

PART III

***“An Arabic Reciting”:* Qur’ān as Spoken Book**

God has said: “Whoever is so absorbed in reciting the Qur’ān that he is distracted from praying to Me and asking [things] of Me, him I shall give the best reward [that is granted to] those who are grateful.”

– *Hadīth* of the Prophet

He who does not recite the Qur’ān melodiously is not one of us.

– *Hadīth* of the Prophet

The major importance of the written text of scripture in Islam is apparent even to the casual observer in any Islamic society. The centrality of the sacred book in Islam represents, as we have seen, in many respects the culmination of the long Near Eastern tradition of the divinely revealed, authoritative written book.¹ The importance of the book of scripture in Muslim faith and practice is especially closely related to, and in significant part derived from, the emphasis on holy writ in Islam’s older sibling traditions of Judaic and Christian piety. Because Islam is not just one of the three major “book religions”, but in many ways even the most radical of the three in the exalted place that it assigns to its book, both ritually and theologically, it is not amiss to speak of the Qur’ān as the prototypical “book of scripture”.

In Muslim piety, however, the written word of its scripture has always been secondary to a strong tradition of oral transmission and aural presence of scripture that far surpasses that of Judaic or Christian usage. In Islam, the functions of the holy book as an oral text have predominated over its functions as a written or printed one. As an English Arabist put it long ago, “from first to last the Koran is essentially a book to be heard, not read.”² For countless millions of Muslims over more than thirteen centuries of Islamic history,

"scripture", *al-kitāb*, has been a book learned, read, and passed on by vocal repetition and memorization. The written Qur'ān may "fix" visibly (and with supreme calligraphic artistry) the authoritative text of divine word in a way unknown in the history of the Vedic texts among Hindus; but like the Veda, the authoritativeness of the qur'anic text is only realized in its fullness and perfection when it is correctly recited aloud. In other words, the book of holy writ (*kitāb*) in Islam is ultimately not a written or printed document, but a holy "reciting", or "recitation", which is precisely what the Arabic word *qur'ān* means.

It was the dominant oral dimension of the Qur'ān as scripture that provided the original impetus to my investigation of the oral aspects of scripture more generally. The Hindus' treatment of their scriptures could always be dismissed as an anomaly – the exception that proves the rule that "sacred book" means written or printed book as we today normally understand the term. Yet because the Qur'ān (unlike the Veda or other Hindu texts) has been the object of *both* significant graphic/visual piety and attention *and also* intense oral/aural piety and attention, it is of special interest in the context of the present study. It offers the clearest, and therefore the pivotal example in which to consider the dimension of scripture that concerns us, namely, its capacity to function simultaneously both as spoken and as written word. Since the Qur'ān is characterized above all by its unusually strong oral treatment and function, the Muslims' scriptural orientation reminds us more of that of the Hindu tradition than that of Islam's near relation, the Christian tradition. Yet no one would deny the presence in Islam of a marked dependence upon scriptural authority reminiscent of those Christian traditions, such as the Puritan "movement of the Book",³ that assign greatest importance to the book of scripture.

It is the abiding and intrinsic orality of the Qur'ān as scriptural book of revelation and authority to which I want to direct our attention in the following three chapters. Here we shall see a paradigm of scripture that is remarkably like that of the Bible in numerous ways, yet also remarkably like that of the Veda in many others. For that reason, it is an excellent example in which to see vividly the oral dimensions of written scripture.

CHAPTER 7

Revelation and Recitation

Truly it is a noble Recitation [*qur'ān*] in a hidden Book [*kitāb makhnūn*], which none [may] touch except the purified – a revelation [*tanzīl*] from the Lord of all beings.

– Qur'ān, S. 56.77–80¹

Had we sent down to you a writing [*kitāb*] on parchment so that they might touch it with their hands, those who do not have faith would say, "Truly, this is nothing but obvious magic."

– Qur'ān, S. 6.7

One could hardly imagine a tradition of religious thought and practice more categorically focused upon a sacred book of divinely revealed word than that initiated by Muhammad in the second and third decades of the seventh century. Yet the undeniable "book" orientation of Islam was from the outset joined to a notion of scripture that is founded and centered upon the active, spoken word of God given in its most perfect and its final form to humankind as a "reciting", or *qur'ān*. In what follows, we shall look first at the general notion of scripture in Islam, and then specifically at the early meaning of the word *qur'ān*, in order to provide the background to an understanding of the orality of the Qur'ān as scripture, which I shall address in Chapter 8.

The Conception of Scripture in Islam

As I have indicated (Chapter 4), the history of "book religion" in the Near Eastern-Mediterranean world apparently began in ancient Mesopotamia, took decisive shape in Exilic and post-Exilic Judaic tradition, and developed dramatically in late antiquity. The last-named period proved especially momentous for the consolidation and definition of scriptural religion, first at the hands of Christians, gnostics, Jewish sectarians, and subsequently the

Manichaeans. Mani (216–77 C.E.) seems to have been the first major religious leader who set out consciously to produce either a new "religion" or a "book" of scripture.² In doing so, he saw himself as the latest in a series of religious prophets and seers and his books as the scriptural foundation for a new tradition of faith. It remained, however, for Islam to appear on the scene to give a fully developed and theologically coherent interpretive framework along these lines to the phenomenon of a scriptural book claiming the authority of divine revelation.

Scripture and Heilsgeschichte

The notion of successive revelations to various nations, each in the form of a book transmitted through a prophet, appears with force and clarity in the Qur'ān. However one chooses to describe the gradual fleshing-out of the idea of successive revelation in the course of the original revelations to Muhammad,³ it forms ultimately the backbone of the entire qur'anic (and hence the Islamic) *Heilsgeschichte*. In the qur'anic view, the leitmotiv of history (and history is "salvation-history" here) consists in God's having sent to nation after nation a prophet (*nabī*; pl.: *anbiyā'*) or apostle (*rasūl*; pl.: *rusul*) to lead its people aright. Where a distinction is occasionally implied between prophetic and apostolic status, the apostles in particular are mentioned as each having been given a divine revelation in the form of a book of scripture (*kitāb*, pl.: *kutub*), which he is charged to proclaim to his people.⁴ These revealed books include the Psalms given to David, the Torah given Moses, and the Gospel sent to Jesus, as well as the Qur'ān revealed to Muhammad. What has followed God's revelation in each case is the creation of a new community of those who respond positively to God's revelation. However, in each previous case, this new community has strayed eventually from the right path and let its scripture be partially lost or its text changed and debased over time. Thus, the Qur'ān comes as a final divine revelation, the last in the scriptural series, sent through "the seal of the prophets", Muhammad, and intended to be taken to heart and preserved henceforward as the guide for true obedience to God. It is the culmination and completion of, as well as the replacement for, all earlier revelations: "And this is a blessed scripture that we sent down to you confirming that which came before it . . ." (S. 6.92).⁵

Scripture as a Generic Idea

The notion that the Qur'ān is not the only *kitāb* given by God to humankind in other words, that other peoples before the coming of Muhammad (11/632)⁶ had been given their own *kutub*, their own revealed scriptures – thus not a secondary development of theological reflection in Islam, but fundamental part of the qur'anic worldview itself. This distinguishes the

history of the concept of scripture in Islam rather decisively from that in either Christian or Jewish tradition (although the Christians' appropriation of Hebrew scripture as their own presents certain analogies, particularly in the accompanying idea of a cumulative history of revelation).

Whereas the generic idea of scripture developed only relatively late in Christian, Judaic, and Western secular use, it was present from the beginning in Islam as part and parcel of the history of prophecy and revelation.⁷ Correspondingly, Judaic and Christian ideas about their respective scriptures tended from the outset to be more exclusive, whereas the qur'anic and subsequent Muslim concept of scripture was inclusive – at least insofar as it ultimately allowed (as, e.g., with the Avesta and Veda) the recognition of more than only the Semitic book traditions as part of the divine plan of revelation leading up to the Qur'ān. (Needless to say, none of the three great monotheistic traditions has been so inclusive as to allow for new revelations coming after their own.) The Qur'ān's own words (S. 2.285) indicate just how clearly Muhammad and the Qur'ān were integrated into a larger *Heilsgeschichte*: ". . . and the faithful all have faith in God, His angels, His scriptures (*kutub*), and his apostles (*rusul*). We make no distinctions among His apostles . . ." ⁸ Just as there had been prophets before Muhammad (see, e.g., S. 3.144), so had there been previous scriptural revelations (as mentioned in S. 3.38). The Qur'ān is indeed the culminating scripture that takes precedence over the inherited (and faulty) versions of previous revelations, but it belongs to the same genre as these, in that it, like them, has come from God through a chosen messenger.

The word for scripture in Arabic, *kitāb* (pl.: *kutub*), is also, both in classical and in modern Arabic, the common word for any kind of writing, even a letter (in much the same way that *Schrift* in German can refer not only to religious "scripture" but also to any piece of writing – a duality of meaning that the English word "scripture" also once had but now has lost).⁹ In the Qur'ān itself, the word is used with several different meanings, but most generally and most often, it designates God's revealed scripture – preeminently the Qur'ān, but also any and (in the plural) all of His scriptures, as already described. Accordingly, Jews and Christians in particular are called "scripture folk", "people of scripture", or "people of the [heavenly] scripture" (*ahl al-kitāb*). In this world, however, the Qur'ān is the Scripture (*al-kitāb*), the "Book of books", the sacred word par excellence.¹⁰

The qur'anic use of *kitāb* reflects the obvious association of this term with not only the most common meaning of the root *K-T-B*, "to write", but also the related meaning, "to decree", "to prescribe", "to make [something] incumbent" (as in God's actions with respect to His creation).¹¹ The close association of writing down with laying down or impressing something in a lasting, authoritative way carries over in some, if not all, of the qur'anic meanings of *kitāb*. It is seen, for example, in the use of the word to refer to a heavenly

book with God in which all events and the nature of all things are written beforetime (6.59; 11.6, 35.11, etc.), as well as a book of destiny, recording a person's good and evil deeds, that will be produced on the Day of Judgment (e.g., 17.71, 39.69). Furthermore, it is also possible to see the use of *kitāb* that which is decreed, or for the preemptive knowledge of God, as basic to the idea of a written book of revelation; for after all, scripture contains that which God has laid down for or made incumbent upon humankind.¹²

The Qur'ān's generic concept of scripture appears to be based upon the idea of an original, heavenly scripture from which the discrete earthly scriptures and revelations are drawn. One could interpret several occurrences of *kitāb* references to this *Urschrift*, or divine prototype of all scripture. Note, for example, S. 10.37:

This Recitation [*qur'ān*] is not such as could be invented save by God. Rather it is a confirmation of what came before it and an exposition of the Scripture [*kitāb*], about which there is no doubt, from the Lord of all beings.¹³

There are two still more specific qur'anic terms that seem to be used to designate this heavenly *Urschrift*: *umm al-kitāb*, literally "the mother of scripture," in the sense of "the essence or prototype of scripture," "the source of scripture," or "the original scripture" (S. 13.39, 43.4);¹⁴ and *lawḥ mahfūz*, the "preserved tablet" (S. 3.7). A synonym in later Muslim usage for the heavenly text is *aṣl al-kitāb*, literally "the root or source of scripture."¹⁵

Muslim Scripture: Some Comparisons and Contrasts

The qur'anic and later Muslim concept of scripture as a generic phenomenon (of which the Qur'ān is the last and best, but by no means the only example) is the backdrop against which the Muslims' specific understanding and treatment of the Qur'ān as *the* scripture must be seen. The image and status accorded the Qur'ān among Muslims present some familiar, but also more unfamiliar characteristics to the person accustomed only to Jewish or Christian treatment of scripture. A few comparisons between Muslim notions about the Qur'ān and other peoples' concepts of their particular scriptures – Jewish or Christian ideas about the Bible – offer one means of clarifying the major elements of Muslims' understanding of their holy text, especially for those of us who have been schooled to take the Jewish Tanakh or the Christian Bible as the normative example of scripture.

Jews and Muslims share the sense of importance attached to the specific (Hebrew or Arabic) language of God's revelation; yet despite the presence in both traditions of an aversion to translation of holy scripture into vernacular tongues, Muslims have been much more categorical than Jews about rejecting such translation. Jews have, it is true, been exceedingly tenacious about the Hebrew language and exceedingly devout about reverential preservation

and regular reading aloud of the Hebrew Torah scrolls in the synagogue. Nevertheless, they have also adjusted to the pragmatic need for the congregation (who may know little or no Hebrew) to understand the content of the Torah reading: hence the translation of the Hebrew text into Greek in the Septuagint and the development of the post-Exilic Targums (Aramaic paraphrases of the Torah), which were to be read in the synagogue after the reading of the Hebrew text.¹⁶ Muslims, on the other hand, have insisted with remarkable consistency that every Muslim, whatever his or her linguistic or cultural background, must maintain the purely Arabic recitation of the Qur'ān in formal worship (*ṣalāt*), even if the only Arabic he or she knows is the memorized syllables of a few short *sūrahs* necessary to *ṣalāt*. In addition, there has historically been general opposition among Muslim scholars, save in one school of legal thought, to the translation of the Qur'ān into vernaculars.¹⁷

Why this fastidious fervor about the Arabic text? Because it is God's direct discourse, *ipsissima vox*. He sent his revelation as a clear "Arabic recitation" (*qur'ān 'arabī*) that was transmitted verbatim through His apostle. For humans to translate it amounts to unfounded and dangerous tampering with the very speech of the Almighty. Because of the fundamental holiness of the words of the Qur'ān, the classical Arabic language has taken on a sacrality felt in often quite visceral fashion by the Muslim who knows it as the sublimely beautiful and untranslatable language of God's perfect revealed word, even if he or she speaks no Arabic. It is not insignificant that where Christian theological disputation has focused on the divine-human nature of Jesus Christ and the virgin birth as a guarantee of his divine nature, Muslim discussion has centered on *i'jāz*, the "inimitability" or "matchlessness" of the divine word of the Qur'ān as proof of its divine character, and the "protection" (*iṣmah*) of the Prophet Muhammad from sin as the additional guarantee of the unblemished transmission of the divine word from God to humankind.¹⁸

This importance of scriptural language can hardly be overemphasized. If this seems foreign to those raised in different traditions, it is well to remember that most scriptural traditions, from Jewish to Hindu to Theravāda Buddhist, exhibit some form of attachment and liturgical commitment to the original language, the *Ursprache*, of their own holy texts. Even the Christian tradition, for all of its long tradition of wholesale translation of scripture into every possible language, is not without parallel elements of such attachment to one linguistic form of the Bible. Here, however, the attachment has been usually not to the Hebrew or Greek *Urtext* but to a particular translation of these that time and tradition has hallowed in one particular sector of the Church as a whole – witness the long-standing Roman Catholic defense of the Vulgate as *the* sacred version of the scriptures and of Latin as *the* sacred liturgical language,¹⁹ or the modern Anglo-American resistance to replacing the Authorized, or "King James" Version with a new translation ("If the King James Bible was good enough for Jesus, it's good enough for me!"). It may

be that the sense of the sacrality of the original language of revelation is strongest in highly oral cultures such as the Indian or Islamic, but it is certainly not limited to these.

Another, and particularly revealing, comparison between Muslim and both Jewish and Christian treatment of scripture can be found in the attention lavished upon the physical text of the scriptural word, not only in the honor shown to it ritually, but also in its embellishment and ornamentation. Whereas Christian, Judaic, and Muslim calligraphic art all reached their respective pinnacles of perfection in the preparation of magnificently calligraphed and illuminated (and, for the Christian Bible, lavishly illustrated) copies of holy scripture, only in Islam has the calligraphic scriptural word become not merely the major expression of religious art, but the dominant visible motif in the art of the entire surrounding culture. The visual, public presence of the Qur'anic word in virtually every part of the Islamic world is striking, even by contrast with the most iconic and visually oriented of Christian cultures (e.g., Byzantine or Latin Christian society in the late Middle Ages). Aniconic tendencies in Judaic and Christian tradition did not lead to anything like the compensating artistic exaltation of the written word of scripture that Muslim iconoclasm stimulated in the supremely developed arts of Islamic manuscript calligraphy and monumental epigraphy, the chief object of which has ever remained the text of "the noble Qur'ān".

Still sharper contrasts between Muslim and Judaic or Christian ideas of scripture can be drawn. The concept of scriptural canon is one example. The notion of a canon of scriptures collected over time as a part of the ongoing record of God's dealing with His people is peculiar to Jews and Christians – albeit in different ways – and distinguishes their concepts of what scripture and divine word means from that of Muslims. For Muslims, revelation was seen as one final, culminating time, in the course of one prophetic career, during which and immediately afterward it was collected with scrupulous care into book form. This collected text, as God's direct speech, has been explicitly recognized as scripture since the actual period of Muhammad's prophetic career during which it "came down." Thus Muslims know nothing of a process of gradual communal canonization analogous to that of Judaic or Christian history.²⁰

In some ways the theory of the authority of the word of the Buddha behind the various Buddhist canons of *sūtras* comes closer than either Jewish or Christian theories of canon to the Muslim concept of an authoritative scriptural text fixed in and shortly after the founder's lifetime, though here too there is a vast distinction. Buddhist understandings of *sūtra* have emphasized the character as the "word of the Buddha" (*buddhavacana*), taught either exotically or esoterically by Siddhartha Gautama; yet the sheer volume and variety of *sūtra* literature in all the various traditions gives it a wholly different character from the short, comparatively uniform Qur'anic text with its significant

stronger historical claim to having attained roughly its present form in the Prophet's lifetime.

Another important and revealing divergence between Muslim and Christian or Muslim and Judaic ideas of scripture is in the theological place accorded holy scripture in the Islamic tradition and those of its two sibling traditions. Although all three have been characterized by the centrality of scripture in worship, piety, devotion, and faith, the Qur'ān stands more clearly alone as the transcendent focus of Muslim faith than does the Christian Bible or even the Jewish Tanakh in its tradition of faith.

On the one hand, it is true that Jews, Christians, and Muslims all hold that scripture contains the word of God. For this reason, all three sacred texts hold positions of major importance in their respective traditions. Indeed, in its most basic sense as the Law revealed at Sinai – as well as in the related sense of the Law as the totality of life for the observant Jew – the Torah plays a role in Judaic tradition that is akin in its ritual centrality and moral-theological significance to the notion of the Qur'ān as God's explicit and complete guidance for Muslim life. Similarly, attachment to the scriptural word of God has been almost as overwhelmingly important a determinant of piety in Christian, and especially Protestant, tradition as it has been in Islam.

On the other hand, for all of the similarities, the character of the Qur'ān as the verbatim speech of God given once and for all through a single chosen prophet sets it apart from the Bible in either of the other two traditions. To a degree unmatched in even the most book-bound Judaic or Christian piety, Muslim religious thought and practice has been relentlessly "scriptural" in its derivation and focus. For Jews, the prime medium of divine-human encounter is the Torah (literally "law", "teaching") – but *Torah* understood not simply as scriptural text but as divine will, cosmic order, and human responsibility, to which the scriptural Torah is the guide. For Christians the encounter comes first and foremost through the person and life of Christ (which are accessible, but not exclusively so, in scripture). In Islam, on the other hand, it is in the concrete text, the very words of the Qur'ān, that Muslims most directly experience God. Scripture for Muslims is itself the divine presence as well as the mediator of divine will and divine grace. In the Qur'ān, God speaks with his own voice, not through inspired human writers. Thus it is not an exaggeration to compare Qur'ān recitation with the Christian Eucharist,²¹ nor to say that in chanting the words of the Qur'ān, one "chants not words about God, but of Him, and indeed, as those words are His essence, chants God himself."²²

This immediacy of divine speech in the words of the Qur'ān leads to a last point of comparison regarding the primary medium of scriptural communication. Here we come to the question with which we are principally concerned in the present study: how sacred, divine word has been transmitted, preserved, and used in the form of scripture. In the Muslim instance, this is remarkably

clear and unequivocal: The Qur'ān has functioned primarily as a vocal transmitted text. It has, for example, been itself the prayerbook and liturgical book of Islam – a function that neither the Jewish nor the Christian Bible, with the exception of the Psalter, has had.²³ Thus, although the Qur'ān does invite comparison in the first instance with the scripturality of Jewish, Christian, and other religious communities that give central importance to holy writ, it is the spoken, not the inscribed Qur'ān that has always taken precedence in the Islamic context. In this regard it suggests, as I have previously noted, distinct analogies to Hindu scriptures.

In Chapter 8, we shall look specifically at the major oral roles of the Qur'ān in Muslim piety and practice. First, however, we need to reevaluate the meaning of the word *qur'ān* in its original context, for it is there that the clear roots of the role and place of the Qur'ān in Muslim life can be found.

The Original Muslim Understanding of "Qur'ān"

The very name "al-Qur'ān" underscores the fact that the qur'anic revelations were originally wholly oral texts intended to be rehearsed and recited, first by Muhammad, then by the faithful; they were not sent as "a writing on parchment" (S. 6.7). The word *qur'ān* is a verbal noun derived from the Arabic root *Q-R-'*, the basic sense of which is "to recite, read aloud."²⁴ Accordingly, "al-Qur'ān" is most accurately translated as "the Reciting" or "the Recitation," and it is as a recited text that the Qur'ān, even after its codification as a single, composite book of revelations, has played its central role in Muslim piety and practice.

Muslims as well as orientalist customarily think of and use the Arabic word *qur'ān* primarily as a proper noun with the definite article: "al-Qur'ān, the Qur'ān."²⁵ With this they refer to the collected and written corpus of Muhammad's revelations from God, most specifically the written text that was codified during the reign of the third caliph, 'Uthmān (23–35/644–56) and orthographically improved about four decades later at the behest of al-Hajjāj, then-governor of Iraq. This corpus is widely held to have been assembled and arranged in essentially its present form by a few of the most respected original "transmitters of the recitation" (*ḥamalat al-qur'ān*), or "transmitters of the revelation" (*ḥamalat al-waḥy*) who were still alive at this time.²⁶ Some of these had been Muhammad's scribes during his lifetime and merited the title "scribes of the revelation" (*kuttāb al-waḥy*); all were presumably "reciters" (*qurrā'*; pl. of *qārī'*), persons who knew greater or lesser portions of the revelations by heart.²⁷

As a codified whole, the revelations have been known and thought of since these earliest days of Islam both as "al-Qur'ān" and simply as "the Book" or "the Scripture" (*al-kitāb*). This idea of a single scriptural codex is expressed also in traditional usage by referring to the Qur'ān as "that which is between

the two boards."²⁸ It has been understood theologically by Muslims over the centuries as "the speech of God" (*kalām Allāh*) preserved from all eternity in God's heavenly scripture (*al-kitāb, umm al-kitāb, al-lawḥ al-mahfūz*) and written down for human use in earthly exemplars or codices (*maṣāḥif*; sing.: *muṣḥaf*).

It is obvious that "al-Qur'ān" in the later, fixed meaning of God's word as written down in the *maṣāḥif* is necessarily a post-'Uthmānic, or at the very least a post-Muhammadan, usage. Until the codification of what has since served as the *textus receptus* – or at least until active revelation ceased with Muhammad's death – there could have been no use of "al-Qur'ān" to refer to the complete body of "collected revelations in written form."²⁹ This is not to deny that even in the Qur'ān there may be hints of a developing notion of the collective revelation in the use of the words *qur'ān* and *kitāb*, but rather to emphasize the fallacy involved in "reading back" the later, concretized meaning of these terms into all of their qur'anic or other traditional-text occurrences.

Nor is this to say that when the Qur'ān was revealed, it was necessarily limited to oral transmission and human memories simply because of lack of knowledge of writing – as, for example, was the case, we may presume, with the Veda among the original Indo-Aryans. We have clear epigraphic evidence of Arabic writing, especially Christian inscriptions, well before the time of Muhammad, and there are many terms in the Qur'ān that bespeak the presence of books and writing in the Arabian milieu in the early seventh century.³⁰ Traditional Islamic accounts tell how not only the qur'anic revelations but also missives to particular tribes or towns were written down at the Prophet's behest by various scribes (although how much trust can be placed in the historicity of these latter reports is open to question).³¹ Technically, the scripture given Muhammad presumably *could* have been passed on from the outset primarily as a holy written text, but it was not, or at least only alongside and as an adjunct to its memorization and recitation. It is patent in the Qur'ān and borne out in the traditional sources that the word of God was specifically intended to live on the lips of the faithful. While the revelations were considered to be a part of God's "Arabic *kitāb*", this in no way conflicted with or detracted from their fundamental character as divine words meant to be learned by heart, chanted aloud, and orally transmitted.³²

That this was the case is confirmed not merely by traditional stories or the compelling euphony of qur'anic language, but also by the many variant readings to the standard written text of the Qur'ān that have been preserved.³³ These variants are commonly synonymous words or differently vowel-ed readings of the consonantal base text that obviously represent divergent oral rather than written traditions.³⁴ Fundamentally, the Qur'ān was what its name proclaimed it to be: the Recitation given by God for Muhammad, and after him, all of His worshipers, to recite (as S. 96.1ff. suggests), above all in

worship of Him. Such chanting or reciting served as a "reminder" (*dhikr*) and a "criterion" (*furqān*) for human beings who are by nature "forgetful"; it proclaimed God's word and kept this word constantly before its intended hearers. In an earlier, detailed article on the earliest meaning of the word *qur'ān*, I have documented this original oral character of Muslim scripture from the Qur'ān and the Hadith literature.³⁵ I want now to reiterate and add to some of the salient points of that study in order to sketch in broad strokes the contextual and textual evidence of this original oral character.

Contextual Evidence for the Original Meaning of "Qur'ān"

The very word *qur'ān* is not attested in any Arabic sources before the Qur'ān itself. This supports the strong linguistic probability that the use of this word for the new revelations to Muhammad would only have been intelligible to the Arabs at that time if analogous words were prominent in contemporary Christian or Jewish use. Before and after Muhammad's time, the Syriac cognate term *qeryānā*, "lection", "reading", was used by Syriac-speaking Christians (and presumably as a borrowing by Arabic-speaking Christians) both for the oral, liturgical reading from holy writ (= *lectio, anagnōsis*) and for the passage of scripture that is read aloud (= *lectio, periochē, anagnōsmata*, etc.).³⁶ John Bowman in particular has rightly stressed the strong parallels in liturgical terminology and usage between eastern Christian liturgical use of a lectionary, or *kiābā d'qeryānā*, and what we can reconstruct of liturgical use of the qur'anic revelations from the Qur'ān itself.³⁷ Also of likely relevance is the additional parallel in both Muslim use of *qur'ān* and Syriac use of *qeryānā* to Rabbinic and later Jewish use of the Hebrew cognates *qerī'ā* and *miqrā'* as terms denoting the act of scripture reading and the passage read aloud respectively.³⁸ *Miqrā'* is used also as a Talmudic term for the whole Bible, one that "serves to underline both the vocal manner of study and the central role that the public reading of the Scriptures played in the liturgy of the Jews."³⁹

Such parallels in Christian and Jewish usage do not have to be taken as evidence of direct or conscious "influence on Muhammad" – a formulation that Muslims rightly find offensive, since it has been used to polemicize against the divine origin of the Qur'ān. What reasonable Muslims and non-Muslims should be able to agree on is that because the Qur'ān was revealed in Arabic (as a "clear" Arabic scripture, if you will), it could only have been proclaimed in terms that made sense in the linguistic and conceptual framework of the day and region. Otherwise, it would not have been intelligible to the Arabs. The Arabic of the day cannot have been devoid of echoes or direct use of Syriac and Hebrew terms nor of major ideas shared by Arab Christians and Jews since these groups were, as the Qur'ān and other sources show, conspicu-

parts of the Arabian scene. The linguistic parallels I have cited make it highly likely that *qur'ān* was understood by the Arabs to refer to texts intended for vocal proclamation, reading, and recitation such as Jews and Christians already practiced in the seventh-century Arabian milieu just as elsewhere.⁴⁰ Furthermore, not only were these two scriptural traditions very much in evidence in Arabia, but so also was that of the Zoroastrians, in which oral recitation of scripture figured even more prominently.⁴¹ For all of these traditions, a "book" used in liturgy and devotions would not have been the silently read document that we today understand a "book" to be; rather, it would have been a sacred, divine word that was meant to be recited or read *viva voce* and listened to with reverence.

"Qur'ān" in the Qur'ān

The internal evidence of the qur'anic text itself supports the fundamentally oral/aural nature of the understanding of scripture among the first Muslims. That the qur'anic revelations were meant to be proclaimed aloud is immediately obvious in the recurring imperative "Qul!" ("Say!"), which introduces well over three hundred different passages of the text. Note, for example, the early *sūrah* known as "Unity" or "Purity": "Say, He is God, One! God is the Everlasting. He neither begets [offspring], nor is He begotten. To Him there is no equal, not one!" (S. 112). Here presumably Muhammad is addressed by the singular imperative, but so too is every person. Thus have Muslims of every generation heard in this ringing call to declare God's singularity and omnipotence one of the most important commands addressed to them in scripture – so much so that in Muslim worship and devotion only the opening *sūrah* is equally or more often recited than this succinct testimony of Muslim faith.⁴²

Another indication of the originally oral form and intended oral use of the revelations is to be found in the frequent occurrence in the Qur'ān (sixty-three times) of the verb *talā*, "to recite, follow", with similar reference to reading the text aloud. This root occurs, for example, in many passages that link God's apostle to recitation of His word; for instance, in S. 62.2:

[God] is He who has sent among the gentiles [lit.: "the unlettered"] an apostle from their own ranks to recite [*yatlū*] to them His wonders [or "verses", "signs"], to purify them, and to teach them scripture [*al-kitāb*] and wisdom, while before this they were in clear error.⁴³

The verbal noun of *talā*, *tilāwah*, became a general term in Islamic usage (alongside *qirā'ah*) for recitation or chanting of the Qur'ān, and the qur'anic basis for this is clear even from the single occurrence of this form, in S. 2.121: "Those to whom We [God] have given the scripture [*kitāb*] and who recite it

truly [yatlūnahu ḥaqqā tilāwātihī]⁴⁴ – those are they who have faith in it." The burden of such passages is clear: Scripture and recitation go together. They are, one may even say, inextricable.

The most impressive qur'anic evidence, however, for the oral character of the scripture given Muhammad comes from the many qur'anic passages in which the word *qur'ān* and the other forms of its root verb *qara'a* can best be understood in context if their verbal force is retained. Unfortunately, later, especially modern, students and interpreters of the Qur'ān have taken so to heart the reified, objectified sense of Qur'ān as both a physical volume of text and the proper name of the text that they have lost its original meaning as simply "reciting" (*qur'ān*). That this verbal force was still present in qur'anic usage can be demonstrated in many of its more than eighty occurrences.⁴⁵ It is most clearly manifest in the two indisputable qur'anic instances in which *qur'ān* functions as a true verbal noun denoting an activity, not an object:

Observe the *ṣalāt* at the sinking of the sun until the darkening of night, and the dawn recital [*qur'ān al-fajr*]; truly, the dawn recital [*qur'ān al-fajr*] is attested [*mashhūd*] (S. 17.78)

Do not move your tongue with it so that you hurry too much! Ours it is to collect it and to recite it [*qur'ān^ahu*], and when We recite it, follow the recitation of it [*qur'ān^ahu*]. (S. 75.16-18)

Beyond those passages in which *qur'ān* can be read in a strictly verbal sense as the action of reciting, there are others in which it occurs, with or without the definite article, not as the proper name of the whole scripture revealed to Muhammad, but as a single revelation or as a generic term for scriptural text. Two of the clearest examples follow:

Neither are you involved in any affair, nor do you recite any recitation [*qur'ān*] from [the scripture], nor do you perform any act, without Our being your witness when you undertake it. . . . (S. 10.61)⁴⁶

When Our revelations [*ayāt*] are recited [*tutlā*] as clear proofs to them, those who do not hope to meet Me say: "Bring a recitation [*qur'ān*] other than this, or change it. . . . (S. 10.15)

All of these passages point us toward an understanding of both the active verbal sense of the word *qur'ān* that underlies every other use of it, and also its nominal use, not only as a proper noun that names the collected book of Muslim scripture, but also as a common noun referring to a particular passage (of revelation) meant for recitation. In these uses, the parallels with both *qeryānā* and *qerī'ālmiqrā'* in Christian and Judaic usage are particularly evident.

"Qur'ān" in Non-Qur'anic Sources

Our earliest Islamic sources after the Qur'ān are the thousands of separate traditions or reports known individually and collectively as *ḥadīth*. An individual *ḥadīth* consists of a report, usually brief, about words and actions of Muhammad and his Companions. Such reports form the major content of not only the large "standard" Ḥadīth works compiled in the third/ninth century, but also the earlier and later works of history, Qur'ān-exegesis, jurisprudence, and theology. While some *ḥadīths* do go back to the time of the Prophet or the first generations after him, others are certainly later forgeries (albeit usually pious, well-intended ones that often seek to put the stamp of his authority on later Islamic praxis). Nevertheless, as source materials at least as old as the third Islamic (ninth C.E.) century, they still offer material from a relatively early period of Islamic history.

In many and diverse *ḥadīth* reports we can find considerable evidence that the verbal-noun and common-noun force of the word *qur'ān* lasted well after the time of Muhammad, even in the face of the increasingly dominant use of "al-Qur'ān" as the proper name of the physical book exemplar (*muṣḥaf*). Of examples involving verbal usages, one of the clearest is a tradition that quotes from a verse ascribed to a famous poet and older companion of the Prophet, Ḥassān b. Thābit. In this, Ḥassān speaks with approval of "one who 'interrupts' the night⁴⁷ by praising [God] and reciting [*qur'ān*]"⁴⁸ – a clear adverbial use of *qur'ān* to denote the act of recitation. A second example is the *ḥadīth* that reports that Muhammad spoke highly of the person "who is constantly mindful of God in/during [his] reciting [*qur'ān*]." ⁴⁹ A particularly striking *ḥadīth* tells how one of the Prophet's Companions came to him one morning and reported how, when he was reciting a *qur'ān* the night before (in some versions, specifically S. 18, "Kahf"), one of his animals tried to bolt from the courtyard. Although he looked around, he could not find what had frightened the animal. Muhammad, however, responded at once: "That was the divine aura [or "presence", *al-sakīnah*] that descended with the recitation [*al-qur'ān*]." ⁵⁰

Qur'ān as a common-noun term for any individual unit of the revelation is attested throughout the early sources, as well as in later ones. One *ḥadīth* reports Muhammad's saying that "in every ritual worship [*ṣalāt*] there is a recitation [*qur'ān*]." ⁵¹ Various of the Companions are said to have "feared that a *qur'ān* would be sent down about us/me" on a particular occasion. ⁵² Ibn 'Umar is even reported to have said that the Companions avoided joking publicly with their wives up until Muhammad's death for fear that a specific *qur'ān* would be revealed to prohibit that. ⁵³ Various occasions are mentioned on which a particular *qur'ān* was revealed; thus one Companion could report to another that "a *qur'ān* was sent down to him [Muhammad] last night." ⁵⁴

Apart from *ḥadīth* reports, there is an amusing common-noun occurrence of *qur'ān* in the story told of how the wife of the Companion and poet 'Ābd Allāh b. Rawāḥah suspected him of making love to a slave girl. Confronting him as he left the girl's quarters, and knowing that he had once sworn never to recite the Qur'ān unless ritually clean, she asked him to recite from scripture for her in order to catch him out. The quick-witted poet promptly recited three lines of poetry that sounded enough like a qur'anic verse to satisfy his wife of his innocence, since "she thought this to be a *qur'ān*."⁵⁵ Later sources also continue to use *qur'ān* as an indefinite noun to refer to a unit of scripture. One example from the fifth century is from a comment by Ibn Ḥazm (d. 456/1064) that among those things that make a *ṣalāt* valid, no matter who performs it, is that he or she "recite the 'mother of the Qur'ān' [S. 1] and a[nother] *qur'ān* along with it."⁵⁶ Finally, Al-Qushayrī (d. 466/1074), in a discussion of God's word, says of the word *qur'ān*: "What is recited is called 'a recitation' [*qur'ān*], just as what is drunk is called 'a drink'."⁵⁷

Implications

All of the foregoing examples testify to a more multifaceted understanding and use of the very term *qur'ān* than modern ideas of "al-Qur'ān" as the book of scripture would imply. The use of *qur'ān* both as an action – reciting – and as a unit of text meant to be recited underscores how seriously "al-Qur'ān" as the name of Muslim scripture is to be taken and how central the recited character of the book of revelation was from the beginning.

There is also a further aspect of the use of the term *qur'ān* in Qur'ān, *Ḥadīth*, and other early sources. The predominant context in which the word occurs is that of the performance of either the formal worship rite (*ṣalāt*) or personal devotion and prayer. As evidence of this beyond the citations already given, one need only mention the myriad *ḥadīths* that were clearly meant to define or confirm the ritual obligations of Muslims vis-à-vis the *ṣalāt*. For example, one of these reports Muhammad to have said that any performance of the worship rite without "a *qur'ān*" in it is "deficient",⁵⁸ although another tells how the Prophet instructed a bedouin who had asked how to perform the *ṣalāt* as follows: "if you have a *qur'ān*, recite it; if not, then praise and magnify God."⁵⁹ Most aspects of the worship rite are covered in one or another prophetic tradition: Thus, for example, the manner in which one recites the *ṣalāt* may be governed by the report of how the Prophet "raised his voice with the Recitation [*qur'ān*]" in his *ṣalāt*.⁶⁰ With regard to personal devotional practice, there are also a vast number of traditions that encourage qur'anic chanting apart from the *ṣalāt* and make recitation a mark of individual piety. In general, the sources make clear that, at a very basic level, the reciting of God's word is, as one *ḥadīth* has it, something "to be returned" to God as "the very best" of all that He has given humankind.⁶²

This is not to deny that Muslims relied heavily on the revelations to address nonliturgical, nondevotional issues, from matters of inheritance to theology. According to the sources, they avidly sought *qur'āns* from Muhammad and, later, each other, in order to gain guidance for individual and collective life. Thus, for example, Ibn 'Abbās answers another Muslim's question with "I shall recite for you a *qur'ān* about that."⁶³ Nevertheless, the recitative texts as a genre (for Muslims, the highest genre of all, namely revelation) seem to have had their original *Sitz im Leben* more in liturgical and devotional life than in the arenas of legal, social, political, or doctrinal matters. However, the latter concerns are in Muslim view virtually inextricable from worship: It is not without reason that, in the books of jurisprudence, the prescribed acts of worship and service (*'ibādāt*) precede the problems of social relations (*mu'āmalāt*). The heart of an Islamic society and of any branch of Islamic learning or other activity is conceived to be the piety of the faithful, the most tangible expression of which is the public cultus.

I emphasize this point about the early understanding and use of *qur'ān*, because later Islamic and much of modern orientalist scholarship has been generally more interested in the Qur'ān as the authority for Islamic institutions and ideas than as what has been often called "the prayerbook of the Muslims." We cannot remind ourselves too often that the chanting or reciting of God's word was the chief visible mark of being a Muslim from the outset.⁶⁴ Furthermore, the oral, recitative function of the Qur'ān that I have described for the early community did not cease after the initial generations of Muslims were gone. It has been evident across the broad spectrum of Muslim faith and practice, at all times and in all places where Muslims have formed a community. Knowledge and recitation of the Qur'ān have continued always to be the badges of the Muslim in a sociopolitical sense as well as in a personal, religious sense, as we shall see.