

## *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 βub\_•*
3. *fa'l-mūriy•ti qad\_•*
4. *fa-atharna bihi naqfi•*
5. *fa-wasaʔna bihi jamfi•*
6. *inna 'l-ins•na li-rabbihī la-kaniūd*
7. *wa-innahu `ala dhalika la-shahīd*
8. *wa-innahu li-hubbi 'l-khayri la-shadīd*
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.