

THE QUR'ÂN'S SELF-IMAGE

WRITING AND AUTHORITY IN ISLAM'S SCRIPTURE

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PREFACE

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'ân so adamant 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'ân 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 *kitâb*—'book' or 'writing'—in the Qur'ân'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 Crolius, 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 *k-t-b* (also represented in this book as $\sqrt{k-t-b}$) 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:

KATABA	he wrote	KUTIBA	it was written
YAKTUBU	he writes	TAKTUBU	she writes
KATIB	writer, scribe	MAKTUB	written
MAKTAB	desk, office		

The root KH-L-Q is connected with creation and gives rise, for example, to these words:

KHALQ	creation	KHALAQA	he created
YAKHLUQU	he creates	TAKHLUQU	she creates
KHALIQ	creator	MAKHLUQ	created
KHALIQA	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 letters gives a common grammatical form. Words that use the pattern CÂCÎC (where C stands for any root consonant) are all active participles of the basic verb:

KÂTIB	one who writes	i.e., a scribe
ÂLIM	one who knows	i.e., a scholar
KHÂLIQ	one who creates	i.e., a creator
QÂTIL	one who kills	i.e., a murderer
ZÂLIM	one who misuses	i.e., a wrongdoer, an oppressor
FÂTÎH	one who breaches	i.e., a conqueror

Similarly the passive participles share a common pattern (MAccÛC):

MAKTÛB	written
MA'LÛM	known
MAKHLÛQ	created
MAQTÛL	killed
MAZLÛM	wronged, oppressed
MAFTÛH	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.

TABLE OF ARABIC transliterations

ء	'	ر	r	ف	f
ا	a	ز	z	ق	q
ب	b	س	s	ك	k
ت	t	ش	sh	ل	l
ث	th	ص	ṣ	م	m
ج	j	ض	ḍ	ن	n
ح	ḥ	ط	ṭ	ه	h
خ	kh	ظ	ẓ	و	w/û
د	d	ع	c	ي	y/i
ذ	dh	غ	gh	ى	à

ABBREVIATIONS

Eİ	<i>The Encyclopaedia of Islam</i> . New ed., prepared by a number of leading orientalists. Edited by an editorial committee consisting of H. A. R. Gibb and others. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1954 - .
CSCO	<i>Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium</i> , Louvain.
GdQ	Nöldeke, Theodor. <i>Geschichte des Qorans</i> . Zweite Auflage, bearbeitet von Friedrich Schwally. 3 vols. 1909-38. Dritte teil von G. Bergsträßer und O. Pretzl. Reprint, Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1970
JAOS	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
JSAI	<i>Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam</i>
JSS	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
MIDEO	<i>Mélanges de l'Institut Dominicain des Etudes Orientales</i>
SEI	<i>The Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam</i> . Edited by H. A. R. Gibb and J. H. Kramers. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1953.

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 Tōrah 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

¹ See, for example, Wilfred C. Smith, "Scripture as Form and Concept: Their Emergence for the Western World," in *Rethinking Scripture: Essays from a Comparative Perspective*, ed. Miriam Levering (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989): 29–57.

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'ân 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'ân 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 Muḥammad 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'ân's own insistence that it be considered a *kitâb* of divine origin, just like the examples bestowed earlier upon Christians and Jews. The apparent similarities between some of the Qur'ân'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.² 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'ân 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'ân 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.³ The way all these are alluded to in the Qur'ân makes it clear that Muḥammad'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.⁴ However, if we attempt to assign each reference in the Qur'ân 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 *kitâb mubîn* 'a writing that makes clear' (Q 34:3; 11:6),⁵ and this echoes a term the Qur'ân uses often of itself and its heavenly source:

طس تِلْكَ آيَاتُ الْقُرْآنِ وَكِتَابٍ مُبِينٍ

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

Sûrat al-Naml 27:1⁶

There is an extraordinary fluidity to the notion of writing evidenced in the Qur'ân. 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 5:83); 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

² Jeffery, *Qur'ân as Scripture*, 9–12.

³ Jeffery, *Qur'ân as Scripture*, 9–14.

⁴ Cf. also Q 36:12 where it is *imâm mubîn* 'an authority that makes things clear'.

⁵ Compare Q 15:1: *أَلَمْ تَرَ تِلْكَ آيَاتُ الْكِتَابِ وَقُرْآنٍ مُبِينٍ* — *Alif Lām Râ. These are the âyât [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'ân's idea of its own role as a *kitâb*, so the words derived from *ḵ-b-y-n* will point to an important facet of the understanding of *ḵ-k-t-b* words.

The consonantal text of the Qur'ân used in this work was made available by the Islamic Computing Centre, London. The vowelings 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, Ahmad 'Alī, Yūsuf 'Alī, and Hanna Kassis. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations of non-English texts are my own.

² See, for example, Arthur Jeffery, *The Qur'ân as Scripture* (New York: Russell F. Moore Company, 1952); Geo Widengren, *The Ascension of the Apostle and the Heavenly Book (King and Saviour III)*, Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift 1950:7 (Uppsala: A.-B. Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1950); and *Muhammad, the Apostle of God, and His Ascension (King and Saviour V)*, Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift 1955:1 (Uppsala: A.-B. Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1955); and also his *Literary and Psychological Aspects of the Hebrew Prophets*, Uppsala Universitets Årsskrift 1948 (Uppsala: A.-B. Lundequistska Bokhandeln, 1948); Richard Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1926); Abraham I. Katsh, *Judaism in Islam: Biblical and Talmudic Backgrounds of the Koran and its Commentaries: Sûras 2 and 3* (New York: New York University Press, 1954); C. C. Torrey, *The Jewish Foundation of Islam* (New York: Ktav, 1967); Tor Andrae, *Muhammad: The Man and his Faith* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936); John Bowman, "The Debt of Islam to Monophysite Syrian Christianity," *Nederlands Theologisch Tijdschrift* 19 (1965): 177–201.

(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 *kitâb* 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.

Geo 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.⁷ Pedersen suggested that the Qur'ân envisages a single heavenly Book and he demonstrated that this book in many ways parallels the varied functions of the Babylonian Tablets of Destiny.⁸ Those who try to distinguish the various celestial volumes are perhaps creating their own difficulty by understanding *kitâb* 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 Qur'ân'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 Qur'ân as the most recent and most trustworthy of these.⁹ Nor is this a new idea, since Judaism had already come to think of the Tôrâh as existing in written form with God long before the creation of the world, though it was not fully

⁷ J. Pedersen, review of *Ursprung und Geschichte der Mormonen: mit Exkursen über die Anfänge des Islams und des Christentums*, by Eduard Meyer, *Der Islam* 5 (1914): 110–15.

⁸ See A. Jeremias, "Book of Life," in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, edited by James Hastings et al. (New York, Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908–26), 2: 792–95.

⁹ Jeffery claims to see in this conception of scripture something new which only emerged with the Elchasaïtes, the Jewish-Christian baptist group of Mesopotamia from which Mani came (*Qur'ân as Scripture*, 13–17). However, it is not at all clear why it should be considered so. Jeffery is right in pointing out that, unlike the heavenly scroll given to Ezekiel (Ezek. 2:9) or the *biblaridion* that is given to John to eat by an angel in Apoc. 10:8–10, the "book" given to Elchasaï becomes his community's scripture. However, is it not the case that Moses being given the tablets of the law is a much earlier appearance of such a notion? This matter deserves more attention, since while it is clear that on Sinai and in the stories Jeffery quotes the seer is given something physical, this is not so with the Qur'ân. Jeffery's approach begs the question of what the early Muslims understood by *kitâb*.

revealed until it was given to Moses,¹⁰ 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,¹¹ 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 Qur'ân's phrase *ahl al-kitâb*, 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."¹² His observation is acute. However, Pedersen fails to take account of how regularly the Qur'ân uses partitive expressions in connection with *kitâb*.¹³ It is not at all evident that any of the *ahl al-kitâb*—or even the Muslims themselves—are understood to be fully in possession of the *kitâb*. The Tablets of Destiny, which Pedersen saw as a parallel to the Qur'ân's *kitâb*, 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-kitâb* 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 *kitâb* serves as a symbol. "Those who have been given the *kitâb*" are also called "those who have been

¹⁰ See, for example, *Genesis Rabbah* 1:1, 4; VIII. Though this idea was strong in the wisdom literature and in rabbinical exegesis, it was not without its opponents among the philosophers. At the same time it became fundamental in the Kabbalah. See "Torah," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (New York: Macmillan, 1971), 15: 1235–37; also Harry Austryn Wolfson, *The Philosophy of the Kalam* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: Harvard University Press, 1976), 238–9; also Barbara A. Holdrege, *Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 131–212.

¹¹ See Colin H. Roberts and T. C. Skeat, *The Birth of the Codex*, London: Oxford University Press for the British Academy, 1983. Also T. C. Skeat, "Early Christian Book-Production: Papyri and Manuscripts," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*. Vol. 2: *The West from the Fathers to the Reformation*, edited by G. W. H. Lampe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 54–79.

¹² Pedersen, review of *Ursprung und Geschichte der Mormonen*, 115.

¹³ E.g., Q 2:174, 231; 3:23, 78, 81; 4:44, 51; 5:44, 48; 18:27; 29:45; 35:31; 42:15.

given knowledge."¹⁴ 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'ân will not do justice to the complexity of its discourse about itself and about the revelations to other communities. The Qur'ân does stress its kinship with other scriptures, and we have seen some evidence of the similarity of Qur'anic 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'ân means when it refers to them.

My intention in the chapters that follow is first to examine critically the consensus that the Qur'ân 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'ân text, principally from the traditions about its compilation and from commentaries. Then I will consider the evidence within the Qur'ân's own discourse, first of all by attending carefully to the polemical passages of the text where the bringing of a *kitâb* is the point at issue between the Prophet and his critics. This will serve to dispel some misconceptions about how the Qur'ân regards the *kitâb*, and so will clear the way for a more careful analysis of the semantic field of "book" and "writing" language within the Qur'anic 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'ân, rather than to presume the Qur'anic 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

¹⁴ *alladhîna 'ûtû-l-ilm*: Q 16:27; 17:107; 22:54; 28:8; 29:49; 30:56; 34:6; 47:16; 58:11.

¹⁵ Izutsu lays out his methodology at length in the early part of *God and Man in the Koran: Semantics of the Koranic Weltanschauung*. Studies in the Humanities and Social Relations, no. 5. (Tokyo: Keio Institute of Cultural and Linguistic Studies, 1964), 9–72; and also in *Ethico-Religious*

One scarcely expects to find at the end of such an investigation that a single word is adequate to translate *kitâb*. Nor is one likely to oppose translation altogether. Rather, I hope that some of the complex connotations of the Qur'ân'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'ân's particular conception of *kitâb* 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'ân'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 *kitâb* present in the Qur'ân'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'ân acknowledges that it is speaking a language already used by other groups—the *ahl al-kitâb*. It was from these people—according to tradition, the Jews of Madîna, the scattered Christian ascetics of the desert, and perhaps others as well—that the people of the Hîjâz region learned the language of *kitâb* that made the Qur'ân's claims and exhortations comprehensible to them. So in the appendix, I turn to the revelations that the Qur'ân sees as its kin and to the communities that cherished them, to see whether the notion of *kitâb* emerging from our semantic analysis would have made sense to the other peoples who were defined by the phenomenon of the *kitâb*.

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'ân was an already complete collection of the revelations of Muḥammad before the time the Arabs had expanded beyond Arabia to other parts of the Middle East. According to Wansbrough, the Qur'ân did not originate in Arabia, nor indeed did Islam. What is customarily 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

Concepts in the Qur'ân, McGill Islamic Studies 1 (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1966), 3–41.

¹⁶ Izutsu, *Concepts*, 3.

process. The Qur'ân 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'ân'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'ân. By calling for a more sophisticated approach to the traditional sources, they have opened the Qur'ân 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'ân 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

¹⁷ John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, London Oriental Series, vol. 31 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977) and his *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History*, London Oriental Series, vol. 34 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

Wansbrough's scenario makes a good deal of the fact that we have no complete copy of the Qur'ân 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 Wheelan has argued that the custom of writing Qur'âns long pre-dates the first datable texts (E. Wheelan, "Forgotten Witness: Evidence for the Early Codification of the Qur'ân," *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.

we can find evidence of that fact even in the traditional accounts. Nonetheless, I approach the text with the presumption that, however it may have come by its historical forms and its present content, it existed as a sacred text from a much earlier time than Wansbrough would posit. The extent to which the entire text was known, transcribed, memorized and used in law or liturgy in the early period is still not clear and much research remains to be done on the matter. However, without foreclosing on the legitimate questions about the Qur'ân's provenance and early history that still remain, I have chosen to treat the text as a coherent whole. I do so because that is the way it functions within the community that canonized it and that looks to it for guidance. The notion of *kitâb* is the overarching theme that proclaims and maintains that coherence.

CHAPTER ONE

The Qur'ân as a Book

WESTERN SCHOLARSHIP AND THE WRITTEN NATURE OF THE QUR'ÂN

One very striking feature of the Qur'ân 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'ân's identity and Muḥammad's mission. The Swedish scholar Geo Widengren went so far as to claim: "That Muḥammad himself, by committing his revelations to paper, purposely aimed at creating a Holy Book in competition with the Tôrâh and 'Evangel', is perfectly clear."¹ The Book had been sent down to Muḥammad 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 Sûra 6:91."² The relevant part of the verse is:

قُلْ مَنْ أَنْزَلَ الْكِتَابَ الَّذِي جَاءَ بِهِ مُوسَى نُورًا وَهُدًى لِلنَّاسِ تَجْعَلُونَهُ قَرَاطِيسَ تُبْدُونَهَا وَتُخْفُونَ كَثِيرًا وَعُلِّمْتُمْ مَا لَمْ تَعْلَمُوا أَنْتُمْ وَلَا آبَاؤُكُمْ

Say, "Who was it who sent down the kitâb 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."

Sûrat al-An'âm 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'ân presents him as being only of the second type.³ Widengren points out that much speculation about Muḥammad's night journey and ascent to heaven ignores and even contradicts the explicit doctrine of the Qur'ân. 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'ân itself. He sums this up at one point in his discussion: "The endeavour of Muḥammad 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."⁴ There is no evidence at all of Muḥammad'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 Muḥammad 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 *kitâb* on *qarâtis* ('papyrus' or 'parchment' rather than 'paper').⁵ 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-Suyûtî lists several types of material on which, according to the traditions, fragments of the Qur'ân were written: *ʿusub* 'the bark of palm-

³ Cf. Widengren, *Muḥammad*, 100ff., 204–8. He summarizes his findings in "Holy Book and Holy Tradition in Islam," in *Holy Book and Holy Tradition*, edited by F. F. Bruce and E. G. Rupp, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1968), 210–236; here 218–220.

⁴ Widengren, *Muḥammad*, 151.

⁵ The term *qirṭās* is almost certainly from the Greek χαρτης, probably through the Syriac *q̄rṭisā*. 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 Nabia Abbott, *The Rise of North Arabic Script and its Qur'anic Development, with a Full Description of the Qur'an Manuscripts in the Oriental Institute* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), 53.

branches'; *likhâf* 'thin stones'; *riqâʿ* 'scraps' (al-Suyûtî understands these to have been of *jild* 'leather'; *raqq* 'parchment'; or *kâghad* 'paper'); *qirṭaʿ al-adīm* 'pieces cut from a skin'; *aktâf* 'shoulder-blades'; *aqtâb* 'the wood of camel saddles'; and *adlâʿ* 'ribs'.⁶ It is difficult to see in such a motley collection of materials any indication that Muḥammad had a book in mind. It is quite likely, of course, that this list has little historical reliability. Nevertheless, it indicates that the community of al-Suyûtî's time (d. 1505) was unaware of anything that might correspond to what Widengren envisages as the Prophet's intended format.

Furthermore, if this verse was actually an expression of Muḥammad's own intentions—as Widengren takes it to be—one might expect its wording to have exerted some influence on the tradition, at least to the extent that *qarâtis* (or the singular *qirṭās*) would appear in the traditional list of materials.⁷ But such has not been the case.

In a somewhat idiosyncratic reading of an important verse, Widengren finds further support for his conviction that "Muḥammad himself has both read and written the Divine Revelations":⁸

وَمَا كُنْتُمْ تَتْلُوا مِنْ قَبْلِهِ مِنْ كِتَابٍ وَلَا تَخُطُّهُ بِيَمِينِكُمْ إِذَا لَأَرْتَابَ الْمُبْطِلُونَ

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

Sûrat al-ʿAnkabût 29:48

It is difficult to see how this verse which is traditionally taken as proof of the Prophet's inability to write, if not also to read,⁹ could be taken by Widengren as an indication of quite the opposite. The text neither confirms nor denies Muḥammad's literacy, but Widengren uses it to prove that the Prophet was literate.¹⁰ On the other hand, traditional Muslim commentators, perhaps with

⁶ Al-Suyûtî, *Al-Itqân fî ʿUlûm al-Qur'ân*, edited by Muṣṭafâ Dîb al-Bughâ, 2 vols. (Damascus and Beirut: Dâr Ibn Kathîr, 1993), 1: 184–86.

⁷ Wensinck found only two uses of *qirṭās* in the collections he indexed, neither of them connected with the Qur'ân (Wensinck, *Al-Muʿjam*, 5: 366). However, al-Suyûtî quotes a tradition on the authority of Sâlim b. ʿAbdallâh b. ʿUmar (a tradition allegedly from the *Muwaṭṭaʿ*) that Wensinck does not record) in which *qirṭās* is used in this connection (*al-Itqân*, 1: 186): Abû Bakr collected the Qur'ân on papyri. He had asked Zayd b. Thâbit about doing it but Zayd refused until his help was sought by (the second caliph) ʿUmar and so he did it.

⁸ Widengren, *Muḥammad*, 150. He takes Noldeke-Schwally to task for not considering the import of this verse with regard to Muḥammad's writing ability. However, they do see in it an indication that the revelations were being written down, though not by the Prophet. *GdQ*, 2: 1–2.

⁹ Noldeke-Schwally suggest this verse might indicate that Muḥammad could read. *GdQ*, 1: 14.

¹⁰ A similar conclusion was drawn, with no better warrant, by G. Weil, "Mahomet savait-il lire et écrire?" in *Actes du IV^e Congrès des Orientalistes* (Florence, 1880), 357–66. Bell also believes that Muḥammad actually wrote out the text himself (R. Bell, trans. *The Qur'an: Translated with a Critical*

greater justification, have claimed to find in it a confirmation of his illiteracy. 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.

Nöldeke 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 Muḥammad 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."¹¹ 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 *q'ryānā* (a liturgical reading), Nöldeke plainly mistranslates this word as 'Lektionar,' a meaning nowhere attested in the lexicons, where a 'lectionary' is rather *ktābā da-q'ryānā*, literally a book of liturgical readings.¹²

Nöldeke 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' uses of *wahy* (usually translated 'revelation') emphasized indistinctness rather than the clarity appropriate to the kind of written document that Nöldeke suggests Muḥammad had in mind.¹⁴ Some parallel might be found in the use of

Rearrangement of the Surahs. [Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1937–1939], vi), although he does not use this verse to support his contention (R. Bell, *A Commentary on the Qur'ān*, Journal of Semitic Studies Monograph, no. 14. [Manchester: University of Manchester Press, 1991], 2: 65).

¹¹ *GdQ*, 2: 1.

¹² *GdQ*, 2: 1, n. 1. See R. Payne-Smith, *Thesaurus Syriacus*. 1879–1901. Reprint, Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms, 1981 2: 3716; C. Brockelmann, *Lexicon Syriacum*. (1928. Reprint, Hildesheim and New York: Georg Olms, 1982), 690. This error is also made by A. Neuwirth (perhaps following Nöldeke) and she uses it to bolster her contention that the name *qur'ān* signals an intention to use the text as a "Perikopenbuch," a source of readings for use in liturgical settings. "Vom Rezitationstext über die Liturgie zum Kanon: zu Entstehung und Wiederauflosung der Surenkomposition im Verlauf der Entwicklung eines islamischen Kultus," in *The Qur'ān as Text*, ed. Stefan Wild, Islamic Philosophy, Theology and Science: Texts and Studies, vol. 27 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1996), 69–105, here 91. In the French version, the confusion is compounded by the fact that the translator chose to render 'Lektionar' as 'misseil'. Though neither Nöldeke nor Neuwirth can offer any evidence for the use of the *q'ryānā* for 'lectionary', there is evidence of its use in pre-Islamic Syriac liturgical manuscripts to designate a particular scripture reading assigned for a feast. See William A. Graham, "The Earliest Meaning of 'Qur'ān,'" *Die Welt des Islams*, 23–24 (1984): 361–77, here 365.

¹³ *Muhammedanische Studien*, 2 vols. (1889–90; reprint Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1961) 2: 7, n. 1.

¹⁴ Polosin cites a line from 'Antara: كويحي صحائف من عهد كسرى' 'like the *wahy* of pages from the days of Kistrā.' V. V. Polosin, *Slovar' Poetov Plemeni 'Abs VI–VIII BB*, (Vocabulary of the Poets of the

the word *āthār* 'traces' or 'tracks' to refer to Prophetic and other traditions, even when they remained determinedly oral, with no suggestion of their having been written.

Furthermore, other uses by the same poets show that *wahy* is equally applicable to communication by sound or gesture. For example, one of the odes of 'Alqama uses the related verbal form *yūḥî* to describe the "speech" of a male ostrich to his nestlings:

يُوحِي إِلَيْهَا بِإِنْقَاضٍ وَنَقْنَقَةٍ كَمَا تَرَاظُنْ فِي أَفْدَانِهَا الرُّومَ

*He communicates (yūḥî) with them in squeaking and clacking sounds, just as the Greeks in their castles speak to each other in an incomprehensible language.*¹⁵

In the poems of the Hudhail tribe the noun *wahy* refers to thunder and the cognate verb *awḥā* is used for the 'speech' of an eagle.¹⁶ In the Qur'ān itself, Zechariah, after being struck dumb, "made signs" (*awḥā*) 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*.

Nöldeke argues that since Muḥammad 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.¹⁷ He summarily dismisses those, like Sprenger and Hirschfeld, who would suggest otherwise, charging that they offer no substantial proof.¹⁸ Yet surely the burden of proof more properly falls on anyone who would maintain that Muḥammad 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

'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. Izutsu 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 *Mu'allāqa* where Izutsu translates *كَمَا ضَمَّنَ الرَّحْمَنُ سَلَامُهَا* as "as if their rocks contained characters." One might as well translate it "as if their rocks contained messages in a strange language." *God and Man*, 159–60.

¹⁵ Ahlwardt, *Divans*, 112, v. 26. M. Sells translates *yūḥî* here as 'beckons'. (*Desert Tracings: Six Classic Arabian Odes* [Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1989], 35).

¹⁶ Bernhard Lewin, *A Vocabulary of the Hudailian Poems*. Acta Regiae Societatis Scientiarum et Litterarum Gothoburgensis: Humaniora 13 (Göteborg: Kungl. vetenskaps-och vitterhets-samhället, 1978): 465.

¹⁷ *GdQ*, 1: 261.

¹⁸ *GdQ*, 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.¹⁹ Therefore, Sprenger seems quite justified in concluding that the Prophet understood the Qur'ân to live not on paper so much as in the hearts of the "unlettered" to whom he was sent.²⁰

Nöldeke's certainty about the Prophet's intentions is somewhat strange, considering his description of him elsewhere. Arguing against the contention that the Prophet foresaw 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'ân than he had to the choice of a successor.²¹

Indeed, one might even turn Nöldeke's earlier argument around and suggest that, since on the evidence of the tradition Muḥammad does not 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-kitâb* that he takes it as referring to (among other things, of course) a document that was originally conceived of as distinct from *al-qur'ân*, and which ultimately took its place.²² What is called in the text *al-qur'ân* is, in Bell's understanding, a collection

¹⁹ Strangely enough, al-Suyûti quotes Al-Khaṭṭābī as claiming that when Zayd said that at the time of Muḥammad's death the Qur'ân had not been collected at all (*lam yakun al-qur'ānu jumī'a fi shay'in*), what he really meant was that it was all but complete! (*Al-Itqān*, 1: 181)

²⁰ Aloys Sprenger, *Das Leben und die Lehre des Mohammad*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (Berlin: Nicolaische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1869), 3: xxxiii.

²¹ *GdQ*, 1: 47. At the time of Muḥammad's death, no discussion had been given to the succession, so it was up to the community to decide the matter—and even to decide by what method and what criteria the decision should be arrived at. The question of succession in the early period of Islam remained an extremely controversial issue, and gave rise ultimately to the division into Sunni and Shi'a.

²² Bell, *Introduction*, 134. This position is still held by A. T. Welch in *Et*² (art. Qur'ân), 5: 403. Arthur Jeffery rejects Bell's contention that Muhammad intended to produce a *kitâb* for his community since the earliest strata of tradition make it clear that there was no such collection at the time of the Prophet's death. However, he does refer later to "material that the Prophet had stored away in

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.²³ *Al-kitâb*, according to Bell, was never completed and whatever logical framework it may once 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'ân."²⁴ Bell understands *al-kitâb* 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'ân*.²⁵ 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.²⁶

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'ân. However, in trying to sustain his position he is forced to gloss over many of those parts of the text where the terms *kitâb* and *qur'ân* appear together. In these instances he suggests, less than convincingly, that *kitâb* refers to the heavenly Book itself rather than to the version of it brought by Muḥammad.²⁷ However, it is not as unusual as Bell seems to think²⁸ 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 [Muḥammad]"?²⁹

preparation for the *Kitâb*" which may have been inherited by Abû Bakr (*Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'ân: the Old Codices* [Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1937], 5–6).

²³ Bell, *Introduction*, 132.

²⁴ Bell, *Introduction*, 135.

²⁵ Bell, *Introduction*, 136.

²⁶ Bell, *Introduction*, 134.

²⁷ For example, the beginning of Sûrat Yûsuf.

أَلَمْ تَلِكْ آيَاتُ الْكِتَابِ الْمُبِينِ || إِنَّا أَنْزَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ
Alif. Lām. Râ. These are verses of the writing that makes things clear. || We have sent it down as a recitation in Arabic, that you might understand. Sûrat Yûsuf 12:1–2

In approaching this verse in his *Commentary* [1: 375], Bell avoids the obvious implication for his theory by suggesting that *kitâb* should here be understood as the heavenly Book rather than as the Book that Muhammad had intended to produce.

²⁸ Bell, *Commentary*, 1: 375.

²⁹ Bell, *Introduction*, 134.

Because he manipulates the Qur'anic text to draw too strong a distinction between *kitâb* and *qur'ân*, Bell fails to examine carefully enough what the text means by *kitâb*. He is correct in saying that "it is pretty clear that something similar to the Torah and the Evangel was meant."³⁰ However, this begs the question of form, since he fails to investigate what precisely Muḥammad 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'ân*. In some respects he even adds to the confusion by stating more forcefully than Bell with reference to the early Medinan phase of Muḥammad's career, that "certainly his function is now represented not as that of warning people of punishment but as that of producing a book."³¹ Even if it is arguable that, as time goes on, the Qur'ân becomes less concerned with stories of punishment, one is not limited to choosing merely between these two functions in describing Muḥammad'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-kitâb*" of *Sûrat Maryam* (Q 19:16, 41, 51, 54, 56).³² However, it is not clear that we should read this in the way Watt does as something like a publisher's instructions 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 Muḥammad'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 Muḥammad's function appears to be reciting (*ṣt-l-w*) the revelations of

³⁰ Bell, *Introduction*, 134.

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'ân (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."

³² Watt is joined in this by T. Kronholm, who also sees evidence of an early fragmentary written Qur'ân in Q 28:49 and Q 11:13 ("Dependence and Prophetic Originality in the Koran," *Orientalia Suecana* 31–32 [1982–3]: 50).

God to the people—not producing the *kitâb* 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)³³ is the idea that the task of producing the Book was left undone because of other responsibilities and demands that pressed upon Muḥammad. If, as they claim, the verses about the *kitâb* indicate that the Prophet's defining function was to produce such a canonical text, it is difficult to see how Muḥammad 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 Muḥammad 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."³⁴ Blachère conjectures that in the Medinan period, as Muḥammad 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.³⁵ 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 [*jamʿ*] and recitation [*qur'ân*] 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.³⁶ Blachère also points out the problems posed by such a project: everyone was aware of the incompleteness of the revelation as long as Muḥammad 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,

³³ A. T. Welch and J. D. Pearson, "Al-Kur'ân" in *ET*, 5: 403. See also A. T. Welch (ed.), *Studies in Qur'ân and Tafsir*. Journal of the American Academy of Religion Thematic Issue, 47.4S (1979): 624.

³⁴ "On n'a aucune raison formelle de croire que Mahomet ait procédé en personne à la constitution d'un *corpus* de la Révélation. On en a de sérieuses d'estimer que cette œuvre n'a même pas été projetée par lui." R. Blachère, *Introduction au Coran* (Paris: Maisonneuve, 1947), 21.

³⁵ Blachère, *Introduction*, 18–19.

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 Muḥammad 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 Muḥammad the ultimately frustrated intention to produce the written codex that the Qur'ân 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'ân 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 Muḥammad's bringing of a *kitâb* was often a point at issue in his confrontations with the *ahl al-kitâb*. As will be clear when we examine these polemical passages in detail, there is no indication that Muḥammad felt the unwritten form of the revelations in any way compromised their status as the *kitâb* of God.

What controls all these scholars' interpretations of the Prophet's actions and intentions is not a seventh-century Hijâzî 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'ân 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'ân's understanding of scripture, on the one hand, and Islam's understanding of the Qur'ân 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'ân 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

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'ân 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'ân 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'ân 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'ân what Muḥammad and the Muslims were learning from the scripted people with whom they had contact, not to read *into* the Qur'ân what we have learned about those scriptures.

MUSLIM SCHOLARS AND THE WRITTEN NATURE OF THE QUR'ÂN

Muslim scholarship, too, has overwhelmingly assumed that the Prophet must have intended the Qur'ân 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'ân in its present form had not been written at the time of Muḥammad's death, but that is as far as the agreement stretches.³⁹

TRADITIONAL ACCOUNTS OF THE WRITING DOWN OF THE QUR'ÂN

The traditions about the collection of the Qur'ân 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'ân 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 (*mutawâtir*) oral tradition from Muḥammad, checked and rechecked by Gabriel, the intermediary for the revelation.⁴⁰

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

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'ân as Text*, 177–194, here 194.

³⁹ William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 46ff. See also Nabia Abbott, *North Arabic Script*, 47.

⁴⁰ Bukhârî, 8: 115 (*K. al-ist'adhân, bâb man nâja bayna yaday-l-nâs*). The traditional account that Gabriel went through an annual check of the contents of the Qur'ân with the Prophet and that it was done twice in the last year of Muḥammad's life was taken up by exegetes and scholars in arguing

of the written Qur'ân, traditions even place Zayd b. Thâbit, Muhammad's most important scribe and the producer of the 'Uthmânic codex, at the final meeting with Gabriel.⁴¹

Al-Baghawî said in his *Sharh al-Sunna*: It is said that Zayd b. Thâbit 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 Abû Bakr and 'Umar relied on him in the matter of the collection of [the Qur'ân] and 'Uthmân entrusted him with the writing of the codices.

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

From Abû Zabyân who said: Ibn 'Abbâs said to us, 'Which [reading] of the Qur'ân do you reckon the most important?' We said, 'The reading of 'Abdallâh; our reading is the latest.' The Messenger of God had told him that Gabriel (upon whom be peace) used to check the Qur'ân with him once a year in the month of Ramaḍân and twice in the last year [of his life] and from this 'Abdallâh had witnessed what had been abrogated and what 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'ân materials took place after the battle of Yamâma (12 A.H.) when 'Umar came to the then Caliph Abû Bakr and urged him to gather

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

⁴¹ *Kitâb al-Mabânî*, in *Two Muqaddimas to the Qur'anic Sciences*, ed. A. Jeffery (Cairo: Maktabat al-Khânjî, 1954), 25. Also al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân fî 'ulûm al-qur'ân* (Damascus: Dâr Ibn Kathîr, 1993), 1: 158:

وقال البغوي في شرح السنة: يقال ان زيد بن ثابت يشهد العرصة الاحيرة التي بين فيها ما نسخ وما بقي وكتبها لرسول الله ﷺ وقرأها عليه وكان يقرئ الناس بها حتى مات ولذلك اعتمدت ابو بكر وعمر في جمعهم وولاد عثمان كتبت المصاحف

⁴² *Kitâb al-Mabânî*, 26:

عن ابي ظبيان قال: قال لنا ابن عباس: اي القرآن تعدون اولاً؟ قلنا قراءة عبد الله، وقرأتنا هي الآخرة فقال له رسول الله ﷺ: كان يعرض عليه جبريل عليه السلام القرآن كل سنة مرة في شهر رمضان وانه عرض عليه آخر نسخة من القرآن فشهدت منه عبد الله ما نسخ وما بدل.

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

Abû Bakr sent for me, at the time of the slaughter of those at Yamâma, and 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭâb was with him. Abû Bakr said, "'Umar has come to me and said that the slaughter took a great toll on the reciters of the Qur'ân⁴³ on the day of Yamâma and he fears lest a similar toll fall upon reciters in every place of battle and as a result much of the Qur'ân be lost (*fa-yadhhab min al-qur'ân kathîr*). He said he thinks I should give orders for the Qur'ân to be collected (*j-m-*)."

[Abû 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 (*wahy*) for the Messenger of God (may the peace and blessings of God be upon him). So search out the Qur'ân and collect it."

I [Zayd] said [to Abû 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'ân! How can you do something that the Messenger of God (may the peace and blessings of God be upon him) did not do?" [Abû 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 Abû Bakr and 'Umar. So I searched out the Qur'ân and collected it

⁴³ Whether the *qurrâ'* were indeed the faithful guardians of the still-oral text of the Qur'ân 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 *qara'a* in *Lisân al-'Arab*, that the root carries a sense of periodization, and that the most obvious meaning of *qurrâ'* in the earliest usage is to refer not to Qur'ân 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 *Qurrâ'* and the Early Arab Lexicographical Tradition," *JSS* 36.2 (1991): 297–307, and the references there to other theories.

⁴⁴ Another tradition from Zayd, (*Kitâb al-Mabânî*, 20–22), has Abû 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 *hadith* which seeks (unconvincingly, in my opinion) to reconcile the accounts of the earlier collection by Abû Bakr and the later one by 'Uthmân.

from scraps of various materials (*riqâ*⁴⁵) from the bark of palm-branches (*usub*), from thin stones (*likhâf*) and from the hearts of men. We found the end of Sûrat Barâ'a from ﴿لَقَدْ جَاءَكُمْ رَسُولٌ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ عَزِيزٌ عَلَيْهِ مَا عَنِتُّمْ حَرِيصٌ﴾ [i.e., Q 9:128–9], in the keeping of Khuzayma b. Thâbit.⁴⁶

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 *muṣḥaf* (pl., *maṣâḥif*, a codex or collection of *ṣuḥuf* 'pages of writing'),⁴⁷ even ingeniously claiming that the Prophet had earlier declared Khuzayma's witness as equal to that of two men.⁴⁸ Alternately Zayd was taken to be the second required witness since he knew the verse,⁴⁹ or Khuzayma was understood to possess the written corroboration of a verse that others only knew from memory.⁵⁰ Yet another tradition has it that 'Uthmân was the second witness.⁵¹

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 any verse before it was accepted. However, the interpretation of this number varies. Traditions tend to privilege oral testimony. For example, al-Suyûtî recounts a tradition from Ibn Abî Dâwûd on the authority of Yahyâ b. 'Abd al-Rahmân b. Hâṭib 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 on:⁵²

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.

⁴⁵ Al-Suyûtî understands these to have been of leather, parchment, or paper (*al-Itqân*, 1: 186).

⁴⁶ *Kitâb al-Mabâni*, 17–18. Al-Suyûtî uses virtually the same tradition as the authoritative account of the first collection of the text (*al-Itqân*, 1: 182). Most traditions are uncertain whether it was Khuzayma or Ibn Khuzayma.

⁴⁷ Al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân*, 1: 184–5.

⁴⁸ Al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân*, 1: 185. فقال اكتبوها فإن رسول الله ﷺ جعل شهادته بشهادة رجلين، 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-Itqân*, 1: 184.

⁵⁰ Al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân*, 1: 184.

⁵¹ Al-Sijistânî, *Kitâb al-Maṣâḥif*, in Jeffery, *Materials*, 11.

⁵² Al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân*, 1: 184: وهذا يدل على أن زيداً كان لا يكتبه في فرد وحده مكتوباً حتى يشهد به من تلقاه سمعاً مع قول زيد. كان يحفظ فكان يفعل ذلك بمبالغة في الاحتياط.

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-ḥifẓ 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 *ḥadīth* (pl., *aḥādīth* 'an account of a saying or action of the Prophet') transmission even well 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-Sijistânî's *Kitâb al-Maṣâḥif*, for example, there are numerous *aḥādīth* like this one concerning Ibn Mas'ûd's rejection of Zayd's work of codification for 'Uthmân: "ʿAbdallâh [Ibn Mas'ûd] said, 'I was already able to recite seventy sûras 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 confidence in written material was growing. The first is *Kitâb fahm al-sunan* by al-Hârith b. Asad al-Muḥāsibî [d. 243 A.H.]:

Writing the Qur'ân is not an innovation (*muḥdathā*), 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 awraq*) that had

⁵³ Quoted by al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân*, 1: 184.

⁵⁴ Quoted by al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân*, 1: 184.

⁵⁵ Richard W. Bulliet, *Islam: The View from the Edge* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 18–22.

⁵⁶ Al-Sijistânî, *Kitâb al-Maṣâḥif*, 13ff.

been found in the rooms of the Messenger of God, may the peace and blessings of God be upon him, on which the Qur'ân 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-Suyûtî also quotes al-Khaṭṭābî [d. 996 C.E.] arguing against those who claimed that the Prophet's prohibition against writing down things he said applied also to the Qur'ân. Al-Khaṭṭābî quotes a Prophetic ḥadīth which explicitly limits the prohibition to non-qur'anic material, and then he claims that the Qur'ân had already been written in its entirety during Muḥammad'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 Qur'anic tradition going back to Muḥammad—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 'Uthmān 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 'Umar, who in turn bequeathed it to his daughter Ḥaṣṣa.⁵⁹ It seems to have played no official or public role until much later, when 'Uthmān was caliph. The reason usually given for what is supposed to be the second recension, made under orders from 'Uthmān, is the disagreement within the rapidly expanding community on exactly how to recite the Qur'ân:

Ḥudhayfa b. al-Yamān came to meet 'Uthmān from the frontier of Armenia and Adharbayjān, where the Syrians and Iraqis had been

⁵⁷ Al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqān*, 1: 185:

كتابة القرآن ليست بمحدثة فانه ﷺ كان يأمر بكتاتبه ولكنه كان مفرقا في الرقاع والاكتاف والعصب فانما أمر الصديق بنسخها من مكان الى مكان محتما وكان ذلك بمنزلة أوراق وحدت في بيت رسول الله ﷺ فيها القرآن منتشر فجمعها جامع وربطها بحيط حتى لا يصيب منها شيء

⁵⁸ Al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqān*, 1: 181:

وقد كان القرآن كتب كله في عهد رسول الله ﷺ ولكن غير مجموع في موضع واحد ولا مرتب السور

On the prohibition of writing, see M. J. Kister, "... *Lā taqr'ū l-qur'āna 'alā l-muḥafiyyn wa-lā taḥmilu l-silma 'ani l-ṣaḥāfiyyin* . . . : Some notes on the Transmission of Ḥadīth," *JSAT* 22 (1998): 127–62.

⁵⁹ Al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqān*, 1: 182.

campaigning together. Ḥudhayfa had noticed how they disagreed in their recitation of the Qur'ân, so he said to 'Uthmān b. 'Affān, "O Commander of the Faithful, take control of this people before they disagree about the *kitāb* the way the Jews and the Christians did."⁶⁰

We were sitting in the mosque and 'Abdallāh [ibn Mas'ūd] was reciting. Ḥudhayfa arrived and said, "What! The reading of Ibn Umm 'Abd [ibn Mas'ūd] and the reading of Abū Mūsā al-Ash'arī! By God, if I live long enough to meet the Commander of the Faithful ['Uthmān], then I'll tell him to make of them a single reading."⁶¹

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

I was sitting with Ḥudhayfa, Abū Mūsā and 'Abdallāh b. Mas'ūd, and Ḥudhayfa said, "The Baṣrans recite the version (*qirā'a*) of Abū Mūsā and the people of Kufans recite the version of 'Abdallāh. By God, if I could get to the Commander of the Faithful I would tell him drown these codices!" 'Abdallāh said, "Then you would be drowned too, and not in water!"⁶²

Tradition would have it that Ḥudhayfa did reach 'Uthmān and that he set about trying to unify the Muslims on one reading of the Qur'ân:

'Uthmān was frightened [by what Ḥudhayfa had said] and sent someone to Ḥaṣṣa the daughter of 'Umar for the sheets (*ṣuḥuf*) on which the Qur'ân had been collected. Ḥaṣṣa sent them to him and 'Uthmān ordered Zayd b. Ṭhābit, Sa'īd b. al-'Āṣ, 'Abdallāh b. Zubayr and 'Abd al-Rahmān b. Hishām to copy them into codices.⁶³

The traditions surrounding the event are contradictory and inconclusive. According to some, 'Uthmān merely had the *ṣuḥuf* of Ḥaṣṣa copied and sent out to all the major provincial centers.⁶⁴ According to others he commissioned the

⁶⁰ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif*, 19.

⁶¹ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif*, 13.

⁶² Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif*, 14.

⁶³ Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif*, 20.

⁶⁴ *Kitāb al-Mabānī*, 22; Al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Maṣāḥif*, 21. If it were the case, however, that 'Uthmān's recension was merely the provision of multiple copies of Ḥaṣṣa's sheets bound in book form, then the destruction or effacement of them after her death (*Kitāb al-Mabānī*, 22) seems to have served no purpose. Since they would have been identical to all the other metropolitan codices distributed by 'Uthmān, 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. *Thâbit* saving the day once again with a missing verse from *Sûrat al-Ahzâb*).⁶⁵ Some accounts force these two incompatible notions together.⁶⁶ Many testify to the completeness of the resultant recension.

Against this strand of tradition which emphasizes the completeness of the 'Uthmânic text, there is another, very significant strand that underscores first, 'Uthmân's awareness of the potential difficulties arising from dialectal and orthographic differences among the members of his commission,⁶⁷ and second, that the resulting *muṣḥaf* did in fact suffer on account of those differences. There are several traditions to this effect:

On the authority of 'Ikrima al-Tâ'i, who said that when the *muṣḥaf* was brought to 'Uthmân he saw in it some cases of incorrect Arabic (*lahn*) and so he said, "If the one who dictated had been of Hudhayl and the scribe from Thaqîf, then these mistakes would not be there."⁶⁸

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'ân.⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰ 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-Suyûtî*, *al-Itqân*, 1: 187.

⁶⁶ *Bukhârî*, 6: 316 (*Kitâb faḍâ'il al-qur'ân*).

⁶⁷ *Kitâb al-Mabânî*, 19–21.

⁶⁸ *Kitâb al-Maṣâḥif*, 32–33. Other variations of such traditions are listed by Bergstraßer, *GdQ*, 3: 2. He discusses the mistakes in the 'Uthmânic *muṣḥaf* in 3: 1–6.

⁶⁹ *Kitâb al-Maṣâḥif*, 32–33.

⁷⁰ Hossein Modarressi has pointed out that the Shī'ites have often been accused of initiating the idea that the text of the Qur'ân 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 Imâmīte Shī'a believe that the text of the Qur'ân was corrupted through additions, omissions, and alterations. Hossein Modarressi, "Early Debates on the Integrity of the Qur'ân," *Studia Islamica* 77 (1993): 5–39.

Hamida bint Abi Yûnus said, "My father recited to me when he was eighty years old from the *muṣḥaf* of 'Â'isha «Surely God and his angels ask blessings [*yusallûna*] on the Prophet. O you who believe ask blessings and invoke peace upon him. ...»" She said, "That was before 'Uthmân changed [*yughayyir*] the codices."⁷¹

Zirr b. Ḥubaysh said: "'Ubayy b. Ka'b asked me, 'How do you count [the verses in] *Sûrat al-Ahzâb*?' I said, 'Seventy-two [or seventy-three] verses.' He said, 'It used to be the same length as *Sûrat 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 *shaykha* commit adultery, stone both of them outright as an exemplary punishment from God. God is mighty, wise.»"⁷²

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 'Uthmân, who was far from universally admired. The second, however, is but one example of the many *ahâdith* in which the completeness of the *muṣḥaf* 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'ân and the *sunna*, Muḥammad'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 Muḥammad 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.⁷³ Burton's thesis, put briefly,⁷⁴ is that the traditions concerning the collection of the Qur'ân should be understood as issuing from the same source as legal *ahâdith* and so should be approached with the same

⁷¹ *Al-Suyûtî*, *al-Itqân*, 2: 718.

⁷² *Al-Suyûtî*, *al-Itqân*, 2: 718.

⁷³ Especially in Burton, *Collection*; also in his "Those are the high-flying cranes," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 15 (1970): 246–65; "The Interpretation of Q 87:6–7 and the Theories of Naskh," *Der Islam* 62 (1985): 5–19; *The Sources of Islamic Law: Islamic Theories of Abrogation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990); and his introduction to Abû 'Ubayd al-Qâsim b. Sallâm's *Kitâb al-Nâsiḥ wa-l-Mansûḥ*, ed. John Burton (Cambridge: E. J. Gibb Memorial Trust, 1987).

⁷⁴ He summarizes his conclusion in *Collection*, 225–40.

critical sophistication.⁷⁵ 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 (*uṣūl al-fiqh*). By developing an intricate theory of abrogation, they sought to maintain the authoritativeness of the Qur'ân alone against claims for the absolute authority of the prophetic *sunna*.⁷⁶

The key issue arose in situations where a Qur'anic 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 Muḥammad's own practice. Yet such would indicate that the *sunna* was capable of overriding a clear Qur'anic 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 Qur'anic authority. This kind of abrogation they referred to as *naskh al-tilâwa dūna-l-ḥukm*, 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 'Uthmân's promulgation of a standardized text.⁷⁷ He suggests these reports of variants were being used to "prove" that the universally acknowledged *muṣḥaf* does not actually contain the complete text of the Qur'ân; 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 Qur'anic 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 Qur'ân 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 Qur'ân with a chain of transmitters (*isnâd*) that will establish its authority as a widely attested (*mutawâtir*) tradition going back to the Prophet.⁷⁸ 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 Qur'ân did somehow still rely on Qur'anic rather than Prophetic authority.⁷⁹

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 Qur'ân as *document* and the Qur'ân as *source*. Considered as canonical document for recitation, the tradition presents the Qur'ân as completely and reliably contained in the *muṣḥaf*; regarded as source for law, the tradition claims that the Qur'ân is in fact more extensive than the *muṣḥaf*.⁸⁰ Burton's contention that the Qur'ân 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.⁸¹

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 Qur'ân 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 *muṣḥaf* of Muḥammad."⁸² 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 (*uṣūlīs*), and he thereby discounts the main stated reason for 'Uthmân's involvement in the history of the Qur'ân text. He has been equally

⁷⁵ Burton, *Collection*, 218–19.

⁷⁶ Burton, *Collection*, 161–62.

⁷⁷ Burton, *Collection*, 228–29.

⁷⁸ Burton, *Collection*, 190–224.

⁷⁹ Burton, *Collection*, 230–31. This has interesting parallels in the claim that the authority for certain practices among some Brahmans rests on "lost" Vedas.

⁸⁰ Burton, *Collection*, 232–33.

⁸¹ Patricia Crone, "Two Legal Problems Bearing on the Early History of the Qur'ân," *ISAI* 18 (1994), 10–15.

⁸² Burton, *Collection*, 239–40.

persuasive in showing that the credit, variously assigned, for first collecting the text could be motivated by a concern for the *isnâd* of the *muṣḥaf*. 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 Qur'ân 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 *uṣûlî* inventiveness—distancing the Prophet from any lacunae that they may wish to claim are in the *muṣḥaf*.⁸⁴ 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 Qur'anic 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 Qur'ân as Muḥammad 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 *muṣḥaf* belonging to the Prophet. Burton's evidence does seem to support his claim that there was only ever one written codification of the Qur'ân. 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 Muḥammad. 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.

⁸³ Al-Khaṭṭābī is quoted to this effect in al-Suyūṭī, *al-Itqân*, 1: 181. He comments on a tradition from Zayd to the effect that at the time the Prophet died the Qur'ân had not been collected at all:

أما لم يجمع القرآن في المصحف لما كان يترقه من ورود ناسخ لبعض أحكامه أو تلاوته

"[The Prophet] did not assemble the Qur'ân in a codex since he was keeping it open for the revelation of something that would abrogate in part its norms or its wording."

⁸⁴ Burton, *Collection*, 132ff.

⁸⁵ See note 97, this chapter.

The significance even of doubtful traditions

It is virtually impossible at this late stage to ascertain the historical reliability of any of the traditions concerning the compilation of the Qur'ân. Nevertheless, even if we were to share Burton's complete skepticism, it still seems possible to rescue from the confusion of the conflicting traditions some indication of the community's understanding of *kitâb*—not because we know what actually took place with regard to the Qur'ân's collection, but because we know what ideas seemed to the community feasible enough, at the time the reports entered the tradition, for their claims to historicity to be accepted. This has always been one of the tenets of non-Muslim *ḥadīth* criticism: that even those reports whose *isnâds* are not trustworthy do provide valuable information about the period in which they entered circulation.

If the traditions about the first collection of the text of the Qur'ân are accepted as genuine, we may take them as a reliable indication that, at least according to the early community's understanding, the Qur'ân was not a book of scripture in the sense that term was understood in wider Jewish or Christian circles. If, on the other hand, the antiquity of this line of tradition is doubtful, then it seems to have had one of two purposes: to keep open a canon that had already been closed by Muḥammad's own codification of the Qur'ân (as Burton suggests), or to take away from 'Uthmân and attribute to 'Umar and Abû Bakr some of the kudos for what later came to be seen as an indispensable service to Islam (Nöldeke and Schwally's conclusion).⁸⁶ Whichever explanation we accept, the reports indicate that at the time the accounts entered the tradition it seemed realistic to the community both that there would have been no authoritative collection of the Qur'ân more than a year after the Prophet's death, and also that even pious people like Abû Bakr and Zayd b. Thâbit could have argued against the advisability and propriety of undertaking such a codification.

The importance of this for our purpose should not be underestimated. The traditions, whether reliably attributed or not, demonstrate that from the earliest times the community did not consider written codification essential to the nature of the Qur'ân. That is to say, they saw no necessary connection between the Qur'ân's calling itself *kitâb* and its being collected and/or written down. Indeed, *Kitâb al-Mabânî* presents the decision to write the recitations down as entirely pragmatic: no safer way could be found to preserve the texts as long as there was a danger that the *ḥuffâz* (those who had memorized all or part of the Qur'ân)

⁸⁶ *GdQ*, 2: 22: "When the Believers found themselves faced with the bitter truth that so inept and unpopular a ruler as 'Uthmân was the father of the canonical recension, it must have seemed to them that justice demanded they apportion at least a role in the preparatory work of this recension to his predecessors who were so far superior to him."

might be killed.⁸⁷ Ibn Qutayba explained Ibn Mas'ûd's omission of the Qur'ân's opening *sûra* 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 *Fâtiḥa* from his *muṣḥaf*, it was not because he thought that it was not part of the Qur'ân. God forbid! Rather he held that the Qur'ân 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 *Sûrat al-Ḥamd* [*al-Fâtiḥa*] on account of its brevity and the fact that it was obligatory for everyone to know it [for the ritual prayer].⁸⁸

Al-Bâqillânî's defense of Ibn Mas'ûd's choice also shows that there was no necessary connection in the community's mind between a text's being part of the Qur'ân and its being written down:

It is not reliably reported from 'Abdallâh that these three chapters [Q 1, 113 and 114] are not part of the Qur'ân. 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'ân. The *sunna* in his view was that they should record only what the Prophet had commanded to be recorded, and 'Abdallâh did not have information that the Prophet had himself recorded these *sûras* or commanded that they be recorded.⁸⁹

Further to this, when the Qur'ân finally came into what we would call book form, it was referred to not as a *kitâb* but as a *muṣḥaf*. The word *muṣḥaf* 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 *kitâb* indicates in that context.⁹⁰ Al-Suyûtî reports as unusual or surprising a tradition to the effect that Sâlim was the first to collect the Qur'ân and he gave it the name *muṣḥaf*, a word he was said to have learned in (Christian) Ethiopia.⁹¹ Certainly the Ethiopic term *maṣḥaf* (meaning both 'book' and 'scripture', from the verb *ṣaḥafa* '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.⁹² It is not clear whether in that case any distinction is implied between *kitâb* and *muṣḥaf*. However, one must consider the likelihood of such a distinction in discourse about the Qur'ân, since it was clearly recognized that to say that the Prophet judged in accordance with *kitâb Allâh* was not necessarily the same thing as saying that he judged in accordance with the Qur'ân text.⁹³

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

كَلَّا إِنَّهَا تَذْكِرَةٌ ۖ فَمَنْ شَاءَ ذَكَرْهُ ۖ فِي صُحُفٍ مُّكَرَّمَةٍ ۖ
مَرْفُوعَةٍ مُّطَهَّرَةٍ ۖ بِأَيْدِي سَفَرَةٍ ۖ كِرَامٍ بَرَرَةٍ

But no! 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.

Sûrat 'Abasa 80:11–16

رَسُولٌ مِّنَ اللَّهِ يَتْلُو صُحُفًا مُّطَهَّرَةً ۖ فِيهَا كُتُبٌ قَيِّمَةٌ

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

Sûrat al-Bayyina 98:2–3

إِنَّهُ لَقُرْآنٌ كَرِيمٌ ۖ فِي كِتَابٍ مَّكْنُونٍ ۖ لَا يَمَسُّهُ إِلَّا الْمُطَهَّرُونَ

That it is a noble Qur'ân || in a kitâb kept hidden || which no one touches
except those who have been purified.

Sûrat al-Wâqî'a 56:77–79

⁸⁷ *Kitâb al-Mabânî*, 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'ân 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-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân*, 1: 272.

وأما إسقاطه العاتية من مصحفه، فليس لظنه أنها ليست من القرآن، معاد الله ولكنه ذهب إلى أن القرآن إنما كتب وجمع بين اللوحين مخافة الشك والسيان والزيادة والنقصان، ورأى أن ذلك مأمون في سورة الحمد لقصرها ووجوب تعلمها على كل واحد.

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

⁹⁰ The only verbal form of $\sqrt{s-h-f}$ reported in *Lisân al-ʿArab* (11: 87–89) is *uṣḥifa*, which is clearly denominative. According to Lane (1654–55) forms (II and V) meaning 'to write or be written wrongly' are postclassical.

⁹¹ Al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân* 1: 183–84.

⁹² "It has become like the lines of a *zabûr* [psalm?] in the *maṣāḥif* [codices] of monks." Ahlwardt, *Divans*, 160. See also Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 193–94.

⁹³ Ibn Hajar 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. 'Ā'isha is reported to have explained the loss of some Qur'ân 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 Ḥaṣṣa 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 'Uthmânic 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 *muṣḥaf* 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 *ḥadīth*. 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'ân. Less noble animals than the goat (like mice and worms) do damage to copies of the Qur'ân, and, if God wills to destroy something, he can use whatever he likes, large or small. Of course the page was kept under the bed because that is

⁹⁴ Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb Ta'wīl Mukḥtaṣif al-Ḥadīth* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Kulliyāt al-Azhariyya, 1966), 310. This story of the domestic animal has been described as a fabrication of the Imāmīte Shī'a. However, Modarressi 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'ân as Scripture*, 95–96.

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'ân rarely take sufficient account of the state of the Arabic writing system during the Prophet's time. The application of the term "Uthmânic 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 *î*. 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'ân texts.⁹⁸ Al-Ḥajjāj 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 permissibility was not universally accepted.⁹⁹ Bergsträßer points out that even in the fourth and fifth centuries different systems of vowelings were extant.¹⁰⁰

Such underdeveloped writing could not have been of the essence of Muḥammad's *kitāb*. One might rather say that it was the *kitāb* 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, *Kitāb Ta'wīl*, 314. The Mu'tazila were indignant at such reports, which seemed abhorrent to reason and clearly contrary to the Qur'ân's own description of itself. (Q 41:41–42):

وَإِنَّهُ لَكِتَابٌ عَزِيزٌ ۖ لَا يَأْتِيهِ الْبَاطِلُ مِنْ بَيْنِ يَدَيْهِ وَلَا مِنْ خَلْفِهِ

For lo! it is a respected scripture. || Futility cannot approach it from the front or from behind.

How, they ask, could it be *ʿaziz* (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 (*waḥy*) be exposed to the risk of being eaten by a goat? (Ibn Qutayba, *Kitāb Ta'wīl*, 310–14.)

⁹⁷ Perhaps the fullest account of this is given in Abbott, *North Arabic Script*.

⁹⁸ Bergsträßer in *GdQ*, 3: 257–58.

⁹⁹ *GdQ*, 3: 261–62.

¹⁰⁰ *GdQ*, 3: 263–69.

and the needs of non-native speakers of Arabic that were responsible for the development of the fuller script.¹⁰¹ In this sense, the writing was the servant of the *kitâb'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:

مَا نَنْسَخْ مِنْ آيَةٍ أَوْ نُنسِهَا نَأْتِ بِخَيْرٍ مِنْهَا أَوْ مِثْلَهَا أَلَمْ تَعْلَمْ أَنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ
We do not abrogate 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?

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:106

What appears in the standard text as *nunsihâ* 'We cause it to be forgotten' is variously read as *nansahâ* 'We forget it', *tunsihâ* 'you cause it to be forgotten' or *tansahâ* 'you forget it'. Each of these readings presents an important theological commitment.¹⁰² 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. *Shâfi'î* preferred to read a *hamza* at the end of the verb (*nansa'uhâ*) and so to make it mean 'We postpone or delay it'.¹⁰³

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'ân's written existence. This is well illustrated by the case of the *fawâtih*, the so-called 'mysterious letters' at the beginning of various *sûras*. James Bellamy puts forward the most consistent and convincing suggestion as to the original nature of the *fawâtih* (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 *basmalah*, the invocation *bismi-llâh al-raḥmân al-raḥîm* 'In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate'.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰¹ Abbott, *North Arabic Script*, 48.

¹⁰² See Burton, *Collection*, 63–64; and Burton, *Kitâb al-Nâsikh*, 11–13.

¹⁰³ Burton, *Collection*, 63.

¹⁰⁴ James A. Bellamy, "The Mysterious Letters of the Koran: Old Abbreviations of the *Basmalah*," *JACS* 93 (1973): 267–85.

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,¹⁰⁵ it is conceivable that, for example, the combination *bâ'-alif* could be taken as the letter *tâ'*. Thus the combinations *bâ'-alif-sîn* or *bâ'-alif-sîn-mîm*—the first letters of the *basmalah*—could conceivably have been read as *tâ-sîn* or as *tâ-sîn-mîm*—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 *basmalah* held a controverted status within the text of the Qur'ân.¹⁰⁶ Since there was no oral tradition of reciting these letters and therefore they were arguably not part of the Qur'ân,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'ân. Given these limitations, it should be no surprise to discover that, both in the understanding of the Prophet and in the life of the

¹⁰⁵ These have been tabulated by Abbott in *North Arabic Script*, table 5, and by Adolf Grohmann in *Arabische Papyrskunde* (Handbuch der Orientalistik, Erste Abteilung, Ergänzungsband II, 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 papyrus PERF n° 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 language must have been no less developed.

¹⁰⁶ Some schools do not number the *basmalah* among the verses of the Qur'ân or recite them aloud, recognizing them only as *sûra* dividers and blessings. See B. Carra de Vaux, "Basmalah," in *SEI* 60. 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 *tâ'*, 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," *JACS* 113 (1993): 572–73.

¹⁰⁷ Bellamy, "Mysterious Letters," 277–78 and references. Al-Suyûti discusses the issue under the question of the number of verses in the Qur'ân and its *sûras* (*al-Itqân*, 1: 230–43).

Muslim community, written copies of the Qur'ân 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 'Uthmânic recension as Bellamy believes¹⁰⁸—but such transcripts played little public role in the transmission and preservation of the Qur'ân, as in the case of the *ṣuḥuf* of Ḥaṣṣa. 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 *sûras* was either known by oral tradition or was more or less obvious to one well-versed in Arabic, it was the *fawâtih* 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 *fawâtih* Bellamy has also pointed out that several of the more puzzling parts of the Qur'ân text proper, some of them quite significant, could be clarified by emending the 'Uthmânic text to bring it into line with what he presumes was the original oral tradition of Muḥammad.¹⁰⁹ 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-Ṭabarî, al-Suyûtî, and al-Zamakhsharî.¹¹⁰ 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'ân 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'ân 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 'Uthmânic text survived because of the disjunction between the oral and written traditions. By

¹⁰⁸ Bellamy, "Proposed Emendations," 573.

¹⁰⁹ Bellamy, "Proposed Emendations," presents eleven cases apart from the *fawâtih* where paleographical insights suggest emendations to problematic passages. Cf. also his "Fa-Ummuhu Ḥâwiyah: A Note on Sûrah 101:9," paper presented to the American Oriental Society (Cambridge, Mass.: March–April, 1992). He suggests emending this somewhat problematic verse to read *fa-ummatun ḥâwiyatun*, adducing several literary and Qur'anic parallels for such a *jawâb al-sharf*. His case here is much less convincing, however, since the emendation involves only the pointing and not the *rasm*. The principle of the *lectio difficilior potius* would seem to support *fa-ummuhu* as the original.

¹¹⁰ *GdQ*, 3: 3, notes 3–6.

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 *fawâtih*, the traditionally recognized flaws in the 'Uthmânic text,¹¹¹ and the difficulties of comprehension (which Bellamy would attribute to scribal errors). 'Uthmân's reported reaction to the mistakes in his *muṣḥaf* 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."¹¹² 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'ân. At the same time it points to the fact that, when the written text did finally come under scrutiny, there was "a certain givenness"¹¹³ to the *muṣḥaf* 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 'Uthmân'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.

STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION

IN WESTERN APPROACHES TO THE QUR'ÂN

Behind the common claim that production of the envisaged "book" was left unfinished, or that it was considered and deliberately postponed, lies an assumption about the structure and form appropriate to such a work. This assumption arises not from the Qur'anic revelations themselves, but rather from what scholars know of the structure and function of other scriptures. They expect to find more

¹¹¹ *GdQ*, 3: 1–6.

¹¹² *GdQ*, 3: 2: "لا تغيروها فان العرب ستعربها بالسكتها"

¹¹³ *GdQ*, 3: 3.

order and a clearer structure in any document that calls itself *kitâb Allâh* 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.¹¹⁴ However, there is no hint in either the text or the tradition that there is anything incomplete about the Qur'ân or that its structure at the time of the Prophet's death was in any way problematic.¹¹⁵ It fulfills its proper function just as it is. The incompleteness of its transcription is something that does not touch the essential nature of the Qur'ân, and was a matter of little importance until the community perceived the text to be vulnerable—to fraudulent augmentation or diminution (as 'Alî feared),¹¹⁶ to partial loss because of the death of its memorizers (as 'Umar and Abû Bakr came to believe),¹¹⁷ or to manipulation that might cause discord within the community (as 'Uthmân sought to forestall).¹¹⁸ That is to say, what was at risk was the function of the Qur'ân 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 *qur'ân* as the text's self-description, not just as its name.¹¹⁹ However, a strong sense remains among scholars that there is, if not a contradiction, at least

¹¹⁴ Bell, *The Qur'ân*, vi.

¹¹⁵ For example, *Kitâb al-Mabânî* (39–77) devotes a chapter to the discussion of the idea that God spoke (*takallama*) the Qur'ân in precisely the order we have before us today, not in the order in which it was sent down.

¹¹⁶ Al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân*, 1: 183.

¹¹⁷ Bukhârî, 6: 314 (*Kitâb fada'il al-qur'ân*).

¹¹⁸ Al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân*, 1: 187–89; Bukhârî, 6: 315 (*Kitâb fada'il al-qur'ân*).

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

a tension between the terms *qur'ân* and *kitâb*.¹²⁰ 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.¹²¹ This sense of tension is not fully apparent in the Qur'ân 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.¹²² That is certainly to be reckoned with in the Muslim use of the Qur'ân; yet what we see in the text of the Qur'ân 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 *kitâb*—'a writing'.

Arguably, by calling itself *kitâb* the Qur'ân 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 Qur'ân 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 QUR'ÂN

Muslim understanding of the Qur'ân 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 Gabriel¹²³ and the assignment by Muḥammad of each new revelation to a particular position within

¹²⁰ Graham, "Earliest Meaning," says any contradiction is only apparent (p. 372) but even he is inclined to see the presence of the term *kitâb* as substantially affecting the meaning of the noun *qur'ân* 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.

¹²² Graham, *Written Word*, passim.

¹²³ Bukhârî, 6: 319–20 (*Kitâb fada'il al-qur'ân*). Al-Bâqillânî is quoted as saying that Gabriel used to command, "Put such and such a verse in such and such a place" (al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân*, 1: 214).

what had already been received.¹²⁴ However, the traditions already cited also demonstrate the community's awareness that, however valuable a written codification may have proven, the idea that the text was to be codified in this way came neither from the Qur'ân itself nor from the Prophet. The author of *Kitâb al-Mabânî* expresses this view quite explicitly:

Since God promised [Muḥammad] that he would preserve the Qur'ân for him, teach him to memorize it, and fix it in his heart, he was protected from forgetting it, and he set himself to getting his community to memorize it. He did not cease from reciting it to them and getting them to recite it. He would regularly preach to them from it and teach them its duties and judgments and its proper interpretation, which he explained after reciting it. With all this he had no need to write down the recitation or collect it, and the Muslims had no need, as long as the Prophet was among them, to bind the recitation [or put it into lasting form] in codices and on pages. However, 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'ân would be lost to them or would lose its completeness because of the martyrdom of those who carried it in memory. When they realized this and set themselves to the task, they could find nothing that would better preserve the recitation than writing it down and binding it into a volume [or making it permanent]. So they wrote it down and bound it [or made it permanent], not only for themselves but also so that it could be a reliable guide for those who were far away or living at a distance and who had not memorized it or were not aware of what it contained. This work of collection was only possible after consultation among the Companions of the Messenger of God and with their agreement that this was the path of truth, the gateway of sincerity, and the clear way of uprightness.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ E.g., al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân*, 1: 190.

¹²⁵ *Kitâb al-Mabânî*, 23. Although Jeffery reads *taḥlîd* and *khalladû* in this passage, it seems that *tajlîd* and *jalladû* would fit the context better. The difference is not significant for the overall meaning of the passage:

قلنا: إنه ﷺ لما وعده الله عز وجل أن يحفظ القرآن له ويثبت في قلبه أمن سيانه فعمل على أنه يحفظه على أمته، ولا يزال يقرؤه عليهم، ويقرئهم إياه، ويعطهم به أحياناً، ويعرفهم العرائض والأحكام والمناسبات من تأويله الذي يعرف بعد تلاوته، فكان بذلك مستعنياً عن كتب القرآن وجمعه، وكان المسلمون غائبين، وبهم النبي ﷺ، عن تجليد [أو تحليل] القرآن في المصاحف والصحف، فحين قبض نبيهم ﷺ أشفقوا من أن تحدث الموائد على حفاظ القرآن الذين عدتهم يسيرة فيضيع القرآن منهم، أو يفقد من حملته باستشهاد حفاظه، فلما جعلوا ذلك، وعملوا عليه لم يحدوا شيئاً هو أحفظ للقرآن من كتبه وتجليده [في الأصل،

Later the community accepted the structure of the Qur'ân as they found it, but presumed that it was the structure ordained by God, who intended the Qur'ân to be a written canon of scripture. Al-Suyûtî quotes the Qâḍî Abû Bakr [al-Bâqillânî, d. 403 A.H.]:

What we hold is that the entirety of the Qur'ân, 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 *muṣṣhaf* of 'Uthmân 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 *sûras* 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 *sûra* 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 vowelings and readings. It is possible either that the Messenger (may the peace and blessings of God be upon him) might have arranged the *sûras* himself or that he entrusted that task to the community after him and did not see to it himself. [Al-Bâqillânî] said that this second possibility is more likely.¹²⁶

This change in the perception of the divinely intended form of the Qur'ân from oral to written raised a difficulty for the community. The Qur'ân'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

تخليده،] مكتبوه وحلده [في الأصل، حلده] نظراً لأنهم، ونصيحة لمن يأتى ويبعد ممن لا يحفظه حفظهم، ولا يعرفه معرفتهم، ولم يمكن الجمع إلا بعد تشاور أصحاب رسول الله ﷺ واتفاقهم على أنه طريق الحق، وباب الصدق، ومهاج الاستقامة.

¹²⁶ Al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân*, 1: 194:

الذي يذهب إليه أن جميع القرآن الذي أنزله الله وأمر بآيات رسمه ولم يسخه ولا رفع تلاوته بعد نزوله، هو هذا الذي بين الدفتين الذي حواه مصحف عثمان، وأنه لم ينقص منه شيء، ولا يريد فيه، وإن ترتيبه ونظمه ثابت على ما نظمته الله تعالى، ورتبه عليه رسوله من أي السور، لم يقدم من ذلك مؤخر ولا آخر منه مقدم، وإن الأمة ضبطت عن النبي ﷺ ترتيب أي كل سورة ومواضعها، وعرفت مواضعها، كما ضبطت عنه نفس القراءات وذات التلاوة، وأنه يمكن أن يكون الرسول ﷺ قد رتب سورة، وإن يكون قد وكل ذلك إلى الأمة بعده، ولم يتول ذلك بنفسه قال: وهذا الثاني أقرب.

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'ân as a set of discrete verses rather than as coherent *sûras* 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'ân 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 *muṣḥaf* were an accurate transcript of the *lawḥ mahfûz* '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 *muṣḥaf*? 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'ân 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 predeterminer of that action.

This is the problem that arises when the rich and complex notion of *kitâb* in Qur'anic discourse is equated with the text of the *muṣḥaf*. 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 *sunna* of the Prophet (as the definitive interpreter of the Qur'ân) and also the *bâṭin* or esoteric interpretation of the Qur'ân.

When the *kitâb Allâh* becomes too closely identified with just what is written down in the *muṣḥaf*, the concept of *kalâm Allâh*, the speech of God, defended by the orthodox as an essential attribute of the divine nature,¹²⁷ starts to take over

¹²⁷ From the *ʿAqida* of Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal. See Ibn Abî Yaʿlâ, *Ṭabaqât al-Ḥanâbila*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥamid al-Fiḡī, 2 vols. (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Sunna al-Muḥammadiyya, 1952) 2: 295–96:

وكان يقول: إن لله عز وجل كلاماً هو به متكلم وذلك صفة له في ذاته، حالف بها الحرس والبيكوت والسكوت، وامتدح بها نفسه ... وكان يقول: إن القرآن كيف تصرف غير مخلوق، وإن الله تعالى تكلم بالصوت والحرف ... وعلى مذهبه أن من قال إن القرآن عبارة عن كلام الله عز وجل، فقد جهل وغلط. وإن الناسخ والمنسوخ في كتاب الله عز وجل دون العبارة عنه، ودون الحكاية له.

"And [Ibn Ḥanbal] used to affirm that God (may he be honoured 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'ân could have issued forth uncreated that God Most High speaks by means of the sounds and the syllables [when the Qur'ân is recited]. ... According to his way of thinking, anyone who maintains that the Qur'ân is only an approximation to the speech of God is in

the richness of the former, yet the two are never quite distinguished. Books are speech:

[Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal] used to hold the doctrine that the Tôrâh and the Injil and any book that God has sent down (as long as it is accepted that it is the speech of God) is uncreated.¹²⁸

And Ibn Qudâma maintains:

The Qur'ân is the speech of God, His inspiration and revelation, which he spoke. It is uncreated. The Qur'ân originated with God and it is to Him that it will return. Whatever is recited of it, or read or heard or written, by whatever means it comes forth, is the uncreated speech of God. It is *sûras* and verses, words and letters, although God speaks without letters or sound.¹²⁹

These statements might suggest that writtenness could not have been central to the Qur'ân from the beginning and that focusing on its writtenness ill serves it.

Even those who do not fully defend the uncreated nature of the Qur'ân still see God's speech as primary and even the celestial writing down of it as somehow intermediate:

Speaking itself [as distinct from the faculty of speech, which is a necessary quality of God] is a sequence of words such as was revealed to the Prophet, but the immutable word of God is different. The words are temporary, they come and go, but the Qur'ân is eternal, non-sequential, free of consonants and vowels. If, however, the veil of ignorance could be lifted from our spiritual eye, then we should perceive that the meaning of the two books, the eternal one and the one in word sequences, is identical. But we cannot now understand this meaning. The material words of the Qur'ân have been created and written on the well-preserved tablet in heaven. The angel Gabriel descended with those words from

ignorance and is mistaken. Both the abrogating and the abrogated verses in the *kitâb* of God are more than just a reflection of God's speech or a version of it."

¹²⁸ Ibn Ḥanbal, *ʿAqida*, 302:

وكان يذهب إلى أن التوراة والإنجيل وكل كتاب أنزله الله عز وجل غير مخلوق، إذا سلم له أنه كلام الله تعالى

¹²⁹ Hans Daiber, "The Creed (*ʿAqida*) of the Ḥanbalite Ibn Qudâma al-Maqdisi: a newly discovered text," in W. al-Qāḍī, ed., *Studia Arabica et Islamica: Festschrift for Iḥsân ʿAbbās on his Sixtieth Birthday* (Beirut: American University in Beirut, 1981), 105–12; here 109:

وإن القرآن كلام الله عز وجل ووحيه وتزييله تكلم به، وهو غير مخلوق، منه بدأ وإليه يعود، وحيث ما تلي وقرئ وسمع وكتب وحيث ما تصرف فهو كلام الله غير مخلوق، وهو سور وآيات وحروف وكلمات، وإن الله تعالى يتكلم بلا حرف وصوت.

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.¹³⁰

Graham calls this focus on *kalām Allāh* the giving of precedence to the Qur'ân's "ontological or 'essential' status as God's Speech over its functional or 'accidental' character as scripture used in worship."¹³¹ He complains that this approach does not do justice to what he perceives to have been "the active force of *Qur'ân* in early (and indeed in later) Muslim life apart from speculation."¹³² However, the focus on the ontological status of the Qur'ân 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 *qur'ân* were collapsed into the content of the *muṣḥaf*. The rich understanding of revelation operative in very early Islam, which Graham so carefully presented in an earlier work,¹³³ was threatened with impoverishment by a focus on the written codification of the Qur'ân 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 Qur'ân 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 Qur'ân 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 *Shāfi'ī*'s time the Qur'ân 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 Qur'ân as a source of guidance in early Islam when compared to the Companions—the fount of *ḥadīth*.¹³⁴ Joseph Schacht observed that "the legal subject-matter of early Islam did not primarily derive from the Qur'ân,"¹³⁵ and it is clear that even where the Qur'ân may have contained

¹³⁰ M. b. Muḥammad al-Faḍālī (d. 821), *Kifāyat al-ʿawāmm fī mā yajibū ʿalayhim min ʿilm al-kalām* (Cairo, n.d.), ch. 1; cited in A. Rippin and J. Knappert, eds. trans., *Textual Sources for the Study of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 130–31.

¹³¹ Graham, "Earliest Meaning," 364.

¹³² Graham, "Earliest Meaning," 364.

¹³³ William A. Graham, *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam* (The Hague: Mouton, 1977), especially 9–48.

¹³⁴ Bulliet, *Islam*, 31.

¹³⁵ J. Schacht, *The Origins of Muhammadan Jurisprudence* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), v.

an explicit ruling, that norm was not considered decisive.¹³⁶ Furthermore, some of the verses claimed as authoritative in *fiqh*, the "stoning verse" for example, do not appear in the *muṣḥaf* and were arguably never part of the Qur'ân.¹³⁷

This gap between the (relatively few) legal prescriptions in the Qur'ân 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 *fawātih*, by textual difficulties, and by various terms that were no longer understood by the commentators,¹³⁸ we are drawn to conclude that the full text of the Qur'ân played quite a limited role in the early decades of Islam.

According to numerous traditions, it was awareness that the memory of the complete Qur'ân 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 Qur'ân 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.¹³⁹ All the variant *maṣāḥif*, 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 *muṣḥaf* 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

¹³⁶ See Schacht, *Origins*, 181, 188, 191, 224ff.

¹³⁷ Patricia Crone and Michael Cook point out that Islamic law maintained a preference for stoning as the penalty for adultery even though the Qur'ân makes it clear (Q 24:2) that the penalty is to be flogging. They take this as an indication that the Qur'ân 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 Qur'ân 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 *qur'ân*. The attempt to justify it by positing the existence of a "stoning verse" is really an elaborate attempt to avoid saying explicitly that *sunna* can abrogate *qur'ân*.

¹³⁸ See Crone, "Two Legal Problems," 1–10.

¹³⁹ For an extended contemporary defence of the validity of eighty different readings, see Labīb as-Saʿīd, *The Recited Qur'ân: A History of the First Recorded Version* (Princeton: Darwin, 1975). A nine-volume compilation of variant readings and the opinions about them is given by Ahmad Muḥtār ʿUmar and ʿAbd al-Salīm Mukarram, *Muʿjam al-qirāʾāt al-qurʾāniyya maʿa muqaddima fi-l-qirāʾāt wa-ashḥar al-qurʾān* (Irbid: Uswah, 1991–97).

the contention of some traditions that the Qur'ân 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,¹⁴⁰ the oral tradition had been preserved as a unity by some Companions up until the time of the 'Uthmânic recension perhaps some twenty years after Muḥammad'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'ân 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'ân 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'ân to have been carefully codified in writing. One might say that the principal function of the Qur'ân 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'ân 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'ân."¹⁴¹ 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.

¹⁴⁰ See, for example, Ibn Mas'ûd's claim to have memorized seventy *sûras* learned directly from the Prophet when Zayd b. Thâbit was still a child. Al-Sijistânî, *Kitâb al-Maṣḍihif*, 13ff.

¹⁴¹ W.C. Smith, *What is Scripture? A Comparative Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 46.

CHAPTER TWO

The Qur'ân's Rejection of Some Common Conceptions of *Kitâb*

A recurring theme in the Qur'ân is controversy—first with the Meccans and then with the people who were already recipients of the *kitâb* (the *ahl al-kitâb*) over Muḥammad's claim to be a bringer of a *kitâb* from God. The constant claim is that in his ministry as a prophet there now came to the Arabs a *kitâb* from God confirming previous revelations; that, just as the *kitâb* had been given to Moses, Jesus and others, so now it was given to Muḥammad:

وَهَذَا كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ مُبَارَكٌ مُصَدِّقُ الَّذِي بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ وَلِتُنْذِرَ أُمَّ الْقُرَى وَمَنْ حَوْلَهَا وَالَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْآخِرَةِ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِ وَهُمْ عَلَى صَلَاتِهِمْ يُحَافِظُونَ

This is a kitâb that We have sent down; it is blessed and confirms what was before it, so you might warn the mother of villages and those around her. Those who believe in the hereafter believe in [this kitâb], and they are careful about their ritual prayer.

Sûrat al-An'âm 6:92

أَفَغَيْرَ اللَّهِ أُبْتَغِي حَكْمًا وَهُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ إِلَيْكُمُ الْكِتَابَ مُفَصَّلًا الَّذِينَ آتَيْنَاهُمُ الْكِتَابَ يَعْلَمُونَ أَنَّهُ مُنْزَلٌ مِنْ رَبِّكَ بِالْحَقِّ فَلَا تَكُونَنَّ مِنَ الْمُمْتَرِينَ

"So shall I seek someone other than God as a judge, when He it is who revealed to you the kitâb in segments?" Those to whom We have already given the kitâb know that it is revealed from your Lord in truth. So never be one of those who doubt.

Sûrat al-An'âm 6:114

¹ This verse begins with what are clearly intended to be words spoken by the Prophet, though the text itself lacks the customary *qul* 'say!' to signal this.

Muḥammad 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 Qur'ān responds to the demands from the Meccans and the *ahl al-kitāb* for tangible and authoritative proof of Muḥammad'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:

أَوْ يَكُونُ لَكَ بَيْتٌ مِنْ زُخْرَفٍ أَوْ تَرْقَى فِي السَّمَاءِ وَلَنْ نُؤْمِنَ لِرُقِيِّكَ حَتَّى تُنْزِلَ عَلَيْنَا كِتَابًا
نَقْرُوهُ قُلْ سُبْحَانَ رَبِّيَ هَلْ كُنْتُ إِلَّا بَشَرًا رَسُولًا

"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?"

Sûrat al-Isrâ' 17:93

Tradition has it that this challenge took place in the Ka'ba when a group of Meccans confronted Muḥammad.³ The Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān. Al-Ṭabarī 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." The challenge is rejected, since only God can do such a thing, not a human messenger. Furthermore, the Qur'ān 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 Noldeke's estimation [GdQ, 1: 139]). Jeffery, *Qur'ān as Scripture*, 13; Bell, *The Qur'ān*, I: 262.

³ Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān fi tafsīr al-qur'ān* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-Imiyya, 1992) 8: 149.

⁴ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 8: 149: كذابا مستورا نقرؤه أمرنا فيه باتباعك والابحان بك

قُلْ لِّمَنِ اجْتَمَعَتِ الْإِنْسُ وَالْجِنُّ عَلَى أَنْ يَأْتُوا بِمِثْلِ هَذَا الْقُرْآنِ لَا يَأْتُونَ بِمِثْلِهِ وَلَوْ كَانَ
بَعْضُهُمْ لِبَعْضٍ ظَهِيرًا

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."

Sûrat al-Isrâ' 17:88

Both of these verses seem to make a distinction between the recitations that Muḥammad 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 Qur'ān was not seen primarily in written, documentary terms: the Meccans felt it should be supplemented with something in writing. Even though the Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān'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 مَنَعَ النَّاسَ أَنْ يُؤْمِنُوا إِذْ جَاءَهُمُ الْهُدَىٰ إِلَّا أَنْ قَالُوا أَبَعَثَ اللَّهُ بَشَرًا رَسُولًا ۖ قُلْ لَوْ كَانَ
فِي الْأَرْضِ مَلَائِكَةٌ يُمْسِكُونَ مَطْمَئِنِّينَ لَنَزَّلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ مَلَكًا رَسُولًا

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."

Sûrat al-Isrâ' 17:94–5⁵

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

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا قَبْلَكَ مِنَ الْمُرْسَلِينَ إِلَّا إِنَّهُمْ لَيَأْكُلُونَ الطَّعَامَ وَيَمْشُونَ فِي الْأَسْوَاقِ وَجَعَلْنَا
بَعْضَكُمْ لِبَعْضٍ فِتْنَةً أَتَصْبِرُونَ وَكَانَ رَبُّكَ بَصِيرًا ۖ وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ لَا يَرْجُونَ لِقَاءَنَا لَوْلَا أُنْزِلَ
عَلَيْنَا الْمَلَأِكَةُ أَوْ تَرَىٰ رَبَّنَا لَقَدْ اسْتَكْبَرُوا فِي أَنْفُسِهِمْ وَعَتَوْا عُتْوًا كَبِيرًا

We sent no messengers prior to you who did not eat food and go about in

⁵ Widengren (*Muḥammad*, 98–100) is surely correct in seeing in such passages evidence of a definite notion among the Meccans of a heavenly *kitāb* brought by an equally heavenly *rasūl*. In his zeal for his position, however, he fails to take full account of the Qur'ān's rejections, both explicit and implicit, of such demands from both the Meccans and the *ahl al-kitāb*.

the markets. And We have made some of you a test for others: will you remain steadfast? Your Lord is always perceptive. || And those who do not want to face us say, "Why are not the angels sent down to us?" or "Why do we not see our Lord?" They certainly have too high an opinion of themselves and are exceedingly proud.

Sûrat al-Furqân 25:20–21

Although the commentators understand the demand to be for a kind of divine affidavit in support of Muḥammad's claims,⁶ it is not clear from the text that content was an issue. What was being sought could well have been something much less functional than the explicit warrant that al-Ṭabarī envisages. The requested *kitâb* was meant to serve as a token that Muḥammad had journeyed to heaven, the realm of *kitâb*. Considering the other miraculous proofs that the Meccans said would satisfy them—a house of gold, a lavish orchard, a spring of water, pieces of the sky falling, an angel coming to them—it would hardly be surprising if the requested *kitâb* were more miraculous and esoteric than functional—and the more authoritative for being so. That the subsequent tradition thought of this *kitâb* principally in terms of its content hints at an important change in the understanding of heavenly writ—its significance shifting from its origin (and what that represents about divine interaction with the world) to its content (analogous to earthly writing).

In case there were any doubt that the Meccans were asking for something physically written, in Q 6:7 we find:

وَكُوْنَزَلْنَا عَلَيْكَ كِتَابًا فِي قِرطَاسٍ فَلَمَسُوهُ بِأَيْدِيهِمْ لَقَالِ الْذِينَ كَفَرُوا إِنَّ هَذَا إِلَّا سِحْرٌ مُبِينٌ

Even if We had sent a writing on papyrus and they were to touch it with their hands, those who disbelieve would have said, "This is clearly nothing but sorcery."

Sûrat al-An'âm 6:7

This divine disavowal of the value of such a proof further indicates the distinction between authority and physical writtenness. God's experience with earlier prophets, especially Moses and Aaron, shows that wonders from heaven no less than

⁶ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 8: 149:

عن محاهد قوله ﴿ كِتَابًا نَقْرُؤُهُ ﴾ قال: من رب العالمين إلى فلان عبد كل رجل صحيفة [أو موضوعة] تصبح عند راسه يقرؤها... عن قتادة ﴿ حَتَّى تُنَزَّلَ عَلَيْنَا كِتَابًا نَقْرُؤُهُ ﴾: أي كتابا حاصا يؤمر فيه باتباعك. From Mujāhid, concerning God's word "a *kitâb* we can read," he said, "From the Lord of the Worlds to so-and-so; in the presence of each man a page [or prescription] that he can read is to appear near his head."... From Qatāda: "Unless you have sent down upon us a *kitâb* we can read," that is, a specific *kitâb* in which we are commanded to obey you.

revelation are often dismissed as sorcery by those who will not believe.⁷ In Muḥammad's own career, charges of sorcery and possession were not uncommon.⁸ However, as Muslims traditionally assert, he offered no corroborating miracle other than the Qur'ān itself.

If the *kitâb* 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:

قُلْ مَنْ أَنْزَلَ الْكِتَابَ الَّذِي جَاءَ بِهِ مُوسَى نُورًا وَهُدًى لِلنَّاسِ تَجْعَلُونَهُ قِرَاطِينَ

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

Sûrat al-An'âm 6:91

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

وَكَتَبْنَا لَهُ فِي الْأَلْوَاḤ مِنْ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ مَوْعِظَةً وَتَفْصِيلًا لِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ

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

Sûrat al-A'rāf 7:145

Yet even before these tablets were given to him, Moses was said to have brought God's *āyāt* '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 *kalām* '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'ānic account of Moses' ministry, and there is no clear indication of the relationship between these physical examples of divine writ and the *kitâb* that the Qur'ān repeatedly says was given to Moses.⁹

⁷ For example, see Q 5:110; 10:76; 27:13; 28:36; 51:52; 61:6.

⁸ See Q 10:2; 11:7; 17:47; 21:3; 28:48; 38:4; 43:30; 43:49; 46:7; 52:15; 54:2; 74:24.

⁹ See, for example, Q 2:53; 23:49; 25:35; 28:43; 32:23; 41:45.

This is no less a question in Judaism, where the relationship between the tablets of stone (אֲבָנִים) given to Moses (Exod. 31:18) and the broader notion of *Tôrāh* is quite complex. The tablets are kept in the ark built by Moses at God's command (Exod. 25:10–16) yet they are not there as a document to be consulted; they rather act as the locus of the continuing exercise of divine authority: "There I will meet with you, and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim that are on the ark of the covenant, I will deliver to you all my commands for the Israelites" (Exod. 25:22). The tablets in the ark are, as it were, a sacrament of the divine presence, a token of God's continued guidance of the community of Israel—not so much a completed text as a promise of continuing access to the divine knowledge and will. Just before his death Moses writes down the law in a book and has it placed beside the ark (Deut. 31:24–26). After the destruction of the first Temple, Israel no

In recounting the events of Moses' ministry, the Qur'ân is seeking, of course, to draw a parallel with Muḥammad. The command to recognize the newly arisen messenger (Q 7:158–59) is inserted into the narrative of Moses and Israel that forms part of the history of prophecy presented in *Sûrat al-A'raf*. If the tablets of Moses were for the Qur'ân the paradigm of the prophetic *kitâb*, then one would not expect to find there such an easy dismissal of the Meccan demand for a physical writing from heaven. If Muḥammad 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 Qur'ân's notion of divine *kitâb* goes well beyond the physical.

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

فَلَمَّا جَاءَهُمُ الْحَقُّ مِنْ عِنْدِنَا قَالُوا لَوْلَا أُوتِيَ مِثْلَ مَا أُوتِيَ مُوسَىٰ أَوَلَمْ يَكْفُرُوا بِمَا أُوتِيَ
مُوسَىٰ مِنْ قَبْلُ قَالُوا سِحْرَانِ تَظَاهَرَا وَقَالُوا إِنَّا بِكُلِّ كَافِرُونَ

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,

longer had the tablets, but in the accounts of the rebuilding of the temple this is not even noted. The rebuilding effort, recounted in the Books of Ezra and Nehemiah, is accompanied by a return to the observance of the Law and the temple ritual under the important figure of Ezra the Scribe, who in the course of eight days reads for the people the whole book of the law of Moses (*sefer tôrah-Môsheh* Neh. 8:1ff). Thus it is made clear that the role of the tablets could not have been essential. In rabbinic Judaism the written Tôrah is considered only part of the Tôrah and must be supplemented and completed by the oral Tôrah passed down from Moses to the rabbis.

Phrases like *sefer tôrah-adonai b'yad-Môsheh* 'the book of the law of God by the hand of Moses' (2Chr. 34:14) may perhaps provide an indication from within the Jewish tradition that the Tôrah is thought of as initially unwritten, i.e., until Moses wrote it down. In Deut. 11:18–20 the words of the Law are to be remembered as well as written, but the writing seems symbolic rather than comprehensive, i.e., what is written is a token of the larger whole which is "stored up in the heart and the soul."

Moshe Halbertal has suggested that the Tôrah goes through three stages. In the covenantal context of the first stage, writing is a sign of commitment; texts are a physical embodiment of will, objects of consent. Writing of the text is part of the covenantal ritual, but the text is still not seen as an object of study and reflection. A second stage is reached in Deuteronomy when the pedagogic function of the text is first mentioned. Teaching is equivalent to announcing and telling, so studying is therefore listening. One learns *from* the book but one does not learn the book. In the third stage, the text becomes self-referential and studying moves beyond reminding and reciting; it takes on the aspects of enquiring, investigating, contemplating (M. Halbertal, *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning and Authority* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997] 11–16).

¹⁰ Al-Ṭabarî maintains (*Tafsîr*, 10: 79) that it was the Jews who put the Quraysh up to this questioning and so the answer from God refers to them more than to the Meccans.

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

Sûrat al-Qaṣaṣ 28:48

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

قُلْ فَأْتُوا بِكِتَابٍ مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ هُوَ أَهْدَىٰ مِنْهُمَا أَتَّبِعُهُ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ

Say, "Bring a *kitâb* from God that gives better guidance than these two. I will follow it, if you are sincere."

Sûrat al-Qaṣaṣ 28:49

Whether or not it was the Jews, as al-Ṭabarî claims, that were behind the Meccans' demand to see a heavenly *kitâb*, the Jews' part in the questioning of Muḥammad's prophetic credentials is made explicit in Q 4:153. Here it is the *ahl al-kitâb* who demand that he have a *kitâb* sent down to them from heaven:

يَسْأَلُكَ أَهْلُ الْكِتَابِ أَنْ تُنِزَلَ عَلَيْهِمْ كِتَابًا مِنَ السَّمَاءِ فَقَدْ سَأَلُوا مُوسَىٰ أَكْبَرَ مِنْ ذَلِكَ
فَقَالُوا أَرَنَا اللَّهَ جَهْرَةً فَأَخَذَتْهُمُ الصَّاعِقَةُ بِظُلْمِهِمْ ثُمَّ اتَّخَذُوا الْعِجْلَ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَتْهُمْ
الْبَيِّنَاتُ فَعَفَوْنَا عَنْ ذَلِكَ وَأَتَيْنَا مُوسَىٰ سُلْطَانًا مُبِينًا

The people of the *kitâb* ask that you cause a *kitâb* to come down upon them from heaven. They already asked more than that of Moses, for they said, "Show us God face to face." The storm of lightning seized them in their benightedness. Then they took for themselves the calf even after clear signs had come to them. But We forgave them that and We granted to Moses an authority that makes things clear.

Sûrat al-Nisâ' 4:153

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, Muḥammad was unable to cause a *kitâb* to descend from heaven. Even if he could do so, it is implied, they still would not believe.

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

Some maintained that they asked him to have sent down to them a *kitâb* from heaven in written form (*maktûb*), in the same way that Moses brought the Israelites the Tôrah in written form from the presence of God. . . . Others maintained rather that they asked him to have a *kitâb* sent down especially for them. . . . Still others maintained that they

demanding of him that he have *kutub* sent down individually upon certain men among them ordering that he be given credence and obedience.¹¹

Al-Ṭabarī'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 (*shāhida*) to the trustworthiness of the Messenger of God and commanding them to obey him."¹² Here he employs language (*āya*, *mu'jiza*, *shāhida*) 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 Muḥammad 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. Muḥammad 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 Muḥammad and his followers—seem to have become difficult to separate. In commenting on Q 6:7, al-Ṭabarī paraphrases God's position:

Muḥammad, even if the inspiration (*waḥy*) 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

¹¹ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 4: 345–46.

فقال بعضهم: سألوه أن ينزل عليهم كتابا من السماء مكتوبا، كما جاء موسى بي إسرائيل بالتوراة مكتوبة من عند الله... وقال آخرون: بل سألوه أن ينزل عليهم كتابا، خاصة لهم... وقال آخرون: بل سألوه أن يرسل على رجال منهم باعيانهم كتابا بالامر بتصديقه واتباعه.

It appears significant that al-Ṭabarī speaks of a *kitāb maktūb* (a written *kitāb*); to add the qualifier, he must also be able to envisage something that can bear the name *kitāb* without being written.

¹² Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 4: 346:

آية معجزة لجميع الخلق أن يأتيها رسالة من الله ﷻ بالصدق، أمرة لهم باتباعه.

those who equate with me things other than me and who compromise my unicity by associating others with me would merely say, "This is clearly just sorcery."¹³

In the hands of the commentators, the *kitāb* called for by the critics has become at once both a physical record of the revelation already given and a sign in support of the Prophet in the face of the Meccans' skepticism. The notion of *kitāb* has become so enmeshed with the recitations that any writing from heaven is conflated with it. Two functions—the record of revelation and the testimony to revelation—have been joined here in a way that on closer analysis leads to quite a conundrum: in al-Ṭabarī's estimation Q 6:7 is a revelation that refuses to give a written record of the revelation—that is, it is revelation speaking about itself.

The commentators have confused matters by failing to distinguish between the revealed *kitāb* that is their subject and the piece of heavenly writing that the Prophet's critics demanded. The text gives no warrant for maintaining that the *kitāb* they were demanding was a written copy of the recitations Muḥammad was giving out. However, we can see that the commentators' approach has been conditioned by the Qur'ān itself, for it constantly intersperses revelations with comments upon their delivery. This is the abiding puzzle of the text: along with verses that are to be construed as timeless divine pronouncements are numerous verses commenting upon and analyzing the processes of the text's own revelation and reception in time. A good example is a verse that will be discussed in more detail later:

وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لَوْلَا نُزِّلَ عَلَيْهِ الْقُرْآنُ جُمْلَةً وَاحِدَةً كَذَلِكَ لِنُثَبِّتَ بِهِ فُؤَادَكَ وَرَتَّلْنَاهُ تَرْتِيلًا

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.

Sūrat 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

¹³ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 5: 150:

لو أنزلت عليك يا محمد الوحي الذي أنزلته عليك مع رسولي في قرطاس يعاينونه ويمسونه بأيديهم، ويظنون إليه ويقروونه منه، معلقا بين السماء والأرض، بحقيقة ما تدعوهم إليه، وصحة ما تأتيهم به من توحيدي وتزيلي، لقال الذين يعادلون بي غيري فيشركون في توحيدي سواي: ﴿إِنْ هَذَا إِلَّا بَشْعَرٌ مِمَّنْ﴾.

itself in the third person and at the same time be considered a unity? How can it define and defend itself even as it is being revealed? This is the very question that confronted the commentators as they examined the beginning of the text proper:

آلَمْ يَأْتِ الْكِتَابَ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ هُدًى لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ

Alif Lām Mīm || That is the kitāb about which there is no doubt: guidance for the God-fearing.

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:1-2

They were puzzled to find a *dhâlika* 'that' rather than a *hâdhâ* 'this' at the beginning Q 2:2, but the majority of traditions opted nevertheless to equate the two, and in this they are generally followed by translators. Others, recognizing that *dhâlika* logically refers to something absent or completed, took it to refer variously to the mysterious letters of Q 2:1, or to the *sûras* of the Qur'ân that had already been revealed, or even to the Gospel and the Tôrâh.¹⁴ The issue was in effect side-stepped at this point, yet the question remains: what is this *kitâb* about which the *kitâb* is always speaking?¹⁵ What is the recitation about which verses are constantly recited?

The Qur'ân is both itself and *about* itself; it is both *hâdhâ* and *dhâlika*, both 'this' and 'that'. Even in its final form it seems still a work in process, carefully observing and commenting upon itself. This is what makes it so mystifying as a canonized, codified text. What the reader finds "between the two covers" comes as a surprise because it has been presented as a completed volume and, more than that, as the copy of a preexistent heavenly document. So one tends to approach it, as noted in chapter 1, with certain presuppositions about how things that bear the name *kitâb* should behave.

The purpose of the present project is to disregard for the moment how the later community of faith presents the Qur'ân to us and look more carefully at how the Qur'ân presents itself. This is useful not because the former has no validity, or because the latter is the only "real" Qur'ân, but because of the insight it might afford into the earliest community's experience of revelation. It is certainly arguable that the earliest community did not experience the Qur'ân principally

¹⁴ Al-Ṭabarî, *Tafsîr*, 1: 128-129.

¹⁵ The answer to this question proposed by Angelika Neuwirth is that only certain parts of the Qur'ân—the pericopes excerpted from the heavenly book, mostly the "*dhikr*" or recalling of prophetic history—are to be understood as belonging to the category of "book". In the Qur'ân 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'ân's self-referential nature. However, it does so by oversimplifying what is in fact a much more complex relationship between the Qur'ân itself and its notion of *kitâb*. "Vom Rezitationstext," 90-91.

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'ân 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 *kitâb* to be brought from heaven was a further criticism, and an implicit demand. That complaint touches on the very nature of the Qur'ân and is of great significance for understanding how Muḥammad 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:

وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لَوْلَا نُزِّلَ عَلَيْهِ الْقُرْآنُ جُمْلَةً وَاحِدَةً كَذَلِكَ لِنُثَبِّتَ بِهِ فُؤَادَكَ وَرَتَّلْنَاهُ تَرْتِيلًا || وَلَا يَأْتُونَكَ بِمَثَلٍ إِلَّا جِئْنَاكَ بِالْحَقِّ وَأَحْسَنَ تَفْسِيرًا

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.

Sûrat al-Furqân 25:32-33

Al-Ṭabarî and other commentators presume that what lies behind the phrase *jumlatan wâhidatan* 'as a single complete pronouncement' is Moses' reception of the complete Tôrâh on a single occasion.¹⁶ The Qur'ân'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-Ṭabarî commenting on these verses express this quite succinctly:

From al-Ḥasan: 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 . . . said, "The Qur'ân was sent down to him in

¹⁶ Al-Ṭabarî, *Tafsîr*, 9: 386: كما أنزلت التوراة على موسى جملة واحدة

response to what they said, so that Muḥammad would know that God would answer the people with the truth regarding what they were saying.”¹⁷

Such a portrayal is perfectly consonant with the structure of a significant part of the Qur'ân: 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'ân's literary forms A. Welch refers to these as “say-statements.” His comment that such passages are “scattered throughout the Qur'ân,” though correct, understates their significance.¹⁸ 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'ân'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 1700.¹⁹ 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'ân.

These “say-statements” are not merely one of the Qur'ân'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'ân is the place where the Arabs are finally brought into the conversation directly. Divine revelation comes, as Ibn Jurayj put it, *jawâban li-qawlihim*—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 wâḥidatan*—as a single complete pronouncement—misunderstands this responsive nature of revelation and is rejected by God. One might say that *jumlatan wâḥidatan* is a category more appropriate to written texts and canons;

¹⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 9: 387:

عن الحسن في قوله ﴿وَرَتَّلْنَاهُ تَرْتِيلًا﴾ قال كان يزل آية وآيتين وآيات، جوابا لهم إذا سألوا عن شيء أنزل الله جوابا لهم وردا عن النبي فيما يتكلمون به . . . عن ابن حريح قوله ﴿وَقَالَ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لَوْلَا نُزِّلَ عَلَيْهِ الْقُرْآنُ حُمْلَةً وَاحِدَةً﴾ كما أنزلت النوراة على موسى؟ قال ﴿كَذَلِكَ لِنُثَبِّتَ بِهِ فُؤَادَكَ﴾ قال : كان القرآن يزل عليه جوابا لقولهم: ليعلم محمد أن الله يجيب القوم بما يقولون بالحق.

¹⁸ A. T. Welch, “al-Qur'ân,” *EL*² 5: 422.

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'ân* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: 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.

they are complete and have a certain unity. In rejecting such a notion, the Qur'ân is asserting its fluidity and orality, its interactive nature.²⁰

Al-Qurṭubî (d. 1273 C.E.) suggests that one reason why the Qur'ân was revealed piecemeal is that, unlike earlier prophets, Muḥammad was unlettered (*ummi*) and so had to learn it by memorization because he could not be given it to read.²¹ Yet al-Qurṭubî too indicates that the revelation of the Qur'ân little by little mostly had to do with its responsive nature:

[God] says, “If We had sent down the Qur'ân 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 (*mutafarriqan*) so that they might have their attention drawn to it time and again. If he had sent it down *jumlatan wâḥidatan* the aim of making them pay attention to it would not have been fulfilled.²²

Al-Qurṭubî 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

²⁰ Not all of al-Ṭabarī's own comments nor those he quotes seem as insightful as that of Ibn Jurayj. Their explanation of the need for the Qur'ân 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:

عن ابن عباس . . . قال كان الله يزل عليه الآية فإذا علمها سي الله رتل آية أخرى، ليعلمه الكتاب عن طهر قلب، ويثبت به فؤاده.

From Ibn 'Abbās: God used to send down the *āya* to him and when the Prophet of God had learnt it, another *āya* was sent down, so that He could teach him the *kitāb* by heart and firmly fix his mind on it (al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 9: 387).

Ibn Jurayj himself falls into this way of thinking a little further on in the same passage: وقوله ﴿وَرَتَّلْنَاهُ تَرْتِيلًا﴾ يقول: وشيئا بعد شيء علمسكه حتى تحفظته [sic] والترتيل في القراءة: الترسل والتشتت.

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.’ (al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, 9: 387).

²¹ Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi' li-'Aḥkām al-Qur'ân* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 1944), 13: 28.

²² Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi' li-'Aḥkām al-Qur'ân*, 13: 29:

يقول لو أنزلنا عليك القرآن حملة واحدة ثم سألك لم يكن عندك ما تجيب به، ولكن تمسك عليك فإذا سألك أحسب . . . ولو نزل حملة بما فيه من الفرائض لنقل عليهم، وعلم الله عز وجل أن الصلاح في إزاله متفرقا، لا بهم يسهلون به مرة بعد مرة، ولو نزل حملة واحدة لزال معنى الصلوة.

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'ân] 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."²³

Ibn Kathîr (d. 1373) sees it as a mark of honor for Muḥammad that unlike the other prophets who were vouchsafed but a single moment of such revelation he received revelations constantly.²⁴ He also recognizes the interactive nature of the divine address:

God answers them to the effect that [the Qur'ân] was revealed in installments (*munajjaman*) over a period of twenty-three years, according to situations (*waqâ'ir*) and events (*ḥawâdith*), and what was needed by way of legal classifications (*aḥkâm*). He did this in order that he might strengthen the hearts of believers with it. . . . Nor can they make any statement (*qawl*) 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.²⁵

Ideas like these are very common in the commentary (*tafsîr*) literature. The tradition could hardly fail to recognize that the Qur'ân 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:²⁶

وَقُرْآنًا فَرَقْنَاهُ لِتَقْرَأَهُ عَلَى النَّاسِ عَلَى مُكْثٍ وَنَزَّلْنَاهُ تَنْزِيلًا

²³ Al-Qurtubî, *al-Jâmi* ʿ, 13: 29

ومعه ناسخ ومنسوخ، فكانوا يتعمدون بالشيء إلى وقت بعينه قد علم الله عز وجل فيه الصلاح، ثم ينزل النسخ بعد ذلك؛ فحamal أن يرسل حملة واحدة: افعلوا كذا ولا تفعلوا

²⁴ Ibn Kathîr, *Tafsîr al-qur'ân al-ʿazîm* ([Cairo?]: Dâr Iḥyâ' al-Kutub al-ʿArabiyya, [1978]), 3:318.

²⁵ Ibn Kathîr, *Tafsîr*, 3: 317:

فاجابهم الله تعالى عن ذلك بأنه إنما نزل محمداً في ثلاث وعشرين سنة بحسب الوقائع والحوادث وما يحتاج إليه من الأحكام ليشب قلوب المؤمنين به ولا يقولون قولاً يعارضون به الحق إلا أحباهم بما هو الحق في نفس الأمر وأبين وأوضح وأفصح من مقالتهم.

²⁶ E.g., al-Tabarî, *Tafsîr*, 8: 161. Some reciters read *farraqnâhu*, though the standard text is *farraqnâhu*. Both could indicate that the Qur'ân was divided into segments, but the latter also often carries in the commentators' usage the notion of making clear and distinct. See Lane, 2383.

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

Sûrat al-Isrâ' 17:106

One of the principal traditional tools for interpreting the Qur'ân text is the determination of a particular historical context for the verse. This use of *asbâb al-nuzûl*, as they are called, recognizes precisely the responsiveness of the revelation that we have been observing.²⁷ The usual translation 'occasions of revelation' perhaps veils the causality implied in the term *asbâb* 'reasons'. Al-Suyûtî quotes al-Wâhidî: "It is not possible to know the interpretation (*tafsîr*) of the verse without determining its narrative context (*qiṣṣa*) and explaining its sending down."²⁸ He also quotes Ibn Taymiyya: "Knowing the reason for the sending down helps in the understanding of the verse. For knowledge of the cause (*sabab*) yields knowledge of the effect (*musabbab*)."²⁹ 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 wâhidatan challenge." If the text of the Qur'ân 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 Kathîr answers the challenge in this way:

God combined for the Qur'ân 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 wâhidatan* 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'î related a tradition with its chain of transmitters going back to Ibn ʿAbbâs: He said the Qur'ân was sent down to the lowest heaven on the Night of

²⁷ See Stefan Wild, "'We Have Sent Down to Thee the Book with the Truth . . .': Spatial and Temporal Implications of the Qur'anic Concepts of *Nuzûl*, *Tanzîl* and *'Inzâl*," in Wild, *Qur'ân as Text*, 148.

²⁸ Al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân*, 1: 93:

قال الواحدى: لا يمكن معرفة تفسير الآية دون الوقوف على قصتها وبيان نزولها.

²⁹ Al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân*, 1: 93:

وقال ابن تيمية: معرفة سبب النزول يعين على فهم الآية، فإن العلم بالسبب يورث العلم بالمسبب.

Divine Decree [*laylat al-qadr*; see Q 97:1] and then was sent down after that over the course of twenty years.³⁰

Al-Qurṭubî relates another tradition going back to Ibn ʿAbbâs:

Commenting upon God's word «We sent it down on the Night of Divine Decree» he said, «The Qur'ân was sent down *jumlatan wâhidatan* from the presence of God on the Preserved Tablet to the Noble Scribes [*al-safarat al-kirâm*; 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 Muḥammad in installments over twenty years.»³¹

Thus, to answer the *jumlatan wâhidatan* 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'ân 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 parcels it out to Muḥammad 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 ought 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—*kalâm Allâh* and *kitâb Allâh*.³²

³⁰ Ibn Kathîr, *Tafsîr*, 3: 318.

وقد جمع الله للقرآن الصفتين معاً، ففي الملا الأعلى أنزل حملة واحدة من اللوح المحفوظ إلى بيت العزة في السماء الدنيا ثم أنزل بعد ذلك إلى الأرض منحماً بحسب الوقائع والحوادث وروى السائي بإسناده عن ابن عباس قال: أنزل القرآن حملة واحدة إلى السماء الدنيا في ليلة القدر ثم نزل بعد ذلك في عشرين سنة.

³¹ Al-Qurṭubî, *al-Jâmiʿ*, 13: 29.

عن ابن عباس في قوله تعالى ﴿إِنَّا أَنْزَلْنَاهُ فِي لَيْلَةِ الْقَدْرِ﴾ قال: أنزل القرآن حملة واحدة من عند الله عز وجل في اللوح المحفوظ إلى السفارة الكرام الكاتبين في السماء، فحمه السفارة الكرام على جبريل عشرين ليلة، ونجمه جبريل عليه السلام على محمد عشرين سنة.

See also al-Ṭabarî's comments on Q 80:15–16, where he reconciles traditions that maintain that the *safara* were *qurrâ'* (reciters) with those that call them *kataba* (scribes) by suggesting that they are angels because angels "are the ones who read the *kutub* and act as go-betweens (*tasfiru*) between God and his messengers" (Al-Ṭabarî, *Tafsîr*, 12: 445–46).

³² For an extensive treatment of theological positions about the status of the Qur'ân, see Wolfson, *Philosophy of the Kalam*, 235–303.

WRITING AND TEXTS

As the traditional commentators suspected, what seems to lie behind the *jumlatan wâhidatan* challenge has to do not only with the Qur'ân 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 epics. 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

³³ For the basis of these observations about texts I am indebted to Paul J. Griffiths, "Scholasticism: The Possible Recovery of an Intellectual Practice," in *Scholasticism: Cross-Cultural and Comparative Perspectives*, ed. José Ignacio Cabezón (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

"copies" of the text is obviously a vexed question, but it need not detain us here. Storage makes possible the redisplay 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. Muḥammad'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'ān'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 Muḥammad'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 (*jawāban li-qawlihim*, as the commentators would say).

The apparent lack of concern for form or order in the Qur'ān strikes many a reader as strange. We search in vain for introduction, exposition, development, conclusion. When we begin *Sūrat 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 *Sūrat al-Nās*. Any point in the text might serve equally well as the beginning or the end, because in a sense the Qur'ān 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'ān 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 *kitāb*.

It might seem that the very word *qur'ān* 'reciting' makes it clear that Muḥammad'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'ān 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 Muḥammad 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 wāḥidatan* challenge is focused: until it is completely displayed, a text has no boundaries.

Both groups who challenged Muḥammad had their own reasons for seeking a bounded text. The *ahl al-kitāb*, who were used to the idea of a corpus of divine revelation, were seeking from Muḥammad a complete text (*jumla wāḥida*) 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 *jawāban li-qawlihim* 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'ān 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-kitāb* were an attempt to cut through this circularity by demanding a medium of display—writing, *kitāb*—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'ān'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 Taha Hussein 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).

³⁵ Griffiths, "Scholasticism," 307.

أَفَلَا يَتَذَكَّرُونَ الْقُرْآنَ وَلَوْ كَانَ مِنْ عِنْدِ غَيْرِ اللَّهِ لَوَجَدُوا فِيهِ اخْتِلَافًا كَثِيرًا

Will they not then ponder the Qur'ân? Were it from someone other than God, they would have found in it much contradiction.

Sûrat al-Nisâ 4:82

وَمَا كَانَ هَذَا الْقُرْآنُ أَنْ يُفْتَرَى مِنْ دُونِ اللَّهِ وَلَكِنْ تَصْدِيقُ الَّذِي بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ وَتَفْصِيلٌ
الْكِتَابِ لَأَرْبَبَ فِيهِ مِنْ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ

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 kitâb—about which there is no doubt—from the lord of the worlds.

Sûrat Yûnus 10:37

As evidenced in the texts quoted in chapter 1, the Qur'ân 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.

KITÂBAS 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 *kitâb* in the discourse of and about the Qur'ân. 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 *qâla-llâh* 'God said' or *qawluhu* 'His saying' is the customary introduction to a quotation from the Qur'ân. The function of writing as a possible means of display for divine speech is evident in the Qur'ân in such verses as:

قُلْ لَوْ كَانَ الْبَحْرُ مِدَادًا لِكَلِمَاتِ رَبِّي لَنَفِدَ الْبَحْرُ قَبْلَ أَنْ تَنفَدَ كَلِمَاتُ رَبِّي
وَلَوْ جِئْنَا بِمِثْلِهِ مَدَدًا

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."

Sûrat al-Kahf 18:109

لَوْ أَشْمَأُ فِي الْأَرْضِ مِنْ شَجَرَةٍ أَفْلَامٌ وَالْبَحْرُ يَمُدُّهُ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ سَبْعَةُ أَبْحُرٍ
مَا نَفِدَتْ كَلِمَاتُ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ

If all the trees on earth were pens, and the sea [were ink], with seven more seas to help it, the words of God would not be exhausted. God is mighty, wise.

Sûrat Luqmân 31:27

God's words (*kalimât*) take precedence; they are displayed, or perhaps only stored, in writing. The *lawḥ mahfûz* of Q 85:22 seems to be another case of display or storage of something primarily spoken:

بَلْ هُوَ قُرْآنٌ مَجِيدٌ ۖ فِي لَوْحٍ مَحْفُوظٍ

It is, rather, a glorious recitation || on a safeguarded tablet.

Sûrat al-Burûj 85:21–22³⁶

The absence in these verses of any word from the root *k-t-b* 'to write' is quite striking. There is an apparent reluctance to use it, which may indicate a sense of the importance of that word beyond the mere act of display or storage. Q 2:282–83 shows no such reluctance; there the root occurs in various forms ten times. However, human writing is the topic there and what is involved is merely storage, the recording of oral contracts.

The heavenly writing that consists in record-keeping³⁷ is nothing more than storage. It makes a record of the "text" of one's deeds for redisplay on the day of judgment:

وَوُضِعَ الْكِتَابُ فَتَرَى الْمُجْرِمِينَ مُشْفِقِينَ مِمَّا فِيهِ وَيَقُولُونَ يَا وَيْلَتَنَا مَا لَ هَذَا الْكِتَابِ لَا يُغَادِرُ صَغِيرَةً وَلَا كَبِيرَةً إِلَّا أَحْصَاهَا وَوَجَدُوا مَا عَمِلُوا حَاضِرًا وَلَا يَظُنُّهُمْ رَبُّكَ أَحَدًا

And the kitâb 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 kitâb is this that does not leave anything small or great out of account? And they will find

³⁶ Al-Jabari notes that some of the *qurra'* read *mahfûzun* rather than *mahfûzin*—understanding the text to be saying that it is the Qur'ân which is safeguarded on the tablet, rather than that the tablet itself is kept safe. Though this might seem a more logical reading, it is not widely accepted.

³⁷ E.g., Q 3:181; 4:81; 5:83; 9:120–1; 10:21; 36:12; 83:7, 9, 18, 20.

whatever they did present there. Your Lord does wrong to no one.

Sûrat al-Kahf 18:49

كَلَّا سَنَكْتُبُ مَا يَقُولُ وَنَمُدُّ لَهُ مِنَ الْعَذَابِ مَدًّا

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

Sûrat 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:

كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الْقِتَالُ وَهُوَ كُرْهٌ لَّكُمْ...

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

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:216

وَمَا كَانَ لِنَفْسٍ أَنْ تَمُوتَ إِلَّا بِإِذْنِ اللَّهِ كِتَابًا مُّوجَّلًا...

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

Sûrat Âl 'Imrân 3:145

قُلْ لَنْ يُصِيبَنَا إِلَّا مَا كَتَبَ اللَّهُ لَنَا هُوَ مَوْلَانَا وَعَلَى اللَّهِ فَلْيَتَوَكَّلِ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ

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."

Sûrat al-Tawba 9:51

يَمْحُوا اللَّهُ مَا يَشَاءُ وَيُثَبِّتُ وَعِنْدَهُ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ

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

Sûrat 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'ân often says, "when he decrees a matter, he merely says to a thing, 'Be!' and it is."³⁸

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'ân and its primary sense: God's authoritative prescription for his creation. When the Qur'ân calls itself *kitâb*, 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 Muḥammad can say that he is bringing *kitâb Allâh* without embarrassment that he has no script to show.³⁹

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—*kalâm Allâh*—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'ân does not so easily fit that schema, since it repeatedly demonstrates and insists upon its oral, responsive nature. So our understanding of *kitâb* 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 *âya* 'verse' is a publicly available "bounded text" issuing from the knowledge and sovereign will of God. Even without being transcribed it is *kitâb*.

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'ân's talk of *kitâb* 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'ân. The choice of the term *muṣḥaf* 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 *muṣḥaf* and its gradual identification with *kitâb Allâh* has impoverished the very rich notions that cluster around the term *kitâb* in the Qur'ân. As I have suggested,

³⁸ Q 2:117, 3:47, 3:59, 6:73, 16:40, 19:35, 36:82, 40:68.

³⁹ This is also why al-Ṭabarî could speak of a *kitâb maktûb* without any sense of redundancy. See note 11, this chapter.

this might have been what drove later Muslim thinkers to concentrate far more on *kalâm Allâh* than on *kitâb Allâh*.⁴⁰

This chapter began by taking note of the Qur'ân'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 *kitâb*, the Qur'ân 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 Qur'ân 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 Qur'ân refuses to behave as an already codified corpus (*jumla wâhida*), 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 *kitâb* that the Qur'ân 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 *kitâb* 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 Qur'ân 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 Qur'ân's own voice it is possible to discover a unified notion of *kitâb* that can make sense of the many and varied uses of this term, which is so central to the understanding of the Qur'ân. 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 Qur'ân'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 *kitâb* functions in the Qur'ân'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 *kitâb* with other terms, but this much is already clear: it is the primary symbol of

⁴⁰ See chapter 1.

God's sovereignty and knowledge. The *kitâb* 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-kitâb* 'the source (lit., mother) of the *kitâb*'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 *kitâb* 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 *kitâb* 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 Qur'ân's *kitâb* 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.

⁴¹ Q 3:7; 13:39; 43:4.

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, Muḥammad 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.¹ 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.² 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."³

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'ân'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'ân. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith has pointed out, the meaning of the Qur'ân is "the

¹ For a history of the emergence of the various kinds of field theory in linguistics see Suzanne Öhman, "Theories of the 'Linguistic Field,'" *Word* (New York) 9 (1953): 123-34, and Harold Basilus, "Neo-Humboldtian Ethnolinguistics," *Word* (New York) 8 (1952): 95-105.

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

³ Izutsu, *Concepts*, 13.

history of its meanings."⁴ In order to illustrate this development, one might cite two works, one by Jane I. Smith⁵ and the other by Jane Dammen McAuliffe.⁶ Each examines the history of commentary on particular words or verses of the Qur'ân, showing how Muslim thought on certain issues has developed over the centuries. Izutsu attempted something similar in his study of the semantic development of the words *imân* and *islâm* in Islamic theological texts.⁷ The present study confines itself to examining the semantic fields evident in the Qur'ân text itself, rather than probing the commentary tradition in a systematic way to discover a clear pattern of historical development in meaning. The commentary tradition is used as a kind of control, to find whether what I am claiming to discern in the Qur'ân text is entirely novel, or whether the Muslim community has recognized something like it before.

Some would object that the earliest stage in the history of the Qur'ân's meanings is unrecoverable because of the gap in time and culture, so the study of the commentary (*tafsîr*) tradition is the only legitimate pursuit for scholars of the Qur'ân.⁸ However, if a gap in time and culture could render the Qur'ân unintelligible to us, then the meaning of any work of *tafsîr* is equally unrecoverable for the very same reasons. Such skepticism only brings us to the point of absurdity.⁹

For Izutsu, each word has both a "basic meaning"—"something inherent in the word itself, which it carries with it wherever it goes"—and also a "relational meaning."¹⁰ As it happens, the example he uses to illustrate his distinction is *kitâb*. Though in Izutsu's opinion its basic meaning remains 'book', once it is introduced into the discourse of the Qur'ân, "the word *kitâb* assumes an unusual importance as the sign of a very particular religious concept surrounded by a halo of sanctity. This comes from the fact that the word stands in very close

⁴ Wilfred C. Smith, "The True Meaning of Scripture: An Empirical Historian's Nonreductionist Interpretation of the Qur'ân," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 11 (1980): 504.

⁵ Jane I. Smith, *An Historical and Semantic Study of the Term "Islam" as Seen in a Sequence of Qur'ân Commentaries* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1975).

⁶ Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

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

⁸ See, for example, Andrew Rippin, ed., *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ân* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 3ff; and his "Reading the Qur'ân with Richard Bell," *JACS* 112 (1992): 639-47.

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), 8-15.

¹⁰ Izutsu, *God and Man*, 18-20.

relation to the concept of Divine Revelation, or rather various concepts having direct reference to Revelation."¹¹ This relational meaning Izutsu considers far more important than the basic meaning. Once the word *kitâb* has entered the semantic field of revelation language in the Qur'ân, 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 *sâ'a* 'hour', and the relational meanings they take on in the Qur'ân'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 *âmana*).¹²

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 Muḥammad intended to produce a written volume for his community. If *kitâb* indeed has a basic meaning, it would be 'writing', and only by extension 'book'. In Arabic usage before the Qur'ân, 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 *kitâb* 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'ân, 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."¹³ While acknowledging that there can be a simple, "neutral" meaning for the word *yawm* (pl. *ayyâm*), 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—*ayyâm al-ʿarab*—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'ân.

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'ân'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 *kitâb* in an ordinary context showing the basic meaning of 'book' pure and simple."¹⁴ 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.¹⁵ 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'ân'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.¹⁶ 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."¹⁷ The areas constituted 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'ân 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."¹⁸ 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'ân'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 *îmân* 'faith' is shown in figure 3.1.

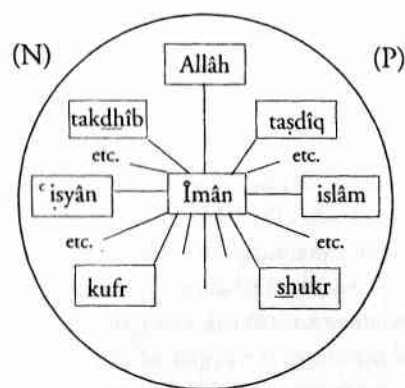
¹⁴ Izutsu, *God and Man*, 20, fig. A.

¹⁵ Izutsu, *God and Man*, 23–24.

¹⁶ Izutsu, *God and Man*, 26.

¹⁷ Izutsu, *God and Man*, 27.

¹⁸ Izutsu, *God and Man*, 29.

Figure 3.1. The semantic field of *imân* 'faith'¹⁹

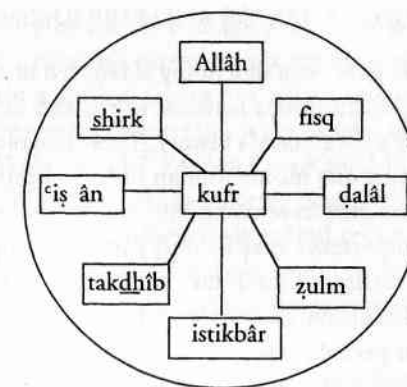
The focus-word, *imân*, anchors the field and delimits its broad meaning without much differentiation. The key-words that cluster around it point—either negatively (N) or positively (P)—to a specific aspect of the central phenomenon.²⁰ Some of the key-words (e.g., *islâm* 'submission' or *kufr* 'unbelief') are themselves important enough to qualify as focus-words in other fields. Although the name *Allâh* figures here only as a key-word because God is the object of *imân*, in fact it functions as the quintessential focus-word in the Qur'ân 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 *imân*. 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 *ḍalâl* '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 *ṣirât* or *sabîl* 'path' (see figure 3.3).

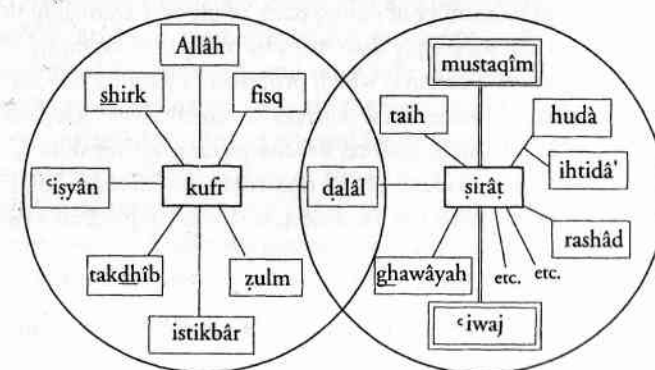
¹⁹ Izutsu, *God and Man*, 30, fig. A.

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*), *islâm* lit., 'the giving over of oneself (to God)' (the verb *aslama*), *taḥḍīq* 'considering (the revealed words) truthful' (the verb *ḥaddaqa*), *Allâh* (as the object of 'belief')."

²¹ Izutsu, *God and Man*, 31.

Figure 3.2. The semantic field of *kufr* 'unbelief'²²

Izutsu classifies the key-words in the *ṣirât* 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'ân views as straight (*mustaqîm* and its synonyms) or crooked (*ʿiwaj* and its synonyms). In the second category are words relating to a person's choosing or being guided to the right way (*hudâ*, *ihtidâ*, *rashâd*, etc.). The third classification consists of the concepts of straying or wandering off the right path (*ḍalâl*, *ghawâyah*, *taiḥ*, etc.).

Figure 3.3. The semantic fields of *kufr* 'unbelief' and *ṣirât* 'path'²³

²² Izutsu, *God and Man*, 32, fig. B. "The negative side of this conceptual network consists of words like *kufr* 'disbelief', *takdhīb* 'claiming that something is a lie' (the verb *kadhhaba*; *kadhīb* 'a lie'), *ʿiṣyân* 'disobedience', and *nifâq* 'making a false show of belief' etc." *Fisq* 'serious sin'; *ḍalâl* 'going astray'; *zûlm* 'darkness, wrongdoing'; *istikbâr* 'pride'; *shirk* 'associating others with God'.

²³ 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.²⁴ 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'ân's 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-Rahmân* for God, or the emergence of the term *kitâb* in what is identified as the later Meccan period.²⁵ Such dating often ends in a completely circular argument.

While we must surely recognize that over the period of its composition the Qur'ân'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 *asbâb al-nuzûl* 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."²⁶

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 *banî Isrâ'il* 'the children of Israel' for the Jews when the Prophet was in Mecca, to the appellation *al-Yahûd* when he was engaged in controversy with actual groups of Jews. While it is true that the uses of *al-Yahûd* are all polemical in nature and appear in what are traditionally identified as Madinan *sûras*, the use of *banî Isrâ'il* is still common in Madinan verses (Q 2:40, 47, 83, 122, 211, 246; 3:49, 93; 5:12, 32, 70, 72, 78, 110; 26:197). In addition there are two uses of *banî Isrâ'il* (one Madinan, 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'ân 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'ân 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'ân should be based on a reasonable assumption about the developing experience of the Prophet himself. Muḥammad 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 *sûras* is opening up new avenues to an appreciation of the Qur'ân'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'ân must avoid attributing too much solely to the changing authorial intentions of Muḥammad, 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'ân's *sûras* developed through four phases, three in Mecca and one in Madina. Mecca, with its *ḥaram* 'sanctuary', its history and its sacred times, provides the orientation in both time and space to the

the Rise of Islam in JAOS 110 (1990): 472–86.

²⁷ See pp. 9–11 above.

²⁸ Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*; and Crone's *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987). See also Crone's article "Two Legal Problems."

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 Muḥammad's experience (257, 259).

³⁰ Neuwirth, "Vom Rezitationstext," 89, n. 51.

³¹ Bell, *Origin of Islam*, 100–133, and Watt, *Bell's Introduction*, 108–120.

thirty-two early Meccan *sûras*, which Neuwirth suggests emerged within the context of an early Islamic worship that was grafted onto the rituals of the Ka'ba.³²

In the second phase the *sûras* of the middle Meccan period, which explicitly invoke the *kitâb*, have a more complex and defined structure, and rehearse of the events of salvation history. They seem to have emerged from a ritual context that was a reprise of Christian and Jewish liturgies of the Word. This took place during the period in which the focus of ritual activity was Jerusalem.³³ In this period the term *kitâb* functioned as a symbol of the shared prophetic heritage, the common memory of salvation history, that the Muslims now share with the Christians and Jews.³⁴ As noted briefly in chapter 2, Neuwirth believes that only certain parts of the Qur'ân—the *dhikr*, the pericopes excerpted from the heavenly book that recall prophetic history—belong to the *kitâb*. In the Qur'ân text, especially in these middle-Meccan *sûras*, these fragments have been placed in a framework put together from other materials—hymns, polemic, affirmations of the revelation—that developed in the setting of Islam's emerging ritual.³⁵

These liturgical *sûras* give way in the third phase to what Neuwirth calls the *Rede-Suren*, *sûras* in the form of a stylized parenthetic address in a ritual setting.³⁶ She notes that these are simpler in structure and shorter, and that they focus much more on the person of the Prophet; there is little recollection of history and much less mention of the *kitâb*. They come from a period when the Ka'ba has once more become the focal point for Muslim worship and concern for a connectedness with the earlier monotheistic traditions is less marked.³⁷ Neuwirth sees here the beginnings of the dissolution of the form the *sûra* had developed as a unified composition that provides all the elements of a complete liturgy. Since this kind of address-*sûra* has no formal closing passage, it would need to be supplemented in the liturgy with ritual elements from other existing *sûras*.³⁸

The fourth phase, the complete dissolution of the liturgical compositional form, is manifest in the later long *sûras*—Q 2–5, 8, 9—which no longer exhibit

³² Neuwirth, "Vom Rezitationstext," 84–88. For a discussion of the relationship of the early Muslims to the dawn and dusk rituals of the Ka'ba, see Uri Rubin, "Morning and Evening Prayers in Early Islam," *JSAI* 10 (1987): 40–64. See also Uri Rubin, "The Ka'ba: Aspects of Its Ritual Functions and Position in Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Times," *JSAI* 8 (1986): 97–131.

³³ She counts twenty-two such "*Geschichtssuren*" without, however, giving a clear listing. During her treatment of them she refers to more than twenty-two, that is, *sûras* 7, 10–15, 19, 21, 23–28, 31, 32, 36–41, 43–45, 46, 50, 54, 67. "Vom Rezitationstext," 89–91.

³⁴ Neuwirth, "Vom Rezitationstext," 92.

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

³⁶ Neuwirth, "Vom Rezitationstext," 95–97.

³⁷ Neuwirth, "Vom Rezitationstext," 101.

³⁸ Neuwirth, "Vom Rezitationstext," 97.

the signs of a coherent schema governing their composition. Neuwirth suggests that in spite of their conventional introductions, they have come to function only as "grab bags" (*Sammelkörbe*) for isolated groups of verses that resemble the classical components of earlier *sûras* but to which quite specific legal provisions have been added.³⁹ 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'ân as a source for excerpting isolated verses or pericopes.⁴⁰

Neuwirth's approach is based upon extensive and minutely detailed structural analysis of the Qur'ân, and the over-arching interpretation she brings to this mass of material is certainly very attractive.⁴¹ She, perhaps more than any other writer, has offered a persuasive scenario for the very particular forms in which the Qur'ân 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 *sûra* 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 *kitâb*) 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 *kitâb* never fades, and it remains closely linked to the Prophet. While her idea that the term *kitâb* only applied to parts of the text seems to offer a solution to the puzzle of the Qur'ân'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'ân itself and its notion of *kitâb*.

A somewhat similar though less rigid proposal for understanding the development of the Qur'ân through different periods is offered by J. Corbon, who also takes his cue from Blachère in positing a development based on the emerging consciousness of the prophetic mission.⁴² He notes that gradually increasing originality (*l'originalité croissante*) is as important a criterion as style or audience for determining the dating of the *sûras*. He takes it as axiomatic that

³⁹ Neuwirth, "Vom Rezitationstext," 98.

⁴⁰ Neuwirth, "Vom Rezitationstext," 99.

⁴¹ See, for example, her *Studien zur Komposition der Mekkanischen Suren*, *Studien zur Sprache, Geschichte und Kultur des islamischen Orients*, Neue Folge, Bd. 10 (Berlin & New York: De Gruyter, 1981), in which she analyzes in extraordinary detail the elements of structure and content of all the Meccan *sûras*.

⁴² Jean Corbon, "Notes sur le vocabulaire de prédication des premières sourates mekkoises," *Mélanges de l'Université Saint Joseph* 36 (1959): 149–95.

texts in which the Qur'ân 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 *kitâb*. Originality shows itself in this period in the way the Qur'ân takes from the earlier scriptures whatever is considered valuable and rejects whatever is incompatible with Muḥammad's mission. Instead of seeking confirmation from the earlier traditions, the Qur'ân 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-Qur'anic 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 Qur'ân, to a uniquely Qur'anic usage. Although the understanding of *kitâb* must have changed and developed over the period of the Qur'ân's genesis and the term emerged only gradually as a key to the Qur'ân's understanding of itself, still it is striking that the symbol of the *kitâb* survived the vicissitudes of that development and remains a unifying focus throughout the text in its final form.

KITÂB AS A FOCUS-WORD

Although Izutsu has included occasional references to the term *kitâb* 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 *kitâb* as a focus-word, however, indeed as one of the most important focus-words of the Qur'ân'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

⁴³ Corbon, "Notes," 152, n. 2.

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 Qur'anic 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.

رَبَّنَا وَابْعَثْ فِيهِمْ رَسُولًا مِنْهُمْ يَتْلُو عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِكَ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ
إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ

Our Lord! Raise up among them a messenger (rasûl) of their own who will recite to them your signs (âyât), make known to them the kitâb and the hikma,⁴⁴ and purify⁴⁵ them. You alone are the Mighty, the Wise.

Sûrat 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:

وَلَا تِمْنَعْنِي عَلَيْكُمْ وَلَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ ۖ كَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا فِيكُمْ رَسُولًا مِنْكُمْ يَتْلُو
عَلَيْكُمْ آيَاتِنَا وَيُزَكِّيكُمْ وَيُعَلِّمُكُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَيُعَلِّمُكُم مَّا لَمْ تَكُونُوا تَعْلَمُونَ

So that I might complete my graciousness to you and that you, perhaps, might be guided ॥ 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-yuzakkih*. 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 2:174; 3:77; 4:49; 24:21). Because of the close connection between charitable giving (later institutionalized in the *zaka*t) and considerations of purity or righteousness, it would seem reasonable to opt for the translation "to impose the *zaka*t 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 *zaka*t. For the connection between the *zaka*t and purity, see J. Schacht in *SEI*, 654.

you the kitâb and the hikma, and makes known to you what you did not know before.

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:150-51

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

لَقَدْ مَنَّ اللَّهُ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ إِذْ بَعَثَ فِيهِمْ رَسُولًا مِنْ أَنْفُسِهِمْ يَتْلُوا عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِهِ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَإِنْ كَانُوا مِنْ قَبْلُ لَفِي ضَلَالٍ مُبِينٍ

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 kitâb and the hikma, even though before that they were manifestly in error.

Sûrat Âl-Imrân 3:164

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

هُوَ الَّذِي بَعَثَ فِي الْأُمِّيِّينَ رَسُولًا مِنْهُمْ يَتْلُوا عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِهِ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَإِنْ كَانُوا مِنْ قَبْلُ لَفِي ضَلَالٍ مُبِينٍ

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

Sûrat al-Jumû'a 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 Muḥammad as *rasûl* '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 Muḥammad'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'ân's vocabulary. For this reason these verses can provide us with a thumbnail sketch of the semantic fields we are exploring.

AL-KITÂB WA-L-HIKMA

The paired expression *al-kitâb wa-l-hikma* occurs in the Qur'ân nine times.⁴⁶ It is also used once in the indefinite, partitive form: *min kitâbin wa hikmatin* (Q 3:81). These constitute half the uses of *al-hikma*, which is paired on other occasions with *âyât Allâh* 'God's signs' (Q 33:34), and *al-mulk* 'sovereignty' (Q 2:251; 38:20); it is used in apposition to *al-bayyinât* 'explanations, clear signs' (Q 43:63) and *al-anbâ* '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 places⁴⁷ of the expression *al-kitâb wa-l-hukm* in a way virtually identical with *al-kitâb wa-l-hikma*—so much so that translators sometimes choose to render *hukm* as 'wisdom' rather than as the more usual 'judgment' or 'government'.⁴⁸ In these three verses, the expression is joined with *al-nubûwa* 'prophecy' and the only other uses of that word are in the expression *al-nubûwa wa-l-kitâb* (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'anic usage, to *hukm*.⁴⁹ 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-khiṭâb* which we might translate 'wise judgment and

⁴⁶ Q 2:129, 151, 231; 3:164; 4:54, 113; 62:2; in Q 3:48 and Q 5:110 along with the Tawrât and the Injil.

⁴⁷ Q 3:79; 6:89; 45:16.

⁴⁸ Pickthall at Q 3:79 (and in a similar context at Q 12:22; 19:12; 21:74, 79; 26:83; 28:14); Yûsuf 'Ali at Q 3:79; 19:12; Bell gives "wisdom" as an alternative to "jurisdiction" at Q 3:79 (73); Aḥmad 'Ali commonly uses "wisdom" for *hukm* (Q 12:22; 19:12; 21:79; 26:21; 26:83; 27:78; 28:14), though not when it is paired with *kitâb*. None of these translations is consistent in its usage.

⁴⁹ Léon Gauthier has posited the existence of a primitive meaning of 'to place' (*poser*) for the root *h-k-m*. He suggests this can account for the variety of apparently irreconcilable meanings associated with that root. See "La racine arabe *حكم* et ses dérivés," in *Homenaje a D. Francisco Codera en su jubilacion del profesorado*, edited with an introduction by Eduardo Saavedra (Saragossa, 1904), 435-54. However, one need not go that far to see the close connection between *hukm* and *hikma*. Pierre Larcher has recently issued a telling challenge to the practice of interpreting Arabic words as derivatives of a root with a particular fundamental meaning. See "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): 291-314.

decisiveness of speech'. In its discussion of the Qur'anic uses of *ḥikma* and *ḥukm*, the classic dictionary *Lisân al-ʿArab* notes how often the words are connected with knowledge of the right and with justice.⁵⁰

Secondly, the expression *al-kitâb wa-l-ḥikma* (or *ḥukm*) should probably be read as a hendiadys; 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'ân itself refers to in two other places as *al-kitâb al-ḥakīm* (Q 10:1; 31:2).⁵¹

Both of these points are reflected in al-Shâfiʿi's *Kitâb al-Umm* where he cites the phrase *al-kitâb wa-l-ḥikma* in Q 62:2 to prove to those who recognize only the Qur'ân as authoritative that the authority of the *sunna* is affirmed by the Qur'ân.⁵² Al-Shâfiʿi recognized the juridical rather than esoteric nature of *ḥikma* 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'ân. To al-Shâfiʿi the *ḥikma* is nothing less than the *sunna* of the Prophet.⁵³

⁵⁰ *Lisân al-ʿArab*, art. *ḥkm*.

⁵¹ See also Q 43:2–4 where the *kitâb* is characterised as *ḥakīm* and Pickthall appropriately translates it 'decisive'. In Q 5:43 the Tôrâh is said to contain *ḥukm Allâh*.

⁵² It is not clear what al-Shâfiʿi made of the meaning of *al-ḥikma* in 3:48, where it was taught to Jesus. Commentators quoted by al-Ṭabarî (*Tafsîr*, 3: 273) agree that it is *al-sunna* without further comment. Al-Ṭabarî himself says: "والْحِكْمَةُ هِيَ السَّيِّئَةُ الَّتِي يُوحِيهَا إِلَيْهِ فِي غَيْرِ كِتَابٍ." "The *ḥikma*, that is the *sunna* that [God] communicated to [Muḥammad] in addition to the *kitâb*."

⁵³ Al-Shâfiʿi, "Kitâb Jimâʿ al-ʿilm" in *Kitâb al-Umm* (Bûlâq, Cairo: Al-Maṭbaʿat al-Kubrâ al-Amîriyya, 1324 A.H.), 251.

قلت قال الله عز وجل ﴿هو الذي بعث في الأميين رسولا منهم يتلوا عليهم آياته ويزكيهم ويعلمهم الكتاب والحكمة﴾ قال فقد علما أن الكتاب كتاب الله فما الحكمة؟ قلت سنة رسول الله ﷺ قال أفيحتمل أن يكون يعلمهم الكتاب حملة والحكمة خاصة وهي أحكامه؟ قلت تعني بأن بين لهم عن الله عز وجل مثل ما بين لهم في حملة الفرائض من الصلاة والزكاة والحج وغيرها فيكون الله قد أحكم فرائض من فرائضه بكتابه وبين كيف هي على لسان نبيه ﷺ قال انه ليحتمل ذلك قلت فإن ذهبت هذا المذهب فهي في معنى الأول قبله الذي لا تصل إليه إلا بحبر عن رسول الله ﷺ

"I [al-Shâfiʿi] said, 'God said, "It was he who raised among the unscriptured a messenger from their own people to recite his signs to them, to purify them and to make known to them the *kitâb* and the *ḥikma*." (Q 62:2)' He said, 'We already know that the *kitâb* is the Book of God, but what is the *ḥikma*?' I said, 'It is the *sunna* of the Messenger of God (may God's peace and blessings be upon him).' He [al-Shâfiʿi's opponent] said, 'Is it really conceivable that He would have taught the *kitâb* to all of them together but taught the *ḥikma* only through the oral transmission of a few people—given that it consists of His *alḥikām* [and therefore is necessary for all to know]?' I answered, 'It [the *ḥikma*] 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 *kitâb* some of

His opponent at this point objected that the phrase should be read as a hendiadys in the way we have suggested, but al-Shâfiʿi himself preferred a reading that would allow him to claim Qur'anic warrant for the authority of an extra-Qur'anic source.⁵⁴ Although al-Shâfiʿi's preference is for treating the *ḥikma* as an oral "document" separate and distinct from the canon of the Qur'ân, 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'ân was accepted without demur even by his opponents as the simple equivalent of "the Book of God," and so al-Shâfiʿi could easily find his emerging second canon endorsed in the first. However, in the Qur'ân itself, where, as we have seen, the *kitâb* resists being reduced to a closed canon, the expression *al-kitâb wa-l-ḥikma/ḥukm* seems more readily understandable as a hendiadys.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 *aḥādīth* have the same status as what preceded them [i.e., the Qur'ân], 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)."

قال فإن ذهبت مذهب تكرير الكلام قلت وإيهم أولى به إذا ذكر الكتاب والحكمة أن يكونا شيئين أو شيئا واحدا قال يحتمل أن يكونا شيئا واحدا ويحتمل أن يكونا شيئا واحدا قلت فظاهرهما أولاهما

"He said, 'What if I were to adopt the position that this is just a case of hendiadys [*takrîr al-kalâm*]?' I [al-Shâfiʿi] said, 'When mention is made of the *kitâb* and of the *ḥikma*, 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—*kitâb* 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-Shâfiʿi, *Kitâb al-Umm*, 251.

⁵⁵ Al-Shâfiʿi's citation and explanation of Q 33:34 to back up his opposition to the hendiadys proposal remains unconvincing except to his imaginary interlocutor:

[قال الشافعي] وفي القرآن دلالة على ما قلنا وخلاف ما ذهبت إليه قال وأبى قلت قول الله عز وجل ﴿وَأذْكُرْنَ مَا يُتْلَىٰ فِي بُيُوتِكُنَّ مِنْ آيَاتِ اللَّهِ وَالْحِكْمَةِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ لَطِيفًا خَبِيرًا﴾ فاجبر أنه يتلى في بيوتهن شيئا قال فهذا القرآن يتلى فكيف تتلى الحكمة؟ قلت إنما معنى التلاوة أن يطق بالقرآن والسنة كما ينطق بها قال فهداه آيين أن الحكمة عبر القرآن

"[Al-Shâfiʿi] said, 'In the Qur'ân there is an indication affirming what we maintain and denying 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 *dyât* of God and the *ḥikma*. Surely God is kind and knowing." It is reported that two things were recited in their houses.' He said, 'Well this means the Qur'ân, which is recited, but how is the *ḥikma* recited?' I said, 'The meaning of "reciting" is that [the words of] the Qur'ân are articulated and [the words of] the *sunna* are articulated as well.' He said, 'This [understanding of "reciting"] shows very clearly that the *ḥikma* is something separate from the Qur'ân.'" al-Shâfiʿi, *Kitâb al-Umm*, 251.

Thus we have identified the first major component of the semantic field of which *kitâb* 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 *yatlû 'alay-kum* (-him) *âyâta-nâ* (-ka, -hu) "he will recite to you/them Our/Your/His signs." The expression "recite the signs (*âyât*) of God" occurs often—thirty-one times in various forms including those just cited.⁵⁶ The verb *talâ* 'to recite' is used quite often in connection with *kitâb*,⁵⁷ and also with *bayyinât* 'clear signs, clarifications',⁵⁸ *dhikr* 'remembrance',⁵⁹ *qur'ân* 'recitation',⁶⁰ *nabâ* 'tidings',⁶¹ *al-tawrât* 'Tôrâh' (Q 3:93) and *shuhuf* 'pages' (Q 98:2). These words lie at the heart of the Qur'anic vocabulary, and *talâ* is one of the main verbs that link them together. Principal among the other verbs used with *âyât* are *jâ'a bi-* 'to bring', *atâ bi-* 'to bring', *qara'a* 'read or recite', *nazala* 'to send down'. The verb *talâ* 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 *âya* (occurring 373 times, mostly in the plural) points to its centrality in the Qur'ân's understanding of revelation, and the relationship between *âya* and *kitâb* throughout the Qur'ân is obviously very close, though also quite complex. The basic meaning of *âya* 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

Though we might consider al-Shâffî's opinion here anachronistic, we shall return in chapter 8 to the significance of his intuition that what was given by God through the Prophet could not have been co-extensive with the delimited text of the Qur'ân but must have been far more comprehensive.

⁵⁶ Q 2:129, 151, 252; 3:58, 101, 108, 113, 164; 8:2, 31; 10:15; 19:58, 73; 22:72 twice; 23:66, 105; 28:45, 59; 31:7; 34:43; 39:71; 45:6, 8, 25, 31; 46:7; 62:2; 65:11; 68:15; 83:13. The verb *talâ* [to recite] occurs sixty-two times in all.

⁵⁷ Q 2:42, 113, 121; 4:127; 18:27; 29:45, 48, 51; 35:29.

⁵⁸ In apposition to *âyât* Q 10:15; 19:73; 22:72; 34:43; 45:25; 46:7.

⁵⁹ Q 3:58; 18:83; 37:3.

⁶⁰ Q 10:61; 27:92.

⁶¹ Q 5:27; 7:175; 10:71; 26:29.

âya (118 times in all) in a refrain that makes specific the purpose of the *âyât*:⁶²

... كَذَلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ آيَاتِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ

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

Sûrat Âl-Imrân 3:103

... انْظُرْ كَيْفَ نَصَرَفُ الْآيَاتِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَفْقَهُونَ

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

Sûrat al-An'âm 6:65

... ذَلِكَ مِنْ آيَاتِ اللَّهِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَذَكَّرُونَ

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

Sûrat al-A'râf 7:26

... كَذَلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ الْآيَاتِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ

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

Sûrat al-Nûr 24:61

As with other places in which term *âya* 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 *âya* 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 *âyât* even without invoking the term. For example:

وَإِذْ آتَيْنَا مُوسَى الْكِتَابَ وَالْفُرْقَانَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ

And then We gave Moses the *kitâb* and the *furqân*, so that you perhaps might be guided.

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:53

⁶² Q 2:73, 187, 219, 221, 242, 266; 3:103; 5:89; 6:65; 7:26, 174, 176; 13:2; 24:1, 61; 30:46; 43:48; 46:27; 57:17.

⁶³ On the *dyât* in nature, see W. A. Graham, "'The Winds to Herald His Mercy' and Other 'Signs for Those of Certain Faith': Nature as Token of God's Sovereignty and Grace in the Qur'ân," in *Faithful Imagining: Essays in Honor of Richard R. Niebuhr* ed. Sang Hyun Lee, Wayne Proudfoot, and Albert Blackwell (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1995).

قُلْ تَعَالَوْا أَتْلُ مَا حَرَّمَ رَبِّي عَلَيْكُمْ . . . ذَلِكُمْ وَصَّاكُمْ بِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ

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

Sûrat al-An'âm 6:151

The most common verbs used to complete the clause when it refers specifically to the *âyât* are: *ʿaqala* 'to use one's intelligence, to reason',⁶⁴ *tafakkara* 'to think over',⁶⁵ *taḍhakkara* 'to recall to mind',⁶⁶ *rajaʿa* 'to come back'.⁶⁷ Less common are *shakara* 'to be grateful' (Q 5:89; 30:46); *ittaqa* 'to be God-fearing' (Q 2:187); *ihtadà* 'to be guided, to accept guidance' (Q 3:103); *faqiha* 'to be knowledgeable' (Q 6:65); *yaqina* 'to be certain' (Q 13:2). A similar pattern is observable in *âya*-type passages even when the actual term *âya* is lacking.

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

أَوَلَمْ يَهْدِ لَهُمْ كَمْ أَهْلَكْنَا مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ مِنَ الْقُرُونِ يَمْشُونَ فِي مَسَاكِينِهِمْ إِنْ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ أَفَلَا يَسْمَعُونَ

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 *âyât*. Will they not then pay heed?

Sûrat al-Sajda 32:26

وَفِي الْأَرْضِ آيَاتٌ لِلْمُوقِنِينَ || وَفِي أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَفَلَا تُبْصِرُونَ

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

Sûrat al-Dhâriyât 51:20–21

Although these are the only two occurrences in which the term *âyât* is actually used, like *laʿalla-kum* (-hum) . . . this refrain regularly accompanies *âya*-type passages. For example:

أَمْ مَنْ يَخْلُقُ كَمَنْ لَا يَخْلُقُ أَفَلَا تَذَكَّرُونَ

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

Sûrat al-Naḥl 16:17

⁶⁴ Q 2:73, 242; 24:61; 57:17.

⁶⁵ Q 2:219, 266; 7:176.

⁶⁶ Q 2:221; 7:26; 24:1.

⁶⁷ Q 7:174; 43:48; 46:27.

أَفَلَمْ يَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَيَنْظُرُوا كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِمْ وَلَدَارُ الْآخِرَةِ خَيْرٌ لِلَّذِينَ اتَّقَوْا أَفَلَا تَعْقِلُونَ

Have they not traveled the earth and seen how things turned out for those who were before them? And surely the abode of the hereafter is good for those who are God-fearing. Can you not then reason?

Sûrat Yûsuf 12:109

أَوَلَمْ يَرَوْا أَنَّا نَسُوقُ الْمَاءَ إِلَى الْأَرْضِ الْجُرُزِ فَنُخْرِجُ بِهِ زَرْعًا تَأْكُلُ مِنْهُ أَنْعَامُهُمْ وَأَنْفُسُهُمْ أَفَلَا يُبْصِرُونَ

Have they not seen how We lead the water to the barren land and cause to come forth crops from which both their cattle and they themselves eat? Can they not then see?

Sûrat al-Sajda 32:27

أَفَلَا يَتَذَكَّرُونَ الْقُرْآنَ أَمْ عَلَى قُلُوبٍ أَقْفَالُهَا

Will they then not ponder the Qur'ân, or are there locks on their hearts?

Sûrat Muḥammad 47:24

Both *laʿalla*- and 'a-fa-lâ give an optative sense to the indicative verbs that follow them, and these refrains run through the Qur'ân as an appeal to heed the signs of God, which are everywhere to be seen. They recall another of the Qur'ân's constant refrains: *âya* (*âyât*) *li-qawmin* . . . 'sign(s) for people who . . .':

يَنْبِتْ لَكُمْ بِهِ الزَّرْعَ وَالزَّيْتُونَ وَالنَّخِيلَ وَالْأَعْنَابَ وَمِنْ كُلِّ الثَّمَرَاتِ إِنْ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَةٌ لِقَوْمٍ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ || وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمْ اللَّيْلَ وَالنَّهَارَ وَالشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ وَالنُّجُومَ مُسَخَّرَاتٍ بِأَمْرِهِ إِنْ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ يَعْقِلُونَ || وَمَا ذَرَأَ لَكُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ مُخْتَلِفًا أَلْوَانُهُ إِنْ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَةٌ لِقَوْمٍ يَذَكَّرُونَ

With [water] He makes crops grow for you, and the olive and the date palm and grapes and all kinds of fruit. Surely there are signs in that for people who think things over. || He has pressed the night and the day, the sun and the moon into service for you, and the stars are forced to serve by His command. Surely there is a sign in that for people who use their intelligence. || Whatever on earth He has created for you in various colors, surely there is a sign in that for people who remember.

Sûrat al-Naḥl 16:11–13

The pattern of usage for *li-qawmin* is similar both to the *laʿalla-kum* (-hum) and to the 'a-fa-lâ refrains: the majority of the verses deal with natural phenomena, but some refer to historical incidents (e.g., Q 27:52), legal provisions (e.g.,

Q 7:32), or revelation (e.g., Q 2:118; 6:105). Apart from the thirty-eight times when *âya* or its plural is used with the formula *li-qawmin*, there are also ten occasions when *li-qawmin* follows other nouns such as *hudâ* 'guidance', *rahma* 'mercy', *bayyina* 'explanation, clear sign', *baṣā'ir* 'visible proofs'. There are, in addition, a few cases of a simplified formula, *âya* or *âyât 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 'aqala;⁶⁸ 'alima 'to come to know, to learn';⁶⁹ tafakkara;⁷⁰ 'amana 'to come to faith, to believe';⁷¹ and sami'a 'to hear, listen'.⁷² There are also occasional uses of other verbs we have already seen *yaqina* (Q 2:118; 45:4), *taḥakkara* (Q 6:126; 16:13), *shakara* (Q 7:58), *ittaqa* (Q 10:6), and *faqiha* (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 *âyât* 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.⁷³

The refrain "signs for a people who . . ." seems rather to have the same optative sense that is grammatically explicit in the other two—*la'alla-* and *a-fa-lâ*. Though it is not possible to adduce grammatical authority, for example, for reading *li-qawmin ya'qilûna* as though it were *li-ya'qilû qawmun* '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 *âyât* rather than merely cataloging the intended recipients. Its meaning seems to be that the *âyât* 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

⁶⁸ Used eight times: Q 2:164; 13:4; 16:12, 67; 29:35; 30:24, 28; 45:5.

⁶⁹ Used seven times: Q 6:97, 105; 7:32; 9:11; 10:5; 27:52; 41:3.

⁷⁰ Used seven times: Q 10:24; 13:3; 16:11, 69; 30:21; 39:42; 45:13.

⁷¹ Used six times: Q 6:99; 16:79; 27:86; 29:24; 30:37; 39:52.

⁷² Used three times: Q 10:67; 16:65; 30:23.

⁷³ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr*, (5: 291, commenting on Q 6:99):

وخص بذلك تعالى ذكره القوم الذين يؤمنون، لأنهم المتفجعون بحجج الله والمعتبرون بها، دون من قد طبع الله على قلبه، فلا يعرف الحق من باطل ولا يتبين هدى من ضلالة.

verse endings in the passage Q 16:11–17: *âyatan li-qawmin yatafakkarûna; âyatan li-qawmin ya'qilûna; âyatan li-qawmin yaḥdḥakkarûna; la'allakum tahtadûna; hum yahtadûna; 'a-fa-lâ taḥakkarûna*.

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 *âyât* 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 (*ahwâ'*) about how things are:

قُلْ إِنَّ هُدَى اللَّهِ هُوَ الْهُدَىٰ وَلَئِنَّ آتِيتَهُمْ بَعْدَ الَّذِي جَاءَكَ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ مَا لَكَ مِنَ اللَّهِ مِن وَلِيٍّ وَلَا نَصِيرٍ

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."

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:120⁷⁴

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

تَنْزِيلٌ مِنَ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ ۖ كِتَابٌ فُصِّلَتْ آيَاتُهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لِّقَوْمٍ يَعْلَمُونَ

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

Sûrat Fuṣṣilat 41:2–3

كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ إِلَيْكَ مُبَارَكٌ لِّيَدَّبَّرُوا آيَاتِهِ وَلِيَتَذَكَّرَ أُولُوا الْأَلْبَابِ

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

Sûrat Ṣād 38:29

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

⁷⁴ See also Q 2:145; 3:61; 13:37.

elevate even the smallest segment of the Qur'ân to the status of a self-contained divine communication of universal significance—*âya li-l-âlamîn*, 'a sign for the worlds'.

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

إِن فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَةً وَمَا كَانَ أَكْثَرُهُمْ مُؤْمِنِينَ

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

Sûrat al-Shu'arâ 26:8, 67, 103, 121, 139, 158, 174, 196

The verbs used in recounting the response of people to God's *âyât* are overwhelmingly negative. The most common are *kadhhaba* 'to call a thing a lie';⁷⁵ *kafara bi-* 'to disbelieve in';⁷⁶ *jahada* 'to deny'.⁷⁷ Others include *istahza* 'a/ittakhadha huzû'an' 'to mock at'; *jâdala fi-* 'to argue about'; *khada* 'to plunge into idle talk about'; *istaskhara* 'to scoff'; *sâ'a fi-* 'to strive against'; *insalakha* 'to slough off'; *ishṭarâ* 'to sell'; *ṣadafa 'an* 'to turn away from'; *ḡalama bi-* 'to wrong'; *âjaza* 'to thwart'; *a-raḡa 'an-* 'to turn away from'; *ghafala* 'to be heedless of'; *istakbara* 'to consider oneself more important than'; *alhada* 'to blaspheme'; *makara* 'to plot against'; *ankara* 'to deny'; *nasiya* 'to forget'.

In examining the semantic field of *âya*, Izutsu takes little account of this negativity. He portrays the response to the *âyât* as a choice between *takdhib* 'calling them lies' on the one hand and *taṣḍiq* 'recognizing their truth' on the other, and offers a neatly balanced schema to represent this choice.⁷⁸ Yet there is no instance in the text of the verb *ṣaddaqa* being used with *âya*. Although it is clear that God would hope for a response of *taṣḍiq*, the Qur'ân is much more concerned to stress how rare it is for God's *âyât* to be accepted. So the *âya* takes on the aspect of a challenge, one that God knows from bitter experience will for

⁷⁵ Thirty-nine times (often in conjunction with *kafara*): Q 2:39; 3:11; 5:10, 86; 6:21, 27, 39, 49, 150, 157; 7:36, 37, 40, 64, 72, 136, 146, 147, 176, 177, 182; 8:54; 10:17, 73, 95; 17:59; 21:77; 22:57; 23:105; 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 *kitâb*.

⁷⁶ Twenty-four times: Q 2:39, 61, 73, 99; 3:4 (with *inṣil*, *tawrât*, and *furqân*), 19, 21, 70, 98, 101, 112; 4:56, 140, 155; 5:10; 8:52; 17:98; 18:105; 19:77; 29:23; 39:63; 45:11; 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 *kitâb*.

⁷⁷ Ten times: Q 6:33; 7:51; 11:59; 29:47, 49; 31:32; 40:63; 41:15, 28; 46:26.

⁷⁸ Izutsu, *God and Man*, 133–39.

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

أُولَئِكَ الَّذِينَ اشْتَرُوا الضَّلَالَةَ بِالْهُدَىٰ فَمَا رَبَحَتِ تِجَارَتُهُمْ وَمَا كَانُوا مُهْتَدِينَ

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

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:16

KNOWLEDGE, GUIDANCE, AND ERROR

The divine knowledge that the *âyât* make available to humanity provides the link to the next key term in the formulaic verses we have been examining—*allama al-kitâb* 'to make known or to teach the *kitâb*'. 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.⁷⁹ 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'anic vocabulary and therefore knowledge should be considered one of the fundamental concepts that the Prophet was seeking to convey to his hearers.⁸⁰ 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'ân 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:⁸¹

وَعَلَّمَ آدَمَ الْأَسْمَاءَ كُلَّهَا ثُمَّ عَرَضَهُمْ عَلَى الْمَلَائِكَةِ فَقَالَ أَنْبِئُونِي بِأَسْمَاءِ هَؤُلَاءِ إِنْ كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ ۖ قَالُوا سُبْحَانَكَ لَا عِلْمَ لَنَا إِلَّا مَا عَلَّمْتَنَا إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَلِيمُ الْحَكِيمُ

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 *kitâb* to Jesus (Q 3:48; 5:110), and Jesus encourages others not to worship himself but rather to continue their teaching and studying of the *kitâb* (Q 3:79). Al-Tabarî (*Tafsir*, 3: 272–3, ad Q 3:48) is of the opinion that when the Qur'ân says God will teach Jesus *al-kitâb*, it means God will teach him to write: *فيعلمه الكتاب، وهو الخط الذي يحطه بيده*.

⁸⁰ Franz Rosenthal, *Knowledge Triumphant: The Concept of Knowledge in Medieval Islam* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), 19–22.

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."

Sûrat 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'ân 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 Muḥammad make this clear:

وَيَسْأَلُونَكَ عَنِ الرُّوحِ قُلِ الرُّوحُ مِنْ أَمْرِ رَبِّي وَمَا أُوتِيتُمْ مِنَ الْعِلْمِ إِلَّا قَلِيلًا

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

Sûrat al-Isrâ' 17:85

As the much-treasured "throne verse" says:

يَعْلَمُ مَا بَيْنَ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَمَا خَلْفَهُمْ وَلَا يُحِيطُونَ بِشَيْءٍ مِنْ عِلْمِهِ إِلَّا بِمَا شَاءَ

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

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:255

The Qur'ân 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:

لَكِنَّ اللَّهَ يَشْهَدُ بِمَا أَنْزَلَ إِلَيْكَ أَنْزَلَهُ يَعْلَمُهُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ يَشْهَدُونَ وَكَفَى بِاللَّهِ شَهِيدًا

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.

Sûrat al-Nisâ' 4:166

نَرْفَعُ دَرَجَاتٍ مَنْ نَشَاءُ وَفَوْقَ كُلِّ ذِي عِلْمٍ عَلِيمٌ

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

Sûrat Yûsuf 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 *rasûl* taught the *kitâb* and the *hikma* to the people, they were *fi ḍalâlin mubînin* 'in manifest error'. They have received *hudâ* 'guidance', not in the sense that they now have all the directions

they need, but rather that they have accepted God as *al-hâdî* 'the Guide' and adopted the status of *muhtadûn* 'those that agree to be guided by another'.

The adjective *ʿalîm* 'knowing' is applied to God in all but six of the 140 occasions that it occurs in the Qur'ân.⁸² Its most common use is in the characteristic verse-ending formula, in which it is paired with another adjective such as *ḥakîm* 'wisely governing', *ʿazîz* 'mighty', *samîʿ* 'hearing', *baṣîr* 'seeing', *khâbir* 'aware' and *wâsiʿ* 'embracing'. The most common pairing is *ʿalîm* and *ḥakîm* 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 *ʿalîm* or *ḥakîm* with the most common of all the verse-ending adjectives applied to God, *raḥîm* '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), *ʾâtaynâhu ḥukman wa-ʿilmān* 'We granted him authority and knowledge.' This link between knowledge and authority brings us back once more to the *kitâb*, which we have already seen is bound closely to *ḥukm/hikma*.

In this chapter I have sketched the broad outlines of the semantic field of which *kitâb* 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 *ʿilm* 'knowledge' and *ḥukm/hikma* 'authority'. With the coming of the *kitâb*, 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 *kitâb* in its fullest sense is the record of both God's knowledge and the authoritative divine will. It can be read in the *âyât*—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 *kitâb* 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 *ʿilm* and *ḥukm*. To borrow the language of *Sûrat al-Fâtiḥa* (Q 1), it represents God's act of compassion (*raḥma*) in proffering the gift (*niʿma*) of guidance (*hudâ*) to people who would otherwise live in aimless wandering (*ḍalâl*).

⁸² The other uses are in reference to Moses (Q 7:109; 26:34), the sorcerers of Egypt (Q 7:112; 26:37) and Abraham's son (Q 15:53; 51:28).

⁸³ *ʿalîm* is paired with *samîʿ* twenty-nine times. The next most common adjective with *ʿalîm* is *wâsiʿ* (six times).

CHAPTER FOUR

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

We have seen more than a little evidence that the noun *kitâb* functions in the Qur'ân 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 *kitâb*; the synonyms for and parallels to *kitâb*; the adjectives used to describe the *kitâb*; plural, indefinite and partitive uses of *kitâb*; 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'ân's understanding of the noun *kitâb*.

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 *sûras* 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'ân has constantly chosen this particular verb, with its primarily physical meaning, over other verbs (e.g., *amara* 'to command', *farada* 'to oblige', *hafiza* 'to keep in memory', *hasiba* '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 *kitâb*.

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; 4:24,¹ 66, 77;
5:32, 45; 7:145; 57:27.

2. for himself: Q 6:12, 54.

B. punishments Q 22:4; 59:3.

C. entitlements Q 2:187; 4:127.

D. rewards Q 5:21; 7:156; 21:105.

E. the course of events Q 3:154; 7:157; 9:51; 58:22.

II. God writes to record

A. good deeds Q 3:53; 5:83; 9:120, 121; 21:94.

B. evil deeds and thoughts Q 3:181; 4:81; 10:21; 19:79; 43:19, 80; 78:29.²

C. all deeds Q 36:12; 82:11.

GOD'S DETERMINATIONS: KITÂB 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 *ʿalâ*, so they literally mean 'to write against', that is, as a claim or a punishment for someone:

¹ This occurrence of the verbal noun is included here since according to some interpreters it is technically a *maʿfûl muṭlaq*. See al-Ṭabarî, *Tafsîr*, 4: 10-11.

² This verse also uses the verbal noun *kitâb* to describe the way God records: *ahṣaynâhu kitâban* 'We have recorded it in writing'.

كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذَا حَضَرَ أَحَدُكُمُ الْمَوْتُ إِنْ تَرَكَ خَيْرًا الْوَصِيَّةُ لِلْوَالِدَيْنِ وَالْأَقْرَبِينَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ
حَقًّا عَلَى الْمُتَّقِينَ

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.

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:180

كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الْقِتَالُ وَهُوَ كُرْهُ لَكُمْ وَعَسَى أَنْ تَكْرَهُوا شَيْئًا وَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَكُمْ وَعَسَى أَنْ تُحِبُّوا شَيْئًا وَهُوَ شَرٌّ لَكُمْ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ وَأَنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

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.

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:216

وَلَوْ لَا أَنْ كَتَبَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمُ الْجَلَاءَ لَعَذَّبُهم فِي الدُّنْيَا وَلَهُمْ فِي الْآخِرَةِ عَذَابُ النَّارِ
And if God had not written expulsion (as a punishment) for them,³ He would have punished them in this world; they have earned in the hereafter the punishment of fire.

Sûrat al-Ḥashr 59:3

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

وَكَتَبْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ فِيهَا أَنَّ النَّفْسَ بِالنَّفْسِ وَالْعَيْنَ بِالْعَيْنِ وَالْأَنْفَ بِالْأَنْفِ وَالْأُذُنَ بِالْأُذُنِ وَالسِّنَّ
بِالسِّنِّ وَالْجُرُوحَ قِصَاصٌ فَمَنْ تَصَدَّقَ بِهِ فَهُوَ كَفَّارَةٌ لَهُ وَمَنْ لَمْ يَحْكَمْ بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ فَأُولَئِكَ
هُمُ الظَّالِمُونَ

And We wrote (as an obligation) upon them in [the Tôrâh] "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.

Sûrat al-Mâ'ida 5:45

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

قُلْ لَيْسَ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ قُلٌّ لِلَّهِ كَتَبَ عَلَى نَفْسِهِ الرَّحْمَةَ لِيَجْزِيَكُمْ إِلَى يَوْمِ

³ Al-Ṭabarî, *Tafsîr*, (ad loc.) took this to mean that God had written this in the *umm al-kitâb*.

الْقِيَامَةِ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ الَّذِينَ خَسِرُوا أَنْفُسَهُمْ فَهُمْ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ

Say, "To whom belongs whatever is in the heavens and the earth?" Say, "To God. He has written mercy (as a claim) on Himself, that He may truly bring you together towards the day of resurrection about which there is no doubt. Those who have forfeited their souls, they do not believe."

Sûrat al-An'âm 6:12

وَإِذَا جَاءَكَ الَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِآيَاتِنَا فَقُلْ سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ كَتَبَ رَبُّكُمْ عَلَى نَفْسِهِ الرَّحْمَةَ أَنَّهُ مَنْ عَمِلَ سِنًّا سَوْءًا بِجَهَالَةٍ ثُمَّ تَابَ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ وَأَصْلَحَ فَإِنَّهُ غُفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ

And when those who believe in Our âyât 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.

Sûrat al-Ar'âm 6:54

What can it mean, however, for God to impose an obligation on himself? In another place (Q 28:75) the Qur'ân says *al-haqq li-llâh*—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 write for someone, i.e., to their credit'.

أُحِلَّ لَكُمْ لَيْلَةَ الصِّيَامِ الرَّفَثُ إِلَى نِسَائِكُمْ هُنَّ لِبَاسٌ لَكُمْ وَأَنْتُمْ لِبَاسٌ لَهُنَّ عَلِمَ اللَّهُ أَنَّكُمْ كُنْتُمْ تَخْتَانُونَ أَنْفُسَكُمْ فَتَابَ عَلَيْكُمْ وَعَفَا عَنْكُمْ فَالآنَ بَاشِرُوهُمْ وَأَنْتُمْ مُتَعَفِّرُونَ مَا كَتَبَ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ وَكُلُوا وَاشْرَبُوا حَتَّى يَتَبَيَّنَ لَكُمُ الْخَيْطُ الْأَبْيَضُ مِنَ الْخَيْطِ الْأَسْوَدِ مِنَ الْفَجْرِ ثُمَّ أَتِمُوا الصِّيَامَ إِلَى اللَّيْلِ وَلَا تُبَاشِرُوهُمْ وَأَنْتُمْ عَاكِفُونَ فِي الْمَسَاجِدِ تِلْكَ حُدُودُ اللَّهِ فَلَا تَقْرُبُوهَا كَذَلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ آيَاتِهِ لِلنَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَّقُونَ

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

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 âyât to humanity that they might be God-fearing.

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:187

وَاكْتُبْ لَنَا فِي هَذِهِ الدُّنْيَا حَسَنَةً وَفِي الْآخِرَةِ إِنَّا هُنَا إِلَيْكَ قَالٌ عَذَابِي أَصِيبُ بِهِ مَنْ أَشَاءُ وَرَحْمَتِي وَسِعَتْ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ فَسَاكُنْهَا لِلَّذِينَ يَتَّقُونَ وَيُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ بِآيَاتِنَا يُؤْمِنُونَ

"And write good for us in this world, and also in the hereafter. Surely We have returned to you." [God] said, "I strike with my punishment whomever I will, and my mercy embraces all things. Therefore I shall write it for those who are God-fearing and pay the zakât, and those who believe our âyât."

Sûrat al-A'raf 7:156

God's determination of the course of events (I:E) is also said to be written. Each of the four occasions when this expression is used is unique. In Q 3:154 the place and moment of each person's death is said to be written. This comes in the context of a controversy over another aspect of writing, i.e., the imposition of the obligation to fight:

قُلْ إِنْ الْأَمْرُ كُلُّهُ لِلَّهِ يُخْفُونَ فِي أَنْفُسِهِمْ مَا لَا يُبْدُونَ لَكَ يَقُولُونَ لَوْ كَانَ لَنَا مِنَ الْأَمْرِ شَيْءٌ مَا قُتِلْنَا هَاهُنَا قُلْ لَوْ كُنْتُمْ فِي بُيُوتِكُمْ لَبَرَزَ الَّذِينَ كُتِبَ عَلَيْهِمُ الْقَتْلُ إِلَى مَضَاجِعِهِمْ
Say, "It is entirely God's to command." They hide among themselves something that they do not reveal to you; they say, "Had we had any say in the matter we would not have been slain here." Say, "Even if you had been in your houses, those against whom it was written (as their fate) that they would be killed would have gone forth to their resting places."

Sûrat Âl 'Imrân 3:154

Q 9:51 uses the preposition *li-* even though it does not seem to be speaking of a reward or entitlement. Nor, however, does it appear to be a punishment 'written against' them:⁴

قُلْ لَنْ يُصِيبَنَا إِلَّا مَا كَتَبَ اللَّهُ لَنَا هُوَ مَوْلَانَا وَعَلَى اللَّهِ فَلْيَتَوَكَّلِ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ

⁴ Daud Rahbar has gone to great pains to show that the Qur'ân 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). D. Rahbar, *God of Justice: A Study in the Ethical Doctrine of the Qur'ân*, (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1960).

Say, "Nothing befalls us except what God has written for us. He is our patron. Let those who believe place their trust in God!"

Sûrat 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 لَأَغْلِبَنَّ أَنَا وَرُسُلِي إِنَّ اللَّهَ قَوِيٌّ عَزِيزٌ

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

Sûrat al-Mujâdala 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:

لَا تَجِدُ قَوْمًا يُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ يُوَادُّونَ مَنْ حَادَّ اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ وَلَوْ كَانُوا آبَاءَهُمْ أَوْ أَبْنَاءَهُمْ أَوْ إِخْوَانَهُمْ أَوْ عَشِيرَتَهُمْ أُولَئِكَ كَتَبَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمُ الْإِيمَانَ وَأَيَّدَهُمْ بِرُوحٍ مِنْهُ وَيُدْخِلُهُمْ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُمْ وَرَضُوا عَنْهُ أُولَئِكَ حِزْبُ اللَّهِ أَلَا إِنَّ حِزْبَ اللَّهِ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ

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 party the successful?

Sûrat al-Mujâdala 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 Tôrâh, 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

⁵ In *Tâj al-arûs*, *katabnâ* 'We wrote' in Q 5:45 is glossed *faradnâ* 'We made obligatory'. Al-Turâth al-ʿArabî, no. 16 (al-Kuwayt: Matbaʿat Hukûmat al-Kuwayt, 1965-), 4: 101.

written for the community in Madîna are not about regulations contained in the text of the Qur'ân but rather about the definitive command of God expressed through the leadership of the Prophet.⁶ 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 *kitâb* as *ḥukm*.

GOD'S RECORDING: KITÂB AS ʿILM

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 يَعْمَلْ مِنَ الصَّالِحَاتِ وَهُوَ مُؤْمِنٌ فَلَا كُفْرَانَ لِسَعِيهِ وَإِنَّا لَهُ كَاتِبُونَ

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.

Sûrat al-Anbiyâ 21:94

This accounting is intended to lead to a reward; thus it establishes a link between *kitâb* as ʿilm and *kitâb* as *ḥukm*:

وَلَا يُنْفِقُونَ نَفَقَةً صَغِيرَةً وَلَا كَبِيرَةً وَلَا يَقْطَعُونَ وَادِيًا إِلَّا كُتِبَ لَهُمْ لِيَجْزِيَهُمُ اللَّهُ أَحْسَنَ مَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ

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.

Sûrat al-Tawba 9:121

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

رَبَّنَا آمَنَّا بِمَا أَنْزَلْتَ وَاتَّبَعْنَا الرَّسُولَ فَاكْتُبْنَا مَعَ الشَّاهِدِينَ

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

⁶ *Lisân al-ʿArab* (s.v. *kataba*) comments on such usage of the verb:

أي فرض الله على لسان نبيه و قيل هو إشارة الى قول الله

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.

Sûrat Âl-Imrân 3:53

وَإِذَا سَمِعُوا مَا أُنزِلَ إِلَى الرَّسُولِ تَرَى أَعْيُنُهُمْ تَفِيضُ مِنَ الدَّمْعِ مِمَّا عَرَفُوا مِنَ الْحَقِّ يَقُولُونَ
رَبَّنَا آمَنَّا فَاكْتُبْنَا مَعَ الشَّاهِدِينَ

When they hear what has been sent down to the messenger, you see their eyes brim with tears because of what they have recognized of the truth. They say, "Our Lord, we believe. So write us down among those who witness."

Sûrat al-Mâ'ida 5:83

The Qur'ân also threatens in several polemical passages (II:B) that people's evil deeds, plotting, and lack of faith are recorded by God:⁷

لَقَدْ سَمِعَ اللَّهُ قَوْلَ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ فَقِيرٌ وَنَحْنُ أَغْنِيَاءُ سَنَكْتُبُ مَا قَالُوا وَقَتْلُهُمُ الْأَنْبِيَاءَ
بِغَيْرِ حَقٍّ وَنَقُولُ ذُوقُوا عَذَابَ الْحَرِيقِ

God has heard the word of those who said [when asked for contributions to the war], "So God is poor, and we are rich?" We shall write down what they said along with their unjustified slaying of the prophets and We shall say, "Taste the punishment of burning!"

Sûrat Âl-Imrân 3:181

وَجَعَلُوا الْمَلَائِكَةَ الَّذِينَ هُمْ عِبَادُ الرَّحْمَنِ إِنَّا أَشْهَدُوا خَلْقَهُمْ سَتُكْتَبُ شَهَادَتُهُمْ
وَيُسْأَلُونَ

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

Sûrat al-Zukhruf 43:19

كَلَّا سَنَكْتُبُ مَا يَقُولُ وَنَمُدُّ لَهُ مِنَ الْعَذَابِ مَدًّا

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

Sûrat Maryam 19:79

Al-Zamakhsharî comments that this kind of writing should probably be understood as 'taking note of' or 'remembering' rather than actual writing down.⁸ The force of the future tense would be "We shall keep in mind" or "We shall take

⁷ The verb *istansakha* 'to seek to have something inscribed' is used in a similar context (Q 45:29) with the noun *kitâb* for such recording of evil deeds.

⁸ Al-Zamakhsharî, *Kashshâf 'an haqqâ'iq al-ta'wil wa-uyûn al-aqâwil fî wujûh al-ta'wil* (Cairo: Mustafâ al-Bâbî al-Halabî wa-Awlâduh, 1966-68), 1: 234.

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 *rasûl*, though obviously not referring Muḥammad or the other prophets:

وَإِذَا أَذَقْنَا النَّاسَ رَحْمَةً مِنْ بَعْدِ ضَرَاءٍ مَسَّتْهُمْ إِذَا لَهُمْ مَكْرٌ فِي آيَاتِنَا قُلِ اللَّهُ أَسْرَعُ مَكْرًا إِنَّ
رُسُلَنَا يَكْتُبُونَ مَا نَمْكُرُونَ

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 âyât. Say, "God is quicker at plotting. Surely our envoys write down what you plot."

Sûrat Yûnus 10:21

أَمْ يَحْسِبُونَ أَنَّا لَا نَسْمَعُ سِرَّهُمْ وَنَجْوَاهُمْ بَلَىٰ وَرُسُلُنَا لَدَيْهِمْ يَكْتُبُونَ

Or do they reckon that We do not hear their secret thoughts and private confidences? Indeed We do, and Our envoys who are beside them write them down.

Sûrat al-Zukhruf 43:80

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

إِنَّا نَحْنُ نُحْيِي الْمَوْتَىٰ وَنَكْتُبُ مَا قَدَّمُوا وَآثَرَهُمْ وَكُلُّ شَيْءٍ أَحْصَيْنَاهُ فِي إِمَامٍ مُبِينٍ

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 imâm.⁹

Sûrat Yâ Sîn 36:12

وَإِنَّ عَلَيْكُمْ لَحَافِظِينَ ۖ كِرَامًا كَاتِبِينَ ۖ يَعْلَمُونَ مَا تَفْعَلُونَ

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

Sûrat al-Infîâr 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

﴿سَنَكْتُبُ مَا قَالُوا﴾ فِي صَحَائِفِ الْحِفْظَةِ أَوْ سَجْمَطِهِ وَنَشْتُهُ فِي عِلْمِنَا لَا نَسَاهُ كَمَا يَثْبُتُ الْمَكْتُوبُ .

"We will write what they said" in the pages of vengeful memory or We shall remember it and fix it in our knowledge the way what is written is fixed so as not to forget it.

⁹ The term *imâm* is customarily translated in this context as 'register.' However, this does not adequately express the sense of authority connoted by *imâm*. This matter will come up again when we examine the synonyms the Qur'ân uses for *kitâb*.

prophets; that is, *kataba* is used to signify the display of *ḥukm* 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:

وَكَتَبْنَا لَهُ فِي الْأَلْوَابِ مِنْ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ مَوْعِظَةً وَتَفْصِيلًا لِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ فَخُذْهَا بِقُوَّةٍ وَأْمُرْ قَوْمَكَ
بِأَخْذِهَا بِحُسْنِهَا سَأُورِيكُمْ دَارَ الْفَاسِقِينَ

And We wrote for Moses] upon the tablets an admonition (maw‘iza) about everything and a criterion of judgment (tafṣil)¹⁰ 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.”

Sûrat al-A‘râf 7:145

وَلَقَدْ كَتَبْنَا فِي الزَّبُورِ مِنْ بَعْدِ الذِّكْرِ أَنَّ الْأَرْضَ يَرِثُهَا عِبَادِيَ الصَّالِحُونَ

And We have already written in the zabûr [scroll? Psalms?], after the reminder, that my servants shall inherit the earth.¹¹

Sûrat al-Anbiyâ’ 21:105

The only instance of *maktûb*, 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:

الَّذِينَ يَتَّبِعُونَ الرَّسُولَ النَّبِيَّ الْأُمِّيَّ الَّذِي يَجِدُونَهُ مَكْتُوبًا عِنْدَهُمْ فِي التَّوْرَةِ وَالْإِنْجِيلِ

[I will write mercy for] those who follow the messenger, the gentile Prophet [or: Prophet to the gentiles],¹² whom they find written in what is already in their possession, in the Tôrâh and the Gospel . . .

Sûrat al-A‘râf 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

¹⁰ *Tafṣil* is an important term in the Qur’ân’s understanding of the *kitâb*. 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’ân’s use of the derivatives of the root *f-ṣ-l*, how closely related it is to the root *ḥ-k-m*. More importantly it provides another link between *ḥukm* and *‘ilm*.

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

¹² *Al-nabî al-ummi*—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 *umam* as equivalent to *gentes*. For a detailed survey of both Muslim and non-Muslim interpretations of the term, see Khalil ‘Athamina, “‘An-Nabîyy al-Ummiyy’: An Inquiry into the Meaning of a Qur’anic Verse,” *Der Islam* 69 (1992): 61–80.

quite closely to what we have so far seen of the usage of the noun *kitâb*. As we shall see in the next two chapters, the occurrences of the noun can be similarly distributed between the categories of *ḥukm*—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; 25:5; 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 *fā‘ala* form (*kâtaba*), which implies a certain mutuality in the written transaction:

وَلَيْسَتَعَفِفَ الَّذِينَ لَا يَجِدُونَ نِكَاحًا حَتَّى يُغْنِيَهُمُ اللَّهُ مِنْ فَضْلِهِ وَالَّذِينَ يَبْتَغُونَ الْكِتَابَ
مِمَّا مَلَكَتْ أَيْمَانُكُمْ فَكَاتِبُوهُمْ إِنْ عَلِمْتُمْ فِيهِمْ خَيْرًا وَآتُوهُمْ مِّنْ مَّالِ اللَّهِ الَّذِي آتَاكُمْ

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 writ, 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.

Sûrat al-Nûr 24:33

The use of the definite, *al-kitâb*, in this verse where one might have expected an indefinite form is of interest. Given that no attempt is made to distinguish this particular *kitâb* from *kitâb* 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:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِذَا تَدَايَنْتُمْ بِدَيْنٍ إِلَى أَجَلٍ مُّسَمًّى فَاكْتُبُوهُ وَلْيَكُنْ بَيْنَكُمْ كَاتِبٌ بِالْعَدْلِ وَلَا يَأْبَ كَاتِبٌ أَنْ يَكْتُبَ كَمَا عَلَّمَهُ اللَّهُ فَلْيَكْتُبْ وَلْيُمْلِلِ الَّذِي عَلَيْهِ الْحَقُّ وَلْيَتَّقِ اللَّهَ رَبَّهُ وَلَا يَبْخَسَ مِنْهُ شَيْئًا . . . وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَيُعَلِّمُكُمُ اللَّهُ وَاللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

O you who believe! When you negotiate a debt for a fixed term, record it in writing. Let a scribe record it in writing between you equitably. Let no scribe refuse to write: as God has taught him, so let him write. Let him who incurs the debt dictate, and let him fear God his Lord, and not diminish it by any amount. . . . Fear God. God teaches you, and God knows well all things.

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:282¹³

THE ISSUE OF WRITING IN THE QUR'ÂN'S POLEMIC

The remaining uses of verbs derived from the root *k-t-b* are negative and polemical. Twice the Qur'ân asks rhetorically whether those who oppose Muḥammad have access to *al-ghayb* 'the unseen' so that they are able to write it down. This underscores the fact that such knowledge is a divine prerogative, and thus that recording it is a uniquely divine activity:

أَمْ عِنْدَهُمُ الْغَيْبُ فَهُمْ يَكْتُبُونَ

Or is the unseen present to them so that they can write (it) down?

Sûrat al-Tûr 52:41; Sûrat al-Qalam 68:47

The other two cases of human writing (Q 2:79; 25:5) concern the validity of claims about the divine origin of revelation. Both raise substantial questions of context and meaning. The first of these comes in the context of a polemic against some of the Jews of Madîna, who, it is claimed, have been duping the simple-minded by passing off as *kitâb* what they themselves have composed:

فَوَيْلٌ لِلَّذِينَ يَكْتُبُونَ الْكِتَابَ بِأَيْدِيهِمْ ثُمَّ يَقُولُونَ هَذَا مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ لِيَشْتَرُوا بِهِ ثَمَنًا قَلِيلًا فَوَيْلٌ لَهُمْ مِمَّا كَتَبَتْ أَيْدِيهِمْ وَوَيْلٌ لَهُمْ مِمَّا يَكْسِبُونَ

So woe to those who write the *kitâb* with their hands and then say, "This is from God," in order to make a small gain from it. Woe to them for what their hands have written, and woe to them for the profit they make.

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:79

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 Qur'anic law and Islamic law that raises questions about the status of the Qur'ân in the early period.

The puzzle of this verse is why what these people have been writing is called "*al-kitâb*" 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 genuine revelation (whether of the Qur'ân, the Gospel or the Tôrâh) 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 Tôrâh—removing all mention of Muḥammad, adding what they liked, deleting what they disliked, and twisting the interpretation of it.¹⁴ It seems unlikely that the charge intended to imply that these rabbis were actually rewriting their Tôrâh scrolls (if, indeed, they possessed any). Muslim tradition (following Q 6:91) often speaks of people concealing rather than changing the text of the Tôrâh. Although the charge of *tahrîf* '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.¹⁵ The term was also used by al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrî to mean misinterpreting the text of the Qur'ân rather than changing it.¹⁶ The Shî'ite traditionist Kulaynî charged the first three caliphs with maintaining the letter of the text of the Qur'ân but misinterpreting its strictures (*harrafû ḥudûdahâ*).¹⁷ In al-Ṭabarî's opinion, the force of the phrase *bi-'aydihim* '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.¹⁸

Thus the use 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 Q 29:48 where the Qur'ân chooses the verb *khaffa* 'to make lines' (and thus 'to write') rather than *kataba* to indicate the actual transcribing of the *kitâb*.

¹⁴ Al-Ṭabarî, *Tafsîr*, 1: 422–24.

¹⁵ See, for example, the traditions reported by al-Ṭabarî (*Tafsîr*, 3: 321–22) in connection with the charge of oral falsification in Q 3:78.

¹⁶ Helmut Ritter, "Studien zur islamischen Frömmigkeit I: Ḥasan al-Baṣrî," *Der Islam* 21 (1933): 68, line 11; 69, line 19; 70, line 16.

¹⁷ Quoted in Modarressi, "Debates," 29: أقاموا حروف الكتاب وحرفوا حدوده

¹⁸ Al-Ṭabarî, *Tafsîr*, 1: 423–24.

وَمَا كُنْتُمْ تَتْلُوا مِنْ قَبْلِهِ مِنْ كِتَابٍ وَلَا تَخُطُّهُ بِيَمِينِكُمْ إِذَا لَارْتَابَ الْمُبْطِلُونَ

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

Sûrat al-ʿAnkabût 29:48

In Q 3:78, another charge to the same effect and it is quite specific about the falsification being oral rather than written.

وَإِنْ مِنْهُمْ لَفَرِيقٌ يَلُونُ أَلَسِنَتَهُمْ بِالْكِتَابِ لِتَحْسَبُوهُ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ وَمَا هُوَ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ وَيَقُولُونَ هُوَ مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ وَمَا هُوَ مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ وَيَقُولُونَ عَلَى اللَّهِ الْكَذِبَ وَهُمْ يَعْلَمُونَ

This verse cannot be translated easily because of the range of possible meanings for the phrase *bi-l-kitâb*. Arberry offers the doubtless accurate but unhelpful "There is a sect of them twist their tongues with the Book." Pickthall renders it, "There is a party of them who distort the Scripture with their tongues." We may find help in understanding the context from another verse that shows people have been making false claims to be bringing revelation. There too these claims are characterized as a lie against God:

وَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنِ افْتَرَى عَلَى اللَّهِ كَذِبًا أَوْ قَالَ أُوحِيَ إِلَيَّ وَلَمْ يُوحَ إِلَيْهِ شَيْءٌ وَمَنْ قَالَ سَأُنْزِلُ مِثْلَ مَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ . . .

Who is more unjust than someone who makes up a lie against God, or says, "I have received revelation," when nothing at all has been inspired in him, and who says, "I will reveal something like God has revealed? . . ."

Sûrat al-Arʿâm 6:93

Taken together, these two verses could give warrant for understanding *yalwûna alsinatahum bi-l-kitâb* as referring to a stylized form of recitation:

And there is a group of them [the ahl al-kitâb] who twist their tongues in the way one would when reciting the kitâb, so that you will think that what they say is from the kitâb, when it is not from the kitâb. And they say, "It is from God," when it is not from God. They are telling a lie against God and they know it.

Sûrat Âl ʿImrân 3:78

This suggests that there may have been among the *ahl al-kitâb*—and perhaps it was adopted by the Muslims—a form of stylized recitation so closely associated with sacred texts that the very use of the style was sufficient to lend authority to whatever was said even if it was not actually part of the scripture.

The second case of the use of the root *k-t-b* in a charge of falsification (Q 25:5) is no less problematic.

وَقَالُوا أَأَسَاطِيرُ الْأَوَّلِينَ اكْتَتَبَهَا فَهِيَ تُمْلَى عَلَيْهِ بُكْرَةً وَأَصِيلًا

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

Sûrat al-Furqân 25:5

This use of *iktataba*, usually translated 'to have [something] written down', is a hapax legomenon in the Qur'ân 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 Muḥammad 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-Zabîdî indicates in *Tâj al-ʿarûs*, *iktataba* is equivalent to *istaktaba*, it could well have the sense of 'to consider something to be *kitâb*'. Perhaps one could paraphrase the verse in this way: "They said, 'These are just myths of the ancients that he claims are *kitâb* [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 *kitâb*—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-kitâb*) 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'.²¹ This is quite in keeping with what we have seen of the Qur'ân's overwhelmingly metaphorical use of the verb *kataba*. The noun *kitâb* certainly bulks much larger in the Qur'ân than the verb *kataba*. It seems likely that the dominating concept of *kitâb*—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 *kitâb* is in some respects a loanword. Indeed the Qur'ân 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-kitâb*, *alladhîna 'ûtû-l-kitâb*—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 2:79, discussed earlier in this section). Otherwise the Qur'ân appears consistently to avoid putting *kataba* and *kitâb* together using other verbs that denote the physical action of writing, making lines and marks—*khatta* (Q 29:48), *raqama* (Q 83:9, 20)²² and *saṭara* (Q 17:58; 33:6; 52:2; 54:53; 68:1).²³ 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," 2Arabica 42 (1995): 45–62. B. 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-raqim* 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 *raqim* was misread as *raḳim*, a mistake that could also easily have occurred in deciphering a Syriac script: *رقيص / رقيص*. 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-Raqim or al-Ruqūd? A Note on Surah 189," *JAOS* 111 (1991): 115–17.

²³ In the case of *saṭara*, 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 *uṣṭūra* (pl. *uṣṭūr*) 'fable' or 'myth', a term used by the Meccans to dismiss Muḥammad's

consists in putting mnemonic marks on paper (or some other material); the other is a much more significant activity, the exercise of divine authority and knowledge, for which writing functions as a metaphor or a symbol rather than as a simple description. The Qur'ân reserves the verb *kataba* almost exclusively to cases of the latter.

According to Jacques Derrida, this same double sense of writing—resulting in a certain ambivalence towards writing—has characterized the Western intellectual and artistic tradition.²⁴ Writing threatens to disrupt the immediacy of personal presence and the authority and responsiveness of the spoken word. Although the spoken word is admittedly at one remove from the pure thought in the mind of the speaker, it is still bound closely to it through personal presence. In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates defends the superiority of the spoken word and dismisses writing as a mere mnemonic device that threatens to substitute for the true knowledge derived from dialectic. He objects that 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 telling you just the same thing for ever. . . . And when [the written word] is ill-treated and unfairly abused, it always needs its parent to come to its help, being unable to defend itself.²⁵

However, when describing genuine knowledge, Socrates finds himself forced to adopt the metaphor of writing:

the sort [of discourse] that goes together with knowledge and is *written* in the soul of the learner; that is powerful enough to defend itself and knows to whom it should speak and to whom it should say nothing. [Phaedrus adds] "You mean the kind of discourse (*logos*) that is alive

recitations (*asāṭir al-awwālīn* 'myths of the ancients': Q 6:25; 8:31; 16:24; 23:83; 25:5; 27:68; 46:17; 68:15; 83:13). These myths seem to have been understood as sacred to the ancients. Al-Ṭabarī, (*Tafsīr*, 9: 366), discussing Q 25:5, comments that these are "their traditions (*aḥādithuhum*), which they used to write (*yusāṭirūnahā*) in their books (*fi kutubihim*)":

هذا الذي جاء به محمد أساطير الأولين يعنون أحاديثهم التي كانوا يسطرونها في كتبهم

²⁴ This is a major theme in Derrida's work, and several pieces have been devoted to exploring it. See especially his "Plato's Pharmacy" and "The Double Session" in *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 61–285; "The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing," in *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 6–26. For a guide through this difficult work, see Christopher Norris, *Derrida* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), 28–62.

²⁵ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 276d, e. I rely here and in the following citation on the translation of Hackforth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1952) but have amended it in some places.

and infused with spirit, of which the written discourse may with justification be called merely a shadow (*eidôlon*).²⁶

In the Qur'ân, writing in the sense of *kitâb* is indeed this kind of living *logos*, not mere lines on a page. The *kitâb* of God remains immediate, 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 *kitâb* as closed text and *kitâb* as authoritative word, to examine how Islam's profoundly active sense of *kitâb Allâh* has often enabled it to escape the confining and fossilizing process through which the *kitâb* becomes equated with, and reduced to, the *muṣḥaf*.

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.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Semantic Field of *Kitâb* II: Titles and Processes

The Muslim community has recognized certain terms as being so central to the Qur'ân'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'ân 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 *kitâb*.

THE NAMES OF PARTICULAR REVELATIONS

FURQÂN

Al-furqân 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 *sûra* 25. The word is traditionally understood to be a name for the whole Qur'ân,¹ yet it is also said to have been sent down to Moses and Aaron (Q 2:53; 21:48). Since *furqân* does not appear in Arabic prior to the Qur'ân,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 *purqâna* '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 *furqân*.

¹ Al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân*, 1: 159; al-Ṭabarî, *Tafsîr*, 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 8:29:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِن تَتَّقُوا اللَّهَ يَجْعَلْ لَكُمْ فُرْقَانًا وَيُكَفِّرْ عَنْكُمْ سَيِّئَاتِكُمْ وَيَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ وَاللَّهُ ذُو الْفَضْلِ الْعَظِيمِ

O you who believe! If you fear God, he will create for you a furqân; He will acquit you of your evildoing and forgive you. God is possessed of great bounty.

Sûrat al-Anfâl 8:29

Al-Ṭabarî notes that in this context authorities have interpreted the word variously as *makhraj* 'escape', *najât* 'salvation' or *faṣl* 'separation, discernment'.³ Its use in connection with Moses and Aaron forms a conceptual link between salvation and scripture:

وَإِذْ آتَيْنَا مُوسَى الْكِتَابَ وَالْفُرْقَانَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ

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

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:53

وَلَقَدْ آتَيْنَا مُوسَى وَهَارُونَ الْفُرْقَانَ وَضِيَاءً وَذِكْرًا لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ

Indeed We granted to Moses and Aaron al-furqân and a light and a reminder (dhikr) for the God-fearing.

Sûrat al-Anbiyâ' 21:48

Since the career of Moses united the roles of liberator and bringer of revelation, and since for the Qur'ân 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.⁴

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 *furqân*, the day when the two armies met." The tradition almost universally recognizes this as

³ Al-Ṭabarî, *Tafsîr*, 1: 69. See also opinions registered by Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 225–29.

⁴ Crone and Cook see in the Qur'anic use of *furqân* (as also in the name *al-Fârûq* 'the Saviour' applied to the Caliph 'Umar) evidence of an earlier strain of Hagarene 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 reinterpreted as terms about revelation derived from Arabic usage and roots rather than the Syriac. Crone and Cook, *Hagarism*, 5–6.

referring to the Battle of Badr and so links the revelation of the Qur'ân 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 *furqân* come together: God saves (*purqâna*) 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'ân distinguishes (*faraqa*) right from wrong and also differentiates (*faraqa*) the Muslims from the unscriptured and from the recipients of earlier revelations.

The sense that *furqân* refers to revelation is probably reinforced by its use on all but one occasion with the verbs 'atâ 'to grant' and *nazzala/anzala* 'to send down'—verbs most often connected with revelation. The dual sense of the term exemplifies how, to the extent that the Qur'ân 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 *furqân* has come to be thought of as an appropriate description of the Qur'ân 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 *furqân* as the name of the Qur'ân from *faraqa* "because it distinguishes between what is true and what is false."⁵ Al-Ṭabarî thinks that the various opinions about the precise meaning of *furqân* in the end come down to the same thing:

All these interpretations of the meaning of *furqân*—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 wrongly opposed him and so a 'decision' has been made between him and his evil opponent.⁶

QUR'ÂN

It is not quite clear whether the term *qur'ân* 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-

⁵ Al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân*, 1: 163.

⁶ Al-Ṭabarî, *Tafsîr*, 1: 69:

وكل هذه التاويلات في معنى (الفرقان) على اختلاف العاظها متقاربات المعاني وذلك أن من جعل له مخرج من أمر كان فيه، فقد جعل له ذلك المخرج منه نجاة. وكذلك إذا نهي منه، فقد نصر على من نهاه فيه نهواً، وفرق بينه وبين ما نهاه السوء.

tion'—he also recognizes that in some instances in the longer, later *sûras* it seems to be used almost as a proper noun to name the revelations Muḥammad is bringing.⁷ For example:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ اشْتَرَى مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ أَنْفُسَهُمْ وَأَمْوَالَهُمْ بِأَنْ لَهُمُ الْجَنَّةُ يُقَاتِلُونَ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ فَيَقْتُلُونَ
وَيُقْتَلُونَ وَعَدًا عَلَيْهِ حَقًّا فِي التَّوْرَةِ وَالْإِنْجِيلِ وَالْقُرْآنِ ...

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 Tôrâh and the Gospel and the Qur'ân.

Sûrat al-Tawba 9:111

The later confusion among Muslim commentators about the derivation of the word, however, is puzzling. If *qur'ân* had originated as a straightforward verbal noun (*maṣḍar*) from *qara'a* 'to recite', we are at a loss to know how this could have become obscured later on. Al-Suyûtî reports extensive disagreement among the scholars about whether the word was a proper noun like *Tawrât* or *Injîl* (the position he favored, following al-Shâfi'î) 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.⁸

There are those who think that the final *nûn* is part of the root and that the word comes from the plural noun *qarâ'in* 'pairs', 'matches' or 'contexts' since its verses confirm each other and resemble each other. Others argue that *qur'ân* is from the verb *qarana* 'to join' since it joins together the *sûras*, the *âyât* and the letters, though al-Râghib insists that it is called this only because it draws together the positive parts of all the previously revealed scriptures.⁹ Those who think of the root as *q-r-* differ about whether it is based on the meaning of 'to recite' or 'to combine'. Al-Ṭabarî sides with Ibn 'Abbâs in adopting the former position while rejecting the latter, which he attributes to Qatâda.¹⁰

There is even one school of thought reported by al-Suyûtî 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'ân, the reciter

⁷ Graham, "Earliest Meaning," 372.

⁸ Al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân*, 1: 161–3.

⁹ Al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân*, 1: 162.

قال الراغب: لا يقال لكل جمع قرآن، ولا لجمع كل كلام قرآن. قال: وإنما سمي قرآناً لكونه جمع ثمرات الكتب السالفة المنزلة. وقيل: لأنه جمع أنواع العلوم كلها.

¹⁰ Al-Ṭabarî, *Tafsir*, 1: 67–69.

"delivers" it from his mouth as a camel delivers her offspring from the womb.¹¹ Al-Ṭabarî, however, quotes the same idiom to support the meaning 'to contain', 'to draw together' the way a camel's womb contains its young.¹² The Mu'tazilite theologians quoted the Arabic idiom "the she-camel collected (*qara'at*) her milk in her udder" when arguing that the Qur'ân could not be eternal since it was a collection.¹³ One sees a strong sense among commentators that whatever the derivation of the term *qur'ân*, the idea of gathering and containing is central to the nature of what Muḥammad has brought. Al-Suyûtî and Ibn 'Aṭiyya, for example, both define *kitâb* as *jam'* 'collection'.¹⁴

This controversy lends weight to the often-expressed opinion that *qur'ân* is actually a borrowed form of the Syriac *q'ryânâ* 'a (liturgical) reading' rather than an apparently new coinage from an existing Arabic word. This view has been challenged with the argument that, since *qiryân* would have been a perfectly acceptable Arabic form, it is less likely that *qur'ân*, with a *hamza* rather than a *yâ* as its third root-letter, is a direct borrowing from the Syriac.¹⁵ This argument, however, is weakened by the lack of universal agreement, as al-Suyûtî points out, that the word should be written or pronounced with a *hamza*.¹⁶ If the word *qur'ân* 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'ân in much the way Graham has described. Even if the disagreements of the later commentators give us reason to doubt Graham's

¹¹ Al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân*, 1: 162:

وحكى قطرب قولاً: إنه إما سمي قرآناً لأن القاريء يظهره ويبيته من فيه، اخذاً من قول العرب: ما قرأت الناقة سلاً قط، أي مت رمث تولد، أي ما اسقطت ولداً، أي ما حملت قط، والقرآن يلفظه القاريء من فيه ويلقيه، فسمي قرآناً.

¹² Al-Ṭabarî, *Tafsir*, 1: 68.

¹³ Al-Shahrâstânî, *Kitâb Nihâyatu-l-Iqdâm fi 'Ilmi-l-Kalâm*, ed. and trans. A. Guillaume (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1934), 310.

¹⁴ Al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân*, 1: 161:

فما تسميته كتاباً: فلجمعه أنواع العلوم والقصص والاحبار على أبلغ وجه، والكتاب لغة الجمع.

Ibn 'Aṭiyya, *Muqaddima li-tafsirih al-musammâ al-Jâmi' al-Muḥarrar*, in *Two Muqaddimas to the Qur'anic Sciences*, ed. A. Jeffery (Maktabat al-Khânji, 1954), 283:

وأما الكتاب: فهو مصدر من كتب إذا جمع، ومنه قيل كنيبة لاجتماعها. ومنه قول الشاعر: "واكتبها ناسكاً" أي اجمعها.

¹⁵ Graham, "Earliest Meaning," 367.

¹⁶ This confusion may have merely resulted from the absence of the *hamza* in the unvowelled consonantal text. Besides *qur'ân* being written قرآن, *yas'alu* was written يسأل and *al-'ân* was written آلان. *GdQ*, III: 43–4. See also, Gerd-R Puin, "Observations on early Qur'ân Manuscripts in Šan'â," in Wild, *Qur'ân as Text*, 107–11.

conclusion that the term originated as a simple *maṣdar* of the verb 'to read', one has to agree with his judgment that it has definitely been influenced by Syriac Christian usage of *q'ryânâ*.¹⁷

It must be said, not only of *qur'ân* but of all the names for manifestations of the *kitâb* under discussion here, that the distinction between common and proper noun, between description and title, is quite ill-defined. Al-Suyûtî quotes two traditions in which both *tawrât* and *injil* are treated as common nouns parallel to *qur'ân*. He does not approve of this practice, though he acknowledges similar things appear in the Qur'ân and the *ḥadīth*:

Ibn al-Durays and others have reported from Ka'b that he said, "In the Tawrât [it says] 'O Muḥammad, I am sending down upon you a new tawrât that will open the eyes of the blind, the ears of the deaf, and the hearts of the uncircumcised.'" Ibn Abî Hâtim reported from Qatâda that he said, "When Moses received the tablets he said, 'O Lord, I find in the tablets a community (*umma*) whose gospels (*anâjiluhum*) are in their hearts. Make them my community.' [God] said, 'That is the community of Ahmad.'" So in these two traditions the Qur'ân is called *tawrât* 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 Tawrât being called *furqân* in [God's] saying, "Behold We granted to Moses the *kitâb* and the *furqân*" [Q 2:53]. And [Muḥammad], may God's peace and blessing be upon him, called the *zabûr* by the name *qur'ân* when he said, "The burden of *al-qur'ân* was lightened for David."¹⁸

DHIKR

Consideration should also be given to the term *al-dhikr*, which al-Ṭabarî includes among what he considers to be the four names of the revelation sent down to Muḥammad.¹⁹ In several places it seems to be used as a proper name (e.g.,

¹⁷ Graham, "Earliest Meaning," 365.

¹⁸ This certainly seems to be one of those cases where *al-qur'ân* should be read as a verbal noun rather than a title: "The burden of recitation was lightened for David." Al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân*, 1: 165:

أخرج ابن الضريس وغيره عن كعب قال: في التوراة: يا محمد، إني منزل عليك توراة جديدة تفتح أعيناً عمياً، وآذاناً صماً، وقلوباً علقاً. وأخرج ابن أبي حاتم، عن قتادة قال: لسا أخذ موسى الألواح قال: يا رب، أحد في الألواح أمة أواجههم في قلوبهم، فأجعلهم أمتي. قال: تلك أمة أحمد. ففي هذين الأثرين تسمية القرآن توراة وإنجيلاً، ومع هذا لا يجوز الآن أن يطلق عليه ذلك، وهذا كما سميت التوراة فرقاناً في قوله: ﴿وَإِذْ آتَيْنَا مُوسَى الْكِتَابَ وَالْفُرْقَانَ﴾. وسُمِّيَ الزبور قرآناً في قوله: خُفِّعَ عَلَى دَاوُدَ الْقُرْآنَ

¹⁹ The others are *qur'ân*, *furqân*, and *kitâb*. Al-Ṭabarî, *Tafstr*, 1: 67–70.

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.²⁰ Al-Ṭabarî points 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 *fakhr* 'source of pride' for the community to which it has been given. He adduces a less than convincing text in support of this interpretation:²¹

وَأَنَّهُ لَذِكْرُكَ وَلِقَوْمِكَ وَسَوْفَ تُسْأَلُونَ

Surely it is a *dhikr* for you and for your people; and you will be questioned.

Sûrat al-Zukhruf 43:44

ZABÛR

This lack of clarity as to whether something is a common or proper noun also arises with *zabûr* (pl., *zabûr*), 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 *zabûr*. However, one must also take into account Q 54:52–3 in which it is said that "every thing they did is in the *zabûr* || and everything small and great thing is written (*mustatâr*). In general it seems to be not much more specific than the term *kitâb*. Several Western scholars have wanted to see in it a corrupted or misunderstood borrowing from the Hebrew *zimra* 'sound of singing' or *mizmôr* 'psalm'.²² Yet such a proposal seems unnecessary. The Qur'ân's use of *zabûr* for what was given to David is sufficient to account for the connection in the mind of the tradition between *zabûr* 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 *zabûr* 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:

قَفَا نَبِكَ مِنْ ذِكْرِي حَبِيبَ وَعِرْفَانَ || وَرَسْمَ عَفَتْ آيَاتِهِ مِنْذَ اِزْمَانَ

أَنْتَ حَجَجَ بَعْدِي عَلَيْهِ فَاصْبَحْتَ || كَخَطِّ زَبُورٍ فِي مَصَاحِفِ رَهْبَانَ

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

²⁰ Neuwirth, "Vom Rezitationstext," 90–91.

²¹ Al-Ṭabarî, *Tafstr*, 1: 70.

²² See Jeffery, *Foreign Vocabulary*, 148–49.

confidant || and for traces of a camp whose signs (âyât) have grown faint over the ages.

Years have passed over it since I was here and [the signs] have become || like the lines (khaṭṭ) of a zabûr in monks' codices (maṣāḥif).²³

لَمَنْ طَلَّ ابْصَرُهُ فَشَجَانِي || كَخَطِ الزُّبُورِ فِي عَسِيبِ يَمَانَ
Whose is the ruined house I see that grieves me so? || It is like the lines of the zabûr on a sheet of palm bark from Yemen.²⁴

This ambiguity about the names or terms for revelation in the Qur'ân 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 *tôrâh* '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 *evangelion* 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 *godspel* '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 *evangelion* of Jesus Christ . . ." (Mk 1:1) and then a little later depicts Jesus as saying, "Repent and believe in the *evangelion*" (Mk 1:15).²⁵ In later Islamic tradition too, both *tôrâh* (*tawrât*) and *evangelion* (*injl*) 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 *âyât*.

²⁴ Ahlwardt, *Divans*, 159; 63, 1.

²⁵ As evidence that the term has not been irrevocably Christianized, one might cite John Wansbrough's usage of "the Muḥammadan *evangelium*" to mean the proclamation of rather than by Muḥammad. Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, passim.

²⁶ *Tawrât* and *Injl* are almost always linked: in eleven out of twelve occurrences of *Injl* and eighteen occurrences of *Tawrât* the two occur together. Their meaning seems straightforward enough, yet it is puzzling that the *Tawrât* is never associated explicitly with Moses. He is many times said to have been given *al-kitâb*; *âyât Allâh*; *hudâ* 'guidance'; *sultân* 'authority'; and *al-alwâh* 'the tablets'; and there are also references to *suḥuf Mūsâ* 'the pages of Moses'. However, none of these is ever identified as *Tawrât*, though it is clear that the *Tawrât* was the revelation of God to the people of Israel. When there is so much in the Qur'ân about Moses and his bringing of God's revelation, the disjunction between his name and the revelation he received is perplexing. Indeed, the *Tawrât* is more closely associated with Jesus and the *Injl* than it is with Moses.

THE MOTIVE AND PROCESSES OF REVELATION

RAḤMA

If mercy is the most prominent attribute of God proclaimed by the Qur'ân, it is also central to the Qur'ân'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 قُرِئَ الْقُرْآنُ فَاسْتَمِعُوا لَهُ وَأَنْصِتُوا لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ

And when the Qur'ân is recited, listen to it and be silent so that perhaps you may find mercy.

Sûrat al-A'raf 7:204

وَهَذَا كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ مُبَارَكٌ فَاتَّبِعُوهُ وَاتَّقُوا لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ

And this too is a kitâb that We have sent down. It is blessed so follow it and be God-fearing so that perhaps you may find mercy.

Sûrat al-An'âm 6:155²⁷

Revelation, as the Qur'ân 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 *hudan wa-rahmatan* should be translated 'in order to guide and to offer mercy' or perhaps better 'as a guide toward 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 can 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.

QUR'ÂN

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

²⁷ Half the uses of the passive *ruḥima* 'to be shown mercy' (used with *la'allakum* '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; 27:77; 28:43; 31:3; 44:6; 45:20; 46:12. *Rahma* is also paired in this context with *imâm* 'leader' (Q 11:17), *shifâ* 'healing' (Q 17:82) *dhikrâ* 'reminder' (Q 29:51).

surely no exaggeration to say that without *qur'ân* 'reciting' there is no *kitâb* for the people, since the revelation comes to them not on paper but on the lips of the Prophet. They gave it recognition and assimilated it not by writing it down but by reciting it in their turn. The accusative *qur'ânan* 'arabiyyan, which occurs six times, can be construed in two ways—as a *hâl* construction (a description of circumstances) or as a *maf'ûl li-ajlih* (a purpose clause). These constructions together express both aspects of the role of recitation: the *kitâb* is revealed by being recited in Arabic, and it is revealed in order to be recited in Arabic.

الْأَرْ تِلْكَ آيَاتُ الْكِتَابِ الْمُبِينِ || إِنَّا أَنْزَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ

Alif. Lām. Râ. Those are âyât of the kitâb that makes things clear. Surely We have sent it down as a recitation in Arabic (or: to be recited in Arabic) that perhaps you might understand.

Sûrat Yûsuf 12:1-2

وَالْكِتَابِ الْمُبِينِ || إِنَّا جَعَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ

By the kitâb that makes things clear! Surely We have determined that it is to be recited in Arabic (or: We have put it into the form of a recitation in Arabic) so that perhaps you might understand.

Sûrat al-Zukhruf 43:2-3

وَكَذَلِكَ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا وَصَرَّفْنَا فِيهِ مِنَ الْوَعِيدِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَّقُونَ أَوْ يُحْدِثُ لَهُمْ ذِكْرًا

Thus We have sent it down by means of (or: for) recitation in Arabic, and have expressed in it certain threats. Perhaps they may be God-fearing or perhaps it may come to them as a reminder.

Sûrat Tâhâ 20:113

وَكَذَلِكَ أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لِتُنْذِرَ أُمَّ الْقُرَى وَمَنْ حَوْلَهَا وَتُنْذِرَ يَوْمَ الْجَمْعِ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ تَرْيَقُ فِي الْجَنَّةِ وَفَرِيقٌ فِي السَّعِيرِ

And thus We have communicated with you by means of an Arabic recitation (or: by means of something to be recited in Arabic), that you might warn the mother of villages and those around it, and might warn of a day of assembly about which there is no doubt: one group in the Garden and one group in the Flame.

Sûrat al-Shûrah 42:7

تَنْزِيلٍ مِنَ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ || كِتَابٌ فُصِّلَتْ آيَاتُهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لِقَوْمٍ يَعْلَمُونَ || بَشِيرًا وَنَذِيرًا فَأَعْرَضَ أَكْثَرُهُمْ فَهُمْ لَا يَسْمَعُونَ

A sending down from the Merciful, the Compassionate, || a kitâb whose

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),²⁹ || to be good tidings and a warning. However, most of them turn away and so they do not hear.

Sûrat Fuṣṣilat 41:2-4

وَلَقَدْ صَرَّفْنَا لِلنَّاسِ فِي هَذَا الْقُرْآنِ مِنْ كُلِّ مَثَلٍ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ || قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا غَيْرِ ذِي عِوَجٍ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَّقُونَ

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.

Sûrat 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 *hâl* or as a *maf'ûl 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'ân* 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 'arabî 'Arabic' in the phrase carries a significance that could pass unnoticed. Why does the Qur'ân 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'ânan aʿjamiyyan* 'recitation in a foreign tongue':

وَلَوْ جَعَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا أَعْجَمِيًّا لَقَالُوا لَوْلَا فُصِّلَتْ آيَاتُهُ أَأَعْجَمِيٌّ وَعَرَبِيٌّ ...

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 âyât were made distinct! What? A foreign tongue and an Arab?"

Sûrat Fuṣṣilat 41:44

The designation 'arabî or aʿjamî for the noun *qur'ân* seems to indicate that people knew of other *qur'âns* 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'ân* were the only *qur'ân*, 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

²⁹ See chapter 2 for a discussion of this refrain.

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'ân here be responding to the objection that the revelations he is bringing are in Arabic (rather than Hebrew or Syriac, the customary languages of the people of the *kitâb*) and thus are a suspect innovation? The Qur'ân'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'ân proved its bona fides by being in one of the earlier prophetic languages (*qur'ânan a'jamiyyan*), they still would not accept it because it was coming from an Arab.

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

أَلَمْ تَرَ تِلْكَ آيَاتُ الْكِتَابِ وَقُرْآنٍ مُبِينٍ

Alif Lâm Râ. Those are the âyât of the kitâb and of a qur'ân that makes itself clear.

Sûrat al-Hijr 15:1

طَس تِلْكَ آيَاتُ الْقُرْآنِ وَكِتَابٍ مُبِينٍ

Tâ Sin. Those are the âyât of the qur'ân and of a kitâb that makes itself clear.

Sûrat al-Naml 27:1

The sentence "those are the *âyât* of the *kitâb*" occurs seven times in the Qur'ân as a *sûra* opening,³⁰ while "those are the *âyât* of the *qur'ân*" occurs only here in Q 27:1.³¹ 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'ân* as a name for the revelation. However, there are several other instances where *qur'ân* and *kitâb* occur together and it would seem, on the face of it, to make little difference to the meaning if they were interchanged:

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'ân* is linked possessively to *âyât*; normally it is the *kitâb* which has *âyât* (Q 10:1; 11:1; 12:1; 13:1; 15:1; 26:2; 28:2; 31:2; 38:29; 41:3). Furthermore, the verb *qara'a* is not used with *âyât*: whenever there is a question of reciting the *âyât*, it is the verb *talâ* that is used. However, see Q 10:15:

وَإِذَا تُلِيَتْ عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتُنَا نَبَّاتَ الَّذِينَ لَا يَرْجُونَ لِقَاءَنَا أَفَتَبْقَرُونَ عَنْ هَذَا أَوْ يُدْبِلُوهُ

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

وَإِذْ صَرَّفْنَا إِلَيْكَ نَافِرًا مِنَ الْجِنِّ يَسْتَمِعُونَ الْقُرْآنَ فَلَمَّا حَضَرُوهُ قَالُوا أَنْصِتُوا فَلَمَّا قُضِيَ وَلَوْ إِلَى قَوْمِهِمْ مُنْذِرِينَ ۖ قَالُوا يَا قَوْمَنَا إِنَّا سَمِعْنَا كِتَابًا أُنْزِلَ مِنْ بَعْدِ مُوسَى مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ يَهْدِي إِلَى الْحَقِّ وَإِلَى طَرِيقٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ

And when We communicated to you, certain of the jinn wanted to hear the reciting. When they attended it, they said, "Hark!" And when it was finished, they turned to their people, warning. || They said, "Our people! Surely we have heard a kitâb that has been sent down after Moses' time, confirming what is already present; it leads to the truth and to a straight path.

Sûrat al-Ahqâf 46:29–30

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

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

إِنَّهُ لَقُرْآنٌ كَرِيمٌ ۖ فِي كِتَابٍ مَكْنُونٍ ۖ لَا يَمَسُّهُ إِلَّا الْمُطَهَّرُونَ

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

Sûrat al-Wâqî'a 56:77–79

بَلْ هُوَ قُرْآنٌ مَجِيدٌ ۖ فِي لَوْحٍ مَحْفُوظٍ

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

Sûrat al-Burûj 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 *wâqî'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 *hādha-l-ḥadīth* 'this speech' (Q 56:81). The referent of the second "it" is *ḥadīth al-junūd* / *wa-fir'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 Muḥammad 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.³² Authority is claimed in two ways: to call it *qur'ân* is to set it apart from those other forms of oral performance and

³² Al-Ṭabarī, *Tafstr*, 12: 530.

mark it as sacred; to say that it is in a *kitâb* 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.

رَسُولٌ مِنَ اللَّهِ يَتْلُو صُحُفًا مُطَهَّرَةً || فِيهَا كُتِبَ قِيمَةٌ

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

Sûrat al-Bayyina 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 Muḥammad was reading a text. To them the *ṣuḥuf* were a metaphor for the divine origin and composition of the *kutub*. Just how metaphorical these *ṣuḥuf* were considered can be gauged from what the traditions quoted in chapter 1 reveal about the careless treatment of the early Qur'ân manuscript. If the *ṣuḥuf* that Muḥammad was reciting were not considered physical, then one must presume that 'the earlier *ṣuḥuf*' (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 *ṣuḥuf* of Moses were Tôrâh scrolls possessed by the Jews of Madîna. The *ṣuḥuf* 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 *talâ*, though apparently so similar in meaning, diverge substantially in Qur'anic usage. Of the sixteen instances of the verb *qara'a* (i.e., leaving out of consideration the verbal noun *qur'ân*), twelve refer to reciting and four to ordinary reading. Of the twelve, seven have *al-qur'ân* as their object,³³ four have no explicit object,³⁴ and only one (Q 10:94) has *kitâb* as object. Of sixty-one occurrences of the verb *talâ*, on the other hand, thirty-one refer to *âyât* (seven times along with *bayyinât*);³⁵ nine refer to *kitâb*;³⁶ five to *nabâ* 'tidings';³⁷ three to *dhikr*;³⁸ three 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.

³⁵ Q 2:129, 151, 252; 3:58, 101, 108, 113, 164; 8:2, 31; 10:15; 19:58, 73; 22:72 (twice); 23:13, 66, 105; 28:45, 59; 31:7; 34:43; 39:71; 45:6, 8, 25, 31; 46:7; 62:2; 65:11; 68:15.

³⁶ Q 2:44, 113, 121; 4:127; 18:27; 29:45, 48, 51; 35:29.

³⁷ Q 5:27; 7:175; 10:71; 26:67; 28:3.

³⁸ Q 3:58; 18:83; 37:3.

various legal pronouncements;³⁹ one to the Tôrâh (Q 3:93); one to *ṣuḥuf* (Q 98:2); one to a *bayyina* (Q 11:17); and four uses are indefinite.⁴⁰ The object is *al-qur'ân* only once (Q 27:92), and the indefinite *qur'ânun* 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 *maṣḍar* as its object. The double use of the imperative without an object at the beginning of *Sûrat al-ʿalaq* (Q 96:1, 3), in what is usually taken to be the very first part of the Qur'ân to be revealed, strongly suggests that the command 'recite!' is self-explanatory.⁴¹ However, the same verb has a non-revelational use meaning 'to read (aloud)'—though always referring heavenly writings.⁴² Taken together with the preponderance of the *maṣḍar* form (seventy occurrences) over the finite verbal forms (sixteen occurrences, and nearly half of these accompanied by the *maṣḍar*), these observations lend further weight to the idea that the origins of *qur'ân* and *qara'a*, whether in Muḥammad's time or earlier, lies in the Syriac *q'ryânâ*.

By way of contrast, *talâ* has a broad range of objects, though it is very strongly associated with the noun *âyât* and to a lesser extent with *kitâb*. It has no intransitive use, and only in very few cases is the object not made explicit. There is only one use of the *maṣḍar*, compared with sixty-one instances of the finite forms of the verb, and even that is in a *mafc'ûl muṭlaq* construction which merely intensifies the verb. There is no use of this verb which is not connected with revelation, or its reception and rehearsal.

TANZÎL

The process of revelation is most commonly characterized by the spatial metaphor of 'coming or sending down'—*nuzûl*, *tanzîl*, *'inzâl*, or *tanazzul*.⁴³ The causative verb forms—*nazzala* (63 finite verbal occurrences, 15 uses of the *maṣḍar*, and 2 of the participle) and *'anzala* (188 finite verbal occurrences, no uses of the *maṣḍar*, and 7 of the participle)—are generally considered to be identical in meaning 'to

³⁹ Q 5:1; 6:151; 22:30.

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 Jibrîl was holding a cloth on which writing was embroidered and telling the Prophet to read it. *Sîra*, ed. Wüstenfeld, 152-3.

⁴² Reading out the *kitâb* in which people's deeds are recorded for judgment (Q 17:14, 71; 69:19), and reading the *kitâb* from heaven demanded by the Meccans as proof of the Prophet's bona fides (Q 17:93).

⁴³ The verbal nouns *nuzûl*, *'inzâl*, and *tanazzul* do not occur in the Qur'ân 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 $\sqrt{n-z-l}$ 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 Muḥammad'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 Ḥira' 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 unveiling 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 unveiling of the divine knowledge and manifestation of the divine will does take place. Probably the Qur'ân's most insistent claim is that God is constantly sending down *âyât*, whether through prophetic activity or natural phenomena, that manifest all we need to know. The *kitâb* 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 *'anzala* (the IV or H or causative form). He proposes four pairs of vectors involved in the use of the D or H form: whether the object is passive (D) or cooperative (H); whether the action is momentary (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 *b-y-n*. F. Leemhuis, *The D and H stems in Koranic Arabic: A Comparative Study of the Function and Meaning of the fa^c-ala and 'af^c-ala 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 spatial and temporal parameters set up by the concepts *nuzûl*, *tanzil* and *'inzâl*, see Stefan Wild, "'We Have Sent Down to Thee the Book with the Truth . . .': Spatial and Temporal Implications of the Qur'anic Concepts of *nuzûl*, *tanzil* and *'inzâl*," in Wild, *The Qur'ân as Text* 137–53.

⁴⁷ Wild, "Spatial and Temporal Implications," 137.

The method of sending down is made clear repeatedly. It is oral (*qur'ân*); sending down in writing is rejected as unlikely to prove convincing (Q 6:7; 4:153).⁴⁸ What is sent down is in the vernacular (*'arabiyyan*) rather than in a foreign or sacral language (*'jamiyyan*).⁴⁹ It comes gradually (*munajjaman*) and in response to situations (*jawâban li-qawlihim*), rather than as a single completed pronouncement (*jumlatan wâhidatan*). 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 *wahy* 'revelation, inspiration' along with the related verb *awḥâ* 'to reveal, to inspire'. Out of the seventy-one occurrences of *awḥâ*, *kitâb* and *qur'ân* are the object (or subject of the passive), only three times each.⁵⁰ In spite of this, *wahy* remains central to the understanding of the *kitâb*. Unlike *tanzil*, *wahy* carries no spatial significance. While it is clearly marked as a religious term, three instances of its use in the Qur'ân remind us that it has a non-religious basis and is not solely a divine activity: Zacharia after being stuck dumb made signs (*awḥâ*) to his companions that they should give praise to God (Q 19:11);⁵¹ and twice the demons (*shayâṭin*) are said to communicate with one another by *wahy* (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.⁵² Indeed, Muslim tradition has almost univocally described the phenomenon as auditory, often even lacking verbal clarity:

Al-Ḥârith b. Hishâm asked the Messenger of God, "Messenger of God, how does the *wahy* come to you?" The Messenger of God said, "Sometimes it comes to me like the ringing of a bell and 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."⁵²

⁴⁸ See discussion of this in chapter 1.

⁴⁹ Revelation is in the vernacular of each people to whom it is sent:

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ رَّسُولٍ إِلَّا بِلِسَانٍ قَوْمِهِ لِيُبَيِّنَ لَهُمْ . . .

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

Sûrat Ibrâhîm 14:4

⁵⁰ For *kitâb* Q 18:27; 24:95; 35:31. For *qur'ân* Q 6:19; 12:3; 42:7. Q 20:114 also speaks of the Qur'ân and *wahyuh* 'its revelation'.

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 (*illâ ramzan*). Perhaps we can take this as a kind of gloss on *awḥâ*.

The Qur'ân itself also refers to *wahy* as visual, or at least as accompanied by visions. It is portrayed as a kind of teaching:

إِنْ هُوَ إِلَّا وَحْيٌ يُوحَىٰ ۖ عَلَّمَهُ شَدِيدُ الْقُوَىٰ ۖ ذُو مِرَّةٍ فَاسْتَوَىٰ ۖ وَهُوَ بِالْأُفُقِ الْأَعْلَىٰ

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.

Sûrat 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'ân 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.⁵⁴

وَمَا كَانَ لِنَبِيٍّ أَنْ يَكُلِمَهُ اللَّهُ إِلَّا وَحْيًا أَوْ مِنْ وَرَاءِ حِجَابٍ أَوْ يُرْسِلَ رَسُولًا فَيُوحِيَ بَأْذَنِهِ مَا يَشَاءُ إِنَّهُ عَلِيُّ حَكِيمٌ

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 [yûhî] with His permission what He wills. Surely He is exalted, wisely governing.

Sûrat al-Shûrâ 42:51

This verse outlines three exceptions to the general rule that God does not address people directly. Wansbrough translates the first exception, *wahyan*, 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 *wahyan* expressly to 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'anic 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

⁵² E.g., *GdQ*, 2: 1.

⁵³ Bukhârî, 1: 3 (*K. bad' 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 *El*², for other traditions about the way the Prophet reacted at moments of revelation.

⁵⁴ Wansbrough, *Qur'anic Studies*, 34–36.

of *wahy* and *awhâ*. 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.⁵⁵ Others have made even more of the quasi-magical status of writing among illiterate peoples. However, when the Qur'ân 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.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:

و ترى منها رسوما قد عفت || 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 zûbur.*⁵⁷

أقبلتُ من عند زياد كالخرف || تخطُّ رجلاي بخط مختلف || تكتبان في الطريق لام الف

I came from Ziyâd like a madman, || my legs tracing divergent lines, || writing 'lâm alif'⁵⁸ on the path.

The verb *awhâ* 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:

⁵⁵ Izutsu, *God and Man*, 160–61.

⁵⁶ See Gregor Schoeler, "Schreiben und Veröffentlichen: Zu Verwendung und Funktion der Schrift in den ersten islamischen Jahrhunderten," *Der Islam* 69 (1992): 1–43.

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

⁵⁸ Abû-l-Najm, quoted in *Tâj al-ʿArûs* and *Lisân al-ʿArab*, s.v. *katâba*. The line relies on a visual pun: the letters *lâm* and *'alif* when written together (لآ) suggest to the poet the intertwined, ungainly legs of a drunkard. See other similar references in Krenkow, "Writing."

قُلْ إِنَّمَا أَنَا بَشَرٌ مِّثْلُكُمْ يُوحَىٰ إِلَيَّ أَنَّمَا إِلَهُكُمُ إِلَهٌ وَاحِدٌ فَمَن كَانَ يَرْجُوا لِقَاءَ رَبِّهِ فَلْيَعْمَلْ
عَمَلًا صَالِحًا وَلَا يُشْرِكْ بِعِبَادَةِ رَبِّهِ أَحَدًا

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."

Sûrat al-Kahf 18:110

Wahy, 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 *wahy* 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 *wahy* 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 *kitâb* is understood by the Qur'ân itself more in terms of process than of fixed content. The central concepts in the Qur'ân's description of the *kitâb*—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 *kitâb* far more than any content.

CHAPTER SIX

The Semantic Field of *Kitâb* III: Synonyms and Attributes

The fundamental pattern already established for the semantic field of *kitâb*—the dual focus of authority (*ḥikma / ḥukm*) and knowledge (*ʿilm*)—can be further elaborated by examining the synonyms for *kitâb* in Qur'anic 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 *kitâb*. The hypothesis in summary is this: in calling itself *kitâb* the Qur'ân 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 *kitâb* functions as a symbol for divine knowledge and authority, so the Qur'ân'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 *kitâb* is the focus-word for a field that unites the fields of *ḥukm* 'authority' and *ʿilm* '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 *kitâb* 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 *ʿilm*, 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'ân's vocabulary that could belong to either of these fields; then those that are more closely associated with *kitâb* are identified. Some of the most important of these are then singled out for closer attention.

Words belonging to the semantic field of *ḥukm* 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'anic vocabulary related to *ḥukm*: authority and its exercise

THE POSITIVE ASPECTS			
ROOT	VOCABULARY		
'-j-r	<i>ajr</i>	reward	
'-kh-dh	<i>âkhaḍha</i>	to take to task	<i>akhaḍha</i> to seize
'-dh-n	<i>'adhina</i>	to give leave	<i>'idhn</i> permission
'-m-r	<i>amara</i>	to command	<i>amr</i> command
'-m-m	<i>imâm</i>	leader, guide	
b-r'	<i>barra'a</i>	to acquit	<i>bari'</i> declared innocent
b-l-w	<i>balâ</i>	to try, test	<i>balâ'</i> trial
t-b-c	<i>ittaba'a</i>	to obey, follow	
th-w-b	<i>thawwaba</i>	to reward	<i>thawâb</i> reward, requital
j-b-r	<i>jabbâr</i>	compelling (God)	
j-z-y	<i>jazâ</i>	to recompense, reward	
j-c-l	<i>ja'ala</i>	to make, declare, reckon, count, appoint	
ḥ-d-d	<i>ḥudûd</i>	limits, boundaries	
ḥ-r-m	<i>ḥarrama</i>	to declare either sacred or unclean	
ḥ-s-b	<i>ḥasiba</i>	to reckon	<i>ḥasib</i> reckoner (God)
ḥ-s-y	<i>aḥṣâ</i>	to reckon, to count	
ḥ-t-m	<i>ḥatm</i>	a thing decreed	
ḥ-q-q	<i>ḥaqqa</i>	to be true, just	<i>ḥaqq</i> truth
ḥ-l-l	<i>aḥalla</i>	to make lawful	<i>ḥalâl</i> lawful, permitted
d-y-n	<i>dâna</i>	to judge	<i>dîn</i> religion
	<i>dayn</i>	debt	
s-l-t	<i>sulṭân</i>	authority	<i>sallata</i> to give authority

s-m-w	<i>sammâ</i>	to name, determine	
s-n-n	<i>sunna</i>	path, customary law	
sh-y'	<i>shâ'a</i>	to will	<i>shay'</i> thing
ṣ-d-q	<i>ṣadaqa</i>	to be true, right	<i>ṣaddaqa</i> to confirm
ṣ-l-ḥ	<i>ṣalaḥa</i>	to be sound, good	<i>aṣaḥa</i> to set right
t-w-c	<i>aṭâ'a</i>	to obey, submit	<i>ṭâ'a</i> obedience
c-d-l	<i>'adala</i>	to be equitable	<i>'adl</i> justice
c-dh-b	<i>'adhaḍhaba</i>	to punish	<i>'adhâb</i> punishment
c-z-z	<i>'aziz</i>	powerful	<i>'izza</i> glory
c-f-w	<i>'afa</i>	to forgive	<i>'afuww</i> forgiving
c-q-b	<i>'aqaba</i>	to punish	<i>'iqâb</i> punishment
c-h-d	<i>'ahida</i>	to promise	<i>'ahd</i> covenant, agreement
gh-f-r	<i>ghafara</i>	to forgive, pardon	<i>ghafûr</i> forgiving
f-t-y	<i>afṭâ</i>	to pronounce	<i>istaṭâ</i> to seek a legal opinion
f-r-d	<i>faraḍa</i>	to impose, appoint	<i>fariḍa</i> ordinance, portion
f-r-q	<i>faraqa</i>	to divide, distinguish	<i>furqân</i> criterion*
f-ṣ-l	<i>faṣl</i>	decision, division	<i>faṣṣala</i> to divide, to detail
q-d-r	<i>qadira</i>	to control, determine	<i>taqdîr</i> ordaining
q-d-y	<i>qaḍâ</i>	to decree, to decide	
q-w-t	<i>muqît</i>	powerful	
q-w-y	<i>qawîy</i>	powerful	<i>quwwa</i> power, strength
q-y-d	<i>qayyada</i>	to allot, assign	
k-r-h	<i>kariha</i>	to detest	<i>akraha</i> to constrain, to compel
k-l-f	<i>kallafa</i>	to impose a burden	
m-k-n	<i>amkana</i>	to give (a person) power over something	
m-l-k	<i>malaka</i>	to rule, possess	<i>malik</i> king
	<i>mulk</i>	reign	
m-n-c	<i>mana'a</i>	to forbid	
n-dh-r	<i>andhara</i>	to warn	<i>nadhîr</i> warner
n-h-w	<i>nahâ</i>	to prohibit	
w-th-q	<i>wâthaqa</i>	to make a compact	<i>mithâq</i> covenant
w-ṣ-y	<i>waṣṣâ</i>	to charge, to enjoin	<i>waṣiyya</i> testament, bequest
h-d-y	<i>hadâ</i>	to guide	<i>hudâ</i> guidance
h-d-m	<i>haḍm</i>	injustice	

* Even though this word is probably from the Syriac/Aramaic *purqânâ* 'salvation', most commentators and translators take it to be from this root. See art. 'Criterion' in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*.

THE NEGATIVE ASPECTS

ROOT	VOCABULARY	
<i>b-gh-y</i>	<i>baghà</i>	to wrong, encroach, rebel
<i>j-h-d</i>	<i>jahada</i>	to deny
<i>s-kh-r</i>	<i>istaskhara</i>	to scoff
<i>s-w-'</i>	<i>sā'a</i>	to be evil
<i>sh-q-q</i>	<i>shiqāq</i>	schism, discord
<i>t-gh-y</i>	<i>taghiya</i>	to transgress
<i>z-l-m</i>	<i>zalama</i>	to do wrong
<i>ʿ-d-w</i>	<i>ʿadā</i>	to transgress
<i>ʿ-ṣ-y</i>	<i>ʿaṣā</i>	to disobey, rebel
<i>ʿ-n-d</i>	<i>ʿanid</i>	stubborn
<i>f-s-d</i>	<i>afsada</i>	to do mischief
<i>f-s-q</i>	<i>fasaqa</i>	to sin, to disobey God
<i>m-k-r</i>	<i>makara</i>	to plot against
<i>n-k-r</i>	<i>ankara</i>	to deny
<i>n-k-l</i>	<i>nakāl</i>	punishment
<i>h-z-'</i>	<i>istahza'a</i>	to scoff

sū' evil, malice

taḡhwā insolence, wickedness

ẓulm wrongdoing

ʿudwān enmity, transgression

ʿaṣīy disobedient, rebellious

fasād mischief

fisq ungodliness, serious sin

huzū' mockery, derision

These two groups of words can be summarized in a single diagram showing the most important elements of the field of *ḥukm* 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.

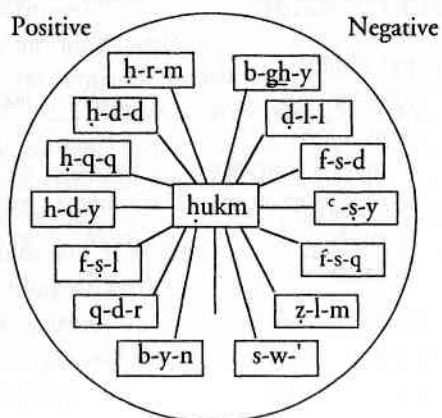


Figure 6.1. The semantic field of *ḥukm* 'authority'

The Qur'ân contains an extraordinarily varied vocabulary associated with *ʿilm* '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 *ʿilm* 'knowledge'

THE POSITIVE ASPECTS

ROOT	VOCABULARY	
<i>b-r-h-n</i>	<i>burhân</i>	proof
<i>b-y-n</i>	<i>bayyana</i>	to make clear
<i>b-ṣ-r</i>	<i>abṣara</i>	to see, to perceive
<i>h-d-th</i>	<i>ḥaddatha</i>	to declare
<i>h-dh-r</i>	<i>ḥadhdhara</i>	to warn
<i>h-s-b</i>	<i>ḥasiba</i>	to reckon, to count
<i>h-ṣ-y</i>	<i>aḥṣa</i>	to reckon, to count
<i>h-f-z</i>	<i>ḥafiz</i>	watcher, recorder
<i>h-q-q</i>	<i>ḥaqqa</i>	to prove true
<i>h-w-t</i>	<i>muḥit</i>	comprehending
<i>kh-b-r</i>	<i>ḵabir</i>	knowing, informed, aware
<i>d-r-s</i>	<i>darasa</i>	to study
<i>d-r-y</i>	<i>darā</i>	to know
<i>dh-k-r</i>	<i>dhakara</i>	to remember
	<i>dhakkara</i>	to remind
<i>r-'-y</i>	<i>ra'ā</i>	to see
<i>sh-ʿ-r</i>	<i>shaʿara</i>	to sense, to be aware
<i>ʿ-r-f</i>	<i>ʿarafa</i>	to know, to recognize
<i>ʿ-q-l</i>	<i>ʿaqala</i>	to understand, to be intelligent
<i>ʿ-l-m</i>	<i>ʿalima</i>	to learn, to know
	<i>ʿilm</i>	knowledge
<i>f-ṣ-l</i>	<i>faṣl</i>	decision, division
<i>f-q-h</i>	<i>faqih</i>	to understand
<i>f-k-r</i>	<i>tafakkara</i>	to reflect
<i>f-h-m</i>	<i>fahhama</i>	to cause to understand
<i>q-w-l</i>	<i>qāla</i>	to say, to speak
<i>k-l-m</i>	<i>kallama</i>	to speak to
	<i>kalām</i>	speech, decree

abāna to make (oneself) clear

baṣīra evidence, perception

ḥadīth tiding, discourse

ḥasib reckoner (God)

ḥafīza to guard, remember

aḥaqqā to verify

adrā to teach

dhikrā reminder

arā to show

ashʿara to make one realize

ʿallama to teach

faṣṣala to divide, to detail

qawl utterance, discourse

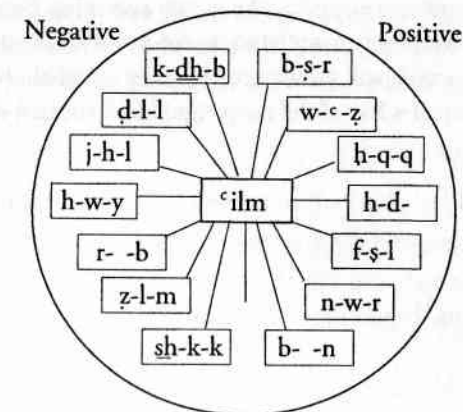
kalima word, command

n-w-r	anâra	to illuminate	nûr	light
h-d-y	hadâ	to guide	hudâ	guidance
w-ḥ-y	awḥâ	to communicate, reveal	wahy	communication, revelation
w-ḥ-z	mawḥiza	exhortation, admonition	waḥza	to exhort, to warn
y-q-n	ayqana	to be certain	yaqîn	certainty

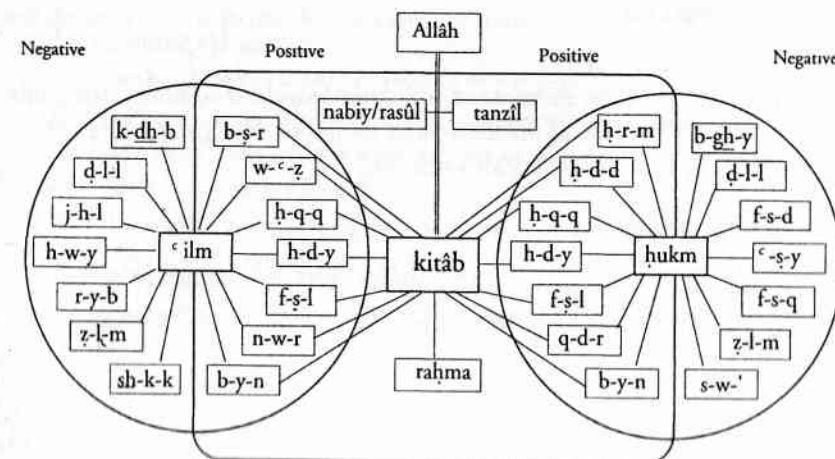
THE NEGATIVE ASPECTS

ROOT	VOCABULARY		
j-h-d	jahada	to deny	
j-d-l	jâdala	to dispute	jadal disputatious
j-h-l	jahila	to be ignorant	jâhiliyya (ignorant) pagans
h-j-j	hâjja	to dispute about	hujja argument, disputation
k-h-l-f	ikhṭalafa	to disagree	
r-y-b	rayb	doubt	irtâba to be in doubt
z-ḥ-m	zaḥama	to claim (falsely)	
sh-k-k	shakk	uncertainty, suspicion	
ḍ-l-l	ḍalla	to stray, to wander	aḍalla to lead astray
	ḍalâl	error	
z-l-m	zulumât	darkness, shadows	
z-n-n	zanṇa	to suppose, surmise	zanṇ conjecture
gh-r-r	gharra	to deceive, to delude	ghurûr delusion, deception
gh-f-l	ghafala	to be forgetful	ghafla heedlessness
k-dh-b	kadhhaba	to call a thing a lie	kidhb a lie
k-f-r	kafara	to disbelieve	
n-s-y	nasiya	to forget	
h-w-y	hawâ	caprice, groundless opinion	

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-ṣ-r*), explanation (*w-ḥ-z*), truth (*ḥ-q-q*), guidance (*h-d-y*), decisiveness (*f-ṣ-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 (*ḍ-l-l*), ignorance (*j-h-l*), capriciousness (*h-w-y*), doubt (*r-y-b*), darkness (*z-l-m*), and uncertainty (*sh-k-k*).

Figure 6.2. The semantic field of *ilm*

The vocabulary in these listings and diagrams is immediately recognizable as central to the Qur'ân's message. Several of the words listed are used dozens of times. However, that fact alone is not sufficient to establish our hypothesis. We are not proposing merely that *ḥukm* and *ilm* are essential to the Qur'ân; that would be merely to state the obvious. Rather, the proposal is that the term *kitâb* functions primarily—almost exclusively—as a unifying symbol for these two aspects of divine activity. This can be represented graphically using a combination and expansion of figures 6.1 and 6.2:

Figure 6.3. The semantic field of *kitâb*

If this schematization is accurate, the words emerging from the roots listed here will be seen to be closely associated to the word *kitâb* in the Qur'ân text itself. In effect, these words will define the *kitâb*. To establish whether this is the case, we will examine just a few of the most significant roots: *h-d-y*, *b-y-n*, *n-w-r*, *h-q-q* and *f-s-l*.

THE ROOT H-D-Y

The Qur'ân announces right at the outset, in *Sûrat al-Fâtiha* (Q 1), the theme of *hudâ* 'guidance', and this theme is explicitly linked with the *kitâb* on twenty-three occasions,² beginning with the introduction to *Sûrat al-Baqara*:

ذَٰلِكَ الْكِتَٰبُ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ هُدًى لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ

That is the kitâb about which there is no doubt, guidance for the God-fearing.

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:2

This theme is sounded throughout the Qur'ân—there are 85 uses of the noun *hudâ* and 215 occurrences of the verbal forms—and it applies not only to what Muḥammad has brought but also to what was given through the earlier prophets:

نَزَّلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَٰبَ بِالْحَقِّ مُصَدِّقًا لِّمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ وَأَنزَلَ التَّوْرَةَ وَالْإِنجِيلَ ۖ مِن قَبْلُ هُدًى لِّلنَّاسِ وَأَنزَلَ الْفُرْقَانَ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ وَاللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ ذُو انتِقَامٍ

He has sent down to you the kitâb with the truth, confirming what was before it, and He sent down the Tôrâh and the Gospel || beforehand as guidance for humanity; and he sent down the furqân. Surely those who disbelieve the âyât of God, theirs will be a severe punishment. God is powerful, ready for vengeance.

Sûrat Âl 'Imrân 3:3-4³

Guidance incorporates elements of both knowledge and authority: the guide is a guide precisely because of the knowledge he has of the right path; based on that knowledge he is recognized as an authority:

قُلْ هَلْ مِن شُرَكَائِكُمْ مَن يَهْدِي إِلَى الْحَقِّ قُلِ اللَّهُ يَهْدِي لِلْحَقِّ أَقَمْنَ يَهْدِي إِلَى الْحَقِّ أَحَقُّ أَن يُتَّبَعَ أَمَّنْ لَا يَهْدِي إِلَّا أَن يُهْدَىٰ فَمَا لَكُمْ كَيْفَ تَحْكُمُونَ

Say, "Is there among the partners you ascribe (to God) any who can guide

² Q 2:2, 214; 3:7-8; 4:51; 5:15-16; 6:88-90, 91, 154, 157; 7:52; 16:64, 89; 17:2; 22:8; 27:1-2; 31:2, 20; 38:43, 49; 39:23; 40:54-55; 42:52; 46:30. It is linked less often (eight times) with *qur'ân*: Q 2:185; 7:203-4; 17:9; 27:1-2; 76-77; 41:44; 71:1-2, 13. It is associated with *âya* fourteen times: Q 3:4, 101; 13:27; 16:101-2; 18:57; 19:59; 22:16; 24:46; 27:1-2; 28:36-37; 31:2; 45:11; 48:20.

³ See also Q 5:44, 46; 6:91, 154; 7:154; 17:2; 28:43.

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?"

Sûrat Yûnus 10:35

The guidance God gives is not limited to the *kitâb*, but it is virtually always associated with the mission of a *rasûl*.⁴ It is always guidance to a straight path toward God:⁵

وَكَذَٰلِكَ أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ رُوحًا مِّنْ أَمْرِنَا مَا كُنْتَ تَدْرِي مَا الْكِتَٰبُ وَلَا الْإِيمَانُ وَلَكِن جَعَلْنَاهُ نُورًا نَّهْدِي بِهِ مَن نَّشَاءُ مِنْ عِبَادِنَا وَإِنَّكَ لَتَهْدِي إِلَى صِرَاطٍ مُّسْتَقِيمٍ ۖ صِرَاطِ اللَّهِ الَّذِي لَهُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ ۚ أَلَا إِلَى اللَّهِ تَصِيرُ الْأُمُورُ

And thus have We communicated to you [Muḥammad] a spirit of Our command. You did not know what the kitâb 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?

Sûrat al-Shûrah 42:52-53

THE ROOT B-Y-N

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

وَمَا أَنزَلْنَا عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَٰبَ إِلَّا لِتُبَيِّنَ لَهُمُ الَّذِي اخْتَلَفُوا فِيهِ وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةً لِّقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ

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

Sûrat al-Nahl 16:64

... وَنَزَّلْنَا عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَٰبَ تِبْيَانًا لِّكُلِّ شَيْءٍ وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةً وَبُشْرَىٰ لِلْمُسْلِمِينَ

... And We sent down upon you the kitâb as an exposition [tibyân] of all

⁴ See Q 3:86, 101; 4:68-69, 115; 5:15-16; 9:33; 12:100-11; 14:4; 16:35; 17:94; 18:55-56; 20:47; 47:32; 48:28; 61:9.

⁵ *Sîrat* (or *ṣarṭ*) *mustaqīm* 'a straight path': Q 1:6; 2:142, 213; 3:51, 101; 4:68, 175; 5:16; 6:39, 87, 126, 153, 161; 7:16; 10:25; 11:56; 15:41; 16:76, 121; 17:35; 19:36; 22:54; 23:73; 24:46; 36:4, 61; 37:118; 42:52; 43:43, 61, 64; 46:30; 48:2, 20; 67:22.

things, as guidance and mercy, and as glad tidings for those who have submitted.

Sûrat al-Nahl 16:89

The term *bayyina* (pl. *bayyinât*) 'explanation, proof, clear sign' is used seventy-two times, always as an expression for revelation. It is usually associated with *rasûl* 'messenger' and/or *âya* 'sign'. Like *âya*, *bayyina* has no necessary connection with *kitâb* but is usually associated with it. Furthermore, similar terms are used with *bayyina* as are used with *kitâb*: God sends it down (*nazzala, anzala*); messengers bring it (*jâ'a bi-*), or God sends them with it (*arsala*):

إِن كَذَّبُوكَ فَقَدْ كُذِّبَ رَسُولٌ مِّن قَبْلِكَ جَاءُوا بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ وَالزُّبُرِ وَالْكِتَابِ الْمُنِيرِ

Even if they deny you, they have already denied messengers who were before you, who came with the bayyinât and with the zûbur and with the kitâb giving light.

Sûrat Âl 'Imrân 3:184

قُلْ أَرَأَيْتُمْ شُرَكَاءَكُمُ الَّذِينَ تَدْعُونَ مِن دُونِ اللَّهِ أَرُونِي مَاذَا خَلَقُوا مِنَ الْأَرْضِ أَمْ لَهُمْ شِرْكٌ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ أَمْ آتَيْنَاهُمُ كِتَابًا فَهُمْ عَلَىٰ بَيِّنَةٍ مِنْهُ بَلْ إِن يَبْدُ الظَّالِمُونَ بَعْضُهُم بَعْضًا إِلَّا غُرُورًا

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 kitâb so that they are acting on the basis of a bayyina from it? No, the evil-doers promise one another nothing but delusion.

Sûrat al-Malâ'ika 35:40

لَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا رُسُلَنَا بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ وَأَنْزَلْنَا مَعَهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْمِيزَانَ لِيَقُومَ النَّاسُ بِالْقِسْطِ ...

Truly We sent our messengers with the bayyinât, and We sent down with them the kitâb and the balance, so that humanity might stand with justice.

Sûrat al-Hadîd 57:25

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ يَكْتُمُونَ مَا أَنْزَلْنَا مِنَ الْبَيِّنَاتِ وَالْهُدَىٰ مِن بَعْدِ مَا بَيَّنَّاهُ لِلنَّاسِ فِي الْكِتَابِ أُولَٰئِكَ يَلْعَنُهُمُ اللَّهُ وَيَلْعَنُهُمُ اللَّاعِنُونَ

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

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:159

There are 119 uses of the active participle, *mubîn*, in the Qur'ân. 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 *-în* that ends so many verses.⁶ Nevertheless, since it remains a key term for the Qur'ân, its frequency must be attributable to more than convenience. Although the *af'ala* form of the verb is usually transitive and generally causative, several of the situations in which *mubîn* is used seem to preclude the translation 'making clear'. The oft-repeated *kitâb mubîn* can justifiably be read as '*kitâb* that makes things clear'. But what are we to make of *dalâl mubîn* which is also frequently used? Can error or straying make things clear? F. Leemhuis has suggested that the apparently intransitive *af'ala* verbs should, in Qur'anic usage at least, be understood as internal causatives.⁷ The attribution *mubîn*, 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.⁸ This meaning emerges, he suggests, in the one instance of a finite form of the verb *abâna* in Q 43:52, where Moses is said scarcely to be able to make himself understood: *lâ yakâdu yubînu*. We might also adduce Q 26:195, which shows that communication is of the essence of this usage: *bi-lisânin 'arabiyyin mubînin* 'in an Arabic tongue that makes itself understood'. Thus, the phrase *kitâb mubîn* 'kitâb 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 telling you just the same thing for ever."¹⁰ In stressing that God's *kitâb* is *mubîn*, the Qur'ân 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 Qur'ân's own words:

⁶ Where a feminine form is called for, it is always the active participle of the *fa'ala* form (*mubayyin*) that is used, and this is never at the end of a verse. There are two such phrases, each repeated three times: *fâḥisha mubayyina* (Q 4:19; 33:30; 65:1) and *âyat mubayyinât* (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 Kathîr and Abû Bakr's *riwâya* of 'Aṣim'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.

⁹ Twelve occurrences: Q 5:15; 6:59; 10:61; 11:6; 12:1; 26:2; 27:1, 75; 28:2; 34:3; 43:2; 44:2.

¹⁰ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 276d.

¹¹ Plato, *Phaedrus*, 276a.

هَذَا كِتَابُنَا يَنْطِقُ عَلَيْكُمْ بِالْحَقِّ إِنَّا كُنَّا نَسْتَنْسِجُ مَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ

This is our kitâb which speaks against you in truth. Surely We were having all you were doing recorded.

Sûrat al-Jâthiya 45:29

The more active or factitive *fa^cala* form—*bayyana* 'to make (something) clear'—is used thirty-five times¹² 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 *kitâb* may be *mubîn* but its eloquence and clarity ultimately rely on God's ability and intention to make things clear, to interpret the *âyât* for people.

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

وَيُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ لَكُمُ الْآيَاتِ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ

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

Sûrat al-Nûr 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 *kitâb*. 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:

وَتِلْكَ حُدُودُ اللَّهِ يُبَيِّنُهَا لِقَوْمٍ يَعْلَمُونَ

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

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:230

On a number of occasions, after offering a specification for some legal provision, the Qur'ân comments that this is a clarification of the *âyât* of God:¹³

وَلِلْمُطَلَّاتِ مَتَاعٌ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ حَقًّا عَلَى الْمُتَّقِينَ ۖ كَذَلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ آيَاتِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ

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

¹² I.e., if one follows Ibn Kathîr and Abû Bakr's *riwâya* of ʿĀṣim's version.

¹³ See also Q 2:187, 219, 266.

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

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:241–42

The element of authoritativeness comprehended by the field of *b-y-n* is also illustrated by the recurring phrases *ṣulṭân mubîn*¹⁴ and *imâm mubîn*¹⁵ 'an authority that speaks for itself'. In many cases these seem to be equivalents for *kitâb mubîn*.

In the Qur'ân's worldview, everything is evident, pellucid, patent. It may be natural for human beings to wonder and to question, but the *âyât* 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'ân, which sometimes becomes explicit, as in the *a-fa-lâ* and *laʿalla*-refrains to which we have already drawn attention.¹⁶ 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:

فَإِنْ زَلَلْتُمْ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَتْكُمْ الْبَيِّنَاتُ فَاَعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ

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

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:209

When human beings reject this freely offered guidance, then God leaves them straying in their ignorance. The Qur'ân 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:

اللَّهُ يَسْتَهْزِئُ بِهِمْ وَيَمْدُهُمْ فِي طُغْيَانِهِمْ يَعْمَهُونَ

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

Sûrat 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 (*nûr*). It appears in primarily two contexts: referring to a divine attribute and as a metaphor for revelation. However, these two uses

¹⁴ Eleven occurrences: Q 4:91, 144, 153; 11:96; 14:10; 18:15; 23:45; 37:156; 40:23; 44:19; 51:38; 52:38.

¹⁵ Q 15:17; 36:12.

¹⁶ See chapter 2.

are not entirely separable. In the meditation on light (Q 24:33ff) that provides the name for the *sûra* in which it occurs, *Sûrat al-Nûr*, God is described as light:

اللَّهُ نُورُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ . . . يَهْدِي اللَّهُ لِنُورِهِ مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَيَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ لِلنَّاسِ وَاللَّهُ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمٌ

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.

Sûrat al-Nûr 24:35

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

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ قَدْ جَاءَكُمْ بُرْهَانٌ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ وَأَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكُمْ نُورًا مُبِينًا

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 [*nûr mubîn*].

Sûrat al-Nisâ' 4:174

... قَدْ جَاءَكُمْ مِنَ اللَّهِ نُورٌ وَكِتَابٌ مُبِينٌ ۖ يَهْدِي بِهِ اللَّهُ مَنِ اتَّبَعَ رِضْوَانَهُ سُبُلَ السَّلَامِ وَيُخْرِجُهُم مِّنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ بِإِذْنِهِ وَيَهْدِيهِمْ إِلَى صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ

Now there has come to you a light from God and a *kitâb* 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.

Sûrat al-Mâ'ida 5:15–16

فَآمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ وَالنُّورِ الَّذِي أَنْزَلْنَا وَاللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ

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

Sûrat al-Taghâbun 64:8

The *kitâb* is four times called *munîr* 'light-giving, illuminating'.¹⁷ The Tôrâh and the Gospel are said to contain light and guidance (Q 5:44, 46). God sent down the *kitâb* 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 (*ẓulumât*) out of which God seeks to draw humanity by sending the *kitâb*:

الْقُرْآنُ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ إِلَيْكَ لِتُخْرِجَ النَّاسَ مِنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهِمْ إِلَى صِرَاطٍ الْمُسْتَقِيمِ

Alif. Lâ. Râ. A *kitâb* that We have sent down to you that you might bring humanity out of the shadows into light, by the will of their Lord, to the path of the Mighty, the Praiseworthy.

Sûrat Ibrâhîm 14:1

There is an unmistakable connection between this darkness (*ẓulumât*) in which humanity has gone astray and wrongdoing (*ẓulm*). Light is thus not merely something that makes possible knowledge for its own sake. That is rarely the Qur'ân'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 *c-l-m*.

THE ROOT *H-Q-Q*

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

كَانَ النَّاسُ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً فَبَعَثَ اللَّهُ النَّبِيِّينَ مُبَشِّرِينَ وَمُنذِرِينَ وَأَنْزَلَ مَعَهُمُ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ لِيَحْكُمَ بَيْنَ النَّاسِ فِي مَا اخْتَلَفُوا فِيهِ

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

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:213

وَأَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ بِالْحَقِّ مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ وَمُهَيِّمًا عَلَيْهِ فَاحْكُم بَيْنَهُمْ بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَاءَهُمْ عَمَّا جَاءَكَ مِنَ الْحَقِّ

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

¹⁸ Q 6:62; 10:30, 32; 18:44; 20:114; 22:62; 23:116; 24:25; 31:30.

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.

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).

the kitâb 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.

Sûrat al-Mâ'ida 5:48

The *kitâb* 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 *kitâb* of God that consists in keeping records:

هَذَا كِتَابُنَا يَنْطِقُ عَلَيْكُمْ بِالْحَقِّ إِنَّا كُنَّا نَسْتَنْسِخُ مَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ

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

Sûrat al-Jâthiya 45:29

The certainty of truth associated with the *kitâb* is contrasted with *ẓann* 'conjecture', *umniya* 'imagining, fancy' and *ahwâ* 'groundless opinions':

وَمِنْهُمْ أُمِّيُونَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ الْكِتَابَ إِلَّا أَمَانِي وَإِنْ هُمْ إِلَّا يَظُنُّونَ

Among them are unlettered folk (ummiyyûn)²⁰ who do not know the kitâb, but know only their own imaginings. They are only surmising.

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:78

قُلْ يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ لَا تَغْلُوا فِي دِينِكُمْ غَيْرَ الْحَقِّ وَلَا تَتَّبِعُوا أَهْوَاءَ قَوْمٍ قَدْ ضَلُّوا مِنْ قَبْلُ وَأَضَلُّوا كَثِيرًا وَضَلُّوا عَنْ سَوَاءِ السَّبِيلِ

Say, "O People of the kitâb! 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."

Sûrat al-Mâ'ida 5:77

THE ROOT F-Ṣ-L

The last of the roots connected with *kitâb* examined here is *f-ṣ-l*. The words derived from this root also combine the senses of explanation and decision, of knowledge and authority. The noun *faṣl* 'decision' is used for the final judgment of humanity—*yawm al-faṣl* 'the day of decision'²¹—and David is said to have been given *faṣl al-khiṭâb* 'decisiveness of speech' (Q 38:20). However, the *kitâb*

²⁰ The context here is a critique of the other scripted 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 37:12; 44:40; 77:13, 14, 38; 78:17.

and its *âyât* are more closely associated with the parts of the verb *faṣṣala*, which is normally translated 'to distinguish, to expound, to detail' though its precise meaning is not always obvious. *Faṣṣala* may be merely a synonym for *bayyana*, and that is how it is customarily treated.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 *kitâb* and *âyât*, 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:

وَكَذَلِكَ نَفْصَلُ الْآيَاتِ وَلِتَسْتَبِينَ سَبِيلُ الْمُجْرِمِينَ

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

Sûrat al-An'âm 6:55

أَفَغَيْرَ اللَّهِ أُتْبَغِي حَكْمًا وَهُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ إِلَيْكُمُ الْكِتَابَ مُفَصَّلًا وَالَّذِينَ آتَيْنَاهُمُ الْكِتَابَ يَعْلَمُونَ أَنَّهُ مُنْزَلٌ مِنْ رَبِّكَ بِالْحَقِّ فَلَا تَكُونَنَّ مِنَ الْمُمْتَرِينَ

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

Sûrat al-An'âm 6:114

وَلَقَدْ جِئْنَاهُمْ بِكِتَابٍ فَصَّلْنَاهُ عَلَىٰ عِلْمٍ هُدًى وَرَحْمَةً لِقَوْمٍ يُؤْمِنُونَ

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

Sûrat al-A'râf 7:52

ثُمَّ آتَيْنَا مُوسَى الْكِتَابَ تَمَامًا عَلَى الَّذِي أَحْسَنَ وَتَفْصِيلًا لِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةً لَعَالَمِهِمْ يُلْقَاهُ رَبُّهُمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ

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

Sûrat al-An'âm 6:154

وَكُنْتُمْ لَهُ فِي الْأَلْوَابِ مِنْ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ مَوْعِظَةً وَتَفْصِيلًا لِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ فَخُذْهَا بِقُوَّةٍ وَأْمُرْ قَوْمَكَ يَأْخُذُوا بِأَحْسَنِهَا سَأُرِيكُمْ دَارَ الْفَاسِقِينَ

²² For example, al-Jabart (ad Q 7:52) equates *faṣṣala* with *bayyana* and *mawayyaza*.

And We wrote for [Moses] upon the tablets an admonition (inaw^ciza) about everything and a criterion of judgment (tafṣil) 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.'"

Sûrat al-A'raf 7:145

If *faṣṣala* indeed has this aspect to its meaning, then it is also closely related to *aḥkama*—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 *Lisân al-ʿArab*: "When a man is *ḥakīm* (authoritative, wise in judgment) it is said of him *aḥkamathu al-tajārib*—experience has made him wise in judgment."²⁴ The Qur'ân describes itself as *ḥakīm* (Q 43:4), and that adjective is used twice for the *kitâb* (Q 10:1; 31:2). So when the verb *aḥkama* is used with reference to the *kitâb* and its *âyât*, it seems appropriate to render it 'to set up as authoritative'. Many commentators implicitly do so when dealing with the much discussed sentence:

هُوَ الَّذِي أَنْزَلَ عَلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ مِنْهُ آيَاتٌ مُحْكَمَاتٌ هُنَّ أُمُّ الْكِتَابِ وَأُخَرُ مُتَشَابِهَاتٌ
فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ زَيْغٌ فَيَتَّبِعُونَ مَا تَشَابَهَ مِنْهُ ابْتِغَاءَ الْفِتْنَةِ وَابْتِغَاءَ تَأْوِيلِهِ
وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُ إِلَّا اللَّهُ وَالرَّاسِخُونَ فِي الْعِلْمِ يَقُولُونَ آمَنَّا بِهِ كُلٌّ مِنْ عِنْدِ رَبِّنَا وَمَا
يَذْكُرُوا إِلَّا أَفْهَامًا الْأَلْبَابِ

He it is who has sent down to you the *kitâb*, some of whose *âyât* have been made authoritative (*muḥkamât*)—they are the substance ('umm' lit., mother) of the *kitâb*—and others are not completely clear (*mutashâbihât*).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;²⁶ and those who are

²³ *Aḥkama* occurs in the Qur'ân four times: twice as a finite verb (Q 11:1; 22:52) and twice as a passive participle (Q 3:7; 47:20).

²⁴ *Lisân al-ʿArab*, s.v. *ḥkm* وقال للرحل إذا كان حكيماً قد أحكمته التجارب والحكيم المنقن للأمور

²⁵ The word *mutashâbihât* 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

steeped in knowledge say, "We believe in it. All of it comes from the presence of our Lord." No one accepts admonition except those with intelligence.

Sûrat Âl ʿImrân 3:7

This verse plays a significant role in the discussions about the nature of the Qur'ân and the authority of particular parts of its text. It has been used to argue for the Qur'ân's miraculous inimitability, and both for and against the propriety or even the very possibility of interpretation. The relationship between the verses that are *muḥkam* and those that are *mutashâbih* is a key hermeneutical tool that makes possible a variety of approaches to the question of the authority of individual verses.²⁷

The two terms are taken by some exegetes as opposed to one another; therefore, if the *muḥkamât* are understood as judicial verses, the *mutashâbihât* are nonjudicial; if the *muḥkamât* are abrogating verses, the *mutashâbihât* are the abrogated verses; if the *muḥkamât* are the basic and essential verses, the *mutashâbihât* are the nonessential or changeable verses; if the *muḥkamât* are clear and distinct, with one obvious interpretation, the *mutashâbihât* are parabolic, ambiguous, and open to various interpretations. Other times commentators see the terms as complementary rather than opposed: therefore, if the *muḥkamât* contain the basic duties and precepts, the *mutashâbihât* are the details and specifics; if the *mutashâbihât* are in need of interpretation, it is the *muḥkamât* that provide it. Many of the exegetical traditions quoted by al-Ṭabarî generally agree that the *muḥkamât* are those verses that have legal content.²⁸ Yet we see in the range of meanings that the commentators propose for *muḥkam* precisely the range of meanings we have been observing in the semantic field of *ḥukm*.

The verbs *faṣṣala* and *aḥkama* appear together quite naturally in Q 11:1:

الْأَرْكَانُ أَحْكَمَتْ آيَاتُهُ ثُمَّ فُصِّلَتْ مِنْ لَدُنْ حَكِيمٍ خَبِيرٍ

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 that it is not *mutashâbih* 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, "Muḥkamât and Mutashâbihât (Koran 3/7): Implication of a Koranic Pair of Terms in Medieval Exegesis," *Arabica* 35 (1988): 143–72. See also Michel Lagarde, "De l'Ambiguïté (*mutashâbih*) 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 ʿAbbâs, who says,

الحكمات: ناسخه، وحلاله وحرامه، وحدوده ومراضيه، وما يؤمن به ويعمل به

"The *muḥkamât* are the abrogating parts [of the Qur'ân], 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 *sûra* is said to be *muḥkama*, with the evident meaning of 'containing an explicit command'.

Alif. Lâm. Râ. A kitâb—its âyât have been made authoritative (uḥkimat) and then set out as criteria (fuṣṣilat)—from one wise in judgment, well-informed.

Sûrat Hûd 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 *kitâb* 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 Qur'ân uses some of the most significant words serving to define and describe the noun *kitâb*. The fundamental pattern is this:

- As creator God knows ($\sqrt{c-l-m}$) the truth ($\sqrt{h-q-q}$) of all things and is in command ($\sqrt{h-k-m}$) of all things. The symbol for this knowledge and authority is *kitâb*.
- Given close attention and reflection ($\sqrt{c-q-l}$, $\sqrt{f-k-r}$, $\sqrt{dh-k-r}$, $\sqrt{f-q-h}$, $\sqrt{y-q-n}$, etc.), it is possible for people to learn ($\sqrt{c-l-m}$) from the *âyât* 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 ($\sqrt{r-s-l}$, $\sqrt{n-b-}$) who bring their communities guidance ($\sqrt{h-d-y}$), a privileged insight into God's knowledge and authoritative will. They recite ($\sqrt{q-r-}$, $\sqrt{t-l-w}$) God's *âyât* in order to remind ($\sqrt{dh-k-r}$) the people of them, to make quite clear ($\sqrt{b-y-n}$, $\sqrt{n-w-r}$, $\sqrt{f-s-l}$) precisely what God requires ($\sqrt{h-k-m}$), and to warn ($\sqrt{n-dh-r}$) of the coming judgment ($\sqrt{f-s-l}$, $\sqrt{h-k-m}$, $\sqrt{d-y-n}$).
- The symbol of this guidance is the *kitâb*—God's sending down ($\sqrt{n-z-l}$) through the prophet of an authoritative word ($\sqrt{q-w-l}$, $\sqrt{k-l-m}$) to address the current situation and the prevailing issue. This divine/prophetic address bears the name *kitâb* not because of its form (which remains oral, fluid, and responsive) but because of its origin and because of its nature as a communication ($\sqrt{n-z-l}$, $\sqrt{w-h-y}$) of God's knowledge ($\sqrt{c-l-m}$) and a clear statement ($\sqrt{b-y-n}$) of God's commands ($\sqrt{h-k-m}$).
- The community addressed by God accepts the relationship of guidance ($\sqrt{h-d-y}$, $\sqrt{r-sh-d}$) first by accepting and affirming ($\sqrt{m-n}$, $\sqrt{s-d-q}$) that what the Prophet recites has a divine origin, then by committing themselves ($\sqrt{s-l-m}$) to obeying ($\sqrt{t-b-c}$, $\sqrt{t-w-c}$) the divine will manifested in the prophetic

word. Acceptance of the word then involves their reciting ($\sqrt{q-r-}$) it in their turn. In this way they become a people who are identified and defined by their having been granted the *kitâb*.

The phenomenon of the *kitâb* unifies this whole schema while itself remaining elusive. Just how elusive is explored in the next chapter as we examine the plurals, partitives, and indefinites that dominate talk about the *kitâb* in Qur'anic discourse. This discussion will further confirm my contention that the Qur'ân's *kitâb* 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 *Kitâb*: Plurals, Partitives and Indefinites

THE PARTIAL AND INDEFINITE *KITÂB*

The elusiveness of the *kitâb* 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'ân. Excluding from consideration for a moment the 57 cases of the stock phrase *ahl al-kitâb* and its parallels (*alladhîna 'ûtû al-kitâb* 'those who have been given the *kitâb*', etc.), just over one-third (68 out of 198) of the remaining uses of *kitâb* 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 *kitâb* from another's and thereby imply plurality. It is tempting to make sense of this multiplicity of forms by understanding the definite *al-kitâb* as referring collectively to the Qur'ân 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 *kitâbun* and the definite *al-kitâb*. Sometimes what God sends down is referred to in very indefinite terms indeed:

فَلِلَّذَلِكَ فَادَعُ وَاسْتَعِمْ كَمَا أُمِرْتُ وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَاءَهُمْ وَقُلْ آمَنْتُ بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ مِنْ
كِتَابٍ وَأُمِرْتُ لِأَعْدِلَ بَيْنَكُمْ

*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 kitâb, and I have been commanded to do
justice among you."*

Sûrat al-Shûrâ 42:15

وَإِذْ أَخَذَ اللَّهُ مِيثَاقَ النَّبِيِّينَ لَمَا آتَيْتُكُمْ مِنْ كِتَابٍ وَحِكْمَةٍ ثُمَّ جَاءَكُمْ رَسُولٌ مُصَدِّقٌ لِمَا مَعَكُمْ لَتُؤْمِنُنَّ بِهِ وَلَتَنْصُرُنَّهُ ...

When God made a covenant with the prophets, [He said], "[There is] what I have given you in the way of kitâb 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.

Sûrat Âl 'Imrân 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 *kutub*:

كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ إِلَيْكَ مُبَارَكٌ لِيَدَّبَّرُوا آيَاتِهِ وَلِيَتَذَكَّرَ أُولُوا الْأَلْبَابِ

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

Sûrat Şad 38:29

كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلَ إِلَيْكَ فَلَا يَكُنْ فِي صَدْرِكَ حَرَجٌ مِنْهُ لَتُنذِرَ بِهِ وَذِكْرَى لِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ

A kitâb 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.

Sûrat al-A'raf 7:2

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

وَإِذْ آتَيْنَا مُوسَى الْكِتَابَ وَالْفُرْقَانَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ

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

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:53

وَلَقَدْ آتَيْنَا مُوسَى الْهُدَى وَأَوْرَثْنَا بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ الْكِتَابَ

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

Sûrat al-Mu'min or Ghâfir 40:53

قَالَ إِنِّي عَبْدُ اللَّهِ آتَانِيَ الْكِتَابَ وَجَعَلَنِي نَبِيًّا

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

Sûrat Maryam 19:30

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

وَالَّذِي أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ هُوَ الْحَقُّ مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ بِعِبَادِهِ لَخَبِيرٌ بَصِيرٌ

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

Sûrat al-Malâ'ika 35:31

أَلَمْ تَرَ إِلَى الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا نَصِيبًا مِنَ الْكِتَابِ يَدْعُونَ إِلَى الْكِتَابِ اللَّهِ لِيُحْكَمَ بَيْنَهُمْ ثُمَّ يَتَوَلَّى فَرِيقٌ مِنْهُمْ وَهُمْ مُعْرِضُونَ

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

Sûrat Âl 'Imrân 3:23

Alford Welch points out that the verses that use the phrase *naṣīb min al-kitâb* 'a share of the kitâb' 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-kitâb*" to "those who have been given a portion of *al-kitâb*."¹ However, Welch ignores the fact that even in these late *sûras*, where the confrontation with Judaism and Christianity and the separation from them are clear, the same people are still called *ahl al-kitâb* (e.g., Q 4:153; 5:15) and *alladhîna 'ûtû-l-kitâb* (e.g., Q 2:144, 145; 9:29). Furthermore, no polemic is based on the incompleteness of their *kitâb*. The critique focuses rather on their culpable ill will in refusing to recognize in what Muḥammad is bringing the very *kitâb* 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-Kur'ân," in *Et* 5: 403. Perhaps this phrase has its origin in an earlier verse (Q 7:37) which speaks of people's *naṣīb min al-kitâb* in a context where clearly it is not scripture that is at issue but God's determination of the length of their lives:

فَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّنْ افْتَرَى عَلَى اللَّهِ كَذِبًا أَوْ كَذَّبَ بِآيَاتِهِ أُولَئِكَ يَنْالُهُمْ نَصِيبُهُمْ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ حَتَّى إِذَا خَافَتْهُمُ رُسُلُنَا يَتَرَفَعُونَ فِيهِمْ ...

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

Sûrat al-A'raf 7:37

وَلَمَّا جَاءَهُمْ رَسُولٌ مِنْ عِنْدِ اللَّهِ مُصَدِّقٌ لِمَا مَعَهُمْ نَبَذَ فَرِيقٌ مِنَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ كِتَابَ اللَّهِ وَرَاءَ ظُهُورِهِمْ كَأَنَّهُمْ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

And when a messenger from God comes to them, confirming what they have, a party of those who have been given the kitâb cast the kitâb of God behind their backs as though they did not know.

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:101²

In addition, in the late period that Welch, following Bell and Watt, identifies as the period when Muḥammad was preparing *al-kitâb*, his new scripture, the word *kitâb* 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:

النَّبِيُّ أَوْلَىٰ بِالْمُؤْمِنِينَ مِنْ أَنفُسِهِمْ وَأَزْوَاجُهُ أُمَّهَاتُهُمْ وَأُولُوا الْأَرْحَامِ بَعْضُهُمْ أَوْلَىٰ بِبَعْضٍ فِي كِتَابِ اللَّهِ مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُهَاجِرِينَ إِلَّا أَنْ تَفْعَلُوا إِلَىٰ أَوْلِيَائِكُمْ مَعْرُوفًا كَانَ ذَلِكَ فِي الْكِتَابِ مَسْطُورًا

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 kitâb of God than believers and those who emigrated—except that you should do kindness to your friends. That has been inscribed (*masṭûran*) in the kitâb.

Sûrat al-Aḥzâb 33:6³

If Bell and those who followed him were correct in their surmise about Muḥammad's intentions and activity at that point of his career, one might expect to see a more careful and systematic use of the term *kitâb* 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:

يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ قَدْ جَاءَكُمْ رَسُولُنَا يُبَيِّنُ لَكُمْ كَثِيرًا مِمَّا كُنْتُمْ تُخْفُونَ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ وَيَعْفُو عَنْ كَثِيرٍ قَدْ جَاءَكُمْ مِنَ اللَّهِ نُورٌ وَكِتَابٌ مُبِينٌ

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

Sûrat al-Mâ'ida 5:15

اتْلُ مَا أُوحِيَ إِلَيْكَ مِنَ الْكِتَابِ وَأَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ . . .

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

Sûrat al-ʿAnkabût 29:45

وَمَا كُنْتَ تَتْلُوا مِنْ قَبْلِهِ مِنْ كِتَابٍ وَلَا تَخُطُّهُ بِيَمِينِكَ إِذَا لَأَرْتَابَ الْمُبِطِلُونَ

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

Sûrat al-ʿAnkabût 29:48

If we take it for granted that the Qur'ân's usage of *kitâb* 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 *kitâb* that can comprehend all these usages. The pattern of usage we have observed seems to imply that the *kitâb*, for all the complexities of its manifestation, is a unity. Indeed, the followers of Muḥammad are supposed to be distinguished by the fact that they have faith *bi-l-kitâb kullih* 'in the whole of the kitâb':

هَآأَنْتُمْ أَوْلَاءُ تُحِبُّونَهُمْ وَلَا يُحِبُّونَكُمْ وَتُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْكِتَابِ كُلِّهِ وَإِذَا لَقُوكُمْ قَالُوا آمَنَّا وَإِذَا خَلَوْا عَضُّوا عَلَيْكُمُ الْأَظْفَارَ مِنَ الْغَيْظِ قُلْ مُوتُوا بِغَيْظِكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلِيمٌ بِذَاتِ الصُّدُورِ

Behold, you are the ones who love them though they do not love you, and you have faith in the whole of the kitâb. 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."

Sûrat Âl ʿImrân 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 *kitâb* is unitary:⁴

قُولُوا آمَنَّا بِاللَّهِ وَمَا أُنْزِلَ إِلَيْنَا وَمَا أُنْزِلَ إِلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ وَالْأَسْبَاطِ وَمَا أُوتِيَ مُوسَىٰ وَعِيسَىٰ وَمَا أُوتِيَ النَّبِيُّونَ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ لَا نُفَرِّقُ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِنْهُمْ وَنَحْنُ لَهُ مُسْلِمُونَ

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

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-kitâb* at the end of Q 33:6 with the parenthesis 'of nature'.

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.

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:136

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

إِنَّا أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ كَمَا أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَى نُوحٍ وَالنَّبِيِّينَ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ وَأَوْحَيْنَا إِلَى إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ وَالْأَسْبَاطِ وَعِيسَى وَأَيُّوبَ وَيُونُسَ وَهَارُونَ وَسُلَيْمَانَ وَآتَيْنَا دَاوُودَ زَبُورًا
Surely We have communicated (*awḥaynâ*) 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 *zabûr*.

Sûrat al-Nisâ 4:163

However, this sense of the unity of the *kitâb* 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 Qur'ân, and we need to examine these carefully to see what bearing they have on the understanding of *kitâb* 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 *kitâb*—both appear simply as *كتب*.⁵

As we shall see, the reciters and the commentators do not always agree that it should be read as a plural. In Q 21:104, which in any case is not about God's *kitâb* but is a simile for the rolling up of the heavens at the end of time, al-Ṭabarî follows the reciters of Madîna and some of those from Kûfa and Baṣra 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 آتَيْنَاهُمْ مِنْ كُتُبٍ يَدْرُسُونَهَا وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا إِلَيْهِمْ قَبْلَكَ مِنْ نَذِيرٍ

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

Sûrat Saba' 34:44

Since the whole of *Sûrat 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 Qur'ân 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 يَكُنِ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ وَالْمُشْرِكِينَ مُنْفَكِينَ حَتَّى تَأْتِيَهُمُ الْبَيِّنَةُ ۖ رَسُولٌ مِنَ اللَّهِ يَتْلُو صُحُفًا مُطَهَّرَةً ۖ فِيهَا كُتُبٌ قَيِّمَةٌ

Those who disbelieve among the People of the *kitâb* 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*.

Sûrat 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:

وَمَرْيَمَ ابْنَتَ عِمْرَانَ الَّتِي أَحْصَنَتْ فَرْجَهَا فَنَفَخْنَا فِيهِ مِنْ رُوحِنَا وَصَدَقَتْ بِكَلِمَاتِ رَبِّهَا وَكُنْتِ مِنَ الْقَانِتِينَ

And Maryam, daughter of Imrân—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 *kutub*, and was among those who obey.

Sûrat al-Tahrîm 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-Ṭabarî notes that some readers are inclined to take it as singular rather than plural:⁷

آمَنَ الرَّسُولُ بِمَا أُنزِلَ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ رَبِّهِ وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ كُلٌّ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَمَلَائِكَتِهِ وَكُتُبِهِ [كِتَابِهِ] وَرُسُلِهِ

⁵ The reports of the old codices compiled by Jeffery bear witness to this difficulty, which seems to have been particularly acute in Q 2:283 where this same consonantal outline (generally read as *kâtiban* 'a scribe') is variously read *kuttâban* or *kuttaban* 'scribes'; *kutuban* 'books'; and *kitâban* 'a book'. Jeffery, *Materials*, passim.

⁶ Al-Ṭabarî, *Tafsîr*, 9: 95, ad Q 21:104.

⁷ Al-Ṭabarî, *Tafsîr*, 3: 152, ad Q 2:285. He understands the people who read it in the singular as implying that only the Qur'ân is meant.

لَا تَفَرِّقُ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِنْ رُسُلِهِ وَقَالُوا سَمِعْنَا وَأَطَعْنَا غُفْرَانَكَ رَبَّنَا وَإِلَيْكَ الْمَصِيرُ

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 kutub [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.”

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:285

A variant of this verse, attributed to Ibn Mas'ūd, has the singular *kitāb* rather than the plural *kutub*.⁸ A parallel formula in Q 2:177 seems to support the feasibility of a singular reading in Q 2:285:

لَيْسَ الْبِرُّ أَنْ تُولُوا وُجُوهَكُمْ قِبَلَ الْمَشْرِقِ وَالْمَغْرِبِ وَلَكِنَّ الْبِرَّ مَنْ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ
وَالْمَلَائِكَةِ وَالْكِتَابِ وَالنَّبِيِّينَ وَآتَى الْمَالَ عَلَى حُبِّهِ

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 love of Him.

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:177

Al-Tabarī 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.⁹ However, his reasoning is precisely what supports the view that the plural

⁸ Instead of *رُسُلِهِ* and *كُتُبِهِ* Ibn Mas'ūd's codex is supposed to have had *رُسُلِهِ* and *كِتَابِهِ* and *نَبِيِّنِهِ*. Jeffery, *Materials*, 32.

⁹ Al-Tabarī, *Tafsir*, 3: 152, ad Q 2:285:

وقد روي عن ابن عباس أنه كان يقرأ ذلك ((وكتابه))، ويقول: الكتاب أكثر من الكتب وكان ابن عباس يوجه تاويل ذلك الى نحو قوله: ﴿وَالْعَصْرُ إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لَفِي خُسْرٍ﴾ بمعنى جنس (الناس) وحنس (الكتاب)، كما يقال: ((ما أكثر درهم فلان ودياره))، ويراد به جنس الدراهم والدينار. وذلك، وإن كان مذهبا من المذاهب معروفا، فإن الذي هو أحب إلي من القراءة في ذلك أن يقرأ بلفظ الجمع. لأن الذي قبله جمع، والذي بعده كذلك - أعني بذلك ﴿وَمَلَائِكَتِهِ وَكُتُبِهِ وَرُسُلِهِ﴾ - فالحاق (الكتب) في الجمع لفظاً به، أعجب إلي من توحيده وإخراجه في اللفظ به بلفظ الواحد، ليكون لاحقاً في اللفظ والمعنى بلفظ ما قبله وما بعده، وبمعناه.

It is reported about Ibn 'Abbās that he used to read that *wa-kitābihi* and that he used to say, “*al-kitāb* includes more (*akthar*) than *al-kutub*.” Moreover, Ibn 'Abbās gave as a reason for this interpretation the analogy of [God's] word, “By the declining day! Surely man is losing.” (Sûrat al-ʿAṣr 103:1–2) which means the whole category of people, and so [the singular *kitābihi*] refers to the whole category of *kitāb*. Similarly it is said, “There is nothing more abundant (*akthar*) than so-and-so's dirham and his dinār” and by that is meant the whole category of dirhams and dinārs. However, even though that is an acceptable opinion, the

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, *kutub*, is intended, since two singular forms precede it, and it obviously refers back to them:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا آمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ وَالْكِتَابِ الَّذِي نَزَّلَ عَلَى رَسُولِهِ وَالَّذِي أَنْزَلَ مِنْ قَبْلُ وَمَنْ يَكْفُرْ بِاللَّهِ وَمَلَائِكَتِهِ وَكُتُبِهِ وَرُسُلِهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ فَقَدْ ضَلَّ ضَلَالًا بَعِيدًا

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 kutub and His messengers and the Last Day has already gone far astray.

Sûrat 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 Muḥammad 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—*tawrât*, *injil*, *kitāb Mūsâ*, *ṣuḥuf Ibrāhîm*, *zabûr* and so on—yet 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 Muḥammad. 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 Muḥammad'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 vowing it that way is better in my opinion than vowing it as a singular and thereby 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 *ahl 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'ân's being recognizable to "those who have knowledge of the *kitâb*":

وَيَقُولُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا لَسْتُ مُرْسَلًا قُلْ كَفَىٰ بِاللَّهِ شَهِيدًا بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَكُمْ وَمِنْ عِنْدِهِ عِلْمُ الْكِتَابِ

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'ad 13:43

وَكَذَٰلِكَ أَنْزَلْنَا إِلَيْكَ الْكِتَابَ فَالَّذِينَ آتَيْنَاهُمُ الْكِتَابَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِ وَمِنْ هَؤُلَاءِ مَنْ يُؤْمِنُ بِهِ وَمَا يَجْحَدُ بِآيَاتِنَا إِلَّا الْكَافِرُونَ

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 *âyât* except the disbelievers.

Sûrat al-Ankabût 29:47

وَإِذَا سَمِعُوا مَا أُنْزِلَ إِلَى الرَّسُولِ تَرَىٰ أَعْيُنُهُمْ تَفِيضُ مِنَ الدَّمْعِ مِمَّا عَرَفُوا مِنَ الْحَقِّ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا آمَنَّا فَاكْتُبْنَا مَعَ الشَّاهِدِينَ

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'ida 5:83

Even though they may be concealing parts of the *kitâb* (e.g., Q 2:42, 159, 174), or deliberately twisting its meaning (Q 2:75; 4:46; 5:13, 41); even though they refuse to recognize the newest manifestation of the *kitâb* (e.g., Q 2:91), the Jews and Christians are still considered recipients of the one *kitâb*. This unity is stated most explicitly in the slight variation on the common statement "what has been sent down to us and what has been sent down to you." In Q 29:46 the two are virtually identified as one:

وَلَا تَجَادِلُوا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ إِلَّا بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ إِلَّا الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا مِنْهُمْ وَقُولُوا آمَنَّا بِالَّذِي أُنْزِلَ إِلَيْنَا وَأُنْزِلَ إِلَيْكُمْ وَإِلَهُنَا وَإِلَهُكُمْ وَاحِدٌ وَنَحْنُ لَهُ مُسْلِمُونَ

And do not contend with the people of the *kitâb*—other than in the kindest way—except with those among them who have done wrong. And say, "We

believe in what has been sent down to us and sent down to you; our God and your God are one, and to Him do we submit.

Sûrat al-Ankabût 29:46

The evidence that the Qur'ân 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'ân'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'ân'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'ân's repeated claim that it is *muṣaddiq* 'confirming' of the earlier revelations.¹¹

The logic of the Qur'ân'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'ân 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 Muḥammad, 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'ân itself. Nothing about the Qur'ân suggests that it conceives of itself as identical with the *kitâb*. From the outset, as we have noted, the Qur'ân speaks about the *kitâb* in the third person, using the modifier *dhālika* 'that' (Q 2:1).

The phrase *naṣīb 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

¹¹ Q 2:41, 89, 91, 97, 101; 3:3, 81; 4:47; 5:48; 6:92; 35:31; 46:12, 30.

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-Shahrastānī, *Nihāyat*, 301.

brand the Jews and Christians as possessors of only incomplete scriptures, in contrast to the Muslims. If the *kitâb* is not a fixed text but rather a symbol or metaphor for God's knowledge and authority, then those who have been given a *kitâb* or a 'share of the *kitâb*' 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 *naşib min al-kitâb* as 'a share in the *kitâb*'.

It is not possible to make sense of the partitives, indefinites and plurals in the Qur'ân's talk about the *kitâb* without relinquishing the notion that it is a celestial canon. Taken all together, what the Qur'ân says of the *kitâb* points not to a circumscribed corpus of liturgy, dogma, and law that can be duplicated and parceled 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 Qur'ân's *kitâb* 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 irrupt onto the scene at any moment; in its being timeless yet utterly contemporary and ad rem; in its playing a role as 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 *kitâb* did not exist within the clearly defined limits of a physical form.

The elusiveness of *kitâb* 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 *jumlata wâhidatan*, since it is a completed whole. The too-easy adoption of the understanding of *kitâb* as 'book' is precisely what opens the way to fundamentalism, which identifies the limits of God's *kitâb* with the boundaries of the received text. The Qur'ân, as we have seen, rejects such a possibility by holding itself above canons and limits. It maintains its right to respond.

The word *kitâb* 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*.¹³ We have seen that the Qur'ân has little interest in writing as a mere mnemonic device for display or storage of the divine word. The claim that something is *kitâb* 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 Qur'ân's *kitâb*, it would be with an emphasis on writing as process rather than as product—*kitâb* as a verbal noun rather than a concrete noun. The process of writing still includes the author's active engagement with

his public. Once a book is produced, however, it takes on its own life and the role of the author recedes. The Muslim community has always had a lively sense that the *kitâb*'s author remains engaged with his audience. We shall see in the next chapter how the understanding of God's "writing" as a process rather than a finished product has profoundly shaped Islam in spite of its preponderant concern for the closed corpus of the Qur'ân.

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 *muṣḥaf* 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 Muḥammad, 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 *muṣḥaf* 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'ân's repeated use of the term *kitâb* in connection with the revelations given to Muḥammad 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 *kitâb* is the writing activity of God, *kitâb* 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'ân 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 *kitâb*, 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'ân 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 *kitâb* pervades Qur'anic discourse and focuses its themes yet it remains strangely elusive. It 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 *kitâb*, and it becomes clear how the term is functioning.

Barbara Holdrege has drawn attention to the way the terms *tôrâh* 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'ân she acknowledges some similarities between conceptions and practices associated with the Qur'ân and those associated with

¹ Barbara Holdrege, *Veda and Torah: Transcending the Textuality of Scripture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), *passim*.

the Veda and the *Tôrâh*. However, she also maintains that "the Qur'ân does not become an encompassing symbol in the way that Veda and *Tôrâh* do."² While it is true the term *qur'ân* does not function in this way, the term *kitâb* 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'ân itself that posited an identity between the text of the *muṣḥaf* and the *kitâb*, 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 *KITÂB*

Up to this point we have mostly confined ourselves to examining the text of the Qur'ân 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'ân's use of the root *k-t-b* and that in interpreting the word *kitâb* 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'ÂN*

One aspect of the tradition that supports the thesis proposed here is the continued orality of the Qur'ân in Islam even after the adoption of the *muṣḥaf*. This was not solely due to the inadequacy of the script, since the preference for oral preservation and transmission continued even after the Qur'anic script developed all the features

² Holdrege, *Veda and Torah*, 409.

necessary to make possible an accurate recitation straight from the page. Possessing a *muṣḥaf* 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 Qur'ān'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.³ Even what structure there is does not concern itself with context. The Qur'ān 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 Qur'ān seem to reveal an underlying presumption that *kalima* 'word' and *kitāb* are equivalent.

لَوْلَا كِتَابٌ مِنَ اللَّهِ سَبَقَ لَمَسَّكُمْ فِيمَا أَخَذْتُمْ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ

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.⁴ In addition there are credal statements where the proximity of *kitāb* and *kalima* is evident:

³ This, of course, is not unique to the Qur'ān. 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.

⁴ Q 10:19; 11:40, 110; 20:129; 23:27; 37:171; 41:45; 42:14.

فَآمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ النَّبِيِّ الْأُمِّيِّ الَّذِي يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَكَلِمَاتِهِ وَاتَّبِعُوهُ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ

So believe in God and His messenger, the gentile Prophet [or: Prophet to the gentiles], who believes in God and in His words, and follow him so that you may be guided.

Sūrat al-A'rāf 7:158

وَمَرْيَمَ ابْنَتَ عِمْرَانَ الَّتِي أَحْصَيْنَا فَرْجَهَا فَنَفَخْنَا فِيهِ مِنْ رُوحِنَا وَصَدَّقَتْ بِكَلِمَاتِ رَبِّهَا وَكُنْتِ مِنَ الْقَائِمِينَ

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 kutub, and was among those who obey.

Sūrat al-Taḥrīm 66:12

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 Qur'ān seems to use it for the same purpose. Although identified as *kitāb Allāh*, the Qur'ān, 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 former virtually disappeared from Muslim theological discourse except as one (and not by any means the most common) way of introducing a quotation from the Qur'ān: "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 Qur'ān text, even though it occurs in the text only four times.⁵ The burning issues of the relationship of God to his speech, and of that speech to the Qur'ān, 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 *maṣāḥif*⁶—the graphical representation (*rasm*) of speech.

Perhaps the reason for this shift from *kitāb* to *kalām* is that the Qur'ān'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 Qur'ān and its authority, so there was no need for recourse to *kitāb* as a symbol of that

⁵ Q 2:75; 7:144; 9:6; 48:15.

⁶ See 54–55 above.

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.⁷ 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 *kitâb* as composition would have been an unnecessary complication. Underlying the position of those who rejected the orthodox dogma of the uncreated Qur'ân 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 Qur'ân's *kitâb* 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 *kitâb* 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 Qur'ân is recited:

وَأِنْ أَحَدٌ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ اسْتَجَارَكَ فَأَجِرْهُ حَتَّى يَسْمَعَ كَلَامَ اللَّهِ ثُمَّ أَبْلِغْهُ مَأْمَنَهُ ذَلِكَ
بِأَنَّهُمْ قَوْمٌ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

And if anyone of the polytheists seeks refuge with you, give him refuge so that he may hear the speech (kalâm) of God. Then see that he reaches the place where he is secure. That is because they are a people who do not know.

Sûrat al-Tawba 9:6

The preference the tradition shows for *kalâm* over *kitâb* as the primary way to understand the Qur'ân may reflect a sense that the particular way *kitâb* is used in the Qur'ân has more in common with active speech than with finished writing.

ASBÂB AL-NUZÛL AND THE RESPONSIVE NATURE OF THE QUR'ÂN

It has already been noted how the *tafsîr* tradition sought to draw from the biography of the Prophet, or perhaps from the Qur'anic verses themselves, a narrative framework that might provide a context for the revelations—*asbâb al-nuzûl*.⁸

⁷ Wolfson, *Philosophy*, passim; for his discussion of the Qur'ân see 235–303.

⁸ Uri Rubin has contended that, contrary to virtually unanimous Western opinion, the source of *asbâb al-nuzûl* traditions lies in the *sîra* 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. Qur'ân verses were added to these accounts only secondarily, to overcome the objection that the *sîra* relied too heavily on Jewish and Christian sources—the so-called *isrâ'iliyyât*. These were then absorbed into *tafsîr* 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 *asbâb al-nuzûl* in particular, see 226–33.

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 Qur'ân 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*)."⁹ 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 *tafsîr* 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 *kitâb* is a process of writing rather than a bounded, preexisting corpus is the important doctrine of *naskh* 'abrogation'.¹⁰ 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 *muṣḥaf*. Second, they also knew that some verses in the *muṣḥaf* 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 *muṣḥaf* 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 *kitâb* 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-tilâwa wa-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:

⁹ al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân*, 1: 93:

وقال ابن تيمية: معرفة سبب الروايع على فهم الآية، فإن العلم بالمعنى يورث العلم بالمعنى.

¹⁰ Issues of *naskh* are discussed in chapter 1. See the references given there. Here I follow substantially the presentation of Burton in *Collection*, 46–104.

مَا نَنْسَخْ مِنْ آيَةٍ أَوْ نُنسِهَا نَأْتِ بِخَيْرٍ مِنْهَا أَوْ مِثْلَهَا أَلَمْ تَعْلَمْ أَنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

We do not abrogate anything of a verse or cause it to be forgotten, without bringing one better than it or its equal. Do you not know that God determines everything?

Sûrat al-Baqara 2:106

The second type is *naskh al-hukm dûna-l-tilâwa* 'the abrogation of the legal obligation but not of the wording'. When the text as we have it is understood still to contain verses that have been abrogated along with the very verses that abrogated them, then in some ways the *kitâb* becomes a palimpsest. God has, as it were, overwritten the earlier pronouncements, yet their physical traces remain, somehow emptied of their former content or authority. The existence of both *nâsikh* 'abrogating' and *mansûkh* 'abrogated' together in the *muṣḥaf* was one of the explanations given for the Qur'ân's having been sent down piecemeal. It would have made no sense for both to have been revealed at the same time, as al-Qurṭubî pointed out:

Also, it contains both abrogating and abrogated material, so they 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 absurdity for Him to have revealed in a single pronouncement, "do this" and "don't do it."¹¹

Perhaps the most puzzling part of the doctrine is *naskh al-tilâwa dûna-l-hukm* 'the abrogation of the wording but not of the legal obligation'. This effectively means that there are sections of text that have been removed from the bounded corpus yet still participate in the unique authority of the *kitâb*, especially vis-à-vis the prophetic *sunna*. Discussing how a wording could be abrogated without losing legal force, Ghazzâlî makes the point that the wording was not the cause or origin ('illa) of the *hukm* but rather a symbol ('alâma) of it. Since the *hukm* is not dependent on the wording for its authority, it can remain in force even after the wording has been abrogated.¹² The text does not constitute authority but

¹¹ Al-Qurṭubî, *Al-Jâmi* 5, 13: 29:

وفيه ناسخ ومنسوخ، فكأنوا يتعبدون بالشيء إلى وقت يعينه قد علم الله عز وجل فيه الصلاح، ثم ينزل النسخ بعد ذلك؛ فحتم أن ينزل حملة واحدة: افعلوا كذا ولا تفعلوا.

¹² Al-Ghazzâlî, *Kitâb al-mustasfâ min ʿilm al-uṣûl*, (Cairo: al-Maktabat al-Tijâriyyat al-Kubrâ, 1937), 1: 79–80:

(فإن قيل) فإن حار نسخها فليسسخ الحكم معها، لأن الحكم تبع للتلاوة فكيف يبقى الفرع مع نسخ الأصل؟ (قلنا) لا بل التلاوة حكم وانعقاد الصلاة بها حكم آخر، فليس بأصل، وإنما الأصل دلالتها، وليس

merely points to it. Another, related doctrine concerns parts of the Qur'ân whose wording was revealed before they had any legal force, or which were in force before their wording had been revealed.¹³

All three varieties of *naskh*, although developed to deal with slightly different issues in *tafsîr* 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 *kitâb* are not coextensive with the contents of the *muṣḥaf*, nor even with the sum total of the revelations vouchsafed to the Prophet. The *kitâb*, then, is symbol rather than content: it is seen as signifying authority rather than creating or containing it.

THE SUNNA OF THE PROPHET AS *ḤIKMA* AND *TANZÎL*

The question of the relationship of the Qur'ân to the *sunna* brings into focus very clearly the community's instinctive approach to the *kitâb*. We saw in chapter 3 how al-Shâfiʿî established the basis of his legal theory by contending that the Qur'ân commanded obedience to the *sunna*. In support he cited the Qur'anic verse Q 62:2 and its expression *al-kitâb wa-l-ḥikma*, arguing that the *ḥikma* meant the *sunna* and so it too had been sent down by God.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'ân. Al-Shâfiʿî's theory is based on the assumption that God has more to say than could be contained within the limited text of the Qur'ân, that there were other judgments given by God that held the same authority as those contained in the *muṣḥaf*. He could not maintain that they were *kitâb* because he was speaking at a time when the term *kitâb* had already been equated with the *muṣḥaf*. So he posited a second, oral text and claimed authority for it on the basis of a Qur'anic command. Al-Suyûtî comments that Jibrîl was said to descend with the *sunna* the same way he descended with the Qur'ân.¹⁵ Al-Shâfiʿî was in no position at that stage to

في نسخ تلاوتها والحكم بأن الصلاة لا تنعقد بها نسخ لدلالاتها، فكيف من دليل لا يتلى ولا تنعقد به صلاة؟ وهذه الآية دليل لزومها وورودها لا لكونها متلوة في القرآن، والنسخ لا يرفع ورودها ونزولها، ولا يجعلها كأنها غير واردة، بل يلحقها بالوارد الذي لا يتلى. كيف يجوز أن يعدم الدليل ويبقى المدلول؟ فإن الدليل علامة لا علة فإذا دلّ فلا ضرر في انعدامها.

¹³ See, for example, al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân*, 1: 116–18.

¹⁴ See chapter 2. Al-Shâfiʿî does not comment on the meaning of *al-ḥikma* in Q 3:48 where it was taught to Jesus. Commentators quoted by al-Ṭabarî (ad loc.) agree that it is *al-sunna* without further comment. Al-Ṭabarî gives his own opinion: "Al-ḥikma, that is *al-sunna* that was revealed to him apart from *kitâb*." والحكمة وهي السنة التي يوحىها إليه في غير كتاب.

¹⁵ Al-Suyûtî, *al-Itqân*, 1: 128.

claim that the *sunna* text could abrogate rulings from the Qur'ân, 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 *ḥadīth* 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'ân and for the Qur'ân 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'ân be abrogated solely by another [section of the] Qur'ân. Rather it may be abrogated by the word (lit., mouth) of His Messenger by means of an inspiration (*wahy*) that is not Qur'anic 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'ân 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 (*lafẓ manẓûm*) which He has bidden us recite publicly, and which is called Qur'ân. 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'ân 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'ân's elusive *kitāb*. After a critique of the claims of Western scholars that the term *kitāb* signifies the intended writtenness of the Qur'ân, 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'ân'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'ân'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: *ḥukm* 'authority' and *ʿilm* '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'ân'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'ân.

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 *muṣḥaf*; that is, after commentators had begun to say *kitāb* means the Qur'ân. We found that the term *kalām*, though comparatively rare in the Qur'ân, 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'ân's text, but no longer in the tradition. Still, the way the tradition treats the Qur'ân itself shows that it has not lost the sense that the text meant to be responsive and was willing to develop. The Qur'ân 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'ân 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'ân'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

¹⁶ Al-Ghazzālī, *al-Mustasfā*, I: 81.

¹⁷ Mohammed Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam: Common Questions, Uncommon Answers*, ed. and trans. Robert D. Lee (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1994), 42; originally published as *Ouvertures sur l'Islam* (Paris: Grancher, 1989).

APPENDIX

The People of the *Kitâb*

What is often overlooked in discussing the relationship of Islam to earlier religious traditions is that the Qur'ân in effect chooses to define itself in their terms. It simply takes the term *kitâb* for granted, and it recognizes a group or groups of people whose attachment to the *kitâb* 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'ân 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'ân 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'ân 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:

وَاكْتُبْ لَنَا فِي هَذِهِ الدُّنْيَا حَسَنَةً وَفِي الْآخِرَةِ إِنَّا هُدُّنَا إِلَيْكَ قَالَ عَذَابِي بِهٍ مَنْ
أَشَاءُ وَرَحْمَتِي وَسِعَتْ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ فَسَاكُنْهَا لِلَّذِينَ يَتَّقُونَ وَيُؤْتُونَ الزَّكَاةَ وَالَّذِينَ هُمْ

¹ See Rubin, *Eye of the Beholder*, 21-43, and the references given there.

بِآيَاتِنَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ۖ ۥ الَّذِينَ يَتَّبِعُونَ الرَّسُولَ النَّبِيَّ الْأُمِّيَّ الَّذِي يَجِدُونَهُ مَكْتُوبًا عِنْدَهُمْ فِي
التَّوْرَةِ وَالْإِنْجِيلِ

"And write good for us in this world, and also in the hereafter. Surely We have returned to you." [God] said, "I strike with my punishment whomever I will, and my mercy embraces all things. Therefore I shall write it for those who are God-fearing and pay the zakât, and those who believe our âyât ۥ and who follow the messenger, the gentile prophet,² whom they find written in what is already in their possession, in the Tôrâh and the Gospel.

Sûrat al-A^crâf 7:156-57

The claim is even more explicit in Q 61:6:

وَإِذْ قَالَ عِيسَى ابْنُ مَرْيَمَ يَا بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ إِنِّي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ إِلَيْكُمْ مُصَدِّقًا لِمَا بَيْنَ يَدَيَّ
مِنَ التَّوْرَةِ وَمُبَشِّرًا بِرَسُولٍ يَأْتِي مِنْ بَعْدِي اسْمُهُ أَحْمَدُ فَلَمَّا جَاءَهُمْ بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ قَالُوا
هَذَا سِحْرٌ مُبِينٌ

And when Jesus son of Maryam said, "O Sons of Israel! I am the messenger of God to you, confirming what was before me in the Tôrâh and bringing good news of a messenger who will come after me, whose name is aḥmad."³ But when he came to them with clear proofs, they said, "This is clearly just magic."

Sûrat al-Ṣaff 61:6

In this work we have examined textual evidence within the Qur'ân that supports a view of the *kitâb* as process and symbol rather than bounded text and fixed canon. Since the Qur'ân has chosen to define itself in terminology characteristic of the Christians and Jews, we also need to ask whether the view of *kitâb* that has emerged from our reading of the text could conceivably have been gleaned from those groups, or at least have been compatible with their language and practice. Since the Qur'ân explicitly claims for its *kitâb* kinship with those of the earlier groups, then presumably it saw its conception of *kitâb* as compatible with theirs, and the Prophet saw his practice as consonant with theirs. The question in this appendix is whether, on the basis of the available historical evidence, it is plausible to propose that a *kitâb* seen as symbol and process would claim kinship

² *Al-nabî al-ummi*. 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 *ḥ-m-d*, so the clause may simply mean "whose name will be very highly praised." Since the name Muḥammad 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.

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)⁴ used and referred to their scriptures in the way the Qur'ân does to its *kitâb*?

THE CHRISTIANS

It is hardly surprising that Christians should have been called *ahl al-kitâb*. 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.⁵ 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'ân, the Sunna and the Sîra. 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 Muḥammad 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 Monastery of Saint Catherine* (Athens: Ekdotike 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 Weitzman et al., *The Icon* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 5–7; and John Beckwith, *Early Christian and Byzantine Art* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), plates 48, 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 Wa'il a Umm al-Rasas—Kastron Mefaa in Giordania," in *Early Christianity in Context*, ed. F. Manns 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" Baptistery in Ravenna also has sustained use of book imagery. See Otto Feld and Urd 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: Iconografici ed architettonici dei sei primi secoli*, (Roma: Università Gregoriana, 1923), 44–45, figs. 21–22. On the sixth-century bishop's cathedra 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 paleocristiana*, (Città del Vaticano: Pontificio Istituto di Archeologia Cristiana, 2000).

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.⁶ As described by Grossi Gondi, the iconographic code resonates unmistakably with the role of the *kitâb* we have observed in the text of the Qur'ân:

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 creaturae*.⁷

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-kitâb*, why did the importance of the physical book or scroll not carry over into early Islam?⁸ The Qur'ân understands Muḥammad to be a bringer of the *kitâb* in the same way as the earlier messengers were. If Muḥammad had been familiar with the iconography of the *ahl al-kitâb*, then one would expect him to have interpreted the Qur'ân's description of his mission as including the same sort of physical embodiment of the *kitâb* 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

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.

⁸ S. G. F. Brandon has argued that iconography is a potent source of sacred tradition independent of the guidance or authority of a specific sacred text. S. G. F. Brandon, "The Holy Book, the Holy Tradition and the Holy Icon: A Phenomenological Survey," in *Holy Book and Holy Tradition*, ed. F. F. Bruce and E. G. Rupp (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1968), 1–19.

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-kitâb*. This seems unlikely, however, especially since there is no such explicit critique in the Qur'ân, even though the attitude of the other communities toward God's *kitâb* is a matter of constant concern and attention. We are led to conclude, then, that recognition of the Christians as *ahl al-kitâb* 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 Muḥammad identified as *ahl al-kitâb*? 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 Muḥammad's early life, Ibn Ishâq tells of an encounter in Syria with a Christian monk by the name of Bahîrâ, who recognized Muḥammad as the promised prophet and alerted his family to both the blessings and the threats that were to come.⁹ There are numerous versions of this story. Some are used by Christians against Muḥammad, 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 Muḥammad as a prophet.¹⁰ 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 Syrian 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.¹¹

⁹ Ibn Ishâq, *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, trans. Alfred Guillaume (London: Oxford University Press, 1955), 79–81, 90.

¹⁰ Sidney H. Griffith, "The Prophet Muḥammad, His Scripture and His Message, according to the Christian Apologies in Arabic and Syriac from the first Abbasid Century," in *La vie du Prophète Mahomet*, Colloque de Strasbourg, 1980 (Strasbourg, 1983), 99–146. Reprinted in Sidney H. Griffith, *Arabic Christianity in the Monasteries of Ninth-Century Palestine* (London: Variorum, 1992). For a bibliography, see A. Abel, "Bahîrâ," *El* 2.

¹¹ See Arthur Voobus, *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'ān come from Syriac.¹² We have already noted the puzzlement that some of the Qur'anic terminology, including the term *qur'ān* itself, caused later generations.¹³ 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'ān's self-description—*kitāb*, *qur'ān*, *furqān*, *sulṭān*, *āya*, *sūra*—to Syriac/Aramaic. A number of other significant words such as *ṣalāt*, *zakāt* and *kafara* may also have had a similar origin.¹⁴ 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'ān 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 Bahīrā, but also in other accounts in the Prophet's biography, such as the story of the conversion of Salmān the Persian, whose Syrian master had advised him to come in search of Muḥammad, and had told him the marks of prophecy to look for.¹⁵ Al-Wāḥidī preserves a tradition about the Prophet's listening to Christian slaves reciting scripture from memory:

Culture in the Near East, Vol. 3. CSCO, vol. 500, Subsidia t. 81 (Louvain: E. Peeters, 1988), 260–64.

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 learned tongues and so 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'ān” is given by al-Suyūṭī in *al-Itqān*, 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). This probably has little significance for the question under consideration here, since the borrowing would have long predated the emergence of Islam, and the Qur'ān itself attests to a secular use for the verb. For a full account of the origins of writing in the Hījāz, see Abbott, *North Arabic Script*, 5–15.

¹³ John Bowman argues that the Syriac lectionary (*ktābā d-qaryānā*), 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'ān. John Bowman, “Holy Scriptures, Lectionaries and Qur'ān,” in *International Congress for the Study of the Qur'ān*, 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 Debt of Islam,” 200, 213. However, it would be difficult to account for the continued orality of the Qur'ān 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 Isḥāq, *Sīrah*, 95–98.

Husayn has related to us from ‘Ubayd [or ‘Abd] Allāh b. Muslim. He said: We had two Christian slaves from the people of ‘Ayn al-Tamr. . . . They used to recite in their tongue *kutub* they possessed. And the Messenger of God used to pass by them listening to their recitation.¹⁶

The Meccans observed this and then accused Muḥammad of merely repeating what he had heard from these Christians. Al-Wāḥidī claims that this was the occasion for the revelation of Q 16:103:

وَلَقَدْ نَعْلَمُ أَنَّهُمْ يَقُولُونَ إِنَّمَا يُعَلِّمُهُ بَشَرٌ لِّسَانُ الَّذِي يُلْحِدُونَ إِلَيْهِ أَعْجَمِيٌّ وَهَذَا لِسَانٌ عَرَبِيٌّ مُبِينٌ

And We know well that they say, “A human being teaches him.” The speech of the one at whom they falsely hint is foreign, but this is clear Arabic speech.

Sūrat al-Naḥl 16:103

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 Muḥammad have observed in them about what it was to be a people of the *kitāb*? The tradition quoted by Wāḥidī suggests that the Muslims knew Muḥammad 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.¹⁷ 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.”¹⁸ Others managed to recite only a few Psalms in a night

¹⁶ Al-Wāḥidī, *Asbāb nuzūl al-qur'ān* (Cairo: Dar al-Kitāb al-Jadīd, 1969), 288, ad Q 16:103.

¹⁷ See Widengren, *Muhammad, the Apostle*, 127, and the references given there to other European scholars.

¹⁸ Thomas, Bishop of Marga, *The Book of Governors*, ed. E. A. Wallis Budge (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, 1893), 2: 503–4.

because the spiritual consolations that came to them from each phrase interrupted the flow of their reciting.¹⁹

Not everyone carried the practice to such lengths, but in ascetic-mystic literature there is always mention of *mazmôrâ* 'the recitation of the psalms' and *q'ryânâ* '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 (*mâtônâyê d' -qdâm şlibâ*)," or "while you are fasting (*şâ'em*), keeping vigil (*şâhar*), reciting Psalms (*mzamar*), praying (*mşallê*) and making use of genuflections and prostrations."²¹ The Qur'ân may contain a description of precisely this kind of asceticism:

لَيْسُوا سَوَاءً مِنْ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ أُمَّةٌ قَائِمَةٌ يَتْلُونَ آيَاتِ اللَّهِ آنَاءَ اللَّيْلِ وَهُمْ يَسْجُدُونَ || يُمْنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَيَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَيُسَارِعُونَ فِي الْخَيْرَاتِ وَأُولَئِكَ مِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ

They are not all alike. Among the People of the kitâb there is an upright community (umma qâ'ima)²² who recite the âyât 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 Âl-Imrân 3:113-114

Vööbus 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

مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ وَالَّذِينَ مَعَهُ أَشِدَّاءُ عَلَى الْكُفَّارِ رُحَمَاءُ بَيْنَهُمْ تَرَاهُمْ رُكْعًا سَجْدًا يَبْتَغُونَ

¹⁹ Dādīshōr, "Treatise on Solitude," in Alphonse Mingana, ed. and trans., *Early Christian Mystics*. Woodbrooke Studies, vol. 7 (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1934), 139.

²⁰ See, for example, 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: *bnay- (bnât-) q'yâma* 'sons (daughters) of the covenant'? Brock has disputed this translation of *q'yâma*, which is preferred by Vööbus (see Arthur Vööbus, *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 Vööbus, *History of Asceticism*, 2: 291; 3: 263. See Dādīshōr'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.

فَضْلًا مِنَ اللَّهِ وَرِضْوَانًا سِيمَاهُمْ فِي وُجُوهِهِمْ مِنْ أَثَرِ السُّجُودِ ذَلِكَ مَثَلُهُمْ فِي التَّوْرَةِ وَمَثَلُهُمْ فِي الْإِنْجِيلِ كَزَرْعٍ أَخْرَجَ شَطْأَهُ فَآزَرَهُ فَاسْتَغْلَظَ فَاسْتَوَى عَلَى سُوقِهِ يُعْجِبُ الزُّرَّاعَ لِيُغَيِّظَ بِهِمُ الْكُفَّارَ وَعَدَ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ مِنْهُمْ مَغْفِرَةً وَأَجْرًا عَظِيمًا

Muhammad is the messenger of God. And those with him are harsh with the disbelievers and merciful among themselves. You see them bowing and prostrating, seeking grace from God and His pleasure. Their mark is on their foreheads from the traces of prostration. Such is their likeness in the Tawrât and their likeness in the Injîl—like a seed that sends out its shoot and strengthens it and rises firm upon its stalk, delighting the sowers—that through them He might anger the disbelievers. God has promised to those of them who believe and do good works forgiveness and a great reward.

Sûrat al-Fath 48:29

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'ân 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.²⁴ 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

²⁴ John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints*, ed. and trans. E. W. Brooks, *Patrologia Orientalis* 17-19 (Paris, 1923-25). A. Vööbus, ed., *The Synodicon of the West Syrian Tradition*, CSCO, *Scriptores Syri*, tt. 161-64 (Louvain: Secrétariat du CSCO, 1975-76). Also A. Vööbus, ed. and trans., *Syriac and Arabic Documents Regarding Legislation Relative to Syrian Asceticism*, Papers of the Estonian Theological Society in Exile, no. 40 (Stockholm: E.T.S.E., 1960). Also Mingana, *Mystics*.

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 (*ktâbâ*, pl. *ktâbê*). The *ktâbâ* 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 *ktâbâ* certainly finds resonance in the Qur'ân.

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.

ॐ नमो भगवते वासुदेवाय ॥ श्रीगणेशाय नमः ॥ श्रीकृष्णाय नमः ॥
 श्रीगणेशाय नमः ॥ श्रीकृष्णाय नमः ॥ श्रीगणेशाय नमः ॥

³¹ Ephraim the Syrian, *Hymnen de Ieiunio*, vi, 1–3 (CSCO, 246: 16):

[illegible]

Ephraim's sense of the close relationship between the witness of *ktābā* and the witness of the natural world resonates with the *āya* 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 (Šamʿôn Ṭûryâ), who spent his life establishing Christian practice among mountain tribes who identified themselves as Christian and said they had heard about the *ktâbâ* but had never seen it or been taught its contents. Simeon made "tablets for writing" and "wrote" for the children whom he had tonsured. "Within four or five years they learned the Psalms and the Scriptures."³² There are also accounts, however, of teaching the *ktâbê* 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 (*kayrâ*). 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 *teshmeshtâ* 'the liturgy of the hours' and *q^aryânâ* '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 *q^aryânâ*, 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 Abbi attracted comment in John of Ephesus' work precisely because they were a departure from the customary communal *q^aryânâ*.³⁵ Having survived persecutions that destroyed his own monastery, Abbi came to another community of 750 men. He had only rags to wear and a small book of the Gospel (*ktâbâ z^côra d-ângelyôn*) 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

³² John of Ephesus, *Lives*, 17: 228.

³³ John of Ephesus, *Lives*, 17: 89.

³⁴ John of Ephesus, *Lives*, 17: 171.

³⁵ John of Ephesus, *Lives*, 17: 213–20.

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^aryānā*), he would sit alone with his book in the chapel.

Although written rules governing monastic practice often focused on abuses or minutiae, they occasionally give 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 (*shelyā*), however, is preserved by two means: through constant recitation (*aminā*) and prayer (*šlōtā*), or by manual service and meditation (*hōgyā*). . . .

On the subject of *q^aryânâ*, the Apostle, when he wrote to his friend Timothy, said: "Until I come be diligent in reading [*q^aryânâ*; Paul's original is ἀναγνώσει 'public 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 (*atâ* = ar. *âya*) shall be upon your hand and a reminder (*dûkrânâ* = ar. *dhikr*) 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^aryânâ aminâ*) 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 (*ktâbâ qadishâ*) and shall sit down in the place that is reserved and shall meditate (*nethhagi*) 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.³⁶

Meditation (*hōgyō*) 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:

³⁶ Voöbus, *Documents*, 155–61. Here and in what follows, Voöbus' translation has been slightly amended.

On the subject of uninterrupted reading (*qirā'a dā'ima*) 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.³⁷

So important was reading that some of the fathers would not admit the illiterate into the community.³⁸ Yet a number of rules concern monks who obviously did not know how to read: "A monk who knows only one Psalm shall repeat (*nethnê*) it in all the prayers."³⁹ 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 copyist:

A monk who knows the Psalms shall chant (*nezmôr*); the one who has learning shall speak at the time of prayer in the church, or [the one who knows] reading (*q^aryânâ*), [let him be] a writer (*sâṭar*), so that he may not be condemned along with that man who hid his talent in the ground.⁴⁰

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. A 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 them learnt them by heart. Then came

³⁷ Rules of Babai (d. 627) in the Arabic translation of Ibn al-Ṭayyib, *Fiqh al-Naṣrāniyya*, in Voobus, *Documents*, 179.

³⁸ E.g., Dādīshōc: "Every brother who comes to the community shall not be received unless he knows how to read books (*ella en ida c l-meqrē b-ktābē*)." 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 'Abbāsid times (*Documents*, 122), and it is reminiscent of a prophetic *ḥadīth* 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 Rules of Iṣḥōc' bar Nūn (*Documents*, 202, rules 13–14).

⁴⁰ Voobus, *Documents*, 71:

דער דגל ווערענדיגט מיט: מן דאט למ הלפנא נאטו. ברוך ד' אלמחלם במלך. אה פירט
המלך חל נאטו חסד חסד ד' אלמחלם במלך.

The syntax is awkward, but the use of the verb *šar* 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'an in chapter 4.

the present generation, who have written them out and put them into their window seats without using them.⁴¹

Many of the anchorites (*iḥidāyē*) made do without any books. In encouraging the cenobites not to consider themselves unable to undertake the obligatory seven-week period of solitude, Dādishōʿ offers the example of the young woman of Alexandria who went to spend her life in a cave, doing nothing but reciting the Psalms: she “imprisoned herself in the grave of the dead in the desert and was deprived of the consolation of books and of intercourse with human beings.”⁴² The monk undertaking this solitary retreat was not permitted to have his servant read him a chapter of a book through the hole in the door of his cell for this would be a distraction from the real task of his solitude.⁴³

We see a certain fear of the misuse of written scriptures in certain of the canons of the Syriac Church:

None of the monks shall carry sayings (*pethgāmē*) from the *ktābā* to anyone.⁴⁴

It is not lawful for a monk to take sayings (*pethgāmē*) from the Gospel or from David or from the portions called those of the Apostles.⁴⁵

These sayings are obviously not understood as oral, since one of the most important tasks of the monk is to spread the knowledge of the word of God. A monk whose conversation was not peppered with scriptural quotations and allusions was no monk at all. The verbs used in these rules—‘carry’ and ‘take’—seems to indicate that what is prohibited is the giving out of written portions of scripture.

The picture that emerges from these monastic writings is of a culture in which literacy was highly prized for the access it gave to Scripture and also the traditions

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 *ktābā* was the most prized possession. Yet this *ktābā* 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’ *pethgāmē* ‘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 Tōrāh, 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:

وَمَا قَدَرُوا اللَّهَ حَقَّ قَدْرِهِ إِذْ قَالُوا مَا أَنزَلَ اللَّهُ عَلَىٰ بَشَرٍ مِّن شَيْءٍ قُلْ مَن أَنزَلَ الْكِتَابَ الَّذِي جَاءَ بِهِ مُوسَىٰ نُورًا وَهُدًى لِّلنَّاسِ تَجْعَلُونَهُ قَرَاطِيسَ تُبْدُونَهَا وَتُخْفُونَ كَثِيرًا وَعُلِّمْتُم مَّا لَمْ تَعْلَمُوا أَنْتُمْ وَلَا آبَاؤُكُمْ قُلِ اللَّهُ ثُمَّ ذَرْهُمْ فِي خَوْضِهِمْ يَلْعَبُونَ

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

⁴¹ See Douglas Burton-Christie, *The Word in the Desert: Scripture and the Quest for Holiness in Early Christian Monasticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 115–16. Burton-Christie 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.

⁴² Dādishōʿ, “Treatise on Solitude,” in Voobus, *Documents*, 112–13.

⁴³ Dādishōʿ, “Treatise on Solitude,” in Voobus, *Documents*, 85.

⁴⁴ Canon 19 of the Rules of Rabbūlā for the Monks, in Voobus, *Documents*, 31. Voobus translates *pethgāmē* 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 Voobus, *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 *qarāfīs*; 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 Tōrāh 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,⁴⁶ 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 Tōrāh scrolls—then we could reasonably expect to find in Islam a similar phenomenon. Yet it is conspicuously absent. Even though the *kitāb* is at the heart of Islam's self-understanding, the *muṣḥaf* 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'anic 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. Wensinck maintains that there were in Madīna, especially among the tribe of the Banū Qaynuqā', 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,⁴⁷ 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 Tōrāh 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 Ḥijāz 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 Tōrāh 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 *maṣāliḥ* that recorded Qur'anic 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.⁴⁸ However, the important thing to note is that the oral Tōrāh was carefully distinguished from the written Tōrāh as *ha-tōrāh shebe'al peh* 'the Tōrāh 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-kātūb* or *d'-ktīb* 'as it is written'. However much interpretation may have been required to make it serve its halakhic purpose, the written Tōrāh remained the touchstone of the oral Tōrāh and was never dispensed with.⁴⁹ Yet even this *kātūb*, the written Tōrāh, lived a primarily oral life as *miqrā'* '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 Tōrāh 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.⁵⁰

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,

⁴⁸ See J. Weingreen, "Oral Torah and Written Records," in Bruce and Rupp, eds., *Holy Book and Holy Tradition*, 54–67.

⁴⁹ On the question of the supersession of the written Law by the oral, see David Weiss Halivni, *Peshat and Derash: Plain and Applied Meaning in Rabbinic Exegesis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 152–53.

⁵⁰ See Geo Widengren, "Tradition and Literature in Early Judaism and in the Early Church," *Numen* 10 (1963): 81.

⁴⁶ See, for example, al-Ṭabarī's report that the Prophet ordered Zayd b. Ṭhābit to study the books of the Jews because he was afraid that they would change his *kitāb* (*The History of al-Ṭabarī [Tārīkh al-rusul wa-al-muluk]* vol. 7, *The Foundation of the Community*, trans. W. M. Watt and M. V. McDonald, [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987], 167).

⁴⁷ A. J. Wensinck, *Muḥammad and the Jews of Medina*. *Islamkundliche Materialien*, vol. 3, ed. and trans. Wolfgang Behn (Freiburg im Breisgau: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1975), 30–32.

albeit the most authoritative, in a great conversation—that seems to be most clearly reflected in the Qur'ân's conception of *kitâb*. In the Qur'ân, the *kitâb* 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 *kitâb* in effect becomes the sending down of statements to be delivered orally.

Furthermore, the halakhic preoccupations of rabbinic Judaism interpreted the Tôrâh 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 Tôrâh speaks anew and responds in the same way as the Qur'ân: *jawâban li-qawlihim*. The intertwining of oral and written Tôrâh would surely have conveyed to the Muslim observer the impression that what God has sent down (Tôrâh) is not all simply contained in the written corpus, but that the Tôrâh continues to respond.

Thus, even if, as I have suggested, the ritual scrolls of the Tôrâh were not very prominent in the region of Mecca and Madîna, the Prophet and his followers would have perceived that the Jews were a people who held tenaciously to a *kitâb* 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'ân's *kitâb* is all-pervasive, yet still somehow elusive. Even from this brief examination of the two major groups of *ahl al-kitâb*, it is evident that their approaches to their respective scriptures and the Qur'ân's approach to the *kitâb* have a great deal in common. This is to be expected, of course, since the Qur'ân 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'ân 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'ân paints.

However, the Qur'ân shows us one aspect of the Christian and Jewish use of scripture we might not otherwise have known. From the Qur'ân'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'ân and in Islamic ritual, we can infer that whatever scrolls and codices may have been in Madîna were not seen by Muḥammad as conspicuously important, and certainly not as constitutive of the authority of scripture. The Muslims observed in the *ahl al-kitâb* 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-kitâb* before them, that receiving the *kitâb* meant, as Arkoun says, "playing host to the divine-revealing word."⁵¹ Yet they would not initially have learnt from the *ahl al-kitâb* that this word of address had any boundaries, that it could be confined between the folds of a scroll or the covers of a codex. This is perhaps why the Qur'ân's *kitâb* remains so authoritative and definitive, so present and active, yet at the same time so elusive.

⁵¹ Arkoun, *Rethinking Islam*, 42.

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