

BOOK(S)

KITĀB, KUTUB, ŞUHUF

This article comprises the following sections: i. Definitions, Morphology, Usage: *kitāb*, *imām*, *zubur*; *asfār*, *şuhuf*, *qirtās*, *sijill*; ii. The Twenty-Three Meanings of *Kitāb*; iii. The Book as Inimitable (*Muʿjiz*); iv. Bibliography.

Definitions, Morphology, Usage

Books are a major theme of the Qurʾān, which uses seven nouns to refer to them: *kitāb* (x232) and its plural *kutub* (x6); *imām* (x4, plural *aʿimma*); *zubur* (x7, singular *zabūr*); *asfār* (x1, singular *sifr*); *şuhuf* (x8, singular *şahifa*); *qirtās* and its plural *qarātīs* (x1 each); and *sijill* (x1).

Kitāb

The root *k-t-b* denotes gathering up and collating, whence the infinitive nouns (i) *katb* for “sewing together two pieces of leather and, by convention, joining together letters with calligraphy” (Rāghib, *sub k-t-b*; cf. al-Shahrastānī, *Mafātīḥ* 1:128)—the latter meaning specifically synonymous with “copying” (*naskh*) (al-ʿAskarī, *Furūq* p. 290, Bāb 28); (ii) *katiba*, “batallion” (Farāhidī, *sub k-t-b*); and (iii) *kitāb(a)*, which refers to the act of writing (see PEN AND WRITING) and to any written record or literal scripture, whether of a few words or of book length. The latter is also used metonymically in the sense of a categorical religious obligation or *fard* (Ibn Fāris, *sub k-t-b*; Saraqustī, *Afʿāl* 2:151; e.g. Q 2:183) and the Divine Decree (*q.v.*) (Ibn Kathīr, *sub Q* 57:22; Ibn ʿAshūr, *sub Q* 9:36) among other meanings which are detailed below.

Imām

The noun *imām* stems—like *umm*, *ummī*, and *umma*—from the root ²*-m-m* of which the verb *amma* means (i) to be in a forward position and lead (*taqaddama*); (ii) to head somewhere (*qaṣada*); and (iii) to bring someone (*amma-l-rajula: shajjahu maʿmūmatan*) (Saraqustī, *Afʿāl* 1:82). In the Qurʾān, *imām* denotes a human leader (Q 2:124; 9:12[pl]; 21:73[pl]; 25:74; 28:5[pl], 41, 32:24[pl]), a book (Q 11:17; 17:71; 36:12; 46:12; see below, section on *kitāb* as the complete record of one’s deeds), or a road (Q 15:79), hence it is defined as “that by which one is led, whether a human being in speech and deed, or a book, or other than that, whether rightly or in falsehood” (Rāghib, cf. Fayrūzābādī). Thus, like a road, an *imām* is a book meant to lead down a path of guidance. The term was notably used in the literal

sense of “guiding book” by the third Rightly-Guided Caliph, ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān (d. 35/656)—Allah be well-pleased with him—in the historic speech in which he urged the Companions (*q.v.*) to compile the Qurʾān as a standardized codex: “In my view you all differ and misspeak (*takhtalifūn wa-talḥanūn*). Those far from me in the various city centers differ the most and misspeak the worst. So, gather together, O Companions of Muḥammad, and write down an *Imām* for the people!” (Ibn Abī Dāwūd, *Maṣāḥif* 1:203-204 §74; supported by other similar reports, cf. Ibn Ḥajar, *Faḍāʾil al-Qurʾān*, jamʿ al-Qurʾān). Indeed, that textual archetype and master *muṣḥaf* became universally known as *al-Muṣḥaf al-Imām*.

Zubur

Zubur is the plural of the noun *zabūr*, book, from the root *z-b-r* of which the verb *zabara* denotes the act of writing (Ibn Fāris). As a proper noun *Zabūr* refers to the Book of the Prophet Dāwūd—upon him peace (*q.v.*) (Rāghib). *Zubur* is variously glossed by al-Zamakhsharī (467-538/1074-1143) as (i) “the Leaves” (*al-şuhuf*) in the verse *indeed other Messengers before you were belied who came with clear proofs, and the Zubur, and the Illuminating Book* (Q 3:184); (ii) “various Books” (*kutuban mukhtalifa*) in reference to the many religious sects in the verse *but they split their affairs into pieces* (*zubur*), *each rejoicing in their own* (Q 23:53); (iii) the entirety of heavenly Books before the Qurʾān in the verse *Truly it is in the Scriptures of the ancients* (Q 26:196, also 54:43), synonymously with the *earlier şuhuf* (Q 20:133); and (iv) “the chronicles of the recorders” (*dawāwīm al-ḥafaẓa*) in the verse *Everything they do is noted in their records* (Q 54:52).

Asfār

Asfār occurs in the sense of books only once in the Qurʾān (Q 62:5)—as the plural noun of *sifr*—and refers to “huge tomes” according to al-Farrāʾ (*Maʿānī al-Qurʾān* 3:155, *sub Q* 62:5), of which the writers are called the *safara*, another Qurʾānic term: *In the hands of scribes* (Q 80:15). The same word also serves as the plural of *safar*, “travel” (cf. Q 4:43 among others), both stemming from the verb *safara* which means to uncover and clear, respectively because a book is meant to uncover the truth and a traveler has cleared the place from which he left (Rāghib, *sub s-f-r*). Al-ʿIrāqī (725-806/1325-1404) exploited this duality with “perfect paronomasia” (*jinās tamm*) in the title of his work documenting the hadiths in *Iḥyāʾ ʿulūm al-Dīn, al-Mughnī ʿan ḥaml al-asfār fīl-asfār* (The Exempter from the Travails of Bearing Tomes while on Travels).