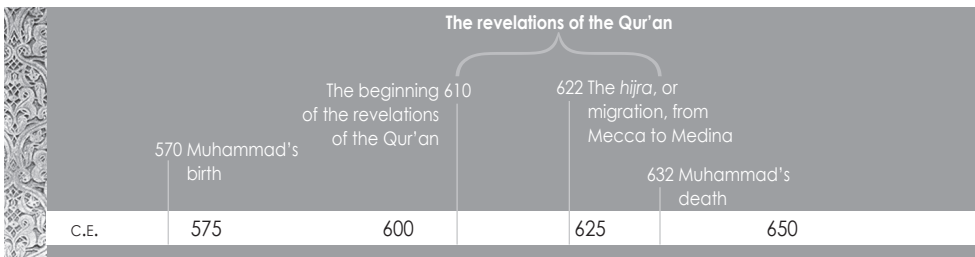


# Introduction

## CHAPTER OUTLINE

Describing the Qur'an; Studying the Qur'an;  
Experiencing the Qur'an



The Qur'an has spoken to countless Muslims throughout history, but its original audience was composed of only one person—the Prophet Muhammad. He was born in the year 570 c.e. in Mecca, a city in the western portion of what is now Saudi Arabia. Sometime around the year 610, Muhammad had an experience that profoundly influenced the future course of human history. It was the first of what he and his followers would come to understand as a series of revelations from God, identified by the Arabic word *allāh*. The revelations continued intermittently throughout the rest of Muhammad's life and ceased only with his death in 632. They are



*“Koran” is also an acceptable spelling for “Qur’an” in English, but the latter is a more accurate transliteration of the Arabic word. The prefix al- before Arabic nouns is the definite article “the.”*

preserved in the book known as *al-qur'ān*, an Arabic term meaning “the recitation.”

The Qur'an addresses many issues and topics, and some of those that are of most interest to modern readers will be discussed in this book. But if the basic message of the Qur'an could be boiled down to one word, it would be the

*The Arabic word allāh  
literally means “the deity.”*



one that came to be used to describe the faith of those who consider it to be the word of God—submission (*al-islām* in Arabic). The Qur'an urges

people to submit themselves to the will of the one God, and anyone who does so is called a *muslim*.



FIGURE 1 *Mt. Hira, where the Qur'an was first revealed to the Prophet Muhammad.*

That monotheistic message was not well received by many of Muhammad's contemporaries in Mecca, which had been a prominent pilgrimage destination for Arabs since long before Muhammad's birth. The city was home to the Ka`ba, a shrine where numerous gods were worshiped, and so Muhammad's call to reject polytheism challenged the dominant form of religious expression and threatened the positive economic effect that pilgrims visiting the Ka`ba had on the city. Tensions between the fledgling Muslim community and members of the Meccan establishment ensued, and the two factions coexisted uneasily until the year 622, when Muhammad and a small group of followers accepted an invitation to journey to Yathrib, a city located about 250 miles to the north.

Muhammad had been asked to come to Yathrib to serve as an arbiter who would help resolve problems among the city’s citizens, among whom was a sizable Jewish population. He spent the last ten years of his life there, and it was in Yathrib that the Muslim community began to flourish. Muhammad became so closely identified with the place that it was renamed “the city of the prophet” (*madīnat al-nabī*), now known as Medina (sometimes spelled Madina).



*Medina is the second holiest city in Islam after Mecca, and its original name was Yathrib.*

Muhammad returned to Mecca on several occasions after he left the city, and he was finally able to convince the majority of its inhabitants to embrace Islam prior to his death in Medina in 632.

The migration from Mecca to Medina, known in Arabic as the *hijra*, was a turning point in the early history of Islam that is considered to be the founding event of the Muslim community. Its significance was commemorated by making the *hijra* the starting point of the Islamic calendar which, as a lunar-based system, is organized by the phases of the moon. The Qur’an emerged within and responded to this historical context, and the chapters that follow will discuss and explain some of the events and developments of that context in greater detail. The remainder of this



*Years that are reckoned by the Islamic calendar are sometimes indicated by the abbreviation A.H., from the Latin Anno Hegirae (“year of the hijra”).*

chapter introduces the Qur’an through a consideration of three topics—what it is, how it is studied, and its presence in Muslim life.

## Describing the Qur’an

This section provides a general overview of the Qur’an with particular attention devoted to two areas. The first is the contents of the text and includes a discussion of such issues as the Qur’an’s arrangement, distinct elements, literary features, and canonization. The second area is the nature of the Qur’an as understood by Muslims. Belief in the Qur’an as the word of God has raised important questions throughout history—about its origin, uniqueness, and character—that have had a significant effect on how Muslims view their sacred text.

### The Contents of the Qur’an

The Qur’an is composed of 114 chapters, which contain about 6,300 verses, making it approximately the same length as the New Testament.

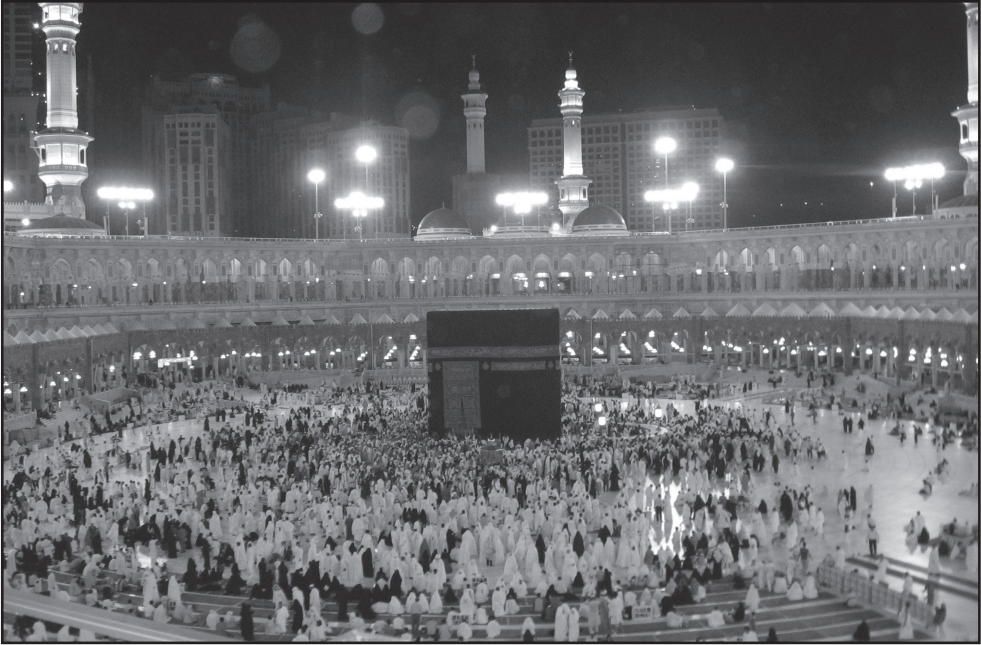


FIGURE 2 *The Ka'ba in the Great Mosque of Mecca.*

The Arabic term for a chapter is *sūra*, and the word for a verse is *āya*, which often has the meaning “sign.” Each chapter has a name, and it is common for Muslims to refer to chapters by their names, although it is not unusual for them to identify a chapter by its number. The titles are normally taken from some word found in or associated with the chapter. It

*Like the Bible, it is common practice to cite a Qur'an passage by identifying the number of its chapter and verse(s).*



might be a personal name, an unusual term, or a theme present in the chapter. Examples of chapter titles in the Qur'an are “The Cow” (chapter 2), “Women” (4), “The Table” (5),

“Abraham” (14), “Mary” (19), “The Spider” (29), “Divorce” (65), and “The Disaster” (101).

#### ARRANGEMENT

The organizing principle of the Qur'an is chapter length, with the longest ones coming first and the shortest found at the end. This is more of a general pattern than a hard-and-fast rule, as seen in the fact that the shortest chapter in the Qur'an is number 108, not 114. The only chapter that clearly violates this principle is the first one, known as *al-fātiḥa* (“The Opening”). It contains only 7 verses but precedes the longest chapter in

the Qur'an, which has 286 verses. The opening chapter is generally held to be an introduction to the entire text of the Qur'an.

#### BASMALA

Every chapter in the Qur'an but one begins with the same phrase—"in the name of God, the merciful One, the compassionate One." This formula is sometimes referred to as the *basmala*, based on the Arabic words that translate "in the name of God." Only in the case of *al-fātiḥa* is the *basmala* considered to be the first verse of the chapter. Everywhere else it functions as a superscription or introduction to the chapter. The *basmala* is missing only in chapter 9, and two main reasons have been proposed for its absence there. It might be that chapters 8 and 9 were originally one unit that was separated at a certain point. Another explanation holds that chapter 9 is unsuitable to begin with the *basmala* because one of its main themes is the punishment that God will exact on idolaters and others who do not obey the divine will. The expression is also found in 27:30, where it is the introduction to a letter that King Solomon sends to the Queen of Sheba.

#### THE MYSTERY LETTERS

A curious aspect of the Qur'an that has generated much discussion and fascination among scholars and non-scholars alike is the presence of letters from the Arabic language at the beginnings of twenty-nine chapters. In a few cases these are single letters, but most of the time they consist of groups of two or more. Muslim tradition has referred to this phenomenon as "the opening letters" or "the cut-off letters," and various explanations have been put forward to account for them.

Among other theories, it has been suggested that they are abbreviations for the names of God or names of Qur'an chapters, division markers between chapters, symbols of numerical values, or secret messages that are shortened words and phrases. None of these proposals has been met with widespread acceptance, and Muslims often adopt the position that the meaning of these letters is a secret known to God alone.



*Examples of the mystery letters include n, y-s, a-l-m, and a-l-m-r. The twenty-nine chapters that begin with them are 2, 3, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 19, 20, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 36, 38, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 46, 50, and 68.*

#### BIBLICAL FIGURES

The references already made to Abraham, Mary, Solomon, and the Queen of Sheba point to the fact that biblical figures are frequently cited

on the pages of the Qur'an. This is so because the text frequently states that the God of the Qur'an is the God of the Bible. Seven are mentioned often by name—Adam, Noah, Moses, Abraham, Joseph (who was sold into Egypt by his brothers), Mary, and Jesus—but a number of others are referred to on occasion, either by name or anonymously. Many parts of the Qur'an therefore have an air of familiarity for the Bible reader, as events in the lives of key biblical characters are recounted and discussed.

But their presence in the Islamic text also raises issues and questions that can have the opposite effect on one accustomed to the parallel Bible traditions. The Qur'an never presents the stories in exactly the same way as their biblical counterparts, and sometimes the differences are quite profound. In general, the Qur'an tends to present these figures and the traditions associated with them in conformance with the beliefs and practices of Islam. In other words, they reflect and cohere to the literary ambience of the Qur'an as an Islamic text.

The example of Noah demonstrates this well. Throughout the four chapters of Genesis in which he appears, Noah speaks only one time, and that only after the flood has subsided and he has returned to dry land. The Noah of the Qur'an is effusive by comparison, as he engages in much conversation and debate. The reason for this difference is simple—the Qur'an considers Noah to be a prophet, and a prophet's primary job is to speak God's message. So the qur'anic Noah constantly implores his people to be faithful and warns them of the consequences if they fail to do so. Bible readers must keep in mind the reasons behind such shifts in character and story line, and should not wrongly assume that the Qur'an's presentation of material familiar to them is due to animosity or disrespect toward them or their religion.

Those who are unfamiliar with the Qur'an often find it to be a confusing and difficult book to read when they first open it. This is particularly the case for Bible readers, who usually expect it to follow the style and structure of their own text. Unlike the biblical literature, which unfolds in chronological order in many places, the Qur'an appears to be random and haphazard in its arrangement because it often shifts modes and topics. A story about Abraham might lead to a discussion of how to relate to non-Muslims, followed by an explanation of regulations involving inheritance that segues into a narrative about Moses.


This has led some, especially non-Muslims, to conclude that the Qur'an lacks coherence and organization. But this opinion has been challenged recently, as more scholars are identifying structures and patterns that had escaped notice earlier. This is especially the case in the analysis of individual chapters, many of which are now recognized to be carefully organized

units that likely emerged within and in response to the framework of the socioreligious context of the early Muslim community. Consequently, non-Muslims should be careful to avoid using the Bible or other sacred texts as a yardstick by which to measure and evaluate the Qur'an.

#### MECCAN/MEDINAN PASSAGES

As noted above, it is impossible to fully understand the Qur'an without some knowledge of the events of the Prophet Muhammad's life. His migration from Mecca to Medina, known as the *hijra*, is of paramount importance when discussing the contents of the Qur'an (see Map, p. 8). Already in the first Islamic century, scholars were making a distinction between material in the Qur'an coming from the period prior to the *hijra* and that from the time after it.

Scholarship into the present day has continued to adopt this approach, although with some modifications, the most notable being the division of the pre-*hijra* material into several subperiods. Although not all scholars agree with this classification, the most common breakdown is into four discrete periods, each with its own literary characteristics and thematic concerns—early Meccan, middle Meccan, late Meccan, and Medinan. Although these categories will not be of great significance throughout this book, the differences between the Meccan and Medinan material, which will be treated more fully below, should be kept in mind.



*The most commonly accepted way of categorizing the material in the Qur'an uses a four-part chronological division: early Meccan, middle Meccan, late Meccan, and Medinan.*

#### LITERARY FEATURES

It is sometimes claimed that the Qur'an should be categorized as poetry, but that is not correct. It is written in a distinct style of prose that has characteristics often associated with poetry. The most distinguishing feature of the text is its rhyme. Some studies have concluded that almost 90 percent of the Qur'an is written in rhymed prose, but it does not always take the form of having the same letter or sound at the end of each verse. The final syllable or word of most verses echoes that of surrounding verses, but this effect is realized through either using the identical sound or relying on assonance that approximates another sound without being the same.

The most common way rhyme is achieved in the Qur'an is through the use of the word endings *-ūn/-ūm/-īn/-īm*. Some of these endings indicate the plural form of an Arabic noun or adjective, and sometimes they



MAP 1 Arabia, Mecca, Yathrib (Medina).



are found throughout an entire chapter. A good example of this is seen in chapter 23, where every one of its 118 verses ends with one of these sounds. A shorter example is found in the first chapter (*al-fātiḥa*), which alternates the sounds *-īn* and *-īm* in its final syllables.

*bismi allāh al-rahmān al-rahīm*  
*al-ḥamdu lil-llāh rab al-`ālamīn*  
*al-rahmān al-rahīm*  
*māliki yawm al-dīn*  
*īyyāka na`abudu wa īyyāka nasta`īm*  
*ihdīnā ṣirāt al-mustaqīm*  
*ṣirāt al-ladhīna an`amta `alayhim ghayri al-maghḍūbi `alayhim wa la ḍāllīn*

In this opening chapter of the Qur'an, the two sounds *-īn* and *-īm* are similar and therefore in assonance, but they are not identical. In addition, the final line indicates that the sections that rhyme are not always of similar length.

Elsewhere, rhymed endings are found in lines that are of more or less the same length throughout. This combination of rhyme and assonance is the main literary feature of the



*“In the name of God, the merciful One, the compassionate One! Praise be to God, Lord of all creation, the merciful One, the compassionate One, king of judgment day. We worship You; we ask You for help. Guide us along the straight path, the path of those You have favored, those who incur no anger and do not go astray.”*

Qur'an. It is so central to the text that sometimes grammatical norms are violated and stylistic conventions are bypassed in order to maintain the rhyme or assonance. It is important to keep in mind that this is an aspect of the text impossible to convey in translation. Consequently, those who read it in English or another language are unable to experience this defining trait, and that is one of the reasons why Muslims say that a translation of the Qur'an is not really the Qur'an but merely an interpretation of it.

Scholars have often noted parallels between the Qur'an's rhyming system and a pre-Islamic literary form called *saj`*. This is especially the case regarding passages from the early Meccan period. There is some disagreement over whether *saj`* is best categorized as prose or poetry. It is characterized by brief phrases and sentences that often rhyme and are similar in their rhythm and meter. These qualities typify many of the earliest sections of the Qur'an but are not present in the later Meccan and Medinan periods.

As will be seen in later chapters of this book, the Qur'an employs a wide variety of literary devices and figures of speech, including metaphors, parables, and rich imagery. One such stylistic technique that has generated much discussion among exegetes and commentators is its use of anthropomorphic language to speak of God. Anthropomorphisms like the hand, eye, and throne of God are mentioned throughout the text to describe various divine attributes like authority, power, and omniscience. "Your Lord is God who created the heavens and earth in six days and then set Himself upon the throne, overseeing everything" (10:3a; cf. 3:73; 7:54; 13:2; 23:88; 32:4; 48:10). This language is somewhat at odds with Islam's view of God as utterly transcendent and beyond human comprehension, but its presence in the Qur'an is usually explained as a way of speaking about the deity in human terms that are immediately understandable to people.

In a related but different vein, the Qur'an's use of plural first-person pronouns like "we," "us," and "our" in divine speech might strike the reader as odd given Islam's monotheism and emphasis on the unity

*An example of the "divine we" from the Bible is seen in Genesis 1:26a. "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness."*



of God. An example is seen in 97:1, where God explains how the Qur'an was revealed. "We sent it down on the Night of Glory." Commentators throughout history have agreed that such language does not in any way

violate the oneness of God that is central to Muslim belief. Most prefer to see it as a stylistic device meant to exalt the deity, and they compare it to the use of the "royal we" or "divine we" found in other cultures and contexts.

#### THE WRITTEN TEXT

What began as a message that circulated orally was eventually written down and went through a process of formation that eventually resulted in the book known as "the Qur'an." The term that refers to the written form of the Qur'an is *muṣḥaf*, which can describe anything from an ancient manuscript to a modern copy of the text. Many very old manuscripts of the Qur'an exist, but none can be dated with certainty to the time of the Prophet Muhammad. Nonetheless, Islamic sources state that during his lifetime some of his followers had begun to record portions of the Qur'an on surfaces like the skins and bones of animals.

According to the traditional account, soon after Muhammad's death in 632 his successor, the caliph Abu Bakr, ordered that the Qur'an be

collected while those most familiar with the revelations were still alive. Muhammad's scribe, a man named Zayd bin Thabit, was charged with coordinating this task. Upon Abu Bakr's death his successor `Umar received the leaves on which Zayd had recorded the Qur'an, and when `Umar died they were passed on to his daughter Hafsa, who had been married to Muhammad. During the reign of the third caliph, `Uthman, who ruled 644–656 c.e., controversies erupted among various groups that were all claiming to have the correct version of the Qur'an in their possession. This led `Uthman, in consultation with scholars and experts, to determine which version was authentic and to order the destruction of all others. This became the accepted text and the basis for all subsequent editions of the Qur'an.

Some scholars, primarily non-Muslims, have questioned the reliability of this traditional account. But there is evidence to suggest that an official written version of the Qur'an was already in existence late in the first Islamic century, which means `Uthman's reign is a plausible period in which to locate the origin of the text of the Qur'an that has come down to us.

Although the precise details of its origin will likely remain unknown, the canonized text of the Qur'an was the basis for thousands of manuscripts produced throughout the centuries, many of which are preserved today in museums and libraries around the world. Occasionally these manuscripts disagree with the received text, and these discrepancies raise interesting and important questions about the history and transmission of the Qur'an. In addition to manuscripts written in Arabic, there are many others written in languages from other parts of the Islamic world like Persian, Urdu, and Turkish.

A common way to date and identify a manuscript is by its script. Someone who is trained in the history of scripts can immediately recognize characteristics like the shape and slant of individual letters that place it within a given time frame and/or location. Among the most commonly used scripts in the Arab world, from earliest to latest, are Hījāzī, Kūfīc, Naskhī, and Maghribī.

In the Arabic language some consonants can function as long vowels, but short vowels are not indicated by letters. The three vowels in Arabic (*a*, *i*, and *u*) are marked by a set of signs and strokes placed above and below consonants, one for each vowel. Arabic also has several diacritical



*Certain elements of Arabic personal names indicate family relationships. Among the most common are “Abu,” meaning “father,” and “Ibn” and “Bin,” which both mean “son.”*

points and markers to help distinguish among similar looking letters and

*Markers commonly used in Arabic script*

- the vowel a
- the vowel i
- the vowel u
- lack of a vowel
- doubled consonant



to indicate phenomena like doubled consonants or the lack of a vowel. This system was not used in Qur'an manuscripts until the tenth century c.e. Since the earliest manuscripts contain none of these features, reading these texts is often a very difficult undertaking. By the ninth century

c.e., a system for indicating vowels by the use of red dots had been developed that facilitated reading.

The chapter titles are another component of the Qur'an not found in the oldest manuscripts, not appearing until the second Islamic century. Prior to that time, chapters were separated from one another either by an ornamental design or a blank space. Later manuscripts typically include chapter titles and elaborate designs, along with an indication of whether the chapter is Meccan or Medinan and the number of verses it contains.

### The Nature of the Qur'an

Muslim belief holds that the Qur'an is a mediated message that was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad through the angel Gabriel. The role Gabriel played in the process is mentioned in 2:97-98, and it is further developed in extraqur'anic sources and traditions. The first revelation Muhammad received is generally held to be chapter 96, whose first word "Recite!" (*iqra*) comes from the same Arabic root as *qur'ān*. "Recite! In the name of your Lord who created. He created humanity from a clinging form. Recite! Your Lord is the noble One, Who taught by means of the pen. Who taught humanity what it did not know" (96:1-5).

The Qur'an refers to itself frequently, and those self-references are often found in passages that explain its nature and source. In many of these

*Arabic is built on a root system, with most words derived from a three-letter root. Each root has one or more primary meanings associated with it. For example, the root k-t-b primarily conveys meanings related to writing, as seen in the word for book (kitāb).*



texts the divine origin of the Qur'an is reiterated, and words from the Arabic root *n-z-l*, meaning "to send down," are commonly used to describe the act of revelation (26:192; 39:1; 41:2; 46:2; 69:43). Its view of revelation therefore has an element of top-down physicality to it, as God communicates the message from heaven

to Muhammad on earth through the agency of Gabriel. The gradual, piecemeal unfolding of the revelation over time is described in 17:106: "It is a

recitation that We have divided in parts, so you can recite it to people in stages. We have sent it down as a revelation [*nazzalnāhu tanzīlan*].”

The Qur’an is silent about the effects the experience of receiving revelations had on Muhammad. The matter is treated in nonscriptural sources that refer to various consequences of the revelatory state. Among the most commonly mentioned are that revelation was accompanied by the ringing of a bell and that Muhammad experienced physical symptoms, including a trancelike state, loss of consciousness, fatigue, perspiration, a change in skin complexion, and general physical discomfort.

An important element of the Qur’an’s self-understanding is that it contains the same message that was given to previous prophets and messengers. Muhammad is the last of a chain of prophetic figures going back to Adam, and for this reason he is called the “seal of the prophets” (33:40). Similarly, the Qur’an is the last of a series of books that communicate God’s will for humanity. Among its predecessors are the Torah and Gospel, given to Moses and Jesus, whose followers tampered with and distorted the revelations they received. This necessitated the sending down of the Qur’an, which accurately preserves God’s message and validates the previous revelations. “This Qur’an could not have been brought forth by anyone other than God. It is a confirmation of what came down before it and an explanation of the book. There is no doubt that it is from the Lord of the worlds” (10:37; cf. 2:89; 3:81; 4:47; 5:48; 35:31; 46:12).

#### A HEAVENLY PROTOTYPE

The Qur’an says it was revealed on the “Night of Power,” and Islamic tradition has designated the twenty-seventh of the month of Ramadan as the date on which Muhammad began to receive revelations (97:1). Copies of the Qur’an have existed since the earliest decades of Islam, but Muslims believe the urtext, or origin, of all those written copies resides with God in heaven. This idea derives from a number of related passages that have been interpreted collectively as describing a heavenly book that contains a comprehensive record of the revelation God has sent down to humanity.

One set of texts refers to the *umm al-kitāb*, literally “mother of the book,” which is generally considered to be a way of designating the source of all the scriptures. “God erases and confirms whatever He wishes, and the *umm al-kitāb* is with Him” (13:39; cf. 4:7; 43:4). According to the most common way of understanding this verse, it describes a heavenly archetype of the Qur’an and other revelations that is with God.



“Truly, We sent it down on the Night of Power.” (Qur’an 97:1).

An allusion to this otherworldly copy of the text is often seen in 85:21-2, a somewhat ambiguous passage that could simply be a reference to a written copy of the Qur'an. "Truly, this is a glorious Qur'an on a preserved tablet." Because it is not explicitly stated, those who see this as a comment about the *umm al-kitāb* argue from inference that it refers to the prototype found in heaven. A third text that factors into this discussion is 56:77-78, with its reference to a book that is "hidden" or "protected" (*maknūn*). "It is a noble Qur'an, in a hidden book."

Taken together, these references to a hidden, preserved book that is the "mother" of the Qur'an form the basis for the belief in its heavenly origin and ongoing existence with God. According to a tradition found in other Islamic sources, on the "Night of Power" the whole Qur'an was sent down from the *umm al-kitāb* to the lowest portion of heaven just above the earth, and from there Gabriel communicated portions of it to Muhammad during the last twenty-two years of his life. The notion of a heavenly book has been a factor in the debate over whether or not the Qur'an is created, a topic that will be discussed below.

#### INIMITABILITY

An important belief held by Muslims about the Qur'an is that it is sui generis and incapable of being imitated. A set of passages often referred to as the "challenge verses" have been influential in the development of this

idea. These texts are directed toward the enemies of Muhammad who criticized and mocked the Qur'an as being nothing more than human speech, akin to the poetry of the pre-Islamic period. The passages respond to this claim by challenging these opponents to duplicate the Qur'an by coming up

*Unlike English, Arabic uses different forms for the second person singular and plural. To avoid confusion, translations in this book will often indicate when the addressee is Muhammad and not a group of people.*



with a text like it. "If they say, 'He has invented it,' say (Muhammad), 'Then bring about ten invented *sūras* like it and call on whoever you can besides God, if you are speaking the truth'" (11:13; cf. 2:23; 10:38; 17:88; 52:33-34).

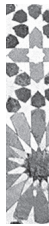
The Arabic term used to describe the inimitability of the Qur'an is *i'jāz*, which derives from the same root as the word for a miracle (*mu'jiza*). According to this doctrine, the language of the Qur'an is unsurpassable and impossible for any human being to replicate. During the third and fourth centuries of the Islamic era (ninth/tenth centuries C.E.), there was much debate within the Muslim community regarding key elements of the faith, including the nature of the Qur'an. One of the main groups

involved in these discussions was the Ash`arites, a prominent theological movement that was very influential in shaping the future direction of Islamic theology and piety. By the latter part of the tenth century c.e., they had successfully lobbied on behalf of the inimitability of the Qur'an, and it has continued to be part of mainstream Muslim belief into the present day.

#### CREATED OR UNCREATED?

Another debate that was raging during the same time as the one about the inimitability of the Qur'an centered on whether the Qur'an was created or uncreated. This dispute emerged in part as a result of the idea mentioned above that there is a heavenly copy of the Qur'an that resides with God. Some argued that this means the Qur'an has existed with God from eternity and is therefore uncreated, while others countered that it is not coeternal with God but a created entity that is dependent upon the divine will for its existence.

The group most commonly associated with the idea of a created Qur'an was the Mu`tazilites, who were often pitted against the Ash`arites on matters of faith and doctrine. This issue was no different, as the Ash`arites argued in favor of the view that the Qur'an is uncreated.



*One of the main differences between the Ash`arites and the Mu`tazilites concerned the role of reason. While the former group maintained that revelation was the starting point and reason must cohere to it, the Mu`tazilites held that reason must inform and influence belief.*

The Mu`tazilites countered that to hold such a position would be a form of dualism because it suggests that the Qur'an shares the eternal nature, which is reserved only for God. The debate intensified when the caliph al-Ma'mun, in the first half of the ninth century c.e., ruled that all judges had to publicly state their belief in a created Qur'an.

The controversies surrounding the inimitability and created/uncreated nature of the Qur'an are examples of the theological disputes Muslims were engaging in during the early centuries of Islam over issues related to God and divine revelation. Eventually, the Ash`arite position in favor of the Qur'an being uncreated became the dominant one, and that has been the majority view within Islam ever since. But there continue to be Muslim voices that speak in favor of a created Qur'an and call for a reopening of the discussion.

## Studying the Qur'an

Because of the important role Islamic tradition ascribes to the third caliph, `Uthman, in establishing the canonized Arabic version of the Qur'an, it is often referred to as “the `Uthmanic text.” Although there are a number of variant readings of the Qur'an that show differences in matters like the use of vowels, most modern copies of the text are the same and are based on the Royal Egyptian edition that was published in 1924 under the auspices of al-Azhar University. In addition to the text of the Qur'an itself, a number of additional books and other materials are frequently consulted that assist scholars in their analytical work.

### Tools

Over the centuries, many study tools and resources have been developed to facilitate the task of studying and interpreting the Qur'an. These aids are similar to those found in related disciplines like biblical studies, and include lexicons, concordances, grammars, commentaries, and general introductions. Three that are unique to study of the Qur'an are connected to the events of Muhammad's life—the *sīra*, the *ḥadīth*, and the *asbāb al-nuzūl*. These resources are valuable because they often help to contextualize the content of the Qur'an by connecting passages to specific moments during the Prophet's lifetime. In this book, references will sometimes be made to “extraqur'anic sources,” and these three are among the most important in that category.

#### THE *SĪRA*

The term *sīra* refers to a genre of literature whose main aim is the presentation of a biographical account of Muhammad's life. Very often, such works also include information about God's relationship with humanity prior to Muhammad's time and stories about the companions of the Prophet and the early caliphs who ruled after his death. They are a combination of narratives, poetry, lists, writings, and speeches meant to provide background on events of importance to the Muslim community.

Many *sīra* works have been written throughout history on into the present day, but the most important is that of Ibn Ishaq, who died in 767 c.e. His was a three-volume compilation that began with the creation of the world, traced the lives of the prophets, and concluded with a description of Muhammad's life and times. Ibn Ishaq's complete work has not survived, but it is known to us through citations in other sources and through the work of his editors, especially Ibn Hisham (d. 830), who limited its scope to Muhammad and events associated with him. Another well-known scholar



whose writings preserve portions of Ibn Ishaq's *sīra* is al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), a prominent exegete and historian who will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter. As their dates of death indicate, all of these individuals lived long after Muhammad's time and were not eyewitnesses to any of the events they report.

The *sīra* literature commonly links Qur'an passages to events in Muhammad's life and in this way establishes a context for many passages whose historical circumstances would remain a mystery if one were to rely solely on the text of the Qur'an. Usually the text in question is no more than a verse or two, and its connection with the Prophet's life is typically made in one of two ways. In some cases, the *sīra* describes the starting point as the revelation of a particular verse, which then causes Muhammad to act or speak in a certain way. More commonly, things occur in the opposite order as an event occurs and then a verse is revealed in response to it. The latter type is sometimes referred to as an "occasion of revelation," a type of writing that will be discussed below. The frequent references in the *sīra* to the historical contexts related to particular Qur'an passages have been a valuable aid in efforts to establish the chronological order of the text.

In addition to the way it historicizes verses, the *sīra* literature is also useful for study of the Qur'an because it sometimes explains or comments upon particular aspects of the text. It does this in different ways, including by clarifying the meanings of problematic passages or words, identifying unnamed people in the text, and providing additional information that gives important background to a particular story. An example of this is seen in the reference in 18:83 to an enigmatic figure referred to as "the two-horned one" (*dhū al-qarnayn*), who is identified by Ibn Isham as Alexander the Great.

#### THE ḤADĪTH

The early Muslim community turned to the Prophet Muhammad as a model when looking for guidance on how to behave and live. Upon his death, his family members, companions, and others who knew him personally shared their memories of what he did and said while he was still alive. These stories eventually began to circulate among members of the wider community and became very influential in shaping ideas about proper Muslim behavior.

The word *ḥadīth*, an Arabic term meaning "report" or "account," can refer either to one of these prophetic traditions individually or to the entire group of them. Each is composed of two parts, a chain and a body. The chain (*isnād*) is a list of names that traces the history of transmission

of the report. The standard formula is “A heard from B who heard from C . . . ,” always ending with Muhammad himself. The body (*matn*) is the tradition itself, which recounts something the Prophet did or said.

Many thousands of these traditions were in circulation in the centuries following Muhammad’s death, and by the ninth century c.e., some individuals had begun to study and collect the *ḥadīth* material. Several collections are considered to be authoritative, with the two most important being those of al-Bukhari and Muslim, who both died around the year 870. Each contains thousands of *ḥadīth* that cover topics as diverse as prayer, revelation, business contracts, and menstruation.

A science of *ḥadīth* criticism was developed that analyzes the traditions to determine their reliability and how accurately they reflect Muhammad’s words and deeds. The chain of transmitters is particularly important in this regard. If a chain is composed of trustworthy individuals and it has no chronological gaps, it is more likely to be deemed authentic. Each *ḥadīth* is placed in one of several categories, like “sound,” “acceptable,” and “weak,” based on careful study.

The role of the *ḥadīth* in Islam has been a point of debate, particularly in recent years. Because the authenticity of a tradition is determined by its chain of transmitters, a spurious *ḥadīth* can be legitimated simply by attaching to it a chain that is known to be reliable. The possibility of such abuses has led many scholars, especially non-Muslims, to question the value of the *ḥadīth* to provide useful data about the Prophet Muhammad’s life and times. Some Muslim scholars also view them cautiously, with some rejecting them completely because of questions about their reliability. Nonetheless, the prophetic traditions continue to play a vital role in the faith lives of many Muslims into the present day.

Each of the *ḥadīth* collections has sections that treat various aspects of the Qur’an. For example, in al-Bukhari’s collection there are portions on prostrating during recitation of the Qur’an (which contains 12 *ḥadīth*), prophetic commentary on the Qur’an (501 *ḥadīth*), virtues of the Qur’an (80 *ḥadīth*), and holding fast to the Qur’an (95 *ḥadīth*). In addition, there are other traditions that treat such topics as what Muhammad experienced while receiving revelations, how the Qur’an was collected, how the Qur’an should be recited, and the proper way to interpret particular passages in the Qur’an. For example, one *ḥadīth* relates a tradition that explains Muhammad’s practice when it came to performing an extra prostration while reciting certain sections of the Qur’an. “Whenever the Prophet recited the *sūra* that contained the prostration of recitation, he used to prostrate. Then, we would also prostrate, but some of us could not find a place to do so.”

Like the *sīra* literature, the *ḥadīth* material also provides information on the historical context of particular verses and passages that can be of assistance in determining the chronological sequence of the Qur'an. The collections contain sometimes lengthy descriptions of events and circumstances that were the cause or result of a revelation to Muhammad. For example, 24:11-17 makes reference to a lie that was told about someone and admonishes members of the community for not exposing it as a falsehood. The details of the episode remain unreported in the Qur'an, but the *ḥadīth* connect it to an incident involving Muhammad's wife `Ā'isha, who was wrongly accused of marital infidelity. Similarly, 17:1 is generally understood to contain a veiled reference to Muhammad's miraculous night journey from Mecca to Jerusalem on the back of a winged beast. This episode in the Prophet's life, which has been widely celebrated throughout history, is not mentioned explicitly in the text but is described in detail in the *ḥadīth*.



The two parts of a *ḥadīth*: (1) the *isnād*, or chain of transmitters, which can cover generations of Muslims; (2) the *matn*, or body, which recounts something the Prophet Muhammad did, said, or observed.

#### THE ASBĀB AL-NUZŪL

Another genre of writing that shares features with the *sīra* and the *ḥadīth* is the “occasions of revelation” (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) material. These are reports that identify the cause, place, and time of a given portion of the text of the Qur'an. They follow a more or less set formula that contains all or most of the following components: (1) an event or set of circumstances; (2) a place; (3) one or more individuals; (4) a reference to time; (5) a statement that the elements listed above led to a divine revelation; (6) the Qur'an passage that was revealed.

One of the first and most well-known examples of this genre is “The Book of the Occasions of Revelation of the Qur'an,” by al-Waḥīdī (d. 1075). In this work, al-Waḥīdī compiles background information on the historical context of passages in more than eighty chapters of the Qur'an. To collect these reports, he likely drew from oral traditions, legal scholarship, exegetical works, and sources like the *sīra* and the *ḥadīth*.

### Chronology

This discussion of the *sīra*, *ḥadīth*, and *asbāb al-nuzūl* has highlighted the importance of chronology in study of the Qur'an. As noted above, the most basic chronological analysis of the text has centered on the distinction between the Meccan and Medinan material. The first to attempt to identify chapters in this fashion was Ibn `Abbas (d. 688), who is considered

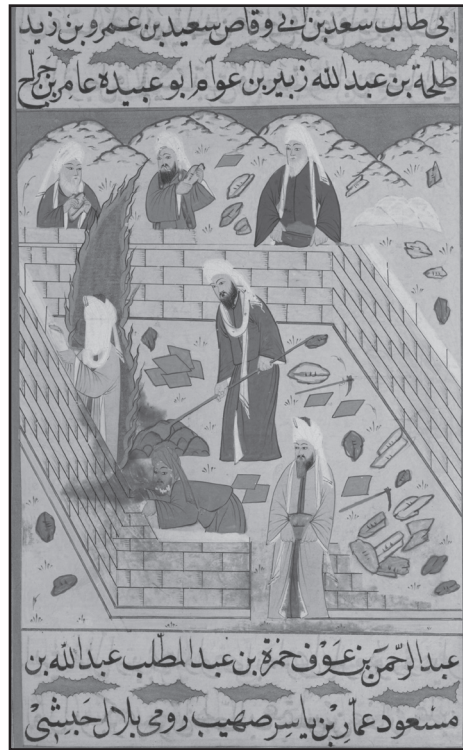


FIGURE 3 Muhammad (surrounded by a flame) and his followers build a mosque in Medina.

to be one of the founding figures of study of the Qur'an. His designation of each chapter as either Meccan or Medinan was broadly accepted and is still found in most copies of the text.

In the standard division, 24 of the Qur'an's 114 chapters are from the Medinan period. In general, the Meccan chapters are briefer and are characterized by calls to convert to monotheism and warnings of the punishment that awaits those who fail to do so. This material attempts to persuade its audience by appealing to proofs found in the natural world, and it also refers to the lives and messages of the earlier prophets, like Moses, to validate Muhammad's prophetic identity. The Medinan chapters, by contrast, are longer and tend to focus more on issues related to the establishment and social organization of the expanding Muslim community. Because the Medinan chapters tend to be longer and are therefore found first in the book's canonical ordering, one can get a better sense of the chronological development of the Qur'an by reading it backward, beginning with chapter 114.

The subdivision of the Meccan chapters into three periods (early, middle, and late) was a further refinement that was introduced by Western non-Muslim scholars. This began to take shape in the mid-nineteenth century, when methods related to historical-critical study of the Bible were emerging. In fact, a number of key figures in European Qur'an scholarship during this time were also well-respected Bible scholars. Drawing upon advances in biblical scholarship, they sought to develop a more detailed understanding of how the Qur'an's chronological development reflected the changing contexts and circumstances of Muhammad's prophetic career.

Since the nineteenth century, various proposals have been put forward that attempt to lay out the chronological order and sequence of the Qur'an's contents. While no single one has gained universal acceptance, the one suggested by the German scholar Theodor Nöldeke (d. 1930) has been widely recognized as a plausible reconstruction of the development of the text. Another scholar whose work is frequently discussed is Richard Bell (d. 1952), a Scotsman who rejected the traditional division into Meccan and Medinan chapters and proposed an alternative system that dated smaller sections and individual verses. Bell's scholarship has been criticized for being idiosyncratic and incoherent, but many believe he has raised important questions about the complex nature of the Qur'an's formation and transmission.

There is a similar lack of agreement among scholars about when the text of the Qur'an was written down. John Burton (b. 1929), also from Scotland, dates it very early by arguing that the Prophet Muhammad himself helped to establish the final form of the Qur'an's consonantal text. At the other end of the spectrum, the American John Wansbrough (d. 2002), who taught in London, contended that the Qur'an was the product of Jewish, Christian, and other sources that did not reach its final form until two centuries after Muhammad. The work of these four, as well as that of other prominent Western scholars, has been more influential among their fellow non-Muslims than among Muslims.

#### ABROGATION

An important feature of the Qur'an that is understood through appeal to chronology is the fact that it appears to contradict itself in places. This is especially the case regarding certain legal matters and practices. Some passages conflict with other ones by prescribing different laws or guidelines for the same set of circumstances. This situation has important theological implications for the Muslim community because the presence of contradictory material in divine revelation could suggest that God's will is subject to change or is imperfect.

To address this and similar concerns, a theory of abrogation was developed to explain how the ruling of one verse is able to replace that of another. This is determined on the basis of chronological order—later verses negate and abrogate earlier ones. The designation given to this field of study of the Qur'an is *al-nāsikh wal-mansūkh* (“the abrogating and the abrogated”), which is the title of the work written by al-Qāsim ibn Sallām (d. 838) that first addressed the topic. Abrogation rests on the notion that the Qur'an's message is sometimes modified or expressed in a different way in order to fit the changing circumstances to which it is addressed. In other words, it recognizes that divine revelation is always directed to a particular context and situation.

A good example of how abrogation works can be seen in the Qur'an's legislation regarding drinking wine. There are three references to the consumption of wine in the text, and each one says something different. In 4:43 believers are told they should not pray if they are intoxicated, but the verse does not explicitly forbid them from drinking wine. But then in 2:219a, the pros and cons of consuming wine and gambling are mentioned, and the verse comes down in favor of avoiding both activities. “They ask you (Muhammad) about wine and games of chance. Say, ‘There is both great sin and benefit for people in them, but their sin is greater than their benefit.’”

That recommendation to abstain is an outright ban in 5:90-91, which forbids Muslims from drinking wine and engaging in other questionable practices. “Oh believers, wine, games of chance, idolatry, and divining with arrows are vile things that are Satan's works. Avoid them so you may prosper. Satan wants to instill enmity and hatred among you with wine and games of chance, and so prevent you from remembering God and praying. Will you not cease these activities?”

The Qur'an's inconsistency in what it teaches about wine is resolved through appeal to abrogation. The third text is held to be among the last ones revealed to Muhammad, and so it is taken as the Qur'an's final and definitive statement on the matter. The other two passages give evidence of the fact that prior to that point alcohol consumption was permitted but frowned upon until it was eventually prohibited by later revelation.

As important as abrogation is for interpretation of the Qur'an, the term appears relatively few times in the text. The Arabic root from which it is derived is *n-s-kh*, which means “to abrogate, annul.” Words from that root are found four times in the Qur'an, with the most important being 2:106, which describes God's decision to substitute certain verses with others. “Whatever revelation we abrogate [*nansakh*] or cause to be forgotten We replace with something better or similar to it. Do you (Muhammad)

not know that God has power over everything?” More than any other, this passage led to the development of the concept of abrogation.

Another verse that is sometimes cited in support of abrogation is 16:101: “If We substitute one revelation in place of another—and God knows best what He sends down—they say, ‘You are inventing it,’ but most of them do not know.” Here the Arabic root *nasakha* is not used, but the reference to God replacing one revelation with another is very much in line with the way the process of abrogation is commonly understood.

### Interpretation

Study of the Qur’an began in the earliest years of Islam. Over time, various subdisciplines of qur’anic study emerged that were referred to as “the sciences of the Qur’an” (*‘ulūm al-qur’ān*), including lexicography, grammar, rhetoric, and exegesis. The two terms most commonly used to describe exegetical study of the Qur’an are *tafsīr* and *ta’wīl*. The word *tafsīr* comes from an Arabic root that means, “to interpret, explain,” and it can refer both to exegetical study of the Qur’an in general and to a specific work or commentary that is the result of such study.



*Shi`a Islam emerged soon after Muhammad’s death. Its central figure is Ali (d. 661), the Prophet’s cousin and son-in-law who was also his fourth successor as caliph. The main difference between Shi`a and Sunni Muslims centers on authority within Islam, with the Shi`a maintaining that leadership was denied them when control of the community was not passed on to members of Ali’s family. As a minority group that constitutes approximately 20 percent of Muslims worldwide, Shi`a have often had to use ta’wīl in their interpretation of the Qur’an in order to explain and support their beliefs and practices.*

The Arabic word *ta’wīl* stems from a root that conveys the sense of returning or going back to the beginning of something. In the Qur’an, it often describes the ability to interpret a dream or a story and sometimes refers to a mysterious interpretation that goes below the surface level. For this reason, a distinction is sometimes made between *tafsīr* as describing the interpretation of a text that has only one meaning and *ta’wīl* as a type of interpretation that chooses one among several possible meanings of a text. This section presents a brief overview of important figures and developments in the history of interpretation of the Qur’an, with greater attention paid to recent scholars whose work has been marked by innovative approaches to the text.

## MUSLIM SCHOLARSHIP

Islamic tradition teaches that the Prophet Muhammad and his companions engaged in interpretation of the Qur'an during their lifetimes, but written exegetical works did not begin to appear until the second century of the Muslim era. The initial efforts did not attempt detailed analysis of passages, and they tended to rely on paraphrase and to discuss the contents of the Qur'an in relation to the tales and legends that were circulating in Arabia from Jewish and other sources.

Among the first sciences of the Qur'an to emerge were grammar and philology, and scholars skilled in these disciplines often tried to make sense of rare or problematic words and phrases present in the text. In this early period, little attempt was made to present a verse-by-verse analysis of the Qur'an. Such a method was introduced with the work of al-Ṭabarī (d. 923), mentioned above, whose magnum opus was titled "The Compilation of Clarity Regarding the Interpretation of the Verses of the Qur'an." It drew upon the results of previous scholarship and included discussion of the prophetic traditions found in the *ḥadīth* in its analysis of the text of the Qur'an. It is a massive work that pays attention to grammar, philology, rhetoric, and meaning, and it remains an invaluable tool. Among other medieval exegetes whose commentaries have been influential are al-Zamakhsharī (d. 1144), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1210), Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Bayḍāwī (d. 1315), Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373), and Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505).

The successors to these prominent figures in the Muslim exegetical tradition frequently cite them, and sometimes later commentaries have been nothing but a compilation of the views and opinions of early and medieval scholarship. Nonetheless, some scholars and the methods they have employed have taken study of the Qur'an in interesting new directions that have introduced fresh ways of thinking about the text and its interpretive possibilities.

Sometimes these innovative approaches have arisen in response to sociopolitical contexts that have raised questions about the role Islam and the Qur'an should play in society. A significant factor in this regard has been the strong presence, some would say dominance, of Western non-Muslim culture throughout the world, including in Muslim-majority areas. Western influence in the form of colonialism, science and technology, and media has occasionally had an impact on views regarding how the Qur'an should be read and interpreted.

Some have argued that analysis of the Qur'an needs to be informed by the rationalism and scientific worldview that developed in Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Two leading figures in this movement were the Indian Sayyid Ahmad Khan (d. 1838) and Muhammad



Abduh (d. 1905) of Egypt. Working in two different contexts, these two reformers shared the opinion that the modern Muslim world must somehow embrace the findings of science and adapt to contemporary cultural norms and attitudes, or run the risk of becoming irrelevant.

This is seen in the principle Khan called “the criterion of conformity to nature.” He argued that there can be no contradiction between the work of God as found in creation and the word of God as revealed in the Qur’an. He believed the truth of any religion, including Islam, can be found in how well it conforms to nature. Consequently, when there is a disagreement between what the Qur’an teaches and what creation teaches through the senses and reason, one should accept the latter as correct and reject the former. This led Khan to deny any references in the Qur’an to miraculous events because they are in conflict with the laws of nature. He also questioned the historical accuracy of the *ḥadīth*, and so he rejected use of the prophetic traditions in interpretation of the Qur’an.

Muhammad Abduh thought Qur’an scholars needed to be addressing the great social problems of their day rather than debating the fine points and minutiae of grammar and philology. From his prominent position as rector of al-Azhar University and chief judge of Egypt, he and his student Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) opposed colonialism while arguing for the compatibility of Islam and science.

He made a distinction between the essential core of Islam and its general principles, a distinction that influenced how he read the Qur’an. Abduh believed that only its essential core is timeless and unchanging, and so only those parts of the Qur’an that constitute that core are relevant for all times and places. The general principles are adaptable and temporary because they were meant only for the context of seventh-century Arabia. Abduh said this distinction must be kept in mind when interpreting the Qur’an, and it formed the basis for his reform efforts in Egypt that addressed issues like women’s education and the negative effects of polygamy.

The reformist views of Khan, Abduh, and others like them were controversial at times and not accepted by all. Nonetheless, they called attention to the social implications of the Qur’an’s message and raised important questions about the text’s role in the world. In this way, they began to develop a methodological framework for future generations of modernists who continue to argue that the effects of study of the Qur’an should be felt in the town square and not just in the scholar’s library.

A development in study of the Qur’an that has a parallel in biblical studies is the adoption of tools and methods from the field of literary theory to analyze the sacred text. This approach is most closely associated

with Amīn al-Khūlī (d. 1967), who taught at the Egyptian University (now the University of Cairo). He and his students have approached the Qur'an with the same questions one would ask of any other piece of literature in their exploration of various narratological, structural, and semiotic dimensions of the text. Literary study of the Qur'an has not been received as warmly or practiced as widely as literary study of the Bible. The legitimacy of the method has sometimes been questioned by those in positions of authority, and some who have employed it have been reprimanded by the guardians of tradition and orthodoxy. Literary study of the Qur'an is still undertaken, but those who engage in it tend to do so cautiously.

Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) was a prominent Pakistani intellectual who taught for many years at the University of Chicago. Much of his scholarship addressed the Qur'an, and he believed that a basic theme of the text concerns how humans are to behave. In order to determine what the Qur'an has to say on this topic, Rahman attempted to outline its ethical system. He felt it was necessary to do this because legal scholars throughout history have consistently denied the historical context of the revelation of the Qur'an, leading to an archaic and ossified system of law that does not reflect the essence of its message.

To address this problem, Rahman argued for the importance of historical criticism of the Qur'an that would take seriously its originating context. At the heart of the method, he proposed what he called a "double movement" for interpreting the Qur'an. The first movement required a return to the original revelation of the passage being studied in order to establish its context during Muhammad's lifetime. According to Rahman, the specific content of the passage should not then simply be applied to the modern day, as is often done. Instead, the interpreter must identify the general principle that underlies it, like equality, justice, or improving the status of women. In the second movement, that general principle is then applied to the modern context in a way that is appropriate given the norms and standards of society. In this way, it is the essence of the Qur'an's teaching, rather than the specific form it took in seventh-century Arabia, that is being passed on to future generations. The distinction Rahman makes here, what he refers to as the "ideal" and the "contingent" messages of the Qur'an, is not unlike the one Muhammad Abduh makes between the essential core and general principles of Islam.

The Tunisian scholar Mohammed Talbi (b. 1921) is another modernist who has proposed a new way of reading the Qur'an. Like the others mentioned above, he believes that recognizing the difference between the text's historical context and our own is the key to proper interpretation. He suggests that the "analogical reading" of the Qur'an that has come to

dominate be replaced by an “intentional reading.” An analogical reading views the present by way of the past and insists that the modern world must conform to and replicate how things were done in the past. Talbi criticizes this approach and says all it does is force onto later times outmoded ways of thinking and acting that were acceptable in the seventh century.

An intentional reading, on the other hand, is based on a text’s orientation. It is a dynamic approach that does not stop at the literal words of the text but tries to discern its general tendency and then acts accordingly. Talbi uses the example of slavery to illustrate how an intentional reading works. Nowhere does the Qur’an explicitly prohibit slavery, but in a number of places it insists that slaves be treated humanely or encourages that they be given their freedom. According to Talbi, the text’s intent is to abolish slavery, but the context of seventh-century Arabia was not yet ready for such a move. But prohibiting slavery was acceptable and appropriate for later generations, who then fully realized the Qur’an’s orientation by outlawing the practice. Talbi believes that an interpretation that pays attention to the Qur’an’s intent and inclination in this manner enables the community to evolve as it acts in accord with God’s will. It is no longer simply perpetuating the way things were done in the past but tapping into the Qur’an’s capacity to creatively respond to new circumstances and changing contexts.

This is just a representative sampling of some of the innovative and interesting work being undertaken by Muslim scholars that gives a sense of possible future directions in study of the Qur’an. To it might be added the many contributions of feminist scholars who are exploring issues related to gender in the text. Scholars like

Asma Barlas (Pakistan, b. 1950), Riffat Hassan (Pakistan, b. 1943), Fatima Mernissi (Morocco, b. 1940), and Amina Wadud-Muhsin (United States, b. 1952) are among the leading figures in this growing field, and some of their work will be discussed in the chapter on gender and sexuality.



*The three principles of reformist interpretation of the Quran: (1) It is a mistake to continue to try to replicate the past; (2) There is a distinction in the Qur’an between its unchanging core and the changing principles it articulates; and (3) The Qur’an must be read contextually.*

#### NON-MUSLIM SCHOLARSHIP

Christians and other non-Muslims have studied and commented on the Qur’an ever since their initial contact with it in the first century of the Muslim era. Most of the early writings were polemical in nature and were characterized by attempts to denigrate Islam and its sacred text or

to show the Qur'an's dependence on the Bible and other Judeo-Christian sources. Their work shows little, if any, familiarity with Muslim exegesis of the Qur'an, and it would not qualify as scholarship by modern standards.

Critical study of the Qur'an in the West began in the nineteenth century and was centered in the German-speaking world. Theodor Nöldeke was mentioned above as a scholar whose work has had a major influence on reconstruction of the chronological development of the Qur'an.

*Among the most prominent Christians to discuss the Qur'an prior to the rise of critical scholarship were John of Damascus (eighth century), Peter the Venerable (twelfth century), and Nicholas of Cusa (fifteenth century). Of the three, Nicholas of Cusa had the most positive view of Islam and the Qur'an.*



He built upon and refined the scholarship of Gustav Weil (d. 1889), who was the first to propose the three-part division of the Meccan material that has

become widely accepted. Much of the scholarship since then has been undertaken in response to the work of Weil and Nöldeke, to either develop it further or to offer alternatives to it. An example of the latter type is seen in Richard Bell (d. 1952), also mentioned earlier, who proposed a radically different understanding of the Qur'an that rearranged its chapters and the material within them.

In addition to its chronological ordering, another area of interest in nineteenth-century non-Muslim study of the Qur'an was its linguistic features, especially philology and lexicography. This was commonly done through an examination of the meanings of individual words and phrases, both in the Qur'an and within the wider context of Arab literature and poetry. Similarly, key concepts and themes of the text were explored with particular attention given to their precise meanings and points of origin.

This interest in linguistic issues continued into the twentieth century, which also saw the rise of new areas of inquiry, including foreign (non-Arabic) words in the Qur'an, the variant readings of the text that are reflected in manuscripts and other sources, and the relationships between the other monotheistic faiths and the Qur'an. The latter area has been of particular interest. While some scholars continued to be motivated by a desire to demonstrate the Qur'an's derivation from or dependence upon the Bible and other Jewish/Christian sources, others have tried to come to a better understanding of how and why the traditions and beliefs shared by the monotheistic religions are expressed in diverse ways in various historical and literary contexts.

Non-Muslims were not the first to pay attention to these issues. The history of Islamic exegesis demonstrates that Muslim scholars have

frequently commented on topics like the foreign vocabulary and alternative readings of the Qur'an and its relationship to Judaism and Christianity. In recent times, non-Muslims scholars have begun to pay more attention to Muslim exegesis, and they have drawn upon sources like the *tafsīr* and *asbāb al-nuzūl* to inform their own study. This has given a broader perspective to their work and has helped to ground it in the rich heritage of Muslim scholarship on the Qur'an.

At the same time, new methods continue to be developed and employed by both Muslims and non-Muslims that put study of the Qur'an in conversation with work being done in other disciplines. Insights and approaches from fields like literature, anthropology, archaeology, and sociology have been adopted that allow scholars to study the text of the Qur'an in innovative and creative ways. Many of these efforts have led to a deeper understanding of the contents of the Qur'an and an appreciation of its role throughout history.

Although it is an obvious point, it is worth noting that non-Muslim scholars of the Qur'an have a different relationship to the text than their Muslim colleagues do. Because they are not members of the community that believe it to be the word of God, they approach and study the Qur'an from a perspective that is not informed by faith. As a result, non-Muslims sometimes ask questions or reach conclusions that many Muslims would not. At times, some Muslims might find non-Muslim scholarship to be flawed or disturbing. Those who view it in theological terms might even label it sinful.

That is an inevitable outcome when dealing with matters of faith about which not all people agree. But non-Muslims (and Muslims) can avoid many of the pitfalls that might result if they adopt an attitude of respect and tolerance. These qualities typify much of the work being done on the Qur'an by non-Muslims, but not all of it. Some authors adopt an inflammatory and hostile tone that belittles Islam and disparages its sacred text. They are driven by agendas and biases that dominate their work so much that it cannot be considered scholarship. Unfortunately, works of this sort are often pitched to a popular audience and are written for mass consumption, and their wide dissemination only ends up reinforcing stereotypes and misperceptions about the Qur'an and Islam.

## Experiencing the Qur'an

Just as Jews and Christians relate to and interact with the Bible in various ways and on many levels, the same can be said about Muslims and the

Qur'an. It is a book, but its role in their lives extends far beyond that of mere words on a page. It instructs them on matters of morality and faith, but the Qur'an is more than just a source from which a theoretical set of ethics is derived. It also has a cultural identity and tangible presence that leaves its mark in many ways, both obvious and subtle. Throughout their lives, Muslims encounter their text in assorted contexts and settings that shape their overall view and understanding of it. In this section, some of the ways Muslims experience the Qur'an are identified and briefly discussed.

### Mosque and School

The Qur'an has always played a central role in the spiritual formation and education of Muslims. The Prophet Muhammad instructed his followers via sermons he preached in the mosque attached to his home in Medina, thereby establishing a practice that continues to this day. During the noon prayer service each Friday, a sermon is delivered prior to the formal prayer ritual. The address is called a *khutba*, and the one who gives it is the *khāṭīb*, who is often the *imām* responsible for leading the community in prayer.

A typical sermon is made up of two parts. The first includes statements of praise of God, a request for blessings on Muhammad, the Muslim creed, and at least one verse from the Qur'an. This part of the sermon is usually theological in nature and is meant to encourage or admonish the congregation on matters of faith. The second part normally has a more



FIGURE 4 Boys reciting the Qur'an in a madrasa in Kashmir.

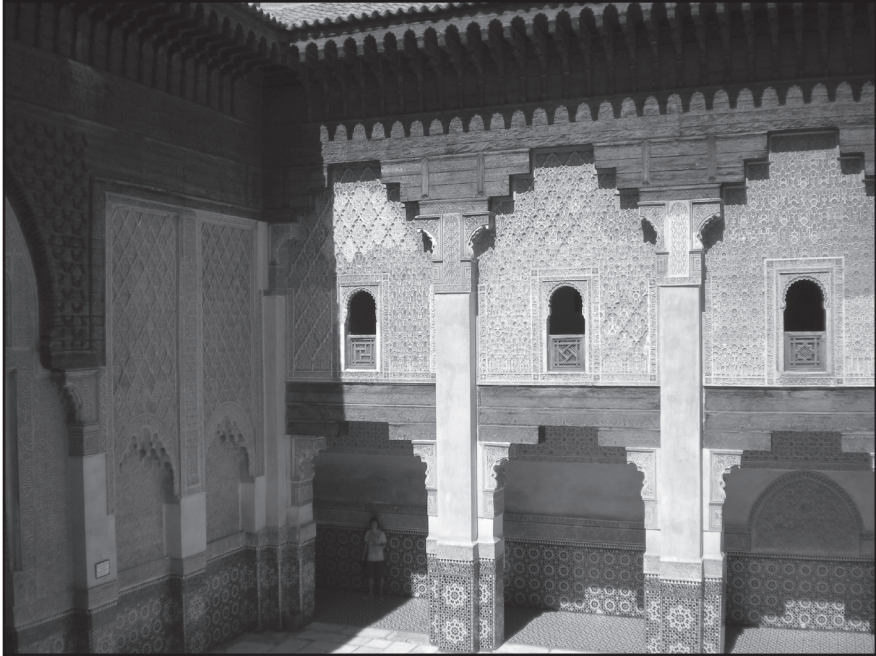


FIGURE 5 *Courtyard of the Ben Youssef Madrasa in Marrakesh, Morocco. (Photo by Debra Bartelli.)*

political or practical tone and discusses some issue or current event that directly affects the Islamic community. The sermon normally concludes with a call for peace, blessings on the Prophet and his companions, and a prayer for all Muslims.

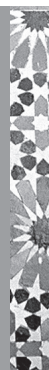
In addition to those of the Friday noon prayer service, formal sermons are also given on other occasions. One is delivered on each of the two major feast days of the Islamic calendar, the “Feast of Fast-Breaking” (*ʿīd al-fiṭr*) and the “Feast of Sacrifice” (*ʿīd al-ʿaḍḥā*), and a sermon is also often given when the community gathers to address some major concern like a drought or other natural disaster. In addition, sermonlike addresses are sometimes delivered outside the structure of formal Friday prayer, and these are referred to as “lessons” or “instructions.” On all of these occasions, the Qur’an is read and commented on with the purpose of enriching the faith lives of those present.

Study of the Qur’an originally took place within the context of the mosque, either in groups or in a one-on-one format through a master-student relationship, and this educational system lasted more than a millennium. Variations on these models have endured in places, but in many countries public and private schools are now the primary means by which

young people are taught about Islam and the Qur'an. In many of these institutions, students learn classical Arabic through the text of the Qur'an. Most universities in the Muslim world offer opportunities for advanced training in the sciences of the Qur'an, and there are also numerous programs associated with mosques, institutes, and schools that provide less formal study of the text.

Many non-Muslims associate Qur'an study with the *madrasa*. A word that means "place of study," the *madrasa* traces its roots to the eleventh century and originally described an educational institution that was associated with a mosque. They developed into centers of learning that provided male students an education in various disciplines related to study of Islam. The university system was established throughout much of the Islamic world during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and this development led to a decline in the influence and importance of the *madrasa*. Nonetheless, they continue to exist in some areas, and the less expensive costs associated with them tend to attract students from lower socioeconomic groups and rural communities.

*The main feasts of the Muslim year are associated with two of the Five Pillars of Islam. The Feast of Fast-Breaking (ʿīd al-fiṭr) takes place at the end of Ramadan, the ninth month of the Muslim calendar, during which Muslims fast from dawn to dusk. The feast lasts for several days, and it is an opportunity for people to share meals, exchange gifts, and engage in communal prayer. The Feast of Sacrifice (ʿīd al-ʿaḍḥā) is associated with the pilgrimage to Mecca that takes place every year during the twelfth month. The last activity for the pilgrims entails sacrificing an animal and sharing it in a meal. As they do so, all Muslims around the world also participate in this ritual and celebrate the feast with their families and friends.*



## Ritual

Recitation of the Qur'an is an essential component of the obligatory prayers of Islam. During each of the five prescribed prayer times, the opening chapter of the Qur'an (*al-fātiḥa*) is recited as well as other sections of one's own choosing. Beyond the use of the Qur'an in this formalized setting, Muslims also engage the text in a variety of other ways that might be considered ritualistic. Included among these is reading/reciting the Qur'an in the home or somewhere else outside the mosque as an act of personal or communal devotion. In order to facilitate this practice, the text of the Qur'an is divided into thirty parts so it can be read in its entirety over the course of a month.



Other rituals include kissing the Qur'an, requesting a blessing (*baraka*) or protection from the Qur'an, and weeping as the Qur'an is read. This latter practice is mentioned specifically in the text. "Say (Muhammad), 'Whether you believe it or not, those who were previously given knowledge fall down prostrate on their faces when it is recited to them, and they say, "Praise be to our Lord! His promise has been fulfilled." They fall down on their faces weeping, and it builds up their humility'" (17:107-9).

Muslims are encouraged to recite certain verses or chapters at particular times. According to tradition, the Prophet Muhammad regularly recited the last three chapters of the Qur'an on various occasions, including when he went to sleep at night and when he was sick. As often occurs with such prophetic practices, this was subsequently adopted by many later Muslims.

Some rituals involving the Qur'an have generated controversy and debate over their legitimacy. This is the case with the practice of kissing the cover of the book and then holding it in one's right hand over one's head in order to receive a blessing, which some consider to be an improper use of the text that lacks support in prophetic traditions.

It is not a requirement in Islam that one seal an oath by placing the right hand on a copy of the Qur'an, but this is sometimes done. Some jurists maintain that such an act is not permissible because one should swear only by God, while others are of the opinion that swearing by the Qur'an is virtually the same thing because it contains God's words. Another practice commonly found in Muslim communities is recitation of the Qur'an upon the death of a person, and chapter 36 is commonly read on such occasions. While legal scholars disagree on the permissibility of reciting the text over the body of the deceased, family and friends often gather after the burial—which takes place the same day as the death according to Islamic custom—to listen to recitation of the Qur'an by someone trained in that skill.

### Popular Practices

Throughout history, Muslims have sometimes used the Qur'an in efforts to achieve certain effects like healing, blessing, protection, and pregnancy. This talismanic use of the text is based on belief in the power of the Qur'an and its ability to transform lives. Many of these expressions of popular religiosity have endured into the present day, but they were more common in earlier periods, when they reflected the religious mindset and worldview of a larger percentage of the populace.

Some examples of these practices have already been mentioned, like seeking a blessing (*baraka*) by holding the Qur'an over one's head or



FIGURE 6 *Mosque lamp from the fourteenth century inscribed with verses from the Qur'an.*

saying the *basmala* prior to engaging in everyday activities. Books and manuals from the medieval and modern eras discuss many other activities that express belief in the transformative power of the Qur'an. In some cases, the text must be spoken aloud in order to realize the desired effect. Particular passages are to be recited to address specific problems like bodily ailments, marital infidelity, and childlessness. Other texts are effective in combating the evil eye, insomnia, or loneliness. One ritual entails reciting the Qur'an over food, which is then eaten to ensure the physical and spiritual health of a person. A similar practice calls for reciting the Qur'an over water so that a sick person might bathe in it and be healed.

At other times, the mere physical presence of the Qur'an is all that is required. A copy of the text is often prominently displayed in a home, automobile, or place of business as a way of seeking success or protection. Plaques, posters, trays, and other objects that contain passages from the Qur'an decorate many homes and offices for the same reason. Some believe that to eat or drink from a cup or plate that has a text from the Qur'an written on it will bring good fortune to an individual.

Similar beliefs exist regarding what a person wears. Pendants containing a small copy of the Qur'an, as well as amulets, necklaces, and other

jewelry inscribed with verses from it, are sometimes worn to guarantee personal safety. Articles of clothing, especially shirts and tunics, have been decorated with text from the Qur'an in order to secure the good health and protection of the one who wears it. The latter were often worn as a type of spiritual armor by soldiers in battle and others who put themselves in harm's way.

Through these and similar practices, Muslims, like members of other faiths, attempt to bridge the gap between the human and the divine. God's word is brought into the realm of the everyday, and it is called upon to assist and accompany people as they negotiate the demands and challenges of human existence. In this way, the message remains transcendent, but its effects on the here and now are acknowledged.

### Recitation

The Qur'an is meant to be heard, not simply read. Sources indicate that within the first few decades after Muhammad's death, a system of recitation of the Qur'an was developed that drew upon the conventions of Arab music and melody current at the time. The term that refers to the rules and guidelines that govern recitation of the Qur'an is *tajwīd*, which establishes such things as the vocalization (use of vowels) of the text, which words and syllables should be stressed, and where pauses are permitted. Textbooks and manuals that present the details on *tajwīd* have been available since the fourth Islamic century. The set of rules they contain traces the roots of *tajwīd* to the time of Muhammad and standardizes how the text is recited.

There are different ways of reciting the text of the Qur'an, depending on which of seven accepted readings one adopts. The differences among them are not considerable and for the most part are limited to matters like variations in the choice and length of vowels in certain passages. The precise number of acceptable alternate readings is sometimes debated, but the number seven is found in a frequently cited *ḥadīth* in which Muhammad tells his followers that they are free to use whatever reading is easiest for them.

It takes many years of training and practice to become skilled in the art of Qur'an recitation. Its best practitioners are well-known throughout the Muslim world, and festivals and competitions are regularly held in which reciters, known as *qurrā'*, display their talents. Some go on to achieve the exalted status of the *ḥāfiẓ*, one who has memorized the entire text of the Qur'an.

## Textual Adornment

Virtually all modern copies of the Qur'an contain only text, but manuscripts from earlier periods are often visually stunning works of art. This is especially the case after the tenth century C.E., when paper began to replace parchment as the primary medium for manuscripts. The practice of adding ornamentation to copies of the Qur'an is similar to what occurred with the Bible, but with an important difference. Biblical manuscripts, especially within the Christian community, are often illustrated with pictures that represent individuals, locations, or scenes described in the text. Such depictions are never found in Qur'an manuscripts, which adhere to Islam's prohibition against drawing the human form and other types of representational art. Qur'an manuscripts were illuminated, rather than illustrated, with the most common style being the use of geometric designs and patterns throughout the text.

The reasons for the use of illumination are both aesthetic and practical. In addition to enhancing the physical attractiveness of the manuscript, some forms of ornamentation also improve its readability by indicating where a verse, chapter, or section of the Qur'an begins and ends. Because many manuscripts lack verse numbers, a gold symbol, usually a pyramid of dots or a rosette, became the usual way to indicate where a verse ends. Manuscripts also commonly use markers to set off groups of five or ten verses—usually a teardrop-shaped mark for five and a circle for ten—placed both in the text and in the page margin. This system is very helpful for locating a particular passage in longer chapters. Many copies of the Qur'an are divided into seven or thirty parts to facilitate the reading of the text over the course of a week or a month, and these divisions are also indicated by decorative symbols in the manuscripts.

Chapter divisions are marked in a number of different ways in the manuscripts. Sometimes breaks between chapters are indicated by a blank space, but usually some kind of geometric design or decoration is found. This block of illumination often also contains information on some of the details of the chapter, like its name, whether it is Meccan or Medinan, and how many verses it contains. These chapter divisions can be quite ornate and adorned with decorations.

Other features of Qur'an manuscripts serve primarily artistic purposes. In later periods, the text on each page is sometimes enclosed in a frame of ornamental decoration composed of lines and geometric patterns. Elaborately designed frontispieces and back pages are often included that attest to the creativity and imagination of those who designed and executed the manuscripts. Bindings of leather or wood sometimes

protect the manuscript, and these covers are usually decorated with carving, stamping, or metalwork.

Depending on the dimensions of the material on which it is written, the amount of illumination it contains, and the size of its script, a single copy of the Qur'an might be contained in one manuscript or it might be a multivolume work. The libraries and museums of the world contain examples in many different shapes and lengths. The high quality of the artwork and attention to detail found in many of them highlight what a time-consuming and expensive process producing a Qur'an manuscript must have been. Those involved in the effort were undoubtedly motivated by a desire to create a work of high artistic quality, but the theological significance of the outcome also must have been apparent to them. In addition to being artists, they were charged with the task of giving visual expression to the word of God.

### Art and Architecture

It was noted above that Islam does not allow representational art, particularly depictions of the human form. The Qur'an does not say anything specific about the topic, but the prohibition is probably an extension of core Islamic teachings like its condemnation of idolatry, a practice

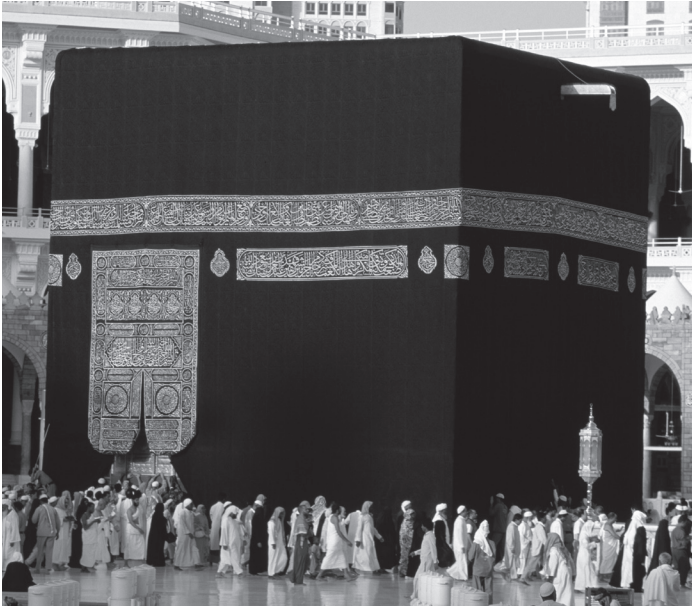


FIGURE 7 *The Ka'ba covered by the kiswa containing verses from the Qur'an.*

the Qur'an criticizes (5:90; 6:74; 7:138; 14:35-36), and the belief that only God can create life. In this light, a person who produces representational art therefore runs the risk of either making something that might lead to

*The kiswa is a black cloth covering placed over the cube-shaped Ka'ba, which is at the center of the Sacred Mosque in Mecca. Each year it is replaced by a new one that is elaborately decorated with verses from the Qur'an.*



sin or trying to engage in an activity that is reserved only for God.

The proscription against such representations led to the use of script as a frequent element of Islamic art. Not surprisingly, the text of the Qur'an is often used for such purposes, especially when the object

or building it adorns has a religious function. The use of the Qur'an for artistic purposes goes back to the first century of the Islamic era, and some of the most impressive examples of it that have survived are found on mosques and monumental buildings.

The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem is one of the most famous buildings in the world associated with Islam, and it provides an excellent example of use of the Qur'an in architecture.

*The prohibition against representational art applies primarily to the Qur'an and decoration found in mosques. Artwork depicting the human form, including that of the Prophet Muhammad, is sometimes found in other contexts.*



It was built in the late seventh century C.E., and many Qur'an passages are contained in the more than seven hundred feet of inscriptions that run along the base of its dome. The *bas-mala* is repeated seven times, and the largest section contains several texts that summarize the Qur'an's teach-

ings about who Jesus was and what constitutes true faith (3:18-19; 4:171-72; 19:33-36).

An interesting aspect of these Qur'an citations is that they do not agree perfectly with the official version that is the basis for translations into English and other languages. These discrepancies have been explained in various ways. Some suggest that the Qur'an passages on the Dome of the Rock may have been communicated orally rather than taken from a written copy of the text. Others believe that the variation might reflect the existence of multiple versions of the Qur'an that were circulating at the same time.

Certain Qur'an passages appear with great frequency in Islamic art and architecture. Because it makes a direct reference to mosques, 9:18 is commonly found in houses of worship. "The ones who frequent God's places of worship are those who believe in God and the Last Day, maintain prayer, pay alms, and fear only God. These may hope to be among those

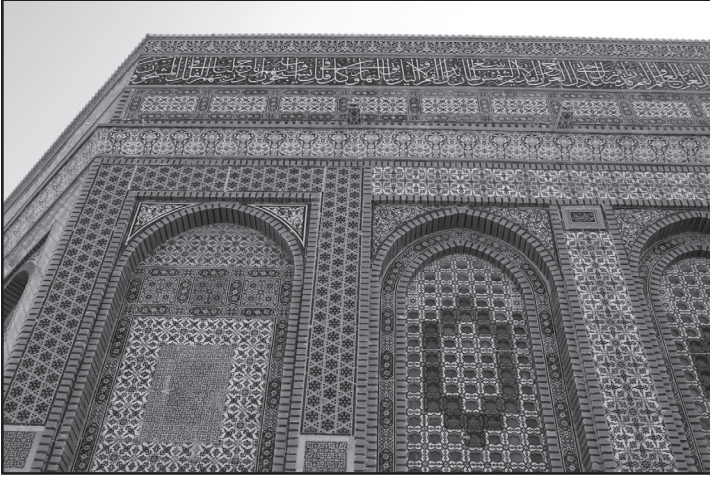


FIGURE 8 *The Dome of the Rock, with Arabic text inscribed around the base of the dome.*

who are rightly guided.” The lengthy “Light Verse” of 24:35, so designated because it compares God to light, is often found in a mosque around the border of its *mihrāb*, a niche in the wall that indicates the direction toward Mecca for prayer. Another section of the Qur’an often used for decorative purposes is chapter 112, which provides a brief summary of Muslim belief about the nature of God. “Say, ‘He is God the One, God the eternal. He has begotten no one, nor was He begotten. He has no equal.’”



FIGURE 9 *The mihrāb of the Great Mosque in Cordoba, Spain.*

## Technology

Technological advances have enabled the Qur'an to have a presence in society that was unimaginable in prior times. The text, in whole or in part, is now available in a variety of forms and media that have transformed the way people are exposed to and interact with the Qur'an. The first experience of technology's impact occurred in the nineteenth century, when publishers began to mass produce the Qur'an by means of the printing press. This development was not without its controversies, particularly in the early stages, when copies were often of inferior quality and marred by errors. But the advantages of mass production and distribution were immediate and undeniable—the sacred text was now available to all at a fraction of the price it would have cost to produce a manuscript.

This allowed the public to have a completely different relationship with the Qur'an than it had in the past. Direct access to the text was no longer the exclusive privilege of the scholar and those wealthy enough to afford it. For the first time in history, anyone was able to own a copy of the Qur'an, and those who were literate, regardless of their level of formal training, could read the text and study its contents. Large-scale publication of the Qur'an had a profound impact on Muslims outside the Arabic-speaking world, as translations into the vernacular were now much more accessible and affordable. This “democratization” of the Qur'an has enabled it to play a larger role in the everyday lives of Muslims everywhere.

The effects of the printing revolution have been obvious and permanent. The Qur'an is present throughout the world in virtually every

language and is one of the most widely distributed books in history. But the Qur'an is also now available through other means beyond the traditional book format. Radio and television have been vehicles for communicating the text for a long time through the broadcast of Qur'an recitation and other forms of religious programming, with some stations devoted exclusively to that purpose. Countless tapes, CDs, and DVDs that contain recordings of the Qur'an are sold every year, and Qur'an ringtones for one's cell phone are now available.

There has been a virtual explosion of the Qur'an's presence on the Internet in recent times. Audio and written forms of the text are available on thousands of



FIGURE 10 *A digital version of the Qur'an.*



websites, in both Arabic and translation. Besides their being searchable, these sites incorporate commentary from ancient and modern scholars into the text so that the user is given a sense of how the Qur'an has been studied and interpreted. Some websites provide information on the Qur'an, while others contain images, video, and audio related to it. This is to say nothing of the thousands of conversations and exchanges about the Qur'an taking place in cyberspace on any given day among people all over the world via the Internet and email.

Whenever the tools of an emerging technology—be it the printing press, television, or the Internet—have come in contact with the Qur'an, the encounter has presented new challenges and opportunities for the Muslim community. In each case, the boundaries of the text are expanded and redefined as people begin to experience it in ways they had not in the past. Inevitably, some respond cautiously and warily to the changed circumstances, while others welcome them. This is, of course, a situation that is not unique to Islam. Like all faiths, it will continue to wrestle with the practical, theological, and ethical implications of technological progress for its adherents, traditions, and texts.

### key TERMS }

*allāh; al-qur'ān; al-islām; muslim; Ka`ba; hijra; sūra; āya; al-fātiḥa; bas-mala; muṣḥaf; Night of Power; umm al-kitāb; i`jāz; sīra; ḥadīth; asbāb al-nuzūl; abrogation; tafsīr; ta`wīl; khuṭba; madrasa; tajwīd; miḥrāb*

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