

## Beginner's guide to the Qur'aan (part 1 of 3)

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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allaah, the Most Merciful, the Bestower of Mercy

### Exactly what is the Qur'aan?

The Qur'aan is the literal, spoken Word of Allaah revealed to the last Prophet Muhammad through Gabriel, the Angel of Revelation, transmitted to us by numerous channels, both verbally and in written form. Inimitable and unique, it is divinely protected from corruption. God says:

**['Indeed, it is We who sent down the message [i.e., the Qur'aan] and indeed, We will be its guardian.']<sup>1</sup>**

### The Basics

The first thing for a beginner to understand about the Qur'aan is its form. The Arabic word, 'Qur'aan,' literally means both 'recitation' and 'reading'. Similarly, the Qur'aan was both recited orally and written down in book form. The true power of the Qur'aan remains in the oral recitation, as it is meant to be read aloud and melodiously, but still the verses were written down on available materials as an aid to memorising and guarding it, and these were collected and arranged in book form both privately and, at a later stage, institutionally. The Qur'aan was not meant to tell a chronological story, and thus, the Qur'aan should not be viewed as a sequential narrative like the book of Genesis.

The Qur'aan often repeats certain verses and themes, shifting topics between them, and often relates narratives in summarised form. We can see two reasons for this. First, it serves a linguistic purpose and is one of the powerful rhetorical techniques of classical Arabic. Second, all themes of the Qur'aan, no matter how varied, are wrapped around one common thread running through the entire book: there is no true god but Allaah, and Muhammad is His messenger. The Qur'aan, unlike the Bible, is not concerned with genealogies, chronological events, or minute historical details, many of which don't suit an oral discourse. The purpose is to use events, from past and present, to illustrate this central message. So when the Qur'aan is discussing the healing properties of honey or the life of Jesus, neither topic is an end in itself, but each is related in one way or another to the central message – the Oneness of God and unity of the prophetic message.

<sup>1</sup> Qur'aan [15:9]

## Beginner's guide to the Qur'aan (part 1 of 3)

Another important point to keep in mind is that the Qur'aan was not revealed in one sitting, but rather it was revealed in parts over a span of 23 years. Many passages were in response to specific events. Often, Qur'aanic revelation would come from the angel Gabriel to Prophet Muhammad as a response to questions raised by unbelievers. The Qur'aan addresses these unbelievers, the People of the Scripture (a term used by the Qur'aan for Jews and Christians), humanity at large, believers, and, finally, the Prophet himself - commanding him what to do in a certain situation or solacing him in the face of ridicule and rejection. Knowing the historical and social context of revelation clarifies the meanings contained in the text itself.

### How is The Qur'aan Organised?

The Qur'aan is composed of 114 parts or chapters of unequal length. Each chapter is called a Soorah in Arabic and each sentence or phrase of the Qur'aan is called an aayah, literally 'a sign.' Like the Bible, the Qur'aan is divided into discrete units, referred to as 'verses' in English. These verses are not standard in length and where each begins and ends was not decided by human beings, but dictated by God. Each one is a discrete act of locution of closed signification, or 'sign', denoted by the word aayah in Arabic. All Soorahs, except one, begin with Bismillaah hir-Rahman nir-Rahim, 'I begin with the name of Allaah, the Most Merciful, the Bestower of Mercy.' Each Soorah has a name that usually relates to a central theme within it. For example, the longest Soorah, Soorah al-Baqarah, or "The Cow", is named after the story of Moses commanding the Jews to offer a sacrifice of a cow, which begins by God saying:

**["And remember Moses said to his people: 'Allaah commands that you sacrifice a cow.'"]<sup>2</sup>**

Since the various chapters are of various lengths, the Qur'aan was divided by scholars of the first century after the death of the Prophet into thirty roughly equal parts, each part is called a Juz' in Arabic. This division of the Qur'aan was done in order for people to memorise or read it in a more organised fashion, and it has no influence on the original structure, as they are mere marks on the sides of the pages denoting the part. In the month of fasting, Ramadhaan, one Juz' is usually recited every night, and the entire Qur'aan is completed by the end of the month.

### Style of the Qur'aan

What topics does the Qur'aan discuss? It covers various subjects. Most importantly, it talks about the Oneness of Allaah and how to live a life pleasing to Him. Other topics include religious doctrine, creation, criminal and civil law, Judaism, Christianity and polytheism, social values, morality, history, stories of past prophets, and science. The most important features of Qur'aan's style in discussing these themes are:

(1) The use of parables to stir curiosity of the reader and explain deep truths.

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<sup>2</sup> Qur'aan [2:67]

## Beginner's guide to the Qur'aan (part 1 of 3)

(2) More than two hundred passages begin with the Arabic word Qul - 'Say' - addressing Prophet Muhammad to say what follows in reply to a question, to explain a matter of faith, or to announce a legal ruling. For example:

**["Say: 'O People of the Scripture! Do you disapprove of us for no other reason than that we believe in Allaah, and the revelation that has come to us and that which came before (us), and because most of you are rebellious and disobedient?'"<sup>3</sup>]**

(3) In some passages of the Qur'aan, Allaah takes oaths by His marvellous creation, both to strengthen an argument or to dispel doubts in the mind of the listener:

**["By the sun and its brightness,  
By the moon when it follows it,  
By the day when it displays it,  
By the night when it covers it,  
By the sky and He who constructed it,  
By the earth and He who spread it,  
By the soul and He who proportioned it..."<sup>4</sup>]**

Sometimes Allaah takes an oath by Himself:

**["But no, by your Lord, they will not (truly) believe until they make you, (O Muhammad), judge concerning that over which they dispute among themselves, and then find within themselves no discomfort from what you have judged and submit in (full, willing) submission."<sup>5</sup>]**

(4) Lastly, the Qur'aan has what is called 'the disjointed letters,' composed of letters of the Arabic alphabet which, if taken together, do not have a known meaning in the Arabic lexicon. This was one of the ways that Allaah challenged the Arabs, who were the most eloquent of people in speech, to bring forth something to the Qur'aan, which consisted of the likes of these disjointed letters. They appear at the beginning of twenty nine Soorahs. For example, the first aayah of Soorat ul-Baqarah contains the letters Alif-Lam-Mim.

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<sup>3</sup> Qur'aan [2:59]

<sup>4</sup> Qur'aan [91:1-7]

<sup>5</sup> Qur'aan [4:65]