

## CHAPTER 2

# Discovering

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### Why the Qur'ān?

The Qur'ān, the holy book of Islam, may well be the most powerful book in human history, with the arguable exception of the Bible. Both in world history and contemporary affairs, it is doubtful that any other book now commands, or has in the past exerted, so profound an influence. Objectively, one of every five people on earth today is Muslim, each of whom subjectively believes that the Qur'ān actually supersedes the Bible, and that it is the Qur'ān – not the Bible – that is unsurpassed. Since Muslims see Islam as the last of the world's religions, they view the Qur'ān as the latest and greatest book. Even if one does not share this view, the sheer magnitude of its influence commands respect, and one cannot be cross-culturally and globally literate without some understanding of this monumental text. The purpose of this chapter is to inspire and assist readers in discovering the Qur'ān for themselves, with the helpful synergy of insider and outsider – religious and secular – perspectives.

### Academic Study of the Qur'ān

The study of the Qur'ān in an academic setting has raised a number of legal and pedagogical issues in recent decades, some of which have thrust the scripture into the public eye in a way that has not been previously experienced. Of course, religion in general is a controversial topic within education, and demands inevitably arise to know why the Qur'ān should (or even can) be taught in a publicly funded university. The situation in the United States, for example, is one that has provoked legal discussions and challenges. Doesn't the study of the Qur'ān in the university violate the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment? What about the separation of church and state?

These very concerns were recently raised in US federal courts. A national academic and legal controversy erupted in summer 2002 when the University of North Carolina

(UNC) at Chapel Hill required incoming freshmen, as part of its Summer Reading Program, to read and discuss Michael Sells' *Approaching the Qur'ān: The Early Revelation* (Sells 1999). This text – a fresh translation and elucidation of the early Meccan *sūras* of the Qur'ān – was recommended by UNC Islamicist Carl Ernst in order to promote an understanding of Islam, especially in light of the events surrounding the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks (Burdei 2002).

Alleging that UNC violated the Establishment Clause and abridged students' rights to religious free exercise by forcing incoming freshmen and transfer students to study Islam against their will, a conservative-Christian activist group, the Family Policy Network (FPN) filed suit in US District Court, Middle District of North Carolina (MDNC), on July 22, seeking a preliminary injunction to keep UNC from conducting its summer program. The case was captioned (named) *Yacovelli v. Moeser* (after James Yacovelli, an FPN spokesman, and James Moeser, UNC Chancellor). When the FPN lost, it immediately appealed to the 4th Circuit Court of Appeals, but lost again. This case was widely reported (see Euben 2002), both nationally and internationally, but was not judicially "reported" (that is, the district and appellate decisions were not published).

A later challenge was filed in 2004 but was lost on appeal. Without going into the technicalities of the *Lemon* test, which the Court applied along with the endorsement and coercion tests, the challenge failed. In his decision, Chief Judge N. Carlton Tilley, Jr. ruled:

*Approaching the Qur'ān* simply cannot be compared to religious practices which have been deemed violative of the *Establishment Clause*, such as posting the Ten Commandments, reading the Lord's Prayer or reciting prayers in school. The book does include Suras, which are similar to Christian Psalms. However, by his own words, the author endeavors only to explain Islam and not to endorse it. Furthermore, listening to Islamic prayers in an effort to understand the artistic nature of the readings and its connection to a historical religious text does not have the primary effect of advancing religion. (*Yacovelli v. Moeser*, 2004 US Dist. LEXIS 9152 [MDNC May 20, 2004], *aff'd Yacovelli v. Moeser* [University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill], 324 F.Supp.2d 760 [2004].)

This ruling is consistent with the US Supreme Court's endorsement of the academic study of religion in public schools and universities, when Justice Tom C. Clark in 1963 declared that "one's education is not complete without a study of comparative religion or the history of religion and its relationship to the advancement of civilization" (*Abington v. Schempp*, 374 US 203, 224, n. 9 [1963]). It is the secular approach that makes the academic study of religion constitutionally permissible: "Nothing we have said here indicates that such study of the Bible or of religion, when presented objectively as part of a secular program of education, may not be effected consistently with the First Amendment" (*Abington v. Schempp*, 374 US 203, 224, n. 9 [1963]). As Justice Powell has said more recently: "Courses in comparative religion of course are customary and constitutionally appropriate" (*Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 US 578, 607 1987] [Powell and O'Connor, JJ., concurring]). Based on Justice Clark's statement as it applies to the Qur'ān specifically, university officials now argue that – in addition to being constitutionally permissible – one's education is not complete without a study of the

Qur'ān (as well as the history of Islam) and its relationship to the advancement of civilization.

## How to Read the Qur'ān?

A nineteenth-century mystic once said that the Qur'ān eclipses all of the miracles of all of the previous prophets, for the miracle of the Qur'ān, alone, remains (Shirazi 1950; Lawson 1988). That is to say, the staff of Moses may have turned into a serpent and swallowed up the magicians' snakes in Pharaoh's court, but that prophetic scepter has vanished. Moses may well have parted the Red Sea, as Muslims themselves believe, but that prodigy is long gone. No empirical evidence of either miracle remains today. What alone abides is the "miracle" of the Qur'ān – its prodigious ability to transform the lives of those who believe and accept the Qur'ān as the best guide for their lives. This transformation is spiritual alchemy, taking the base appetites that most of us are born with and transmuting these into the pure gold of a refined moral and spiritual character. The Qur'ān can transform a pair of horns into a set of wings, changing the pious believer from a devil into an angel. Such is the nature of Muslim belief about the Qur'ān.

The Qur'ān can and should be taught in the university – not to convert students into pious Muslims, but to convert pious Muslim beliefs into something students can understand, so that they can appreciate the power of the book to influence those who believe in it. However, beyond the question of why the Qur'ān should be taught, there is the problem of how it should be taught. In whatever course and context it may be taught, the challenge is to engage readers in the study of this text, to assist them in discovering the Qur'ān for themselves.

Reading the Qur'ān is far easier said than done. The Qur'ān is a challenging text. To the uninitiated, the book is both simplistic and enigmatic. To the untrained eye, the Qur'ān, on first impression, may strike one as arcane, florid, repetitive, or otherwise impenetrable to Westerners wholly unprepared to study the text dispassionately. However, there is a deeper hermeneutical issue involved, one of attitude and assumptions as to the authority and nature of the text.

The Qur'ān makes its own particular truth-claims, which are quite audacious. It tells the reader that its source is an archetypal "mother of the book" (*umm al-kitāb*) in heaven. The Qur'ān is therefore of divine origin. It is not only authorized, it is actually authored by God Himself. This is an extraordinary claim, indeed. As such, from a Muslim perspective the element of divine revelation is of paramount importance. God wrote the Qur'ān, Muslims believe, and thus the book commands their respect. But should it command the respect of those who have not been raised in its culture, who might consider it in the university? Absolutely. So where does one begin? There are methodological considerations that must first be addressed. The Qur'ān may be a difficult text for non-Muslims, but it is not unfathomable.

The still-predominantly Christian West may have serious misgivings as to the truth of such claims. Isn't the Qur'ān an ersatz version of the Bible – a derivative imitation?

**Table 2.1** Polarities in the study of the Qur’ān

Western	Muslim
Secular academic	Traditional academic
Analytic	Synthetic
Tendency to over-differentiate	Tendency to harmonize
Use of reason and bias	Use of reason and faith
Sometimes offensive	Sometimes defensive

This very assumption largely biased the Western reception of the Qur’ān from the very start, and affected (infected) its study until now. As a result, polarities in the study of the Qur’ān have emerged, although these are beginning to disappear. The great divide in Qur’ānic studies has historically been the tension between traditional Muslim approaches and Western academic approaches. Although problematic for gaining a coherent understanding and appreciation of the Qur’ān, these two competing paradigms are somewhat synergistic. If you combine the two, you get what Wilfred Cantwell Smith (Smith 1959: 53; but cf. McCutcheon 1999) regarded as the insider–outsider dynamic. In principle, he suggested that the best approach to the study of the Qur’ān and Islam is to be able to enter into a believer’s (emic) perspective while maintaining some degree of relative objectivity (etic perspective). Indeed, Smith’s canon of believer intelligibility requires that “no statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion’s believers.” This “creative principle” offers the best of both worlds, for it “provides experimental control that can lead” scholars “dynamically towards the truth.” However, unless one adheres to Smith’s principle, polarities will inevitably arise. Table 2.1 highlights the nature of these polarities.

The table shows a complement of productive and reductive approaches. The method of reading largely determines what is read and how it is understood. The Muslim approaches the Qur’ān reverentially and with full faith in the truth it enshrines. The Western secular approach can be just the opposite: it is skeptical and analytic. But it does not have to be. Where there are apparent difficulties and even apparent contradictions in the text, the Muslim will try to resolve those anomalies by harmonizing them on a higher plane of understanding, while a person approaching the text from a secular perspective (the Westerner) may be dismissive of the Qur’ān as simply a human enterprise where inconsistencies and errors are to be expected. Such a conclusion is not only misguided according to any knowledgeable Muslim, it is also an attack upon the integrity of a sacred text that is divinely revealed.

This concept of the Qur’ān as a revealed scripture is basic to an appreciation as to why Muslims both revere the Qur’ān and orient their entire lives according to its dictates, for the Qur’ān and the *ḥadīth* (oral traditions that report the sayings and actions of the Muḥammad) are the two principal sources of authority for Muslim doctrine and praxis. So, to the questions of where to begin in discovering the Qur’ān, it only makes sense to start with the concept of revelation.

## Revelation and the Abrahamic Faiths

Scholars have long recognized that claims of revelation are central to the three Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. What these faiths have in common is that each is monotheistic. That is, they each preach a belief in a supreme Being, a one-and-only, all-powerful God. Historically, monotheism is a conscious revolution against the archaic, pre-monotheistic mind-set. This revolution was not prevalently theoretic but dynamic. It effected a radical shift in the concentration of what some scholars call the *numinosum*, or the locus of the supernatural. Archaic (“primitive” or “primal”) culture is founded on the idea of an anthropocentric correspondence of microcosm and macrocosm, of part-to-whole, as in astrology. In the archaic worldview, the *numinosum* is situated in and around nature, whereas in a monotheistic framework, the *numinosum* is a supreme being, located outside nature. Monotheism disenchant the universe by exorcizing the very existence of gods, demons, and sprites. The nature spirits disappear, ghosts vanish, and the astrological basis of fate and predestination collapses. Experimental science of a pre-modern type could not have been born without the demythologization of nature that monotheism put into motion. By moving God outside of nature, monotheism contributes to the revaluation of the ideas of infinity and the void.

This revolution in worldview – disenchanting nature and seeing divinity as its prime mover – gave rise to two major defining features of Western civilization: historicism and technique. The first affects the human sciences; the other impacts the physical sciences. The argument that Islam is one of the unacknowledged roots of Western civilization flows from this historical perspective: Islamic philosophy and science impacted the high medieval and renaissance cultures to produce Western civilization, especially after the Enlightenment.

Within the monotheist worldview that is central to Islam, the Qur’ān is the literary amber of revelation – the primary mode of disclosure of God’s will for humanity. The Qur’ān speaks of itself as a revealed text. Phenomenologists of religion have identified five characteristics or phenomena typically associated with revelation (Dininger 1987: 356). There are two prime characteristics. (1) *Origin or source*: All revelation has a source – God, or something supernatural or numinous communicates some kind of message to human beings. *Wahy* is the technical term for revelation in the Qur’ān. The fundamental sense of *wahy* seems to be what those steeped in the European romantic ethos would call a “flash of inspiration,” in the sense that it is sudden and unpremeditated; (2) *Instrument or means*: Revelation is communicated supernaturally, through the agency of dreams, visions, ecstasies, words, or sacred books. *Nuzūl* is a synonym for revelation, but with the explicit notion that the Qur’ān was “sent down” from its archetypal original in the spiritual realm known as the heavens.

Other key phenomena of revelation, all of which the Qur’ān exemplifies, are: (3) *Content or object*: Revelation is the communication of the didactic, helping, or punishing presence, will, being, activity, or commission of the divinity. In this case, the Qur’ān is a revelation from God, pure and simple, communicated through a series of revelations imparted to Muḥammad over the course of twenty-three lunar years. Thus, it would be error and sacrilege to speak of Muḥammad as the “author” of the Qur’ān.

(4) *Recipients or addressees*: The Qur'ān itself is a revelation of the universal type. It is a message from God to the world; (5) *Effect and consequence for the recipient*: Revelation transforms its recipient. As the agent of revelation, Muḥammad was commissioned with a divine mission to present the Qur'ān as the voice of God, calling the entire world to righteousness and justice, to morality and decency, and to a life of prayer and fasting, and surrender to the will of God. The fact that Muḥammad was commissioned with a divine mission does not make Muḥammad himself divine, as the Qur'ān itself states: "He would never order you to take the angels and the prophets as Lords" (Q 3:74). This idea may be seen in an early Christian text: "Neither is there salvation in believing in teachers and calling them lords" (*Homilies* 8:5 in Roberts and Donaldson 1989–90).

## How the Qur'ān Was Revealed

With an understanding of revelation generally, the specifics of the revelation of the Qur'ān may now be addressed. Such considerations focus on the person identified as the prophet of Islam, Muḥammad.

It was Muḥammad's practice to meditate prayerfully in a cave on Mt. Ḥirā'. He was practicing *taḥannuth*, some sort of pious exercise, when he first encountered the archangel Gabriel, who revealed the Qur'ān to him over the next twenty-three lunar years. Tradition is unanimous that Gabriel was the agent of revelation, even though he is mentioned only twice in the Qur'ān. The Qur'ān itself explains how God reveals: "It belongs not to any mortal that God should speak to him, except by revelation, or from behind a veil, or that He should send a messenger and he reveal whatsoever He will, by His leave; surely He is All-high, All-wise" (Q 42:50). In other words, while the prophet revealed the Qur'ān, it was God who authored it, according to Muslim belief.

The Qur'ān is modeled on an archetypal *al-lawḥ al-maḥfiṭz*, the "preserved tablet" (Q 85:22), having been sent down to the nearest heaven on the "night of power" (Q 97) in the holy month of Ramaḍān, in order for Gabriel to transmit it to Muḥammad. The text of Qur'ān is from God, Muslims believe, while the recording and editing of Qur'ān is by men. It is important to understand the implications of the Qur'ān being originally revealed over a period of time, and thereafter collected and edited. Just as the Qur'ān cannot be read from cover to cover in quite the same way that one reads a novel or treatise, the Qur'ān was not written from cover to cover as well. Just as writers have flashes of inspiration, Muḥammad experienced flashes of revelation. These cumulatively became the Qur'ān.

The *ḥadīth* literature provides many anecdotes as to how revelations would come upon Muḥammad. The descriptions vary. The agent of revelation Gabriel taught Muḥammad to recite the first passages of the Qur'ān. Most frequently the accounts speak of revelations "descending" upon Muḥammad such that he would hear the sound of buzzing, or of bells, or would feel a great weight come upon him, or would enter a trance, after which the words of the Qur'ān would become indelibly inscribed in his heart, and subsequently dictated to scribes. The revelations of the Qur'ān were first recorded by scribes who wrote down the verses on whatever writing materials were available: leaves and branches of palm trees, white stones, leather, shoulder blades

of sheep, ribs. One early account states that a revelation was actually eaten by a domestic animal, because it had been recorded on something organic and edible.

After Muḥammad's death in 11/632, there was no authoritative record of the revelations. They had to be collected. The process of assembling, collating, and codifying the Qur'ān was not informed by a great deal of available information as to dating and other historical information on which to base the traditional form that the Qur'ān eventually took. According to tradition, the decision to preserve the Qur'ān was taken after hundreds of reciters were killed in the Battle of Yamāma (12/633). 'Umar (who was to become the second Caliph) suggested to Abū Bakr that the Qur'ān be collected and written down. Finally, the text was fixed under 'Uthmān, in the dialect of the Quraysh tribe (that of Muḥammad), said to be the clearest of dialects, according to tradition. Where difficulties in establishing the text arose, the dialect of the Quraysh, the tribe to which the prophet belonged, was given preference. Written texts required attestation from reciters, who had heard and memorized the Qur'ān by heart. Thus, the canon of the Qur'ān was fixed as well as the order of the *sūras* and the integrity of the consonantal text.

The urgency with which the text became fixed under the decree of the caliph 'Uthmān afforded precious little opportunity for a systematic, much less scientific ordering of the text. Its preservation was more important than its sequencing, and it was left to later Muslims scholars to provide a critical apparatus for more fully appreciating the pieces that made up the larger whole. How much editing and how intrusive or interpretive such editing may have been is largely a modern question that has occupied much of Western scholarship on the Qur'ān.

Soon after the Qur'ān was revealed, it spread like wildfire, racing with the Arab conquerors during the first two centuries of Arab expansion. The rapidity and breadth of that expansion was dramatic. At this stage, the Qur'ān had not yet achieved its status as a world text, for the simple reason that it was considered an "Arab" book (or, rather, "the" Arab book, since the Qur'ān is the first book in Arabic). Non-Arab converts were at first obliged to attach themselves to various Arab tribes, in a kind of process of spiritual and social adoption. It did not take long before non-Arabs, especially the Persians, took umbrage with this. How could a scripture with a universal message, they argued, be restricted to just a single ethnicity? And, if not, on what grounds were Arabs justified in relegating to non-Arabs a secondary status, when the category of "Muslims" constitutes a spiritual and social "nation" that embraces all races and nations, yet transcends them? Was not the prophet Abraham a Muslim ("one who surrenders" to the will of God)? And is not anyone who professes belief in the oneness of God and in the authenticity of the prophet Muḥammad to be accounted as a believer, on equal footing with every other? And so it came to be: the appeal to the Qur'ān's universalisms, expressive of its egalitarian ethic, prevailed. Thus Islam, although based on a message revealed in Arabic, was transposed to other cultures and climes, although it took centuries before the Qur'ān itself was actually translated into other languages. This singular revelation became a universal scripture.

In its final form, the Qur'ān's 114 *sūras* are arbitrarily arranged by the longest *sūra* first (except for the short "opening" chapter). The traditional dating of these *sūras* has the "early Meccan *sūras*" spanning the first thirteen lunar years (with early, middle, and

final periods), shifting to the period of “Medinan *sūras*” in 1/622, coinciding with the first year of the *hijra* or migration of the early Muslim community from Mecca to Medina, followed by the “later Meccan *sūras*” on the prophet’s triumphal return to his oasis-city of Mecca shortly before the end of his life in 11/632.

Taking what has become a classic, two-part division of Muḥammad’s life (Watt 1953, 1956), the early Meccan *sūras* exemplify Muḥammad’s role as “prophet” while the Medinan and later Meccan *sūras* present Muḥammad’s vocation as “statesman.” Thus the earlier revelations are intended to kindle hope and to strike the fear of God into the heart of the hearer by the promise of heaven and the threat of hell. Accordingly, the prophet’s role is that of a “warner” who has come to make people alive to the threat of impending doom and death unless they repent and surrender to the will of God.

First warned, later governed – this is basically the purpose of the revelations and the logic of their sequence. The later Qur’ānic revelations enshrine laws and principles for Muslims to follow. Once a Muslim community had formed (the migration of Muslims to Mecca in 1/622 effectively created the first Muslim state), laws were needed. Accordingly, Muḥammad became a statesman in addition to his role as prophet, and began revealing the laws and ethical principles that later became the foundation for the four Sunnī schools of law and a distinctive way of life.

## Sources of Revelation?

Whether the Qur’ān is informed by previous sources is a vexed question. To suggest that the Qur’ān somehow derives from predominantly Jewish or Christian sources is tantamount to discrediting the Qur’ān as a document of revelation. For Muslims, the question should be the other way around. The Qur’ān is the gold standard of divine truth. Since it is pure and unadulterated, it is previous scriptures that should be measured against the Qur’ān, not the other way around. Indeed, the Qur’ān comprehends all previous scriptures:

Within itself, the Qur’ān provides Muslims with a view of the Bible. Mention is made of the “scrolls” of Abraham and Moses, the *Tawrāt* (Torah) of Moses, the *Zabūr* (usually understood as the Psalms) of David and the *Injīl* (Gospel) of Jesus, all conceived as direct revelation from God to the prophet concerned: “Surely we sent down the Torah wherein is guidance and light” (Qur’ān 5.48); “And we sent, following in their footsteps, Jesus son of Mary, confirming the Torah before him; and we gave to him the Gospel, wherein is guidance and light” (Qur’ān 5.50). In this way, all previous scriptures are pictured within the revelatory and compositional image of the Qur’ān itself. (Rippin 1993: 250)

To say that Muḥammad was “influenced” by his religious world and that the Qur’ān is a hodge-podge of intermixed influences is not only highly reductionist, but suggests that the prophet was himself the author of the Qur’ān and not God. Surely God had no need to borrow from previous scripture or religious lore, from the Muslim perspective. So the tension between traditional Muslim and Western academic approaches is perhaps nowhere more intense than in discussing this question.

One approach that is both methodologically sound as well as religiously acceptable is to look at the foreign vocabulary of the Qurʾān and also the religious technical terms and concepts that the Qurʾān mentions. This area of study has proven fruitful for elucidating the text. But then, again, what exactly is being proved? If used as evidence that the Qurʾān is derivative, then this crosses over from a purely descriptive phenomenology into an explanatory phenomenology that is inherently reductive. This latter approach tries to “explain away” the Qurʾān, presenting it as the product of past influences rather than as an original work that absorbs and reconfigures its cultural content to produce an Islamic civilization of world-historical proportions.

For Muslims, the only pre-Islamic source for the Qurʾān is the archetypal “mother of the book” of which the earthly Qurʾān is a faithful copy. But Muslim scholars will readily admit that the Qurʾān speaks to its historical-contemporary world, which includes the immediate past. Thus we find specific references to practices from the pre-Islamic period that the Qurʾān explicitly forbids. This is “influence” in the other direction. For instance, the pre-Islamic practice of female infanticide was quite common, where parents would bury their infant daughter in the hot, desert sand, if they thought it too much of a financial burden to raise a girl. So, in this respect, Islam functioned as a women’s protectionist movement. Suffice it to say that knowledge of pre-Islamic Arabia is the natural starting place for developing a fuller understanding and appreciation for how the Qurʾān represents a significant moral and social advancement after the pre-Islamic “age of ignorance.”

## Major Themes of Revelation

Knowing something of the history of the revelation of the Qurʾān and its codification provides a necessary orientation. But the real heart of the Qurʾān is its message. One useful way of approaching the Qurʾān is to see it as the vehicle for expressing profound truths regarding God and the universe, and humankind and its civilizations. God is the creator, and humankind the creative. The themes of the Qurʾān, therefore, are the organizing principles of Islamic religion and civilization. What follow are several of the major themes of the Qurʾān. Most of the Qurʾān’s religious principles are common to the Abrahamic faiths, and many of its morals may be appreciated as universal ethical truths.

### *Exaltation*

One feels the presence of God in the Qurʾān, which makes it such a powerful text. Since Muḥammad is the revealer, not author, the pious read the text as the voice of God Himself. This is not a mere poetic device, as the voice of God in the Puritan poet Michael Wigglesworth’s “God’s Controversy with New England” (1662). The Qurʾān is the real thing, like a whole book of the Ten Commandments and more. This direct communication of God to man is charged with a power and authority that Muslims feel makes the Qurʾān inimitable, and without peer. No other text can compare with it, except

previous scriptures. And rarely are they so direct and compelling. The Qurʾān is a conduit to the presence of God, and to follow the Qurʾān's dictates is to manifest the will of God.

### *Creation*

The Qurʾān accounts for the creation of the world – not as a scientific treatise, but rather as a prophetic narrative. Scholars call this cosmogony. The important thing to remember is that cosmogony often functions as “sociogony” – the genesis of society. Just as God is the creator of the physical universe, the Qurʾān is the great moral and social civilizer of human (Muslim) society, when ideally applied.

### *Revelation*

We have stated earlier that the Qurʾān is a revelation (actually a series of revelations) direct from God. In practice that means that everything the Qurʾān says is taken as truth. This fact is clearly of profound importance in appreciating the status and authority of the Qurʾān. While all of the Qurʾān is God's revealed truth, the Qurʾān does not contain all of God's revelations. The Qurʾān “confirms” the truth of previous revelations, as embodied in the Jewish and Christian scriptures. Much of the Qurʾān, in fact, is retrospective. It harks back to the days of previous prophets and relates what became of them and tells of the fate of peoples who rejected and persecuted the warners and messengers that God sent to them. These historical narratives have a didactic (edifying) function. They are homilies on religious history, and thus serve a religious purpose.

With its dire warnings of the day of judgment, the Qurʾān is prospective as well as retrospective. It endows history with teleology – a purpose and a final result. While this teleology is predestined, the individual can largely choose the outcome for his or her salvation. Here, salvation is not absolution from sin, but a resolution to abide by the will of God. This is true for entire societies as well, since they are aggregates of individuals and families. That is to say, an entire social order can be transformed by following the way of life illuminated by the Qurʾān. Thus, revelation contains within it the seeds of a higher civilization.

And so it happened: Islam reigned as the world's “superpower” during the so-called dark ages of Europe, when great Muslim civilizations exerted a moralizing, philosophical and scientific influence on the West. Historically, Islam is one of the catalysts that sparked the Renaissance. Ideally, revelation is the genesis of ideal civilization.

### *Consummation*

The Qurʾān is not just one of a series of progressive revelations sent by God to help steer the course of civilization. The Qurʾān literally is the latest and greatest revelation to date. We know this because we are told that Muḥammad is the “seal of the prophets”

– that is, the final messenger. He has, in a real sense, completed the series of revelations. The Qurʾān is therefore the capstone of God’s messages to the world.

Muḥammad’s station as the “seal of the prophets” is of fundamental importance in Islam. This appellation comes from the famous “seal verse” (Q 33:40). Although interpretations of this key verse did vary in early Islam (Friedmann 1986), there is now a consensus among Muslims that the term “seal” means “last,” in the sense of both “latest” and “final.” While Muḥammad is considered fully human and not divine (Islam rejects the doctrine of incarnation), this truth-claim easily rivals – in both its audacity and centrality of dogma – that of Jesus being the son of God. Rather than a person being the “word” of God, for Muslims the Qurʾān is the word of God literally. However, that Muḥammad is the seal of the prophets is a major truth-claim and is effectively non-negotiable. It has achieved the status of a dogma, and one learns not to debate this point with Muslims if friendship is a priority. Accepting Muḥammad as the seal of the prophets is absolutely fundamental to Muslims everywhere. And this belief is firmly anchored in the Qurʾān itself.

### *Salvation*

For Muslims, salvation consists in much more than simply being forgiven for one’s past sins and transgressions. The act of repentance itself effects much of this. Indeed, the true test of one’s sincerity is a matter of public record, purely in terms of one’s actions. This record is not simply what gets recorded in the proverbial “Book of Deeds,” to be read back to each individual on the day of judgment. Rather, pious deeds both manifest and further nurture purity of heart and soul. Here, salvation is active, not passive. One’s salvation is a matter of degree, not of status. But Islam sees a spiritual life beyond forgiveness. Salvation is not a change of status that magically and suddenly averts God’s wrath. Salvation is a process, a refinement of one’s character over time.

A deeper walk with God on the “straight path” of Islam can come about through spiritual growth and transformation. But how does one do this? What can serve as an infallible spiritual guide? For Muslims, the way to bring one’s life into greater conformity with God’s will is through following the laws of the Qurʾān and the example of Muḥammad. The truest sign of one’s transformative faith is conformity and dedication to the principles and teachings of Islam which are preserved, first and foremost, in the Qurʾān itself. The single most important act of piety is to surrender one’s own will to that of the will of God. The word “Muslim” means “one who has submitted” or surrendered to the will of God. “Surrender” is not the best translation, because following God’s will is an act of free will, a vigilant choice, a matter of strength through commitment and practice.

Then what is the will of God? There is a Zoroastrian scripture that states: “The will of the Lord is the law of holiness” (the Ahunwar, the most sacred formula in Zoroastrianism, a common refrain found throughout the Zend Avesta – see Vendidad, Fargard 19, and *passim*). This means that, rather than trying to divine what the will of God is in terms of making important life-decisions, the will of God is not so much what

one believes, or what one is, but what one does. What a Muslim believes and what a Muslim does combine to produce what a Muslim is.

Surrendering to the will of God begins with professing one's self to be Muslim, by proclaiming that "There is no god but God" and that "Muḥammad is the messenger of God." As a general rule, Muslims pray more frequently than in any other religion. They also fast longer, for thirty days during the holy month of Ramaḍān (the dates of which annually vary because Islam is based on a lunar calendar). Once one is properly oriented towards God, and is conscious of God throughout the day, it becomes much easier to fulfill one's moral obligations as a pious Muslim. For salvation to be complete, it must be perfected. But salvation is not an all-or-nothing proposition. It is a process of drawing ever nearer to God, which process involves becoming more God-like in one's deeds. Here is where faith and works combine to effect salvation.

Therefore, the requirements of the Qur'ān for the true believer may be described, in Christian terms, as a "faith of works." In other words, Islam is ideally a "faith at work" (in Christian terms, a "way of life") and thus a "faith that works" – for the benefit of individual and society alike. If, as Christians often say, "faith without works is dead," the "faith with works" is very much alive. This is the spiritual life that Islam breathes into the physical lives of pious Muslims. Readers may be familiar with the way in which Martin Luther dichotomized faith and works. Individuals would not be "saved" by unaided efforts, but by faith alone. Islam has no such doctrine of salvation by grace. The most efficacious grace is not to give up on the sinner and allow another to die in his place as in Christianity. The better way is to promote the spiritual and moral growth of the individual. This takes discipline as well as a certain amount of faith. Daily obligatory prayer and following the laws and precepts of the Qur'ān is the truest salvation by grace, because works and faith combine to become, in the words of the beloved spiritual, "Amazing Grace."

### *Civilization*

Salvation is not just for the individual. There is collective salvation as well. The purpose of the Qur'ān is to communicate God's will for humankind – all of humanity. Through its laws and moral principles, the Qur'ān is meant to benefit the world through restructuring human society, to infuse it with the consciousness of God and to make it alive to the will of God for human society. It is a call to righteousness and brotherhood, to human solidarity in a community of principle and commonality of values. The Qur'ān is nothing less than an attempt to reorder human society, to rescue it, Muslims would say, from the moral appetites and turpitude that threaten to make the West morally uncivilized while remaining technologically advanced. Islam offers to fill a spiritual vacuum to which Western society has largely turned a blind eye. Islamic spirituality can be harmonized with the best of Western – Christian as well as contemporary secular – traditions of civic virtues, of moral decency and of family values, informed by the West's traditional Judeo-Christian ethic. Just as the biblical "ten commandments" are still relevant, the Qur'ān still has much to say, although even some Muslims

would say that it needs to be understood anew within the changed circumstances of modernity and postmodernity.

### *Final destination*

Few other sacred texts depict the afterlife so vividly as the Qurʾān. Whether literal or metaphorical, paradise is described as the abode of the righteous, dwelling in peace in Edenic gardens inhabited by dark-eyed damsels that seem to represent higher passions rather than lower ones. Conversely, the Qurʾān portrays hell in equally graphic terms, as a pit of fire and brimstone, with a descriptive immediacy that the sermons of Jonathan Edwards can scarcely rival. Indeed, it is said that around a full one-third of the Qurʾān is eschatological, dealing with the afterlife in the next world and with the day of judgment here on earth at the end of time. As in Christianity, the day of resurrection plays a prominent role in the Qurʾān with a focus on inevitable moral accountability, both individual and collective in nature. Through promise and threat, the Qurʾān instills a healthy fear of God in the believer, who is constantly taught to respect divine authority and to expect the consequences of one's own actions.

## Reading Revelation

The Qurʾān presents a number of challenges for interpreter and reader alike. Many Western readers have complained that the Qurʾān is dull and repetitive. If the Qurʾān were read as a novel from cover to cover, there might be some truth to this. But just as the Qurʾān was revealed in piecemeal fashion, so also should it be read. The final redaction of the Qurʾān obscures this fact. There are few obvious markers that will signal, to the untrained eye, the beginning and end of various discrete, revelatory sections known as pericopes. The best examples of a piece of revelation preserved in its entirety and discretely identifiable would be most of what are known as the early Meccan *sūras*.

The Qurʾān was not intended to be read as a book in one or two sittings. The more that one reads, the more the reader will have the sense that the Qurʾān repeats itself. Some expressions recur like a refrain. They have a rhetorical purpose, in that they are repeated for stress. The reiterative nature of the Qurʾān notwithstanding, certain passages have achieved such renown that they have come to be known as what al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) referred to as the “jewels of the Qurʾān.” These include such celebrated passages as the “throne verse” (Q 2:255) and the “light verse” (Q 24:35).

Shifting from the mystical to the perplexing, some Qurʾānic passages defy easy explanation. The most obvious examples are the so-called “mysterious letters of the Qurʾān,” which occur at the very beginning of twenty-nine chapters. Muslims themselves often have a mystical relationship with the Qurʾān that does not require that they understand the text, divine its enigmas or derive mystical meaning by probing its depths. In popular or “folk” Islam, instead of trying to divine its truths, Muslims may turn to the

Qurʾān as a source of divination. One common practice is to consult the Qurʾān as a kind of oracle. If a person wishes to know the solution to a personal problem, he or she can look to the Qurʾān for personal guidance by carefully meditating on the passage that first falls into view.

It is instructive enough simply to be able to see the different modes of discourse that give texture and vitality to the Qurʾān. Although the Qurʾān does not have a definite structure in any kind of systematic method, it has a complex of structures within it. These have been identified in various ways by Muslim and Western scholars alike. One way to discern the various shifts in revelatory content is to perform a genre analysis of a *sūra* or part of a *sūra* in question. The major genres, or the various styles of Qurʾānic revelations, are as follows.

### *Prophetic revelations*

A narrative is simply a story. If the story is true, it qualifies as history. Some narratives have a purely edifying (instructive) function. Whether historically verifiable or not, all of the Qurʾānic narratives are morally true. Such a distinction will probably be lost on those pious Muslims who take the sacred text at its word (literally). Take for instance the story of Jesus as a young boy. The Qurʾān states that, as a child, Jesus would fashion birds out of mud, then breathe life into them, and the birds would fly away:

And He [Jesus] will teach him the book, the wisdom, the Torah, the Gospel, to be a messenger to the Children of Israel saying, "I have come to you with a sign from your Lord. I will create for you out of clay as the likeness of a bird; then I will breathe into it, and it will be a bird, by the leave of God. I will also heal the blind and the leper, and bring to life the dead, by the leave of God." (Q 3:43)

Despite the abundance of miracle narratives in the four gospels, this particular prodigious ability of Jesus is unreported in the gospels found today in the New Testament. Thus, as the Qurʾān itself states, some stories it relates may be traced back to previous scriptures, and some not. This is a case of one that is not.

Prophetic narratives are what they purport to be – stories of the prophets. The Qurʾān has many such narratives. Indeed, the Qurʾān speaks much more about past prophets than about the prophet Muḥammad himself. These narratives, for the most part, are partial, even fragmentary. The only complete prophetic narrative in the Qurʾān is the *sūra* of Joseph (Q 12). The nature of these narratives is referential and homiletic. They serve an edifying purpose.

Many of the Qurʾān's prophetic narratives will no doubt be familiar to readers who are conversant with the Hebrew scriptures and the New Testament. However, in addition to the "new" material on Jesus just mentioned, the Qurʾān contains many other stories that are not to be found anywhere in the Bible. For many readers, this adds to the Qurʾān's mystique. Whether such stories are those of Moses and Khiḍr (Q 18), the story of the Seven Sleepers (Q 18), or other nonbiblical narratives that add to the overall impression, the reader must not assume that these stories are untrue or merely

apocryphal. Whether they are or not is not the point. For Muslims, the Qurʾān confirms much material found in previous scriptures, and adds new material as well. Even if such stories may be found in Jewish lore or elsewhere, it is safe to say that the Qurʾān presents these as morally true and as paradigmatically important. The stories are authoritative and, by virtue of their status as revelation, are true for Muslims howsoever they may be nuanced or explained.

### *Edifying revelations*

While the majority of narratives are stories of the prophets, other narratives have a purely edifying purpose. One example is the Qurʾān's use of parables. These function in quite the same way as the parables of Jesus. Maxims, aphorisms, and other wisdom sayings enrich the didactic dimension of the Qurʾān. This material regulates the lives of Muslims in ways that laws cannot. Laws may govern outward actions, and conform them to moral and religious standards. But the Qurʾānic wisdom literature is the heart of piety, which can take on mystical dimensions not contemplated by observant praxis alone.

### *Legal revelations*

As stated earlier, the Qurʾān is one of the two major sources of Islamic law. The other is the *ḥadīth* literature, which is a body of traditions that report the extra-canonical sayings and actions of Muḥammad. Together, the Qurʾān and *ḥadīth* make up the *sunna*, the way of the prophet, which, in turn, becomes the *sharīʿa*, the code that Muslims should follow. If the Qurʾān is the revealed word of God, then the life and sayings of Muḥammad represent the will of God. Muḥammad is the perfect Muslim. Therefore, the pious Muslim will try to emulate the prophet in just about every way, beyond his singularly prophetic mission.

Given the harsh realities of the day, the Qurʾān can at times be uncompromising. Some of its corporeal punishments are objectionable and unacceptable in the modern world today. Some Muslim reformers advocate dispensing with the letter of certain Islamic laws yet preserving principles and social goals that stand behind them.

### *Liturgical revelations*

The Qurʾān has liturgical value because it is used in private and public worship. Among the many and varied devotional uses of the Qurʾān, the first *sūra* is used in daily obligatory prayer (*ṣalāt*). Qurʾānic recitation – that is, chanting the verses of the Qurʾān according to stylized canons of intonation and cadence – became an art-form in itself, just like Qurʾānic calligraphy. In a sense, Qurʾānic recitation re-enacts those original, revelatory moments of the spoken Qurʾān as they were first dictated by Muḥammad to his scribes.

The Qurʾān loses much of its force on the barren printed page. Emotions thrill to the spirited invocation of Qurʾānic passages, as a whole religious culture comes alive. One does not have to know Arabic to be struck by the emotional depth that is conveyed by Qurʾānic recitation. The hearts of the pious are swept with awe and fascination by the measured accents of the text, as it is experienced in the depth of the soul.

### *Polemical revelations*

To promote Islam is also to defend it. Secular as well as religious charges were leveled at the prophet of Islam. Muḥammad was variously accused of being a crazed poet, soothsayer, or sorcerer, as well as a liar. In all of these cases, Qurʾānic polemics are to be seen as both actual and theoretical. They may be historical and localized, or doctrinal and generalized. Sometimes the Qurʾān directly cites the charges it refutes. The important thing to remember is that the Qurʾān, despite its exalted claims to revelation, is personalized through the formative experience of Islam as a historical movement. Muḥammad and the early Muslims faced challenges, debates, and outright persecution. Under these circumstances, polemics served an immediate purpose, yet had a paradigmatic value as Islam spread to countries outside Arabia, where Islam was just as new then as before.

Another aspect of Qurʾānic polemics is apologetic in nature. Among the detractors of Islam were Jewish communities. This fact becomes problematic in the modern context and has fueled charges of a latent Muslim anti-Semitism. The many references to Judaism, however, are for instructive purposes, and a much greater focus is placed on the prophethood of Moses, who is really a prototype of Muḥammad himself.

The Qurʾān has a certain degree of affection for Christians. During times of persecution in the early days of Islam, Christians tended to be the most sympathetic of onlookers. Muslims share a great deal in common with Christians. However, the Qurʾān brooks no tolerance for the Christian doctrine of the trinity. Although the Qurʾān affirms the virgin birth, it does not accord Jesus the status of the son of God (nor that of God, for that matter). The Qurʾān also views original sin as absolute injustice and complete predestination. Pure Christianity is pure Islam, since there is only one true religion. What would Jesus do if he met Muḥammad? Muslims would say that Jesus would embrace the truth of Muḥammad's revelation, considering the fact that the Qurʾān states that Jesus prophesied the advent of Muḥammad.

## Assessing the Qurʾān

Is the Qurʾān a revelation sent down by God, as Muslims claim? This is clearly a theological question. If the answer were yes, Christians and others might feel compelled to become Muslims. The simplest solution is to recognize Islam for what it is – a system of salvation at the center of which is the Qurʾān, which is functionally and effectively the word of God, entirely independent of what non-Muslims have to say about its truth claims. The Qurʾān invites all humanity to respond to the call of God. It sees itself as

the latest and fullest testimony of God and the most direct expression of the divine purpose for humanity. This is a monumental truth-claim, and must be taken very seriously when studying the text. Readers will wish to keep this salient fact in mind because it goes far to explain the power of the Qur'ān to command allegiance and serve as the effective constitution of entire Islamic societies.

An understanding of the Qur'ān is analogous to music appreciation, although saying so is by no means meant to trivialize the purpose or process of gaining that understanding. Muslims have a coherent worldview, one that originates from the Qur'ān itself. To appreciate the Qur'ān is to develop a sensitivity to the operation of the divine in a culture removed for centuries from the Euro-American world but now increasingly an integral part of it. One can only gain from such an understanding. Indeed, one can only be enriched by it, but only if one's prejudices are first abandoned. The Qur'ān is a world unto itself, a palatial architecture of meaning that is multidimensional and comprehends the totality of the human experience. On the moral and spiritual foundation of the Qur'ān, an entire history and civilization has been built. The West can continue to clash with Islam – which is the religion of the Qur'ān – or embrace it.

To acknowledge the beauty and depth of the Qur'ān is not to convert to Islam, but to converse with it and with Muslims who are enlivened by it. Yes, the Qur'ān is a text of monumental historical importance. But it may have an even greater contemporary relevance, for in an increasing number of Western nations the population of Muslims is beginning to surpass the number of Jews. Thus the religion of Islam is rapidly entrenching itself as a French religion, as part of UK society, as a feature of the Canadian mosaic, and as an essential element of the spiritual landscape of the United States.

To know the Qur'ān is to better prepare oneself for inevitable encounters with Muslims both in America and abroad – not as the exotic “other” somewhere in the distant Orient, but as the religion and way of life of our fellow compatriots at home – friends, neighbors and, through increasing religious intermarriage, that of our immediate and extended families. The events of September 11, 2001 have riveted world attention on Islam (albeit radical Islam). Sales of the Qur'ān and texts on Islam have skyrocketed.

For the non-Muslim, reading the Qur'ān is an act of moderation, a significant form of communication, an act of intellectual and perhaps spiritual empathy, and, for some, a religious moment without a religious commitment, and a gesture of understanding. It is an act of humanity. Moreover, the Qur'ān is a text of world-historical proportions that institutions of higher learning can scarcely afford to ignore, because our domestic life, as well as international affairs, will be increasingly informed by it. Discovering the Qur'ān on a personal basis can be rewarding for its own sake. Studying the Qur'ān will equip university students with a competence they are sure to find useful in an increasingly multicultural world, one-fifth of which is already under Islam's spiritual, political, and cultural authority – with an even greater part of the world affected by it. The US courts have already weighed in on the University of North Carolina Qur'ān controversy. While reading the Qur'ān cannot be required, it is required reading for reli-

gious, political, cultural, and global literacy. In its own way, it is a democratic as well as academic enterprise.

### Further reading

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