

An Introduction to the Quran

(part 1 of 2): Organization and Meanings



The Quran is the Muslim scripture, that is to say the scripture of the followers of Islam. Islam is the religion established among the Arabs - a people until then largely confined to the Arabian Peninsula - by the Prophet Muhammad in the early seventh century. The Quran was revealed to Prophet Muhammad by God through the agency of the angel Gabriel; this took place partly in Mecca, his hometown, and partly in Medina, where he succeeded in creating a state in an otherwise stateless tribal society. The message was revealed in Arabic, the language of the people it was initially addressed to, even though the message was ultimately for the whole of humanity. The Quran specifically mentions that Muhammad was the messenger to the whole of mankind, and that he is the last messenger to be sent. Thus, the Quran is the final message that supersedes and reiterates the basic religion God ordained for the Jews and the Christians, as well as the Muslims. Today, the total number of Muslims in the world is over a billion, making up almost a fifth of the world's population. For all Muslim communities, whatever their language and wherever they live, the Quran is their scripture.

The Basics

The first thing to understand about the Quran is its form. The Arabic word, 'Quran,' literally means both 'recitation' and 'reading'. Similarly, the Quran was both recited orally and written down in book form. The true power of the Quran remains in the oral recitation, as it is meant to be read aloud and melodiously, but still the verses were written down on available materials as an aid to memorizing and guarding it, and these were collected and ordered in book form both privately and, at a later stage, institutionally. The Quran was not meant to tell a chronological story, and thus, the Quran should not be viewed as a sequential narrative like the book of Genesis. The Arabic book

that goes by the name Quran is about as long as the New Testament. In most editions it is about 600 pages in length.

In contrast to the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, the Quran was issued from the mouth of a single person, who recited what he heard from the angel Gabriel. On the other hand, both the Jewish and the Christian scriptures are collections of many books that were written down by a large number of human beings, and opinions differ as to their status as revelation.

How Is The Quran Organized?

The Quran is composed of 114 parts or chapters of unequal length. Each chapter is called a *surah* in Arabic and each sentence or phrase of the Quran is called an *aaya*, literally 'a sign.' Like the Bible, the Quran is divided into discrete units, referred to as verses in English. These verses are not standard in length or meter, and where each begins and ends was not decided by human beings, but dictated by God. Each one is a discrete act of locution of closed signification, or 'sign', denoted by the word *aayah* in Arabic. The shortest of the *surahs* has ten words, and the longest *surah*, which is placed second in the text, has 6,100 words. The first *surah*, the *Fatihah* ("The Opening"), is relatively short (twenty-five words). From the second *surah* onward, the *surahs* gradually decrease in length, although this is not a hard and fast rule. The last sixty *surahs* take up about as much space as the second. Some of the longer *aayahs* are much longer than the shortest *surahs*.

All *surahs*, except one, begin with *Bisillah hir-Rahman nir-Rahim*, 'In the Name of God, the Most-Merciful, the Compassionate.' Each *surah* has a name that usually mentions a key motto within it. For example, the longest *surah*, *Surah al-Baqara*, or "The Cow", is named after the story of Moses commanding the Jews to offer a sacrifice of a cow, which begins by God saying:

"And remember when Moses said to his people: 'God commands that you sacrifice a cow...'" (Quran 2:67)

Since the various chapters are of various lengths, the Quran was divided by scholars of the first century after the death of the Prophet into thirty roughly equal parts, each part is called a *juz* in Arabic. This division of the Quran was done in order for people to memorize or read it in a more organized fashion, and it has no influence on the original structure, as they are mere marks on the sides of the pages denoting the part. In the Muslim month of fasting, Ramadan, one *juz* is usually recited every night, and the entire Quran is completed in the thirty days of the month.

Translations of Quran

A beginner should know a few points about Quran translations.

First, there is a distinction between the Quran and its translation. In Christian view, the Bible is the Bible, no matter what language it may be in.

But a translation of the Quran is not the word of God, for the Quran is the exact Arabic words spoken by God, revealed to Prophet Muhammad by Gabriel. The word of God is only the Arabic Quran as God says:

"Indeed, I revealed it as an Arabic Quran." (Quran 12:2)

A translation is simply an explanation of the meanings of the Quran. That is why one modern English translation has been titled "The Meaning of the Glorious Quran": it strives only to give the meaning, but falls short, as any translation must, of reproducing the form of the Holy Book. The translated text loses the inimitable quality of the original, so be aware of the degree to which a translation reflects the original message at every level of meaning, and that it will probably not match it. For this reason, all which is regarded as 'recitation' of the Quran is to be done in Arabic, such as the recitation of the Quran in the five daily prayers of the Muslims.

Second, there is no perfect translation of the Quran, and, being human works, each almost always has errors. Some translations are better in their linguistic quality, while others are noted for their exactness in portraying the meaning. Many inaccurate, and sometimes misleading, translations that are generally not accepted as reliable renditions of the Quran by mainstream Muslims are sold in the market.

Third, while a review of all the English translations is out of the scope of this article, some translations are recommended over others. The most widely read English translation is by Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali, followed by that of Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, the first translation by an English Muslim. Yusuf 'Ali's translation is generally acceptable, but his footnote commentary, useful at times, can be odd and unacceptable. Another widespread translation is done by Dr. Hilali and Muhsin Khan called 'Interpretation of the Meaning of The Noble Quran.' Although it is the most accurate, the many transliterated Arabic terms and endless parentheses make it hard to follow and confusing for a beginner. A newer version with more flowing text has been published by Saheeh International, and this is probably a better translation, as it combines both exactness in translation and readability.

Exegesis (*Tafseer* in Arabic)

Although the meanings of the Quran are easy and clear to understand, one must be careful to make assertions about the religion without relying on an authentic commentary. Not only did Prophet Muhammad bring the Quran, he also explained it to his companions, and these sayings have been collected and preserved till this day. God says:

"And We have sent down to you (O Muhammad) the message that you may explain clearly to men what is sent for them..." (Quran 16:44)

In order to understand some of the deeper meanings of the Quran, one should rely upon commentaries which mention these statements of the Prophet as well as his companions, and not upon what they understand from the text, as their understanding of it is limited to their prior knowledge.

A specific methodology exists for exegesis of the Quran in order to extract the proper meaning. The Quranic sciences, as they are called, are an extremely specialized field of Islamic scholarship which requires mastery in multiple disciplines, like exegesis, recitations, script, inimitability, circumstances behind revelation, abrogation, Quranic grammar, unusual terms, religious rulings, and Arabic language and literature. According to scholars of Quranic exegesis, the proper method of explaining the verses of Quran are:

- (i) *Tafseer* of the Quran by Quran.
- (ii) *Tafseer* of the Quran by the Sunna of the Prophet.
- (iii) *Tafseer* of the Quran by the Companions.
- (iv) *Tafseer* of the Quran by Arabic language.
- (v) *Tafseer* of the Quran by ‘opinion’, if it does not contradict the above four sources.

(part 2 of 2): Its Inimitableness and Language

Muslims are absolutely convinced of the greatness and importance of the Quran, which is usually mentioned with epithets like "noble," "glorious," and "pure." What is it that so deeply moves the Muslim when reciting from the Quran, when seeing its verses, or when barely touching it?

The style of the Quran is inimitable and of divine beauty and power. Try as he may, no man can write a paragraph that is comparable to a verse of the revealed Book. This has to do partly with the literary merit of the text and the efficacy of the words - their transforming and saving power - that is inimitable. It moves an illiterate shepherd to tears when recited to him, and it has shaped the lives of millions of simple people over the course of almost fourteen centuries; it has nourished some of the most powerful intellects known to human records; it has stopped sophisticates in their tracks and made pious believers of them, and it has been the source of the most subtle philosophy and of an art which expresses its deepest meaning in visual terms; it has brought the wandering tribes of humanity together in communities and civilizations upon which its imprint is apparent even to the most casual observer.

To recite the *Quran* is the most sublime and edifying occupation for the Muslim, even when he or she does not intellectually understand its words, as is the case with most non-Arab believers. The Muslims’ desire to recite the Quran as beautifully as possible, and the art of *tilāwah*, the proper recitation, has developed into a science. Even when reciting the Book without embellishment, one has to observe certain rules of recitation. The *hafiz*, who

"preserves" the Quran, i.e., knows it by heart, is highly respected, and boys and girls are sent at an early age to the mosque to memorize the 'Book.'

In order not to besmirch the sacred character of the Quran, care should be taken that it is not left in a place where someone may accidentally stand, sit on or otherwise disrespect it; it is extremely disliked to use any book, let alone the Quran, as a prop for holding anything up. When not being read, the Muslim will replace it in the shelf of the bookcase, or on the lectern. Some people wrap it carefully in cloth in order to preserve it and also to be able handle it when not in a state of purity if needed. They also like to ensure that it is placed above other books, and they avoid just letting the Quran lie around. It is absolutely forbidden to take it into the place one urinates or defecates or that is a place of major impurity (toilets, middens, sheepcotes, city sewers, etc.). Even reciting it in such places is a thing not done.

Language of the Quran

The Quranic world view is closely tied to the Arabic language, which, like Hebrew and Aramaic (the language spoken by Jesus), belongs to the Semitic family. The Quran defines itself specifically as an 'Arabic scripture', and the message is shaped to the complex structure of the chosen language, a structure fundamentally different to that of any European tongue. The internal logic of Semitic languages is very different from that of Indo-European languages such as English, Latin, Sanskrit, and Persian. Every Arabic word may be traced back to a verbal root consisting of three, four or five consonants from which are derived up to twelve different verbal modes, together with a number of nouns and adjectives. This is referred to as the triliteral root, and specific words are formed from it by the insertion of long or short vowels and by the addition of suffixes and prefixes. The root as such is 'dead' - unpronounceable - until brought to life, that is to say vocalized, by the vowels, and it is according to their placing that the basic meaning is developed in a number of different directions. The root has sometimes been described as the 'body' while the vowelling is the 'soul'; or again, it is from the root that a great tree grows. Without understanding the meanings and the related concepts of the Arabic words, it is impossible to appreciate the richness of the associated meanings, the difficulty of translating words into English, and the interrelationships among Arabic words that are obvious in the original.

The Muslims' preoccupation with the sublime language of the Quran grew into the study of grammar and rhetoric, especially when non-Arabs entered the fold of Islam in increasing numbers and had to be taught about the peculiarities of the language of revelation. The belief that the Book was untranslatable forced those who embraced Islam to learn Arabic or at least to become acquainted with the Arabic alphabet. Many times, this led nations to actually adopt Arabic as their native languages, as is the case with all Arab nations save the Arabian Peninsula. This had immense consequences for other languages, such as Persian, Turkish, Malay and many others, who adopted the Arabic

script. Quranic sayings and expressions are used as much in high literature as in daily conversations, even among non-Arabs, and Arab non-Muslims.