

A Note on Qur'ān Seminar Sessions

The present volume is the product of the Qur'ān Seminar, a project involving 50 discussion sessions, each on a passage of the Qur'ān, which unfolded over the course of five conferences at the University of Notre Dame during the academic year 2012–13. The scholars who participated in the Qur'ān Seminar ultimately produced brief commentaries on a selection of Qur'ānic passages, and these commentaries were edited to form the basis of this book.

The Qur'ān Seminar project is ongoing on the IQSA (International Qur'ānic Studies Association) website (iqsaweb.org, through the members “login”). That website contains many of the commentaries found in this work in an interactive, hypertext format. It also contains the commentaries which emerge from the new Qur'ān Seminar sessions, on additional Qur'ānic passages, which are convened each year at IQSA's North American conference. Thus the number of passages on the Qur'ān Seminar website continues to increase. IQSA's website also allows for the emendation of individual commentaries, and the contribution of new commentaries on earlier passages in a moderated format. Thus new voices and perspectives are regularly added to the Commentary as it moves towards comprehensive coverage of the Qur'ānic text.

At the same time it is our hope that IQSA will not be the exclusive home of the Qur'ān Seminar. It is our conviction that the method of the Qur'ān Seminar is a useful one for the advancement of Qur'ānic Studies, and our hope is that others will establish their own Qur'ān Seminar sessions. In other words, the Qur'ān Seminar is not meant to be an initiative of Notre Dame or of IQSA, so much as a useful method or format for serious scholarly conversation on the Qur'ān to be used freely by others. Here, then, we include some basic guidelines for those who would like to establish their own Qur'ān Seminar sessions.

Qur'ān Seminar sessions involve a roundtable discussion of individual passages of the Qur'ān. As a rule these passages should be brief. Organizers of the sessions should look for segments of the Qur'ānic text that have a certain coherence. However, the selection of passages itself should not be thought of as a scholarly argument; that is, the work of the organizers is not to identify “original” units of the Qur'ānic text, but rather to identify passages of the text which will generate a meaningful discussion. Moreover, organizers should in any case encourage participants to discuss the logic behind the selection of a passage, and to reflect on the passage's relationship to that which precedes and follows it. Such a discussion often proves to be a significant and profitable element of Qur'ān Seminar sessions.

Ultimately the goal of Qur'ān Seminar sessions is to offer students and scholars of the Qur'ān a new encounter with the text. This new encounter is possible above all when standard readings of the text are *not* assumed to be authoritative. Thus Qur'ān Seminar participants should be encouraged not to read the text of the Qur'ān through the lens of classical Islamic tradition (whether *asbāb al-nuzūl* or *nāsikh wa-mansūkh* traditions, or standard interpretations found in *tafsīr*, *ḥadīth*, or lexico-

graphical works). They should also be encouraged not to assume that a proper interpretation has been established by any individual theory, nor to defer to any participant in the session who is known for having studied the passage at hand. These principles are inspired by a practical concern: to promote a collegial setting in which open discussion fosters creative ideas and *all* participants feel a sense of purpose and usefulness in their study of the Qur'ān. They do not reflect a negative judgment of the reasonableness of interpretations found in the classical Islamic tradition, or the cogency of any arguments in the academic tradition.

The structure of individual Qur'ān Seminar sessions is meant to foster this sense of equal engagement. Organizers should dedicate 45–60 minutes for the discussion of each passage, and ask one participant to serve as a presenter/moderator for each session. In advance of the sessions participants should compose a brief commentary (approximately 1–2 paragraphs) on each passage and send them to the organizers (or, as in the case of the Notre Dame Qur'ān Seminar, post them to an online forum). The organizers should integrate the commentaries of all participants into one document for each passage, and distribute this document in advance of the session. This document will help animate discussion and will allow participants to refer to the views of others with precision.

Qur'ān Seminar sessions should always take place in a room with seating in a roundtable format. The Arabic text of the Qur'ān (with or without diacritical points) and a translation of the text might be made available on a screen or integrated into the document with commentaries. The session itself should begin with a brief (5–10 minutes) introduction in which the presenter/moderator offers a reflection on the commentaries on the passage at hand (and *not* on the passage itself). This may involve a description of similar points made by a number of different participants, differences in interpretation among participants, questions raised in the participants' commentaries, or elements of the Qur'ānic passage at hand which do not appear in those commentaries. The point of the introduction is *not* to give a conference paper on the Qur'ānic passage, but rather to present questions or topics that can be taken up in the subsequent discussion.

The rest of the session is dedicated to that discussion, for which the opening presenter acts as a moderator (while also participating in the discussion). During this discussion participants should be encouraged to raise new points and to respond to points made in the introduction or by others during the discussion. The focus of the discussion should always be the Qur'ānic passage at hand. Participants should be encouraged to consider the context of the passage in the Qur'ān and the relation of the passage to other segments of the Qur'ān. Participants might also consider the way in which the passage at hand develops, interprets, or refutes earlier literature or traditions, Biblical or otherwise. In addition they might consider how the evidence of linguistics, grammar, epigraphy, or Qur'ānic manuscripts contributes to our understanding of the passage. References to academic scholarship on these matters are welcome, but such references should be articulated in a way

that encourages conversation and invites response, and not in a way that closes down the conversation.

Participants might also discuss interpretations and traditions of classical Islamic scholarship or *sīra* narratives that are meant to explain the passage at hand. However, classical Muslim exegetes should be thought of as scholars, even colleagues, whose views might inform discussion, and not as authorities who have recorded or remembered the original meaning of the Qur'ān or what things really took place when a passage was revealed. For example, whereas classical exegetes might be quoted for their insight on the meaning of a Qur'ānic term, the idea that a certain passage is “Meccan” or “Medinan” should not be imposed on the group. Participants might argue for such an idea, but their argument should always be based on the text at hand. In other words, there is only one authority in Qur'ān Seminar sessions: the Qur'ān itself, and no other work, whether *ḥadīth*, *tafsīr*, or an academic article.

Finally, organizers should make it clear that the goal of Qur'ān Seminar session is *not* for the participants to reach a consensus. On the contrary, Qur'ān Seminar sessions are meant to be polyvalent (not unlike many classical *tafsīrs*). The goal of these sessions is to encourage creative thinking and the exchange of ideas, and not to reduce these ideas to a definitive explanation. In light of this, Qur'ān Seminar organizers should seek to establish an atmosphere of respectful dialogue, and participants in Qur'ān Seminar sessions should always listen and respond to the observations of others in a spirit of charity.