This book attempts to supply a historically oriented dictionary of key Qur’anic terms and phrases: I start with Qur’anic words and seek to grasp the concepts they denote and ultimately also to reconstruct the theology—which in this context means a certain vision of God, humans, and the cosmos—that arises from the interlacing of these concepts. The qualifier “historically oriented” is meant to signal that the book’s interest is in establishing, however hypothetically, what a given Qur’anic term would have meant to the Qur’an’s earliest recipients in early seventh-century western Arabia.

The book grew out of preliminary work towards a commentary on Surahs 1–3 that was undertaken in the framework of the research project Qur’anic Commentary: An Integrative Paradigm (QuCIP), funded by the European Research Council under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement no. 771047). As I discovered much more swiftly than I would have liked, a commentary volume of the sort I had in mind needed to include or be supplemented by an examination of a considerable number of frequently recurrent and theologically pivotal Qur’anic words, such as → āyah (meaning a natural or historical “sign” of God), → kitāb (“scripture”), or → ittaqā (“to be wary,” namely, of God). After initially attempting to meet this objective through a glossary of key terms, a self-standing book eventually imposed itself as the more appropriate format. For unlike ordinary dictionaries, I do not simply offer a certain number of approximate English equivalents of a given Arabic word. Rather, the entries that follow provide a discursive and, as per the book’s subtitle, “critical” account of how a particular Qur’anic word or phrase semantically functions in various scriptural contexts, and attempt to extract important aspects of Qur’anic theology that are bound up with the terms in question. In pursuing this objective, I work through diverse bodies of philological data and argue for or against a great number of interpretive claims, engaging with as much relevant prior scholarship as I have managed to track down and process. The dictionary’s entries therefore take the form of more or less concise scholarly essays on a certain word or group of words. This basic structure bears a certain resemblance to Mustansir Mir’s 1987 Dictionary of Qur’anic Terms and Concepts, although I have permitted myself to write at far greater length, reflecting the significant progress that the study of the Qur’an has made over the past thirty-five years.

As explained in more detail in the introduction, the dictionary’s basic approach is “concordantial,” which is to say that it aims to survey the way, or ways, in which a certain term or phrase is used across the entire Qur’anic corpus. This is essentially to practise what Muslim scholars have termed tafsīr al-quṭrān bi-l-quṭrān, “interpreting the Qur’an by means of the Qur’an.” In addition, and in contrast to the dictionary by Mir just mentioned, most of my entries cultivate a close interest in the connections between Qur’anic language and other textual corpora whose diction and content may be viewed as having had currency, in some shape or form, in the Qur’an’s historical milieu. These corpora principally include the Bible,
Christian and rabbinic texts, pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, \(^1\) and Arabian epigraphy. I hope that my interest in identifying, where possible, close extra-Qur’anic parallels and precursors for the words and phrases I discuss will not come across as reductionist source-mongering, since I am concerned with ascertaining difference as much as similarity.\(^2\)

As just noted, this is not a dictionary of the usual kind, which for Qur’anic Arabic has been superbly compiled by Arne Ambros (CDKA; see also Badawi and Abdel Haleem 2008). As a result, I have not felt obliged to produce an entry on every Qur’anic word, which would have turned this work into a multi-volume series. My general policy has been to concentrate on words and phrases that I deemed to carry significant theological, anthropological, or cosmological weight and that occur at least several times across different Qur’anic surahs, in many cases dozens or hundreds of times. For instance, the word → āyah, which designates sundry “signs” of God’s power and benevolence in nature and history but can also refer to textual units of the Qur’an, figures in more than 350 verses. Another example, of obvious theological significance, is → allāh, “God,” with almost 2,700 occurrences. Many other words that are extremely common are however omitted, such as the prepositions min and fī or the negator lā, all of which figure more than a thousand times. While my overarching preoccupation is with words that play a significant role in articulating the Qur’anic vision of God, humans, and creation at large, I have in some cases included entries on expressions that give rise to more narrowly linguistic problems if these have wider interpretative ramifications. Examples are → la’alla (“so that,” “perhaps”) and the demonstratives → dhālika and tilka (“that”). Even so, the present volume is silent on large parts of Qur’anic vocabulary. Other words are treated only in passing, in entries with which they are cross-referenced. Thus, the verbs hawiya and ishtahā (“to desire”) are briefly discussed under other headings, such as → nafs, signifying the human “soul” or vital self, which the Qur’an presents as the wellspring of desires and appetites.

Despite my two guiding considerations of theological significance and frequency, the decision of which words and phrases to include has often been a subjective one. For instance, there is no entry on the verb “to say” (qāla). Admittedly, it has an abundance of occurrences, often precedes momentous statements attributed to the Qur’an’s opponents or historical protagonists, and also plays an important literary role in the way the Qur’an demarcates the voice of its divine speaker from that of its human conveyer, God’s “Messenger,” as well as the way in which the Qur’an stages debates between the Messenger and his audience (Ashraf 2018; HCI 12–14). But it seems to me that all of these matters are

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1 On using reputedly pre-Islamic poetry in order to shed light on the Qur’an in a manner that minimises the danger of relying on fabricated material, see Sinai 2019b, 19–26 (with further references). For reasons of space, the present work will usually reference relevant poetic verses that are potentially pre-Islamic without seeking to come to a considered verdict on their authenticity.

2 For instance, with regard to Qur’anic verses affirming that God “sets a seal upon” the hearts of unbelievers I conclude that no meaningful antecedent has so far been identified in which the metaphor of heart-sealing is employed in the same sense as in the Qur’an (→ khatama). Another Qur’anic phrase that is hitherto unprecedented is the category of the “scripture-owners” (→ āhl al-kitāb), an umbrella term for Jews and Christians. Two further likely cases of Qur’anic conceptual innovation—and not, as some previous scholarship would have it (e.g., NB 23–25), of misunderstanding—are the application of the term → firqān, “salvation, deliverance,” to divine revelations and the Qur’anic reception of the rabbinic concept of God’s “dwelling” or presence in the world (Hebrew: shākinah), which is reconfigured as a divinely conferred sense of inward composure and tranquillity, denoted by Arabic → sakīnah. Of course, one does well to remember the chestnut that absence of evidence is not evidence of absence: it is not impossible that seemingly unparalleled Qur’anic concepts or phrases nonetheless emerged prior to the Qur’an and that the latter is simply the earliest extant text documenting them.
more suitably dealt with in other formats of scholarly writing than a dictionary. Despite the criterion of frequency, I do cover some infrequent words closely bound up with other terms that more obviously meet my two conditions for inclusion. For example, the plural adjective → ghulf (“wrapped in foreskins” or “uncircumcised”) appears only in Q 2:88 and 4:155 but forms an important tessera in the Qur’an’s discourse about the human heart, thus complementing my entry on → qalb, “heart.” It also provides an important piece of evidence in favour of the broader claim that the Qur’anic concept of the heart, unlike that of the vital self or → nafs, shows a significant imprint of Biblical language.

The Qur’an furnishes the multiple strands of post-Qur’anic Islam with a distinctive and partially unifying lexicon (see already GMK 46), even though the component terms of this lexicon do of course undergo significant semantic development over time, in addition to exhibiting important synchronic differences between various authors, disciplines, and schools of thought. Some of the entries in this dictionary could, I imagine, usefully serve as the chronologically first stratum in a conceptual history of fundamental Islamic terms like islām (“self-surrender” or “self-dedication,” namely, to God), shirk (the illicit “association” of other beings with God), nafs (designating the human “soul” or “vital self”), or jihād (“contending” on behalf of God). Nonetheless, this book has no ambition to undertake a longitudinal study of the rich and absorbing post-Qur’anic reception history of the words discussed. This has not, however, prevented me from making limited use of premodern Islamic scholarship, such as a number of well-known Qur’anic commentaries, where this seemed helpful in elucidating the range of meanings that Qur’anic terms would have conveyed to the Qur’an’s initial addressees. The way I relate to premodern scriptural scholarship, in other words, is to treat it like “secondary literature,” as Patricia Crone once put it (QP xv). Indeed, against those tempted to dismiss traditional Islamic sources as largely irrelevant or even detrimental to the historical-critical study of the Qur’an, I would emphatically insist that practitioners of the latter are well advised to engage, albeit selectively and critically, with the sophisticated heritage of Islamic scriptural learning (see also Sinai 2017c, 104–105). This is vividly illustrated by Q 6:91, discussed in an excursus under → ashraka below. In the now dominant Ḥafṣ ‘an ‘Āṣim reading of the Qur’an, this verse anomalously implies that the Qur’an’s pagan opponents recognised and transmitted the Bible. The puzzling anomaly disappears, however, if one gives preference to a textual variant transmitted in Islamic sources that turns a string of second-person verbs into the third person while leaving the text’s consonantal skeleton or rasm unchanged. Paying attention to the text-critical achievements of premodern Muslim scholarship thus helps dispel an ostensibly intractable interpretive problem.

I am therefore quite keen to avoid giving the indefensible impression that serious philological work on the Qur’an did not exist before the nineteenth century. I have tried to throw this point into occasional relief by acknowledging, at several junctures, views of premodern authors that remain pertinent for historical-critical research. A disadvantage of this approach is that it leads me to present only isolated snapshots from the Islamic tradition that happen to agree with my own culturally contingent sense of what is interpretively plausible. I can understand why some might frown upon what could be perceived as a wilful subjection of premodern scriptural scholarship to modern hermeneutical concerns. But this is precisely what treating premodern Islamic exegesis as secondary literature rather than as a primary object of study boils down to in practice; and while I would agree that the hermeneutical agenda of classical exegetes like al-Ṭabarī or al-Zamaksharī deserves careful
historical description in its own right, I also believe that the questions asked by modern historical-critical students of the Islamic scripture—e.g., what is the meaning of a given Qur’anic term, what was the putative historical context of a certain passage or surah, does a given surah include material dating to different periods?—have meaningful overlap with the interpretive concerns of their precolonial forebears, whose views therefore command attention. In fact, it is very likely that the premodern scholarly tradition would have had much more to offer than the present book is able to convey, if only I had permitted myself to spend more time looking. The best excuse I can proffer for having fallen short is that this work is already bursting at the seams.

I am conscious that my concern to foreground the need for a judicious measure of critical engagement with traditional Islamic scholarship is bound to be diluted by a concurrent effort, namely, my attempt to benefit from older European research that has tended to suffer from undeserved neglect or mere token acknowledgement, especially German scholarship of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Just like premodern Islamic works, such “Orientalist” publications can be punctuated by assertions that many contemporary scholars would be hesitant to repeat, such as a casual sense of European cultural superiority or naively disparaging remarks about Muhammad and the Qur’an. But as with premodern scholarship in Arabic, it is usually worth a contemporary researcher’s while to try to excavate the genuine philological and interpretive insights underneath the occasionally uninviting surface. As one particularly imposing figure among early Western scholars of the Qur’an, I would single out Josef Horovitz (d. 1931; see, e.g., Goitein 1935, Conrad 2002, Jäger 2008, and Johnston-Bloom 2018). His treatment of many of the Qur’anic terms also covered in the present book balances sensitivity to inner-Qur’anic usage with due attention to relevant Jewish and Christian precedents and, crucially, early Arabic poetry. In many respects, his ground-breaking work still forms a model of scholarly thoroughness and sound judgement, and the fact that Horovitz’s academic legacy was stymied, displaced, and dispersed in the wake of World War II and the Holocaust constituted a major setback for the modern study of the Qur’an. Fittingly, Horovitz is also the ultimate stimulator behind the concordance of pre-Islamic poetry that has served me as an important resource (Arazi and Masalha 1999; see ibid., 7).

Another obvious and more recent source of inspiration is Toshihiko Izutsu (d. 1993; see Albayrak 2012). Izutsu, on whom the introduction has more to say, pioneered the analysis of Qur’anic “semantic fields” in light of pre-Islamic poetry. He also placed a generally welcome emphasis on the Qur’an’s reworking and reshaping of existing concepts. Arguably, Izutsu showed less interest than one might today wish in the fact that by the Qur’an’s time Arabic had for centuries rubbed shoulders with various forms of Aramaic and other ancient languages (but see GMK 106–119). As noted at several junctures in the present volume, it is possible or even likely that many of the Qur’an’s “ethico-religious concepts,” as Izutsu calls them, were coined by pre-Islamic Arabophone Christians and Jews and then radiated outward into syncretistically minded pagan (i.e., not self-avowedly Jewish or Christian) circles. A prime illustration for this is the verb → šallā, whose Qur’anic meaning “to pray” is sufficiently attested in early Arabic poetry in order to permit the confident claim that the word was already employed by pre-Qur’anic Jews and Christians, undoubtedly under the influence of its Aramaic cognate. Hence, some of the semantic differences between the language of pre-Islamic poetry and that of the Qur’an—such as the fact that the Qur’an employs the verb → kafara for unbelief in or “repudiation”
of God and his revelatory signs, rather than only in the sense of treating someone with ingratitude—may well be due to the fact that Qur’anic Arabic is continuous with registers and types of Arabic that are only incompletely reflected by pre-Islamic poetry. But such quibbles aside, the questions asked by Izutsu and some of the ways in which he set about answering them are clearly foundational for the present work.

A final set of remarks, before closing this preface with a series of due acknowledgements, concerns the historical background assumptions that I bring to bear on the Qur’anic text. In line with previous publications of mine (especially HCI 40–77), I am reasonably optimistic that the Qur’anic corpus is by and large explicable within the broad parameters of the traditional Islamic narrative of origins, with some modifications and shorn of the profuse anecdotal, and often unverifiable, detail supplied by post-Qur’anic Islamic sources (see in more detail the synthesis in Sinai, forthcoming a). This means that I am content to approach the Qur’anic corpus as having emerged in early seventh-century Mecca and Medina and during the life of a charismatic preacher called Muhammad, though I would not a priori rule out the possibility that specific Qur’anic passages underwent a degree of early post-prophetic editing and expansion (see HCI 52–54 and under → bayyana as well as the somewhat similar model in Tesei 2019). I recognise that certain features of the Qur’an jar with the portrayal of its environment in the Islamic tradition and also with the present state of our archaeological and other historical knowledge. In particular, as Guillaume Dye and Tommaso Tesei have pointed out, the Qur’an’s extensive adaptation of Christian traditions and narratives sits somewhat uneasily with the lack of evidence for organised Christian communities in the immediate milieu in which the Qur’an’s genesis is supposed to have unfolded (Dye 2019, 772–776; Tesei 2021, 188–189). However, seeing that in the early seventh century the Ḥijāz had effectively become encircled by Christian centres in Najrān, in Ethiopia, in the northern borderlands of the Arabian Peninsula, and on the Gulf coast (e.g., Munt 2015, 252–253), I am not sufficiently unsettled by the dissonance just noted in order to be tempted to jettison the conventional paradigm of the Qur’an’s gestation—for instance, by decoupling extensive sections of the Qur’anic corpus from the career of Muhammad and his Ḥijāzī context (thus Dye 2019, 784, and Tesei 2021, 189). I also adhere to a fairly conventional, though not undisputed, understanding of the Qur’an’s internal chronology, as a unilinear diachronic sequence leading from the Meccan surahs to

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3 Sometimes pre-Islamic poetry may nonetheless contain valuable vestiges of such Jewish and Christian usage. Apart from the case of ǧallā, “to pray,” see, e.g., the poetic formula bi-hamdi llāhi and variants, whose likely link to Christian doxologies is briefly discussed in Sinai 2019b, 62.

4 The fact that some fundamental religious terms in Qur’anic Arabic have their most immediate ancestors in Classical Ethiopic—including → al-infil (meaning the Gospel or the Christian Bible), → al-hawāriyyān (denoting the apostles of Christ; see under → rasūl), fāṭir (“creator”; → khalaqa), and probably also → al-shaytān (“the devil”) and → jahannam (“hell”)—certainly coheres very well with the supposition that the manifold Christian traditions found in the Qur’an passed through western Arabia. To previous arguments in favour of a Ḥijāzī origin of the Qur’an, one may now add van Putten’s detailed contention that the Qur’an’s canonical rasm tends to display morphological and phonological features that are associated with Ḥijāzī Arabic, such as the loss of the glottal stop or hamzah (van Putten 2022, 99–149). It must be conceded that our understanding of the idiosyncrasies of Ḥijāzī Arabic is often dependent on information supplied by Muslim scholars, who may at least on occasion have derived their understanding of Ḥijāzī Arabic from the Qur’anic text, even if one would also expect statements about dialectal features to have been to some degree controlled by common linguistic knowledge. But the possibility of circular inference does not apply to the elision of glottal stops, since in the post-Qur’anic Islamic tradition the Qur’an was usually recited with hamzahs (van Putten 2022, 150–181).
the Medinan ones, the point of transition from Meccan to Medinan being the “emigration” or hijrah of Muhammad and his followers (HCI 111–137). In any case, while I would maintain that the hypothesis of a late closure of the Qur’an in the second half of the seventh century is bedevilled by severe explanatory challenges (see under → jāhada), it is not a primary concern of the present work to show that the scenario of the Qur’an’s genesis just intimated is true or superior to alternative models, even though I have on a few occasions allowed myself to comment on related matters (apart from the remarks under → jāhada, see also under → ard ḍānd the final section under → ḥitāb). In general, I trust that when I speak of Muhammad as a historical actor, of Mecca and Medina as historically concrete sites of his activity, and of Meccan and Medinan surahs, then more sceptically inclined readers will know to make appropriate subtractions from my statements in line with their own historiographical temperament. I would be equally pleased if something equivalent turned out to be possible for those Muslim readers who feel that my approach to the Islamic tradition is excessively, rather than insufficiently, sceptical.

As I have tried to signal, I am not dogmatically opposed to the hypothesis of a late closure of the Qur’anic corpus; I merely think that the hypothesis has so far run an explanatory budget deficit (but see, again, the careful argument for limited mid-seventh-century additions to the Qur’an in Tesei 2019). I am, however, convinced that the division of the Qur’an into the three principal groups of surahs and passages to which I appeal—early Meccan, later Meccan, and Medinan—is capable of being justified in terms immanent to the text itself, such as style, lexicon, and distinctive theological positions, and that such a subdivision accordingly does not require much faith in the historical accuracy of the early Islamic historical record. For instance, features permitting one to draw a fairly confident boundary between the Meccan and Medinan layers of the Qur’anic corpus include divergent conceptions of divine punishment, a Medinan turn towards militant activism, and different understandings of Muhammad’s prophetic role (Marshall 1999, 117–185; Sinai 2015–2016; Sinai 2018a; Durie 2018, 47–103; O’Connor 2022; Sinai 2022a). Hence, those who are wary of the geographical and historiographical implications that undeniably inhere in the traditional classifiers “Meccan” and “Medinan” may well opt to speak of “pre-transitional” and “post-transitional” surahs, like Mark Durie, but should nonetheless find it possible to accept that the scope of both textual groups is broadly similar to what is presupposed by me. Similarly, Tommaso Tesei has recently analysed a corpus of Qur’anic texts consisting in a majority of the early Meccan surahs as defined by Theodor Nöldeke (Tesei 2021). While Tesei sees promise in a non-standard account of the Qur’an’s origins and proposes to limit the proclamations delivered by Muhammad himself to the cluster of texts studied by him, he agrees at least that this group of texts is stylistically and thematically coherent, and also that it forms the earliest layer of the Qur’an. This inspires some hope that Nöldekan talk of early Meccan surahs will to a considerable degree turn out to be translatable into an analytic idiom with different historical background assumptions. Given such alignment in the ways in which the Qur’anic corpus is partitioned into smaller textual groups, I am hopeful that the following attempts to ascertain the meaning of Qur’anic terms and thereby to track the contours of Qur’anic theology have value even for scholars who dispute some of my own historical and chronological views.

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