

CIS Bulletin: The Qur'an

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The **Qur'an**, an Arabic word meaning "to recite" or recitation," or **Koran**, a spelling not preferred today, is the holy book of Islam.

The revealed books of Islam are the Torah, the Psalms of David, the Gospel of Jesus (not the Gospels), and the Qur'an. All, except the Qur'an, are in practice dismissed as not offering a sure text, although Muslims are instructed to believe in them insofar as they have not been corrupted. The authority and text of the Qur'an are never questioned by Muslims, although Muslims may (and do) interpret the Qur'an differently.

Muslims believe the Qur'an is the exact or literal words of Allah [an Arabic word for God meaning "The God"] in Arabic and the last of God's revelation to mankind. Muslims believe the Qur'an was revealed word-for-word to Muhammad (570-632) by the angel Gabriel over a period of some twenty-three years, beginning about A.D. 610. The name, Qur'an, was given as the title of the book because of Muslims' believe Gabriel recited the book to Muhammad, who memorized the words as they were recited. In other words, the Qur'an existed in heaven with Allah prior to Gabriel's recitation of the book to Muhammad.

Great honor is given today to persons who have memorized the entire Qur'an, which is about 4/5 the size of the New Testament, and can "recite" it. Preteen boys have memorized the entire Qur'an. All Muslims are required to learn at least some chapters to be able to perform the obligatory prayers.

Muhammad did not write down the Qur'an, but gave the revelations to his followers, who collected and wrote them on pieces of paper, stones, palm-leaves, bones and leather. After Muhammad's death, it was agreed the revelation had ended. His followers gathered the verses and chapters together into one book for use by the Muslim community. However, several versions of the Qur'an circulated, until an official version was adopted. All other copies of the Qur'an, which could be found, were burned.

The Qur'an is considered inerrant and without inconsistencies by Muslims. When inconsistencies are found, they are explained away by claiming clarifications during the 23 years of revelation. The text of the Qur'an has almost certainly fallen victim to "scribal glosses," especially during the earlier years when the text of the Quran was being collected. The Qur'an has not been "criticized" by scholars as has the Bible. Muslims resist such criticism.

Non-Muslim scholars believe the religious sources for the Qur'an are Judaism, Christianity and Arabic tribal religions, the three faiths Muhammad tried to unite under his new faith.

Languages of the Qur'an

The Qur'an was originally written in classical Arabic. Today, the book has been translated into many languages, including English. The first translation into English was in 1649. Translations are considered to be of value only for personal use, and are held to be interpretations, not the real Qur'an; only the Qur'an in Arabic is considered worthy of theological discussion.

Organization of the Qur'an

The Qur'an consists of 114 chapters, called *suras* or *surahs*. The organization of the Qur'an is artificial and does not follow a historical or chronological outline.

The first chapter or opening chapter is a prayer of seven verses to Allah. The remainder of the book, 113 chapters, are generally arranged with the longest chapter next and the shortest chapter

toward the end of the book. The Qur'an is written as poetry and prose.

Every chapter, except one, begins with the words, "In the Name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful."

The Qur'an follows the Tanakh in reading from right to left and from the back to the front as we look at it.

Similarities between the Qur'an and the Bible

There are many similarities between the Qur'an and the Bible, which many non-Muslim scholars interpret as an effort by Muhammad to attract Christians to his faith.

However, Muslim scholars do not compare the Qur'an with the Bible, but rather, with Christ, "The Word of God in Islam is the Qur'an; in Christianity it is Christ." In Christianity, the Word became flesh; in Islam, the Word became a book.

New Testament in the Qur'an

Jesus, called "Isa" in Arabic, is mentioned in 15 *suras* and in 93 verses for a total of 97 times. All references to Jesus in the Qur'an are positive, but most do not agree with teachings about Jesus in the New Testament.

The Qur'an gives titles to Jesus greater than any figure before him. He is called a "sign" and an "example." He is called Messiah, son of Mary, Messenger, Prophet, and Servant. However, these terms do not mean to a Muslim what they mean to a Christian. As a prophet, Jesus' sinlessness is affirmed.

Jesus is also called the "Word of God." The Qur'an calls Jesus the "Spirit of God" seven times. The Qur'an teaches that the Spirit supported Jesus throughout his life, from birth to his ascension.

Jesus is not the Son of God. "Allah has not chosen any son, nor is there any God along with Him" (*Sura* 23:91).

The virgin birth of Jesus is affirmed. The Qur'an gives particular stress to Mary and her background; God chose her and made her pure. While the Qur'an doesn't tell how the conception occurred, there are two allusions to God breathing His Spirit into Mary (*Sura* 21:91; 66:12). When she was about to give birth, she withdrew to a trunk of a palm tree where the Lord provided figs and water (*Sura* 19:22-25).

The Qur'an and Islamic literature affirms Jesus performed miracles, although not all of the miracles are recorded in the New Testament. He healed the blind and the leper and raised the dead. One extra-biblical miracle, perhaps from the apocryphal *The Infancy Story of Thomas*, is the story of Jesus creating a bird from clay and breathing on it to bring it to life.

According to the Qur'an, Jesus did not die on the cross. Most Muslims believe *Sura* 4:156-158 teaches that a substitute was provided for him on the cross. However, Jesus' death is mentioned in *Sura* 19:33-34, "Peace on me the day I was born, and the day I die, and the day I shall be raised alive! Such was Jesus, son of Mary: (that is) a statement of truth concerning which they doubt."

Muslims believe John 14:16 is a prophecy about birth of Muhammad. Other biblical verses, such as Genesis 17:20-21, Deuteronomy 18:18-19, 33:1-2, and Matthew 21:42-44 are also said to anticipate Muhammad. *Sura* 61:6 states, "And when Jesus, son of Mary, said: O Children of Israel! Lo! I am the messenger of Allah unto you, confirming that which was (revealed) before me in the Torah, and bringing good tidings of a messenger who cometh after me, whose name is the Praised One." "The Praised One," *Ahmad* in Arabic, is believed to be Muhammad.

A *hadith* states that Jesus will descend as a judge with a spear in His hand to kill the Anti-Christ praying in a mosque. Then he will kill all swine, smash crucifixes, and destroy all synagogues and churches.

Old Testament in the Quran

The Qur'an accepts the creation of the world by Allah, but does not give the details as found in the Bible. The Qur'an rejects the theory of evolution, stating that Allah created Adam, the first human. "Behold, the Lord said to the angels, "I will create a vice-regent [a deputy appointed to serve a supreme chief] on earth" (S. 2:30). Adam and his wife [Eve's name is not mentioned in the Qur'an.] "in the Garden."

Satan [Iblis in Arabic] refused the command to the angels to "Bow down to Adam" (S. 2:34; 20:116). The theory of fallen angels is not accepted in Muslim theology (fn., p. 16); Satan is spoken of as a *Jinn* in *Surah* 18:50. Allah created Jinns from a flame of fire (fn., p. 372). They could believe or disbelieve; the Qur'an said Jinns falsely believed Allah had sons and daughters (S. 6:100). They will be judged along with humans.

After the fall, Adam and his wife are expelled from the Garden, but they immediately show remorse and are forgiven. There is nothing in Islam to suggest that Adam's wife led him to sin; they sinned and were forgiven together. The Qur'an rejects the sinfulness of mankind; there is no separation between Allah and humanity. Adam is the first prophet of Allah.

The story of Adam's two sons is told and that one killed the other (S. 5:27-32). The story of Noah and the flood is told several times. He is the second prophet of Allah mentioned in the Qur'an. The Tower of Babel is mentioned.

Abraham is an especially important prophet of Allah in the Qur'an. He rejected the idols worshipped by his father and destroyed them, "So he broke them to pieces, (All) but the biggest of them" (S. 21:58). This refers to the Ka'ba in Mecca. Abraham is believed to have rededicated the Ka'ba to the worship of Allah.

The story of Allah's command for Abraham to sacrifice his son is told in the Qur'an (S. 37:99-113). However, the name of that son is not given in the Qur'an. A Muslim commentary cites Genesis 22:2 in which Abraham is told to take his "only son Isaac" and offer him as a sacrifice. Ignoring Isaac's name in Genesis, the commentary emphasizes "only son." Saying Ishmael was Abraham's "only son" for 14 years, and that Isaac was never Abraham's "only son," Ishmael must have been the son he was commanded to sacrifice. The Tanakh translates the phrase, "favorite son," not "only son." The sacrifice was in or near Mecca. Abraham and Ishmael are both believed to have worshipped Allah at the Ka'ba.

Moses is mentioned in 36 *Suras* in the Qur'an. The Qur'an tells that the infant Moses was placed in the Nile to be found and adopted by the Pharaoh's wife (S. 20:39). Moses' mother was called to nurse the child for the Pharaoh's wife. Moses killed an Egyptian and fled from Egypt. Islam teaches that prophets of Allah are sinless and usually do not mentioned sins committed by prophets. A commentary says Moses "did not intend to kill" the Egyptian. Allah spoke to him (S. 4:164). Back in Egypt before the Pharaoh, Moses is accused of magic as he pressures the Pharaoh to let the "Children of Israel" go. The miracles are called "signs" in the Qur'an (S. 7:133). Finally, the Children of Israel are allowed to leave Egypt; they cross "a dry path for them through the sea" (S. 20:77-78), while the Pharaoh's army is drowned in the sea. Allah feeds the Children of Israel manna and quails in the wilderness. A commentary suggests an "Egyptianised" Hebrew lead the people to make a golden calf (S. 20:88), not Aaron.

Moses received the Tablets of Law (similar to the Ten Commandments) from Allah. Muslims reject the Biblical account of Moses breaking the stone on which the Commandments were written (Ex. 32:10).

The Ark of the Covenant is mentioned (S. 2:248).

David is recognized as both king and prophet. Since prophets are sinless, no mention is made in the Qur'an of his adultery with Bathsheba and his part in her husband's murder.

He authored many Psalms. "Though their present form is different from the original and they do undoubtedly include Psalms not written by David, the collection contains much devotional poetry of a high order" (fn., p. 270).

Solomon's wisdom is recognized. Everything David and Solomon accomplished came from Allah (S. 21:79). Even the wind obeyed Solomon (S. 21:81).

Job is recognized as a prophet of Allah. "Job was a prosperous man, with faith in Allah, living somewhere in the northeast corner of Arabia."

Other Old Testament prophets mentioned in the Qur'an are Jonah, Ezekiel and Elisha.

Handling the Qur'an

The Qur'an states that only those who are clean and pure should touch the sacred text: "This is indeed a Holy Qur'an, in a book well-guarded, which none shall touch but those who are clean..." (56:77-79). Some Muslims believe only Muslims are "clean and pure," and so non-Muslims should not touch the Qur'an.

Most Muslims hold to the following guidelines.

1) One should make formal ablutions [prescribed washing] before handling the Qur'an or reading from its text.

2) One who is in need of a formal bath (after intercourse or during menstrual bleeding) should not touch the Qur'an until after bathing.

3) A non-Muslim should not handle the sacred text, but may listen to tapes of the Qur'an or handle a translation or exegesis.

4) Those who are unable to handle the Qur'an based on these reasons should either avoid handling the Qur'an completely, or in necessity hold it while using some sort of barrier covering the hand, such as a cloth or a glove.

Hadith

Hadith (Arabic: "report," "account" or "talk") are written traditions about what Muhammad, his family or "Companions of the Prophets" said, did or approved of. Some *Hadith* are believed to be sacred because God is speaking through the prophet. Although not held to be canonical as is the Qur'an, *Hadith* are nevertheless closely followed by Muslims. Various *hadith* have been written as differing traditions of Muhammad's teachings and practices arose. Different schools of Muslim scholars accept different *hadith*. One collection contains 9,200 *hadith*, others are much shorter.

Shia Muslims refer to *Hadith* as *khobar* (Arabic: "news") and include references to Imams not found in Sunni *Hadith*.

Hadith contain rules which Muslims are expected to follow. Each *Hadith* contains a source who claims he heard or saw Muhammad do so and so. These claims became the universal Muslim norm and are often used to set religious law or *sharia*. For example, in Islamic culture today, Muslim women are often encouraged or pressured to wear a *burqa*. The custom goes back to the time of Muhammad who made his female relatives wear a *burqa*. For Muslims, it is enough that Muhammad required his female relatives to wear a *burqa*. Some Muslim scholars believe Muhammad made this requirement to hide the identity of his female relatives at a time when a threat against the family existed and that it was not a custom Muhammad intended for all time.

Other rules deal with minor issues such as how to tie one's sandals.

In Islam, the term *sunnah* (Arabic: "right custom") refers to the way Muhammad lived his life, and is seen as similar in importance to the *hadith*. [The sunni sect of Islam takes its name from the *sunnah*.] Sunni Muslim judges will refer to the Qur'an, *hadith* and *sunnah* in making their legal rulings, called *fatwas* (published opinions regarding religious doctrine or law made by a recognized religious authority).