

Women, war and hypocrites: studying the Qur'an, by Robert A. Campbell, Sydney, Cape Breton University Press, 2010, x + 234 pp., £12.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-1-897009-53-6

Continuing from his 2009 *Reading the Qur'an in English*, the aim of this fascinating book is to provide first-time readers of English-language translations of the Qur'an with some degree of guidance to the fourth chapter – *Sūrat al-Nisā'* (Women). This is a bold undertaking in which, happily, Campbell is largely successful. The book covers topics such as marriage and lewdness, and also – as the title suggest – war and the Hypocrites. Campbell also touches on the crucifixion of Jesus. His main argument is that there is a degree of coherence and continuity in the text that is often under-appreciated or misunderstood. He reminds readers that the three principal objectives of the Qur'an are to convey the message of monotheism, to provide spiritual guidance and judgment, and to inform ethical behavior. Certainly, whilst there is no grand list of directives akin to the Ten Commandments of the Bible (although six of them are present in the Qur'an nonetheless), as a recitation the Qur'an provides its own meanings found within the text (although not necessarily in an esoteric, 'hidden' or Sufi fashion, as is often assumed).

Many non-Muslim or Western readers of the Qur'an in translation would probably agree with the late Professor Alfred Guillaume, who observed that 'the arrangement of the text is arbitrary and haphazard' (1954, p. 58). Campbell avers the opposite: there is an inherent structure (thematic and/or concatenational) that is often difficult even for scholars to detect or pinpoint, but which is present nevertheless. Study of the linguistic resonance and rhythm will lead to a great understating of the significance of the Qur'an which remains, after all, primarily an aural and oral experience. Campbell asserts: 'I see absolutely no benefit in ever reading the Qur'an from the so-called beginning to the end – in fact I would suggest that the very concepts of beginning and end apply to the Qur'an in only a limited manner' (p. 31).

A large part of the book explores the 'Beating Verse' (Q 4.34), which would appear to grant divine sanction to domestic abuse. Considering that the Qur'an devotes a great deal of attention to the social issue of the status of women, Campbell devotes some time to examining the opinions of various scholars, particularly modern and Western-educated (whether Muslim or non-Muslim), on the subject. He concludes that: 'The historical and contemporary exegetical interpretations ... display a range of approaches and opinions that raise as many questions as they provide answers' (p. 117). He suggests the real problem lies in fact with the 'logical fallacy of the loaded question' (p. 118) and asks whether the query itself – as to whether Qur'an permits wife beating – is flawed and rests on fundamentally faulty presuppositions. Campbell states that we should really be asking about the circumstances in which a man may still beat his wife. The crux of the matter, which still leaves modern Western readers feeling very uneasy, lies in the historical sociological context of the issue, coupled with the complex parallel thematic structures of and in the Sura itself.

I suspect many readers will regard the philological emphasis on English language translations and a deliberate paucity of attention to qur'anic Arabic words disappointing. For example, Campbell energetically discusses the expression 'if you fear' in Sura 4, linking verses 3 and 34, and yet does not articulate exactly what the Arabic expression is. Furthermore, the constant reference to and quotation of a veritable horde of other scholars can disrupt the flow of the text, and may distract the reader from the point the author is trying to convey. Campbell is rather heavily reliant upon Muhammad Abdel Haleem's 1999 translation of the Qur'an, together with his commentaries. I note with some surprise the omission of any reference to W. Montgomery Watt's *Companion to the Qur'an* (1967). However, anyone who quotes Anton Chekov in *obiter dicta* explaining the Qur'an

deserves quite some measure of respect and any new contribution to increase comprehension of the Qur'an is definitely welcome. Campbell's book certainly makes compelling reading for anyone wishing to expand their knowledge of Islam. This book will be an asset, especially to novice English-speaking readers of the Qur'an in translation.

References

- 1. Guillaume, A. 1954. *Islam*. Hammondsworth, UK: Penguin
- 2. Watt, W.M. 1967. *Companion to the Qur'an*. London: George Allen and Unwin