

The Story of the Quran

(part 1 of 4): God's Final Revelation



Muslims believe the Quran to be God's final revelation. They believe it is the literal word of God, revealed over many years, to His final prophet, Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him. The Quran is full of wisdom. It is full of the wonder and glory of God, and a testament to His mercy and justice. It is not a history book, a storybook, or a scientific textbook, although it contains all of those genres. The Quran is God's greatest gift to humanity – it is a book like no other. In the second verse of the second chapter of the Quran, God describes the Quran by calling it a book whereof there is no doubt, a guidance to those who are pious, righteous, and fear God. (Quran 2:2)

The Quran is core to Islam. Believing in it is a requirement. One who does not believe in the Quran, in its entirety, cannot claim to be a Muslim.

"The Messenger (Muhammad) believes in what has been sent down to him from his Lord, and (so do) the believers. Each one believes in God, His Angels, His Books, and His Messengers. (They say,) 'We make no distinction between one another of His Messengers' — and they say, 'We hear, and we obey. (We seek) Your forgiveness, our Lord, and to You is the return (of all)'." (Quran 2:285)

Islam has two primary sources, the Quran, and the authentic Traditions of Prophet Muhammad, that explain and sometimes expand on that of the Quran.

"And We have not sent down the Book (the Quran) to you (O Muhammad, except that you may explain clearly unto them those things in which they differ, and (as) a guidance and a mercy for a folk who believe." (Quran 16:64)

The Quran was delivered to Prophet Muhammad by the Angel Gabriel and revealed in stages over a period of 23 years.

“And (it is) a Quran which We have divided into parts, in order that you might recite it to men at intervals. And We have revealed it by stages.” (Quran 17:106)

Prophet Muhammad was commanded by God to convey the Quran to all of humankind and the responsibility weighed heavily upon him. Even in his farewell address he called on the people present to bear witness that he had delivered the message.

The Quran explains the concept of God, it explains in detail what is permissible and what is forbidden, it explains the basics of good manners and morals, and gives rulings about worship. It tells stories about the Prophets and our righteous predecessors, and describes Paradise and Hell. The Quran was revealed for all of humankind.

The book in which the Quran (the words of God) are contained in is called *amushaf*. The Quran is considered so unique in content and style that it cannot be translated; therefore, any translation is considered an interpretation of the meanings of the Quran.

When God sent Prophets to the various nations He often allowed them to perform miracles that were relevant to their particular time and place. In the time of Moses magic and sorcery were prevalent therefore Moses' miracles appealed to the people he was sent to guide. In the time of Muhammad, the Arabs, although predominantly illiterate, were masters of the spoken word. Their poetry and prose were considered outstanding and a model of literary excellence.

When Prophet Muhammad recited the Quran – the words of God – the Arabs were moved tremendously by its sublime tone and extraordinary beauty. The Quran was Prophet Muhammad's miracle from God. Muhammad was unable to read or write therefore the Arabs knew that he was unlikely to have produced such eloquent words, but even so some refused to believe that the Quran was the word of God. God therefore challenged them, in the Quran, to produce a rival text.

“And if you (Arab pagans, Jews, and Christians) are in doubt concerning that which We have sent down (i.e. the Quran) to Our slave (Muhammad), then produce a chapter of the like thereof and call your witnesses (supporters and helpers) besides God, if you are truthful.” (Quran 2:23)

Of course they were unable to do so. In contrast to those who questioned the origin of the Quran, many Arabs converted to Islam after hearing the recitation. They knew immediately that such sublime beauty could originate only from God. Even today it is possible to see Muslims moved to tears while listening to or reciting the Quran. In fact some people, unable to understand even one word of the Arabic language are moved by the intrinsic beauty of the Quran.

After establishing that Quran is the word of God and that it is a recitation, it is also important to understand that Quran has remained unchanged for more than 1400 years. Today when a Muslim in Egypt holds his *mushaf* in his hands and begins to recite you can be sure that in far away Fiji another Muslim is looking at and reciting the exact same words. There are no differences. The child in France holding his first *mushaf* is tentatively reciting the same words that flowed from the lips of Prophet Muhammad.

God assures us in Quran that He will surely protect His words. He says, **“Verily, it is We Who have sent down the Quran and surely, We will guard it (from corruption).” (Quran 15:9)** This means that God will guard against anything false being added or any part of it being taken away.^[1] It is protected from tampering and if anyone attempts to distort the meanings of Quran, God will guide someone to expose the deception.^[2] Muslims believe that the previous revelations from God, including the Torah and the Gospels of Jesus were either lost in antiquity, or changed and distorted, so it is a source of comfort to them knowing that God’s words – the Quran – are now well guarded.

God sent down the Quran, from above the heavens, to the Angel Gabriel in the glorious month of Ramadan. The story of how this recitation was revealed and how Quran came to be available worldwide, with an interpretation of the meanings translated into over 100 languages^[3] will be covered in part 2.

Footnotes:

^[1] From the Tafseer of Ibn Jareer al-Tabari

^[2] From the Tafseer of Al-Sa’di

^[3] The Centre for African studies at the University of Pennsylvania claims that the Quran has been translated into 114 languages.

(part 2 of 4): From the Preserved Tablet to Humankind

“And thus, We have sent to you O Muhammad a revelation, and a mercy of Our Command. You knew not what the Book is, nor what is Faith? But We have made it (this Quran) a light wherewith We guide whosoever of Our slaves We will. And verily, you O Muhammad are indeed guiding (humankind) to the Straight Path.” (Quran 42:52)



Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, the final Messenger from God, received the Quran, in two stages.

These perfect words of God were sent down to guide humankind out of the darkness and into the light; they are guidance and a mercy. The Quran – the words of God are perfect words, from a perfect God, to His Creation. On the night known as the ‘Night of Decree’, in the Islamic month of Ramadan, the Quran descended, from the Preserved Tablet^[1] to the Lowest Heaven. It then descended from the heavens to the earth in small stages.

The revelation was delivered to Prophet Muhammad through the Angel Gabriel.^[2] When Prophet Muhammad was around forty years of age he started to spend time in deep reflection. According to his beloved wife Aisha^[3] the love of seclusion was bestowed upon him via vivid good dreams. He would go to the cave known as *Hira* to worship the One God and contemplate life, the universe, and his place in the world.

One night during Ramadan an angel came to him and asked him to read. The Prophet, who was unable to read or write, replied 'I do not know how to read'. The angel then held him forcibly and pressed his chest so hard that he could not bear the pressure. The angel then released Muhammad and asked him once more to read. Again he replied “but I do not know how to read”. The angel held him forcibly three times and Muhammad responded each time that he did not know how to read (or asked what shall I read). The angel then related to him the first words of Quran.^[4]

“Read! In the Name of your Lord, Who has created (all that exists). He has created man from a clot (a piece of thick coagulated blood). Read! And your Lord is the Most Generous, Who has taught by the pen, He has taught man that which he knew not.” (Quran 96:1-5)

After this first revelation, which Muhammad found frightening; he was not visited by the angel Gabriel again for an undetermined amount of time. The next time he encountered him (the angel) he was walking alone. Prophet Muhammad heard a voice from the heavens. When he looked up he saw the angel sitting on a chair between the sky and the earth. Muhammad was afraid and ran home seeking comfort and asking to be wrapped in blankets. The second revelation occurred at this time.^[5]

“O you covered in garments arise and warn the people of a severe punishment...” (Quran 74:1-5)

Over the next 23 years until shortly before Prophet Muhammad’s death, the Quran was revealed in stages. Several reasons have been suggested for this. Some say that it was revealed slowly to offer Prophet Muhammad support and address issues as they arose.

Aisha, the wife of the Prophet, narrates that when asked about how the divine inspiration was revealed Prophet Muhammad replied, **“Sometimes it is like the ringing of a bell, this form of inspiration is the hardest of all and then this state passes after I have grasped what is inspired. Sometimes the**

Angel comes in the form of a man and talks to me and I grasp whatever he says”.^[6] Ibn Abbas described Prophet Muhammad as bearing the revelation “with great trouble and moving his lips quickly”.^[7] As the words of Quran were revealed to Prophet Muhammad he began to commit them to memory.

Memorization was considered important and was widely practised even in the early years of Islam. Prophet Muhammad requested that his companions memorise Quran and used various measures to assure that the revelation was preserved in their memories. According to Ibn Ishaq, compiler of one of the first biographies of Prophet Muhammad, Abdullah Ibn Masood was the first man, after Muhammad, to recite the Quran publicly and on this occasion was severely beaten. Prophet Muhammad’s closest companion Abu Bakr was also known to recite Quran outside his home in Mecca.^[8]

Quran was memorised by the companions during Prophet Muhammad’s lifetime and this tradition has continued through the following generations. Even today Muslims unable to read Arabic memorise the exact same words that were memorised by the Arabs of the 7th century CE. The majority of the Arabs were unlettered, including Prophet Muhammad; however the importance of the written word was well understood.

Preserving the divine revelation was paramount; therefore trustworthy and knowledgeable people memorised and wrote down the words of Quran. These included the four men destined to follow Muhammad as leaders of the Muslim nation and a man named Zaid Ibn Thabit, who would be instrumental in the preservation of Quran for the many generations to follow.

Writing materials were difficult to obtain and in these very early days portions of Quran were written onto animal skins, thin light coloured stones, bones, and even bark. The companions would write down the words of revelation and Prophet Muhammad would listen to the men recite from the written word to make sure there were no mistakes. It could be said that the Quran was written down under the direct supervision of Prophet Muhammad. The Quran was not revealed in order, however the Angel Gabriel instructed Prophet Muhammad on how to compile the Quran in the divinely inspired correct sequence.

Footnotes:

^[1] Lauh Al-Mahfuz (the preserved tablet) is the book in which God wrote the divine decrees and the destiny of all of creation. It was with God before the creation.

^[2] Suyuti’ in *Al Itqan Fi Ulum Al Quran*, Beirut, 1973, Vol. I pp. 39-40 based on three reports from ‘Abdullah Ibn ‘Abbas, in Hakim, Baihaqi and Nasa’i.

^[3] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

^[4] These are the first words that were revealed, not to be confused with the first chapter of Quran, for Quran chapters were not revealed in order.

^[5] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

[6] Ibid

[7] Ibid

[8] Ibn Hisham

(part 3 of 4): A Revelation Well Preserved and Guarded

**“It is We Who have sent down the remembrance (i.e. the Quran) and surely, We will guard it from corruption.”
(Quran 15:9)**

When God revealed His words of guidance for the whole of humankind – the Quran, He guaranteed to preserve it. One of the ways in which it was preserved was that the men, women and children around the Prophet Muhammad memorized Quran, paying careful attention to each word. In the very early days of Islam the emphasis was on memorization, however soon, those who had mastered the art of reading and writing began to write down the words of Quran on whatever writing material available. They wrote on flat stones, bark, bones, and even animal skins.

As the words of God were revealed, to Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, by the Angel Gabriel, it is said that he would call for a scribe to write down the words as they began to flow from his lips. The principle scribe was a man named Zaid Ibn Thabit. Many companions reported that Prophet Muhammad would call for Zaid saying **“let him bring the board, the ink pot and the scapula bone”**.^[1] In the lifetime of the Prophet, the Quran existed on bits and pieces of writing material, rather than in book form.

One of the reasons that Quran was not at that stage, in the form of a book was that it was not revealed in order. Rather the chapters and verses were revealed over a period of 23 years often in response to happenings in the life and times of the early Muslim community. However, the order of the chapters and verses of Quran was known to Prophet Muhammad. When the Angel Gabriel would reveal the divine words of God, he would also issue instructions as to what verses and chapters belonged where.

The Quran was written down under the direct supervision of Prophet Muhammad. Uthman, one of the Prophet’s closest companions recalled that, “when something was revealed to him, Prophet Muhammad would call someone from amongst those who used to write for him and say, **‘place these verses in the chapter in which such and such is mentioned’** and if only one verse was revealed he would say, **‘place this verse in this chapter’**”^[2].

Thus at the time of the Prophet’s death pieces of Quran were held in trust by many members of the Muslim community. Some had only a few pages from which they were learning to recite, others such as the scribes, had several chapters and still others had pieces of bark or animal skin containing only one verse.

During the time of Abu Bakr, the man chosen to lead the Muslim nation after the death of Prophet Muhammad, the wider Muslim community found itself in a time of civil strife. False Prophets arose and many bewildered people, unable to sustain their faith without Prophet Muhammad, left the fold of Islam. Battles and skirmishes took place and many of the men who had memorized the Quran lost their lives.

Abu Bakr was afraid that the Quran would be lost, so he consulted some of the senior companions about compiling the Quran into a single book. He asked Zaid ibn Thabit, to oversee this task. At first, Zaid felt uneasy about doing something that Prophet Muhammad did not specifically authorize. However, he did agree to collect pieces of Quran, both written and memorized and compile a book – the *Mushaf*. In the traditions of Prophet Muhammad, we find Zaid Ibn Thabit's own recollection of how the compilation of Quran came about.^[3]

“Abu Bakr sent for me when the people of al-Yamaamah had been killed [i.e., a number of the Prophet's Companions who fought against the false prophet Musaylimah]. I went to him and found Umar ibn al-Khattab sitting with him. Abu Bakr then said to me, ‘Umar has come saying the casualties were heavy among those who knew the Quran by heart, and I am afraid that more heavy casualties may take place on other battlefields, whereby a large part of the Quran may be lost. Therefore I suggest that you (Abu Bakr) order that the Quran be collected.’”

I said to Umar, “How can you do something that the Messenger of God did not do?” Umar said, “By God, this is something good”. Umar kept on urging me to accept his proposal until God opened my heart to it and I began to realize the good in the idea. 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 the Messenger of God, so search for the fragmentary scripts of Quran and compile them into one book.”

“By Allah (God) if they had ordered me to move one of the mountains, it would not have been heavier for me than this (ordering me to compile the Quran). Then I said to Abu Bakr, “How can you do something that the Messenger of God did not do?” Abu Bakr replied, “By God, it is a good thing.” Abu Bakr kept on urging me to accept his idea until God opened my heart to that to which He had opened the hearts of Abu Bakr and Umar. Therefore, I started looking for the Quran and collecting it from what it was written on, palm stalks, thin white stones and also from the men who knew it by heart, until I had collected it all.

Zaid had memorized all of the Quran and had been Prophet Muhammad's most trusted scribe; therefore, it would have been possible for him to have written the whole Quran from his own memory. However, he did not use this method alone. He was very careful and methodical in his compilation of the Quran and would not write down any verses unless they had been confirmed by at least two of Prophet Muhammad's Companions.

Thus, the Quran came to be written and compiled in book form. It remained with Abu Bakr until his death, at which time it came into the possession of Umar Ibn al Khattab. After Umar's death, it was entrusted to his daughter Hafsah. This however is not the end of the story of Quran. In the time of Uthman, the third leader of the Muslim nation, the book in which the Quran (the words of God) is contained, the *Mushaf*, became standardized. The Quran was no longer written in the various dialects of Arabic. In part 4 we will discover how the *Mushaf* known as the Uthmani Quran, came into being.

Footnotes:

[1] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

[2] *Abu Dawood*

[3] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

(part 4 of 4): Then, Today, and for all Time

When Quran was revealed to Prophet Muhammad by the Angel Gabriel, it was revealed in seven Arabic dialects[1], therefore when different Companions recited there were sometimes slight differences in pronunciation. While Prophet Muhammad was alive, he was able to clarify and resolve any pronunciation disputes.

From the traditions of Prophet Muhammad, Umar Ibn Al Khattab narrates an anecdote that clearly shows how the people around the Prophet were anxious to preserve the authenticity of Quran and that the Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, was able to mediate any disputes. He says,

I heard Hisham ibn Hakim reciting in a way different to that of mine. Therefore, I was about to quarrel with him (during the prayer) but I waited until he finished, then I brought him to God's Messenger and said, "I have heard him reciting in a way different to the way you taught it to me." The Prophet ordered me to release him and asked Hisham to recite. When he recited it, God's messenger said, "It was revealed in this way." He then asked me to recite the same verses. When I recited it, he said, "It was revealed in this way. The Quran has been revealed in seven different ways, so recite it in the way that is easier for you." [2]

After the death of Prophet Muhammad, hundreds of thousands of non-Arabs converted to Islam. By the time Uthman Ibn Affan was leader of the Islamic nation the Quran was recited in a variety of different accents and dialects. Many people especially those new to Islam were becoming confused and some of the Companions of Prophet Muhammad began to fear that the authenticity of Quran would be compromised.

Whilst on a journey, one of Prophet Muhammad's companions noticed that there were many different recitations of Quran throughout the Muslim Caliphate. He suggested to Uthman that there be an official version recited in the dialect of the tribe of Quraish and written in the style used in the city of Medina. All dialects of the Arabic language were renowned for their eloquence but the dialect of Quraish was considered the most expressive and articulate, and thus over generations, it came to be known as the dialect of the Quran.

Uthman Ibn Affan knew the Quran by heart and had intimate knowledge of the context and circumstances relating to each verse, thus he was a fitting person to oversee the standardization of the Quran. As we know, the Quran had been gathered together during the time of Abu Bakr and was in the safekeeping of Umar Ibn Al Khattab's daughter, and Prophet Muhammad's wife, Hafsah. Uthman sent word to Hafsah, and took possession of the original *Mushaf*. The authentic traditions of Prophet Muhammad relate the event as follows.

Hudhaifah came to Uthman at the time when the people of Syria and the people of Iraq were at war with Armenia and Azerbaijan. He was alarmed by their (the people of Syria and Iraq) differences in the recitation, so he said to 'Uthman, "O leader of the believers! Save this nation before they dispute about the Quran as the Jews and the Christians did dispute about their books." Therefore, 'Uthman sent a message to Hafsah saying, "Send us the manuscript so that we may make copies and we will return the manuscript to you." [3]

Once again, the leaders of the Muslim Caliphate and the men and women Companions of the Prophet made great efforts to preserve the words of God and to remain faithful to the Message. Uthman ordered some of the most trusted companions, including for a second time Zaid Ibn Thabit, to make careful copies of the *Mushaf*, saying "in case you disagree, copy it into the dialect of Quraish".[4]

The original manuscript was sent back to Hafsah and Uthman then ordered all other *unofficial* copies to be burned or otherwise destroyed. Thus, an end was put to the dispute and the Muslims were united. The Uthmani Quran is the *Mushaf* used by more than 1.2 billion Muslims throughout the world today. The Quran has remained preserved from generation to generation. Each *Mushaf* is an exact copy of the original.

**"Verily, it is We Who have sent down the remembrance (Quran), and surely, We will guard it (from corruption)."
(Quran15:9)**

It is not known exactly how many copies were made by Uthman, but many believe it to be five, not including his own copy. The cities of Mecca, Medina, Damascus, Kufa, and Basra each received a copy. Throughout early Islamic

literature, references are made to these copies and it is believed that original copies exist to this day in Turkey and Uzbekistan.

Ibn Batuta, in the 14th century C.E. said he had seen copies or sheets from the copies of the Quran prepared under Uthman, in Granada, Marrakesh, Basra, and other cities. Ibn Kathir related that he had seen a copy of the Uthmani Quran, which was brought to Damascus from Palestine. He said it was ‘very large, in beautiful clear strong writing with strong ink, in parchment, I think, made of camel skin’.[5] Ibn Jubair said he saw the Uthmani manuscript in the mosque of Medina in the year 1184 C.E. Some say it remained in Medina until the Turks removed it in WW1. The Treaty of Versailles contains the following clause:

Article 246: Within six months from the coming into force of the present Treaty, Germany will restore to His Majesty, King of Hedjaz, the original Koran of Caliph Othman, which was removed from Medina by the Turkish authorities and is stated to have been presented to the ex-Emperor William II.”[6]

Footnotes:

[1] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari, Saheeh Muslim*

[2] Ibid.

[3] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

[4] Ibid.

[5] *Uloom Al-Quran: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Quran*, Ahmad Von Denffer, Islamic foundation, UK.

[6] *Major Peace Treaties of Modern History*, New York, Chelsea House Publishers.