God Is Beautiful: The Aesthetic Experience of the Qur'an

Navid Kermani, Trans. Tony Crawford
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God is Beautiful is the English translation of a work originally submitted as a doctoral dissertation in Islamic studies at the University of Bonn in 1997 and published as *Gott ist Schön: Das ästhetische Erlebung des Koran* in 1999. Four printings since then attest to its popularity, which stems from its handling of a fascinating topic – Muslims' experience of the Qur'an. This subject has been largely ignored in western scholarship, notable exceptions being art historical investigations of Qur'anic calligraphy and Kristina Nelson's work on Qur'anic recitation. Rather than attempting a historical, linguistic, or grammatical analysis of the Qur'an, Kermani here engages in reader-response criticism to explain how the Qur'an both affected and continues to affect Muslim readers. This work presents itself as an alternative path to the Orientalists'

negative assessments of the Qur'an as an aesthetic text, which implied that Muslims' claims about its beauty were simply the results of bias, devotion, blind adherence to tradition, and imperfect understanding. Kermani divides the discussion into six chapters, each of which investigates the topic from a different angle.

Chapter 1, "The First Listeners," discusses accounts of early reception of the Qur'an, stressing that from the very beginning its appeal was its linguistic beauty as much as the content of its message. He examines, among many others, the famous example Umar ibn al-Khattab's conversion after he heard the beginning of *Sūrat Ṭāhā* (Q. 20) and was enraptured by its beauty and eloquence. The aesthetic experience of the Islamic message was thus inseparable from its theological or religious aspects. Chapter 6, "The Sufi Listeners," makes a similar point by focusing on the reception of the Quran in mystical circles and especially on accounts of *qatlā al-Qur'ān*, figures who, upon hearing certain verses, were so affected emotionally that they died on the spot. Through its linguistic form, the Qur'an has a visceral effect on the hearer that cannot be reduced to the mental reception of doctrine.

Chapter 2, "The Text," considers the Qur'an's poeticity. According to the theories of modern poets and literary critics such as Pablo Neruda or Roman Jakobson, the Qur'an certainly qualifies as a poetic text, but by its own standards this is not the case because the Qur'anic text regards poetry as fundamentally fictional and involving the propagation of falsehoods, whereas the truth of the message is paramount in the Qur'an. In addition, its content is seen as being distinct from the typical themes of poetry. For listeners as well, the text's poetic features are not seen as an end in themselves, but rather as a means to convey and enhance God's message, which remains the focus.

Chapter 3, "The Sound," makes the point that in many passages the Qur'an presents itself as an oral-aural phenomenon, an orally performed text that is received by hearing, and not a written text to be received by reading. Thus, in the Qur'an the verb *qara'a* generally means "recite" and not "read," and it refers to the delivery of the text and not to its reception. The science of Qur'anic recitation similarly emphasizes the primacy of oral performance over written transmission, and Kermani cites the grand mid-twentieth-century Egyptian project to produce the ten well-known readings of the Qur'an, each in their eight sub-traditions, as an indication of the potential of the scripture's oral form to re-establish its superiority over the written form. Kermani stresses a point discussed by European scholars, most notably by Widengren in the 1955 work *The Ascension of the Apostle and the Heavenly Book*, that many

Qur'anic passages suggest that the oral messages derive from a celestial book that exists on another plane, is not tangible, and to which neither the Prophet nor his audience have direct access.

Chapter 4, "The Miracle," focuses on classical theories of the Qur'an's miraculous nature (*i'jāz al-Qur'ān*). It mentions in passing the Mu'tazili theory of *ṣarfah* (turning away), as well as the works of al-Rummani (d. 384/994), al-Khattabi (d. 386/996), and al-Baqillani (d. 403/1013), but focuses primarily on the theory of Abd al-Qahir al-Jurjani (d. 474/1078) in *Dalā'il I'jāz al-Qur'ān*. One of the main points made is that the theory of *i'jāz* is not simply a consequence of the conviction of the Qur'an's superiority that became enshrined in theological doctrine, but rather was influenced from early on by an appreciation for the text's aesthetic aspects and was explicated by al-Jurjani and others in great detail using all of the technical arsenal of the Arabic rhetorical tradition.

Chapter 5, "The Prophet among the Poets," compares prophecy with theories of artistic genius, drawing primarily on modern German romanticism. Kermani makes the important point that Islamic tradition embraces rhetoric and poetic features as perfectly compatible with revelation and, indeed, as present in revelation in a superior form. Rather than working to distance the Prophet from rhetorical ability, and thus bolstering the idea that the text was not in any way his invention and instead came from a divine source, Islamic tradition stressed the Prophet's eloquence and, while maintaining some distinction between prophetic inspiration (*waḥy*) and poetic or mystical inspiration (*ilhām*), admitted that the two were related.

The possible criticisms of this work have more to do with what Kermani does not say than with what he does say. The adoption of reader-response criticism allows the author to focus on the text's reception, and this involves some sidestepping of historical and interpretive problems. For example, his discussion of *tajwīd* is fine, but one still wonders how authentic the tradition is. Was the Qur'an recited in such an elaborate manner during the first few Islamic centuries, in an equally elaborate fashion but one that differed from modern conceptions in particular ways, or in a completely different manner altogether? How did the tradition change over time? How much of recitation practice might one retrieve from classical manuals of recitation or descriptions of actual performances?

At several points Kermani does list poetic elements in the text, including rhyme, and recognizes that the aesthetic experience cannot be separated entirely from the text itself. Nevertheless, the emphasis on reception frees him from having to answer whether there is any discrepancy between what is

objectively present in the text and what is experienced or understood by the audience.

Kermani recognizes that the Qur'an contains elements that may be compared with poetry and *saj'*, the rhymed prose associated with the pre-Islamic soothsayers (*kuhhān*), but he stresses that while the literary features may be similar, their content and function have changed *completely*, thereby rendering the Qur'an categorically unlike the earlier texts. Surviving fragments in the poetry of Umayyah ibn Abi Salt, al-Kalbi's *The Book of Idols*, and other texts suggest that the pre-Islamic Arabs had substantial bodies of *religious* poetry, most of which was probably suppressed because it was too obviously pagan. The imagined completeness of the changes involved in moving from pre-Islamic to Qur'anic modes of expression may thus be exaggerated.

In addition to soothsayers, there were also prophetic figures in pre-Islamic tradition, evident not only in the Qur'anic stories of Hud, Salih, and Shu'ayb, the prophets of 'Ad, Thamud, and Midian, respectively, but also in the record of the "false prophets" who were near contemporaries of the Prophet, the most famous example being that of Musaylimah "the Liar." *Saj'* and of course oratory were used as well to perform religious functions. Certainly, the genres used by the soothsayers were modified and changed, but many of their formal features were preserved intact and their original functions are not entirely lost.

When Kermani claims that "soothsaying" proper is not found in Qur'anic passages that formally resemble the *kāhin*'s pronouncements, this is only partially true. The Qur'an does not predict which tribe will attack first or suggest whether it will be advantageous to travel to Syria for trade this year, but it does present oracular predictions. The obvious modification is that nearly all of the oracular texts in the Qur'an predict the Day of Judgment and the ultimate fate of believers and unbelievers. The most notable exception is the beginning of *Sūrat al-Rūm* (Q. 30), which predicts a Byzantine victory over the Persians in the near future, according even more closely with more conventional understandings of soothsaying.

The author's concern with a German audience is evident in his frequent citations of German literary figures and philosophers such as Heinrich Heine, Goethe, and others. The effect of this, to suggest that discussion of the Qur'an can fit easily into German intellectual and cultural discourse – equivalent, in the American context, to mention of Thomas Jefferson, De Tocqueville, *The Federalist Papers* – may be lost on the American reader and even potentially confusing. The work is written in the style of a rambling essay with a number of digressions and asides that do not move the main argument forward. There

are a number of technical slip-ups, such as *khujja* (evidence) (p. 225), which should be *ḥujja*, or *khaya* for "fear" (p. 236), which should be *khashya*. Nevertheless, it successfully presents a fresh view of the Qur'an, thereby counterbalancing studies that view the Qur'an as a normative text, a source of legal or theological principles, or an ideological battleground. *God is Beautiful* can change readers' perspectives by urging them to look at the Qur'an, the literature that has grown up around it, and its place in society through a different, aesthetic lens.

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