

Understanding Islam Series Two: Standing before God

To view the video that goes with this article, go to www.ahlulbayt.tv/understandingislam

Part Eleven: Encountering the Word of God in the Qur'an

One of the problems that has come in with the development of Religious Studies is to categorise things that do not really fit together. For example, there is a category of “Holy Book” but this does not cover the diversity between sacred texts in different religions or the variety of writings within a given book, like the Bible. To think of the Qur'an as a “Holy Book” is to misunderstand it.

Similarly, in our modern way of thinking, we think of a book as something that must be interrogated intellectually, the text must be deconstructed and analysed using various methods of literary criticism. With this approach, to think of analysing a text in a language that one does not command is meaningless. The book has no power or authority if one cannot decipher the writing. To approach the Qur'an merely as a text to be analysed is again to misunderstand it and to render much of its power inert.

Practice makes the importance clearer

If we consider how Muslims treat a copy of the Qur'an, then we can begin to explore its importance. Typically, the Qur'an will be wrapped in a worthy cloth or sometimes placed in a specially constructed and decorated box such as might be used for jewellery. The Qur'an will be kept on the highest shelf in the principal room of the house and no other books will be kept there to show that it is unique and special. A Muslim will make the ritual washing (*wudu*) before handling it and will often reverence it with a kiss or touch it to the forehead as a sign of respect before opening it. Old or worn copies of the Qur'an that need to be disposed of typically will be buried.

Two practical examples stress the point. Imagine a packed bus with every seat taken and people standing in every possible space. A man gets on with a copy of the Qur'an wrapped in a cloth and tucked under his arm for safety. He backs into the dense mass of people using his body to protect the Qur'an. Before long, someone notices what he is carrying and a seat is made available so that he can sit down. This honour is not on account of his person but because of the Qur'an that he carries. Secondly, imagine a major international conference about Islam. On the stage sit a group of renowned university professors. One is standing at a lectern giving a lecture and has just quoted something from a copy of the Qur'an, which he replaces on a shelf on the lectern. Somehow it topples and falls to the ground. Before he can react, another professor has jumped to his feet, knelt down, picked up the Qur'an, revered it with a kiss, dusted off any dirt that might have clung to it and replaced it on the shelf.

These actions speak of something worthy of the greatest respect. And yet there is a discussion amongst the scholars of Islam as to whether the Qur'an can ever be thought of as pages between two covers; it is in a literal sense, "the Word of God."

Worthy of being committed to memory

There were those people in the infant Muslim community who could write and they took down in writing the verses of the Qur'an from the lips of Muhammad. There were many more, who committed the verses to memory. This was a society that worked on what we today call "oral history." This means that things that were important to them were memorised and passed on from one generation to the next. The same process was used to commit poetry to memory and stories that were important to the community. Many experiments have been done to show how remarkably retentive the memory is amongst people who rely on it alone. Poems that we would think of as "book-length" are habitually remembered and recited "word-perfect." Such were the memories of the people who memorised the Qur'an from the lips of Muhammad.

This aural tradition is important; when one hears the Qur'an recited and memorises it that way, one necessarily memorises also the pronunciation, the phraseology and the emphases. People committed the whole text of the Qur'an to memory, cross-checked one another and recited it in the presence of the Prophet. Such people, who have proven their memorisation of the Qur'an, are called in the Islamic tradition *hafiz* (for men) or *hafizah* (for women). They began a process that has endured in all Muslim countries around the world throughout the centuries of people committing the Qur'an to memory under the direction of a teacher who has memorised it. This passing from teacher to pupil set up a chain of transmitters (*silsila*) of the Qur'an. In this way, the Qur'an: words, pronunciation, phraseology and emphases, has lived in the hearts of Muslim believers.

Two examples to make this clear: When copies of the Qur'an were first sent out to the principal cities of the expanding Muslim Empire in 647, a *hafiz* was sent along with each copy to ensure that there were no errors in pronouncing or phrasing the written copy. When they arrived and settled, they began to teach others to memorise the Qur'an and thus began a new *silsila*. Secondly, when Muslims were taken as slaves from West Africa and put into encampments in the Americas, they went with no possessions of any kind; yet we know that they were later able to recite the Qur'an and it was taken down by dictation to begin a new deposit there.

The art of beautiful recitation of the Qur'an has become highly commendable in Islam. Those who have perfected it are given the title, Qari, and are held in great honour. Several different styles of recitation have developed in different places and an accomplished Qari will have mastered more than one. Such Qaris are in great demand to give formal public recitations at family events, such as weddings, and especially during the month of Ramadan. It was a traditional way for a blind person to earn a living. The hope, and indeed expectation, would be that the memorisation of the

Qur'an would be a preliminary to gaining a command of the Arabic language but by no means all who have memorised the Qur'an or who can recite it beautifully can deconstruct the language in which it is written. Some Qaris, who can recite the Qur'an beautifully, have memorised it and learnt the art of recitation phonetically.

A minority of Arabic speakers

Only around fifteen percent of Muslims worldwide have Arabic as their mother-tongue. If we add a generous ten percent to this figure for those who have learnt to command the language, this still leaves us with seventy-five percent of Muslims worldwide who cannot deconstruct the language of the Qur'an. What is the impact of the Arabic Qur'an on the non-Arabic reader or hearer?

We need to think of the Qur'an as "Word of God" and not as a book or a text. To memorise even some of the Qur'an means that the Word of God lives in my heart. To recite it means that the Word of God passes over my lips; it is carried on my breath. Again, two examples: Imagine me standing on a street corner in a Muslim quarter in Britain talking to a group of Muslim lads aged around sixteen to nineteen. A greasy paper that has been used to wrap chips is carried by the wind and wraps around our feet. One young man bends down to pick it up but another stops him and does it himself. He throws it in a bin and I am bound to ask: "Why did you do that and stop him?" He replies that the first boy was a *hafiz* and so the Qur'an lives in his heart so he ought not to do such a dirty job. Secondly, think of the power of lyrical words on the human soul. "I love Italian opera!" "Can you understand Italian?" "That's not the point; it speaks to my soul and moves my spirit." When people hear the Qur'an being recited, they are moved by the power of the sound; it is as though it vibrates in the human heart.

This idea of the power of the spoken word can be seen in the use of verses of the Qur'an in healing. Certain verses can be recited over the sick person or even breathed over them. Similarly, verses of the Qur'an can be written with saffron water on paper and then placed in a glass of water until the writing disperses into it; the paper is then discarded and the water conveying the Qur'anic verse is drunk. In the same way, the Qur'an is used in exorcism, either by using spoken Qur'anic verses as commands or by writing them on a board and having the affected person stare at them so that the power of the verse enters through the eyes.

The deeper meanings of the Qur'anic verses are released through study and meditation; by sitting in silent meditation focused on a verse, it is as though one allows God to speak in the heart to give guidance. Beautiful calligraphy used in writing verses of the Qur'an is thought of as a visual prayer or *dhikr*. The Qur'an is used to protect people, as in the custom of writing a verse on a piece of parchment, rolling it and placing it in a small cylinder or *tarwiz*, which is then attached to the clothing or tied on the body. In some cultures, children sleep with a copy of the Qur'an under their pillows. In the practice of *istikhara* (discerning God's guidance

when faced with a difficult situation), after prayer and fasting, the Qur'an is opened at random and the verses that appear are interpreted as guidance.