

## Book Reviews

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### **Gott ist schön. Das ästhetische Erleben des Koran**

NAVID KERMANI

München: C.H. Beck, 2000, 548 pp., including notes, bibliography and general index  
ISBN 3 406 46738 5; DM 49.80.

The book under review is a PhD dissertation submitted in 1997 to the Friedrich Wilhelm University of Bonn, Germany. For this outstanding study, the author, Navid Kermani, was awarded the Ernst Bloch Förderpreis 2000.

*God is beautiful:*<sup>1</sup> *Experiencing the Qurʾān aesthetically*, as one could translate the title, is a carefully produced publication that is special in several regards. This volume addresses issues crucial to the understanding of the holy scripture of Muslims; and it provides expert knowledge on Islam in a way that makes reading it a pleasure for specialists in Islamic studies and for non-specialist alike. In more detail, it inquires into the complex and fascinating phenomenon of aesthetics involved when Muslim believers—as individuals and as a community—experience the Qurʾān: by listening to it, reciting or reading it. One aspect much emphasized throughout the book relates to the first generations of Muslims and their almost irresistible attraction to the Qurʾānic text, including feelings of great joy and pleasure, but also emotional reactions so overwhelming and extreme that some hearers of the Qurʾān are even believed to have died as a result of them.

N. Kermani's study 'understands the Qurʾān as a structure: not as a concrete manifestation, but as a system of relations'. In this context, his book describes and analyses 'the relation and attitudes Muslims show towards the Qurʾān, and the importance aesthetics hold in this relationship. Not the work [i.e. the Qurʾān] as such, but its reception by the audience, is the focus. The Qurʾān [itself] is chosen as a central theme only when the question needs to be addressed as to whether the Qurʾān presupposes or, at least, indicates a specific aesthetic manner of its reception.' Along these lines, the author distances himself from 'an approach', as he says, 'which has been prevalent for a long time in western research on the Qurʾān ... [and which] focused on the analysis of what the Qurʾān *is*, and what, for example, its words *mean in reality* ... , and to which genre the Qurʾān belongs, or whether or not the Qurʾān is complete, authentic, defective, ethically acceptable, or well written.' In contrast, Kermani aims at showing "what the Qurʾān is *for* Muslims" (pp. 10–11, italics as in the German original).

What this actually means will become clearer when one looks at the titles of the six chapters of the book. In translation, these are: 1, *The First Hearers*; 2, *The Text*; 3, *The Sound*; 4, *The Miracle*; 5, *The Prophet among the Poets*; and 6, *The Sufis' Listening*. Regrettably, the table of contents does not provide more than these indications. Within each chapter, however, headings separate the largely independent thematic sections. These headings help the reader direct him/herself through this substantial volume of more than 400 pages of main text, followed by almost 120 pages of end-notes, more

than 30 pages of bibliography, plus indices each for suras, proper names and technical terms.

Kermani's book displays the author's profound knowledge in his fields of expertise. It also shows that his research has greatly benefited from the fresh and, in part, trail-blazing approaches of modern scholarship, in disciplines other than Arabic and Islamic studies: such as Jan Assmann's works on collective memory and cultural identity; Umberto Eco's on semiotics; studies in the history of religion, literary criticism, structuralism, the aesthetics of reception, philosophy and linguistics (of Theodor Adorno, Karl Bühler, Johann Georg Hamann, Jan Mukarovsky, etc.). As for Qur'ān studies, the publications of Angelika Neuwirth and Stefan Wild, for example, are more frequently quoted.

Most primary sources of this study are well known: the Qur'ān itself; the literature of prophetic tradition; medieval biographies of the Prophet Muḥammad (such as Ibn Hishām's, Ibn Kathīr's works); medieval Qur'ān commentaries (the *Kashshāf* of the Mu'tazilite scholar al-Zamakhsharī was used extensively; as well as a variety of important works of classical Arabic literature and scholarly writing (of 'Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī, al-Ghazālī, Ibn al-'Arabī, and others). In addition, Kermani makes extensive use of modern Arabic and Persian sources: on the Qur'ān, by scholars such as Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd and Maḥmūd Rāmiyār; and on Arabic poetry, by the poet and literary critic, Nizār Qabbānī.

The variety of topics discussed in Chapter 1, 'The First Hearers', is illustrated by its sub-headings: *Memorized History; Qur'ān and Transmission; Conversion; The Community of Hearers of the Qur'ān; The Powerlessness of the Opponents; The Power of the Word; Excursus on the Magic of Language; Language and Poetry in Ancient Arabian Society.*

Chapter 2, 'The Text', is dedicated to the 'poeticity' of the Qur'ān. It is one of the most original parts of Kermani's study and seems to promote best the general approach the author has taken. Here he studies, as he calls it, *the openness of the Qur'ān* and the relation between *idea and structure*. When asking the question *Is the Qur'ān poetry?*, Kermani addresses an issue that has been the subject of debates since the rise of Islam. However, he clarifies that he does not want to deal—neither here nor in subsequent chapters—with the "Qur'ān's character as art" (*Kunstcharakter*), or its language, style or rhetorical devices *per se*, or its divine beauty in which Muslims believe. Instead, he is interested in the question of *how* the language and style of the Qur'ān, along with the sound of its recitation, have been appreciated throughout the history of Islam (pp. 96–97). Naturally, these observations focus on the experiences of Muslims. Interestingly enough, however, there are also some references to experiences of prominent western writers when encountering the Qur'ān in one way or another.

Thus, in terms of 'the ternary relation between sender (God, Muḥammad), message (Qur'ān), and recipients (the Meccans, Muslims)', Kermani focuses on the latter. He studies the recipients and, more importantly, the question as 'to how and to what extent the Qur'ān actualizes itself as an aesthetic object in the consciousness of its recipients' (p. 97). In such an approach, the *how* of the communication of a message can gain priority over the actual contents of the message. This, in turn, is due to the fact that poetically structured texts commonly do not simply consist of 'information' and 'meaning'. Rather, poetical structuring involves a specific combination of 'language signs' and other, 'non-language references'. The latter are considered as being innate to poetically structured texts, enabling them to eventually refer back to themselves. This virtually means that poetically structured texts 'display the sign as sign'.<sup>2</sup> In effect, it is this complex mechanism which is of particular interest to Kermani, since it helps

stimulate aesthetically the consciousness of consumers or recipients of poetically structured texts.

Given these premises, Kermani suggests that it is reasonable to speak of the Qurʾān as a ‘poetically structured’ text and to approach it as such. He argues that the Qurʾān shows ‘signs’ of parallelism, repetition, metaphor, parable, unexpected inversions, along with sound effects caused by paronomasia, rhythm, semantic peculiarities and tension caused by elements of plot, etc. Although relying much here on modern and post-modern terminology and methodologies (along with relevant studies of poetical passages in the Bible), his reasoning also incorporates well the ideas already advocated by some medieval Muslim scholars who appreciated the Qurʾān—also—for its poetic language. Kermani maintains that the poetic phenomena as apparent in the Qurʾān would make it necessary to advance more emphatically knowledge of the various aesthetic dimensions of Islam’s Holy Scripture. In particular, he draws attention to and meticulously studies (a) the exquisite ways in which the Qurʾān combines the various ‘signs’ of poeticity, and (b) the effects these signs seem to have on the structure, order and ‘composition’ (Arabic: *naẓm*) of the Qurʾānic text as a whole.

In Chapters Three to Six, Kermani elaborates on these and other theoretical parameters when applying them to his research. Chapter 3, ‘The Sound’, deals with the *oral nature (Mündlichkeit) of the scripture, the text as score*, and the passages in the Qurʾān when *God speaks*. Chapter 4, ‘The Miracle’, concentrates on the *Theory of ‘Composition’ (naẓm) of the Qurʾān* as established by ‘Abd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī (d. ca. 1078), the brilliant medieval scholar and literary critic who applied in his work logic along with theories of literary aesthetics and stylistics. Aspects of *The History of Reception of the Qurʾān* are set into perspective when al-Jurjānī’s views on the ‘inimitability’ or ‘wondrous character’ (*iʿjāz*) of the Qurʾān as outlined in his famous *Dalāʾil al-iʿjāz fī l-Qurʾān* are compared with those of another—although more apologetic—classic on the topic: the *Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* by Muhammad ibn al-Ṭayyib al-Bāqillānī (d. 1013). These passages of Kermani’s analysis are most stimulating; they insightfully continue a tradition of research set forth by scholars such as Helmut Ritter who published in 1959 a remarkable German translation of another important work of al-Jurjānī’s, the *Asrār al-balāgha* (‘The Mysteries of Eloquence’); Kamal Abu Deeb who studied ‘Al-Jurjānī’s Theory of Poetic Imagery (1979); and Gustave E. von Grunebaum who published an annotated translation of the parts of al-Bāqillānī’s *Iʿjāz* that deal with poetry (1959). Future research in this regard might also include al-Bāqillānī’s incomplete work *al-Intiṣār li-l-Qurʾān* (‘Siding with the Qurʾān’; ms. Kara Mustafa Pasa, Istanbul; facs edition Frankfurt am Main: Institute for the History of Arabic–Islamic Science, 1986) which deals with the textual integrity of the Qurʾān.

Chapter 5, ‘The Prophet among the Poets’, addresses *The Islamic Prophet and ‘The Aesthetics of Genius’* (the term *Genieästhetik* stands for a concept rooted in ancient Greece, used by German writers and philosophers of the 18th century in reference to an extraordinary person whose creative and artful achievements were perceived as ‘inspired by God’). The book concludes with Chapter 6, ‘The Sufis’ Listening’, with notions on the particular passion, devotion and joy the Qurʾān can inspire Ṣūfīs to experience.

Kermani’s book covers a wide spectrum of the intellectual and religious traditions of Islam. It appears to be like a pool of fresh ideas, many of which can be expected to stimulate further research on the Qurʾān. Most thoughts presented in this study are substantiated by translations of passages drawn from primary sources. Particularly striking (and enjoyable to read) are the many accounts relating events of the first

generations of Muslims. Kermani proves himself here as a gifted writer when he artfully combines these accounts with reflections of individual medieval and modern Muslim and non-Muslim scholars. This enables him to evoke in the reader's mind a most spectacular picture of how Muslims have, or may have, experienced the Qur'ān throughout the centuries. Nonetheless, one should keep in mind that this picture represents, for the most parts, what Muslim 'collective memory' (J. Assmann) of later times has preserved. For readers interested in the history of ideas and historical truth, this aspect of Kermani's approach might be something to be viewed with reservation in this otherwise fascinating book.

Evidently, Kermani does not intend to present a chronological survey of Muslim aesthetics in experiencing their holy scripture; nor does he deal with issues of the reliability of medieval reports as such, or the historicity of events related therein, or the significance of statements quoted from medieval and modern Muslim scholars in terms of the history of ideas. Rather, the author makes prolific use of the information as presented in the sources, from medieval times onwards. For the pursuit of aesthetics, he takes these pieces of information given in the sources basically at face value. Hence, this approach does not inquire into the layers beneath the polished surface which later sources tend to present when it comes to the 'golden age' of an earlier time. Even though the book under discussion focuses on aesthetics, such a methodological decision is, however, rather debatable. It is of particular significance for Chapter 1, which deals with the foundation of Islam, when it presents issues related to the aesthetics of 'The First Hearers' of the Qur'ān. Here, the continuous switches between reports, stories and views of, at times medieval, at others modern, Muslim Arabic and Persian authors (that make this book so remarkably rich and enjoyable otherwise) may create reluctance on the part of some readers to accept Kermani's presentation. This point also relates to an idea reported in medieval and modern sources and, accordingly, much emphasized in this study: the 'most spectacular conversions' to Islam of Meccans and Medinans (p. 37), resulting from life-changing aesthetic encounters with the Qur'ān, described as 'both joy and displeasing feelings' caused 'by the unprecedented strong attraction the recitations of the Qur'ān by the Prophet Muḥammad' and his first adherents had created (p. 110).

Nonetheless, these latter notions are by no means intended to modify the excellent impression N. Kermani's book makes: it is an intelligible and very substantial volume on the Qur'ān and on Muslim aesthetics. This study is particularly welcome, given the challenges the world is facing with people of different beliefs and cultural backgrounds living together and interacting with one another more than ever before. It helps understand Muslim individual spirituality and Islamic belief. It also promotes inter-religious dialogue and may eventually further acceptance and sympathy in the West towards the civilization of Islam.

Sebastian Günther (University of Toronto), Department of Near and Middle Eastern Civilizations, 4 Bancroft Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M5S 1C1.

## Notes

1. Taken from a prophetic tradition: "... *Allāhu jamīlun wa-yuḥibbu l-jamāla* ..."; God is beautiful and likes beauty, cf. *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, no. 91; and *Musnad Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal*, no. 3779.
2. In semiotics, however, it is also stated that signs are connected to words. Words in turn, to have meaning, 'include both atomic units of content and contextual instructions ruling over the word's capacity to enter linguistic segments larger than the sign'. This indicates that the meaning-

generating capacity of the sign is both limited and stabilized in recognizable and understandable form. In other words: for a comprehensive appreciation of the sign, a thorough understanding of the word is needed. Needless to say, it would be a misunderstanding of semiotics to lessen in any way the significance of both philological precision and inquiry into historical truth, cf. Umberto Eco: *Semiotics and the Philosophy of Language*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986, esp. p. 22; and *The Limits of Interpretation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 5, 64–82.

**Of Dishes and Discourse: Classical Arabic Literary Representations of Food**  
GEERT JAN VAN GELDER

Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000, 186 pp.

[published in the United States as *God's Banquet. Food in Classical Arabic Literature*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2000, 186 pp.]

In this short and congenial book Geert Jan van Gelder continues his explorations into some of the byways of classical Arabic literature, already represented by his 1988 study of Arabic invective poetry, *The Bad and the Ugly*, as well as an entire series of articles he has published on selected themes and topoi in various genres of Arabic verse and prose. As always, he here displays an extraordinary control of the entire range of premodern Arabic literature—from pre-Islamic times through the Ottoman period—and the confidence with which he offers his interpretations of the material he discusses is never misplaced: he has an extremely good ear for what the texts are saying, and his elegant translations (sometimes, in the case of poetry, even with rhyme) manage to convey not only the sense but also the charm of the original Arabic.

The study of culinary traditions in the Middle East is a growth industry these days, and van Gelder is fully aware of the burgeoning literature on medieval Arabic cookbooks, the anthropology of Middle Eastern food and so on; but, as he points out, there has been little work to date on Arabic *literary* treatments of food, despite the sheer prodigality of the material available. Every text a specialist would expect to be considered finds its place in this book—from Imru' al-Qays's girls tossing about camel meat 'with fat like fringes of twisted silk' to Badī' al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī's *al-Maqāma al-Maḍīriya* (in which the much-anticipated *maḍīra*—a stew cooked in sour milk—never actually appears) to Ibn Sūdūn's obsession with banana splits; but the banquet also includes such rarities as an early poetic paean to the joys of eating earthworms, scorpions and hedgehogs and a disquisition on the implications of dreaming about cheese. (The American title of the book, *God's Banquet*, is lifted from van Gelder's reference to a Prophetic tradition so describing the Qur'ān.)

Given the actual contours of Arabic literary history, as well as van Gelder's own particular interests, the way he has structured his book seems somehow inevitable. An introductory chapter reviews the relevant scholarship, sets up the links between food and literature (and sex and excrement) to be explored, and defines the author's self-imposed parameters—comparative aspects are not ignored but not emphasized, theoretical considerations are virtually entirely foresworn, 'liquids' (most especially wine) are ruled out as tangential to the central topic. The following two chapters deal with pre-Islamic verse (camel as both mount and food, early recipe poems) and the difference that Islam made in the Arabs' views of food (dietary regulations, fasting, asceticism and, especially—in a literary context—the prominent role of food in the *Kulturkampf* of the Shu'ūbiya, with particular attention to the non-Arabs' disdain for the Bedouin predilection for eating lizards).

