

## *Book Reviews*

### **Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an: Volume Five: Si-Z**

*Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed.*  
*Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006. 576 pages.*

### **Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an: Volume Six: Index**

*Jane Dammen McAuliffe, ed.*  
*Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2006. 860 pages.*

The *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* (hereinafter *EQ*) is a multi-volume collection of reference texts on the holy book of Islam that appeared in western languages from 2001 until 2006. The Qur'an (lit. "the Recitation"), which Muslims believe to be the word of God delivered to Muhammad by the angel Gabriel, is systematically analyzed by the diverse contributing writers according to its different layers.

The different Qur'anic strata embrace numerous themes, among them theology, Islamic jurisprudence, Biblical narratives, primary figures in Islamic history (e.g., the Prophet's Companions and adversaries), historical events, rituals and customs, polemics, and the Qur'an's literary structure and literary language, which combines poetry with rhymed prose. Each level is carefully examined and explored by leading scholars of Islamic studies. Therefore, this work is highly significant for those who wish to learn about the Qur'an's different aspects from a reliable objective source.

Jane Dammen McAuliffe, the general editor, has focused on two parallel spheres: Muslim traditional scholarship and non-Muslim inquisitive research. This approach enables the potential audience to gain Qur'anic knowledge from the scholarship of pious Muslims, although the scientific character of this academic work prevails. The articles vary widely in length and discuss diverse themes. Both Muslim and non-Muslim approaches, as well as traditional Islamic and modern investigative attitudes to the holy text, are introduced. Extensive reference is made to the classical and contemporary Islamic exegetical traditions. Written in English to make the *EQ*

accessible to non Arabic-reading specialists, it has become a most important secondary tool for any Qur'an research. The bibliography at the end of each entry, which cites works in both Arabic and western languages, is useful.

As with the former volumes, the fifth volume maintains the *EQ*'s reputation as a large-scale reference text on various aspects of the Qur'an written in a serious and responsible, yet innovative and broadly accessible, way. The entries are very comprehensible, and the list of contributing scholars given at the volume's end is quite impressive.

One popular theme discussed in the fifth volume is Ruth Roded's "Women and the Qur'an" (pp. 523-40), which is divided into spiritual equality, symbolic weakness and social reality, legal material relating to women and gender, female characters in Qur'anic narratives, and women's scholarship and feminist readings of the Qur'an. As intended in the concept of the *EQ*, this entry offers the reader insights into both traditional Islamic attitudes toward women as well as such novel trends in the contemporary Muslim world as feminism in Islam and gender studies in the light of the Qur'an.

An additional woman-related topic is Mona Siddiqui's article on the veil (pp. 412-16), an issue lying at the heart of the ongoing open and controversial debates in the Muslim world and the West. In Europe, for example, the heated debate over the legitimacy of wearing the veil as an external symbol of religious conviction remains unresolved. Siddiqui reviews the veil in the light of Islamic religious literature (viz., the Qur'an, Qur'an commentaries, and the hadiths) and portrays the current state of affairs concerning it.

A third example is Binyamin Abrahamov's essay on "World" (pp. 551-54), a brief yet thorough survey of the various meanings of this word in the Qur'an: the whole physical world, Earth, one's lifetime in this world, the world to come, and its division into Paradise and Hell. Again, the contributor covers all relevant aspects of the theme referring to the different theological attitudes toward the world (traditionalist vs. rationalist theologians) based on the diverse lingual usages of *world* in the Qur'an.

Volume 6, the index for the entire encyclopaedia, integrates the alphabetically arranged entries of articles about the contents of the Qur'an according to the list of authors, articles, proper names, Arabic words and phrases, and Qur'anic citations. Although these various indexes are exceedingly detailed, locating a specific word is not necessarily undemanding. For example, proper names appear sometimes in English and sometimes in Arabic, which is quite awkward and often confusing. Thus, someone looking for *Nasara* will not be able to find it, for it appears under "Christian[s]" and in

brackets. In addition, the mosque al-Aqsa not found under “mosque,” but under “al-masjid al-Aqsa” (under the letter “ma”). However, the index of Arabic words and phrases is comfortable, since the listings are alphabetized by the Arabic trilateral root only. The index can be purchased separately.

On the whole, this small critique notwithstanding, the *EQ* is highly recommended for inquiries on Qur’an-relevant topics. Next to the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, the *EQ* is of major importance for both non-specialists as well as specialists in the field of Islamic studies.

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### **The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran**

*Christoph Luxenberg*  
*Berlin: Hans Schiler, 2007. 349 pages.*

Christoph Luxenberg’s (a pseudonym) highly controversial book, now available in English, has caused some to see in him an important ally in the war against Osama bin Laden and others to shake his book off as “orientalism.” There has been, in English at least, little substantive reporting on the actual arguments advanced. I will try to present a critical review of the main contentions and types of arguments Luxenberg offers in support.

This book has two theses: one brazen and sweeping, the other a collection of specific arguments and analyses. The sweeping thesis is that the Qur’an was originally a lectionary, a collection of texts from the Hebrew and Christian Bibles to be read out loud (p. 104). It was set down in Karshuni, a form of Syriac written in Arabic characters; however, the Qur’an employed an alphabet more primitive than the one now in use. In particular, diacritical dots were lacking. Given this double bind, so to speak, its first students had great difficulty understanding the text, particularly insofar as they mistakenly took it to be written in Arabic. Hence the large amount of significant misreadings, the individual reinterpretations of which collectively form what I call the book’s second thesis.

This is clearly not a book that will convince the faithful. But even if one sets aside one’s personal beliefs, some major problems emerge. For example, who was responsible for establishing the Qur’anic text? A key role is