



Islam & World Events

2. WHAT IS THE QURAN?



A page from the Arabic Qu'ran

Introduction to the Quran

The word "Quran" comes from the Arabic verb, *qara'a* meaning "to recite", "to read". According to Mohammed, the command given to him was by the angel Gabriel three times, in the cave of Hira was "to *qara'a*" or read. Mohammad replied, "What shall I read"? Thus, the word for Mohammad's revelation is the Quran.

The words in the Quran are linked to the 23-years of Mohammad's call, from A.D. 610 to his death in 632. The revelations, in the Quran, according to Islam are from an identical book located in Heaven, revealed through the angel Gabriel.

What is the Qu'ran

The Quran, according to Islam, is the very word of Allah, revealed through Gabriel to the prophet Mohammed. The language of the Quran is Arabic, the dialect belonging to the Quraish tribe, the tribe entrusted with the city of Mecca, and the tribe Mohammad belonged to.

The Quran is divided into 114 chapters, called *surah(s)*, these chapters, with the exception of the first are generally arranged according to length. Surah 2, *the Cow* is the longest and the last ones the shortest.

The chapters of the Quran also have a title derived from a word within the text; these titles do not necessarily have a link to the subject matter in the Surah, from which it is derived. The titles have names such as "The Cow" (Surah 2), "Women" (Surah 4), "The Bee" 16 (Surah 16).

In the beginning of the Surah is a short introduction prayer, the *Basmalah*, which says "In the name of God, the Compassionate the Merciful". This prayer is at the start of every surah except the ninth.

The verses of the Surah, called *ayah* vary in size (pl, ayat), the earliest are the shortest, the longer Surahs have longer verses with less rhyme. The Quran, in the Arabic is written in rhyme prose, *saj*, a style similar to the prose used by the *kāhins*, or soothsayers of Arabia.

The Quran is presented as the speech of God (Allah), who is speaking, first person through Gabriel to Mohammad. Allah refers to himself as "We" and Mohammed is the one told, "to say". Mohammed is directed to tell the message Allah has given him, he is Allah's final messenger to the world, the "seal of the prophets" according to the Quran. Here is an example from the Quran Surah 2, the Cow. Notice, Allah is the "We" speaking telling Mohammad to "Say".

35. And We said: O Adam! Dwell thou and thy wife in the Garden, and eat ye freely (of the fruits) thereof where ye will; but come not nigh this tree lest ye become wrongdoers. 36. But Satan caused them to deflect there from and expelled them from the (happy) state in which they were; and We said: Fall down, one of you a foe unto the other! There shall be for you on earth a habitation and provision for a time. Surah 2:35-36

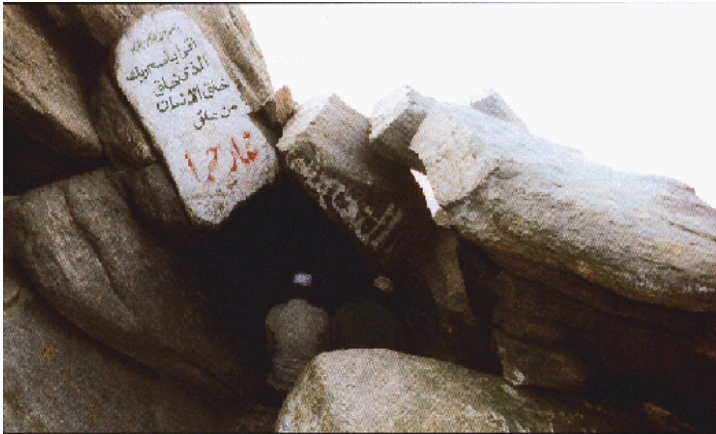
94. Say (unto them): If the abode of the Hereafter in the providence of Allah is indeed for you alone and not for others of mankind (as ye pretend), then long for death (for ye must long for death) if ye are

truthful. 95. But they will never long for it, because of that which their own hands have sent before them. Allah is Aware of evildoers. Surah 2:94-95¹

How was the Quran revealed?

The Quran is the written text, of the revelation, which Mohammad claimed he received from Allah. The account of how Mohammed first received the revelation of the Quran is recorded in the traditions of the prophets, the *Hadith*² (*Traditions*) and by early Islamic historians, who explain the events.

In the year A.D. 610, Mohammad was forty-years old and in the cave of Hera mediating when he believed he received his call to prophet-hood. This prophetic call was the beginning of the Quran, for it would be the same angelic force, who spoke to Mohammed in the cave, who would later reveal to him parts of the Quran, the "book in heaven". Muslim historian *Muhammad H. Haykal*, who reports the events of Mohammad's call, according to Islamic traditions writes,



The Cave Hira

One day, while Muhammad was asleep in the cave, an angel approached with a sheet in his hand. The angel said to Muhammad, "Read." Muhammad answered in surprise, "What shall I read?" He felt as if the angel had strangled and then released him and heard once more the command, "Read." Muhammad's reply was, "What shall I read?" Once more he felt the angel strangling and then releasing him, and he heard him repeat the command, "Read."

For the third time Muhammad answered, "What shall I read?" fearful that this time the strangling would be stronger. The angel replied, "Read in the name of your Lord, the Creator, Who created man of a clot of

blood. Read! Your Lord is most gracious. It is He who taught man by the pen that which he does not know [Qur'an, 96:1-5.], Muhammad recited these verses, repeating them after the angel who withdrew after they were permanently carved upon his memory. Thus the earliest of the biographies reported, and so did ibn Ishaq³

According to the Haykal, Mohammad was not sure what happened, he thought the "angel" might have been a demon, who possessed him, something he always feared.

Stricken with panic, Muhammad arose and asked himself, "What did I see? Did possession of the devil which I feared all along come to pass?" Muhammad looked to his right and his left but saw nothing. For a while he stood there trembling with fear and stricken with awe. He feared the cave might be haunted and that he might run away still unable to explain what he saw. He walked in the area around the mountain asking himself who could have commanded him to read.⁴

Mohammed went home and confided to his wife, Khadija, about what just happened in the cave, he confessed he feared he might have become possessed, she reassured a scarred Mohammed. Khadijah then went to her Christian cousin, Waraqah ibn Nawfal, who was in the process of translating the gospel (Injil) into Arabic, for advice regarding Mohammad. Upon hearing the events regarding Mohammad, Waraqah declared him a prophet to the Arabic people. Mohammad believed Waraqah, he took his declaration to heart, proclaiming his new message to family and friends.

As Muhammad entered his house he asked Khadijah to wrap him in blankets. She could see that her husband was shivering as if struck with high fever. When he calmed down, he cast toward his wife the

¹ Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meanings of the Holy Quran*, English translation surah 2

² record of the traditions or sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, revered and received as a major source of religious law and moral guidance, second only to the authority of the Qur'an, or scripture of Islam.

³ Muhammad H. Haykal, *The Life of Muhammad* Translated by Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, Islamic Book Trust, 2002, Pg. 73

⁴ *Ibid*, Pg. 74

glance of a man in need of rescue and said, "O Khadijah, what has happened to me?" He told her of his experience and intimated to her his fear that his mind had finally betrayed him, and that he was becoming a seer or a man possessed..... she said to him, "Joy to my cousin! Be firm. By him who dominates Khadijah's soul I pray and hope that you will be the Prophet of this nation. By God, He will not let you down. You will be kind to your kin; your speech will all be true; you will rescue the weary; entertain the guest and help the truth to prevail. "Reassured, Muhammad thanked Khadijah and was grateful for her faith. Exhausted, he fell asleep..... Khadijah ran to her cousin Waraqah ibn Nawfal who, as we saw earlier, had already become a Christian and had translated part of the Evangel into Arabic. When she finished telling him what Muhammad had seen and heard and of her compassionate and hopeful response to her husband, Waraqah broke into these words: "Holy, Holy! By Him who dominates Waraqah's soul, if your report is true, O Khadijah, this must be the Great Spirit that spoke to Moses. Muhammad must be the Prophet of this nation.⁵

From this point forward, the "angel" who appeared to Mohammad would come back over the remaining 22-years of his life, from forty to age sixty-two, giving him further revelations. The 114 Surahs recorded in the Quran, are linked to the periods in Mohammad's life, until his death in A.D. 632.

The method of revelation was not always the same according to Islamic tradition, over the years to follow, when Mohammad received revelation of the Quran, he would faint, foam at the mouth and tremble at times. The book *True Guidance Part IV*, records the *Hadiths* regarding the manner which Mohammad received his revelations,

The authoritative *Hadith* (Tradition) relate that Muhammad used to faint whenever revelations came to him. It is claimed he used to act like a drunkard (See *Al-Sirah al-Nabawiya*, by Ibn Hisham; chapter on how the revelation came). In his book, *Al-Quran al-Majid*, Darwaza claims that Muhammad was taken out of this world. Abu Huraira says that "whenever Muhammad received revelation, he was overwhelmed by trembling." Another account says: "He became distressed, foaming at the mouth and closing his eyes. At times he snorted like a young camel" (Ahmad b. Hanbal I, 34, 464, VI. 163)....Umar b. al-Khattab said: "When revelation descended upon Muhammad, one could hear it near his face like the humming of bees" (Ahmad b. Hanbal, I. 34)⁶

Mohammed and his attempted suicide during the period of silence (610-613)

Following the first appearance of the "angel" and the proclamation of his "Call", there was a period of silence for about three-years. During this period, Mohammad was distraught and often thought about suicide, wishing to throw himself off the mountains of Hira or Qubays. Hykal writes,

Muhammad expected the revelations to guide his path from day to day, but they subsided. Gabriel did not appear for some time, and all around him there was nothing but silence. Muhammad fell into solitude, separated from himself as well as from the people. His old fears recurred. It is told that even Khadijah said to him, "Does it not seem that your Lord is displeased with you?" Dismayed and frightened, he returned to the mountain and the cave of Hira'. There, he prayed for God fervently, seeking assiduously to reach Him. Particularly, he wanted to ask God about the cause of this divine displeasure. Khadijah did not dread these days any less than Muhammad, nor was she any less fearful. Often Muhammad wished to die, but he would again feel the call and the command of his Lord which dispelled such ideas. It was also told that he once thought of throwing himself down from the top of Mount Hira' or Mount Abu Qubays, thinking what good was this life if his greatest hope therein was to be frustrated and destroyed? Torn between these fears on one hand and despair on the other, revelation came to him after a long interval.⁷

⁵ Ibid, Pg. 75

⁶ The True Guidance Part IV, Light of Life Publishers, Villach Austria, Translated from the 1981 Arabic Version, 1994. Pg. 9

⁷ Muhammad H. Haykal, The Life of Muhammad Translated by Ismail Raji al-Faruqi, Islamic Book Trust, 2002, Pg. 79

History of the Quran

Mohammad's death

The Quran was revealed to Mohammad during a 23-year period, A.D. 610 to 632. Mohammad's death in 632, was not expected, he was 62-years old when he died. Muhammad gave his revelations orally and did not write them down, the claim being, he could neither read nor write, the prophet was the mouthpiece of Allah, there was no need to have written scripture.

In the year 632, Mohammad made his last pilgrimage to Mecca, a few month later on June 8th, 632 Muhammad died by the side of his young wife, Aisha who cradled the prophet as he passed. Muslim traditions as recorded by *Marmaduke Pickthall*, blame Mohammed's death on a Jewish captive of Kheyber Fortress in North Arabia, a recent conquest of Islam.

It was at Kheybar that a Jewess prepared for the Prophet poisoned meat, of which he only tasted a morsel without swallowing it, then warned his comrades that it was poisoned. One Muslim, who had already swallowed a mouthful, died immediately, and the Prophet himself, from the mere taste of it, derived the illness, which eventually caused his death. The woman who cooked the meat was brought before him. When she said that she had done it on account of the humiliation of her people, he forgave her.⁸

Collection of the Quran

During Mohammad's life, the revelations were not collected into one collection but were scattered, written on palm-leaf stalks, thin white stones bones and the memory of men. In the year 633, after the death of Mohammad, during the reign (Caliphate)⁹ of Abu Bakr (A.D. 632-633) the Muslims were involved in the *Battle of Yamamah*¹⁰, where many of the *hafiz* died on the battlefield. The hafiz, Muslims who knew the words of the Quran by heart, were an invaluable resource for Islam, because they preserved the Quran, in their heart. Their death brought concern the Quran could fade away, if those who memorized it died. Zaid bin Thabit was Mohammed's scribe, who was appointed to the task of collecting the scattered Surahs. The Hadith from Bukhari reports the following,

Narrated Zaid bin Thabit:

Abu Bakr As-Siddiq sent for me when the people! of Yamama had been killed (i.e., a number of the Prophet's Companions who fought against Musailama). (I went to him) and found 'Umar bin Al-Khattab sitting with him. Abu Bakr then said (to me), "Umar has come to me and said: "Casualties were heavy among the Qurra' of the! Qur'an (i.e. those who knew the Quran by heart) on the day of the Battle of Yalmama, and I am afraid that more heavy casualties may take place among the Qurra' on other battlefields, whereby a large part of the Qur'an may be lost. Therefore I suggest, you (Abu Bakr) order that the Qur'an be collected." I said to 'Umar, "How can you do something which Allah's Apostle did not do?" 'Umar said, "By Allah, that is a good project. "Umar kept on urging me to accept his proposal till Allah opened my chest for it and I began to realize the good in the idea which 'Umar had realized." Then Abu Bakr said (to me). 'You are a wise young man and we do not have any suspicion about you, and you used to write the Divine Inspiration for Allah's Apostle. So you should search for (the fragmentary scripts of) the Qur'an and collect it in one book)." By Allah If they had ordered me to shift one of the mountains, it would not have been heavier for me than this ordering me to collect the Qur'an. Then I said to Abu Bakr, "How will you do something which Allah's Apostle did not do?" Abu Bakr replied, "By Allah, it is a good project." Abu Bakr kept on urging me to accept his idea until Allah opened my chest for what He had opened the chests of Abu Bakr and 'Umar. So I started looking for the Qur'an and collecting it from (what was written on) palmed stalks, thin white stones and also from the men who knew it by heart."¹¹

⁸ Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Glorious Koran*, Everyman Library, 1992, Pg. 14, Introducton

⁹ Caliphates were the deputies of successor of Mohammed, Abu Bakr the father of Mohammad's wife, Aisha was the first Caliphate.

¹⁰ The Battle of Yamamah involved a man called Musaylimah who claimed equal prophethood with Mohammad, after Mohammad's death Musaylimah was killed at the battle, he is called "the Liar" in Islam.

¹¹ Hadith, Al-Bukhari, <http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/fundamentals/hadithsunnah/bukhari/061.sbt.html>, Volume 6, Book 61, Number 509:

Al-Bukhari who died in A.D. 870, collected Hadiths regarding Mohammad and Islam, his collection is the most respected of the Hadiths in the Muslim world, despite this fact, many

Islam's first five leaders
Mohammad (A.D. 610-632)
Abu Bakr (632-634)
Umar ibn al-Khattāb (634-644)
Uthman ibn Affan (644-656)
Alī ibn Abī Tālib (656-661)

Muslims still hold to the Muslim orthodox theory that the Quran was arranged in the current form under the direction of Gabriel and Mohammad.

The Quran(s) collected and burned

The work of Zaid bin Thabit was not complete because, several years later during the reign of the third Caliph, Uthman (644-656), in the Muslim campaign against Armenia a dispute broke out between the various Muslim groups. The Bukarhi Hadith reports,

Narrated Anas bin Malik: Hudhaifa bin Al-Yaman came to Uthman at the time when the people of Sham and the people of Iraq were Waging war to conquer Arminya and Adharbijan. Hudhaifa was afraid of their (the people of Sham and Iraq) differences in the recitation of the Qur'an, so he said to 'Uthman, "O chief of the Believers! Save this nation before they differ about the Book (Quran) as Jews and the Christians did before." So 'Uthman sent a message to Hafsa saying, "Send us the manuscripts of the Qur'an so that we may compile the Qur'anic materials in perfect copies and return the manuscripts to you." Hafsa sent it to 'Uthman. 'Uthman then ordered Zaid bin Thabit, 'Abdullah bin AzZubair, Said bin Al-As and 'AbdurRahman bin Harith bin Hisham to rewrite the manuscripts in perfect copies. 'Uthman said to the three Quraishi men, "In case you disagree with Zaid bin Thabit on any point in the Qur'an, then write it in the dialect of Quraish, the Qur'an was revealed in their tongue." They did so, and when they had written many copies, 'Uthman returned the original manuscripts to Hafsa. 'Uthman sent to every Muslim province one copy of what they had copied, and ordered that all the other Qur'anic materials, whether written in fragmentary manuscripts or whole copies, be burnt. Said bin Thabit added, "A Verse from Surat Ahzab was missed by me when we copied the Qur'an and I used to hear Allah's Apostle reciting it. So we searched for it and found it with Khuzaima bin Thabit Al-Ansari. (That Verse was): 'Among the Believers are men who have been true in their covenant with Allah.' (33.23)¹²

The point here is important, the Quran by the time of the third Caliph, already had variations in the text, requiring immediate repair. Therefore, all the copies of the Quran throughout the Muslim Empire, had to be collected, burned and replaced with a standardized version of the Quran. This demonstrates not all Qurans were the same, there was a point in time, when the various Qurans were different.

The current version of the Arabic Quran, is the Quran distributed by Uthman, to the various parts of the Muslim world, after the earlier versions were collected and burned.

Themes in the Quran

When reading the Quran, it helps to understand the Surah's period of the "revelation", because the period of "revelation" is related to the content. The German scholar, *Theodore Noldeke* (1860), who wrote *A History of the Quran*, placed the Surahs in their chronological order, based on their content and historical background. The periods have been divided into four distinct era's in Mohammad's "calling"

The *Meccan Period* from (A.D. 610 to 622) is divided into three periods; *early*, *middle* and *late*. Only the fourth period, the *Medina Period* is certain with Muslims.

Early Meccan

These Surah tend to be shorter, Mohammad at first did not attack the Idol worshipers, Mohammad is manly a "Warner" to the people of Mecca. He describes to them the destiny of the lost in Hell and the

¹² Hadith, Al-Bukhari <http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/fundamentals/hadithsunnah/bukhari/061.sbt.html#006.061.510>
Volume 6, Book 61, Number 510:

pleasures of paradise. Mohammad had particular problems with the wealthy Meccans who rejected his message, and mocked him as messenger.

Surah 104. Al-Humaza

1. Woe unto every slandering traducer,
2. Who hath gathered wealth (of this world) and arranged it.
3. He thinketh that his wealth will render him immortal.
4. Nay, but verily he will be flung to the Consuming One.
5. Ah, what will convey unto thee what the Consuming One is!
6. (It is) the fire of Allah, kindled,
7. Which leapeth up over the hearts (of men).
8. Lo! it is closed in on them
9. In outstretched columns.

Middle/Late Meccan

After this period, Mohammad faced greater opposition, he became more argumentative and his Surahs became longer and more detailed in content. Biblical characters from the Old and New Testaments, appear which mirror his rejection. Mohammad associated his suffering and rejection in Mecca, as a sign of a prophet, similar to the biblical prophets, who also suffered rejection.

Surah 17. Al-Israal (Bani Israel) (111 Verses)

1. Glorified be He Who carried His servant by night from the Inviolable Place of Worship to the Far Distant Place of Worship the neighbourhood whereof We have blessed, that We might show him of Our tokens! Lo! He, only He, is the Nearer, the Seer.
2. We gave unto Moses the Scripture, and We appointed it a guidance for the Children of Israel, saying: Choose no guardian beside Me.
3. (They were) the seed of those whom We carried (in the ship) along with Noah. Lo! he was a grateful slave.
4. And We decreed for the Children of Israel in the scripture: Ye verily will work corruption in the earth twice, and ye will become great tyrants.

Medina (622-630)

In September of 622, Mohammad arrives in Medina, where his Surah's take on a much different tone, he becomes the head of an Islamic state. He is to be obeyed, and respected, he is no longer just a "Warner", he is now Allah's representative on earth.

Surah 9. At-Tauba

1. Freedom from obligation (is proclaimed) from Allah and His messenger toward those of the idolaters with whom ye made a treaty:
2. Travel freely in the land four months, and know that ye cannot escape Allah and that Allah will confound the disbelievers (in His guidance).
3. And a proclamation from Allah and His messenger to all men on the day of the Greater Pilgrimage that Allah is free from obligation to the idolaters, and (so is) His messenger. So, if ye repent, it will be better for you; but if ye are averse, then know that ye cannot escape Allah. Give tidings (O Muhammad) of a painful doom to those who disbelieve.

Another clear characteristic of the Medina Surahs is the increasing antagonism between the Jews of Medina and Mohammad. The Jews reject Mohammad's claim of prophet, they are seen as allies of the pagans of Mecca, who work against Mohammad, and therefore against Allah. The Jews become the enemies of Allah and his prophet.

Surah 4. An-Nisaa (177 Verses)

46. Some of those who are Jews change words from their context and say: "We hear and disobey; hear thou as one who heareth not" and "Listen to us!" distorting with their tongues and slandering religion. If they had said: "We hear and we obey; hear thou, and look at us" it had been better for them, and more upright. But Allah hath cursed them for their disbelief, so they believe not, save a few. 47. O ye unto whom the Scripture hath been given! Believe in what We have revealed concerning that which ye possess, before We destroy countenances so as to confound them, or curse them as We cursed the Sabbath breakers (of old time). The commandment of Allah is always executed. Surah 4: 46-47

The new view of the Jews and Christians as enemies begins after the first years of the Medina period. These views, will shape the Muslim views of Jews and Christians in the years to come, as the Empire of Islam meets the west.

