AL-SHAJARAH
ISTAC Journal of Islamic Thought & Civilisation
Vol. 31, No.1 (2026): 225–232

Halim Rane and Ibrahim Zein, *Covenants with Allāh: Keystone of Islam*. New York: Routledge, 2026. xv + 240 pp. References, index. Paperback. ISBN: 978-1-032-79766-3.

The book pursues two primary objectives: (1) a historical survey of the application of the concept of covenant in Islamic history, and (2) a theorisation of covenants in Islam, whether in the form of a theory or a paradigm. As such, this review adopts these two objectives as its criteria for analysis.

To attain these objectives, the book employs an inductive textual survey of Islam's primary sources—namely, the Qurʾān and the Sunnah—by mapping the semantic relations between key terms within selected verses and narrations. This survey reveals a logical unfolding, both structurally and empirically. Structurally, it begins with God as the source of the covenant, followed by man as its second party and Satan as an adversarial third. Empirically, it traces the applications and misapplications of the covenant from the time of Adam to the advent of Prophet Muḥammad, and subsequently into modern Islamic history across various levels—from the individual to the international. This methodological framework informs the overall arrangement of the book's chapters.

Such an approach is not uncommon in Islamic studies; introductory works on fields such as *maqāṣid al-Sharīʿah*, *tafsīr*, and *taṣawwuf* often adopt similar methods. The book's distinction, therefore, lies less in methodological innovation than in its structural organisation.

Published Online: 30 June 2026
DOI:10.31436/shajarah.v31i1.2414
ISSN:1394-6870 | E-ISSN:2735-1866
Copyright © 2026 International Islamic University Malaysia

Chapter One, "Allāh, Earth, and Afterlife," outlines the basic scaffolding of the covenant paradigm by identifying three domains in which the covenant operates: God, earthly life, and the hereafter. God is the source of the covenant; earthly life constitutes the arena of its fulfilment; and the hereafter serves as the site of reckoning. This corresponds to the primordial covenant (*mīthāq alastu*) between man and God. The discussion largely reiterates themes familiar from the classical tradition.

One noteworthy point concerns the role of the *asmāʾ al-ḥusnā* in shaping the believer's moral orientation: they not only convey knowledge of the divine will but also inform the kind of being one ought to become. This idea—commonly associated with the notion of *takhalluq bi-akhlāq Allāh* in the Ṣūfī tradition—is not explicitly developed in relation to the covenant. Its omission represents a missed opportunity, as such a connection would have allowed the covenant paradigm to be articulated not only in moral but also in spiritual terms.

Chapter Two, "Adam, Satan, and Humanity," explores the first particularised application of the primordial covenant in the account of Adam and his wife, alongside its initial breach by Satan. From this episode, the book derives an extended network of rights and responsibilities governing human relations, beginning with the most fundamental: the covenantal bond between male and female in marriage, described as a *mīthāqan ghalīẓan*.[1]

[1] In its most elaborate and sophisticated covenantal form in Islam, see Hammūdah ʿAbd al ʿĀṭī, *The Family Structure in Islam* (Indianapolis: American

From this foundational relationship, the discussion expands to encompass broader forms of covenant governing human interaction at multiple levels—communal, societal, national, and international. In all such contexts, man remains bound by the covenant with God, guided by prophetic revelation and entrusted with the role of *khalīfah*. At the same time, the persistent presence of Satan underscores the possibility of deviation. The emphasis on human capacity for choice—obedience, disobedience, repentance, and reform—highlights the existential significance of the covenant.

Chapter Three, "Abraham, Israelites, and Arabs," and Chapter Four, "Messengers, Believers, and Disbelievers," trace the historical unfolding of covenants through the lives of the Prophets and their respective communities. Chapter Three focuses on Abraham and subsequent Prophets among his descendants—particularly those sent to the Israelites and the Arabs—while Chapter Four centres on Prophet Muḥammad. Together, these chapters establish two principal claims: first, that the prophetic mission originates in the covenant made with Abraham as the "leader of humankind" and extends to all subsequent Prophets and their followers; and second, that the fulfilment of this covenant in its earthly phase culminates in the emergence of Islam as a revealed religion.

Although these discussions make no explicit reference to earlier contemporary works on covenant theory—such as al-Attas's *Covenants Fulfilled* or Ismail Faruqi's "A Comparison of the Islamic and

---

Trust Publications, 1977).

Christian Approaches to Hebrew Scripture”[2]—the influence of both is nevertheless discernible. From Faruqi, the book adopts the notion of the covenantal honour of the Israelites and the Arabs as grounded not in lineage but in fidelity to the Abrahamic covenant. From al-Attas, it draws the idea that the fulfilment of the covenant finds its culmination in Islam. A notable contribution, however, lies in the book’s more detailed treatment of covenantal implications in areas such as Jewish claims to sacred lands and Christian intra- and interreligious conduct.

By this stage, the book has established a near-comprehensive account of the covenant paradigm, emphasising that its ethical prescriptions and legal provisions are contained within the Qurʾān and the Sunnah, while its exemplary realisation is embodied in the Prophetic community of al-Madīnah al-Munawwarah. (A more theoretically refined articulation of this relationship may be found in al-Attas’s *Islām and Secularism*).[3]

Chapters Five to Seven extend this framework through an extensive historical survey of Muslim societies, documenting instances in which covenants were formed, upheld, or violated across a wide range of political and social contexts over fourteen centuries. While the breadth of this material is considerable, its analytical function remains consistent with the broader pattern of the work: historical cases are

---

[2] Ismail Faruqi, “A Comparison of the Islamic and Christian Approaches to Hebrew Scripture” in *Ismāʿīl Fārūqī: Selected Essays* (London; Washington: IIIT, 2018), 36–55.

[3] Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Islām and Secularism* (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1993), 53–54.

presented primarily as illustrations of the covenantal framework rather than as sources from which new theoretical insights are derived.

Chapter Eight, "A Theory of Covenants in Islam," is perhaps the most significant, as it represents the book's attempt to fulfil its second objective. Two key terms— "paradigm" and "theory"—are employed in a largely Kuhnian sense. A paradigm is defined as a broad framework that informs perception and interpretation, while a theory is understood as a set of interrelated propositions intended to explain a phenomenon within such a framework. Within this schema, the covenant is identified as the core theory of the Islamic paradigm.

At the outset, the book appears to recognise the requirements of theory-building. However, its treatment of these requirements lacks conceptual precision. A central difficulty lies in its failure to distinguish clearly between the covenant as a concept and as a phenomenon. In its textual analyses of the Qurʾān, the covenant is treated descriptively as a conceptual structure; yet in its engagement with historical material, it is treated normatively as a standard by which phenomena are evaluated.

This shift produces a methodological inconsistency. Rather than deriving a theory inductively from historical phenomena, the analysis proceeds by applying a pre-existing conceptual framework to assess those phenomena. The theory thus precedes and governs the analysis, functioning less as an explanatory construct than as an underlying paradigm. In this sense, what is presented as a theory operates instead as a normative framework.

The implications of this are most evident in the treatment of "testability." A theory, properly speaking, must be open to verification or falsification through engagement with empirical reality. Here, however, historical cases are assessed in terms of their conformity to the covenantal framework: alignment is taken as confirmation, while deviation is attributed to failure on the part of the phenomena rather than to any inadequacy in the theory. The theory itself remains unaffected, thereby undermining its claim to explanatory status.

The difficulty, therefore, lies not merely in execution but in conceptualisation. The covenant, as articulated in the Qurʾān, functions primarily as a normative concept rather than as a descriptive theory. Its discourse is moral and evaluative rather than explanatory in the scientific sense. The absence of a clear distinction between concept and phenomenon consequently weakens the book's claim to have developed a theory in the strict sense.

This conceptual ambiguity is further reflected in the interchangeable use of terms such as "covenant paradigm," "covenantal Islamic paradigm," and "Islamic paradigm," which raises questions of definitional precision and coherence. While these formulations may be related, their lack of explicit differentiation obscures the conceptual structure the book seeks to establish.

Nevertheless, the work succeeds in demonstrating the centrality of the covenant within the Islamic paradigm. Indeed, the evidence presented suggests that the covenant is not merely a component within that paradigm but is constitutive of it. Without it, the paradigm itself would be rendered unintelligible. In this respect,

the book's emphasis on the essentially covenantal nature of Islam is well founded.

This account, however, would have been further strengthened by engagement with al-Attas's analysis of the "existential indebtedness" (*dāna* or *dayn*) of man to God as a fundamental dimension of religion (*dīn*), whereby the covenant may be understood as the means through which this primordial debt is acknowledged and repaid.[4]

Despite its claim that the covenant represents an understudied field, the evidence suggests otherwise. The concept has long been embedded within the Islamic intellectual tradition, particularly in Qur'ānic exegesis, even if not always articulated in explicitly paradigmatic terms. As Recep Şentürk has shown, for example, covenantal principles underlie broader political concepts such as the "circle of justice" (*dā'irat al-'adl*), even where they are not explicitly foregrounded.[5]

The claim of novelty is further weakened by the book's limited engagement with the *tafsīr* tradition. Aside from Ibn Kathīr, there is little indication that other major exegetical works have been substantially utilised. A more sustained engagement with this tradition might have yielded a more nuanced assessment of

---

[4] al-Attas, *Islam and Secularism*. 139.

[5] Recep Senturk, "Ibn Khaldūn and Kınalızāde's Concept of Dā'irat al-Siyāsah: A Rethinking of Modern Politics from A Civilisational Perspective," *TAFHIM: IKIM Journal of Islam and the Contemporary World*, 17(1): 1–21. https://doi.org/10.56389/tafhim.vol17no1.1

the concept's historical development and avoided overstating its novelty.

To conclude, the book succeeds admirably in achieving its first objective, offering a wide-ranging and detailed survey of the role of covenant in Islamic history. Its second objective, however—the development of a coherent theory—remains only partially realised. The work is best understood as a preliminary contribution to a more rigorous theoretical formulation.

Nevertheless, its significance should not be understated. In the sense described by Ibn Ḥazm, the book performs the important scholarly function of *jamʿ*—the gathering and organisation of dispersed materials. Its principal contribution lies in bringing together a wide range of discussions on covenant across the Islamic tradition and presenting them within a unified structure. In this respect, its value is considerable, even if its theoretical ambitions exceed what is ultimately achieved.

Reviewed by:

Yusra Hulaimi | Institute of Islamic Understanding Malaysia (IKIM)

yusra@ikim.gov.my