

Interview with John Kaltner
Introducing the Qur'an

Fortress Press: What is the value of having a companion when reading Islam's sacred text? What do you mean that your introduction is for "today's reader"?

John Kaltner: Although the two texts have much in common, the experience of reading the Qur'an is markedly different from that of reading the Bible. Perhaps the most noticeable difference for Bible readers is the way the Qur'an is arranged. Much of the Bible follows a more or less chronological ordering that the Qur'an doesn't adopt. It appears to skip around from topic to topic and character to character in a way that can strike non-Muslims as somewhat random and haphazard. In addition, the presence of biblical stories and figures can be confusing because they are never presented in the same way as they appear in the Bible. Consequently, for Jews and Christians the Qur'an is simultaneously both a strange and a familiar book. A companion can be a valuable aid to help orient one to the Qur'an and explain how and why it is similar to and distinct from the Bible.

This book is organized around seven topics that I believe will be of interest to modern readers. I don't attempt to cover everything the Qur'an has to say but instead offer a thorough overview of these seven themes to give the reader a good sense of what the text teaches regarding some issues of contemporary relevance and importance. In this way, the book provides a good general introduction to Muslim belief and practice.

FP: Your book is organized thematically and seems to develop organically—from creation of the natural environment and of persons, to the family, to relations with outsiders, and on to themes of violence, war, and the meaning of death. Is this correct? If not, is there a rationale behind the order of the book?

JK: Yes, that's a good way of understanding the sequence of the chapters. In a sense, that order replicates the common experiences we all undergo as human beings. We're born into a world and environment of which we are only one small part, and it's important that we learn our place within creation in order to have the proper relationship with it. Our first experiences of community are within the context of our families, and as we grow up and mature we must learn how to coexist with others outside that family circle, particularly those who are different from us. Throughout our lives there are moments of stress and tension that have the potential to lead to violence. And of course, the fact that we are mortal beings means we all share the experience of death. My book attempts to explain how the Qur'an traces out the various points along the way in that journey through life.

FP: You marvel in your preface at the considerable ignorance non-Muslims have of the Qur'an and its teachings, especially given that it is the sacred text of one of the world's major religious traditions. You also acknowledge many similarities between the Qur'an and the Bible. Could you discuss the overarching similarities between these two sacred texts and identify the need for practitioners of different religious traditions to expand their literacy with the sacred writings of other traditions?

JK: Jews and Christians are often quite surprised to discover that the Qur'an and the Bible share so much in common. One of the primary reasons for the similarities is the Islamic understanding of revelation. The Qur'an teaches that throughout history God spoke to various prophets who were charged with the responsibility of communicating that message to their communities. The names of some of those prophets are mentioned in the Qur'an and many of them are familiar to Bible readers, including Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus. Muslims believe that Muhammad was the final link in that prophetic chain and that the Qur'an accurately preserves God's word to humanity.

But the Qur'an is quite clear that God sent down the same revelation to all the prophets, including Muhammad. That message can be summed up in the word *islam*, which is the Arabic term that describes the act of submission. According to the Qur'an all of humanity, indeed all of creation, must submit to God's will and therefore we are all *muslims*, or those who submit. If you think about it, that idea of submission is at the very heart of the Judeo-Christian tradition as well. The theme of covenant is central to the Hebrew Bible, and when the Israelites enter into the covenantal relationship with God, isn't that an act of submission that expresses a willingness faithfully to obey God's will? Similarly, many of Jesus' teachings in the New Testament are centered on the concept of the reign of God, which clearly expresses the need to surrender oneself to the divine will. All members of the monotheistic faiths are called to submit to something or someone greater than themselves and are therefore *muslims* by definition. We can understand and appreciate that common calling only if we're familiar with the texts and traditions of the other faith communities.

FP: Would you identify the top three misperceptions that non-Muslims have of the Qur'an and that you seek to correct in your book? Are there any interpretations of the Qur'an by Muslims themselves that your book might help correct? Do you acknowledge whether alternative interpretations or understandings are mutually valid, or is there an authoritative understanding that you seek to convey to your readers?

JK: Non-Muslims have many misperceptions about the Qur'an, but I think three are deeply ingrained and adversely affect how Islam is perceived: (1) that it is a misogynistic text that degrades women; (2) that it is a violent text that calls for war and violence against all non-Muslims; and (3) that it is the antithesis and polar opposite of the Bible. In various ways I try to dispel these inaccurate perceptions in the book.

One of the reasons non-Muslims believe the Qur'an is a violent and misogynistic text is because certain Muslims have that understanding of it and use it to justify their actions and attitudes. I'm thinking, for example, of those who cite the Qur'an to endorse terrorism and other acts of violence. The contextualized reading I call for in the book challenges an approach that lifts passages out of context and simplistically tries to bring an eighth-century perspective into the modern world to address contemporary issues.

Any text, including sacred texts, must be interpreted, and interpretations will vary depending upon the circumstances and contexts of readers. I don't think it's appropriate to impose one interpretation that must be applied to all times and places, so I believe alternative interpretations can be valid and don't have to be mutually exclusive. But I'm opposed to interpretations that misuse the text in order to further one's own agenda or that violate the rights of others.

FP: Please explain the images that grace your book, which is an introduction to the *text* of the Qur'an. Why did you decide to incorporate these images, and how do they enhance our understanding of the Qur'an?

JK: Similar to what we find with manuscripts of the Bible from the medieval period, copies of the Qur'an are often stunning works of art. And because Islam forbids representation of humans and other living creatures the text itself is often an important component of the aesthetic experience of the viewer or the one reading the Qur'an. Various types of script emerged at different times and in different places that have their own distinct features and ways of forming the Arabic letters. In addition, the borders and margins of manuscripts are often richly decorated in vibrant colors and elaborate patterns. I think it's important for readers of the book to appreciate the fact that for Muslims the Qur'an is not merely a spoken or recited text but it is also a written text that is experienced visually, so many of the images in the book try to convey this dimension. Some images show how the Qur'an functions in the daily lives of Muslims by depicting them reading it or studying it. Still others illustrate how the Qur'an can take various forms and be used for different purposes. The hope is that the reader will get a sense of the Qur'an's role as a cultural artifact, not just a religious text.

FP: You've incorporated at the end of each chapter certain teaching features, including lists of key terms, a range of discussion questions, and suggested readings. Could you briefly explain the value and use of these features and how they can benefit one who uses your book?

JK: I think it's important that non-Muslims be familiar with some of the Arabic terms that Muslims use to speak about the Qur'an and how it is studied. Sometimes these terms provide valuable insight on key aspects of how Islam understands its sacred text. For example, the Arabic word for revelation literally means "sending down," a sense that captures an important dimension of how Muslims believe God communicates with humanity. The book contains about one hundred Arabic terms and there's a list of some at the end of each chapter as well as a comprehensive listing of all of them in an appendix. That might sound like a lot, but I try to make it as user friendly as possible by including definitions as well as sound files with their pronunciation on the book's web site. The discussion questions are meant to address some of the important issues and themes treated in each chapter. The class instructor or discussion group facilitator can use these as a way of getting the conversation going, and the questions are broad enough that differences of opinion can emerge and the discussion can be taken in many different directions. The recommended readings are works that are accessible to the non-specialist but are informed by the latest scholarship. They'll be of use to readers who wish to explore particular aspects of Islam and the Qur'an in more detail.

FP: How would you summarize your own perception or understanding of the Qur'an? What do you find most compelling in the Qur'an's text? Can you share stories of your students' encounters with the Qur'an that are particularly instructive for us today?

JK: Writing this book allowed me to delve into and experience the Qur'an in a way I had not had the opportunity to do previously. The result is that I have a much deeper appreciation of the simplicity and richness of the text. It is a simple text in that it is typically very direct and unambiguous. While scholars sometimes debate the fine points, there is no doubt as to the overall message of the Qur'an, and it is neatly summed up in the name of the faith that takes it as its sacred text—it calls human beings and all of creation to submit to the will of God. Its richness comes from the fact that it repeats this message over and over again, but always in new ways. I was struck by this often in the course of working on the book. Whether the topic is the natural environment, the family, Muslim/non-Muslim relations, or life after death, the message is remarkably consistent: submit, submit, submit. I think that's a vitally important reminder for modern people, who often seek to be in a position of dominance and control.

I first began to work on this book while I was teaching a course titled "The Qur'an and Contemporary Issues." That was an extremely rewarding and enjoyable experience, not least of all because I had the opportunity to observe the students in the course rethink their views on the Qur'an as they became better informed about it throughout the semester. Each day I asked two of them to find a website related to the Qur'an and share it with the members of the class. In the beginning most of them played it safe, and talked about sites that contained the text of the Qur'an or recitations of it. But by the end of the semester they were bringing in sites that presented mistaken and distorted views of the Qur'an, some of them deeply troubling and offensive to Muslims. The students were now in a position to evaluate and critique such presentations of the Qur'an in a way they were not able to at the start of the semester. In their course evaluations many students pointed to that web site assignment as an indication of how far they had come in their understanding of the Qur'an, and I couldn't agree more.