Beyond the Written Word

Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion

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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
Cambridge
New York New Rochelle Melbourne Sydney
PART III

"An Arabic Reciting": Qur'ān as Spoken Book

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

-Hadith of the Prophet

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

-Hadith of the Prophet

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

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

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

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

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

CHAPTER 7

Revelation and Recitation

Truly it is a clear Recitation [qu'ān muṣbān] in a written [fixed, prescribed?] Book [kiyāb muṭrāb], which none [may] touch except the purified - a revelation [rūjūs] from the Lord of all beings.

- Qur'an, S. 56.77-80

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

- Qur'an, S. 6.7

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

The Conception of Scripture in Islam

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