

The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life

Ingrid Mattson

Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2008. pages 262.

The resources for instructors dealing with the Qur'an in their courses have improved in recent years with the completion of Jane Dammen McAuliffe's *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* (Brill: 2001-06) and *Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an* (Cambridge University Press: 2006) and Andrew Rippin's *Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an* (Blackwell: 2006). But however useful the collected articles of these works are, new students of the Qur'an often respond more enthusiastically to such narrative approaches as the vignettes in Bruce Lawrence's *The Qur'an: A Biography* (Atlantic Monthly Press: 2007). The more integrated narrative approach of Ingrid Mattson's *The Story of the Qur'an: Its History and Place in Muslim Life* provides a new accessible introduction to the Qur'an and its history. Mattson illuminates the perspectives of believers and critical historical scholarship by telling the story of the continuities and ruptures in the reception, transmission, and interpretation of the Qur'an among diverse communities in changing historical contexts.

Chapter 1 provides an overview of the Qur'an as well as a conventional account of pre-Islamic Arabia and the life of Muhammad. Chapter 2 is an ambitious effort to present the development of the Muslim community during the years of the Qur'an's revelation. It also includes discussion of the hadith literature and sciences as well as analyses of the Qur'an's sound, style, and major themes. The organizing principle of this chapter is occasionally lost in this wealth of information.

The third chapter, concerned with the Qur'an's oral and written transmission, is equally ambitious and the book's greatest success. It surveys Islamic history and traditions as Mattson traces the chain of transmission (*isnād*) of a young American girl who has memorized the Qur'an and received a certificate (*ijāzah*) authorizing her to recite and teach it. Her *isnād* is used to link developments in the Qur'an's codification and early transmission. Readers follow this *isnad* to al-Andalus, through encounters with the Crusaders and the Mongols and on into the Ottoman Empire. Breaks and discontinuities in transmission and tradition are explored as well, including the experience of Muslim slaves in the Americas, the colonization of Muslim lands, and the impact of various technologies.

Chapter 4 presents manifestations of the Qur'an in Muslim lives and cultures. It includes discussion of architecture, conceptions of ritual purity, etiquette for interacting with the Qur'an, and classical theological positions on the Qur'an. The final two chapters deal with the challenges related to understanding of the Qur'an. The fifth chapter, treating intellectual challenges, discusses how the commentary genres, legal hermeneutics, and modern approaches to the Qur'an developed. The sixth chapter does not have a confessional tone; however, its focus on the spiritual challenges for comprehending the Qur'an enables the reader to benefit from the insight of an author who clearly takes such challenges seriously.

The work includes a basic glossary, index of Qur'anic citations, general index, and notes. The bibliography contains both English and Arabic sources essential for further academic study. Mattson has succinctly annotated a separate bibliography of select English translations of the Qur'an. In addition, there are several photographs and a large chart illustrating an *isnād* for the Qur'an's transmission.

Given Mattson's statement that the work grew out of her experience as an instructor and a desire to create an accessible and academically grounded introduction (p. vi), it is not a criticism to note that the book will be most effective in a classroom environment where an instructor can explain the material and guide readers unfamiliar with Islam and its history. However, the length and organization of a few chapters may hinder easy integration of the text into some courses. Each chapter is densely packed with a variety of material that one could present separately. Frequent subheadings mitigate, but do not eliminate, this difficulty. The work is most suited for readers in courses focusing on the Qur'an and Islam, rather than courses where these are secondary foci, or casual readers with no background in Islam.

There are other limitations. In several places one is disappointed not to find a fuller statement of Shi'i perspectives, for instance in the discussion of the methodology of legal exegesis (pp. 206-08) or the conflict between Ali and Mu'awiyah (pp. 179-80). Critical historians may dismiss particular revisionist theories of the Qur'an's formation with good reason, and limiting discussion of this material in an introductory text shows sound editorial judgment. However, one may feel some disappointment that once introduced, Mattson's treatment of revisionist theories is not more thorough in its engagement of more scholars than John Wansbrough. Knowledgeable readers will notice some inconsistencies or errors in the simplified transliterations, while students may be frustrated by belated or missing definitions for a few Arabic terms.

An obvious strength of Mattson's work is her sensitivity to the motivations and assumptions of both believers and historians in their investigations of the Qur'an. She regularly cautions readers about the limitations of source materials and anachronistic attributions of motives to earlier generations. She is forthright, pragmatic, and avoids both polemic and apology as she introduces readers to multiple perspectives. Attentive critical readers may agree or disagree with her presentation of a few issues, such as the centrality of the Prophetic Sunnah in the early community (e.g., p. 21). Nonetheless, the work will serve readers with widely divergent critical orientations, motives, and interests.

Mattson has made a welcome contribution with her accessible approach and balanced presentation of multiple perspectives in *The Story of the Qur'an*. She gives life to the depth and variety of traditions of Muslim engagement with the Qur'an as well as the trauma of ruptures in these traditions before and during the modern period. Simultaneously, she subtly models contemporary interests in exploring fresh possibilities as new questions and perspectives, particularly women's perspectives, are brought to bear on traditional understandings of the Qur'an.

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