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Introduction

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According to a thirteenth-century compilation of qurʾānic knowledge – a medieval 'companion to the Qurʾān' – the Arabic Qurʾān contains 323,015 letters, 77,439 words, more than 6,000 verses and 114 chapters or sūras.[1] This makes it a rather modestly sized text when contrasted with the Upanishads, the Mahabharata and the Pali canon of Buddhist writings. But why would these titles come immediately to mind as the point of comparison? The quick answer to that question lies in their classification as 'scripture' or 'sacred text' or 'holy writ' or 'divine word' or even 'classics'. These works, and many others that could be added, found their place in the late nineteenth-century publishing project known as *The sacred books of the East*.[2] That project itself marked an important moment in the conceptual expansion of such categorisation. For centuries, the English term 'scripture', and its equivalents in European languages, had been virtually synonymous with the Bible. While it was recognised, particularly by Christian apologists and missionaries, that other texts were revered by their respective religious communities, that recognition was usually negative and antagonistic.

THE PECULIAR CATEGORY OF SCRIPTURE

It is only rather recently that the term 'scripture' has itself become a contested category, a subject of scholarly interest and debate. An obvious, but not unique, reason is its etymology and derivation from the Latin word for 'writing', *scriptura* (pl. *scripturae*). Not all texts that have achieved a normative status within particular religious communities are written texts and, for others, writing is not the primary form of their dissemination. Scholars of comparative religion have discovered that this category, a category conceived within a Jewish and Christian framework, does not translate easily and accurately to other religious traditions. Neither content nor form suffices to define and delimit this concept. But 'scripture' does describe a connection between a particular community and a particular text. It names

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a relationship. Rather than designating a quality that inheres in a text, the term marks an affiliation between a text and those who accord it special status. People who do not acknowledge or share that affiliation will study and treat such texts differently from those who do. As commonly classified, the Qurʾān falls into this category of 'scripture' and that categorisation shapes the way in which it has been read, by both Muslims and non-Muslims, and the way in which scholars have treated it.

THE SELF-CONSCIOUSLY SCRIPTURAL SCRIPTURE

Within the past decade increasing attention has been paid to what I would call the 'self-declarative' quality of the Qurʾān. In the words of one scholar, the Qurʾān 'describes itself by various generic terms, comments, explains, distinguishes, puts itself into perspective vis-à-vis other revelations, denies hostile interpretations, and so on'.[3] An earlier essay made an even more categorical declaration: 'the Qur'an is the most meta-textual, most self-referential holy text known in the history of world religions'.[4] Another astute reader of the Qurʾān remarks that the 'abiding enigma of the text is that, along with verses that are to be construed as timeless divine pronouncements, it also contains a large amount of commentary upon and analysis of the processes of its own revelation and the vicissitudes of its own reception in time'.[5] The Qurʾān's 'self-declarative' or 'self-referential' nature expresses itself in various forms but one important expression is found in the qurʾānic term *kitāb*, a common Arabic word that is frequently, but insufficiently, rendered as 'book'. A careful collection and analysis of the 261 appearances of this word in the Qurʾān – to say nothing of the many more occurrences of its cognates – reveal multiple significations that range from the divine inventory of all creation to the eschatological record of every human deed. The Qurʾān's representation of itself as '*kitāb*' – its self-declaration or self-characterisation as such – is linked to these documentations of divine knowledge but in a fluid and open-ended fashion.

This very ambiguity has exercised Western scholarship on the Qurʾān for well over a century. Successive scholars have asked whether the Prophet was consciously occupied with the production of a written corpus, a calque on such earlier codices as the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, and whether he saw this as a defining mark of his prophethood. While numerous, and competing, responses to this historical puzzle have been proposed, none has secured sustained consensus. Consequently, the Qurʾān's many self-declarations continue to tantalise: 'That is the *kitāb* about which there

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is no doubt, guidance for those who fear God' (Q 2:2); 'indeed, we revealed it as an Arabic *qurʾān* so that you may understand' (Q 12:2); 'these are the verses of the *kitāb* and a *qurʾān* that makes clear' (Q 15:1); 'a *kitāb* that we have revealed to you, full of blessing so that you may reflect upon its verses' (Q 37:29); 'rather, it is a glorious *qurʾān*' (Q 85:21). I have used the Arabic words *kitāb* and *qurʾān*, rather than giving their English equivalents, in order to capture the polysemous quality of these terms. Verses such as these represent but a small fraction of the Qur'ān's textual self-referencing; equally prominent are frequently found self-descriptives like 'glorious', 'truthful', 'flawless', 'wise'.

Among the most perplexing of these self-declarative verses is one that begins: 'He is the one who revealed to you the *kitāb* in which there are clear verses – they are the 'mother' of the book – and others which are ambiguous.' Q 3:7 continues with several more statements but for now I want to highlight the contrast drawn between the terms that I have translated as 'clear' and 'ambiguous'. My rendering of these terms represents but one of several interpretive traditions on this verse but it suffices to invoke the decisive classification. By dividing its contents into two hermeneutical categories, the 'clear' or 'defined' and the 'ambiguous' or 'undefined', the Qurʾān creates – to borrow a phrase from biblical studies – its own 'canon within the canon'. It adduces an additional form of self-description and self-characterisation, one oriented to the interpretative parameters of different kinds of verses.

In its self-conscious scripturality, the Qurʾān does not simply define and describe itself. It also situates itself in relation to other 'books', to other 'scriptures'. It clearly expresses an awareness of divine revelation as a chronological sequence, a series of time-specific disclosures intended for particular peoples. Q 2:136 marks the milestones in that chronology: 'Say, "We believe in God and what has been revealed to us and in what was revealed to Abraham and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, in what Moses and Jesus were given and in what the prophets were given from their lord."' Q 4:136 urges belief in the '*kitāb* that he [God] revealed before' and promises perdition for those who do not believe in 'God and his angels and his *kutub* [plural of *kitāb*] and his messengers and the last day'. Being more explicit about these '*kutub*', in yet other passages the Qurʾān designates 'what Moses and Jesus were given' as the Torah (*Tawrāt*) and the Gospel (*Injīl*), recognising their respective positions in the continuity of revelation.

The notion that each successive scripture confirms its predecessor wins repeated affirmation in the Qurʾān (Q 2:42, 3:3, 12:111 and 46:12, among many other instances) with the Gospel's confirmation of the Torah (Q 5:46)

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used as the primary example. But recognition and confirmation do not equal perpetual validation. Among its strongest self-declaratives are the Qurʾān's assertions of its overriding pre-eminence, its utter finality. With this revelation, God has completed his salvific sequencing of prophets and messengers. The words spoken to Muḥammad, the 'seal of the prophets', constitute God's full and final guidance for humankind.

Assertions of pre-eminence are but one of the ways in which another essential quality of the Qurʾān manifests itself. The Qurʾān is an argumentative text. Even the most casual reader cannot help but be struck by the omnipresence of debate and disputation, of apologetic and polemic, of postulation and refutation. As I have remarked in an earlier essay, 'the operative voice in any given pericope, whether it be that of God, of Muḥammad or of another protagonist, regularly addresses actual or implicit antagonists'.[6] A recent study of this phenomenon finds in the qurʾānic text 'full arguments with premises and conclusions, antecedents and consequents, constructions *a fortiori*, commands supported by justification, conclusions produced by rule-based reasoning, comparisons, contrasts, and many other patterns'.[7] Viewed from the perspective of historical analysis, the Qurʾān quite clearly represents a *Sitz im Leben* of religious contestation. Continued claims to its own supremacy play out both retrospectively and prospectively. The qurʾānic abrogation of previous scriptures argues that differences between the Qurʾān and such earlier revelations as the Torah and the Gospel are a consequence of deliberate or inadvertent corruption in the transmission of these prior texts. Looking forward in time, Q 2:23 challenges any would-be future prophet to 'produce a sūra like' those of the Qurʾān and Q 17:88 declares that even the combined efforts of humans and jinn could create nothing equal to it. This human incapacity to meet the qurʾānic challenge serves as the principal justification for the doctrine of the Qurʾān's inimitability. These dual concepts – the corruption of earlier canonical texts and the human incapacity to match its excellence – buttress theological testimonies to the unique stature of this scripture.

READERS AND THEIR DISCONTENTS

For the unprepared reader, however, affirmations of inimitability and avowals that the Qurʾān is the 'miracle' that substantiates Muḥammad's claim to prophethood, can be hard to square with an initial exposure to the text. The Qurʾān is not an easy read. If the comments of colleagues and friends over the years are any indication, I suspect that few who tackle the text cold, who simply pluck a paperback translation from a bookshop

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shelf, persevere to the concluding sūras. Expectations of how a 'scripture' or a 'classic' should be structured – how it should 'read' – contribute to the frequently experienced frustrations. European and North American readers almost inevitably bring to the reading of the Qur'ān biblically formed assumptions that 'scripture' will behave in a certain way, will have a narrative structure, will move forward in time, will assemble its genres into distinct sections. Even so sophisticated a student of Islamic literature as Theodor Nöldeke (d. 1930), a renowned German scholar of the Qur'ān, fell prey to such presumptions:

> On the whole, while many parts of the Koran undoubtedly have considerable rhetorical power, even over an unbelieving reader, the book, aesthetically considered, is by no means a first-rate performance. To begin with what we are most competent to criticise, let us look at some of the more extended narratives. It has already been noticed how vehement and abrupt they are where they ought to be characterized by epic repose. Indispensable links, both in expression and in the sequence of events, are often omitted, so that to understand these histories is sometimes far easier for us than for those who heard them first, because we know most of them from better sources. Along with this, there is a great deal of superfluous verbiage; and nowhere do we find a steady advance in the narration.[8]

Nöldeke goes on to render a negative judgement on the Joseph account in the Qur'ān (Q 12) as compared 'with the story in Genesis, so admirably conceived and so admirably executed in spite of some slight discrepancies'. His criticism addresses not only the narrative elements of the Qur'ān but the non-narrative, as well, where 'the connection of ideas is extremely loose, and even the syntax betrays great awkwardness'.[9]

For most Western readers, the Bible operates as the literary template against which other sacred books are assessed. Even those who have had no direct exposure to the biblical text absorb this presumption because the Bible's echoes and archetypes have informed so much of subsequent Western literature. In an interesting turn, the world of biblical scholarship itself has felt the force of these popular preconceptions. The atomistic focus of much historical-critical exegesis has been challenged by recent calls for more integrated readings. These challenges make the further claim that such holistic readings can minimise the distance between the ancient and contemporary interpreter, can recapture – albeit at a more sophisticated level – the perspective of pre-critical reading.

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The biblical scholars who make these assertions must argue that current literary expectations of what constitutes a 'book' are no different than those of the biblical expositors. In other words, they must contend that both contemporary readers and scholars and ancient readers and scholars are equally concerned with matters of internal coherence and consistency and of narrative development and closure. Against such claims, however, must be placed the views of those who assert that preoccupations of this sort were frequently absent in the production process of many biblical books: 'The compilers of the biblical books were not trying to produce "works" in the literary sense, with a clear theme or plot and a high degree of closure, but rather anthologies of material which could be dipped into at any point.'[10]

To shift such expectations and to ease the frustrations of unprepared readers it may help if we return to the limitations of the term 'scripture' with its etymological roots sunk in the soil of the written word. Notions of genre discrimination, narrative development and chronological coherence recede in importance when the focus shifts from reading to recitation. As experienced by Muslims over the past fourteen centuries, the majority of whom could neither speak nor read Arabic, the Qurʾān is primarily sound, not script. The earliest instruction in the Qurʾān, that given to small children in elementary recitation classes, ignores the sequence of the sūras. These students start with the shortest sūras, those at the end of the written text, and they learn to vocalise them by repeating the sounds that emerge from their teacher's mouth. The children chant in Arabic but as most do not know that language, they have no idea what they are chanting and the meaning of their chant must be explained to them. Yet for these children and for their elders, the sounds themselves are powerful, whether immediately intelligible or not. Understood to be God's own words divinely dictated to his final prophet, they are full of sacred blessing.

For those who do speak Arabic, the aural and textual beauty of the Qurʾān has been avowed for centuries. The sheer majesty of the language, its rhetorical force and the vitality of its rhythmical cadences produce a powerful impact on people who can appreciate its linguistic and literary qualities. Classical treatises even collect the stories of those who have been 'slain by the Qurʾān', mortally overwhelmed by its sublime sounds.[11] Whether apocryphal or not, accounts of fainting, falling unconscious or even expiring portray a form of textual reception that is utterly foreign to contemporary expectations of linear narrative function.

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READERS AND THEIR REASONS

Yet from the time of the Qurʾān's appearance on the global literary stage, many non-Muslim readers have persevered. They have come to the text by different paths, drawn to it for diverse reasons. For some, in both medieval and modern times, the purpose has been apologetics and polemics. The Qurʾān is a window into the mind of the enemy and must be read to find arguments with which to refute that adversary. In its most virulent forms, such reading becomes an act of geopolitical aggression. A less antagonistic version would engage the text as a prelude to proselytisation, seeking an entrée for religious or ideological conversion. Whether the conviction sought be a conversion to evangelical Christianity or to democratic pluralism, the textual approach is the same. Both the belligerent and the benign versions of this approach manifest themselves in our electronic world of blogs and chat rooms.

Other readers cultivate the Qurʾān with an attitude of cultural curiosity. They are attracted by the literary status of the text, by its position in the pantheon of world literature. Their interest may be formed and honed within a scholarly discipline like history or philology or comparative literature. If their textual investigations are to be rigorous and academically fruitful, such readers must be well versed in qurʾānic Arabic and in the literature and culture of the classical Islamic world as well as its historical contexts.

Finally, there are the readers who come to the Qurʾān for religious reasons, seeking spiritual enlightenment and personal transformation. These, of course, share the motivations of devout Muslims and many eventually make the profession of faith that marks entrance into the community of believers. For such readers, the Qurʾān takes on the fully relational quality of 'scripture' or 'sacred book', the ultimate source of guidance and insight. 'It is a treasure-house, an ocean, a mine: the deeper religious readers dig, the more ardently they fish, the more single-mindedly they seek gold, the greater will be their reward.'[12]

Three fascinating figures can serve to exemplify these approaches. None was born Muslim or nurtured from infancy in the rhythms and tonalities of the recited text. Neither did any of these three anticipate the impact this sacred book would have on his life. In different historical periods and from different perspectives, Peter the Venerable, Ignaz Goldziher and Muhammad Asad turned their attention to the Qurʾān. It is no overstatement to say that each in his own fashion changed the course of qurʾānic studies. For our present purposes, however, I am more interested in introducing

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them as embodiments of particular forms of reading, of different ways of approaching the text of the Qurʾān.

Safely lodged in a Parisian library lie the results of a remarkable vision, a fateful journey and a successful scholarly collaboration. At the age of twenty-eight, Pierre Maurice de Montboissier was elected abbot of Cluny, centre of a monastic empire so vast that it encompassed hundreds of monasteries and thousands of monks.[13] The son of a Burgundian nobleman, this monk, who was to become known as Peter the Venerable (d. 1156), entered the Cluniac order while still a teenager but within a few decades became one of the most prominent churchmen of his generation. High among the many accomplishments for which history remembers Peter was his role in the production of the first complete Latin translation of the Qurʾān. Why would a French abbot have commissioned such a translation? Fortunately for us, Peter left a record of his reasons, one that can be culled from both his correspondence and his polemical writings.[14] Peter's motivations for supporting qurʾānic scholarship were clear and straightforward. They can be succinctly captured in the phrase 'know the enemy'. In the eyes of Peter and others of his era, Islam was a grievous heresy and a false religion, one which should be denounced and combated at every turn. Yet such a formidable adversary could only be adequately refuted if it were properly understood. Peter recognised that central to such understanding was a knowledge of the Qurʾān, a knowledge in the service of refutation.

In 1142, Peter set out for Spain, intent upon visitations to the Cluniac monasteries there and prompted by an invitation from Emperor Alfonso VII, whose grandfather had been a benefactor to Cluny.[15] He spent a prolonged period in Spain but whether he conceived his plan of translating key Islamic texts at this point or earlier is unknown. What is known, however, is that during his sojourn he met and commissioned a group of translators and informants to produce Latin versions of the Qurʾān,[16] as well as of other Arabic works dealing with ḥadīth, the life of the Prophet and Islamic theology.[17] The Qurʾān's translator was an English cleric and archdeacon of the church of Pamplona, Robert of Ketton.[18]

Peter's translation project was no disinterested scholarly exercise. His substantial subventions – and his letters mention that the translators were well remunerated – underwrote the foundational work for a polemical attack. While there is evidence that Peter the Venerable tried to interest others in writing this polemic, his efforts were unsuccessful and he eventually decided to do it himself. He was certainly no novice to such endeavours, having already written several works addressed to the correction of various Christian heresies. Nevertheless, his *Liber contra sectam sive*

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haeresim Saracenorum, along with a similar treatise directed at the Jews, have achieved particular importance because 'they represent the first European books dealing with these faiths in which talmudic and koranic sources are cited verbatim within a carefully structured Christian argument'.[19]

More than seven centuries separate Peter from the Hungarian scholar Ignaz Goldziher (d. 1921) but an even greater gulf spans the distance between their reasons for attending to the Qur'ān. Despite Goldziher having died more than seventy-five years ago, his work remains vital for the field of qur'ānic studies. Scholars continue to mine his published corpus and to build their own arguments on the basis of, or in disagreement with, some of his fundamental insights. Goldziher was born in the Hungarian town of Székesfehérvár and educated in both his native country and in Germany, studying in Berlin and Leipzig – where he received his Ph.D. in 1869 – and then doing postdoctoral work in Leiden and Vienna. His doctoral work prepared him in Hebrew, Arabic and Syriac and culminated in a thesis on a medieval Arabic commentary on the Bible.[20] Quite a lot can be known about the intellectual development of this extraordinary scholar and the past few decades have seen the steady increase of books and articles on various aspects of Goldziher's biography and bibliography.

In a fashion that our email age may never be able to replicate, the study of his life and scholarly maturation is facilitated by a wealth of personal data. Goldziher kept a diary and was a prolific correspondent, leaving a rich written record from which much can be gleaned. He also kept an account of the profoundly formative trip of several months that he took to the Middle East at the age of twenty-three. Already a philological prodigy, he used this journey to learn Arabic dialects, to buy books and to become the 'first European allowed to attend the Theological lectures of the Al-Azhar'.[21]

Goldziher is generally recognised as a key figure in the foundation of the modern field of Arabic and Islamic studies. He drew upon the work of such important predecessors as Theodor Nöldeke and his own teacher H. L. Fleischer (d. 1888) and was deeply informed by currents of biblical studies that had emerged with the Haskala and its modernising and rationalising ideals. As a Hungarian Jew, he was attracted to the promise of religious reform, seeing it as both an important end in itself and as a means of achieving the full assimilation of Jews into the social fabric of their respective countries.

It is clear from a review of Goldziher's education that he, like most 'Orientalists' in the nineteenth century, was deeply influenced by the new insights and methodologies being explored by biblical scholars and, like many others of his generation, suffered the backlash that such scholarship generated. Both he and his contemporary Julius Wellhausen (d. 1918) were

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shaped by the perspective of Abraham Geiger (d. 1874) who insisted that all religious texts were human productions, decisively determined by the historical contexts that generated them. Goldziher took this insight into Islamic studies: 'The method he espoused, and which he was the first to apply systematically to the study of Islam on such a broad-ranging scale, viewed texts not as depositories of mere facts that research should ferret out and line up one after another, but as sources in which one could discern the stages of transformation through which a community based on a common religious vision had passed as it struggled to come to terms with a host of new situations and problems. By careful and critical analysis of these sources, one could extrapolate important new insights on such processes of development not only in religious thought, but in literature, social perceptions, and politics as well.'[22]

Goldziher's publications command a topical breadth that few contemporary scholars could hope to equal. He wrote on Bedouin life, the culture of Muslim Spain, the development of ḥadīth, the literary history and theory of early Arabic poetry, and many other matters. None of his works, however, has had more lasting value than his lectures on the history and varieties of qurʾānic interpretation.[23] Contemporary work on this subject continues to cite this seminal study and it remains an active part of the scholarly conversation. For breadth and acuity it has yet to be superseded. Certainly there have been efforts to update Goldziher's *Richtungen* and to draw upon the much larger number of Qurʾān commentaries that have been edited and published in the past century. Nevertheless, Goldziher's volume remains vital to the scholarly conversation about the Qurʾān and its interpretation. He still stands as one of the most astute readers of this tradition.

Goldziher read the Qurʾān and its centuries of interpretive literature from the perspective of the academically informed outsider. Our final figure in this typological triptych shared that stance initially but eventually abandoned it for the full embrace of religious conversion. About fifty years ago, a journalist by the name of Muhammad Asad published a memoir that captured the attention of reviewers and the reading public alike. Entitled *The road to Mecca*, it spun a tale of travel and religious reflection, a spiritual pilgrimage that took one man from his roots in eastern European Jewry through a conversion to Islam to a significant contribution to Muslim scholarship on the Qurʾān. Leopold Weiss (d. 1992), Asad's birth name, was born in the first year of the twentieth century and lived until its last decade.[24] His family insisted on an intensive education in Hebrew and the major Jewish texts. Weiss did not continue such studies at the University of Vienna, however, and after completing his degree pursued a career in film writing