

## *Emory Resources on the Middle East*

### **Great Books of the Islamic World (I):**

#### **The Qur'an**

The Qur'an, like the Bible, is one of the most important and influential books in the history of the world. As the sacred text of Muslims, nearly one fifth of the world's population, the Qur'an is continually read and recited around the globe, figuring in Muslims' prayers throughout the day. But the Qur'an is not merely like the Bible in its importance as a sacred text; the relationship is quite a bit closer. The text of the Qur'an draws on elements from Jewish, Christian, and pre-Islamic Arabian religious traditions, joining them in a framework that is strongly and decidedly Biblical. One might go so far as to say that a background knowledge of the Bible is essential for a proper understanding of the Qur'an. That this is so is not surprising or odd; it is merely a consequence of the Biblical framework of the Prophet Muhammad's mission.

According to Islamic doctrine, the Qur'an is made up of a series of divine revelations delivered by the angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad over a period of 23 years (ca. 610-622 C.E.) and compiled roughly twenty years after his death. In terms of size, the Qur'an is about 4/5 of the New Testament. It contains 114 chapters, or *surahs*, which are divided up into about 6,500 verses, or *ayahs*. The chapters are organized in roughly descending order of length, with the exception of the first surah: the longest surah is the second surah, Surat al-Baqarah ("the Surah of the Cow") with 286 verses; the shortest surahs are grouped at the end of the Qur'an. The surahs of the Qur'an vary widely in length. The shortest, Surat al-Kawthar ("Abundance") (Q 108) and Surat al-Nasr ("Victory") (Q 110) are merely three verses long. With one exception, the surahs of the Qur'an are each preceded by the heading *b'ismi Llahi r-Rahmani r'r-Rahim* "In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate." The exception is the ninth surah, Surat al-Bara'ah ("The Ultimatum"). Various reasons have been proposed for this; one of the most widelyrepeated is that the phrase is omitted because this surah was a threat of war against the pagan Meccans, and the phrase would be something like a salutation, inappropriate for such a stern document.

The text is obviously in Arabic. All around the globe Muslim children learn to read and recite parts of the Qur'an in Arabic as part of their basic religious education--all Muslims must memorize some of the Qur'anic text for use in the daily prayer. This has not prevented Muslims and others from translating the Qur'an into many languages. In English alone, there are over fifty translations; the oldest are those of Alexander Ross in 1649 and George Sale in 1734.

In addition, the Qur'an rhymes. Rhyme and rhythm are crucial components of the text and play an important role in creating its aesthetic qualities and beauty as a text often recited out loud. According to one estimate, over 85% of the verses of the Qur'an exhibit end rhyme.

**Exercise I: Examine the text below and answer the questions that follow:**

**Surat al-'Adiyat ("the Coursers" = "Gallopers"):**

*bi'smi 'll•hi r-ra\_m•ni 'r-ra\_im*

1. *wa'l-fi•diy•ti ḍab\_•*
2. *fa'l-mughir•ti ḥub\_•*
3. *fa'l-mūriy•ti qad\_•*
4. *fa-atharna bihi naqfi•*
5. *fa-wasaʿna bihi jamfi•*
6. *inna 'l-ins•na li-rabbihī la-kanūd*
7. *wa-innahu `ala dhalika la-shahīd*
8. *wa-innahu li-hubbi 'l-khayri la-shahīd*
9. *a-fa-la ya`lamu idha bu`thira ma fi'l-qubūr*
10. *wa-hussila ma fi 's-sudūr*
11. *inna rabbahum bihim yawma`dhin la-khabir*

In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate:

1. [I Swear] By the coursers, snorting,
2. Sending out sparks,
3. And raiding at dawn--
4. They leave a trail of dust there
5. They charge at the center [of the enemy] there.—
6. Man is indeed an ingrate to his Lord,
7. And he is indeed a witness to that.
8. And he is obsessed with the love of wealth.
9. Does he not know that, when those who are in the graves are brought forth,
10. And what is in men's breasts is extracted,
11. On that day, their Lord will be fully informed about them.

**Questions:**

1. How many distinct rhymes occur in this *surah*?
2. Divide the *surah* into sections based on rhyme. Do the verses of each section match each other rhythmically? Give examples.
3. Do the verses of each rhyming section match each other in terms of language or sentence structure? Give examples.
4. Point out one place in the text where parallelism is disturbed or not maintained exactly.

A key feature of the Qur'an's Biblical framework is its insistence on monotheism. Many are under the impression that 'Allah' refers to some odd and inscrutable deity, certainly not to be identified with the God of Jews and Christians. The Qur'an stresses that Allah is *the* Biblical God, the same God who created the Heavens and the Earth in six days, expelled Adam and Eve from the Garden, delivered Moses and the Hebrews from Egypt, and parted the Red Sea. In the Qur'an and in Islamic religious literature in general, Allah is merely Arabic for the Biblical God, just as Dios is in Spanish, Dieu in French, or Gott in German. Unfortunately, many translations of the Qur'an help maintain this misunderstanding by retaining Allah in English, allowing the uninformed to persist in distinguishing between the Jewish or Christian God and Allah.

The Qur'an recognizes both the Torah and the Gospels as legitimate sacred texts revealed by God—obviously the same, Biblical God—to mankind. Over half the *surahs* or chapters of the Qur'an contain narratives which tell Biblical material in a form which resembles the sermons one might hear in a Church or Synagogue. Familiar Biblical characters appear prominently throughout the Qur'an, including Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Lot, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Saul, David, Solomon, the Queen of Sheba, Mary, John the Baptist, and Jesus Christ. In fact, the leading figure in the Qur'an is Moses, whose name occurs 136 times. In contrast, the Prophet Muhammad appears only five times by name.

The Islamic theological concepts of sin, the soul, the afterlife, repentance, forgiveness, heaven, hell, angels, Satan, and the Day of Judgment should all be familiar to Christians and Jews. Here, Islam's debt to the Bible is obvious. For example, *jahannam*, one of the main terms for hell in the Qur'an, clearly derives from the Hebrew *Gehinnom*. In addition, Islamic practice involves many specific elements similar to those found in Judaism and Christianity. Islam shares with Judaism, for example, the ban on eating pork. Islamic rules for slaughtering meat, rules for ritual purity and ablutions (washing before prayer), the form and stipulations of a marriage contract, and many other details are quite similar to those found in the orthodox Jewish tradition.

More important than these numerous points of similarity, is the overall framework of the Prophet Muhammad's mission. The Prophet Muhammad saw himself as playing a role in Biblical history. Because he belonged to a series of prophets who all preached worship of the same God, it was only logical that the experiences of earlier, Biblical prophets could serve as a model and guide for his mission. Much of the Qur'an follows this typological or analogical logic. That is to say that a series of equations or comparisons are continually being made in the Qur'an between Biblical figures and the Prophet and his contemporaries.

The form and style of the Qur'an is quite different from what we might expect from analogy with either the Old Testament or the Gospels. A large portion of the Old

Testament, including the books Genesis through Ezra and Nehemiah, is presented chronologically. God creates the world in the opening verses of the first book, and the narrative flows, occasional interruptions aside, through antediluvian history, the age of the patriarchs, the invasion of Canaan, the kingdoms up to the Babylonian captivity, and, taking up the thread again after the return from Babylon, post-exilic history until ca. 400 B.C.E. The Qur'an does not present this chronological historical narrative. The Gospels, as you know, narrate the life and mission of Christ. The Qur'an does not tell the story of the mission of the Prophet Muhammad, or only does so indirectly. Muhammad is not the main character in the Qur'an--he only appears five times by name. In contrast, Jesus appears by name twenty-five times and Moses over one hundred and thirty. Most of the surahs of the Qur'an resemble sermons. Rather than simply telling a story, they make a moral point, teaching the audience. They introduce this moral point, then provide summaries of narratives, most often Biblical, which illustrate that point, then conclude, pointing out the moral included in those stories. For example, surah 54 of the Qur'an warns the audience of the Prophet that peoples who fail to heed the words of their prophets and worship the one God regularly meet destruction. The introduction and conclusion stress this point, and the middle sections give quick summaries of stories which serve as examples: the story of Noah and the flood, the stories of Hud and Salih, prophets from the ancient Arabian tradition, and their tribes `Ad and Thamud, the story of Lot and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the story of Moses and Pharaoh.

Biblical narratives are thus used as instructive examples from which the Prophet and his contemporaries should learn on which they should base their beliefs and actions. Moses appears so frequently in the text because he is analogous to, or serves as a model for, the Prophet Muhammad. Pharaoh represents the tyrannical tribal chiefs of Quraysh, the rulers of Mecca and the Prophet's chief enemies. The Hebrews—termed the Sons of Israel in the Qur'an—represent the embattled early Muslims. This idea is expressed clearly and succinctly in a statement the Prophet addressed to his followers: "Your situation is like that of the Sons of Israel as much as one sandal resembles its pair. If they had entered a lizard's hole, so would you." His statement implies that the events of Biblical history are directly relevant to the Prophet's own time and experiences of the Muslims. Even the details of that history will repeat themselves in the Muslim community.

Biblical comparison, analogy, or typology is pervasive in the text of the Qur'an, Islamic practice, and early Islamic history. A few examples may help you understand its importance for the faith.

The Arabic word for book, '*Kitab*', occurs in many contexts in the Qur'an, and has a number of meanings. It sometimes refers to the record of one's sins with which one is confronted on the Day of Judgment. It sometimes refers to the Qur'an itself. In many passages, however, it refers to the Bible. In my view, should be translated as such. The term *ahl al-kitab*, usually translated as 'people of the book' or 'people of scripture' occurs frequently in the Qur'an in reference to Jews and Christians. I think that this people of the Bible. The point is not just that they have a scripture, and are therefore somehow

legitimate; the point is that they have THE scripture which all three traditions share in some fashion.

*Hijrah* is a particularly important Islamic term. It refers to central event in Islamic history is It refers to the flight of the Prophet and his followers from persecution, from Mecca, their native town, to Medina, where they were able to worship and establish a stable community for the first time. The date of this event, 622 C.E., is taken as the start of the Islamic calendar. *Hijrah*, is usually translated into English literally, as 'migration' or 'emigration,' but, in my view, this translation fails to capture the religious significance of the term. I believe, rather, that it actually means 'Exodus.' Its use refers to the Hebrews' exodus from Egypt. Just as the Hebrews, led by Moses, fled Egypt, escaped the tyranny of Pharaoh and made it, eventually, to the Promised land, the Muslims, led by the Prophet, fled Mecca, escaped the tyranny of the chiefs of the Quraysh tribe, and made it to safety in Yathrib, which would be renamed *Madinat al-nabi* 'the City of the Prophet.'

As you are probably aware, pilgrimage to Mecca is a fundamental duty for Muslims. But on what logic was the pilgrimage instituted? Why do Muslims pray toward Mecca? The Qur'an answers as follows: The Ka'bah, the rectangular shrine at Mecca which had served as a place of worship for many gods prior to Islam, was actually a Biblical Temple. It was originally built by Abraham and Ishmael, who dedicated it to the worship of the one God. It was thus construed as the First Temple, and Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem was actually the Second Temple. The early Muslims had prayed toward Jerusalem, presumably on the logic that it was the site of the Temple. Only when it was revealed that the Ka'bah was actually Abraham's Temple was prayer toward Mecca instituted.

If Moses and Abraham play central roles in the Qur'an, Jesus is also important. The Qur'an recasts or reinterprets Jesus as a prophet who preached worship of the one God, parallel with other prophetic figures in the text. It rejects the notion of Jesus' divinity and along with it belief in the trinity. However, it does accept many elements of Christian doctrine. In the Qur'an, Jesus performs many miracles, curing the sick and raising the dead. The virgin birth is accepted as true and a miracle. In fact, Mary is the only woman named in the Qur'an. Jesus is referred to as 'Christ' and also 'the Word'. The term 'Holy Spirit' also appears, though not in the context of the trinity. Jesus' disciples and the Last Supper also appear. Its import, of course, is different—the scene serves to emphasize God's providence, bounty, and the favor he shows to his prophets and the believers. The scene of the Crucifixion also occurs, but the Qur'an said that 'it was made to look' to the audience that Jesus was killed in this manner, when in fact he was not. The implication is that God miraculously saved Jesus at the last minute, before suffering martyrdom.

Another key term from early Islamic history is *Ansar*, literally 'helpers' or 'allies', referring to the natives of Medina who converted to Islam, to be distinguished from the Muhajirun, the Meccan Muslims who had fled to Medina. The Qur'an itself suggests that this label was given on the basis of an analogy with the Disciples of Jesus. Verse 52 of the third surah of the Qur'an portrays Jesus preaching to his people. It reads: "But when Jesus became conscious of their disbelief he cried: Who will be my helpers (*ansar*) in the

cause of God? The disciples said: We will be God's helpers (*ansar*). We believe in God; bear witness that we have submitted (unto Him). (3:52)" The term *ansar* intentionally puns here on *nasara* "Christians" [from "Nazarenes"].

Here we see that Jesus' Disciples and, by extension, Christians are held up as a model for the early Muslim community to emulate. This is merely one indication of the profound importance of Biblical tradition for the Qur'an and Islam and of depth of shared tradition between the Islam and Christianity.

## The Prophet Muhammad's Life

- ca. 570 Prophet's birth;  
father: 'Abd Allah, died before his birth;  
mother Aminah died when he was very young;  
raised by uncle Abu Talib
- ca. 595 marriage to Khadijah
- ca. 610 first revelations
- ca. 613 first preaching
- ca. 614 preaches in House of al-Arqam; about 39 followers
- ca. 615 "migration" of a group of Muslims to Abyssinia (Ethiopia)  
(some stay until 628)
- ca. 615 Abu Jahl leads opposition to Muhammad
- ca. 616 Boycott of the the Prophet's clan, the clan of Hashim
- ca. 619 Abu Talib and Khadijah die;  
Another of the Prophet's uncles, Abu Lahab ('Abd al-'Uzza) becomes leader of the clan of Hashim.  
He initially pledges, then withdraws, support for the Prophet  
M. goes to a nearby Arabian town, al-Ta'if, to  
M. approaches nomadic tribes
- 620-621 natives of Yathrib (later Medina = al-Madinah, the City of the Prophet) come to Mecca on pilgrimage;
- 622 Hijrah "Emigration" = Exodus from Mecca to Medina  
Muhajirun "Emigrants" = Meccan Muslims  
Ansar "Helpers"/ "Disciples" = Muslims of Medina
- 24 September 622 Muhammad arrives in Medina
- August 623 The Prophet's House/mosque in Medina completed
- March 624 Battle of Badr; victory for the Muslims vs. Meccans
- 625 Battle of Uhud; defeat of Muslims by Meccans, or at best stand-off
- 627 Battle of the Trench; failure of Siege of Medina by Meccans
- 628 Truce of Hdaybiyah with Meccans
- 629 Lesser Pilgrimage to Mecca; Meccans evacuate town for 3 days while Muslims perform their own pilgrimage.
- 630 Conquest of Mecca by Muslims
- January 31, 630 Battle of Hunayn (Muslims and Meccans vs. Hawazin federation and Thaqif tribe (al-Ta'if))
- 630 Expedition to Tabuk in the North of Arabia
- 630 Delegations from tribes of Arabia pledge allegiance to the Prophet
- 631 "Farewell Pilgrimage"—the Prophet's last pilgrimage to Mecca
- 632 Death of Prophet

## **I. Characters in the Qur'an from the Hebrew Bible and Jewish tradition:**

God	Allah
Adam and Eve	Adam; Eve appears, but is not named
Cain and Abel	Qabil, Habil
Noah	Nuh
Abraham	Ibrahim
Sarah, Hagar	both appear, but are not named
Isaac, Ishmael	Ishaq, Isma`il
Lot, his wife	Lut; wife not named
Jacob	Ya`qub
Joseph and his brothers	Yusuf; brothers not named
Potiphar and his wife	al-`Aziz; wife not named
Moses	Musa
Amram, Moses' father	`Imran
Aaron	Harun
Pharaoh	Fir`awn
Saul	Talut
David	Dawud
Goliath	Jalut
Solomon	Sulayman
the Queen of Sheba	Saba'
Job	Ayyub
Elijah (Elias)	Ilyas
Ezra	`Uzayr
Elisha	Ilyasa`
Ezekiel	Dhu al-Kifl
Jonah	Yunus
Gabriel	Jibril
Michael	Mikal
Haman	Haman
Korah	Qarun
Satan	al-Shaytan
Gog and Magog	Yajuj and Majuj
Baal (a Canaanite god)	Ba`l

## **II. Characters in the Qur'an from the New Testament and Christian tradition:**

Jesus Christ	`Isa al-Masih
Mary	Maryam
Zechariah	Zakariyya
Elizabeth	not named
John the Baptist	Yahya
the Disciples	al-Hawariyun
the Devil	Iblis (< Gr. diabolos)

### **III. Characters in the Qur'an from pre-Islamic Arabian traditions:**

Hud and his tribe, `Ad

Salih and his tribe, Thamud

Luqman, famous for his wisdom

~unayn

Tubba` = Kings of Yemen

Shu`ayb and the people of Midian [conflated with Jethro, Moses' father-in-law]

Genies (Jinn)

Pre-Islamic gods:

Wadd (Love)

Suwa` (Time, Fate)

Yaghuth (He Helps, Provides)

Ya`uq (He Hinders)

Nasr (Eagle)

al-Lat (the Goddess)

al-Manat (Fate)

al-`Uzza (the Strong One (fem.) = Venus, Aphrodite)

Shams = the Sun

### Hebrew, Greek, and Terms related to the Bible in the Qur'an:

Jannaatu `Adn	paradise	< Garden of Eden
jahannam	hell	< Heb. <i>Gehinnom</i>
Babil	Babel	
Sina' or Sayna'	Sinai	
al-Tur	The Mountain = Sinai	< Aramaic <i>Tor</i>
al-Tawrat	Torah	
al-Injil	the Gospel	< Gr. <i>Evangelion</i>
asbat	the Tribes of Israel	< Heb. <i>sheva'im</i>
sabt	the Sabbath	< Heb. <i>shabat</i>
tabut	the Ark of the Covenant	
sakinah	God's presence	< Heb. <i>shekhina</i>
sadaqah	alms	
al-yamm	the river, sea	< Heb. <i>ha-yamm</i>
yawm al-din	the Day of Judgment	
al-Masih	the Messiah; Christ	
al-Shaytan	Satan	
Iblis	the Devil	< Gr. <i>diabolos</i>
hijrah	literally "flight, migration"	= Exodus, deliverance
ansar	literally, "allies, helpers"	= Disciples
bayt	literally "house"	= Temple
al-Ma'idah	literally "table" (title of the fifth Surah)	= the Last Supper
Kalimah	the Word	= Christ
al-Ruh al-quddus	the Holy Ghost	
al-Kitab	literally "the Book"	= the Bible
ahl al-kitab	literally "people of the Book"	= people of the Bible
nabi	prophet	< Heb. <i>nevi</i>
ayat	"signs, miracles"	< Heb. <i>otot</i> "signs"

## Terms Related to the Qurʾān:

- yah (pl. •y•t)** Verse of the Qurʾān  
Sign, specifically a visible, tangible, or perceptible sign in the world, pointing to a supernatural truth, such as God's existence, power, or uniqueness.
- sūrah (pl. suwar)** Chapter of the Qurʾān
- al-F•tiḥ** Literally, "The Opening," a term referring to the first surah of the Qurʾānic codex as we have it. This surah, which resembles The Lord's Prayer of Christians, is frequently used as a prayer in daily life.
- juzʿ (pl. ajz•)** One thirtieth part of the Qurʾān. The Qurʾān is divided into thirtieths for liturgical use; by reading one juzʿ a day, an individual can complete the Qurʾān in one month. This is often done as a pious act during Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting, or families may hire one or more professional Qurʾān readers to do a complete reading of the Qurʾān at the tomb of a deceased relative.
- muqriʿ** Professional Qurʾān reader. Generally *muqriʿ*'s perform at funerals, and on religious holidays and occasions. They also read at mosques, tombs, and cemeteries on a set schedule (e.g., every Friday, every evening during Ramadan).
- til•wāh** Reading the Qurʾān (to oneself).
- tartil** "Ordinary" reading of the Qurʾān, but out loud.
- tajwid** "Professional" reading of the Qurʾān, paying attention to strict rules concerning pronunciation, pausing, and length of syllables. It often involves musical or artistic touches, though most would insist that *tajwid* should not be considered music.
- muṣṣaf** A one-volume copy of the Qurʾān. A codex, i.e. what is now to us an ordinary book, that may be opened, as opposed to a scroll, that must be unrolled.
- rabfiāh** A copy of the Qurʾān divided into thirty parts (*ajzaʿ*) for liturgical use. Usually these are kept in a large box designed to hold all thirty slim volumes.
- qir•āt** "Readings" of the Qurʾān. These refer to seven, ten, or fourteen "systems" for reading the Qurʾān, each of which includes rules concerning pausing and pronunciation, but also variants in the text.



<b>at-Tawr•t</b>	The Torah, taken in the Qur'an to be the sacred text of the Jews, delivered to them by God through the Prophet Moses. The distinction among the five books of Moses does not appear in the Qur'an.
<b>al-Injil</b>	The Gospel, taken in the Qur'an to be the sacred text of the Christians, delivered to them by God through the prophet Jesus.
<b>al-Zabur</b>	The Psalms, taken in the Qur'an to be a distinct sacred text delivered to the Jews by God through David.
<b>Σuϕ Ibr•him</b>	"The Scrolls of Abraham." Another sacred text mentioned in the Qur'an.
<b>Kit•b</b>	Literally, "book." This term is used in the Qur'an to mean: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. The Bible.</li> <li>2. The Qur'an.</li> <li>3. A Sacred Text.</li> <li>4. The record of a believer's good or bad deeds, which is handed him or her at God's court on the Day of Judgement. Those who are handed their records in their right hands will go to Paradise. those who are handed their records in their left hands or behind their backs will be condemned to Hell.</li> </ol>
to	
<b>tafsir</b>	A commentary on the Qur'an.
<b>mufassir</b>	Author of tafsir.
<b>basmalah</b>	The phrase <i>bi'smi Ll•hi r-raϕm•ni r-raϕim</i> "In the name of God, the Merciful and Compassionate." This phrase occurs at the head every surah with the exception of the ninth, Surat al-Bar•vah
of	Ultimatum"). It also occurs once in the text of Surat al-
("The	Ants") in the story of King Solomon and the Queen
Naml ("The	Solomon begins an official letter to the Queen of
of Sheba.	Sheba with the
Sheba with the	phrase.
<b>kursi</b>	Literally, "chair." A small stand designed to hold the Qur'an for reading. They are usually made of two interlocking pieces of
wood	that unfold to sit in the shape of an X on the ground.
<b>•y•t al-aϕ•m</b>	1. The verses of the Qur'an which are understood to contain legal injunctions and are thus relevant for Islamic law. They are held to be 500 in number, about 1/13 the total number of verses in the Qur'an.

2. A type of work which provides a legal commentary on these verses.

**asb•b al-nuzül**

Literally, “the causes or occasions of revelation.” This is a genre of work in which the background to the revelation of specific passages, or surahs is explained, usually in the form of an oral report, of events that occurred during the Prophet’s mission. This type of work seeks to show what problem or situation the verse was originally meant to address.

**ح•في÷**

Someone who has memorized the Qur’an.

**khatm, khatmah**

1. A complete reading of the Qur’an.
2. A performance of the reading of the entire Qur’an by a professional Qur’an reader.
3. The occasion when a student first finishes reading the entire Qur’an and the celebration or ceremony that is held when this happens.

**maktab/kutt•b**

Traditionally, write, as well

A school where memorization of the Qur’an is taught. This was where most Muslims learned how to read and as some arithmetic and other elementary skills.

**Meccan/Medinan**

Both Muslim and Orientalist scholars divide up the surahs of the Qur’an historically, into those that were revealed when the Prophet was in Mecca (ca. 610-622) and those that were revealed when he was at Medina (c.a 622-632). The Meccan surahs tend to be shorter, have short, rhythmically parallel verses, and include general moral messages such as warnings of the Judgment in the Afterlife. The Medinan surahs are longer, have much longer verses, and include many specific answers to legal and other questions of relevance to an established community. In modern Qur’ans, the surah usually identifies it as Meccan or Medinan

Both Muslim and Orientalist scholars divide up the surahs of the Qur’an historically, into those that were revealed when the Prophet was in Mecca (ca. 610-622) and those that were revealed when he was at Medina (c.a 622-632). The Meccan surahs tend to be shorter, have short, rhythmically parallel verses, and include general moral messages such as warnings of the Judgment in the Afterlife. The Medinan surahs are longer, have much longer verses, and include many specific answers to legal and other questions of relevance to an established community. In modern Qur’ans, the surah usually identifies it as Meccan or Medinan

**mysterious letters**

Twenty-nine surahs of the Qur’an open with a series of letters from the Arabic alphabet. Their meaning is disputed. Some say that they are abbreviations of important religious terms; others say that they are not meant to be understood by mortals. The Arabic terms for these letters are *muqat’afati* “separated, interrupted (letters)” or *faw•ti* “openers.” Examples include *alif-l•m-mim* (A-L-M), *y•-sin* (Y-S), *ح•mim* (~M), and so on.

Twenty-nine surahs of the Qur’an open with a series of letters from the Arabic alphabet. Their meaning is disputed. Some say that they are abbreviations of important religious terms; others say that they are not meant to be understood by mortals. The Arabic terms for these letters are *muqat’afati* “separated, interrupted (letters)” or *faw•ti* “openers.” Examples include *alif-l•m-mim* (A-L-M), *y•-sin* (Y-S), *ح•mim* (~M), and so on.

<b>J•hiliyyah</b>	The Islamic term for the pre-Islamic, pagan period, characterized, in the view of the Qur'an, by the worship of many gods and reprehensible religious, social, and other practices.
<b>~ij•z</b>	Central Western Arabia, where Mecca and Medina are located
<b>Kafibah</b>	Literally "the Cube" The temple or shrine in Mecca. In the Prophet's time an earlier, this was a pagan shrine where many gods were worshipped. it was also the site of a popular annual pilgrimage. The Qur'an interprets this shrine as a Biblical temple originally devoted to the worship of God by Abraham and Ishmael, but corrupted by subsequent generations of Arabs.
<b>~ajj</b>	The annual pilgrimage to Mecca
<b>Quraysh</b>	The tribe of the Prophet.
<b>H•shim</b>	The clan of the Prophet.

### Quiz on the Qur'an.

Short answers:

1. What is the term for a verse in the Qur'an?
2. What is the term for a chapter in the Qur'an?
3. How many surahs are there in the Qur'an?
4. Has the Qur'an been translated into English? How many times?
5. Where was the Prophet Muhammad born?
6. Name three characters who appear in both the Qur'an and the Hebrew Bible.
7. Name three characters who appear in both the Qur'an and the Gospels.
8. Name three characters who appear in the Qur'an but appear neither in the Hebrew Bible nor in the Gospels.
9. What are the two names applied to the devil in the Qur'an?
10. What does a *muqri* do?

### Multiple choice:

1. The sacred texts mentioned in the Qur'an include
  - a. the Torah.
  - b. the Gospel.
  - c. the Psalms of David.
  - d. all of the above.
2. What was the name of a school where children learn to memorize the Qur'an?
  - a. *juz*
  - b. *fi*
  - c. *maktab*
  - d. *muqri*

3. When did the *hijrah* take place?
  - a. 570 C.E.
  - b. 622 C.E.
  - c. 632 C.E.
  - d. 750 C.E.
  
4. When did the Prophet Muhammad pass away?
  - a. 570 C.E.
  - b. 622 C.E.
  - c. 632 C.E.
  - d. 750 C.E.
  
5. The mysterious letters occur ...
  - a. at the beginning of the Qur'an.
  - b. at the ends of fifteen surahs of the Qur'an.
  - c. throughout the Qur'an.
  - d. at the beginnings of twenty-nine surahs of the Qur'an.
  
6. The first English translation of the Qur'an was published in
  - a. 1542
  - b. 1649
  - c. 1734
  - d. 1800
  
7. Which of the following are terms applied to prophets in the Qur'an?
  - a. Prophet
  - b. Messenger
  - c. Warner
  - d. All of the above.
  
8. Someone who has memorized the Qur'an is called a
  - a. *ḥafīẓ*.
  - b. *adith*.
  - c. *ajj*.
  - d. *ijz*.
  
9. The term *Yawm al-Din* refers to
  - a. the Day of Judgment.
  - b. the Day of Resurrection.
  - c. the Day of Punishment.
  - d. the Day of Celebration.
  
10. The Prophet Muhammad appears in the Qur'an
  - a. frequently by name.
  - b. never by name.

- c. in every surah.
- d. none of the above.

## The Six Most Popular Texts from the Qur'an:

### *al-F•ti,ah* (Q 1)

In the name of God, the Merciful and Beneficent

1. Praise be to God, Lord of [all] Peoples,
2. The Merciful and Beneficent,
3. King of the Day of Judgment.
4. We worship You, and from You we seek help.
5. Lead us on the straight path,
6. The path of those whom You have blessed,
7. Not of those who have incurred Your wrath, nor of those who have gone astray.

[When Sunni Muslims recite the F•ti,ah, they usually add “Amen” at the end.]

[This is my own translation. This surah is recited when visiting the tomb of a relative, when remembering a deceased relative, when sealing a pact or contract, such as entering into a partnership or reconciling an old feud or conflict, when agreeing on a betrothal or engagement.]

### **Exercise II: Compare and contrast al-F•ti,ah with the Lord's Prayer below.**

What elements are similar? What elements are different? What is the effect on the hearer?

Our Father in heaven,  
Hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come.  
Your will be done,  
    on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread.  
And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.  
And do not bring us to the time of trial, but rescue us from the evil one.

[When reciting this prayer, Christians often add: “For Thine is the power and the power and the glory for ever and ever, Amen.”]

[This is the prayer given by Jesus to his followers in the Gospel of Matthew 6:9-13. The version is that of the New Revised Standard Version]

\*\*\*\*\*

### *Surat al-Ikhlās* (Q 112)

In the name of God, the Merciful and Beneficent

1. Say: God is One.
2. God is Everlasting.
3. He neither begets nor was begotten,
4. Nor does He have any equal.

*qul huwa Llāhu ahad \**

*Allahu s-samad \**  
*lam yalid wa-lam yulad \**  
*wa-lam yakun lahu kufuwan ahad \**

[This surah is frequently recited as a credal statement, in addition to being a favorite for inclusion in daily prayer. It is reminiscent of what is called the *Shma`* in Jewish tradition, a particularly important prayer:

“Hear, O Israel! The Lord [Yahweh] is our God.  
The Lord [Yahweh] is One.”  
*shma` yisra`el*  
*adonai [yahweh] eloheinu*  
*adonai [yahweh] e`ad*

The key point of comparison is the emphasis on the term “One,” which occurs in a rhythmically final position in both texts. In the Arabic, it also provides the rhyme that continues throughout the *surah*. “One” is *ehad* in Hebrew. While it would normally be *wahid* in Arabic, *ahad* appears here unexpectedly [It exists in Arabic, but is only normally used in construct before a plural noun, e.g., *a`ad ar-rij •l* “one of the men.” It may be that the use of *a`ad* here is meant to match *e`ad* of the Hebrew prayer.

\*\*\*\*\*

#### ***Surat al-Falaq* (“Daybreak”) (Q 113)**

In the name of God, the Merciful and Beneficent

1. Say: I seek protection with the Lord of the Daybreak
2. From the evil of His Creation:
3. From the evil of the dark when it falls;
4. From the evil of women who blow on knots;
5. And from the evil of an envier when he envies.

[The mention of women blowing on knots (in string, twine, or thread, presumably) refers to a type of magic practiced in pre-Islamic Arabia involving uttering a curse of an enemy while tying a knot and then blowing on it. The goal of this practice was to cause the curse actually to befall the enemy mentioned, an Arabian form of voodoo, so to speak. Envy is also considered a dangerous and destructive force in Middle Eastern societies.]

#### ***Surat al-Nas* (“Mankind”) (Q 114)**

In the name of God, the Merciful and Beneficent

1. Say: I seek protection with the Lord of mankind,
2. The King of mankind,
3. The God of mankind,
4. From the evil of the slinking whisperer
5. Who whispers in the breasts of mankind,
6. Both genies and mankind.

[The slinking whisperer who appears in verse 4 is traditionally identified as the Devil. The genies (*jinn*) mentioned in verse 6 are described as a parallel species to man who

share many of their characteristics but are often invisible, weightless, and endowed with the power of flight. The Qur'an states that they have been created out of fire, while man has been created out of clay. They appear often in the Qur'an, but the idea that they grant three wishes comes from elsewhere—ultimately European folktales, in all likelihood. Even the Aladdin story in Arabic does not have three wishes. Genies may be both good or bad, but they are conceived of as being more bad than good, on the whole, or at least potentially quite dangerous. Often the meaning of genies is close to that of “demons” in English.]

**Exercise III. Complete the following:**

1. What are the similarities between these two surahs? Be specific, and pay attention to the structure.
2. What purpose or function are they meant to serve?
3. What does the initial “Say:” tell us?
4. What does the overall similarity of the two texts suggest?
5. How do the two surahs differ? Do these differences give them a different effect?

\*\*\*\*\*

***Ayat al-Kursi* (“The Verse of the Throne”) (Q 2:255)**

255. God—There is no god save Him, the Alive, the Eternal. Neither slumber nor sleep overtakes Him. To Him belongs all that is in the Heavens and all that is on the Earth. Who is he who would intercede with Him except by His leave? He knows that which is in front of them and that which is behind them, while they encompass nothing of His knowledge save what he will. His Throne extends over the Heavens and the Earth, and sustaining them does not tire Him. He is the Sublime and Tremendous. \*

[This verse is often read to ward off evil, probably on the logic that it stresses God’s power. *Surat Yasin*, the 36th surah of the Qur’an, is also read to ward off evil, as are *Surat al-Falaq* and *Surat al-Nas*. It appears frequently on jewelry, such as pendants, worn as a type of amulet, and is probably the single most frequent text for wall plaques, souvenir plates, and other decorative items for the home or office.]

**Exercise IV. Answer the following questions:**

1. If God has a throne, what does this tell us about Him?
  
2. How long is this one verse? Do you think it is from a Meccan surah or a Medinan surah?
  
3. The verse insists that God does not get tired. Does God ever get tired in the Bible? (Hint: Didn't He need to rest once?)
  
4. Comment on any aspect of the verse that you find interesting.

\*\*\*\*\*

***Ayat al-Nur* (“The Verse of Light”) (Q 24:35)**

35. God is the Light of the Heavens and the Earth. The likeness of His light is like a niche in which there is a lamp. The lamp is in a glass. The glass is as if it were a pearly star, kindled with oil from a blessed tree, an olive tree neither from the East nor the West, the oil of which nearly glows even when fire has not yet touched it. Light upon Light, God guides to His Light whom He will. God speaks to mankind in parables, and God is the Knower of all things.

[This verse appears especially on lamps hung in mosques, as well as on plaques and other decorative items in homes.]

**Exercise V. Answer the following questions:**

- 1.. Compare and contrast the Verse of Light with the Verse of the Throne.

2. The Verse of Light informs us that God speaks to mankind in parables (Ar. *mathal*, *amth•l*). The Arabic word *mathal* “proverb, parable, comparison” is related to the Hebrew and Aramaic words *mashal*, which have the same meaning, and parables play a substantial role in the Bible. (You may have heard of the parables of Jesus in the gospels.) A parable is a text which has two meanings, the surface or literal meaning, and a second meaning which is not specified literally but must be figured out. What is the two levels of meaning of the Verse of Light, in your opinion?

\*\*\*\*\*

**Exercise VI: This passage is the first half of Surah 89, The Dawn.  
Read it carefully and answer the following questions.**

Q 89 The Chapter of the Dawn

1. [Swear] By the dawn,
2. By the ten nights,
3. By the even and the odd,
4. And by the night when it passes.
5. Is there not in these an oath for one who understands?
6. Have you not seen what your Lord did with [the tribe of] `Ad,
7. with [the city of] Iram of the many pillars,
8. The like of which have not been created in all the land?
9. And with [the people of] Thamud, who hollowed out the boulders in the valley?
10. And with Pharaoh, ruler of the Pyramids?
11. All of them were tyrants in the lands

12. Multiplying corruption therein,
13. So your Lord poured upon them a scourge of punishment,
14. For your Lord is on constant guard.

...

#### Questions

1. Divide up this passage into logical sections.
2. In your opinion, what purpose do the oaths at the beginning of the passage serve?
3. What are the three examples given in the passage? With which are you familiar? Which have you not seen mentioned before?
4. What are the characteristics that bind these three examples together? What is the audience supposed to think about them?
5. What is role does the Lord play in this passage?

**Exercise V: This passage is the first half of Surah 89, “The Dawn.”  
Read it carefully and answer the following questions.**

#### Q 89 The Chapter of the Dawn

1. [Swear] By the dawn,
2. By the ten nights,
3. By the even and the odd,
4. And by the night when it passes.
5. Is there not in these an oath for one who understands?
6. Have you not seen what your Lord did with [the tribe of] `Ad,
7. with [the city of] Iram of the many pillars,
8. The like of which have not been created in all the land?
9. And with [the people of] Thamud, who hollowed out the boulders in the valley?
10. And with Pharaoh, ruler of the Pyramids?
11. All of them were tyrants in the lands
12. Multiplying corruption therein,
13. So your Lord poured upon them a scourge of punishment,
14. For your Lord is on constant guard.

...

#### Questions

1. Divide up this passage into logical sections.

2. In your opinion, what purpose do the oaths at the beginning of the passage serve?

3. What are the three examples given in the passage? With which are you familiar? Which have you not seen mentioned before?

4. What are the characteristics that bind these three examples together? What is the audience supposed to think about them?

5. What role does the Lord play in this passage?

**Bibliography:**

Some English translations of the Qur'an:

*The Holy Qur'an: Text, Translation and Commentary.* Trans. Abdallah Yusuf Ali. Originally published in Lahore in 1938, but many editions since. This translation includes a number of informative appendices, many preaching commentaries and many selections of the translator's own devotional poetry. A number of editions are available with the Arabic text as well

*The Koran.* Trans. with notes by N.J. Dawood. 4th rev. ed. New York: Penguin, 1974, This is the best translation available in English to date, in my opinion. The translator avoids literal translation and endeavors to render the Arabic into functionally equivalent English. Unfortunately, his translation does not provide the verse numbers in the text, which makes close work with the text difficult.

*The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'an: An Explanatory Translation.* Trans. Mohammad Marmaduke Pickthall. First published New York: A.A. Knopf, 1930, but many editions have been published since. Pickthall sticks very close to the Arabic text and standard Sunni doctrine regarding the meaning of the text. He also overdoes an attempt to sound like the King James Bible. Because of the first feature, as well as the provision of verse numbers in the text, I have found this suitable for use in the classroom.

*The Koran Interpreted.* Trans. Arthur Arberry. London, 1964. Reads well in English, but is perhaps too flowery on occasion. A number of Arberry's rhetorical flourishes do not reflect the original text accurately, in my opinion.

*The Qur'ān, Translated, with a Critical Re-Arrangement of the Surahs,* 2 vols. Trans. Richard Bell. Edinburgh : T. & T. Clark, 1937-39. This translation is interesting because it rearranges the surahs in what Bell reconstructs as the historical order of their appearance. In addition, it includes many notes and markings explaining how the individual surahs were constructed out of smaller historical fragments.

#### **General:**

Bell, Richard and Montgomery Watt. *Introduction to the Qur'ān.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970, 1991.

Cook, Michael. *A Short Introduction to the Qur'ān.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000

*Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an,* 5 vols. Ed. Jane D. MacAuliffe. Leiden: Brill, 2001-?.

#### **More Specific:**

Bell, Richard. *A Commentary on the Qur'ān,* 2 vols. Ed. C. E. Bosworth and M. E. J. Richardson. Manchester, 1991.

Burton, John. *The Collection of the Qur'ān.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

Izutsu, Toshihiko. *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'ān.* Motreal, 1966.

\_\_\_\_\_. *God and Man in the Koran.* New York, 1964; repr. 1980

Jeffery, Arthur. *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'ān.* Baroda, 1938.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Materials for the History of the Text of the Qur'ān. The Kitāb al-Maṣāʾif of Ibn*

*Abi Dāwūd together with a collection of the variant readings from the codices of Ibn Masʿūd, etc.* Leiden, 1937.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Two Muqaddimas to the Qur'ānic Sciences. The Muqaddima to the Kitāb al-Maṣāʾif and the Muqaddima of Ibn al-Aʿrabi to his Tafsir.* Cairo, 1954.

Mac Auliffe, Jane. *Qur'ānic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis.* Cambridge, 1991.

Parrinder, Edward Geoffrey. *Jesus in the Qur'ān.* New York: Barnes and Noble, 1965.

Rippin, ed. *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān.* Oxford, 1988.

Wild, S., ed. *The Qur'ān as Text.* Leiden, 1966.

Devin J. Stewart,  
Department of Middle Eastern and South Asian Studies  
Emory University  
[all translations are my own]