

BOOK REVIEW:

QUR'ANIC COVENANTS: AN INTRODUCTION

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Ahmer Bilal Soofi's *Qur'anic Covenants: An Introduction* offers an exploration of the Qur'an through the lens of legal and contractual obligations, presenting an intricate relationship between the divine and humans. Soofi, a distinguished international lawyer, takes an innovative approach by presenting the Qur'an not just as a religious text but also as a legal document establishing covenants between Allah and His creation. The covenant framework, as outlined in the book, is a model that highlights how compliance with legal and moral duties can be encouraged at various levels—personal, societal, and international. The essence of this framework is to remind individuals and the State that their legal duties, whether at the local or international level, are coupled with moral and religious obligations, which are deeply ingrained in the Qur'anic teachings. This moral duty permeates through multiple facets of society, as the Qur'an consistently emphasises upholding covenants. This framework bridges the gap between religious obligations and legal duties, providing a fresh perspective on how believers and societies should govern themselves.

Agreements and contracts normatively govern the relationship at the individual, State, societal and global levels. The concept of the 'covenant' ensures bilateralism where both parties wilfully agree to certain actions or inactions, thus creating an enabling environment of voluntariness in good faith. There is an extensive body of literature and a rich tradition of scholarship available on the Old and New Testaments discussing Christian covenant theology, but very little literature addressing the concept of

covenants in the Qur'an. Most of the available literature on covenants in the Qur'an revolves around the primordial covenant, commonly referred to as the 'covenant of *Alastu*', which is made between God and all of humanity before the beginning of creation.¹

The book offers a unique perspective on the idea of covenants in the Qur'an – a lesser-explored dimension of the Qur'an. While much of the literature on the Qur'an has focused on Islamic legal rules (*shariah*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and moral codes, Soofi argues that covenants, both explicit and implicit, form the backbone of the Qur'anic message.² He draws parallels between modern legal contracts and the Qur'an, applying a legal lens to understand the text of the Qur'an. According to Soofi's thesis, there is a direct contractual relationship between Allah and human beings – what he calls a 'covenant'.³ To establish this claim, Soofi presents a very broad definition of the 'covenant', encompassing representations and warranties, unilateral declarations, standing offers and even statements made with the intent to be binding. He posits that such agreements do not require formal documentation but can be established through the mutual conduct of the parties.⁴ His definition establishes a legal framework between the believer and God, where the believer is expected to make course corrections in their conduct through the exercise of free will. Moreover, his definition emphasises the significance of the individual within the broader contract and promotes an appreciation of bilateralism in the covenant.

Soofi broadly categorises covenants into two groups: covenants 'within' the Qur'an (those explicitly mentioned in the text) and covenants 'under' the Qur'an (those that derive from its principles). Covenants in the first group

¹ Qur'an 7:172

² Ahmer Bilal Soofi, *Qur'anic Covenants: An Introduction* (2nd edition 2024) 14

³ Soofi (n 2) 16 'It includes not only formal agreements but also orally agreed understandings and implied covenants. It also includes representations and warranties, unilateral assertions or declarations, standing offers, and even assertions made with the intent to be bound by the same. The designation of such an agreement as a contract, covenant, or treaty indication in the Qur'an itself that upon the acceptance of a specific condition or assertion, the performance of a particular act, or upon the exercise of restraint to act in a certain manner, there will follow in the jurisdiction hereafter,¹⁵ as a matter of certainty, some reward or consequence including punishment that is mentioned either in general or specific terms in the Qur'an. The covenant stands formed once a person does any of the above in consideration¹⁶ of a gain as promised by Allah, whether the consideration is material or not.'

⁴ Soofi (n 2) 15.

are extracted and expounded from the Qur'anic text, encompassing both explicit⁵ and implicit covenants.⁶ The second group consists of private contracts, legislative covenants and treaties, among others. This perspective presents a distinctive understanding of the obligations that arise from the recognition of such covenants within and under the Qur'an, establishing a personal and direct contractual relationship between Allah and His creation, free from any external intervention.

He also makes an interesting comparison to the *shariah*, suggesting that if an individual complies with *shariah* in order to seek of rewards of the hereafter, this transaction will concurrently take the form of a covenant. His central thesis posits that understanding the Qur'an as a covenant would not only influence religious obligations but also offer insights into legal and policy frameworks in Islamic societies. The book's legalistic approach is particularly useful in modern contexts, where debates on governance, State laws, and international relations often intersect with religious principles. Soofi argues that recognising these covenants can influence everything from personal behaviour to global diplomacy, suggesting that adherence to the covenants found within and under the Qur'an has far-reaching implications for both individuals and States.

The book is methodically organised, beginning with a definition of a covenant and its applicability to the Qur'an. The book is structured in a way that allows readers to build their understanding progressively, with each chapter providing new insights into the nature of covenants in the Qur'an. The accessible writing style ensures that even readers unfamiliar with legal scholarship can grasp the significance of the covenants Soofi discusses.

Soofi highlights the legal underpinnings of these covenants by referencing Islamic legal traditions and the works of respected Islamic scholars while also citing examples from international law. This dual approach enhances the reader's understanding of how these covenants are meant to be applied in modern-day scenarios, whether in personal conduct or international relations. This structured approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the

⁵ Primordial covenant, covenant of Salat, Allah's Covenants with Prophets as His Attorneys and Envoys, Covenant of 'You remember Me. I Remember You'

⁶ Covenant of Access, Covenant of Communication, Covenant to Gain Worldly Knowledge

subject matter. Despite the complexity of the subject matter, Soofi's writing is clear and accessible. He successfully breaks down intricate legal and religious concepts, making them accessible to a broad audience. His use of legal terminology, combined with traditional Islamic scholarship, creates a balanced narrative that bridges both fields without alienating readers from either background.

One of the book's standout features is its ability to combine traditional Islamic scholarship with modern legal principles. Soofi adeptly applies legal terminology such as unilateral undertakings, representations,⁷ and warranties⁸ to explain the nature of the Qur'anic covenants. This approach not only makes the book accessible to legal scholars but also provides religious scholars with a new lens through which they can appreciate understanding the Qur'an. The most significant earlier study, *The Idea of the Divine Covenant in the Qur'an* by Robert Carter Darnell, and the *Higher Objectives (Maqāṣid) of Covenants in Islam: A Content Analysis of 'Abd and Mithāq in the Qur'an* by Halim Rane focuses on describing covenants more objectively.

In contrast, Soofi's work explores the covenants as legal relationships between the Creator and creation by exploring both explicit and implicit covenants in the text of the Qur'an. His work offers a unique perspective on obligations arising from covenants in the Qur'an, presenting them as Allah's offer within the covenantal framework of the text. In the earlier articles, covenants were conceptualised based on the main Qur'ānic covenantal terms 'abd and mithāq, or their work was the description of the types of covenants mentioned in the Qur'an. However, Soofi expounds covenants through *quid pro quo* statements in the Qur'an, drawing his conceptualisation from the overall structure of the text.

The book's strengths are in its thorough analysis of the Qur'anic text, which is supported by both traditional scholarship and modern legal theory. Soofi's

⁷ A representation, 'A presentation of fact – either by words or by conduct – made to induce someone to act, esp. to enter into a contract.'

⁸ A warranty, 'An express or implied promise that something in furtherance of the contract is guaranteed by one of the contracting parties; esp., a seller's promise that the thing being sold is as represented or promised.'

detailed breakdown of different types of covenants and their implications provides an important idea: compliance with law, particularly Islamic law, is not enforced through coercion but rather through the free will of both parties, as seen in contracts. The book presents the idea that various types of agreements, such as representations, warranties, and unilateral understandings, are all inherently bilateral when viewed as covenants. However, the work would have benefited from a thorough examination of each covenant, how these covenants become bilateral, and how they interact with modern constitutional frameworks in Muslim countries.

In conclusion, *Qur'anic Covenants: An Introduction* is a commendable contribution to the field of Islamic and Qur'anic studies which shines due to its straightforward explanation of the concepts. Soofi's meticulous research and clear presentation make this book a must-read for anyone interested in the intersection of law, religion, and society. The author tried to reconcile traditional Qur'anic Studies with modern legal scholarship by emphasising the sanctity of contracts as a foundational aspect of faith in Islam. By positioning the Qur'an as a guide for both spiritual and worldly matters, Soofi encourages readers to see the relevance of Islamic teachings in contemporary legal and societal contexts. This book is particularly timely in an age where questions about the role of religion in governance and law are more pertinent than ever. It challenges believers to internalise their religious obligations as binding covenants and offers a legal framework that has the potential to influence both personal behaviour and international relations.