

Understanding Islam Series One: The Big Picture

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Part Eight: What is the Qur'an?

God created all human beings to find happiness in this world through obedience to the divine will and the reward of paradise in the next. In God's great mercy, God sent guidance to all humanity in the form of books of revelation or scriptures. The Qur'an is the last scripture and the ultimate benchmark by which all earlier ones can be judged. It lies at the core of the Muslim faith and way of life. It was sent down by God to Muhammad who conveyed it to the world by speaking it aloud – the name Qur'an means 'the recitation'.

The revelation begins

The revelation of the Qur'an began in the year 610, on a dark night towards the end of the month of Ramadan [Q. 2:185]. Muhammad had gone to spend time in deep meditation and spiritual retreat in a cave on Mount Hira, just outside Makka. A light appeared on the horizon and drew closer [Q. 53:3-10]. Eventually it was identified as the angel Jibril (Gabriel). Jibril halted a distance away from Muhammad and spoke the word *iqra*, commanding him to 'recite' or 'speak forth.'

Muhammad did not know what to do. Jibril came closer and again said *iqra*. At this, Muhammad said that he didn't know what he was supposed to say. Like most people at this time, Muhammad had not received any formal book-based education. He was *ummi*, meaning that he had not received education on earlier scriptures and he was "unlettered." The significance of this is that what Muhammad was about to recite could not have come from him. He could not have made it up himself. It must have been given to him by God [Q. 10:37-38; 17:88; 45:2].

Jibril then embraced Muhammad. During this embrace, the heart of Muhammad, as the seat of wisdom and knowledge, was purified in receiving the revelation from God. After the embrace, when Jibril again said *iqra* to Muhammad, the first verses of the Qur'an just welled up from his heart and flowed from his lips [Q. 96:1-5]. This was the start of the process of revelation that would go on for the next twenty-two years [Q. 17:106; 25:32].

As Muhammad was a pure being, his heart was a fit resting place for the revelation which was sent down to him without any fear of corruption or interference [Q. 2:97]. As it came from Muhammad's heart to his lips, it was preserved from error by the angel Jibril acting as the 'Trusted Spirit' [Q. 26:192-195]. This process of revelation is called *wahy*, which is linked to the word *tanzil*, and refers to the 'sending down' of the Qur'an from God to our world in a human language, Arabic [Q. 12:2; 41:44].

It's important to try to understand that Muhammad is the receiver and conveyor of the revelation, not in any sense the author. Authorship lies with God and control over the transmission of the words of the Qur'an until they came from the mouth of the Prophet. There is no scope for distortion. The words of the Qur'an were given to him by God [Q. 53: 3-6]. He did not have to memorise the Qur'an. It was simply 'there' in his heart and he knew it.

Muhammad told Khadija his wife what had happened. According to some sources, she asked her cousin Waraqa, who was a Christian, for his advice. After listening to Muhammad's account, he confirmed that in his Christian tradition such things are known when God calls a prophet to carry a message into the world. Khadija realised that Muhammad was God's messenger and became his first follower. At the same time, other sources stress that the Prophet knew and was certain about what happened; there was no room for doubt in his life [Q. 53:1-12].

This first revelation is celebrated each year on the odd-numbered nights in the last ten days of Ramadan, often the 27th night. It is called the Night of Power (*Laylat al-Qadr*). Muslims devote this night to worship and according to the Qur'an, angels are sent throughout the earth to bring God's blessings to all those who are in prayer and to convey their requests to God [Q. 97:1-5].

For a further twenty-two years, the Qur'an continued to come down to Muhammad in a series of revelations, with occasional intervals. These revelations came from God who has the capacity to communicate through the *kalam allah*; the speech or word of God from whom it cannot be separated. It exists beyond time with God and not here on earth. By tradition, the *kalam allah* is contained on the Preserved Tablet, *al-Lawh al-Mahfuz* in heaven [Q. 43:2-4, 85:21-22]. From here it has been sent down to prophets in various languages throughout human history. The Qur'an is the earthly deposit of the *kalam allah* expressed in Arabic.

The same process of revelation was used for all the earlier scriptures. So the Qur'an says that revelation was sent down to Abraham, Moses, David, Jesus and Muhammad. Jibril was the agent in those earlier revelations too [Q. 2:97]. The guidance sent in all the scriptures was essentially the same although there were differences in specific application. We do not know how many books were sent throughout human history or how many messengers there were. The Qur'an mentions these five scriptures by name and twenty-five prophets.

Recording the Qur'an

Muhammad recited the Qur'an to his immediate group of companions, some of whom memorised it. In Muhammad's time, poets and storytellers would memorise hundreds of stories and long poems and then travel from one place to another reciting them for the entertainment and education of their listeners. These were the kind of men and women who memorised the Qur'an as Muhammad recited it. Muhammad checked them and they crosschecked one another. On several occasions Jibril came to

Muhammad to hear him recite the verses of the Qur'an revealed so far. Thus, a reliable record of the Qur'an was established in the hearts of the memorisers.

As groups of verses were revealed, Muhammad was informed by God into which chapter of the Qur'an they should be placed. There are 114 chapters (*suras*) in total. They were given names, by which most Muslims know them, and later numbered. At a later period, the verses (*ayat*) in each chapter were given numbers for ease of reference. The chapters vary greatly in length from three to 286 verses. About eighty-six *suras* were revealed in Makka (610-622). The remaining twenty-eight were revealed in Madina (622-632).

Those amongst the early Muslims who could write began to build up their own collections of written verses. The Prophet organised this by nominating certain scribes to copy down revelations as they were revealed. The leaders amongst these were Ali, his cousin, and Zayd ibn Thabit. They wrote on pieces of parchment, leaves, stone tablets, and any other materials that were available.

By the time the revelation of the Qur'an came to an end with the death of Muhammad in 632, there were two records: one that the memorisers had learnt by heart and one written down. A few of the scribes had complete copies of the Qur'an but most people had only collections of verses.

Preserving the text

The Qur'an itself teaches that the earlier scriptures had been partially lost or distorted. To avoid this, there was a desire that it should be written down in book form to preserve it intact. This need was reinforced when eighty of the memorisers were killed in the Battle of Yamama shortly after the Prophet's death. Caliph Abu Bakr (r. 632-634) ordered that Zayd should make a complete copy in book form. As he did so, he crosschecked the written records with that in the hearts of the memorisers to produce an accurate text. This "official copy" was put into the safekeeping of Hafsa (d. 667), one of Muhammad's wives and the daughter of the second Caliph, Umar (r. 634-644).

The third Caliph, Uthman (r. 644-656), was concerned that there were fragments of badly written Qur'anic verses in circulation. This was also a time of expansion of Muslim rule. There was the need for a "master copy" to be written, copied and circulated to various parts of the Muslim territories. This was drawn up in 647 from the copy kept by Hafsa and checked against the memorisers. Zayd was again involved in this and Ali approved the action, so there was unity amongst the parties of early Muslims. Once it was complete, Uthman ordered that all the earlier written records of the Qur'an be destroyed to avoid confusion. All except the copy in Hafsa's care, which was returned to her.

This "master copy" of the Qur'an was copied and sent to the five principal Muslim cities of that time. With each copy was sent a trained *qari* or reciter to show people

how to pronounce it as the script was written without vowels. There developed a diversity of reading styles of the Qur'an, which can lead to a variation in the meaning of some words. The earliest manuscripts we have now probably date from the 8th century, and are in museums in Tashkent, Sanaa, Mashhad and Istanbul.

God says that God will preserve the Qur'an intact for all time [Q. 15:9] and Muslims see this as a miracle. The primary record of the Qur'an is that which is in the hearts of people who memorise it. Hence great importance is attached to clarity and precision in memorising and recitation.

The linguistic style of the Qur'an is partly poetic but truly unique [Q. 2:23-24]. It is unlike any other form of literature in the Arabic language. Every piece of Arabic literature, before and after the Qur'an, is regarded as second-rate.

The Qur'an, as the revealed Word of God, actually exists only in the Arabic language; so scholarly discussion must be based on the Arabic text alone. The Arabic in which it is written has become the standard classical language which is still understood throughout the Arabic-speaking world, in spite of the many different forms of spoken Arabic which have evolved through the centuries. As with any major language, Arabic contains many shades of meaning which resist translation. To translate it is to interpret it – just as it is with any translation of a great work of literature.

Interpretation of the Qur'an

The Qur'an was revealed over a period of twenty-two years, and the revelations appeared within a particular social and historical context. To know these is of great importance in interpreting the Qur'an so they have been recorded in the early works of scholarship.

The first and best interpreter of the Qur'an was Muhammad himself. This means that careful attention is paid to the ways in which he put Qur'anic principles into practice in his life, teaching and judgements. These incidents are recorded in the biographies of Muhammad and his companions, and the great collections of Hadith, which contain what Muhammad said, taught, did and the things of which he approved.

For Shi'a Muslims, the Imams were also infallible interpreters of the Qur'an and were able to give guidance under divine inspiration. This means that the body of interpretation built up by them, especially by the sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, is of great importance. Different schools of Muslims read the Qur'an with different emphases: some look for the outer explicit meaning and others have traditionally seen hidden meaning in the text.

The Qur'an rarely says all it has to say on a topic in just one place. There is a danger in taking one verse in isolation. To understand the teaching of the Qur'an one needs to take every reference on a particular topic and interpret it within its own context and in relation to the whole. Then we need to draw out from this the 'golden message' of the

Qur'an. This golden message needs to be applied in every society as it engages with Islam. In order to achieve this, scholars need to study the new context to make sure that we achieve an outcome in accordance with the guidance of God.

Pious use of the Qur'an

The Qur'an is not just 'a book'; it is the Word of God. Therefore respect is to be shown to the Qur'an in any format, especially to any printed or written verses [Q. 7:204]. When the Qur'an is being read or recited, great respect is shown. Many Muslims follow the tradition of covering their heads whenever the Qur'an is spoken aloud or when the text is being studied.

Before a Muslim will handle a copy of the Qur'an, he or she will make the ritual washing or *wudu*. As it is intended for all humankind, non-Muslims are permitted to read and handle it. They are not required to do the ritual washing before doing so, but should treat it with great respect. It should never be laid on the floor or any other unclean place. In a pile of books, it should always be on the top.

Old and worn out copies of the Qur'an must be disposed of with respect, normally through burial. This also applies to any piece of paper or anything else on which a verse of the Qur'an in Arabic has been written, for example, by putting such pieces of paper through a shredder.

In many Muslim houses, a copy of the Qur'an will be wrapped in a special cloth or kept in a worthy box and then placed on a high shelf in a principal room.

Every Muslim learns some verses of the Qur'an by heart. But in every generation and society, some will make the effort to memorise the whole Qur'an under the guidance of a teacher. Someone who has completed this memorisation will be shown respect with the title *hafiz*, or *hafizah* for a woman, as they 'carry the Qur'an in their heart'.

To aid the process of recitation, the Qur'an has been divided into thirty parts called *juz*. During Ramadan, Muslims recite one *juz* each night so that the whole Qur'an is recited in the course of the month. Sunnis do this in a special congregational prayer called *tarawih*, whilst the Shi'a do their recitation in private or in groups with accompanying prayers.

In Arabic-speaking societies, the relationship to the words of the Qur'an is more immediate for the ordinary believer. Most educated people would be able to understand almost every word as it is read or recited. Only about fifteen per cent of Muslims worldwide are native Arabic-speakers. Those who do not understand Arabic learn the Qur'an phonetically. This reminds us that the Word of God does not just speak to the intellect but also to the heart. By memorising and reciting the Qur'an, Muslims develop a relationship with God that goes beyond linguistic understanding and takes them into a spiritual communion with God.

Most schools of Islam do not allow figurative drawing or painting and some don't permit photographs of animate objects. The art of calligraphy has been highly developed by Muslim artists; in this way the words of the Qur'an can be dignified in their actual writing. There are several different scripts used in such calligraphy. Calligraphy is often used in mosque decoration and on ceramic tiles, which beautify the homes and public places of Muslims.