *furqan* has come to be thought of as an appropriate description of the Qur’an and is translated, for example, by Pickthall in most cases as “the Criterion (of right and wrong).” Al-Suyûtî gives Mujâhid as his authority for deriving *furqan* as the name of the Qur’an from *faraqa* “because it distinguishes between what is true and what is false.” Al-¯Tabari thinks that the various opinions about the precise meaning of *furqan* in the end come down to the same thing:

All these interpretations of the meaning of *furqan*—in spite of the difference in their wordings—are reconcilable when it comes to their meanings. That is to say, if a ‘way out’ is provided for someone from the situation he is in, that ‘way out’ is his ‘salvation’. Similarly, if he is saved from it, that means there has been a victory over the one who wrongfully opposed him and so a ‘decision’ has been made between him and his evil opponent.

Qur’an

It is not quite clear whether the term *qur’an* fits more easily into the category of names or of processes. Although William Graham has convincingly shown that it should be taken in most cases as a common verbal noun ‘reciting’ or ‘recita-

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3 Al-Tabari, Tafsîr, 1:69. See also opinions registered by Jeffery, Foreign Vocabulary, 225–29.
4 Crone and Cook see in the Qur’anic use of *furqan* (as also in the name al-¯Farâq ‘the Saviour’ applied to the Caliph (Umar) evidence of an earlier strain of Hâgarene messianism. As Islam transcended this and developed a new sense of itself as the religion of a neo-Mosaic prophet, these remnants of messianism were reinterpret as terms about revelation derived from Arabic usage and roots rather than the Syriac. Crone and Cook, Hagarism, 5–6.
5 Al-Suyûtî, al-Iqân, 1:163.
6 Al-Tabari, Tafsîr, 1:69.
tion”—he also recognizes that in some instances in the longer, later sūras it seems to be used almost as a proper noun to name the revelations Muhammad is bringing. For example:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ أَخْصَصَ مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ أَنْفُسَهُمْ وَأَمَالَهُمْ بِأنْ لَهُمُ الْحَجَةَ الْمُقَدَّسَةَ فِي سِيبِيلِ اللَّهِ فِي قُرَّةَنَّ

وَفِي قُرَّةَنَّ وَعَلَّمَهُ وُفُذَّاً عَلَى حَمَّةٍ فِي الْبَيْتِ ِالْمُطَفَّرَةِ وَالْمُطَفَّرَةَ

Surely God has purchased from the believers their lives and their goods in exchange for their being entitled to the Garden when they fight in the way of God and kill or are killed. This is as a promise which is binding on Him in the Tórah and the Gospel and the Qur’an.

Sūrat al-Tawba 9:111

The later confusion among Muslim commentators about the derivation of the word, however, is puzzling. If Qur’an had originated as a straightforward verbal noun (masdar) from qara’a ‘to recite,’ we are at a loss to know how this could have become obscured later on. Al-Suyūtī reports extensive disagreement among the scholars about whether the word was a proper noun like Tawrát or Injil (the position he favored, following al-Shāfi’ī) or whether it is derived and if so, from what word. Those who think of it as derived disagree about the root of the word.

There are those who think that the final nūn is part of the root and that the word comes from the plural noun qara’n ‘pairs,’ matches or ‘contexts’ since its verses confirm each other and resemble each other. Others argue that Qur’an is from the verb qara‘a ‘to join’ since it joins together the sūras, the dyāt and the letters, though al-Rāghib insists that it is called this only because it draws together the positive parts of all the previously revealed scriptures. Those who think of the root as q-r-r’ differ about whether it is based on the meaning of ‘to recite’ or ‘to combine.’ Al-Tabari sides with Ibn ‘Abbās in adopting the former position while rejecting the latter, which he attributes to Qatādā.

There is even one school of thought reported by al-Suyūtī that quotes Bedouin usage to the effect that the verb qara‘a is used of animals to mean ‘to deliver,’ that is, ‘to give birth to.’ In pronouncing and expounding the Qur’an, the reciter “delivers” it from his mouth as a camel delivers her offspring from the womb. Al-Tabari, however, quotes the same idiom to support the meaning ‘to contain,’ ‘to draw together’ the way a camel’s womb contains its young. The Mu’tazilite theologians quoted the Arabic idiom “the she-camel collected (qara‘at) her milk in her udder” when arguing that the Qur’an could not be eternal since it was a collection. One sees a strong sense among commentators that whatever the derivation of the term Qur’an, the idea of gathering and containing is central to the nature of what Muhammad has brought. Al-Suyūtī and Ibn ‘Atiyya, for example, both define kitāb as jam‘ ‘collection.’

This controversy lends weight to the often-expressed opinion that Qur’an is actually a borrowed form of the Syriac q̣aryāṇa (‘liturgical reading’) rather than an apparently new coinage from an existing Arabic word. This view has been challenged with the argument that, since q̣aryāṇ would have been a perfectly acceptable Arabic form, it is less likely that Qur’an, with a hamza rather than a yā as its third root-letter, is a direct borrowing from the Syriac. This argument, however, is weakened by the lack of universal agreement, as al-Suyūtī points out, that the word should be written or pronounced with a hamza. If the word Qur’an were borrowed, it would have been as a technical term for scripture and its oral proclamation. Given the range of usage involved with such a term, it could still function in the Qur’an in much the way Graham has described. Even if the disagreements of the later commentators give us reason to doubt Graham’s

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7 Graham, “Earliest Meaning,” 372.
9 Al-Suyūtī, al-I’tiqān, 1: 162:

قَالُ الرَّأَبُ: لَا يَقُولُ لَكُمْ فَرَقُ النَّارِ لَا يَخْرُجُ كَلْكُلِّ كَلَامٍ قَرَنَّ. قَالُ: إِنَّا سُبُبُ قَرَنَّا لَكُونُهُ جَمِيعٌ شُرْمَاتُ

الْكِتَابِ السَّالِفَةِ الدَّرَالْقُرَّةِ وَقَدْ لَاهُ جَمِيعُ اثْنَاءِ الْعَمَّاَمَا كَلِها.

10 Al-Tabari, Ta’ṣīr, 1: 67–69.

11 Al-Suyūtī, al-I’tiqān, 1: 162:

وَرَحِيَ قُطُبُ قَوْلُ: إِنَّا سُبُبُ قَرَنَّا لَانَارِقَ الدَّارِ. يُظْفِرُ وَيُبْسِطُ فِيهِ. إِنَّا أَخْتَلَفْنا مَعَهُ: مَا قَرَنَّ النَاَّفَةِ مَعْلُوًّةً، إِنًّا مَسْتَرَطْنا لَنْوَذَ. إِنَّا مَتَّى حَمَّةَ عَلَى حَمَّةٍ، وَقَرَنَّ بِفَلَظَةِ الدَّارِ مِنْ فِيهِ.

وَقَدْ جَعَلْنَاهُ نَحْثًا قَارِنًا.

12 Al-Tabari, Ta’ṣīr, 1: 68.


14 Al-Suyūtī, al-I’tiqān, 1: 161:

فَأَتَهُمُ السَّبِيحُ: فلأَحَبِّنَّهُوَكَالْعَمَّاءَ الْمُقَدَّمَةَ وَالْفَتْحَ عَلَى إِلَى مِنْهُوَ وَالْكِتَابِ لَعَلَّهُ طَفُّقَ. إِنَّا كَانَ الْكَتَابُ: مَعْدُورُ مِنْ كَتَابٍ أَنْ حَمَّةَ. وَقَدْ قُلَّ لَكَ وَاكْتِبْنَ لَكِنْ فِي الْكِتَابِ وَقَدْ قُلَّ لَكَ وَاكْتِبْنَ لَكَ.


16 This confusion may have merely resulted from the absence of the hamza in the unwilled consonantal text. Besides Qur’an being written قُرَّأَنَّ, yāṣ ‘āl wā was written ʿayn, and al ‘ān was written ʿayn. C. F. Gill, III: 43-4. See also, Gerd-R. Puin, “Observations on early Qur’ān Manuscripts in Ṣan‘ā‘,” in Wild, Qur’ān as Text, 107–11.
conclusion that the term originated as a simple masdar of the verb 'to read', one has to agree with his judgment that it has definitely been influenced by Syriac Christian usage of ˹q̣̊yānā. ˺

It must be said, not only of ˹q̣̊rān˺ but of all the names for manifestations of the kitāb under discussion here, that the distinction between common and proper noun, between description and title, is quite ill-defined. Al-Suyūṭī quotes two traditions in which both tawrāt and injil are treated as common nouns parallel to ˹q̣̊rān˺. He does not approve of this practice, though he acknowledges similar things appear in the Qurʾān and the hadīth:

Ibn al-Durays and others have reported from Ka'b that he said, "In the Tawrāt [it says] 'O Muḥammad, I am sending down upon you a new tawrāt that will open the eyes of the blind, the ears of the deaf, and the hearts of the uncircumcised.'" Ibn Abī Ḥātim reported from Qatāda that he said, "When Moses received the tablets he said, 'O Lord, I find in the tablets a community (umma) whose gospels (anājīfūhum) are in their hearts. Make them my community.' [God] said, 'That is the community of Ahmād.'" So in these two traditions the Qurʾān is called tawrāt and injil. In spite of this it is not permissible nowadays to call it that, even though it is similar to the case of the Tawrāt being called farqān in [God's] saying, "Behold We granted to Moses the kitāb and the farqān" [Q 2:53]. And [Muḥammad], may God's peace and blessing be upon him, called the zabūr by the name ˹q̣̊rān˺ when he said, "The burden of ˹q̣̊rān˺ was lightened for David." ˺

Q 21:105), yet it continues to function with all the force of a common noun. Neuwirth suggests that it is the name for those sections of the "heavenly Book" that deal with the history of the prophets and earlier peoples. ˺

It is also pointed out that the word bears two meanings. Besides being a 'reminder' from God of His commands and humanity's duties, a dhikr is a sharaf 'honor' and a sakīra 'source of pride' for the community to which it has been given. He addsuce a less than convincing text in support of this interpretation:

Surely it is a dhikr for you and for your people; and you will be questioned.
Sūrat al-Zukhrūf 43:44

ZABūR

This lack of clarity as to whether something is a common or proper noun also arises with zabūr (pl., zubūr), which is often thought to mean the Psalms since it is said in Q 4:163 and Q 17:55 that David was given a zabūr. However, one must also take into account Q 54:52–3 in which it is said that "everything they did in the zabūr || and everything small and great thing is written (mustātar)." In general it seems to be not much more specific than the term kitāb. Several Western scholars have wanted to see in it a corrupted or misunderstood borrowing from the Hebrew zimra 'sound of singing' or mishūrī 'psalm'. Yet such a proposal seems unnecessary. The Qurʾān's use of zabūr for what was given to David is sufficient to account for the connection in the mind of the tradition between zabūr and the Psalms, even though the word obviously carries a more general, though still sacred, meaning in most places. The similarity of the roots of zabūr and its supposed Hebrew or Syriac cognates (the middle radicals, though not identical, are both bilabials) certainly supports the Davidic association, but it seems unnecessary to posit a borrowing or corruption when the term was already in use in pre-Islamic poetry to mean (pace Jeffery) something more specific than just "the general sense of a writing." Imru' al-Qays uses the term twice, once explicitly and once arguably with reference to written scriptures:

Stop here, both of you, and let us weep for the memory of a friend and

21 Al-Ṭabarī, Taḥfīz, 1:70.
22 See Jeffery, Foreign Vocabulary, 148–49.
confidant || and for traces of a camp whose signs (ṣāyāt) have grown faint over the ages.

Years have passed over it since I was here and [the signs] have become || like the lines (khat) of a zabūr in monks’ codices (masāhīl).23

لَمْ يَصْلَ عَلَيْهِ هَذَا قَرْنٌ || كَخَطَّ الْزَّبْرُ فِي عَسِيبِ ٌبِن

Whose is the ruined house I see that grieves me so? || It is like the lines of the zabūr on a sheet of palm bark from Yemen.24

This ambiguity about the names or terms for revelation in the Qurʾān suggests that a similar process may have been at work as had already taken place in other contexts. A common noun has become a technical term, even a proper name, yet still retains some of its original force so that it can be used as a generic term. For example, the Hebrew noun tōrāh ‘direction, teaching, law’: even after it became the proper name for the scripture of the Jewish community, it could still be occasionally be used in the plural (e.g., Is 24:5; Ez 44:24). The Christian term evangēlion raises similar issues for the translator as it covers all the ground from the straightforward ‘good news’ to the more complex and technical ‘gospel’ (itself a Middle English form of the Old English godspell ‘good tale’) which can mean 1) the preaching done by Jesus, 2) the preaching about Jesus, whether oral or in writing, or 3) a segment of that writing read in a liturgical context. Some of the ambiguity becomes apparent when we see Mark begin his work with “The beginning of the evangēlion of Jesus Christ . . . ” (Mk 1:1) and then a little later depicts Jesus as saying, “Repent and believe in the evangēlion” (Mk 1:15).25 In later Islamic tradition too, both tawrāt (tawrāt) and evangēlion (injill) seem to have been adopted as proper nouns, but then recovered at least a limited common usage—not their original common meaning but as common nouns for revelations.26

23 Ahlwardt, Divans, 160; 65, 1–2. Perhaps he also is playing on two meanings of dyāt.

24 Ahlwardt, Divans, 159; 65, 1.

25 As evidence that the term has not been irrevocably Christianized, one might cite John Wansbrough’s usage of “the Muḥammadan evangēlion” to mean the proclamation of rather than by Muhammad. Wansbrough, Qurʾānic Studies, passim.

26 Tawrāt and injill are almost always linked: in eleven out of twelve occurrences of injill and eighteen occurrences of Tawrāt the two occur together. Their meaning seems straightforward enough, yet it is puzzling that the Tawrāt is never associated explicitly with Moses. He is many times said to have been given al-khiṣbāt, dyāt Allāh; ṣulṭān ‘guidance’; sulṭān ‘authority’; and al-ṭābīq ‘the tablets’; and there are also references to suḥf Mūsā ‘the pages of Moses’. However, none of these is ever identified as Tawrāt, though it is clear that the Tawrāt was the revelation of God to the people of Israel. When there is so much in the Qurʾān about Moses and his bringing of God’s revelation, the distinction between his name and the revelation he received is perplexing. Indeed, the Tawrāt is more closely associated with Jesus and the injill than it is with Moses.

THE MOTIVE AND PROCESSES OF REVELATION

RAHMA

If mercy is the most prominent attribute of God proclaimed by the Qurʾān, it is also central to the Qurʾān’s understanding of itself and, indeed, of all revelation. Revelation is a rahma in the sense that it is an offer of mercy or means to mercy:

وَإِذَا قَرَى الْقُرْآنُ فَاتَمََّّـنَّـهُ وَأَصَلَّى عَلَى مَلَكِهِ مَرَّاتٌ أَرْضُ[26] And when the Qurʾān is recited, listen to it and be silent so that perhaps you may find mercy.

Sūrat al-Aʿrāf 7:204

وَهَذَا كِتَابٌ مِّنَ الْقُرْآنِ وَفَاتَّـنَّـهُ وَأَصَلَّى عَلَيْهِ مَرَّاتٌ And this too is a kitāb that We have sent down. It is blessed so follow it and be God-fearing so that perhaps you may find mercy.

Sūrat al-Anʿām 6:155

Revelation, as the Qurʾān so often says, comes “as guidance and a mercy [from God],”28 yet the possibility remains that it may not be accepted as such. Therefore it may be more accurate to describe it as an offer of guidance and mercy. Perhaps the phrase ḥudān wa-raḥmatan should be translated ‘in order to guide and to offer mercy’ or perhaps better ‘as a guide towards mercy’.

However, the relationship between rahma and revelation has another aspect. Not only is revelation a means of obtaining God’s mercy; it is an act of mercy for God to communicate his commands and knowledge in the first place, whatever their reception. Revelation is a free act of divine sovereignty. Human beings cannot neither expect nor demand it. However, as with other exercises of mercy, it is understood to be God’s customary way of acting. Revelation both emanates from God’s mercy and leads back towards it.

QURʾĀN

We have already examined the role of Qurʾān as a name for the revelations brought by Muhammad, yet it is as a term describing the process of revelation and the assimilation of what is revealed that the use of Qurʾān is most telling. It is

27 Half the uses of the passive rahma ‘to be shown mercy’ (used with ḥaḍālakum ‘perhaps you may to express divine intention) are connected with responding to revelation: Q 6:155; 7:63; 204; 49:10.

28 This is said twelve times: Q 6:154, 157; 7:52; 12:111; 16:64; 89:27; 28:43; 31:3; 44:6; 45:20; 46:12. Rahma is also paired in this context with īmān ‘leader’ (Q 11:17), ẓilāl ‘healing’ (Q 17:82) ẓilāl ‘reminder’ (Q 29:51).
verses are made distinct in order to be (or: by being) recited in Arabic for people who have knowledge (or: so that people might have knowledge)." || to be good tidings and a warning. However, most of them turn away and so they do not hear.

Sūrat Fussilat 41:2–4

And in this recitation We have made for mankind every kind of comparison—perhaps they might reflect—‖ as a recitation (or: to be recited) in Arabic, without any crookedness, so that perhaps they might be God-fearing.

Sūrat al-Zumar 39:27–28

It is difficult to make a firm choice between the two possibilities of reading the indefinite accusative construction as a hāl or as a maf'al li-ajlih. Perhaps a choice is not required, since both are feasible in most cases and both correspond to the use and context of the term qur'ān as we know it. In fact, perhaps such a choice is discouraged, for to resolve the ambiguity one way or the other is also to betray the original.

The adjective ‘arabī’Arabic’ in the phrase carries a significance that could pass unnoticed. Why does the Qur'ān draw attention to the particular language in which the revelations are given when it is obviously in Arabic and addressed to the Arabs? This issue is raised explicitly in Q 41:44 with the use of a contrasting parallel—qur'ān a'jamīyān ‘recitation in a foreign tongue’:

And if We had determined that it was to be recited in a foreign tongue (or: if We had put it into the form of a recitation in a foreign tongue) they would surely have said, "If only its āyāt were made distinct! What? A foreign tongue and an Arab?"

Sūrat Fussilat 41:44

The designation 'arabi or a'jamī for the noun qur'ān seems to indicate that people knew of other qur'āns apart from this one, that is to say, they were familiar with the phenomenon of communities of people reciting what they considered to be divine revelations. If this qur'ān were the only qur'ān, there would be no sense in applying a linguistic description to the indefinite form.

Behind this verse is conceivably yet another objection raised by the Prophet's...
opponents, similar to those we have already seen—that he is just a human being, that he is not given the revelation all at once, that he has no miracles to show, that he cannot produce written proof from heaven. Could the Qur’an here be responding to the objection that the revelations he is bringing is in Arabic (rather than Hebrew or Syriac, the customary languages of the people of the kitāb) and thus are a suspect innovation? The Qur'an's response is that these revelations are exactly the same as what was said to the earlier prophets and that, if they were to be recited in a foreign tongue, the people would not understand. Such is their opposition that, even if the Qur'an proved its bona fides by being in one of the earlier prophetic languages (qur'anān 'ajamiyyan), they still would not accept it because it was coming from an Arab.

The six qur'anān 'arabiyyan verses cited just previously already indicate the close relationship between qur'anān and kitāb. In Muslim usage, these two words have come to be virtually interchangeable as names of the same thing. In the Qur'an they sometimes seem so—for example in verses Q 15:1 and Q 27:1:

اَلّذِيْنَ كُلُّهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَقُرْآنٌ مُّبِينٌ

Alif Lām Rā. Those are the ayāt of the kitāb and of a qur'anān that makes itself clear.

Sūrat al-Hijr 15:1

مَثَلُهُمْ كُلُّهُمُ الْقُرْآنِ وَكَانَ مَعِينٌ

Tā Sin. Those are the ayāt of the qur'anān and of a kitāb that makes itself clear.

Sūrat al-Naml 27:1

The sentence "those are the ayāt of the kitāb" occurs seven times in the Qur'an as a sūra opening, while "those are the ayāt of the qur'anān" occurs only here in Q 27:1. Perhaps the difference is significant and this exception is just a case of a metathesis that has passed unnoticed because of the gradual emergence of al-qur'anān as a name for the revelation. However, there are several other instances where qur'anān and kitāb occur together and it would seem, on the face of it, to make little difference to the meaning if they were interchanged:

Yet, on close examination, we see that an irreducible difference remains: qur'anān can be a means of display for the kitāb, but the reverse cannot be the case. It is certainly true to Qur'anic usage to understand the term qur'anān as principally concerned with process. The proximity of two terms underscores the orality of the kitāb rather than the writtenness of the qur'anān.

There are, however, two closely related verses that must be examined in order to determine whether the relationship of qur'anān and kitāb as we have outlined it is sustained throughout the Qur'an:

إِنَّ الْقُرْآنَ تُبَيِّنُ ما فِي كِتَابٍ مَّكْحُولٍ

[I swear] that it is a noble qur'anān || in a kitāb kept hidden || which no one touches except those who have been purified.

Sūrat al-Wāq'ī'a 56:77–79

بُلْنَّ هُوَ قُرْآنٌ مَّجِيدٌ

Rather it is a praiseworthy qur'anān || on a protected tablet.

Sūrat al-Būrāj 85:21–22

It is important to establish the "it" of each of these two verses. Neither verse is referring to the whole of the revelation. The first refers to the threat of the wāq'ī'a which the Meccans are not taking seriously; in the next two verses this threat is also called tanzil 'a sending down' (Q 56:80) and ḥadīth al-hadith 'this speech' (Q 56:81). The referent of the second "it" is ḥadīth al-junūd / wa-fi'r awn wa-thamūd 'the story of the armies / and of Pharaoh and Thamūd' (Q 85:17–18). Both verses underscore the authority of the recitation Muhammad was bringing. As al-Ṭabarī points out (ad Q 85:17) the Meccans are dismissing it as mere poetry or the rhymed prose of the soothsayer. Authority is claimed in two ways: to call it qur'anān is to set it apart from those other forms of oral performance and

30 Q 10:1; 12:1; 13:1; 15:1; 26:2; 28:2; 31:2.

31 In fact, this is the only place where qur'anān is linked possessively to ayāt; normally it is the kitāb which has ayāt (Q 103: 11:1; 12:1; 13:1; 15:1; 26:2; 28:2; 31:2; 38:29: 41:3). Furthermore, the verb qura'a' is not used with ayāt: whenever there is a question of reciting the ayāt, it is the verb talā that is used. However, see Q 10:15:

وَإِذَا نَذَّبَلُونَ عَلَيْهِمْ أَنَّا لَا نَرْضُونَ عَلَيْهِمْ هُدًى هَذَا إِنَّمَا هُدُيَهُ عِنْدَنَا أَوْ تَأْتِهَا...

And when our clear ayāt are recited (tālā) to them, those who do not look forward to an encounter with us say, "Come with a different recitation (qur'anān) from this, or change it."

32 Al-Ṭabarī, Taḥfīz, 12: 530.
mark it as sacred; to say that it is in a kitāb or on a tablet is, as we have already seen, to address the question not of storage as much as of composition. This is also made clear by another verse.

रसूल उनमें से है, जिन्होंने पूरी पृष्ठ संक्षिप्त (suhuf) पृष्ठों में निकटता की।

A messenger from God, who recites (yatālat) purified pages (suhuf) || containing firm kutub.

Sūrat al-Bayyinah 98:2–3

The kutub, of course, are not various canons but acts of divine authority, or prescriptions. The fact that the commentators deal with this verse without even mentioning its most obvious implication indicates that they did not at all take it as suggesting that Muhammad was reading a text. To them the suhuf were a metaphor for the divine origin and composition of the kutub. Just how metaphorical these suhuf were considered can be gauged from what the traditions quoted in chapter 1 reveal about the careless treatment of the early Qurʾān manuscript. If the suhuf that Muhammad was reciting were not considered physical, then one must presume that ‘the earlier suhuf’ (Q 20:133; 87:18) and those of Abraham (Q 87:19) and Moses (Q 53:36; 87:19) could have been just as symbolic. There is certainly no warrant here for claiming that suhuf of Moses were Tūrāḥ scrolls possessed by the Jews of Madīna. The suhuf take their name, perhaps, from a celestial source (Q 80:13), but in human experience they remain words recited by the prophets and those who follow them.

At this point it should be noted how the verbs for reciting and reading, qara‘a and talā, though apparently so similar in meaning, diverge substantially in Qurʾānic usage. Of the sixteen instances of the verb qara‘a (i.e., leaving out of consideration the verbal noun qurʾān), twelve refer to reciting and four to ordinary reading. Of the twelve, seven have al-qurʾān as their object,34 four have no explicit object,35 and only one (Q 10:94) has kitāb as object. Of sixty-one occurrences of the verb talā, on the other hand, thirty-one refer to āyāt (seven times along with bayyinat);36 nine refer to kitāb;37 five to nabā ‘tidings;38 three to dhikr;39 three to various legal pronouncements;40 one to the Tūrāḥ (Q 3:93); one to suhuf (Q 98:2); one to a baya‘īna (Q 11:17); and four uses are indefinite.41 The object is al-qurʾān only once (Q 27:92), and the indefinite qurʾānun twice (Q 10:16; 61).

The difference is stark, yet it is not altogether clear what to make of it. The verb qara‘a—at least in the context of revelation—could be characterized as self-contained: with a single exception, it has either no object, or its own masdar as its object. The double use of the imperative without an object at the beginning of Sūrat al-‘alq (Q 96:1, 3), in what is usually taken to be the very first part of the Qurʾān to be revealed, strongly suggests that the command ‘recite!’ is self-explanatory.42 However, the same verb has a non-revelational use meaning ‘to read (aloud)—though always referring heavenly writings.43 Taken together with the preponderance of the masdar form (seventy occurrences) over the finite verbal forms (sixteen occurrences, and nearly half of these accompanied by the masdar), these observations lend further weight to the idea that the origins of qurʾān and qara‘a, whether in Muhammad’s time or earlier, lies in the Syriac qurāannahā.

By way of contrast, talā has a broad range of objects, though it is very strongly associated with the noun āyāt and to a lesser extent with kitāb. It has no intransitive use, and only in very few cases is the object not made explicit. There is only one use of the masdar, compared with sixty-one instances of the finite forms of the verb, and even that is in a mafʻūl mutlaq construction which merely intensifies the verb. There is no use of this verb which is not connected with revelation, or its reception and rehearsal.

TANZIL.

The process of revelation is most commonly characterized by the spatial metaphor of ‘coming or sending down’—nuzūl, tanzil, inzil, or tanazzul.44 The causative verb forms—nazala (63 finite verbal occurrences, 15 uses of the masdar, and 2 of the participle) and ‘anzala (188 finite verbal occurrences, no uses of the masdar, and 7 of the participle—are generally considered to be identical in meaning ‘to

33 Q 7:204; 16:98; 17:45; 106; 73:20 (twice); 84:21.
34 Q 96:1 and Q 96:3 are imperatives with no object at all. Q 26:199 and Q 75:18 have a pronoun object with no explicit referent.
38 Q 3:58; 18:83; 37:3.
40 Q 2:102; 13:30; 17:107; 33:34.
41 Tradition, however, has explained the absence of a grammatical object by providing a physical one in the original context, saying that āyāt was a cloth on which writing was embroidered and telling the Prophet to read it. Sīra, ed. Wustenfeld, 152–3.
42 Reading out the kitāb in which people’s deeds are recorded for judgment (Q 17:14, 71; 69:19), and reading the kitāb from heaven demanded by the Meccans as proof of the Prophet’s bona fides (Q 17:93).
43 The verbal nouns nuzūl, inzil, and tanazzul do not occur in the Qurʾān and are used here merely as shorthand for the verbal usage.
send down.44 Although by far the majority of uses of verbs from the root ُنِزَلَ deal with revelation, there are other objects as well: e.g., mountains (Q 24:43), various kinds of rain (Q 30:49; 31:34; 42:28), manna and quails (Q 2:57; 7:160; 20:80), and armies (Q 9:26). In one sense the notion of sending down itself could be said to be neutral since it is merely spatial. However, this spatiality implies the theological premise of a two-tiered universe in which the initiative is always in the upper (divine, celestial) tier. Furthermore, the verbal noun tanzil standing by itself45 can only have a revelational meaning. The direction of communication is always downward, although tradition has also sought in its development of the story of the Muhammad’s ascent to heaven to establish a special prophetic access in the opposite direction. In addition, the first revelations are portrayed as taking place in a cave on Mount Hira’ to which the Prophet had ascended—in Islamic, no less than in the Jewish and Christian traditions, the mountaintop enjoys a privileged proximity to heaven.46

It has been pointed out that the habit of translating the term tanzil as ‘revelation’ can be misleading, since it implies an unrolling or manifestation more appropriate to a Christian sense of revelation.47 The Islamic tradition, in developing its ever more elaborate “topography” of revelation, is certainly careful to maintain the distance between God and humanity. Nevertheless, even if the divine essence remains inaccessible, a genuine unrolling of the divine knowledge and manifestation of the divine will does take place. Probably the Qur’an’s most insistant claim is that God is constantly sending down ُنِزَلَ, whether through prophetic activity or natural phenomena, that manifest all we need to know. The kitāb that is sent down in fact reveals a great deal about God.

44 Contrary to the opinion of most Arab philologists, F. Leemhuis has suggested that we can discern some subtle differences between the verb nazzala (the II or D or factitive form) and tanzila (the IV or H or causative form). He proposes four pairs of vectors involved in the use of the D or H forms: whether the object is passive (D) or cooperative (H); whether the action is monominy (D) or lasting (H); whether the action is habitual (D) or circumstantial (H); and whether the subject (D) or the object (H) is the primary focus. These subdifferentiations, as Leemhuis calls them, are all functioning at the same time, and the resultant effect on usage is extremely subtle. For our purposes, his observations may be of more use when it comes to the verbal root ُنِزَلَ. F. Leemhuis, The D and H stems in Koranic Arabic: A Comparative Study of the Function and Meaning of the fat’ala and fa’sala Forms in Koranic Usage, Publications of the Netherlands Institute of Archaeology and Arabic Studies in Cairo, no. 2 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1977).
45 E.g., Q 36:5; 41:2; 56:80; 69:43.
46 For a fuller discussion of the spacial and temporal parameters set up by the concepts nuzzil, tanzil, and ُنِزَلَ, see Stefan Wild, “We Have Sent Down to Thee the Book with the Truth...: Spatial and Temporal Implications of the Qur’anic Concepts of nuzzil, tanzil and ُنِزَلَ,” in Wild, The Qur’an as Text 137–53.

The method of sending down is made clear repeatedly. It is oral (qu’drān)48 of sending down in writing is rejected as unlikely to prove convincing (Q 6:7; 4:153).49 What is sent down is in the vernacular (‘arabiyān) rather than in a foreign or sacral language (‘a’jamiyān).50 It comes gradually (muta‘ājam) and in response to situations (jawāba li-qawilīm), rather than as a single, completed pronouncement (jumlatan wahdītan). God’s constancy in sending down reveals his engagement with the world, God’s ceaseless activity in providing for human need and addressing the human situation.

WAHY

The last of the process terms we shall examine briefly is waḥy ‘revelation, inspiration’ along with the related verb awḥa ‘to reveal, to inspire’. Out of the seventy-one occurrences of awḥa, kitaḥ and qu’drān are the object (or subject of the passive), only three times each.51 In spite of this, waḥy remains central to the understanding of the kitaḥ. Unlike tanzil, waḥy carries no spatial significance. While it is clearly marked as a religious term, three instances of its use in the Qur’an remind us that it has a non-religious basis and is not solely a divine activity: Zacharia after being stuck dumb made signs (awḥa) to his companions that they should give praise to God (Q 19:11);52 and twice the demons (shayṭān) are said to communicate with one another by waḥy (Q 6:112, 121). While Western scholars have often wanted to see in this term a reference to written scriptures, the evidence is far from convincing.53 Indeed, Muslim tradition has almost univocally described the phenomenon as auditory, often even lacking verbal clarity:

Al-Hārith b. Hishām asked the Messenger of God, “Messenger of God, how does the waḥy come to you?” The Messenger of God said, “Sometimes it comes to me like the ringing of a bell that is the most difficult for me then it stops and I have memorized what he said. And sometimes an angel appears in the form of a man to me and addresses me and I remember what he says.”54

48 See discussion of this in chapter 1.
49 Revelation is in the vernacular of each people to whom it is sent:

We never send a messenger except in the language of his people so that he might explain to them...

Sanāt ibn ‘Abī‘alī 14:4
51 In Q 3:41 Zacharia is informed that he will not be able to speak to anyone for three days except by signs or gestures (ilāū ‘amal). Perhaps we can take this as a kind of gloss on awḥa.
The Qur’an itself also refers to wahy as visual, or at least as accompanied by visions. It is portrayed as a kind of teaching:

\[\text{\textit{إن هو إلا وحّي موحى}} \quad \text{\textit{علمة شديد الفوؤد}} \quad \text{\textit{و هو ما استوى}} \quad \text{\textit{و هو بالآفة الأعم}}\]

It is nothing other than a wahy that is inspired. || One of mighty powers has taught him, || one who is vigorous; and he grew clear to view || when he was on the highest horizon.

Sūrat al-Najm 53:4–7

As with the topology of revelation mentioned in connection with tanzil, so with the interpretation of wahy, the Muslim tradition has guarded the distance between the divine and the human. As a result, it has privileged those parts of the Qur’an that suggest that wahy is mediated through the angel Gabriel. John Wansbrough has argued that in several instances, and especially in Q 42:51, the word evidently means that God addresses the Prophet directly.\(^\text{54}\)

\[\text{وما كان ليبشر أن يكلمه الله إلا وحيا من رأى حجاب أو يرسل رسولًا فحبره} \quad \text{أزاه له عليه حكيم} \]

It is not granted to any mortal that God should address him except by wahy or from behind a veil, or that He send a messenger who reveals [wahy] with His permission what He wills. Surely He is exalted, wisely governing.

Sūrat al-Shūrā 42:51

This verse outlines three exceptions to the general rule that God does not address people directly. Wansbrough translates the first exception, wahy, as ‘directly’ since, he argues, there must be some contrast between this and the third exception (through a messenger). However, the verse uses the term wahy to expressly establish a contrast between God’s direct speech (kallama ‘to address directly’) and the way God addresses human beings. For this reason Wansbrough’s interpretation cannot stand. He may be right that the precise meaning of the distinction is not to be sought in post-Qur’ānic speculation since, as he is concerned to show, this is controlled by a polemical agenda. However, perhaps the distinction may be found in pre-Islamic usage of the type already alluded to in chapter 1. A common thread of mysteriousness and indecipherability runs through those uses of wahy and awhā. Often a sense of distance, absence, and antiquity are implied. However, even when the communication is immediate, it is still incomprehensible to the third-person observer. Recall the poet ‘Alqama’s clacking ostrich and incomprehensible Greeks!

Izutsu contends that if wahy does mean something written, its mysteriousness lies in the inability of most of the Arabs of that time to read it. They knew it was for communication, yet it remained undeciphered.\(^\text{55}\) Others have made even more of the quasi-magical status of writing among illiterate peoples. However, when the Qur’an can speak so matter-of-factly about the writing of contracts (Q 2:282–83), one must wonder whether this magical status has not been somewhat overestimated. Writing was certainly solemn, as evidenced by the written contracts said to have hung in the Ka‘ba and the written agreements and judgments kept by families for generations.\(^\text{56}\) Moreover, it was surely the preserve of a relative few. Yet it was not necessarily magical, for even the poets that use the term wahy show in those same poems that they know how to read the letters and they could make visual jokes with them:

\[\text{و هي بها رسمها قد عطف} || \text{مثل خط اللام في وحي الزبر} \]

And you see traces of it that have already grown faint || like the line of the letter L in the wahy of the zumur.\(^\text{57}\)

I came from Ziyād like a madman, || my legs tracing divergent lines, || writing "lām allāh"\(^\text{58}\) on the path.

The verb awhā is often used intransitively: a process of communication takes place but what is communicated is left unstated. At the same time the revelation is not devoid of content, and in many cases the end result is concrete guidance to be followed. On some occasions what is communicated is doctrine:

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\(^{52}\) E.g., GdQ, 2: 1.

\(^{53}\) Bushbri, 1: 3 (K. ba’d al-wahy). In another version of this tradition the angel approaches in the form of a young man and hands the wahy down to him. However, the tradition is unusual. See Wensinck, "Wahy," in EI', for other traditions about the way the Prophet reacted at moments of revelation.

\(^{54}\) Wansbrough, Qur’ānic Studies, 34–36.

\(^{55}\) Izutsu, God and Man, 160–61.


\(^{57}\) Izutsu (God and Man, 160) cites this line from Al-Marrāb b. Munqūdā, a poet of the first century of Islam. He translates fi wahy al-zumur as 'in the writing of books,' but one could not be confident of such an unambiguous translation of these complex terms.

\(^{58}\) Abū-Isqād, quoted in Tāhir ibn ‘Abī Arīs and Leeūn ibn ‘Arīs, s.v. katuba. The line relies on a visual pun: the letters lām and ‘аlif when written together (‘А) suggest to the poet the intertwined, unguinely legs of a drunkard. See other similar references in Krenkow, "Writing."
Say, "I am only human like you. He reveals to me that your God is only One God. And whoever there may be who looks forward to the encounter with his Lord, let him do good work and include no one else in worship with his Lord."

Sūrat al-Kahf 18:110

Walḥy, then, does not seem to be the simple and unambiguous direct address that Wansbrough takes it to be, though he is surely right to insist on a measure of demystification. Nor does walḥy have any necessary connection with written communication as many others have suggested. It indicates a kind of communication that remains impenetrable, and perhaps exotic to a third person observing it, yet it remains full of meaning for the one receiving it. Given the range of its use, it seems best to translate walḥy simply as 'communication', understanding that it normally refers to divine communication.

Taken all together, these observations about the processes of revelation point up the extent to which the kitāb is understood by the Qur’ān itself more in terms of process than of fixed content. The central concepts in the Qur’ān’s description of the kitāb—mercy, recitation, sending down, and communicating—are all terms describing divine-human engagement. They are not merely the mechanisms for delivering a preexistent canon. This motive of mercy and the processes of engagement between God and humanity together actually constitute and define the kitāb far more than any content.

CHAPTER SIX

The Semantic Field of Kitāb III: Synonyms and Attributes

The fundamental pattern already established for the semantic field of kitāb—the dual focus of authority (ḥikma / ḥukm) and knowledge ('ilm)—can be further elaborated by examining the synonyms for kitāb in Qur’ānic usage. It is not feasible in a study such as this to undertake a detailed examination of all these words so our approach is to test the working hypothesis that has emerged from the study so far against the actual use of the word kitāb. The hypothesis in summary is this: in calling itself kitāb the Qur’ān cannot be suggesting that it is a bounded corpus, since it rejects calls to behave as a strictly delimited canon and insists on remaining responsive to and engaged with the human situation it addresses. Though cognizant of other kinds of writing, it reserves the root k-t-b almost exclusively for divine activity, or for attempts to imitate it. The term kitāb functions as a symbol for divine knowledge and authority, so the Qur’ān’s kutub do not constitute a kind of library or archive of independent volumes. Their plurality should rather be understood as indicating the continuity of the manifestations of God’s authoritative knowledge.

In terms of semantic fields, this hypothesis proposes that the term kitāb is the focus-word for a field that unites the fields of ḥukm 'authority' and 'ilm 'knowledge'. It does not unite them merely as a container for them; rather, it stands for them and symbolizes them. It is a metaphor for them and a locus of their activity. If this hypothesis is valid, then we should find that the myriad terms that cluster around kitāb and serve to define it reflect this dual focus on authority and knowledge. These words should belong to the semantic field of either ḥukm or 'ilm, and some important terms should unite the characteristics of both fields.
I begin by listing according to their roots all the terms of the Qur‘ān’s vocabulary that could belong to either of these fields; then those that are more closely associated with kitāb are identified. Some of the most important of these are then singled out for closer attention.

Words belonging to the semantic field of hukm are associated with decision, command, prohibition, permission, power, judgment, punishment, forgiveness, separation, control, and the like. The field obviously contains both positive and negative aspects of the phenomenon, and the negative pole of the field would include words that denote resistance to authority: disobedience, wrongdoing, lack of order or control. Both aspects are presented here in tabular form, following the alphabetic order of the Arabic root:

Table 6.1. Qur‘ānic vocabulary related to hukm: authority and its exercise

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ROOT</th>
<th>VOCABULARY</th>
<th>THE POSITIVE ASPECTS</th>
<th>SYNTHONS AND ATTRIBUTES OF THE KITĀB</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>'j-r</td>
<td>ajr</td>
<td>reward</td>
<td>s-m-w</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'kh-dh</td>
<td>akhada</td>
<td>to take to task</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'dh-n</td>
<td>idhina</td>
<td>to give leave</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'m-r</td>
<td>amara</td>
<td>to command</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>'m-m</td>
<td>imam</td>
<td>leader, guide</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b-r</td>
<td>barra</td>
<td>to acquit</td>
<td>j-b-r</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b-l-w</td>
<td>bal</td>
<td>to try, test</td>
<td>j-z-y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s-b</td>
<td>ittaba</td>
<td>to obey, follow</td>
<td>j-c-l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s-l-t</td>
<td>sultân</td>
<td>authority</td>
<td>s-n-n</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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* Even though this word is probably from the Syriac/Aramaic purqand, ‘salvation’, most commentators and translators take it to be from this root. See art. ‘Criterion’ in Encyclopaedia of the Qur‘ān.
The Qur'an contains an extraordinarily varied vocabulary associated with 'ilm 'knowledge'. The field consists of all those words to do with perception, knowledge, understanding, clarity and truth. There is also, of course, a substantial vocabulary connected with the negative aspects of this field: doubt, argument, ignorance, forgetfulness.

Table 6.2. Qur'anic vocabulary related to 'ilm 'knowledge'

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ROOT</th>
<th>VOCABULARY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>b-r-h-n</td>
<td>burhān              proof</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b-y-n</td>
<td>bayyana             to make clear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b-s-r</td>
<td>abara                to see, to perceive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h-d-th</td>
<td>hadadhātha           to declare</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h-dh-r</td>
<td>hadadhāra            to warn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h-s-b</td>
<td>hasiba               to reckon, to count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h-s-y</td>
<td>ahsā               to reckon, to count</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h-f-s</td>
<td>haṣfiz               to guard, remember</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h-q-q</td>
<td>ḥaqqa                to prove true</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>h-w-t</td>
<td>muḥit                comprehending</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ḥh-b-r</td>
<td>ḥabīr                knowing, informed, aware</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ḍ-r-s</td>
<td>darasā               to study</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ḍ-r-y</td>
<td>darā                to know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ḍh-k-r</td>
<td>ḍhakara             to remember</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ḍh-kk-r</td>
<td>dhakkara           to remind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ḍh-r</td>
<td>rała               to teach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sh-c-r</td>
<td>shufrāa             to show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s-r-f</td>
<td>sarafa              to make one realize</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s-q-l</td>
<td>sāqala             to understand, to be intelligent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>s-l-m</td>
<td>'alima              to learn, to know</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>i-lm</td>
<td>faṣāla             to divide, to detail</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f-s-l</td>
<td>fatiha             to understand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f-q-h</td>
<td>tafakkara           to reflect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f-h-m</td>
<td>fahhama             to cause to understand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>q-w-l</td>
<td>qāla                to say, to speak</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k-l-m</td>
<td>kalāma              to speak to</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>k-lm</td>
<td>kalām              speech, decree</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These two groups of words can be summarized in a single diagram showing the most important elements of the field of hukm with both its positive and negative aspects: On the positive (left-hand) side are the roots associated with prohibition, restriction, truth, guidance, decision, power, and explanation. On the negative (right-hand) side are the roots signifying rebellion, straying, sin, disobedience, wickedness, oppression, and malice.

![Figure 6.1. The semantic field of hukm 'authority']
Again, the two aspects of the field of *ilm* can be represented by a diagram indicating the more important and frequently occurring roots of the semantic field. On the positive (right-hand) side are the roots associated with vision (*b-s-r*), explanation (*w-s-z*), truth (*h-q-q*), guidance (*h-d-y*), decisiveness (*f-s-l*), light (*n-w-r*), and clarity (*b-y-n*). On the negative (left-hand) side are the roots associated with falsehood (*k-dh-b*), error (*d-l-l*), ignorance (*j-h-l*), capriciousness (*h-w-y*), doubt (*r-y-b*), darkness (*z-l-m*), and uncertainty (*sh-k-k*).
one to the truth.” Say, “God guides to the truth. Does the one who guides to the truth more deserve to be followed, or the one who cannot find the way unless he himself be guided? What is wrong with you? How do you judge?”

Sūrat Yūnus 10:35

The guidance God gives is not limited to the kīthā, but it is virtually always associated with the mission of a rasūl. It is always guidance to a straight path toward God:

And thus have We communicated to you [Muḥammad] a spirit of Our command. You did not know what the kīthā was, nor faith. But We have made it a light by which We guide whomever We will among our servants. And surely you are providing guidance to a straight path, || the path of God, to whom belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is on earth. Does not everything make its way to God?

Sūrat al-Shūrā 42:52-53

THE ROOT B-Y-N

Closely related to the guidance offered through the kīthā are explanation and clarification. Words derived from the root b-y-n are very frequent in the Qurʾān, and clarity is central to the Qurʾān’s sense of itself:

And We have not revealed the kīthā to you other than for a reason that you might make clear to them what they are at odds about, and as guidance and mercy for a people who believe.

Sūrat al-Nahl 16:64

... And We sent down upon you the kīthā as an exposition [ṣibyān] of all

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3 See also Q 5:64, 46; 65:14; 7:154; 17:22; 28:43.
things, as guidance and mercy, and as glad tidings for those who have submitted.

Sūrat al-Naḥl 16:89

The term bāyinā (pl. bāyināt) ‘explanation, proof, clear sign’ is used seventy-two times, always as an expression for revelation. It is usually associated with rāsūl ‘messenger’ and/or aya ‘sign’. Like aya, bāyīnā has no necessary connection with kitāb but is usually associated with it. Furthermore, similar terms are used with bāyinā as are used with kitāb: God sends it down (nazzala, anzala); messengers bring it (jā' a bi-), or God sends them with it (arsala):

فِئَنَ كَأْنَ لَكُمْ فَقْرٌ وَسْلَمٌ مِّنْ فَيْنَكُمْ جَاعَلَهُمُ اللَّهُ الْبَيَانَاتِ وَالْإِيَّامَ وَالْكِتَابِ الْمَنِيرِ

Even if they deny you, they have already denied messengers who were before you, who came with the bāyināt and with the zubur and with the kitāb giving light.

Sūrat ʿAl-İnān 3:184

قَلْ أَرَأَيْتَنَّ شَرَاءً كَمَا مَنَّ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ مَا خَلَقَ مِنَ الْإِنْسَانِ إِنْ يَشَاءُ فَلْيَبْنَ عَلَى بَيْنَتِهِ مَنْ ذَا الْكُتَّابُ مَعْدَنًا إِنَّ مَا بَيْنَ الْعَالَمَاتِ نُقُصُّهُ فَيْتَكُونَ كُلُّ شَيْءٍ عَلَى بَيْنَتِهِ مَنْ ذَا الْكُتَّابُ مَعْدَنًا إِنَّ مَا بَيْنَ الْعَالَمَاتِ نُقُصُّهُ

Say, “Have you seen your partners—those other than God to whom you pray? Show me what they created of the earth! Or are they entitled to any share in the heavens? Or have We given them a kitāb so that they are acting on the basis of a bāyinā from it? No, the evil-doers promise one another nothing but delusion.

Sūrat al-Mālāʾika 35:40

مَا أَرْسَلْنِي بِالْبَيْنَاتِ وَأَرْسَلْنِي مَعْمَهُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْعِبَادَانِ لِيَقْسَمَ النَّاسَ بِالْعِلْمِ... Truly We sent our messengers with the bāyināt, and We sent down with them the kitāb and the balance, so that humanity might stand with justice.

Sūrat al-Hadid 57:25

إِنَّ الْأَرْضَ لَقَالَهَا إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لَقَالَ إِنَّ الْمَعْلُوْمَ الْكِتَابَ الْبَيْنَاتُ بَيْنَهُمَا وَلَبِينَهُمَا الْأُمَّةُ

Surely those who hide what We have sent down of the bāyināt and the guidance after We had made it clear to humanity in the kitāb—God curses them, and the cursers curse them.

Sūrat al-Baqara 2:159

There are 119 uses of the active participle, mubīn, in the Qurʾān. It occurs only in this masculine singular form and only at the ends of verses—two factors that suggest that its frequency can be partly attributed to the convenient rhyme it provides with the regular oblique masculine plural ending -イン that ends so many verses. Nevertheless, since it remains a key term for the Qurʾān, its frequency must be attributable to more than convenience. Although the al-ala form of the verb is usually transitive and generally causative, several of the situations in which mubīn is used seem to preclude the translation ‘making clear’. The oft-repeated kitāb mubīn can justifiably be read as kitāb that makes things clear’. But what are we to make of dalāl mubīn which is also frequently used? Can error or straying make things clear? F. Leemhuis has suggested that the apparently intransitive al-ala verbs should, in Qurʾānic usage at least, be understood as internal causatives. The attribution mubīn, according to Leemhuis, would imply not so much that the subject is making things clear, nor that it is simply clear, but that it shows itself clearly; it makes itself evident or makes itself understood. This meaning emerges, he suggests, in the one instance of a finite form of the verb abāna in Q 43:52, where Moses is said scarcely to be able to make himself understood: là yakādu yubīnu. We might also adduce Q 26:195, which shows that communication is of the essence of this usage: bi-lādīnīn ‘arabiyyin mubīnīn ‘in an Arabic tongue that makes itself understood’. Thus, the phrase kitāb mubīn ‘kitāb that makes itself understood’9 recalls Socrates’ criticism of writing: written words “seem to talk to you as though they were intelligent, but if you ask them anything about what they say, from a desire to be instructed, they go on talking you just the same thing for ever.”10 In stressing that God’s kitāb is mubīn, the Qurʾān is claiming that, in Plato’s words, it “is powerful enough to defend itself, and knows to whom it should speak and to whom it should say nothing.”11 In the Qurʾān’s own words:

6 Where a feminine form is called for, it is always the active participle of the far-ala form (nubayyin) that is used, and this is never at the end of a verse. There are two such phrases, each repeated three times: fāhiša nubayyin (Q 4:19; 33:30; 65:1) and dyāt nubayyin (Q 24:34, 46:65:11). Leemhuis discusses the difficulty the use of an active participle of a transitive verb raises for the first phrase. He points out that the orthodox versions are at variance about the vocalization, and he opts for Ibn Kāhir and Abū Bakr’s reading of ‘Asm’s version, where a passive participle is read in every case. Leemhuis, D and H Stems, 50–53.

7 Leemhuis, D and H Stems, 38–65.

8 Leemhuis, D and H Stems, 51.


10 Plato, Phaedrus, 276d.

11 Plato, Phaedrus, 276a.
This is our kitāb which speaks against you in truth. Surely We were having all you were doing recorded.

Sūrat al-Jāthiyā 45:29

The more active or factitive faʿala form—bayyana 'to make (something) clear'—is used thirty-five times and is with only one exception reserved for God (twenty-nine times) or one of God's messengers (five times). This underscores the primacy of the divine author over his composition. The kitāb may be muḥṭīn but its eloquence and clarity ultimately rely on God's ability and intention to make things clear, to interpret the ʾayāt for people.

Though clarity, clarification and explanation are perhaps more closely associated with ʿilm than with hukm, still these ideas do play a role in the semantic field of authority as well as that of knowledge:

And he makes clear for you the ʾayāt. God is knowing, wise in judgment.

Sūrat al-Nūr 24:18

Like the root h-d-y, b-y-n unites both the elements that we have identified as fundamental to the meaning of kitāb. The complete clarity that God offers about the nature of things is not solely a matter of information but is also a demand for action. When God's will is made manifest through revelation and the mission of a messenger, it commands assent and compliance. Thus, part of the activity of clarification is making more explicit the norms already enunciated:

These are the limits (imposed) by God. He makes them clear for people who have knowledge.

Sūrat al-Baqara 2:230

On a number of occasions, after offering a specification for some legal provision, the Qur'ān comments that this is a clarification of the ʾayāt of God.

Divorced women are entitled to a reasonable provision as a rightful claim

12 I.e., if one follows Ibn Kathīr and Abu Bakr's riwayt of ʿAṣim's version.
13 See also Q 2:187, 219, 266.

on the god-fearing. || Thus God makes clear [yuḥīyīn] to you His ʾayāt so that perhaps you might understand.

Sūrat al-Baqara 2:241–2

The element of authoritativeness comprehended by the field of b-y-n is also illustrated by the recurring phrases suḥūt muḥṭīn and imām muḥṭīn—'an authority that speaks for itself'. In many cases these seem to be equivalents for kitāb muḥṭīn.

In the Qur'ān's worldview, everything is evident, pellucid, patent. It may be natural for human beings to wonder and to question, but the ʾayāt of nature, history and prophetic preaching lie before us like an open book in which all is explained and understandable. It is only human obstinacy that refuses the guidance everywhere offered by God. This is perhaps what lies behind the tone of frustration we detect in the Qur'ān, which sometimes becomes explicit, as in the a-faʿ-all and laʿallā- refrains to which we have already drawn attention. God has made everything so clear that it seems incomprehensible that anyone should persist in questioning or turn back to the old ways after the truth has been revealed:

And if you slide back after the clear proofs (bayyināt) have come to you, then know that God is powerful, wise in judgment.

Sūrat al-Baqara 2:209

When human beings reject this freely offered guidance, then God leaves them straying in their ignorance. The Qur'ān uses the image of a lightning storm in Q 2:15–20. God is almost toying with these disbelievers as they are given the occasional flash of insight, but then are left in darkness once more:

God Himself mocks them, making them wander blindly on in their insolence.

Sūrat al-Baqara 2:15

THE ROOT N-W-R

The clarity and the clarifying purpose of God's revelation are also expressed using the symbolism of light (nūr). It appears in primarily two contexts: referring to a divine attribute and as a metaphor for revelation. However, these two uses
are not entirely separable. In the meditation on light (Q 24:33ff) that provides the name for the sūra in which it occurs, Sūrat al-Nūr, God is described as light:


God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. . . . God guides to his light whomever he will. And God coins figures of speech for humanity. God is well aware of all things.

Sūrat al-Nūr 24:35

However, in language that recalls the nature of revelation, God is also said to send down light to guide humanity:


O People! Now a proof has come to you from your Lord, and We have sent down to you a light that shows itself clearly [nūr mubin].

Sūrat al-Nisāʾ 4:174

Now there has come to you a light from God and a kitāb that makes itself clear. || By it God guides to paths of peace whoever seeks His good pleasure. He brings them out of darkness into the light by His decree, and guides them to a straight path.

Sūrat al-Māʾīda 5:15–16

So believe in God and his messenger and the light that We have sent down. God is well aware of what you do.

Sūrat al-Taghābun 64:8

The kitāb is four times called munīr ‘light-giving, illuminating’.17 The Tūrah and the Gospel are said to contain light and guidance (Q 5:44, 46). God sent down the kitāb that Moses brought as light and guidance (Q 6:91). Thus God himself is light; God guides to the light; and he also guides by means of light.

In contrast to the light are the shadows and darkness (zulūmāt) out of which God seeks to draw humanity by sending the kitāb:


There is an unmistakable connection between this darkness (zulūmāt) in which humanity has gone astray and wrongdoing (zulm). Light is thus not merely something that makes possible knowledge for its own sake. That is rarely the Qurʾān’s concern. Knowledge of the nature of things reveals God’s authoritative will and so guides human action. The roots n-w-r and z-l-m, then, belong to the fields of both h-k-m and z-l-m.

THE ROOT H-Q-Q

The light and clarity brought by the kitāb are about ḥaqq ‘truth, right’. Of the 247 occurrences of the noun ḥaqq, approximately one sixth are with kitāb. Like nūr, ḥaqq is also an attribute of God.18 Again, the Qurʾān is more concerned with the practical ‘right’ than the more abstract ‘truth’.19 So ḥaqq is used to describe the way the kitāb functions: since it is sent bi-l-ḥaqq ‘with the truth’, the kitāb is able to give judgment (yāhkim) as well as to form the basis for the judgment of the Prophet:


Humanity was one community, and God sent prophets as bringers of good tidings and as warners, and sent down with them the kitāb with the truth that it might give judgment concerning what people disagreed about among themselves.

Sūrat al-Baqara 2:213

We have sent down to you the kitāb with the truth, confirming whatever of

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17 Q 3:184; 22:8; 31:20; 35:25. Of the other two occurrences of the word, one applies to the Prophet (Q 33:46) and one to the moon (Q 25:61).


19 Even in places where there are theological issues at stake with the Christians—the Trinity (Q 4:171; 5:73) or the crucifixion of Jesus (Q 4:157)—the ultimate concern is the uniqueness and hence the authority of God.
the kitāb was already present, and assuring it. So judge between them according to what God has sent down, and do not follow their groundless opinions away from what has come to you of the truth.

Sūrat al-İmām 5:48

The kitāb that has been sent down is not the only one that proclaims the truth and judges according to it. The same is true of the kitāb of God that consists in keeping records:

ما أتىكم أنفسكم من كتب إلا خيرريك

This is our kitāb, which speaks against you truly. Surely We were having all you were doing recorded.

Sūrat al-Jāhiya 45:29

The certainty of truth associated with the kitāb is contrasted with ḥann ‘conjecture’, umniya ‘imagining, fancy’ and ahwa’ ‘groundless opinions’:

أنتِ حان فمكَّنة لتهذيك، وفَثَّكَة لتهذيك

Among them are unlettered folk (ummiyyûn)\(^\text{20}\) who do not know the kitāb, but know only their own imaginings. They are only surmising.

Sūrat al-Baqara 2:78

قُلْ قَالُوا لَنْ نَعُلُو فِي دِينِكُمْ دَابِرًا الْحَقَّ وَلَنْ نَفْسَحَوْا أَفْوَاهُمۡ فَوْمَ قَدْ ضَلُّوا مِنْ فِيْلَ

Say, “O People of the kitāb! Do not go beyond the bounds of truth in your religion, and do not follow the groundless opinions of people who went astray before and who have led many astray, and who have strayed from the part of the way that is level.”

Sūrat al-İmām 5:77

THE ROOT F-S-L.

The last of the roots connected with kitāb examined here is f-s-l. The words derived from this root also combine the senses of explanation and decision, of knowledge and authority. The noun fasl ‘decision’ is used for the final judgment of humanity—yawm al-fasl ‘the day of decision’\(^\text{21}\)—and David is said to have been given fasl al-kitāb ‘decisiveness of speech’ (Q 38:20). However, the kitāb

..and its āyāt are more closely associated with the parts of the verb fasala, which is normally translated ‘to distinguish, to expound, to detail’ though its precise meaning is not always obvious. Fasala may be merely a synonym for bayyana, and that is how it is customarily treated.\(^\text{22}\) However, it may also be helpful to understand it as often having a factitive sense: ‘to make a thing decisive, to make it a criterion’. When the verb is used so often with kitāb and āyāt, it seems to mean more than just that they have been made clear. Rather, they have been set up as clear criteria to guide human action, so they serve to judge between those who believe and those who refuse to do so:

وَكَذَلْكَ نَفْسُ الْأَيَّاتِ وَالْمَذْهِبُينَ سِبْلَ السَّمِيحَينَ

In this way make the āyāt a criterion so that the way of the wrongdoers may be evident.

Sūrat al-An'am 6:55

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْفَفُ عَنْكُمْ حَيْثُ أَتَّلُو الْكِتَابَ مَعْلُومًا وَالَّذِينَ أَتَّلُو الْكِتَابَ

Shall I look for someone other than God as judge, when it is He who sent down to you the kitāb as something intended to be decisive (mufassāl)? Those to whom We have given the kitāb know that it is sent down from your Lord in truth. So do not become one of those who waver.

Sūrat al-An'am 6:114

وَكَذَلْكَ جَنَّاهُ بِكِتَابٍ فَضَلْنَاهُ عَلَى عِلْمِهِدَى وَرَحْمَةٍ لَّفَوْمٍ

We have brought them a kitāb that We have made decisive based on knowledge, a guidance and a mercy for a people who believe.

Sūrat al-Al'ā' 7:52

لَمْ نُنْتِجَ مَعْلُومَ الْكِتَابَ مَعْلِيَةً عَلَى الَّذِينَ لَا يَحْسَنُونَ وَلَا يَتَفْصِيلُ لِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ وَلَا يَرْحَمُونَ وَلَا يَفْتَحُونَ بَلْ يَفْتَحُونَ بِقَوْمٍ مَّعْلُومٍ

Then We gave to Moses the kitāb, complete for those who do good, providing criteria of judgment (tafsîl) in every matter—guidance and mercy. Perhaps they might come to believe in the encounter with their Lord.

Sūrat al-An'am 6:154


\(^{20}\) The context here is a critique of the other scriptured people, so the term ummi seems to imply that some were uneducated and thus not familiar with their own holy texts. In other contexts it can simply mean ‘unscriptured’.

\(^{21}\) Q.3:12; 44:40; 77:13, 14, 38; 78:17.

\(^{22}\) For example, al-Jabar (ad Q 7:52) equates fasala with bayyana and mufasal.
And We wrote for [Moses] upon the tablets an admonition (nawriya) about everything and a criterion of judgment (tafsir) in every matter. Then [We said] "Hold fast to it; and command your people, 'Hold fast to the best of it. I shall show you the abode of grievous sinners.'"

Sūrat al-A'raf 7:145

If faṣṣala indeed has this aspect to its meaning, then it is also closely related to ahkama—a verb that has given commentators and translators no little difficulty.23 It seems unsatisfactory to render it 'to confirm' or 'to set clear' (Arberry), 'to formulate clearly' or 'to adjust' (Bell), or 'to perfect' (Pickthall). We can take a cue from Liṣān al-ʿArab: "When a man is ḥakim (authoritative, wise in judgment) it is said of him ahkamah al-tajārib—experience has made him wise in judgment."24 The Qur'ān describes itself as ḥakīm (Q 43:4), and that adjective is used twice for the kitāb (Q 10:1; 31:2). So when the verb ahkama is used with reference to the kitāb and its āyāt, it seems appropriate to render it 'to set up as authoritative'. Many commentators implicitly do so when dealing with the much discussed sentence:

هو الذي أرسل على الكتاب من آيات متكنّات، من الكتاب، وأخرب الذين في قلوبهم رُبّ يُبِينون ما سِبْع فَرْعُونَ، من بينما يَتَبَلَّبُونَ، كَانَ اللهُ وَالرَّسُولُ ﷺ ﻓِي الْعَالَمِ يَفْلَوْنُ آيَةً ﻋِنْدَ رَبِّهِ وَيَدْكُرُ ﻟَمْ يَأْوِي لَهُ آيَةً

He it is who has sent down to you the kitāb, some of whose āyāt have been made authoritative (muḥkamāt)—they are the substance ('umm lit., mother) of the kitāb—and others are not completely clear (mutasāhābihāt).25 As for those in whose hearts there is distortion, they seek out the part of it that is not completely clear, looking to sow discord and seeking interpretation, whereas no one knows the interpretation except God,

23 Ahkama occurs in the Qur'ān four times: twice as a finite verb (Q 11:1; 22:52) and twice as a passive participle (Q 3:7; 47:20).
24 Liṣān al-ʿArab, s.v. ʾḥm.
25 The word mutasāhābihāt is rendered variously by translators as 'ambiguous', 'allegorical', 'metaphorical', 'resembling each other', etc. Its form indicates mutuality; its root 'similarity' or 'ambiguity'. The translation chosen here follows Yusuf Ali; it does not limit the meaning too strictly but seems to allow a variety of interpretations, as does the original. The rest of the verse makes it clear that the word applies to verses whose meanings are neither obvious nor univocal and that therefore require some interpretation. They are open to abuse for that very reason.
26 Some commentators would not break the sentence here (Arabic has no punctuation marks), but would rather consider 'those steeped in knowledge' as the subject both of the verb 'know' as well as of 'say'. The difference in meaning is obviously substantial. However, even the more commonly accepted "punctuation" which reserves knowledge of the meaning to God, still allows those who claim to know the meaning of a verse to do so on the basis of it is not mutasāhābih at all, but rather muḥkam and therefore quite clear.

27 An enlightening survey of the way these terms were used and understood in medieval Muslim exegesis is given in Leah Kinberg, "Muḥkamāt and Muḥtāṣābihāt (Koran 3:7): Implication of a Koranic Pair of Terms in Medieval Exegesis," Arābica 35 (1988): 143–72. See also Michel Lagarde, "De l'Ambiguïté (mutasāhābihāt) dans le Coran: tentatives d'explication des exégètes musulmans," Quaderni di studi arabi 3 (1985): 45–62.
28 For example, he reports (ad Q 3:7 #6571) a tradition from Ibn ʿAbbas, who says.

"The muḥkamāt are the abrogating parts [of the Qur'ān], its permissions and prohibitions, its limits and obligations, what is to be believed in and what is to be acted upon."

In Q 47:20 a sūra is said to be muḥkama, with the evident meaning of 'containing an explicit command'.
Alif. Lám. Rá. A kitāb—its āyāt have been made authoritative (uṣlīmat) and then set out as criteria (fuṣūlāt)—from one wise in judgment, well-informed.

Sūrat Hūd 11:1

Here too we notice that clarity and specificity are in the service not of mere information but of authority.

A clear picture is now emerging of the way kitāb functions as a key-word linking the fields of knowledge and authority. We saw in chapter 4 how the verb kataba was reserved almost exclusively for the exercise of divine authority and the recording of divine knowledge. In chapter 5 and in this chapter we have explored the way the Qurʾān uses some of the most significant words serving to define and describe the noun kitāb. The fundamental pattern is this:

• As creator God knows (vī-l-m) the truth (nh-l-q) of all things and is in command (nh-k-m) of all things. The symbol for this knowledge and authority is kitāb.

• Given close attention and reflection (vī-q-l, vī-k-r, vī-dh-k-r, vī-q-h, vī-y-q-n, etc.), it is possible for people to learn (vī-l-m) from the āyāt of nature and history much of the truth of what God knows and commands. Yet they rarely do so.

• In order to call humanity to such attentiveness and reflection, God sends prophetic messengers (vr-s-l, vn-b-) who bring their communities guidance (nh-d-y), a privileged insight into God’s knowledge and authoritative will. They recite (vqr-r-, vr-l-w) God’s āyāt in order to remind (vdh-k-r) the people of them, to make quite clear (vbr-y-n, vn-w-r, vfr-ℓ) precisely what God requires (vnh-k-m), and to warn (vndh-r) of the coming judgment (vfr-ℓ, ϊh-k-m, vdh-y-n).

• The symbol of this guidance is the kitāb—God’s sending down (vn-z-l) through the prophet of an authoritative word (vqw-l, vkl-m) to address the current situation and the prevailing issue. This divine/prophetic address bears the name kitāb not because of its form (which remains oral, fluid, and responsive) but because of its origin and because of its nature as a communication (vn-z-l, vnw-h-y) of God’s knowledge (vī-l-m) and a clear statement (vbr-y-n) of God’s commands (vnh-k-m).

• The community addressed by God accepts the relationship of guidance (nh-d-y, vr-sb-d) first by accepting and affirming (vms-n, vfr-d-q) that what the Prophet recites has a divine origin, then by committing themselves (vms-l-m) to obeying (v1-b-y, vfr-w-) the divine will manifested in the prophetic word. Acceptance of the word then involves their reciting (vqr-r-) it in their turn. In this way they become a people who are identified and defined by their having been granted the kitāb.

The phenomenon of the kitāb unifies this whole schema while itself remaining elusive. Just how elusive is explored in the next chapter as we examine the plurals, paritives, and indefinites that dominate talk about the kitāb in Qurʾānic discourse. This discussion will further confirm my contention that the Qurʾān’s kitāb is not a book in the generally accepted sense of a closed corpus. Rather, it is the symbol of a process of continuing divine engagement with human beings—an engagement that is rich and varied, yet so direct and specific in its address that it could never be comprehended in a fixed canon nor confined between two covers.
CHAPTER SEVEN

The Elusiveness of the Kitāb:
Plurals, Partitives and Indefinites

THE PARTIAL AND INDEFINITE KITĀB

The elusiveness of the kitāb is nowhere more evident than in the predominance of indefinite and partitive forms in which it appears. There are 255 occurrences of the singular noun in the Qur’ān. Excluding from consideration for a moment the 57 cases of the stock phrase ahl al-kitāb and its parallels (aladhina 'attā al-kitāb ‘those who have been given the kitāb’, etc.), just over one-third (68 out of 198) of the remaining uses of kitāb are indefinite or partitive. The plural, kutub, accounts for another 6 uses, and 12 uses of the singular are accompanied by a possessive pronoun to distinguish one person’s kitāb from another’s and thereby imply plurality. It is tempting to make sense of this multiplicity of forms by understanding the definite al-kitāb as referring collectively to the Qur’ān and other scriptures, and the various indefinite uses as referring to other records and decrees. Yet this distinction cannot be sustained. The revelations to Muḥammad are regularly referred to as both the indefinite kitāb and the definite al-kitāb.

Sometimes what God sends down is referred to in very indefinite terms indeed:

لا يَئْلَهُ الْمَلَأَا فَاعْلَمُ وَكُنْ مُشْهُدَةً إِنَّ مَنْ أَمَرَتْهُ لَا وَلَادُ عَلَيْهِمْ وَقَالَ اتَّبِعِيْنَ بِعَذَابِ الْحَرْسِ الَّذِي نَجَّيْنَكُم

So summon people to that and be forthright as you have been commanded.
Do not follow their groundless opinions, but say, “I believe in whatever God has sent down in the way of kitāb, and I have been commanded to do justice among you.”

Sūrat al-Shārā 42:15
When God made a covenant with the prophets, [He said], "[There is] what I have given you in the way of kitāb and hikma. And afterward there will come to you a messenger, confirming what you have. You are to believe in him and you are to support him."

Sūrat al-Imrān 3:81

On other occasions what is sent down is referred to with more specificity yet is still indefinite, implying that what comes to Muḥammad is one of many kitāb:

A blessed kitāb that We have sent down to you, that they might ponder its āyāt, and that people of understanding might reflect.

Sūrat al-Sād 38:29

A kitāb that has been sent down to you—so let there be no heaviness in your heart on account of it—that with it you might give warning, and a reminder to the believers.

Sūrat al-Anfāl 7:2

The Qurʾān seems undecided about the exact relationship between what we might call "al-kitāb writ large" and what has been given to Muḥammad and the other messengers. It often appears that they have been given the whole kitāb, since the definite form is used without any qualification:

And behold, We gave Moses the kitāb and the furqān, that perhaps you might accept being guided.

Sūrat al-Baqara 2:53

And We gave Moses the guidance, and We bequeathed to the Children of Israel the kitāb.

Sūrat al-Muʾmin 40:53

[Jesus] said, I am the servant of God. He has given me the kitāb and has appointed me a prophet.

Sūrat Maryam 19:30

However, at other times only a part of the kitāb appears to have been given, whether to Muḥammad or to the others:

As for what We communicate to you of the kitāb, it is the truth. (We communicate it) as confirmation of what was before it. Surely concerning his servants God is informed and perceptive.

Sūrat al-Mālāʾika 35:31

Have you not seen how those who have received a share of the kitāb appeal to the kitāb of God that it may adjudicate between them? Then a faction of them turn away, since they are opposed.

Alford Welch points out that the verses that use the phrase naṣīb min al-kitāb 'a share of the kitāb' are unanimously considered late. He takes this as one of the indications of a definitive break with the earlier religions and a reduction of their status from "those who have been given al-kitāb" to "those who have been given a portion of al-kitāb." However, Welch ignores the fact that even in these late sūras, where the confrontation with Judaism and Christianity and the separation from them are clear, the same people are still called ahl al-kitāb (e.g., Q 4:153; 5:15) and al-kitāb (e.g., Q 2:144, 145; 9:29). Furthermore, no polemic is based on the incompleteness of their kitāb. The critique focuses rather on their culpable ill will in refusing to recognize in what Muḥammad is bringing the very kitāb they have already received. They cannot excuse their behavior by appealing to the incompleteness of the revelation they have been given:

1 A. T. Welch, "Al-Kurʾān," in El 5: 403. Perhaps this phrase has its origin in an earlier verse (Q 7:37) which speaks of people's naṣīb min al-kitāb in a context where clearly it is not scripture that is at issue but God's determination of the length of their lives:

Who is more unjust than the one who makes up a lie against God or says our dyāt are best? As for these their share from the kitāb will reach them till, when Our messengers come to gather them...

Sūrat al-Anfāl 7:37
And when a messenger from God comes to them, confirming what they have, a party of those who have been given the kitāb cast the kitāb of God behind their backs as though they did not know.

Sūrat al-Baqara 2:101

In addition, in the late period that Welch, following Bell and Watt, identifies as the period when Muhammad was preparing al-kitāb, his new scripture, the word kitāb was still being used in the definite form to refer not to the canon he was supposedly compiling, but to judgments of God that are not part of the text:

The Prophet is closer to the believers than their own souls, and his wives are their mothers. And those who have ties of kinship are closer one to another in the kitāb of God than believers and those who emigrated—except that you should do kindness to your friends. That has been inscribed (maṣūra) in the kitāb.

Sūrat al-Ahzab 33:6

If Bell and those who followed him were correct in their surmise about Muhammad's intentions and activity at that point of his career, one might expect to see a more careful and systematic use of the term kitāb to avoid confusion about the status of the new canon and its relationship to earlier ones. However, this is not the case, as these few examples show:

O People of the kitāb! Now has Our messenger come to you, making clear for you a great deal of what you used to hide of the kitāb, and forgiving a great deal. Now there has come to you from God a light and a kitāb that makes itself clear.

Sūrat al-Mā’ida 5:15

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2 See also Q 3:187. The idiom 'to cast a thing behind one's back' means simply 'to reject' or 'to turn one's back on'.

3 Pickthall glosses his translation of al-kitāb at the end of Q 33:6 with the parenthetical 'of nature'.

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Recite what has been communicated to you of the kitāb, and establish the ritual prayer...

Sūrat al-Ankabūt 29:45

Before it you used not recite any kitāb nor do you transcribe it with your right hand, for those who follow vanities might have doubted.

Sūrat al-Ankabūt 29:48

If we take it for granted that the Qur'an's usage of kitāb has a certain consistency and is not merely haphazard, there appear to be two choices for interpreting this apparent confusion of definites, indefinites and partitives: We either picture a heaven cluttered with books and records, or we search for a unitary concept of kitāb that can comprehend all these usages. The pattern of usage we have observed seems to imply that the kitāb, for all the complexities of its manifestation, is a unity. Indeed, the followers of Muhammad are supposed to be distinguished by the fact that they have faith bi-l-kitāb kullīh 'in the whole of the kitāb':

Behold, you are the ones who love them though they do not love you, and you have faith in the whole of the kitāb. When they meet you they say, "We have faith." But when they are alone they bite their fingers at you for rage. Say, "Perish from your rage! Surely God is aware of what hearts contain."

Sūrat Al-Imrān 3:119

The Muslims are told to profess that they make no distinction among the prophets and what they have brought. This profession can only be done on the premise that the kitāb is unitary:

Say, "We believe in God and what has been sent down to us and in what was sent down to Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and in what Moses and Jesus were given, and in what the prophets

4 See also Q 3:84, which is almost identical.
were given by their Lord—we make no distinction between any of them—and to Him do we submit.

Sūrat al-Baqara 2:136

The process of revelation is the same in the case of Muḥammad as it was with the earlier messengers:

إِنَّا أُوْحِيْنَا إِلَيْنِا كَمَا أُوْحِيْنَا إِلَى نُوحٍ وَالسَّبِينِ وَعَمَّرٍ وَأَبْرَاهِيمٍ وَإِسْحَاقَ وَيَعُونَ وَيَسَعِيَوْنَ وَهَارِونَ وَسَمِيْعَانَ وَآدَمَ ذَاتَ مَرْوَى

Surely We have communicated (awḥaynā) to you just as We communicated to Noah and the prophets after him, and as We communicated to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and to Jesus and Job and Jonah and Aaron and Solomon, and as We gave to David the zabur.

Sūrat al-Nisā' 4:163

However, this sense of the unity of the kitāb might appear to be somewhat weakened by the occasional uses of the plural, kutub. So it is to these that we turn our attention next.

THE MULTIPLICITY OF KUTUB

There are six instances of the plural kutub in the Qurān, and we need to examine these carefully to see what bearing they have on the understanding of kitāb proposed here. Especially relevant are the two instances where kutub occurs in a credal formula and so we might expect to find a carefully developed position. It is important to note before approaching each verse that in the consonantal text there is no difference between kutub and kitāb—both appear simply as كِتَابُ. As we shall see, the reciters and the commentators do not always agree that كِتَابُ should be read as a plural. In Q 21:104, which in any case is not about God’s kitāb but is a simile for the rolling up of the heavens at the end of time, al-Ṭabarī follows the reciters of Madīna and some of those from Kūfa and Bāṣra in preferring the singular.6

Two more occurrences of the plural (Q 34:44; 98:3) are indefinite. In each case it is a single people or a single prophet that is being spoken about, so the plural implies not a multiplicity of canons but rather a multiplicity of divine commands or of individual moments of revelation. The negative in Q 34:44 reinforces the indefiniteness:

وَمَا أُنْفِقَ مِنْكُمْ إِلَّا كَثَّرْنَٰهُ هُمْ وَمَا أُرْسِلَ إِلَيْهِمْ فَيُرَى كَثَّرْنَٰهُ مِنْ نَّفْسِهِ

And We have not given them any kutub to study, nor did We send—prior to you—anyone to warn them.

Sūrat Saba' 34:44

Since the whole of Sūrat al-Bayyina (Q 98) is manifestly concerned with the coming of Muḥammad, the commentators tend to understand the indefinite kutub of Q 98:3 as meaning the Qurān alone. However, it could also be interpreted as indefinitely as it was in the last verse as a reflecting the plurality of the moments of revelation, or of divine commands:

لَمْ يَكُنَّ الْمَلَائِكَةُ كَفَرُوا مِنْ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ وَالْمُجَدِّدِينَ مَعْلُومٌ حَتَّى كَانَوا نَابِيَّينَ بِالْبَيْنَةِ رَسُولٌ

Those who disbelieve among the People of the kitāb and the polytheists would never have ceased until the bayyina came to them, || a messenger from God, reciting purified pages || in which are true kutub.

Sūrat al-Bayyina 98:1–3

We might take a similar approach in the case of Q 66:12. The most straightforward understanding of the verse is not that Maryam was a believer in more than one canon, but that she accepted whatever God said or commanded:

وَمِمَّا أَتَى عَلَيْهِ مَنْ أَحْيَنَتْ فَقَطَحَتْهَا فِي فِتْنَتِهَا تَأْثِرُ بِكِتَابِ يَوْمَ يُنْفَعُ بِهِ

And Maryam, daughter of Imrān—she whose maidenhead remained untouched—so We breathed into it something of Our Spirit. She put her trust in the words of her Lord and his kitāb, and was among those who obey.

Sūrat al-Tahrīm 66:12

The remaining two cases of the plural kutub are both in credal statements. In one of these (Q 2:285), the plural is not the only accepted reading. Al-Ṭabarī notes that some readers are inclined to take it as singular rather than plural:7

آَمَنَ الرَّسُولُ بِمَا أُنْفِقَ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ رَبِّهِ وَالْمُؤْمِنِينَ كُلُّ آمَنٌ بِاللَّهِ وَمَا لَكُمُ الكِتَابُ وَرَسُولُهُ

And the ruṣūl are witnesses, and you are witnesses of all that is written in the Book and of His Messengers and of the Book and His Messenger (kitāb) and of His ruṣūl.
The messenger believes in what has been sent down to him from his Lord. And as for the believers, each one believes in God and His angels and His kitāb [or kitāb] and His messengers—we make no distinction between any of His messengers—and they say, “We have heard and obeyed. Your forgiveness, our Lord! Toward you are we destined.”

Sūrat al-Baqara 2:285

A variant of this verse, attributed to Ibn Mas'ūd, has the singular kitāb rather than the plural kitūb.9 A parallel formula in Q 2:177 seems to support the feasibility of a singular reading in Q 2:285:

Righteousness is not a matter of whether you turn your faces to the east or the west. Rather, righteousness means that a person believes in God and the Last Day and the angels and the kitāb and the prophets, and gives wealth for the love of Him.

Sūrat al-Baqara 2:177

Al-Tabari finally rejects the singular reading in Q 2:285, arguing that since the words before and after it are both plural, it makes more sense to read it as a plural.8 However, his reasoning is precisely what supports the view that the plural reading was original. Since the singular stands out in a list of plurals, it is quite possible, given that the consonantal text is identical for both, that the plural reading became widespread merely by agreement with the other elements in the list. There can be no certainty about this, since all we know is that the singular reading was not uncommon in Q 2:285 and was the only traditional reading in the case of Q 2:177. One might prefer to argue the reverse: that the plural was the earlier form and that the singular gained currency because of an apologetic desire to make it clear that ultimately only the Qur’ān was to be believed. However, the slight preponderance of the evidence is in favor of the singular.

In the last case (Q 4:136), however, there is little doubt that a plural, kitūb, is intended, since two singular forms precede it, and it obviously refers back to them:

O you who believe, believe in God and His messenger and the kitāb that He has sent down to His messenger, and the kitāb that He sent down before. Whoever disbelieves in God and His angels and His kitūb and His messengers and the Last Day has already gone far astray.

Sūrat al-Nisā’ 4:136

The question is whether we are forced to read the verse as affirming a multiplicity (or at least a duality) of canons. Taken in isolation, it might seem so, but several factors make such a reading problematic. In the first place, all the revelations prior to that given to Muhammad are referred to in the singular: the kitāb that God sent down before.10 They have been named severally in other places in the Qur’ān—tawrāt, inji’īt, kitāb Mūsā, suhuf Ibrāhīm, zabūr and so on—but here they are subsumed under a singular. Perhaps the Qur’ān understands them to be identical and therefore effectively a single kitāb, but still distinct from the one now given to Muhammad. However, there is too much at stake for the Qur’ān to allow that the earlier examples of revelation are not identical with what the Prophet is bringing. It is the unity of the kitāb that forms the basis of Muhammad’s reading that seems better to me is the plural, because what comes before it is plural and what comes after it is plural—[I mean by that “and his angels and his books and his messengers.” Including ‘the books’ in the string of plurals by voicing it that way is better in my opinion than voicing it as a singular and therefore excluding it. In this way it conforms with the other words before and after it both in form and meaning. 10 Crone and Cook hold that the appellation all al-kitāb implies that the Muslims recognized only one canon apart from their own, that is, they conflated Jewish, Christian and other scriptures into one kitāb. Crone and Cook, Hagarism, 38.
claim that he should be accepted by the ahl al-kitâb, and so everything depends on the Qur'an's being recognizable to "those who have knowledge of the kitâb":

Those who disbelieve say, "You are not one who has been sent (mursal)." Say, "God or anyone who has knowledge of the kitâb is sufficient witness [in the dispute] between me and you."

Sûrat al-Ra'd 13:43

In the same way We have sent down to you the kitâb, and those to whom We have already given the kitâb believe in it. Among these people too there are some who believe in it. And no one denies Our Lâyt except the disbelievers.

Sûrat al-Ankabût 29:47

When they [the Christian monks] listen to what has been sent down to the messenger, you see their eyes brim with tears because of what they recognize of the truth. They say, "Our Lord, we believe, so write us down among those who witness.

Sûrat al-Mâ'idah 5:83

The evidence that the Qur'an considers al-kitâb to be unitary, and that it relies on that unity for its own claim to authority, is very strong. Furthermore, that evidence depends not just on the uncertain readings of a few verses. It is woven into the logic of the Qur'anic apologetic and polemic. The use of the plural kutub reflects a belief not in the existence of a celestial library but in the plurality of the manifestations of the one kitâb, that is, the successive interventions made by God in history in order to guide humanity by making clear what God alone knows and what is God's alone to will and command. The Qur'an's very claim to authority rests on there being a single, univocal, and integral kitâb, manifested in the past and now manifest once more through the mission of the Prophet. Since, as we have seen in the Qur'an's case, the kitâb is always responsive to the situation it is addressing, what is remembered and recited by each community will vary. Thus, though the kutub are not identical in their wording, they exhibit a unanimity that comes of having the same authoritative source. This understanding is expressed in the Qur'an's repeated claim that it is mu'adhdin 'confirming' of the earlier revelations.11

The logic of the Qur'an's own approach demonstrates the impossibility of understanding al-kitâb as a fixed text, a book. More than one group of people has been given al-kitâb; if it were a fixed text, then each group would have the same text. If the Qur'an is the latest exemplar of that one text, then it would follow that the Jews and the Christians have for centuries been in possession of the same text. Examples of the absurdities to which this gives rise could be multiplied, but it is sufficient to note that logically this would mean that the scriptures of the earlier communities would have devoted a substantial amount of their attention to controversy with Muhammad, though they pre-dated him by centuries. It would mean that the holy books of those communities address not those communities themselves, but a sixth-century Arab.12 We certainly cannot attribute this view to the Qur'an itself. Nothing about the Qur'an suggests that it conceives of itself as identical with the kitâb. From the outset, as we have noted, the Qur'an speaks about the kitâb in the third person, using the modifier dhâlîka 'that' (Q 2:1).

The phrase nashîb min al-kitâb 'a share of the kitâb' may shed some light here. We have seen that it is difficult to construe this phrase as an attempt to

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12 This is the kind of argument the Mu'tazilites used to challenge the orthodox contention that the speech of God was eternal. See al-Shahrastânî, Nihâyât, 301.
brand the Jews and Christians as possessors of only incomplete scriptures, in contrast to the Muslims. If the kitāb is not a fixed text but rather a symbol or metaphor for God’s knowledge and authority, then those who have been given a kitāb or a ‘share of the kitāb’ are those who through God’s messengers participate in the divine knowledge and are guided by the divine command. Perhaps this sense can be conveyed by translating nāṣīb min al-kitāb as ‘a share in the kitāb’.

It is not possible to make sense of the partitives, indefinites and plurals in the Qurʾān’s talk about the kitāb without relinquishing the notion that it is a celestial canon. Taken all together, what the Qurʾān says of the kitāb points not to a circumscribed corpus of liturgy, dogma, and law that can be duplicated and parcelled out for each group, but to an open-ended process of divine engagement with humanity in its concrete history. That is the reason that the Qurʾān’s kitāb remains ever-present yet still elusive.

That elusiveness consists in its being shared by other groups yet in different forms; in its always remaining open-ended and likely to rebirth onto the scene at any moment; in its being timeless yet utterly contemporary and at the same time a metaphor for the various forms and activities of God’s knowledge and authority. All these factors contributing to the sense of its elusiveness are reinforced by the fact that the kitāb did not exist within the clearly defined limits of a physical form.

The elusiveness of kitāb is also the reason it cannot be translated as ‘book’. A book lays claim to a certain fixity and completeness; it has no trouble being delivered jumlatan wahidatan, since it is a completed whole. The easy adoption of the understanding of kitāb as ‘book’ is precisely what opens the way to fundamentalism, which identifies the limits of God’s kitāb with the boundaries of the received text. The Qurʾān, as we have seen, rejects such a possibility by holding itself above canons and limits. It maintains its right to respond.

The word kitāb allows, of course, the alternative translation ‘writing’, which would remove some of the boundaries imposed by ‘book’. Yet here too one must tread carefully since, as Derrida points out, in our logocentric tradition writing is seen as derivative, the mere “signifier of the signifier,” two steps removed from the essential self and its logos. We have seen that the Qurʾān has little interest in writing as a mere mnemonic device for display or storage of the divine word. The claim that something is kitāb is a claim to authority and knowledge, not a statement about the form in which it is kept. If we were to choose the translation ‘writing’ for the Qurʾān’s kitāb, it would be with an emphasis on writing as process rather than as product—kitāb as a verbal noun rather than a concrete noun. The process of writing still includes the author’s active engagement with

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13 Derrida, Of Grammatology, 6-7.
CHAPTER EIGHT

The Continuing Life of the Kitâb in Muslim Tradition

The time has come to draw together the strands of this enquiry and to propose as concise a definition as possible of the kitâb based in these observations. We will then attempt to identify the ways this richer and broader sense of the kitâb has remained operative in Islam even after the adoption of the mushaf and the identification of that closed corpus with what the corpus itself refers to as kitâb Allâh.

We have already rejected the commonly accepted translation ‘book’ as inadequate to the complexities of the Qur’anic term kitâb. A book contains an inherent claim to being complete and bounded, to being structured and ordered. It is the incongruity of this implicit claim with the actual form of the text that has prompted many Western authors to presume that Muhammad, for whatever reason, had left his task as author or editor unfinished. Muslim authors have also accepted the claim implicit in the term ‘book’, and so have maintained that, appearance to the contrary notwithstanding, the existing form, order, content, and structure of the mushaf were divinely intended. However, the Qur’ân’s kitâb cannot be mistaken for a book because it remains responsive and open to further development. Its boundaries are never fixed since it is not made completely clear whether this text—the Qur’ân—is the whole kitâb or part of it, one of several kutub or the only one. The Qur’ân maintains a distance between itself and the kitâb by referring to it in the third person: it gives so much of its attention to observing, proclaiming, defending, and defining the kitâb that it can scarcely be considered identical with it. Yet the Qur’ân does not speak of the kitâb merely as something already fixed and at one remove from itself, for Qur’ân ‘reciting’ is the very process by which the kitâb is made manifest and engages with humanity.
Because of the processes at work here, in preference to 'book' I have suggested the translation 'writing', though with some qualifications. In chapter 2, I distinguished the various ways in which writing is related to texts and proposed that the Qur'ān's repeated use of the term kitāb in connection with the revelations given to Muhammad should not be taken as signifying a concern about the manner of their display or the form of their eventual storage. Rather, it should be seen as a claim about the source of their composition and so about their authority and veracity.

Since the source of the kitāb is the writing activity of God, kitāb retains an active sense. It is not the kind of writing scorned by Socrates, which looked intelligent but when questioned could do nothing more than repeat the same words again. It is writing as process, rather than a writing that is the finished product of that process. This is manifested in the Qur'ān by the way its thought is constantly developing and its commands are becoming more specific or more appropriate to changing situations. As writing it is constantly rewriting and so upsetting the boundaries of the text.

We saw in chapter 4 how the verbal uses of the root k-t-b are metaphors for God's knowing and remembering, determining, and commanding—in short, God's knowledge and authority. However, when it comes to the noun kitāb, even Western scholars have been slow to see that the same metaphorical process is still at work. They have been so eager to make the Qur'ān conform to their notion of a scriptural corpus (although one in need of further work) that they have ignored its repeated refusal to conform to that notion. From the outset the kitāb pervades Qur'ānic discourse and focuses its themes yet it remains strangely elusive. Its functions, as we have seen, primarily as a symbol for the knowledge and authority of God. It does not constitute the totality of God's address to humanity as a bounded text, but rather plays a role as the token of access to that totality and as the locus of continuing divine address. To test the reading we are proposing, one need only use an expression like 'God's knowledge and authority' or 'God's authoritative knowledge' as a translation for kitāb, and it becomes clear how the term is functioning.

Barbara Holdrege has drawn attention to the way the terms tōrah and veda both transcend the particular texts to which those names were originally applied, and have come to function within their respective contexts as symbols encompassing a sense of revelation that goes beyond the original canon.¹ In her brief treatment of the Qur'ān she acknowledges some similarities between conceptions and practices associated with the Qur'ān and those associated with the Veda and the Tōrah. However, she also maintains that "the Qur'ān does not become an encompassing symbol in the way that Veda and Tōrah do."² While it is true the term qur'ān does not function in this way, the term kitāb does. Although the term is a very textual metaphor, it transcends any particular canonical text—even a preexistent heavenly canon. As a symbol it encompasses all there is of God's knowledge and authority while not confining it within a bounded text.

This sense of a canon that somehow transcends the fixed text can be observed in other situations as well. In current discussions in the academy, for example, the so-called Western Canon is not a universally agreed upon list of works, but a symbol. Even those who believe in the value of this canon disagree on precisely what it includes, though they agree that there is a vaguely defined tradition of literature that remains the locus of access to what is seen as the essential richness of Western civilization. There are, then, two senses of canon: the first has to do with an authoritatively defined corpus of texts; the second sees such a corpus as symbolic of something much greater. It was the Muslim community rather than the Qur'ān itself that posited an identity between the text of the mushaf and the kitāb, thereby establishing the first of these two kinds of canonicity. Even so, the community maintained its sense that the knowledge and authority of God revealed through the Prophet went beyond any text.

**ISLAMIC TRADITION AND THE SYMBOLIC KITĀB**

Up to this point we have mostly confined ourselves to examining the text of the Qur'ān and also the little we know of its earliest history. In many respects what I have been offering is not a new reading of the text, but a more attentive one—a reading predicated upon the idea that a unity underlies the Qur'ān's use of the root k-t-b and that in interpreting the word kitāb we should avoid multiplying entities. The Islamic tradition itself may be uneasy about adopting such a reading as too radical a departure from the traditional approach. However, there are several aspects of the tradition that implicitly support the position advanced here. Some of these have already been alluded to here and there, but it is important to place them together to hear their united witness.

**THE CONTINUED ORALITY OF THE QUR'ĀN**

One aspect of the tradition that supports the thesis proposed here is the continued orality of the Qur'ān in Islam even after the adoption of the mushaf. This was not solely due to the inadequacy of the script, since the preference for oral preservation and transmission continued even after the Qur'ānic script developed all the features

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² Holdrege, *Veda and Torah*, 409.
necessary to make possible an accurate recitation straight from the page. Possessing a mushaf could never compare, even in the days when they were rare, with having the text by heart and ready on the tongue. Of course much relevant information and law is available in the written word, but the Islamic tradition’s allegiance to orality strongly suggests that kitāb Allāh is not seen merely as a book of reference.

Even when canons have been fixed ne varietur, a profound difference remains between one that lives primarily as an oral tradition and one that exists principally in writing. The context of a verse of scripture quoted orally is not provided by the verses that would cluster around it if it were on a page, but by the situation that the person quoting it is attempting to address. A written canon, on the other hand, forces its own context and concerns upon the reader. By the same token, the written canon shows readers contexts other than their own and is able to broaden their perception and change their point of reference.

Context has never been the Qurān’s principal concern. It often does provide a kind of context by quoting the position of the opponent before responding. However, its lack of a narrative structure makes the establishment of the original context tentative at best. Even what structure there is does not concern itself with context. The Qurān lives in an eternal present, addressing itself not to a time-bound context but to the moment at hand. In preserving their canon in this way, Muslims have implicitly acknowledged that the kitāb is not a book in the ordinary sense. Their preservation of the kitāb “on the lips” is seen as the guarantee of continuing divine guidance.

One might wonder whether, in the end, there is really any great difference between kitāb and logos. A few places in the Qurān seem to reveal an underlying presumption that kalima ‘word’ and kitāb are equivalent.

Had it not been for a kitāb from God that preceded, an awesome punishment would have come upon you because of what you took.

Sūrat al-Anfāl 8:68

This single occurrence of kitāb is to be compared with eight occurrences of kalima in exactly the same construction. In addition there are credal statements where the proximity of kitāb and kalima is evident:

3 This, of course, is not unique to the Qurān. One could say the same, for example, of the letters of Paul. Even in the gospels, which do provide a narrative framework, it is often clear that that framework is secondary and that the saying or parable belonged originally in another context.


Plato, even while decrying the inadequacy of the written word, found himself forced to use the metaphor of writing to describe the true logos, and the Qurān seems to use it for the same purpose. Although identified as kitāb Allāh, the Qurān, because of its orality and the sense of its immediacy to God, has always had the status of God’s speech (kalām) in Islamic tradition—though precisely what this meant was long a matter of heated dispute. In fact, it is probably due to the proximity of kitāb Allāh to kalām Allāh in the Qur’anic worldview that the latter virtually disappeared from Muslim theological discourse except once (and not by any means the most common) way of introducing a quotation from the Qurān: “as God says in his kitāb, . . .” Kalām Allāh has all but taken over from kitāb Allāh as the key term for expressing faith in the divine origin and authority of the Qurān text, even though it occurs in the text only four times. The burning issues of the relationship of God to his speech, and of that speech to the Qurān, were discussed almost entirely without reference to kitāb. Where writing was mentioned at all, it was only in its secondary role as display and storage—what is written in the masahif—the graphical representation (rasm) of speech.

Perhaps the reason for this shift from kitāb to kalām is that the Qurān’s use of the term kitāb is, as I have been maintaining, a statement about the authority of the source of composition. This was not the point at issue among the theologians or between them and the orthodox—all agreed on the source of the Qurān and its authority, so there was no need for recourse to kitāb as a symbol of that.
authority. The question at hand, rather, was the relationship between the authoritative composition and the various stages and forms of its display and storage. It may be, as Wolfson claimed, that Christian influence not only dictated the questions but also shaped the solutions of Islam's theological discussions. However, that may be, controversy raged for decades over the status of the display and storage of God's speech, and in such a context to focus on kitāb as composition would have been an unnecessary complication. Underlying the position of those who rejected the orthodox dogma of the uncreated Qurʾān was a sense that God's communication must remain above the limits that human expression or physical display would place on it. In this they implicitly recognized the Qurʾān's kitāb as the metaphor it is. Even the orthodox, in defending their position, appeal not to the limits that a more literal reading of the noun kitāb would legitimize but rather to a verse that speaks about giving asylum to a polytheist so that he might hear the (actual) speech of God when the Qurʾān is recited:

 وإن أتخذنا من السَّمَّا ركَنَات فَاجْعَلْنَا كَلاماً لَّهُمُ الْبَلَاغَة مَأْنُونَ

And if anyone of the polytheists seeks refuge with you, give him refuge so that he may hear the speech (kalām) of God. Then see that he reaches the place where he is secure. That is because they are a people who do not know.

Sūrat al-Tawbah 9:6

The preference the tradition shows for kalām over kitāb as the primary way to understand the Qurʾān may reflect a sense that the particular way kitāb is used in the Qurʾān has more in common with active speech than with finished writing.

ASBĀB AL-NUZŪL AND THE RESPONSIVE NATURE OF THE QURʾĀN

It has already been noted how the tafsīr tradition sought to draw from the biography of the Prophet, or perhaps from the Qurʾānic verses themselves, a narrative framework that might provide a context for the revelations—asbāb al-nuzūl. ⁷

The origins of these narrative fragments do not concern us at present, for it is more important to note the underlying presumption about the responsive nature of the Qurʾān and the way it was perceived to be intimately related to circumstances. As Ibn Taymiyya put it, "Knowing the reason (sabab) for the sending down helps in the understanding of the verse. For knowledge of the cause (sabab) yields knowledge of the effect (musabbab)." ⁸ Even though one may be able to construct a scholastic edifice around this statement to protect the conceptions of the preexistent fixed corpus and God's eternal speech, the fact remains that the tafsīr tradition took it as axiomatic that the verses of the text addressed the present moment as well as the eternal verities. The commentators were less concerned with theological niceties than with the practical implications of scripture for law; this required balancing belief in the universal authority of God's word with an understanding of the specificity of its responses to situations.

NASKH AND THE BOUNDARIES OF THE TEXT

One of the clearest indications that the tradition recognizes that the kitāb is a process of writing rather than a bounded, preexisting corpus is the important doctrine of naskh 'abrogation'. ⁹ This doctrine constitutes a recognition that the boundaries of the authoritative text have time and again been broken through and redrawn. First, the community knew that some verses that were once a part of what was brought by the Prophet were no longer recited or remembered; nor were they contained in the mushaf. Second, they also knew that some verses in the mushaf were irreconcilable with other verses, and so both could not still be legally binding. Third, some argued, there were verses whose wording was not to be found in the mushaf but which still had legal force. It was inconceivable to attribute this state of affairs to carelessness on the part of the Prophet or his companions, or to suggest that God's will in revealing the kitāb had somehow been thwarted. Therefore, a threefold doctrine of naskh developed to deal with each of these phenomena.

The first type of abrogation—naskh al-tīl was-l-hukm 'the abrogation of the wording (lit., reading) as well as the legal obligation'—seems to represent a kind of editing process. In some respects, this was the least important branch of the science of naskh since no legal obligations were at stake. The material was not important, and God had made it clear that anything that had been removed or forgotten would be replaced with something better:

⁷ Wolfson, Philosophy, passim; for his discussion of the Qurʾān see 235–303.

⁸ Uri Rubin has contended that, contrary to virtually unanimous Western opinion, the source of asbāb al-nuzūl traditions lies in the sīra literature, which sought to elaborate a biography for the Prophet that would situate him firmly in the tradition of earlier prophets, thereby establishing his authority and Islam's legitimacy. Qurʾānic verses were added to these accounts only secondarily, to overcome the objection that the sīra relied too heavily on Jewish and Christian sources—the so-called sīra'diyāyat. These were then absorbed into tafsīr at a later date. For a summary of his findings see Uri Rubin, The Eye of the Beholder: The Life of Muhammad as Viewed by the Early Muslims: A Textual Analysis. Studies in Late Antiquity and Early Islam, no. 5 (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1995), 217–25. On asbāb al-nuzūl in particular, see 226–33.

⁹ al-Suyūṭī, al-Iḥāṣ, 1: 93:

قال ابن أبي عبيدة: معرفة حسب الكاتب يعين على فهم الآية، فإن العلم بالنسب يورث العلم بالنسب.

Issues of naskh are discussed in chapter 1. See the references given there. Here I follow substantially the presentation of Horton in Collection. 46–104.
merely points to it. Another, related doctrine concerns parts of the Qur’an whose wording was revealed before they had any legal force, or which were in force before their wording had been revealed.\footnote{13}

All three varieties of naskh, although developed to deal with slightly different issues in tafsir and fiqh, come together to reveal a more complex attitude toward the canon than is usually considered characteristic of Islam. For the doctrine of naskh recognizes that the revelations claiming authority as kitāb are not coextensive with the contents of the mushaf, nor even with the sum total of the revelations vouchsafed to the Prophet. The kitāb, then, is symbol rather than content: it is seen as signifying authority rather than creating or containing it.

**THE SUNNA OF THE PROPHET AS HIKMAA AND TANZIL**

The question of the relationship of the Qur’an to the sunna brings into focus very clearly the community’s instinctive approach to the kitāb. We saw in chapter 3 how al-Shāfi‘i established the basis of his legal theory by contending that the Qur’an commanded obedience to the sunna. In support he cited the Qur’anic verse Q 62:2 and its expression al-kitāb wa-l-hikma, arguing that the hikma meant the sunna and so it too had been sent down by God.\footnote{14} His interlocutor at that point was someone who would not accept that there were any obligations binding upon a Muslim except those contained in the text of the Qur’an. Al-Shāfi‘i’s theory is based on the assumption that God has more to say than can be contained within the limited text of the Qur’an, that there were other judgments given by God that held the same authority as those contained in the mushaf. He could not maintain that they were kitāb because he was speaking at a time when the term kitāb had already been equated with the mushaf. So he posited a second, oral text and claimed authority for it on the basis of a Qur’anic command. Al-Suyūṭi comments that Jibril was said to descend with the sunna the same way he descended with the Qur’an.\footnote{15} Al-Shāfi‘i was in no position at that stage to...

\footnote{11} Al-Qurṭubi, Al-Tamaṣğūq, 1: 3: 19: 79: 80.


\footnote{13} See, for example, al-Suyūṭi, al-Iqtāṣ, 1: 116-18.

\footnote{14} See chapter 2. Al-Shāfi‘i does not comment on the meaning of al-hikma in Q 3:48 where it was taught to Jesus. Commentators quoted by al-Tabarī (ad loc.) agree that it is al-sunnah without further comment. Al-Tabarī gives his own opinion: “Al-hikma, that is al-sunnah that was revealed to him apart from kitāb.”

\footnote{15} Al-Suyūṭi, al-Iqtāṣ, 1: 128.
claim that the *sunna* text could abrogate rulings from the Qur’ān, because he was still trying to argue for the authoritative place of the *sunna*. However, two centuries later, and after the great canonical collections of *hadīth* had been compiled and the authority of the Prophet’s *sunna* established, al-Ghazzālī was free to say:

It is permissible for the *sunna* to abrogate the Qur’ān and for the Qur’ān to abrogate the *sunna*. . . . The truth of the matter is that the one who does the abrogating is God and that He does so by the mouth of His Messenger. This means that it is not essential that a ruling of the Qur’ān be abrogated solely by another [section of the] Qur’ān. Rather it may be abrogated by the word (lit., mouth) of His Messenger by means of an inspiration (*wahy*) that is not Qur’ānic inspiration. The Word of God (*kalām Allāh*) is one. It includes both the expressions that are abrogating and those that are abrogated. God does not have two words, one of which is Qur’ānic and the other not. God has but one Word, which varies in the modes of its expression. On occasions, God indicates His Word in stylized speech (*lafz manzūm*) which He has bid us recite publicly, and which is called Qur’ānic. On other occasions God indicates His Word by speech that is not publicly recited, and which is called *sunna*. Both were heard from the Prophet.16

Ghazzālī’s appeal to *kalām Allāh* as standing somehow above the *kitāb* conceived solely as the text of the Qur’ān is noteworthy. This is the same tactic we noticed among the theologians. It demonstrates again the assumption that the process of God’s engagement with humanity goes beyond the limits of the canonical corpus.

In conclusion, let us briefly retrace the steps we have taken in search of the Qur’ān’s elusive *kitāb*. After a critique of the claims of Western scholars that the term *kitāb* signifies the intended writteness of the Qur’ān, we examined material within Muslim tradition about the early history of the text that calls this conception of *kitāb* into question. Account was then taken of the Qur’ān’s own judgment that there is little value in written materials, even those sent from heaven, and its rejection the demand that it prove itself an already closed canon. It insists on remaining responsive to the current situation, while at the same time placing the notion of *kitāb* at the very heart of its understanding of itself and of God’s dealings with humanity throughout history.

By listening attentively to the Qur’ān’s own use of the noun *kitāb* and the verbs derived from the root *k-t-b*, we identified two primary elements in *kitāb’s*

field of meaning: *hukm ‘authority’* and *‘ilm ‘knowledge’.* The clearly metaphorical intent of almost all the verbal uses suggested that the noun too is functioning primarily as a metaphor and symbol for the processes of divine engagement with the world, rather than as the simple description of the form of God’s revelation that it is often taken to be. This symbolic understanding seems to be the only way of making sense of the complexities of the Qur’ān’s *kitāb*, even if it calls into question long-held assumptions about the Prophet’s plans, the nature of canonical texts, and the intended form of the Qur’ān.

The conclusion reached through close textual analysis—that the *kitāb* is a symbol for God’s knowledge and authority, a token of the promise of continuing divine guidance—was then tested against the evolving tradition within which the term *kitāb* continued to function after the closure of the canon and the adoption of the *musnafs* that is, after commentators had begun to say *kitāb* means the Qur’ān. We found that the term *kalām*, though comparatively rare in the Qur’ān, had virtually replaced *kitāb* as the key to understanding the nature of God’s revelation. The term *kitāb* was perhaps now too closely associated with the limited text to be of use in elaborating an expressive theology of revelation. The term *kalām* offered all the richness and flexibility, the sense of responsiveness and freshness that *kitāb* still has in the Qur’ān’s text, but no longer in the tradition. Still, the way the tradition treats the Qur’ān itself shows that it has not lost the sense that the text meant to be responsive and was willing to develop. The Qur’ān never claimed to be the entirety of God’s address. As *kitāb*, it intended to be the locus of continued guidance.

The term *kitāb* becomes dangerous when it is understood as signifying something as static and fixed as a book. For some believers, the implicit claim to totality and completeness contained in the word ‘book’ becomes the basis for a fundamentalism that cuts itself adrift from the evolving wisdom of the tradition. The Qur’ān does not license such a circumscribed conception of divine guidance. For observers of Islam, on the other hand, the idea that this book, this limited text, claims to be the totality of God’s address to humanity merely seems presumptuous. In the Qur’ān’s view, to have been given the *kitāb* does not mean being confined within a corpus of revelations, but rather, in Mohammed Arkoun’s evocative words, “playing host to a power with an infinite capacity to signify things . . . playing host to the divine-revealing word.”17

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APPENDIX

The People of the Kitāb

What is often overlooked in discussing the relationship of Islam to earlier religious traditions is that the Qur’ān in effect chooses to define itself in their terms. It simply takes the term Kitāb for granted, and it recognizes a group or groups of people whose attachment to the Kitāb is not just one characteristic among others but their defining characteristic. Indeed, it chooses to place itself (and to claim pride of place) within that whole stream of religious experience, that understanding of salvation history in which God’s communication with humanity through the prophets is not completed utterance but continuing guidance.

The Qur’ān is in no way embarrassed by signs of affinity with other traditions, since it considers these signs the marks not of dependence but rather of divine provenance and hence of authority. In many a passage addressed to the Jews and Christians, the Qur’ān seems to be demonstrating its knowledge of their history to prove that it encompasses what they have been given. By appealing to Abrahamic tradition as pre-Jewish and pre-Christian, and by placing predictions of the coming prophet on the lips of earlier prophets, the Qur’ān claims for the religion of Muḥammad the status of sibling rather than offspring in relation to the other religions. This claim is more developed, of course, in the biography of the Prophet,¹ but the basis is already there in texts like Q 7:156–57:

…أَكْتَبْنَا لَنَا هَذِهِ الْدِّينَةُ حَسَنَتُهُ وَأَخَذْنَا إِلَيْكَ ذَلِكَ عِنْدَيْنِ أَصْبَحَ بِهِ مَا أُنَقِّيَ وَرَجَمَتْيْنِي وَسَعَتْ كُلُّ شَيْءٍ وَفَسَّاطْنِها لِلْدِّينِ يَتَّقُونُ وَيَوْمُونَ الرَّكْوَةَ وَالْقُلُوبَ هُمُ

¹ See Rubin, Eye of the Beholder, 21–43, and the references given there.
and even identity with the scriptures of the Christians and Jews. Is there any evidence that the Christians and Jews (with whom the early Muslim community must have had contact) used and referred to their scriptures in the way the Qur’an does to its kitāb?

THE CHRISTIANS

It is hardly surprising that Christians should have been called ahl al-kitāb. The ubiquity of books and scrolls in Christian iconography throughout the Byzantine Empire and beyond reveals how central a concept scripture was in the Christian tradition at the time Islam was emerging. The care lavished on the production of

4 Whichever approach one chooses to take to early Islamic history, the claim of contact with Christians and Jews still stands. If one accepts the traditional accounts at face value, there is ample evidence of contact in the biographical sources. Those who adopt a more sceptical approach to early sources and to accounts of Islamic origins that seem too colored by faith would still want to recognize the echoes of Christian and Jewish contact in the Qur’an, the Sunna and the Sira. Even the most radical followers of the Wansbrough thesis will by definition accept that the early Muslim community had contact with Christians and Jews—though of course they may not include Muhammad in that community.

5 The earliest extant Byzantine icon painted on wood, dating to the first half of the sixth century, is a bust of Christ Pantocrator holding a bejeweled book. See Konstantinos A. Manafis, ed., Sinai: Treasures of the Monasteries of Saint Catherine (Athens: Ekdōtike Athenon, 1990), figs. 1–2. There are other works at St. Catherine’s with similar features dating from the sixth and seventh centuries. In numerous examples from sixth-century Constantinople, Antioch, and Egypt, books and scrolls play an important role. See Kurt Weitzmann, The Icon (New York: Knopf, 1982), 5–7; and John Beckwith, Early Christian and Byzantine Art (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), plates 48–55, 55–57. A fifth-century church in present-day Jordan bears witness to the fact that such iconography was also present closer to the area of our concern. See M. Piccirillo, “La Chiesa del Prete Wali a Umm al-Rasas—Kastron Mefæa in Giordania,” in Early Christianity in Context, ed. F. Manus and E. Alliata (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1993), 316, fig. 9; 318, figs. 13–14.

The large body of surviving Byzantine mosaics in Ravenna bear eloquent witness to the importance of the book in the iconographic program of the eastern imperial artists who created them. See Ernst Kitzinger, Byzantine Art in the Making: Main Lines of Stylistic Development in Mediterranean Art, 3rd–7th Century (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1977), 81–107. The small fifth-century mausoleum of Galla Placidia in Ravenna has a large mosaic of the martyrdom of Lawrence, who is holding an open book and facing a tabernacle containing four codices labeled with the names of the evangelists, whose symbols also adorn the corners of the dome. The “Neronian” Baptistry in Ravenna also has sustained use of book imagery. See Otto Feld and Urs Peschlow, eds., Studien zur spätantiken und byzantinischen Kunst, Band 2 (Bonn: Dr. Rudolf Habelt GmbH, 1986), plates 34, 35.

In Rome there is even earlier evidence of the importance of the book and scroll in Christian iconography. Paintings of St. Peter and Sts. Cornelius and Cyprian with large books date from the fourth century. See F. Grossi Gondi, I monumenti cristiani: Iconograﬁe ed architettonici dei secoli primi, (Roma: Università Gregoriana, 1923), 44–45, figs. 21–22. On the sixth-century bishop’s cathedral from Ravenna the carvings of the evangelists, each with his own codex, underscore the importance of preaching in the episcopal ministry (Grossi Gondi, Monumenti, 199–200, fig. 68). See also Fabrizio Bisconti, ed., Temi di iconografia palaeocristiana, (Città del Vaticano: Pontiﬁcio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 2000).

2 Al-nabi al-ummī. See note 12 in chapter 4 above.

3 The word aḥmad in this context is not necessarily a proper name. It is comparative or superlative adjective from the root h-m-d, so the clause may simply mean “whose name will be very highly praised.” Since the name Muhammad comes from the same root, Muslim tradition has taken this verse to mean that Jesus actually foretold the name of the Prophet of Islam. The word aḥmad was eventually adopted among Muslims as a proper name.
codices, and their prominence in iconography, reflected the liturgical importance of written and proclaimed scripture.

There is a code to the use of books in Byzantine iconography: how the book is held, whether it is open or closed, the height of the book or its bearer relative to other figures, all convey meaning. In particular, the giving of law from the hand of God to Moses or from Jesus to Peter is of great importance. As described by Grossi Gondi, the iconographic code resonates unmistakably with the role of the kitāb we have observed in the text of the Qurʾān:

Having a scroll in hand in this way can signify giving as well as having received power, a mission, or a mandate. Thus we see the scroll grasped in the hands of Christ to indicate his innate supreme power as he accomplishes some action, especially a miraculous act. Or we see it held in the hand Moses or Peter to signify the power conferred on them as law-givers and leaders of the two peoples of the Old and New Testaments. Or else we see it in the hands of the angels, because they have been sent to carry out some divine command; or more often in the hands of the Prophets, as those charged with foretelling to the nations the Messiah to come; or in the hands of the Apostles, to whom Christ entrusted the office of spreading the Gospel omni creaturarum.  

These books and scrolls that are omnipresent in Christian iconography reveal a strong preference for physical writings as symbols of authority and revelation. However, they also prompt a question. If this iconographic evidence, and the liturgical practice that it reflects, had elicited the appellation ahl al-kitāb, why did the importance of the physical book or scroll not carry over into early Islam? The Qurʾān understands Muhammad to be a bringer of the kitāb in the same way as the earlier messengers were. If Muhammad had been familiar with the iconography of the ahl al-kitāb, then one would expect him to have interpreted the Qurʾān's description of his mission as including the sort of physical embodiment of the kitāb that he had been given. Yet, as we have seen, he did not produce a scroll or a codex, or even an undisputed canon. Nor did he leave instructions that this should be done after his death had brought the revelations to a close.

The lack of importance given to physical books of scripture in early Islam might appear to be an implicit criticism of the excessive reverence shown to these secondary manifestations of the word of God by the ahl al-kitāb. This seems unlikely, however, especially since there is no such explicit critique in the Qurʾān, even though the attitude of the other communities toward God's kitāb is a matter of constant concern and attention. We are led to conclude, then, that the recognition of the Christians as ahl al-kitāb was due not so much to the presence of physical books in their iconography or activity, but rather to the prominence of the language of books and writing in their discourse and worship.

Who, then, were the Christians that Muhammad identified as ahl al-kitāb? If we look for an answer from the Islamic tradition itself, we are directed principally towards the Syriac ascetics. Therefore we shall give some attention to their use of book and writing language. This process will necessarily be speculative, but not without warrant. In his account of Muhammad's early life, Ibn ʿIṣḥāq tells of an encounter in Syria with a Christian monk by the name of Babīrā, who recognized Muhammad as the promised prophet and alerted his family to both the blessings and the threats that were to come. There are numerous versions of this story. Some are used by Christians against Muhammad, charging him with having secretly learned about the Jewish and Christian scriptures from a disgruntled monk and then passing himself off as a prophet by merely repeating them. Other versions are used by Muslims against those Christians who refused to accept Muhammad as a prophet. The stories reveal that what for Muslims was a mark of Islam's bona fides could seem to Christians a proof of its fraudulence. For our purposes, the importance of such stories does not lie in their dubious claim to historicity. It lies rather in what they indicate about the Muslim community's recognition of the debt Islam owes to the Syriac ascetical tradition for its awareness of the presence of the last prophet in its midst, for confirmation of his status, and for assistance in protecting him. This sense of indebtedness and kinship is perhaps reflected in the very positive attitude of the early Islamic tradition towards the Christian monks, their piety, and their ascetical practices.

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6 Grossi Gondi, Monumenti, 244–245; 118, fig. 35. See the fourth-century sarcophagus in which Christ is portrayed giving the scroll of the new law to Peter, whose hands are veiled to receive it. A. Grabar, Early Christian Art: From the Rise of Christianity to the Death of Theodosius, trans. Stuart Gilbert and James Emmons (New York: Odyssey Press, 1968), figs. 276–79.

7 Grossi Gondi, Monumenti, 245.


11 See Arthur Vossius, History of Asceticism in the Syrian Orient: A Contribution to the History of
Furthermore, in the tafsir tradition we find recognition from within Islam that many of the foreign words in the Qur'an come from Syriac. We have already noted the puzzlement that some of the Qur'anic terminology, including the term Qur'an itself, caused later generations. This indicates that these terms were almost certainly loanwords whose original context was no longer familiar to the commentators.

Arthur Jeffery traces most of the key terms connected with the Qur'an's self-description—kitâb, Qur'an, fursân, sultan, âya, sûra—to Syriac/Aramaic. A number of other significant words such as salat, zakât and kafara may also have had a similar origin. He discusses this phenomenon only in the isolated treatments of each word and so does not speculate about the full import of such a broadly shared vocabulary. At minimum, one can say that in the environment being addressed by the Qur'an these words had some currency because they were understandable to the listeners. Taken together, they suggest that the environment in which the Prophet was preaching had some substantial contact with Syrian Christianity. Muslim historical tradition bears this out, not only in the legend of Bahirâ, but also in other accounts in the Prophet's biography, such as the story of the conversion of Salim the Persian, whose Syrian master had advised him to come in search of Muhammad, and had told him the marks of prophecy to look for. Al-Wâhidî preserves a tradition about the Prophet's listening to Christian slaves reciting scripture from memory:

12 Jeffery, Foreign Vocabulary, 19-23. Jeffery shows that for a Muslim exegete to say that a word comes from Syriac may at times mean nothing more than that it is from the old Aramaic tongue and is not intelligible to the ordinary person (23). A summary of the classical discussion of the challenge this poses to the notion of "an Arabic Qur'an" is given by al-Suyûtî in al Ítâqân, 314-18. Some Western scholars even trace the use of the root k-t-b in the sense of writing to an early borrowing from Aramaic, of which Syriac is the eastern variety (Jeffery, Foreign Vocabulary, 249).

13 John Bowman argues that the Syriac lectionary (kitâb d-guryând), not just by its name but also by its content, its style and the context of its use, provides us with a likely paradigm for the Qur'an. John Bowman, "Holy Scriptures, Lectionaries and Qur'an," in International Congress for the Study of the Qur'an, Australian National University, Canberra, 8–13 May 1980, ed. A. H. Johns, 2nd ed. (Canberra: Australian National University, 1981), 29–37. See also Bowman, "The Debit of Islam," 200, 213. However, it would be difficult to account for the continued orality of the Qur'an if its model were indeed a lectionary. The liturgical importance of the lectionary is nowhere paralleled in Islam.

14 Jeffery, Foreign Vocabulary, s.vv.

15 Ibn Ithâq, Sîrût, 95–98.

It is worth noting that the tradition does not deny such contacts, but merely points out that the difference of language precludes textual dependence.

The tradition's witness that the Prophet and others of his contemporaries had personal experience of Syriac ascetics—probably more with eremitical anchorites than with cenobites, who shared some kind of communal life—makes it important for our purposes to discover how those men and women used and spoke about scripture, how they recited prayers, memorized texts, and utilized books. What would Muhammad have observed in them about what it was to be a people of the kitâb? The tradition quoted by Wâhidî suggests that the Muslims knew Muhammad to have been acquainted with the Christian custom of reciting the scriptures by heart. There are many passages in Eastern Christian literature showing that this was one of the distinguishing features of the pious believer. Some of the anchorites are known to have recited the entire psalter twice in a day and night. Thomas, Bishop of Marga, says of Mar Elijah that "even when he was wearied in sleep, his mouth was not silent, but was singing psalms audibly, and . . . whilst his soul was answering with secret hallelujahs, his mouth sang psalms as he dreamed." Others managed to recite only a few Psalms in a night


17 See Widengren, Muhammad, the Apostle, 127, and the references given there to other Eastern scholars.

because the spiritual consolations that came to them from each phrase interrupted the flow of their reciting.  

Not everyone carried the practice to such lengths, but in ascetic-mystic literature there is always mention of mazmôra ‘the recitation of the psalms’ and q'rub ‘the reading’. 20 The ascetical exhortations compiled by Alphonse Mingana are full of such expressions as “recitation of Psalms, reading, and prostrations before the cross (mâtôdây dâ-qa'dâm šîlîb),” or “while you are fasting (šâdîm), keeping vigil (šahâr), reciting Psalms (mîzarîm), praying (msallîm) and making use of genuflections and prostrations.” 21 The Qur'an may contain a description of precisely this kind of asceticism:

They are not all alike. Among the People of the kitâb there is an upright community (umma qâ'ima) 22 who recite the ayât of God during the night hours while they prostrate themselves. || They believe in God and the Last Day, and enjoin right conduct and forbid indecency and vie one with another in good works. These are among the righteous.  

Sûrat Al-Imrân 3:113–114

Voöbus also sees in Q 48:29 a reference to the monks' bowing and prostrations, and to the large bulges that developed on their foreheads from hitting the ground: 23

Mohammad rû'sûl Allah wâlî-dîn mu'mînî maw'adda 'ainî 'alî al-khû'fî râhîma mu'mînîn tâ'â'îm rû'sûl Allah. 24

20 Mingana, Mystics, 112, 131, 137, 139, 170, 173, 191, and passim.

21 Mingana, Mystics, 170, 127.

22 Could this be an echo of the title applied to monks and nuns in Syriac: bnyî- (bnî-) q'ûma 'sons (daughters) of the covenant'? Brock has disputed this translation of q'ûma, which is preferred by Voöbus (see Arthur Voöbus, Celibacy: A Requirement for Admission to Baptism in the Early Syrian Church, Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile, no. 10 (Stockholm: E.T.S.E., 1951). He prefers, though admits the difficulty of, translating it 'resurrection'. Those who have chosen the monastic way, then, are considered to be living as though the resurrection has already taken place, i.e., neither marrying nor being given in marriage (Lk 20:36). See S. P. Brock, "Early Syrian Asceticism," Numen 20 (1973): 1–19, here 7–8. Against this position it might be argued that there was very little else in the ascetical tradition with a post-resurrectional tone. It was very much marked by a penitential atmosphere and a consciousness of impending judgment.

23 Voöbus, History of Asceticism, 2: 291; 3: 263. See Dâdshîh's exhortation to such practices in Mingana, Mystics, 131. This verse and, perhaps, the practice of the Prophet himself have made such calloused lesions on the forehead a prized mark of piety in many parts of the Muslim world.


Appendix: The People of the Kitâb

To present a complete picture of Syriac ascetical practice is beyond the scope of this work. It is enough to provide a general impression of the approach to scripture in this tradition by presenting a sampling of texts, with the intention to demonstrate how the sense of kitâb that we have been discovering in the Qur'an was appropriate to the audience it was addressing. The presentation of the texts will consist of two sections: a brief presentation of the understanding of scripture in the hymns and metrical sermons of Ephraim the Syrian, and an examination of some of the exhortations, biographies and rules connected with monastic practice in the Syrian tradition for what they reveal about the use of scripture. 25

Much of the information in the rules is gleaned indirectly since the canons generally do not set out to give a full description of ascetical practice but rather address themselves to abuses and laxity. Similarly, the hagiographies are more likely to describe feats of asceticism rather than the saints regular, daily disciplines. On the other hand, because the sources are not consciously addressing our question, we can be more confident that what we find there is unvarnished.

Ephraim the Syrian (d. 373)

The works of Ephraim the Syrian, more than those of any other, left their stamp on the tradition for many centuries after his death in 373. One of the reasons why Ephraim's compositions were so influential in the Eastern Church for so long is that they are in verse. The bulk of his literary legacy consists of either
didactic hymns (madtrāshē) intended to be sung, or of verse homilies (memrē) intended for recitation. Both were meant for memorization. The economy of these forms means that they reveal little of his way of referring to scripture as he quoted it. However, several of the hymns offer substantial insight into the way he understood scripture. In a number of passages Ephraim portrays the way nature and scripture both bear witness to the same Lord:

Wherever you turn your eyes, there is God's symbol; Whatever you read, you will find there his types.26

Look at Nature and Scripture (ktābā)! We see them as one, yoked together for the tiller. Nature hates adulterers, and those who practice magic and murder. It is these that the Law (nāmōsā),27 too, hates. Once Nature and the Law had purified the land, they sowed in it new commandments — in the land of the heart, so that it might bear fruit: praise for Nature's Lord, glory for Scripture's Lord (mārēh d-ktābā).28

A long hymn on paradise begins with an exposition of the way the word (mellē) of the creator accompanies one just as the rock of Num 20:8, according to rabbinic tradition, followed the Israelites in the desert and continued to provide water (cf. also 1 Cor 10:4). Then the poem turns to the book of Genesis:

In his book (sefrā) Moses wrote (ktāb) of the creation of the natural world, so that both the natural world and the book might testify to the Creator: the natural world, through man's use of it, the book (ktābā), through his reading of it. They are witnesses that reach everywhere; They are to be found at all times present at every hour, rebuking the unbeliever (kāfūrā) who denies the Creator.29

Ephraim then describes how the scripture leads him beyond its actual wording and acts as a bridge to contemplation of what lies beyond the text:

I read (qrā) the opening of this book and was full of joy, for its verses and lines spread out their arms to welcome me; the first rushed out and kissed me and led me on to its companions; and when I reached that line where the story of paradise is written (ktīb), it lifted me up and transported me from the bosom of the book to the very bosom of paradise. . . . Both the bridge and the gate of paradise did I find in this book (sefrā); my eye indeed remained outside but my mind entered within. I began to muse on things Moses had not written (kāteb).30

25 Other writers also used this form and Dādīshō' explains why:
I have made known to you, my beloved in the Lord, these exhortations in a metrical style, so that you might recite (tebrē) them and memorize (tefrē) them in the time of your joy, and so that you may sing them to mournful melodies in the time of lassitude, when the demons afflict you with their fights." (Mingana, Mystics, 135; his translation has been slightly amended.)

26 Ephraim the Syrian, Hymnmen de Virginitate, xx, 12 (CSCO 169: 114):


27 From the Greek nomos, i.e., the Tōrāh. Brock rather misleadingly translates this 'scripture' and so ignores Ephraim's distinction between ktābā and nāmōsā.

28 Ephraim the Syrian, Hymnmen contra Haereses, xxviii, 11 (CSCO, 223: 70):
Here and in the following passages, Brock's translation has been somewhat amended.
Mention of the eye makes it clear that in this hymn Ephraim is referring to the reading of a physical text. In other places it is the voice that is portrayed as the key to the treasures of scripture:

In the midst of the Fast the Scriptures gathered like merchants, having in their possession a veritable treasure house of divinity.

With that holy voice as the key they are opened up before those who listen.

Blessed is that King who opened up his treasury to his people in need.

Each person, as if he were treasurer, possesses his own key; who can fail to get rich?31

From these few selections from Ephraim’s works emerges an interesting conception of scripture (ktábā, pl. ktábē). The ktábā is often personified in Ephraim’s hymns: it is active; it leads; it institutes commandments; it stores up treasures; its lines and words engage and draw the reader into a world beyond the words. This very active sense of the role of the ktábā certainly finds resonance in the Qur’ān.

Since in scriptural traditions writing is so closely bound to ideas of canonicity—what is displayed in writing is thereby given fixed boundaries—it is important to note Ephraim’s view of the relationship between the actual written lines and the truth to which they open the way. Even for the highly literate Ephraim reading from a text there is no absolute demarcation between the content of scripture and what is not actually written there—what Moses wrote leads him to meditate on things of which Moses did not write. How much more, therefore, are the edges of canon blurred in situations where a text is known primarily in an oral way? We witness this again and again in the monastic exhortations, where scriptural quotation and gloss can scarcely be distinguished from each other. The very notion of such a distinction relies on conventions of writing to mark off the canonical text from any addition, yet in these exhortations this is rarely, if ever, done. Indeed, one of the processes at work in the genesis of sacred texts themselves is the transition of particular words and phrases from the margins to the center of the text, from marginality to canonicity.

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31 Ephraim the Syrian, Hymnen de Iœmitta, vi, 1-3 (CSCO, 246: 16):

Ephraim’s sense of the close relationship between the witness of ktábā and the witness of the natural world resonates with the dāya passages of the Qur’ān. All the world is a kind of book in which the same message about God can be read if only humanity would reflect for a moment.

MONASTIC RULES, EXHORTATIONS AND BIOGRAPHIES

John of Ephesus (d. 586) wrote his collection of hagiographies between 566 and 568, and we can glean from them a certain amount about how scripture was used and spoken of. Here too we find the strands of literacy and orality intertwined. Many of John’s subjects were educated and were concerned to teach others. He tells us of Simeon the Mountaineer (Shamīrān Tūrīyā), who spent his life establishing Christian practice among mountain tribes who identified themselves as Christian and said they had heard about the ktábā but had never seen it or been taught its contents. Simeon made “tablets for writing” and “wrote” for the children whom he had tensured. “Within four or five years they learned the Psalms and the Scriptures.”32 There are also accounts, however, of teaching the ktábā from a high window to classes of children gathered in the street below. The setting implies that no writing was involved; it was teaching by memorization.33

Saint Euphemia and her daughter, John tells us, were both very well educated, and the daughter even in handwriting (kayrā). However, they went to the trouble of learning the Psalms by heart.34 This fact highlights the distinction, which runs through all the ascetical writings, between teshmeštā ‘the liturgy of the hours’ and qaryānā ‘reading or reciting’. The liturgy seems to have been done from memory, as evidenced by the specific rules for monks who knew only a single psalm. Reading or reciting, on the other hand, relied more on written texts, but was still conceived as aural more than visual, since it was a communal practice. To engage in the qaryānā, which constituted a third of the monastic day, was primarily to listen.

There were exceptions to the rule, of course, and the habits of one Blessed Abbā attracted comment in John of Ephesus’ work precisely because they were a departure from the customary communal qaryānā.35 Having survived persecutions that destroyed his own monastery, Abbā came to another community of 750 men. He had only rags to wear and a small book of the Gospel (ktábā zêt-dāramā ḏ-āngelybn) upon which he would spend all his time meditating. He sat in a corner and kept himself entirely covered but for a small opening that allowed

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33 John of Ephesus, Lives, 17: 89.
some light to fall on the book he kept in his lap. He would sit for hours with it open at the Beatitudes or some passage that threatened judgment without turning the page. Abbi was unusual in having his own book of the gospels, and when the other monks separated into groups to listen to reading (q′ryānā), he would sit alone with his book in the chapel.

Although written rules governing monastic practice often focused on abuses or minutiae, they occasionally gave us a rounded picture of the cenobitic ideal. The Rules of Abraham of Kashkar—one of the great figures of eastern Syrian monasticism—were written in 571 C.E.

Stillness (ghelyā), however, is preserved by two means: through constant recitation (aminā) and prayer (šlētā), or by manual service and meditation (hōgyā), . . .

On the subject of q′ryānā, the Apostle, when he wrote to his friend Timothy, said: "Until I come be diligent in reading [q′ryānā; Paul's original is ḡāyūnū′at ʿpublic reading'], in supplication and teaching; meditate on these and dwell upon them." (1 Tim 4:13, 15) And our Lord God said to Joshua son of Nun, "This book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth; meditate on it by day and by night, etc." (Joshua 1:8) And again Moses speaks to the people: "A sign (atā = ar. ʿāya) shall be upon your hand and a reminder (dākrānā = ar. ḍhikr) between your eyes because the law of the Lord shall be in your mouth." (Ex 13.9) And from the fathers, "A beautiful discipline cannot exist in the soul without a constant reciting (q′ryānā aminā) and supplication to God." And the holy Marcus says: "Pray to God and he shall open the eye of your intellect that you may know the profit that comes from prayer and recitation." . . .

On the subject of Sunday when the brothers are gathered together: the brother who is early in arrival in the church shall take the holy book (ktābā qadīšā) and shall sit down in the place that is reserved and shall meditate (nēthlēgi) on it until all his brothers come together. In this way everyone who comes may have his mind occupied in listening to the reading and may not stray into hurtful talk. . .

Meditation (hōgyā) in this context is apparently not silent reflection but rather the prayerful reading aloud of the text. The cenobitic life was dominated by reading, for through the sound of it the Word of God could enter the soul:

On the subject of uninterrupted reading (qirā′a dāʿima) at table: there shall be uninterrupted reading at table and no conversation. The hand shall take care of the needs of the body and the soul shall hear through the medium of the ear the word (kalām) of the Lord and shall thank him. . .

So important was reading that some of the fathers would not admit the illiterate into the community. . . Yet a number of rules concern monks who obviously did not know how to read: "A monk who knows only one Psalm shall repeat (nēthnē) it in all the prayers." Other rules make it clear that a relative few were expected to be proficient at reading; it was considered a special talent that also equipped one to be a writer or copyst:

A monk who knows the Psalms shall chant (nezmūr); the one who has learning shall speak at the time of prayer in the church, or [the one who knows] reading (q′ryānā), [let him be] a writer (ṣātar), so that he may not be condemned along with that man who hid his talent in the ground.

Not all these ascetics were cenobites, however, and many by choice lived in solitude, some engaging in spectacular mortifications, others content with the anonymity of a remote cave. Within this anchorite movement, there was a certain resistance to books, since they were considered treasures to be renounced. The same was sometimes true even of the cenobites, who feared that the reification of the written word would make it something to be stored rather than lived. And saying from one of the Egyptian fathers sums this up:

The prophets wrote books. Then came our fathers who put them into practice... Those who came after learnt them by heart. Then came . . .

38 E.g., Dādīshū: "Every brother who comes to the community shall not be received unless he knows how to read books (ella en idāt l-meqē b-khedū)." Voobus Documents, 170.
39 "Rules for the monks in Persia," 22, in Voobus Documents, 92. There is a similar anonymous rule in Arabic, though in Syriac script, dating from 6th/7th centuries (Jacob 122), and it is reminiscent of a prophetic ḫadīth about someone who only knows one passage of the Qur′ān using that same passage at every prayer time. Other rules for monks who cannot read well are found in the ninth-century Rule of Ishā′ī bar Nūn (Documents, 202, rules 13-14).
40 Voobus Documents, 71:

The syntax is awkward, but the use of the verb star suggests copying rather than composing. Since he was able to read, he could make copies of manuscripts. See the discussion of the cognate verb in the Qur′ān in chapter 4.
of the elders. Yet at the same time, written texts could be dispensed with, and
memorization was even preferred in some cases, especially with the Psalms. The
primary experience of scripture was oral and aural. Monastic life was suffused
with the sounds of the scriptures and the wisdom of the holy fathers that those
scriptures had nourished.

Both the Syriac and the Egyptian ascetical traditions encircled and penetrated
the environment in which Islam grew up. In the life of the kind of Christian
ascetic with whom the Arabs would have had the most contact, the kitāb was
the most prized possession. Yet this kitāb was not necessarily possessed as a physical
book, nor did it appear to have boundaries and limits. It was the means of access
to the divine even if one knew only part of it; it functioned as the source for the
fathers' pethgäme 'responses' to the situation of the monk and his community.
It was indisputably divine, authoritative, immutable. It was memorized and recited
in worship, internalized until the monk's own speech was almost indistinguishable
from it—yet it is rarely seen. Does this not sound rather like what the Qur'ān
seems to have in mind when it speaks of the kitāb? In the thought world of the
Prophet and his contemporaries, the monks would be nothing if not people of
the kitāb.

THE JEWS

The Qur'ān uses the verb darasa 'to study' several times in connection with the
kitāb. It is surely not too much to suggest that this echoes the words derash and
midrash used by the Jews for the study and interpretation of the Toraḥ, though
the word also has cognates in common use in Syriac Christianity. The Qur'ān
also gives us some indications as to how the Jews were perceived in relation to
physical texts:

They did not do justice to God's power when they said, "God has not sent
down anything at all to a human being." Say, "Who was it who sent down
the kitāb that Moses brought to be light and guidance for humanity and
that you put on (lit., make into) parchments [or: papyri] that you display,
but of which you also conceal a great deal? You were taught what neither
you nor your forebears knew." Say, "God." Then leave them to play at
their discussions.

Sūrat al-An'ām 6:91

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41 See Douglas Burton-Christie, The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early
deals principally with Egyptian monasticism but he points out (39–40) that the Syriac tradition was
even earlier and may have been one of the most important formative influences on the development
of the Pachomian and Antonian traditions. On the use of scripture in the Pachomian tradition, see
Graham, Beyond the Written Word, 126–40.


43 Dādisḥō, "Treatise on Solitude," in Wūbus, Documents, 85.

44 Canon 19 of the Rules of Rabūlā for the Monks, in Wūbus, Documents, 31. Wūbus translates
pethgäme as 'answers', reflecting the use of this word for the sayings of the fathers of the ascetical
tradition, which were often responses to queries from their disciples. According to Burton-Christie,
this term (from the Greek apophthegma) is associated more with written collections than with oral
tradition. So it seems better just to translate it here as 'sayings'.

45 Rules of Jacob of Edessa in Wūbus, Documents, 95.
It is clear from this that the Jews were known to have some written texts. However, as we noted in chapter 2, the fact that these were written down was not apparently considered essential to their nature as kitāb. They are kitāb that has been written down on qurāts; they are not kitāb simply because they have been written down. It would surely not be surprising if the Qur‘ān were referring here to Tora scrolls in liturgical use in these Jewish communities. However, although the Muslim historical tradition takes it for granted that the Jews of Madīna had such scrolls, it is impossible to say with any certainty that they actually did. We would presume, of course, that they did have them, but two pieces of evidence suggest that they might not have.

First, if the ahl al-kitāb with whom Muḥammad was in contact were recognizable from the way they revered the physical scriptures—whether Gospel codices, lectionaries, or Tora scrolls—then we could reasonably expect to find in Islamic a similar phenomenon. Yet it is conspicuously absent. Even though the kitāb is at the heart of Islam's self-understanding, the muṣāḥaf is entirely absent from its ritual. Physical texts are not considered constitutive of one's relationship to the kitāb. They remain always ancillary. Of course, many mosques are copiously decorated with Qur'ānic texts but this is entirely a matter of custom and choice, and there are many otherwise very lavishly embellished buildings that have no calligraphy at all. In prayer outside the mosque, which is the rule rather than the exception, there is no requirement that the kitāb be present in any other way than orally.

Second, the way the Qur‘ān alludes to earlier scriptures has long been recognized as incompatible with actual textual dependence. These allusions reflect, rather, a familiarity with oral tradition, both canonical and extra-canonical. In some cases the allusions may even contain remnants of traditions now lost that were once part of the common stock of Judaic oral literature. Wensnick maintains that there were in Madīna, especially among the tribe of the Banū Qaynuqa', at least some Jews of "a stock who originated in Palestine." However, the consensus among historians seems to be that the Jewish tribes of Madīna were Arabic-speaking proselytes and converts, which may well have limited the extent to which Hebrew or even Aramaic texts were used among them.

These two points cannot be taken as proof that there were no ceremonial scrolls or substantial texts for the study of the Hebrew Bible in Madīna. What they do indicate, however, along with the Qur‘ān’s comment in Q 6:91, is that the prominence of a physically written form of the Toraḥ was unlikely to have marked the Jews in the eyes of the Prophet and his companions as ahl al-kitāb. Therefore, we can conclude that it was the prominence of the kitāb in the language of the Jews more than in their practice that is reflected in the Qur‘ān’s conception of kitāb. Little reliable historical information exists about the particular Jewish groups in the Hijāz at the time of Islam’s emergence. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, we must assume that the Jews of Madīna, though remote from the great centers of learning, spoke of scripture in a way similar to that in other communities of the diaspora, even if they did so in Arabic.

The notion of the oral Toraḥ immediately attracts one’s attention when considering oral notions of scripture in Islam. A corpus of religious law claiming roots in the Sinai event and remaining (at least formally) unwritten seems to offer a paradigm for the understanding of the Qur‘ān’s kitāb. Indeed, the following of such a paradigm by the early community might go some way to explaining the existence of private masāḥif that recorded Qur‘ānic passages but had no official standing, for we know that the oral Law was often written down for preservation but could not be quoted from or transmitted in that form. However, the important thing to note is that the oral Toraḥ was carefully distinguished from the written Toraḥ as ha-toraḥ ghebe‘al peh ‘the Toraḥ that is on the lips’. Even though in practice it may be as authoritative as the written Law, in referring to it one may not say ka-kitāb or dho-kitāb ‘as it is written’. However much interpretation may have been required to make it serve its halakhic purpose, the written Toraḥ remained the touchstone of the oral Toraḥ and was never dispensed with. Yet even this kitāb, the written Toraḥ, lived a primarily oral life as migra‘ ‘what is recited’. Though acknowledged and quoted as ‘written’, and therefore of a more authoritative nature, it existed woven into the worship of the people and the conversation of the rabbis. Furthermore, the rabbis do introduce quotations from the written Toraḥ with sheni‘mar ‘as it was said’, and in referring to scripture there seems to be a certain indifference regarding whether the written Law is quoted as having been handed down orally or in written form.

This intertwining of the oral and the written in the Jewish tradition—where what is written is specified as such but is experienced as just one of several voices—

albeit the most authoritative, in a great conversation—that seems to be most clearly reflected in the Qur'an’s conception of kitāb. In the Qur'an, the kitāb has—one might even say is—a voice: the consistent use of the imperative qul ‘say’ reflects this intertwining of oral and written, for the sending down of the kitāb in effect becomes the sending down of statements to be delivered orally.

Furthermore, the halakhic preoccupations of rabbinic Judaism interpreted the Tora as the divine response not just to situations long past but to the questions of the current moment. In the hands of the rabbis, the written Tora speaks anew and responds in the same way as the Qur'an: jawāban li-gawlīhim. The intertwining of oral and written Tora would surely have conveyed to the Muslim observer the impression that what God has sent down (Tora) is not all simply contained in the written corpus, but that the Tora continues to respond.

Thus, even if, as I have suggested, the ritual scrolls of the Tora were not very prominent in the region of Mecca and Madina, the Prophet and his followers would have perceived that the Jews were a people who held tenaciously to a kitāb given to them by God. They recited its prayers and liturgies and sought guidance in the light of its precepts. The stories of earlier generations that it contained were the history of God’s continued dealings with this people and a record of divine perseverance in the face of repeated human faithlessness. It addressed them in all the vicissitudes of their lives, imparting the knowledge of God’s authoritative will.

We explored in chapter 7 the idea that the Qur’an’s kitāb is all-pervasive, yet still somehow elusive. Even from this brief examination of the two major groups of ahl al-kitāb, it is evident that their approaches to their respective scriptures and the Qur’an’s approach to the kitāb have a great deal in common. This is to be expected, of course, since the Qur’an chose to define itself in their terms. In effect, it says that what the Arabs have now is what the Jews and Christians have had from some time earlier. By saying so, the Qur’an provides insight into the way it saw those other groups relating to their kutub. We know from their own texts something of the ways the Jews and Christians understood the scriptures, and we have found that these confirm the picture the Qur’an paints.

However, the Qur’an shows us one aspect of the Christian and Jewish use of scripture we might not otherwise have known. From the Qur’an’s denial of the proof value of written texts, as well as from the absence of a significant role for written material in the early history of the Qur’an and in Islamic ritual, we can infer that whatever scrolls and codices may have been in Madina were not seen by Muhammad as conspicuously important, and certainly not as constitutive of the authority of scripture. The Muslims observed in the ahl al-kitāb a belief in

God’s authoritative address to humanity throughout history. They recognized that the same word was being addressed to them now, in their own language and through their own Prophet. They gradually learned to weave this word into the fabric of their lives, in worship, piety, and law. They realized, as had the ahl al-kitāb before them, that receiving the kitāb meant, as Arkoun says, “playing host to the divine-revealing word.” Yet they would not initially have learned from the ahl al-kitāb that this word of address had any boundaries, that it could not be confined between the folds of a scroll or the covers of a codex. This is perhaps why the Qur’an’s kitāb remains so authoritative and definitive, so present and active, yet at the same time so elusive.

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51 Arkoun, Rethinking Islam, 42.
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