

The Exceptional Qur'ān: Flexible and Exceptive Rhetoric in Islam's Holy Book

PISCATAWAY: GORGIAS PRESS, 2021, 344 PAGES.

JOHANNE LOUISE CHRISTIANSEN

Johanne Louise Christiansen's *The Exceptional Qur'ān: Flexible and Exceptive Rhetoric in Islam's Holy Book* offers a lucid study of Qur'ānic exceptions and flexibilities. The book begins with a critical discussion of the Muslim creed. In the Introduction, the author argues that “the exceptive particle *illā* (‘except,’ ‘but,’ or ‘unless’) found in the *Shahādah*, is neither an exception nor a general or absolute denial” (1). However, she claims this exception is false because it is “self-contradictory” and “paradoxical in nature.” This discussion includes a claim that authoritative scholars of the Muslim tradition, such as al-Qurṭubī (d. 671/1272), did not consider such exceptions to be a comprehensive and absolute exception, but rather to represent a categorical proposition or argument. The book consists of seven chapters and an Introduction. In the Introduction, Christiansen highlights the categorical or absolute aspects of exception in the Qur'ān.

The exceptional element of the Qur'ān's language is the book's primary focus. In addition to exceptions, the book also examines dispensations in the Qur'ān's legislative language, such as that found in

Q.24:2-9, 4:7, or 11:12. The author examines dispensations and exemptions that have been granted to the believers, particularly in the cases of victims of oppression. The author calls this category of dispensation an “oppression argument” (2). Regarding the language of exception in the Qur’ān, Christiansen argues that:

The exceptive language of the Qur’ān and its establishment of a balance between principle and dispensation are part of a deliberate strategy articulated in a flexible and adaptive system that can incorporate a wide range of adherents. (13)

Thus, the book aims to provide a comprehensive examination of the exceptive language and the flexibility of the Qur’ān.

The first four chapters of the book provide a philological and semantic analysis of the Qur’ānic text, focusing on exceptive language and legal flexibility. The fifth chapter introduces a discussion of legal aspects of the Hebrew Bible, and considers the Qur’ān’s legal strategies in relation to pre-Qur’ānic sources. This chapter also discusses Holger Zellentin’s understanding of the Qur’ān’s legal culture. The final two chapters include a discussion of semantic analysis and the system theoretical framework advanced by the American anthropologist Roy A. Rappaport (d. 1997). Here, Christiansen examines the exceptive language of the Qur’ān from the vantage point of Rappaport’s theory of systems.

More specifically, the first chapter focuses on the linguistic and textual features of exception and flexibility in the Qur’ān. The chapter examines the Qur’ānic usage of the *illā* and *ghayr*, discussing the occurrences of both words in the Qur’ānic text with the Meccan and Medinan *sūrah*s. Christiansen argues, “*Ghayr* is sometimes declinable, especially when taking a prepositional function as ‘other than’ or ‘unless’” (17). Therefore, *ghayr* is also understood as representing an exception. In addition to being exceptions, *illā* and *ghayr* function as particles, and frequently occur in the Qur’ānic text. For example in Q.7:184 (18), “he is but a plain warner (*in huwa illā nadhīrun mubīn*).” Christiansen states that, both *illā* and *ghayr* are integral parts of semitic languages, especially Arabic, their translation into English language is complicated,

noting that “the particle *illā* holds a natural but double semantic connotation” (19).

Thus, from a grammatical perspective, *illā* can have the connotations of both an absolute or particular exception. The book provides a comprehensive examination of the Qur’ānic text that positions God as an ultimate exception. Christiansen points out that the “Qur’ānic god [God] is an ultimate grammatical *exception*” (20). The “another common Qur’ānic *illā* phrase with a similar meaning is the exhortation not to worship deities other than God: ‘Do not serve anyone *except* God,’ *allā ta’budū illā allahā* (Q.11:26; 2:83; 12:40; 17:23; 41:14; 46:21)” (21). Indeed, the Qur’ānic particles *illā* and *ghayr* are consistently used to indicate the absolute oneness of God, along with the other aspects of His nature. A significant portion of this discussion is dedicated to exceptions from groups, which deal with an individual and or group character. An important distinction is made between an individual and a group of characters in the Qur’ānic text, such as between God and a group of gods (*lā ilāha...*) (24), or between generic associations and a family, or between *Iblīs* and a group of angels or *Jinn*. Similarly, a clear exception is made between the wife of Lot and Noah’s son. The former was “one of those who tarried (*kānat mina l-ghābirīna*)” (24), while the latter was not saved from the flood (Q.11:40; 23:27). Consequently, exceptions from condemnation and pardon are also discussed and analyzed. In this chapter, other linguistic tools such as *dūn* (other than or apart from or to the exclusion of), *hattā* (until, unless as long as or even), *innamā* (only), *min*, *ākhar*, *ba’d*, *ṭā’ifah min*, *fariq min* are discussed in detail with their grammatical usage analyzed.

Chapter two of the book focuses on legal exceptions in the Qur’ān. Christiansen is of the opinion that “a comprehensive study of law in the Qur’ān is still lacking in the field of Qur’ānic studies” (61). Here, Christiansen suggests that “to fully understand the legal and quasi-legal stipulation expressed by the Qur’ān, the law must be defined in the broadest sense” (61). As far as the general exceptional language of the Qur’ān is concerned, Christiansen highlights that this can be expressed through the particles such as “*illā*, *ghayr*, *dūn*, and *hattā*” (63). The chapter also discusses the context of law as it occurs in different walks of life,

whether it be in the realm of social norms, governmental regulations, and family life (e.g., marriage, adultery, proper behavior, matters of belief, ritual, behavior toward others etc.).

Chapter three discusses recurring legal arguments of exception and flexibility in the Qur'ān. Here, Christiansen argues that “the Qur'ān appears to develop a common pool of standardized legal stock phrases and arguments that have to do with *exceptions*” (85). From among these recurring arguments for a legal exception within the Qur'ān, a few references are: “best-manner” (Q.6:152; 17:34;29:46), “what-happened-in-the-past” (Q.2:275; 4:22; 5:95), or the “the duress argument” (Q.2:173: 3:28; 5:3; 6:119). Similarly, chapter four discusses legal hypotheticals that have a dispensatory aim in the Qur'ān. Christiansen examines the dispensatory aims found within different verses and considers their hypothetical implications. For instance, in Q.2:196 that deals with the regulation regarding pilgrimage, the author classifies some of its key aspects as follows:

Fulfill the ḥajj and 'Umrah for God (wa-atimmū l-ḥajja wa-l-'umrata li-llāhi) [command], but if you are prevented (fa-in uḥṣirtum) [hypothetical], [give] whatever offerings are feasible (fa-mā staysara mina l-hadyī) [expiation] (147).

Thus, Christiansen argues:

The verse [Q. 2:196] demonstrates that Qur'ānic legality does not simply entail 'do's and don'ts' but rather that it voices a clear awareness of the complexities involved in fulfilling its rules. Within the very premise of casuistic law lies the notion that it is neither absolute nor categorical. (148)

The book also discusses the aims of Qur'ānic hypotheticals in detail. Christiansen argues that “the Qur'ānic hypotheticals are not only linked to Qur'ānic notions of hardship and ease but also to the notions of the divine testing of humans and their absolute obedience to the law (Q. 5:87; 94:47; 47:31)” (148). Similarly, dispensatory circumstances in

the Qur'ān are also discussed in detail. Christiansen has identified ten key dispensatory circumstances in the Qur'ān: sickness, travel, lack of means, gender, fear, safety, obligation and volition, additional external factors, intent and cognitive factors, hostility, abandonment, and recidivism (152). Chapter five of the book discusses the exceptive language in the Hebrew Bible, dealing primarily with the apodictic and casuistic modes found in that text. Christiansen also makes a comparison between the apodictic and casuistic parts of the Qur'ān and the Bible. For instance, in Ex.21:28-32:

If an ox gores a man or a woman to death, then the ox shall surely be stoned, and its flesh shall not be eaten, but the owner of the ox shall be acquitted.

The above rule has been compared with the blood money mentioned in Q.4:92. Christiansen is of the opinion that “Although the apodictic and casuistic styles is frequent in the legal portions of the Hebrew Bible, the text does not seem to operate with direct *exceptions* to the same degree as found in the Qur'ān” (183). Christiansen also discusses “the Qur'ān as late antique legal culture,” which engages the claims from some Western scholars that the Qur'ān has adopted Biblical stories. However, Christiansen argues that the Qur'ān treats the Biblical traditions differently.

In Chapter six, Christiansen examines “a system theoretical approach to the Qur'ān” and introduces the system theory of Roy A. Rappaport and evaluate the theoretical investigations into the Qur'ānic text. For example, the chapter discusses *sūrat al-muzzamil* (wrapped in a robe), and its style, prose, verse length, form, content, and rhyme from the perspective of a system theoretical framework. In this chapter, Christiansen is discussing a command to the prophet Muḥammad (SAAW) in which he was instructed to spend a portion of night in prayer mentioned in *sūrah* 73 (223) and she argues that “the Qur'ān's negotiation of the vigil, as well as the other ascetic practices, generally demonstrates that the text takes a position in relation to the contemporaneous religious beliefs and practices of Late Antiquity” (223). Lastly, in the seventh chapter,

Christiansen focuses on flexibility in the Qur'ān. She stresses that the Qur'ānic concept of the ultimate God is adaptable and flexible rather than fixed into a particular historical or material context (241). This concluding chapter further demonstrates the exceptions and dispensations discussed in the preceding chapters. It concludes by advancing an important argument that the Qur'ān often does not work in clear-cut dichotomies, but instead applies numerous and complex strategies comprising “loopholes,” exceptions, modifications, dispensations, and ambiguities. From a system theory perspective, this complexity appears to represent a new theoretical framework that requires further exploration and substantiation. To conclude, the book differs markedly from traditional Islamic approaches to the Qur'ān, and represents a comprehensive addition to the academic field of Qur'ānic studies.

AB MAJEED GANAIE
PHD STUDENT
DEPARTMENT OF RELIGIOUS STUDIES
CENTRAL UNIVERSITY OF KASHMIR
JAMMU & KASHMIR, INDIA

doi: 10.35632/ajis.v41i3-4.3257