

Book Review: Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'an

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Book Review

Ma'rifat, Muhammad Hadi (2014). Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'an, transl. Salim Rossier and Mansoor Limba, abridged and introduced by Mohammad Saeed Bahmanpour, Iran: SAMT.

It is difficult to find a comprehensive book in English which addresses the complexity of the study of the Qur'an, including the numerous and sometimes jockeying primary sources, while representing the spirit of traditional Islamic scholarship. While some other books published in the 20th century on this topic prioritize odd theories for the sake of oddity, or the personal preferences of their authors, or simply lack detail, this tightly-packed two-volume series provides a comprehensive overview of the origin, nature, and compilation of the Qur'an which is situated within the overall framework of traditional Islamic thought. An abridged version of *al-Tamhīd fī 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān* by Ayatollah Moḥammad Hādī Ma'rifat, the translation by Salim Rossier and Mansoor Limba is lucid, readable, and reflects a familiarity with the technical language of Islamic scholarship as well as a skill of rendering it comprehensible to the lay reader. Its arguments are bolstered by ample quotations from classical Islamic scholars on the nature and compilation of the Qur'an; these quotations are particularly useful for readers who may not have access to the original texts, due to reasons of language, or who would be overwhelmed at the bulk of classical literature on the topic and are in need of a quick reference work on these topics.

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It presents a sincere reading of hadith and historical texts, while not shying away from critical analysis of the aforementioned texts, either in terms of content or chain of narration. As such, it is particularly useful as a launching pad for further in-depth studies of aspects of the Qur'an, as well as an upper-level textbook.

A helpful introduction by Muhammad Saeed Bahmanpour provides a history and definition of 'Qur'anic sciences', a term which may be unfamiliar to some readers, especially those coming from outside the Islamic tradition. From this, we understand the place of the present work in the context of pre-modern Islamic scholarship. The introduction then embarks upon a detailed but concise overview of the under-discussed topic of early Shi'i contributions to the Qur'anic sciences – a topic, again, which may be new to some readers. Thirdly, it addresses two early Muslim questions about the translation of the Qur'an: would this conflict with the nature of the Qur'an as divine revelation, and what about the loss of beauty, tone, and nuance inevitable during translation? Although the reflections in this section are largely historical, involving matters such as the translation of the Qur'an into Latin, the challenges of translating the Qur'an remain a pertinent discussion today (even if it is unilaterally or near-unilaterally accepted that translation is acceptable.) Fourthly, the introduction reflects on the study of the Qur'an in the West from the mediaeval era until the twentieth century, and the undercurrent of Christian-Muslim polemics, and prejudice. Orientalist views on the origins and integrity of the Qur'an continue to be discussed in the next sections; overall, many readers will find the broad and critical discussion to shed helpful light on the sociopolitical and intellectual contexts of these works.

The introduction is followed by a brief autobiographical foreword on the life of Ayatollah Ma'rifat. This is of interest not only to gain a better understanding of the author, but as an artefact of the traditional scholarly culture of the early modern generations in the shrine cities – how they lived, what they valued, and the customs of the seminary. Although not dwelled upon, the mention of the impact of the political developments in twentieth-century Iraq on the author's scholarly career also adds value to this section as a living history of Shi'a in the past century. This amiable, personal reflection acts as a counterpoint to the more objective discussions of the Qur'anic sciences, which form the bulk of the work, although occasional personal reflections do pepper the core work.

The core text opens with the basics – explanations of the meaning and etymology of the word Qur'ān. This section is distinguished by quotations from the classical scholars Al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī and Aḥmad ibn Fāris,

whose writings are also foundational to the tradition of Qur'anic exegesis. There is then a century-by-century overview of the development of the Qur'anic sciences, expanding on the outline presented in the introduction. It then proceeds to the topic of waḥy (revelation, inspiration), including classical views on the meaning of waḥy and the mechanisms understood by which it occurred. A particularly useful section for readers who have primarily studied scriptures other than the Qur'an is a discussion on the Qur'an as an oral or written text, since sometimes this can be an area of confusion, especially given notions of a 'book' in the contemporary English language. Critical analyses of both ḥadīth describing the revelation and Orientalist views on the revelation distinguish this book from others which merely restate them. Significant discussion is also dedicated to the chronology and locations of the revelation, with a discussion of each sūrah and whether it was revealed in Mecca, Medina, or a combination thereof, based on both ḥadīth/historical evidence and contextual indicators. This is followed by a detailed overview of the concept of the 'reasons for revelation' (asbāb al-nuzūl) and the difference between a sabab al-nuzūl and sha'n al-nuzūl ('background to revelation'). This section is particularly helpful in understanding the challenges and misunderstandings that can surround discussions of the reasons for revelation, particularly among a non-scholarly audience, as well as some of the questions that can arise, such as whether someone who narrated a reason for revelation needed to actually have been present at that time.

These subjects form Chapters I-IV, the bulk of the work. The final chapter, Chapter V, explores the concept of the inimitability (i'jāz) of the Qur'an, an idea fundamental to both the Qur'an and Islamic theology: while the Qur'an itself challenges readers to produce its like, the varying ways that the Qur'an is understood to be eternally inimitable are taken as evidence of its divine origins. While, often, today, this subject is discussed outside of a historical context, this section offers an overview of the development of Muslim thought on the inimitability of the Qur'an during the formative period of Islamic thought, including reference to non-extant works. Many dimensions of the inimitability of the Qur'an are discussed, including eloquence and rhetorical style, which is helpfully illustrated with transliterated examples for the non-Arabic reader who may be appreciating the Qur'an only in translation. Insofar as the contents of the sūrahs can sometimes be puzzling to some modern readers, there is a discussion of the thematic unity of the sūrahs. This is followed by the topic of the scientific inimitability of the Qur'an; the concordance of the Qur'an and science has been of particular interest in the modern world. This section provides both a

general discussion of the topic as well as specific examples, supported by ḥadīth.

While these chapters should provide more than enough for the reader to consider, should the reader's appetite be whetted for more, Volume II contains further discussions of matters pertaining to the Quran, such as an in-depth analysis of the process of compilation of the Qur'an, the concept of the 'seven reciters' (qirā'āt) and 'seven readings' (aḥruf), tafsīr versus ta'wīl, the clear (muḥkam) and ambiguous (mutashābih), and the question of alteration of the Qur'an (taḥrif, which the author resoundingly rejects). Between these two volumes, it is hard to imagine any stone being left unturned with respect to the study of the Qur'an, and this set of volumes is certain to answer any question readers may have about the Qur'anic scripture itself; while, in the curious irony of learning, inspiring more.