

title in a previous citing, *Warding off the Masses from Theology*, is recognized as al-Ghazālī's last work, and thus is his final statement on many of the questions of his time, which are—not surprisingly—also the main questions of our time.² This work is exquisitely translated and, for those serious in grounding their faith in the 'Way of the Salaf', it provides clear insights about how to proceed:

The salvation of mankind lies in firm belief in what is true, so that the image of truth is engraved upon their hearts. Then when they die and the veil is lifted, and they see that things are just as they had believed they were, they will not be disgraced and burned by the fire of disappointment and shame first, and by the fire of Hell second. When the image of truth is engraved upon the heart, it does not matter it got there. Whether it was by true proof, formal proof, convincing proof, acceptance based on high opinion of someone, or no more than blind conformity, does not matter. What matters is that the belief is true. If someone believes the truth about God and His Attributes, His Scriptures, His Messengers, and the Last Day, as they really are, then he will be saved, even if this belief is not based on reasoned theological proof. God Most High asks no more of His servants than that.

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Nicolai Sinai: *Key Terms of the Qur'an* • Princeton: Princeton University Press • 2023 • ISBN 978-0691241319.

Key Terms of the Qur'an: A Critical Dictionary could have been a major contribution to the field of academic study of the Qur'ān if Nicolai Sinai had actually produced the content befitting the title; as it is, the grand scheme elaborated in the introductory pages, promising “a historically oriented dictionary of key Qur'ānic terms and phrases”, dissolves into vacuous and tiringly old discussions on whether a certain term has pre-Qur'ānic valence or Biblical precedent. When one digs into the actual content of the *Key Terms*, one finds a well-planned structure of the selected Qur'ānic key terms, but very little content, because the author's actual sources are not the rich ocean of scholarly

2. For a comprehensive study of the manuscript tradition of this work, see, Fiazuddin Shu'ayb, “Al-Ghazzālī's Final Word on Kalām” in *Islam & Science*, Vol. 9 (Winter 2011) No. 2, pp. 151-172; online at https://www.cis-ca.org/_media/pdf/2011/2/A_afwok.pdf, accessed July 24, 2024.

reflection on the key terms of the Qurʾān but watered-down, often petrified stagnant pools of “modern hermeneutical concerns” to which the author has consciously and willingly thrown his grand project (p. xi). Is it because he does not have the facility to read classical Arabic scholarship on the subject (Rāghib, Zarkashī, Zamakhsharī, *et al* for instance) or because he really believes that the shallow waters gathered by the likes of Josef Horovitz are really a wellspring to study the Qurʾānic vocabulary, even if one discounts the “uninviting surface” of “disparaging remarks about Muhammad and the Qurʾān” (p. xii)? It is hard to understand how a twenty-first century scholar of the Qurʾān could show such reverence to a discredited Jewish German orientalist like Josef Horovitz (1874–1931), whose main concern in his academic work was Arabic poetry, rather than the Qurʾān itself, even though one can justify—to some extent—Sinai’s appreciation of Horovitz in reference to his own project because the study of the pre-Islamic Arabic poetry is a *sine qua non* for the study of the Qurʾānic vocabulary and terms, but why would one go to Horovitz for that purpose instead of a Zamakhsharī and a Bayḍawī, who masterfully explain not only the Arabic poetry they cite but also its extension, and in many cases, reversal of the meanings of the poetical usages, when employed in the Qurʾān?

Be that as it may, *Key Terms of the Qurʾān* does lay the foundational framework for a future work on the key terms of the Qurʾān even though it supplies only a scant content for them. It is definitely somewhat more detailed than Mustansir Mir’s 1987 cursory work, *Dictionary of the Qurʾānic Terms and Concepts*, which is acknowledged by Sinai (p. ix) as a precedent for his own work, yet, neither Mir nor Sinai come close to Toshihiko Izutsu (1914–1993) whose ground-breaking works have not been matched by any Western scholar working in this field.

The fact that *Key Terms of the Qurʾān* does not add anything substantial to the scholarship on the Qurʾānic key terms becomes apparent as soon as one compares the content of any key term in Sinai’s work with what Izutsu wrote about the same term. One example would suffice. Both Izutsu and Sinai include the key Qurʾānic term ṣabr in their works. Both devote more or less the same number of words (1285),³ both use pre-Islamic Arabic poetry as a point of departure, but whereas Izutsu’s entry digs deeper into that poetic tradition, provides clear insights into the transference of the concepts from the pre-Qurʾānic usage into the Qurʾānic Weltanschauung, Sinai’s text is sourceless generalization; even the primary English words used are inadequate:

In ancient Arabic poetry, the virtue of steadfastness (*ṣabr*) is the poet-hero’s ability to restrain (*ṣabara*) his vital self (*naḥs*) and unflinchingly to face the manifold dangers and hardships to which he must expose

3. Toshihiko Izutsu, *Ethico-Religious Concept in the Qurʾān* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University, 2002), pp.101-102.

himself (see the material discussed under *nafs*; for a further verse boasting of steadfastness in battle, see Lyall 1918–1924, no. 106:6). Qur’anic residues of this general link between the virtue of steadfastness and mastery of the vital self or *nafs* consist in Q 18:28, where the noun *nafs* is the direct object of transitive *ṣabara*, similar to some poetic verses, and 12:18.83, where Jacob recommends steadfastness as the way to overcome the persuasive promptings (verb: *sawwala*) of one’s *nafs*. Nonetheless, the Meccan surahs exhibit a significant conceptual reconfiguration of the virtue of steadfastness in line with their general emphasis that the believers must patiently await God’s judgement. The Medinan surahs subsequently enrich this largely passive Meccan concept of forbearance with more activist aspects.⁴

Izutsu, on the other hand, translates *ṣabr* as “patience” and adds “steadfastness” and “endurance” as qualifiers and clearly states that

ṣabr was a prominent virtue in desert conditions in the days of Jāhiliyah. It was part of the *shaj’ah*, “courage”, which I have described, or rather it was an essential ingredient of it. In the desert where the conditions of living were so harsh, every man was constantly required to show extraordinary patience and endurance, if only for his mere existence and for the subsistence of his tribe. Physical strength was of course necessary, but it was not enough; it had to be backed up by something coming from within, namely patience, the inflexible determination to stand by one’s cause whatever might happen.

Semantically, the word is the exact opposite of *jaz’* which means the property of those who cannot bear patiently what befalls them and are quick to manifest violent agitation; this implies that *ṣabr* itself means having sufficient strength of soul to remain patient under adversity and suffering and to persevere amidst under all the difficulties in championing one’s own cause. It will be easily seen that *ṣabr* was a representative manly virtue of the warrior on the battlefield. There could be no courage without the virtue of *ṣabr*.

This old nomadic virtue, too, Islām transformed into a one [sic] of its cardinal virtues by furnishing it with a definite religious direction: ‘patience in the way of God’.⁵

Izutsu then goes on to provide examples from the Qur’ān explicating the range of concepts he has mentioned whereas Sinai remains obsessed with his false dichotomy of Meccan-Medinan schema he over-emphasized in his previous edited work, *Unlocking the Medinan Qur’an*,⁶ without providing an

4. P. 464; emphasis added.

5. *Ethico-Religious Concept*, pp. 101-102.

6. See review of this edited work in *The Muslim World Book Review*, 43:2, 2023, pp. 20-22.

over-arching meaning of the term in the Qurʾān.

The *Key Terms of the Qurʾān* is also bereft of any real conceptual content because it does not tap into source material where such material is to be found. It regurgitates nauseating Orientalism; including Sinai's various asides, such as his note with regard to *ghulf*, a usage which for him "provides an important piece of evidence in favour of the broader claim that the Qurʾānic concept of the heart, unlike that of the vital self or *nafs*, shows a significant imprint of Biblical language." (p. xi).

The problem here is not the structure, but the content or its lack—a grand scheme without content is more loathsome for the intellect. One hopes the author's next work will be grounded in real material which is found in real primary sources on the language and sciences of the Qurʾān, centuries before the arrival of Horovitz on the scene. The author would do some good to himself if, instead of grazing all over the empty land, he were to dive into the rich semantic fields of someone like al-Rāghib al-Aṣḥāhānī whose *Mufradāt al-fāz al-Qurʾān* yields dazzling jewels and pearls which are a delight to read. "Ṣabr", Rāghib tells us

means withholding (*imsāk*) with constriction (*ḍiq*), thus, *ṣabartu al-dāba* means, 'I held the animal without giving it food...*ṣabr* is to withhold the *nafs* from something, due to demands of the intellect or religion, *ṣabr* is a well-known word which is given different names with the change of circumstances of its usage, thus, steadfastness of the *nafs* when a calamity strikes is called *ṣabr*; it is the opposite of *jazʿ*, and when used in the context of battles, *ṣabr* is called *shujaʿ* ("valor"), which is the opposite of cowardliness (*jubn*). If [*ṣabr*] is in relation to enduring an accidental calamity, then it is called *raḥb al-ṣadr* (expansiveness of the heart) and its opposite is *al-ḍajār*; if it pertains to withholding speech, it is called *kitmān* whose opposite is *madhal* ("disclosure under coercion"); Allah Most High has named all of these *ṣabr* and used it as [in the following verses]...

This is not to provide a prescription to the author of the *Key Words*; it is via a content-based critique of his work, provided on the hope that the author will look at the constructive solutions being proposed with openness and receptivity; this can lead to an intellectual opening and meaningful scholarly engagement with the Qurʾān.

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