

The Qur'ān: Text, History and Culture, 6th Biennial Conference on the Qur'ān, 12-14 November 2009, organized by the Centre of Islamic Studies, SOAS, University of London, London-UK

On 12-14 November 2009, the Centre of Islamic Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London, hosted a conference entitled “*The Qur'ān: Text, Interpretation and Translation*”, during which a total of 35 papers were presented in English over eleven sessions. This series, which has been running biennially since 1999, aims to bring together academics from a number of Qur'ān-related disciplines and provide an ongoing forum to investigate the ways in which we read, understand, interpret, debate and represent Qur'anic discourse.

Following an opening address by Professor Muhammad Abdel Haleem (*Director of the Centre of Islamic Studies at SOAS*), who welcomed the speakers and audience, the first panel of the conference, “Structure & Composition”, opened, chaired by Mustansir Mir (*Youngstown State University, Ohio-USA*). Papers presented in this panel included Michel Cuypers's (*Institut Dominicain d'Etudes Orientales, Egypt*) “Semitic Rhetoric as a Key to the Question of Nazm of the Qur'anic Text”, which examined the composition of the Qur'anic text and discussed the rules of semitic rhetoric, which has been rediscovered in the field of biblical studies, and applied these rules to the Qur'anic text. The paper was followed by Ayman al-Desouky's (*SOAS, University of London, UK*) “Nazm, Ijāz, Discontinuous Kerygma: Approaching Qur'anic Voice on the Other Side of the Poetic”, in which he proposes a new approach to the discussion of *nazm* and *ijāz* that emphasizes the force of sacred language at the levels of syntax and metaphoric operations. The panel concluded with Thomas Hoffmann's (*Aarhus University, Denmark*) “From the Chaotic to the Chaordic: Rethinking Chaos and Qur'ān”, in which Hoffman discussed the crucial relevance of chaos in the Qur'ān. At the end of his presentation, he devised the portmanteau word “chaordic” (chaos+order) to call attention to this issue. After a short break, a lunchtime presentation, “Documenting the Textual History of the Qur'ān: The Approach of the Corpus Coranicum Project”, was given by Michael Marx, Hadiya Gurtmann and Jens Sauer (*Brandenburg Academy of Sciences, Germany*). It discussed the approach of the ‘Corpus Coranicum’ Project, which follows the German scholar

Gotthelf Bergsträßer's (1886-1933) methodology in describing the Qurʾanic text in history.

In the second session, chaired by Ayman Shihadeh (SOAS, *University of London, UK*), presentations on the theme of "The Qurʾān and Medieval Philosophy" were given by Peter Adamson (*King's College, London-UK*), Daniel De Smet and Meryem Sebti (*Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, France*), and Heidrun Eichner (*Freie Universität, Berlin-Germany*). In "Abū Bakr al-Rāzī on Prophecy", Peter Adamson focused on Abū Bakr al-Rāzī's views on prophecy. He mentioned that al-Rāzī's position is in fact much more nuanced than it seems. Rather than attacking prophecy as a whole, he attacked schismatic groups within Islam, especially those who endorsed *taqlīd* and denied the efficacy of individual rational reflection. In "Avicenna's Philosophical Approach to the Qurʾān in the Light of His *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*", Daniel De Smet and Meryem Sebti examined Avicenna's *Tafsīr Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ*, comparing the basic principles of his metaphysics (*wājib al-wujūd*, *ṣudūr*, etc.) to the words of the Qurʾān (*huwa*, *Allah*, and *aḥad*), and emphasized the importance of Avicenna's philosophical approach to the Qurʾān. In final presentation, "The Hermeneutics of Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Qurʾān Commentary: A Link between Philosophy and Sufism", Heidrun Eichner surveyed the Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's Qurʾanic commentary based on the notion of *ishbāra* and argued that this Qurʾanic commentary does not only attest to a shared methodological background, which is used in analyzing textual units of the various works comments on, but also establishes an immediate connection on the level of content.

The final session of the day, chaired by Elsaid Badawi (SOAS, *University of London, UK*), was devoted to papers related to "Theological Approaches to the Qurʾān". The panel began with Anthony H. Johns's (*Australian National University, Australia*) "The Transfiguration of the Spoken Word: A Humanistic Approach to *Ijāz*", in which he sought to explore the *ijāz* of the Qurʾān from a different perspective on modes of direct speech occurring in a number of Qurʾanic locutions, including the words of God addressed directly to Muḥammad (pbuh) and those spoken by the varied assembly of actors. Afterward, Abdessamad Belhaj (*Pázmány Péter Catholic University, Hungary*) presented a paper on "Argumentation of the Qurʾān through al-Muzaffar al-Rāzī's *Hujaj al-Qurʾān* and al-Ṭūfī's *ʿAlam al-jadbal*". Ahmad Achtar (*Heythrop College, University of London, UK*) delivered "al-Zamakhsharī's Unique Hermeneutics of Anthropomorphic Verses

in the Qurʾān: *Majāz* Based on *Kināya* and *Takhyīl*". He addressed al-Jurjānī's theory of *majāz* and its relation to the hermeneutical tools used by al-Zamakhsharī, which can be called *majāz* based on *kināya* and *takhyīl*. The first day of panels culminated with Christopher Melchert's (*University of Oxford, UK*) "God Created Adam in His Image", which focused on the historical interpretations of the ḥadīth that "God created Adam in his image".

The second day of the conference started with a session entitled "*Tafsīr*" and chaired by Toby Mayer (*Institute of Ismaili Studies, London-UK*). In "Astrology and *Tafsīr*", Robert Morrison (*Bowdoin College, Brunswick-Australia*) discussed the topic of judicial astrology, predicting future events on the basis of celestial positions, and used the *tafsīr* literature to support this practice. Jamal J. Elias (*University of Pennsylvania, USA*) followed with a paper on "Sufi *Tafsīr* Reconsidered: Exploring the Development of a Genre", in which he explored and challenged the Sufi *tafsīr* on the Qurʾān as a scholarly or literary genre through a direct examination of Sufi *tafsīr* literature from the formative, medieval and early modern periods. The panel closed with Mustansir Mir's (*Youngstown State University, USA*) discussion of "Reading the Qurʾān with the Bible in Mind", which offered an analytical study of Qurʾānic interaction with the Bible and examined historical Muslim scholarly attitudes toward the Bible. The paper also raised and discussed the larger issue of using of the Bible as an aid in Qurʾānic exegesis. The second panel of the morning, chaired by Muhammed Abdel Haleem (*SOAS, University of London, UK*) and again devoted to "*Tafsīr*", included papers from Badri N. Zubir (*International Islamic University, Malaysia*) and Husain Qutbuddin (*Academy of Advanced Studies in South Asian Islam and Arabic, India*). In "al-Sharīf al-Raḍī's Contribution to Qurʾānic Exegesis: An Analysis of *Talkhīs al-bayān fī majāz al-Qurʾān*", Zubir examined the contribution of al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (d. 1015) to the field of *tafsīr* through his work *Talkhīs al-bayān fī majāz al-Qurʾān*. In "Fatimid Legal Hermeneutics: The *Daʿāʾim al-Islām* of al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān (d. 363/974)", Qutbuddin outlined the essential hermeneutical techniques used in the interpretation of the Qurʾān by the eminent Fāṭimī dāʿī and qāḍī al-Nuʿmān b. Muḥammad in his foundational fiqh text, *Daʿāʾim al-Islām*.

The first afternoon session, chaired by Anthony Johns (*Australian National University, Australia*), offered presentations on "Ethics in the Qurʾān". In "Defining Good in the Qurʾān: A Semantic Inquiry in

Qurʾanic Ethics”, Ahmad Z. Obeidat (*McGill University, Canada*), argued for the existence of three value-types in the Qurʾān: authoritarian, utilitarian, and naturalist; he proposed a reconciliatory synthesis way between them, namely, the ethical maxim “act by what gives you life”. In “Islamic Morality in the Making: The Sexual Ethics of the Qurʾān and its Late Antique Context”, Patrick Franke (*Universität Bamberg, Germany*) claimed that a parallel reading of late antique texts (Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian, Manichaean, Pagan etc.) pertaining to sexuality might contribute to a better understanding of Qurʾān verses related to sex, sexuality, and sexual ethics. In “Conceptions of Trust in the Qurʾān: The Case of *Amāna*”, Nora S. Eggen (*University of Oslo, Norway*) focused on *amāna* and the other various notions expressed in the Qurʾān for the concept of trust and pointed out that the concept of *amāna* is a central and intersecting point on trust. The second afternoon session, entitled “The Qurʾān in the Contemporary World”, was chaired by Sebastian Guenther (*University of Göttingen, Germany*). In “Whither Averroism: Does Ibn Rushd’s Interpretation of the Qurʾān Provide the Basis for a Modernist Rereading of Islamic Law?”, A. David K. Owen (*Harvard University, USA*), investigated the claim mentioned in his title and concluded by pointing out Ibn Rushd’s legal writings’ complementary use of philosophical ethics derived from Aristotle and legal norms derived from the Qurʾān. In “A Typology of Contemporary Sunnī Tafsīr: Sources, Methods and Aims of Qurʾanic Commentaries from the Arabic World, Indonesia and Turkey since 1967”, Johanna Pink (*Freie Universität, Berlin-Germany*), developed a typology of contemporary *tafsīr* in different regions and languages of the Islamic world since 1967, exploring similarities and differences between them as well as their political, religious, social and cultural motives. Finally, in “Ḥarakat al-taʾwīl al-niswī li l-Qurʾān wa l-dīn”, Hassan al-Shafei (*University of Cairo, Egypt*) discussed the significance of congruities between lexical elements in the Qurʾanic text on the basis that, in any given utterance, it is expected by the reader or listener that words be interconnected to allow us to arrive at the intended sense.

“Early Manuscripts”, chaired by Abdul-Hakim al-Matroudi, (*SOAS, University of London, UK*), was the main topic of the opening session of the conference’s third and final day. Alain George’s (*University of Edinburgh, UK*) “On Chronology and Provenance in Early Qurʾāns” examined artistic and calligraphic elements as well as regional variations in the early Qurʾān manuscripts. Anne Regourd’s (*The Louvre,*

France) “One More ‘Abbāsīd Qurʾān: IFAO, Edfou 73” focused on a single folio of parchment found in Egypt in the 1920s bearing several Qurʾānic verses, which were identified as belonging to the beginning of the 3rd/9th century. Shannon Wearing’s (*New York University, USA*) “Precious Blood, Sacred Text: The Legacy of the ‘Uthmānic Qurʾān” emphasized the role of the ‘Uthmānic Qurʾān as an emotional and political object and discussed how its codices has been utilized in the practice of Islam.

The session on “Early Qurʾānic Text” was chaired by Mustafa Shah (*SOAS, University of London, UK*). In “The Sanaa Palimpsest: Introductory Remarks to Philological and Literary Aspects”, Asma Helali (*Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, France*) discussed on a project on some of the oldest Qurʾān manuscripts found in Sanaa and underlined its importance for Qurʾānic studies in providing new materials. The presentation included photos of the palimpsest. Afterward, in “The Qurʾān According to Agfa: The Gotthelf-Bergsträsser-Photoarchive of Qurʾānic Manuscripts and the Question of Material Evidence for the Study of the Textual History of the Qurʾān”, Michael Marx (*Brandenburg Academy of Sciences, Germany*) discussed the Gotthelf-Bergsträsser photoarchive of Qurʾānic manuscripts, Gotthelf’s approach to the Qurʾān, and the importance of material evidence in the study of the textual history of the Qurʾān. Finally, in “A Neglected Aspect of the History of the Qurʾān: The *Waqf* Rules and the Redaction of the Qurʾānic Text”, Amr Osman (*Princeton University, USA*) delivered a study demonstrating the significance of *waqf* (pausing or resuming while reciting the Qurʾān) as a form of *tafsīr* and discussed how it could change the meaning.

The afternoon of the third day was devoted to the two panels: “Cultural Expressions”, chaired by Sebastian Guenther (*University of Göttingen, Germany*), and “Literary Perspectives”, chaired by Stefan Sperl (*SOAS, University of London, UK*). In the former, Natalia Viola (*The Islamic Manuscript Association, Cambridge-UK*) opened with “West African Qurʾāns: Codicological Features of the Sūdānī Style”, a paper on the codicological features of the Sūdānī calligraphic style in a selection of images of Qurʾāns dating from the 18th-20th centuries from different countries in West Africa. This was followed by Elsaid Badawi’s (*The American University in Cairo, Egypt*) “Qurʾānic Recitation and Audience Rhythm: The Case of the Egyptian Reciter, Muṣṭafā Ismāʿīl (1905-1978)”, which demonstrated the relation of interdependency between the Qurʾān reciter and audience through the example

of Mustafa Ismāʿīl, one of the greatest Qurʾān reciters of our time, and also included an auditory part. In “The Early American Qurʾān: Islamic Scripture and U.S. Canon”, Jeffrey Einboden, (*Northern Illinois University, USA*) examined the initial receptions, adaptations and translations of the Qurʾān during the American renaissance (1830-1860) and outlined its influence on the US canon as well as American cultural and religious foundations.

In the latter session, Todd Lawson (*University of Toronto, Canada*) gave a paper entitled “The Qurʾān as Epic: A Consideration of Formal and Thematic Elements”, which presented the formal and thematic elements of the Qurʾān as epic. Shawkat Toorawa’s (*Cornell University, USA*) “(Absent) Fathers in the Qurʾān” focused on absence of the fathers of main characters in the Qurʾān, including Noah, Moses, Jesus, Muḥammad and others, and explored what it means in the larger Qurʾānic and Islamic narrative. In “The Fantastic in the Qurʾān: A Structural Approach to Study the Story of Moses and al-Khiḍr (18:60-82)”, Hanadi M. Behairi (*Umm al-Qurā University, Saudi Arabia*) brought the conference to an end with a structural, literary analysis of the fantastic in the story of Moses and al-Khiḍr in the Qurʾān using Tzvetan Todorov’s theory of the fantastic.

Throughout the discussions, participants offered thought-provoking questions and recommendations. There was abundant opportunity for participants to make each other’s acquaintance and share information about their specializations. After the final presentation, Professor Muhammed Abdel Haleem gave the closing speech, in which he thanked the chairs and speakers for their contributions and looked ahead to the next meeting in fall 2011.

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