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GUIDE TO THE QURAN

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Experiencing the Quran

We are in the seventh century in Arabia and Mecca, the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad, is a city in turmoil. Muhammad's simple message of worshipping one God and abandoning idolatry has only a modest following, but alarm bells are being raised amongst the elite of his tribe. Set in the ways of their ancestors, they refuse to listen to the message Muhammad is teaching and begin to warn others against him.

In this climate of confusion, Tufayl ibn Amr, leader of a tribe in Southern Arabia decides to leave his village and pay a visit to Mecca. Upon his arrival, he is warned about Muhammad by the Meccan leaders and told that Muhammad is a wizard who utters bewitched words and is likely possessed. Although Tufayl is known for his poetic prowess, he decides to err on the side of caution and resolves not to listen to any of Muhammad's words lest he be influenced by the crafty words of this man claiming to be a prophet of God. Knowing he may chance upon Muhammad there, Tufayl enters the sacred mosque in Mecca with his ears stuffed with cotton, so fearful he is of falling under Muhammad's spell. But while the Prophet is performing his prayers, Tufayl can't help but notice his strange movements, bowing and prostrating, so unlike what he has witnessed before. He inches closer, and stray bits of melody enter his ears. Muhammad is reciting verses from the Quran in his prayer, and despite his hesitation, Tufayl listens to the Prophet, enthralled at the recitation. Tufayl knows that what he hears is not mere poetry. He approaches Muhammad and asks him about his message and mission. The Prophet recites more of the Quran to him and conviction enters Tufayl's heart. He says to the Prophet Muhammad, "I swear by God, never in my life did I hear such beautiful words. Neither was a more noble or just mission ever described to me."

Fast forward some fourteen hundred odd years later and the Quran is still enlightening and mesmerizing its readers the world over. Yet in some respects, our time seems no different than when it was revealed – the Quran’s message continues to be shrouded in mystery with much conjecture on its contents put forth by those who understand little of it. Many non-Muslims have not been introduced to the book, and numerous misconceptions and questions about its true message abound in the minds of those who know of it. As well, many Muslims who read the Quran as an act of devotion have not fully understood its history and its teachings. Still, the Quran in one way or another continues to exert its massive influence on the lives of Muslims, and is often cited in reference to Muslim culture and world events.

[Click here to hear a rendition of the Quran in its original Arabic language](#)

The word ‘Quran’ literally means ‘a Recitation’ or ‘a Reading.’ The Quran is called by that name precisely because it is meant to be a regularly recited book. In its name, the Quran encompasses the two related words, reading and recitation. Reading may give the impression of a silent and visual activity, while recitation includes the production of sound. The Quran, therefore, is meant to be read and heard, and to be listened to, even by the reader.

The emphasis on giving voice to the Quran began with the moment when Muslims believe the Quran was first introduced to the Prophet Muhammad. In the year 610 C.E., the Prophet had an extraordinary experience. As he was meditating in a cave, the angel Gabriel came to him and commanded him: “Recite, in the name of thy Lord ...” (Quran 96:1-5). The Prophet began to recite what the angel dictated to him as parts of the Quran and to proclaim those revealed pieces to all who would listen. This process continued over the next two decades until the Prophet died in 632 C.E. As detailed in a later chapter, the revealed messages were preserved, and in their entirety, form the Quran.

For Muslims, the Quran is the Word of God. To read the book is to be in close contact and communion with the Creator. The spiritual status of the Quran is expressed in the book itself in powerful words and imagery: “Had We sent down this Quran on a mountain, verily, you would have seen it humble itself and cleave asunder in awe of God” (59:21). But the Quran is not meant simply to be read and understood; its teachings and principles are meant to be implemented. As Oxford University Professor Tariq Ramadan aptly puts it, “The revealed text, God’s Word, presents itself both as a benevolent reminder and as a particularly demanding moral injunction that spreads spiritual inspiration as much as it structures the definite form of religious ritual” (In the Footsteps of the Prophet, pg. 42)

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To understand the religion of Islam and the way of life of Muslims, it is necessary to know the Quran. Yet like most books, especially world scriptures, the Quran can be read for better or for worse. From the outset, it may be approached and read with the aim of finding fault with the scripture. This aim is not new, and in fact, the Quran acknowledges that at the time when it was being revealed to the Prophet Muhammad, there were already detractors and sceptics. One’s biases and preferences may be read into the Quran as well, resulting in injustices perpetrated by those who cite the book as their source. And as modern debates rage on the role of the Quran in justice and women’s rights and what Islam says about peace and violence, we are left with confusing questions and unclear answers about what the Quran’s true message really is. One thing though that is for certain is that we must read the Quran for ourselves as a necessary part of our education in an attempt to understand the complexities of these issues. And whether the Quran is read for better or worse, it is important to know the basics of how the book came to be, the backdrop of its revelation, and how to understand what it seems to be saying. To begin, let us turn to an examination of the historical context in which the Quran was revealed.

History of the Quran

Revelation and Proclamation

The Quran is composed of 114 separate chapters (or 'suras' in Arabic), varying in length from 3 to 286 verses. But unlike most books, the Quran was not composed from start to finish and then made available to the public. Instead, over the course of Muhammad's 23 year mission, the Quran was inspired into his mind bit by bit, taught to him by Gabriel, the angel of revelation. Often, these revelations were a response to events and questions that had arisen. Each time Muhammad was inspired with some verses of the Quran, he would proclaim them to those around him. The Quran was not spoken as ordinary speech, but was chanted reverently in such a way that it was clear that these were God's words and not Muhammad's. Muhammad's followers would memorize these words and repeat them to others, and his designated scribes would write down the revelation on parchment and other available material. The Quranic revelations would also be recited in sermons and in prayers.

Compilation and Preservation

Although these revelations were memorized, circulated, and well-known among the community of Muslims, it was not until after Muhammad's death that they were collected into a single book. Fearing that the book might be forgotten, the leaders of the community commissioned Muhammad's scribe, Zaib b. Thabit, to compile a manuscript after collecting the diverse written pieces and consulting those who had memorized the book. The chapters of the Quran were not arranged in the order that they were initially revealed. (The first revelation is actually the first five verses of chapter 96.) Rather, Muslims believe that whenever a new revelation would come to Muhammad, he would inform his scribes about where this new portion would fit into the Quranic whole. Zaid ordered the Quran according to these earlier instructions.



7th century Quran manuscript

The compilation was completed in two stages, first during the reign of the first caliph Abu Bakr, and then under the third caliph Uthman, who ruled between 12 and 24 years after Muhammad's death. The process was an official and public one, ensuring that nothing that deserved inclusion in the book could be left out, and that nothing could be included in it except that which was properly attested by those who had learnt the Quran directly from the prophet Muhammad. The majority of western historians of Islam agree that the Quran that Muslims read today can be traced back to the compilation done during Uthman's reign.

Context: The Life of Muhammad

To understand any book, it is important to understand its historical context. This is especially true of the Quran, since its various portions were often revealed as a direct response to events that occurred during Muhammad's life.

Muhammad was born in Mecca around 570 C.E. When he was about 40 years old, he was visited by the angel Gabriel, who announced the first revelation. Muhammad continued to receive revelations and to proclaim them to the public for about 12 years in Mecca, slowly gaining a handful of followers. In Mecca, his followers were few, and many were poor and marginalized members of society who were attracted to the Quran's egalitarian message. The leaders of Mecca, however, persecuted the Muslim community, rejecting Muhammad's call towards monotheism, ethical responsibility and social justice.

Driven out by the Meccans' persistent persecution, the Muslims migrated to Medina, where they were warmly accepted. There they established a community based on the Quran's teachings, with Muhammad as their leader. Muhammad continued to receive revelations for the next 10 years until his death in 632 C.E. Although the community in Medina no longer lived under the Meccans' persecution, they faced other challenges. The Meccans were determined not to let the Muslim faith grow, since it threatened their way of life. On several occasions they

sent armies to Medina attempting to crush the fledgling community, forcing the Muslims to defend themselves in battle. The community also faced the challenge of ordering society so that justice and fairness were maintained.

These two phases of Muhammad's prophetic mission - the Meccan and Medinan - are reflected in the Quran.

The Meccan chapters (those revealed during Muhammad's time in Mecca) were usually short, poetic and striking, gripping listeners' attention so that they would pay attention to the new message. They laid out the main theological and ethical precepts that defined the new faith - monotheism, prophethood, judgement after death and social responsibility. These precepts served as the foundation for the details that were to come in later revelations.

The Medinan chapters, on the other hand, built upon the Meccan foundations by detailing religious practices that believers were expected to carry out. These passages tended to be longer and more prosaic. It is here, for example, that Muslims were told to fast in the month of Ramadan, and were instructed how to collect and distribute charity to the needy in society. The Medinan passages also addressed the various battles that the community was forced to partake in. Furthermore, they dealt with societal problems like divorce, contract disputes and crime, and instructed the community on how to deal with them.

It should be evident from this discussion that it is useful to know which chapters are Meccan and which are Medinan. If we do not keep this distinction in mind, we can misconstrue a detail of law as being more important than its theological, moral, and ethical foundation. Thus, many translations of Quran helpfully inform us at the start of each chapter whether the chapter is Meccan or Medinan. Some also include footnotes explaining the context of specific passages. While these are all helpful, it should also be noted that at the end of the day, the Quran can be understood at a basic level without the need for footnotes and commentaries.

Why do Muslims believe in the Quran?

The Quran claims to be the word of God, and not the work of Muhammad or any other human being. Why do Muslims believe this claim? Early Muslims had a variety of reasons. First, they trusted the character of Muhammad, who was known as a truthful and trustworthy individual even prior to proclaiming the Quran. Second, people who were familiar with the idea of revelation and prophecy in the Judaeo-Christian tradition saw that Muhammad's prophetic mission resembled that of previous prophets. Third, many were impressed by the purity and reasonableness of the Quran's teachings about God's oneness and personal responsibility. Many marginalized individuals - the poor, the orphans, slaves - found justice and dignity in the Quran's teachings. Fourth, many were struck by the beauty and majesty of the Quran's discourse. The voice of the Quran moved them in a way that they had never previously experienced. They could not imagine that such a book could be the work of a human being, especially Muhammad, who was known to be uneducated.

One notable companion of Muhammad who was overcome by the power of the Quran was Umar b. al-Khattab. Prior to embracing Islam, Umar was a fierce enemy of the faith. He was on his way to confront the Prophet when he found out that his sister had embraced Islam. When he found her reading the Quran he struck her on her face, leaving her bleeding. But then he took up her parchments to see what she had been reading. As he read the opening verses of Chapter 20, he was overwhelmed by its majesty. This simple experience of the Quran touched his heart so strongly that he decided to embrace Islam.

The Quran itself recognizes its own majesty and isn't afraid to call attention to itself and challenge its readers. The book confidently asserts that had it been from other than God we would have found much discrepancy in it (4:82). Muslims believe that the Quran is free of error, and is therefore God's word. The Quran also challenges its detractors to produce a book like it, assuring them that they cannot. Muslims are confident that the Quran is inimitable - its form and substance cannot be matched by any other book.

In modern times, Muslims have discovered new reasons to affirm their belief in the Quran in addition to those already mentioned. Many Muslims look to the Quran's discussions of past history, such as its description of the Egyptian kings and pharaohs, and point out that the Quran accurately describes details that were not known to Muhammad's contemporaries. The Quran also seems to predict some future events, such as the Byzantine victories over the Sassanids, which later unfolded as the Quran foretold. Furthermore, some scientists have been amazed by the accuracy with which the Quran speaks about natural phenomena, such as the development of the human embryo, since these phenomena have only been understood in modern times.

All of these reasons are cited by Muslims to explain their belief that the Quran is God's word. But at the end of the day, the chief reason that Muslims believe in the Quran is that it speaks to their hearts with such truth and power that they cannot imagine it being from any other source but the divine.

Major themes

God

The main message of the Quran is that people should turn away from false gods and worship the one, true God. Discussion of God is prevalent throughout the Quran. Many names are used to describe God. God is said to be Merciful, Knowledgeable, Wise, Sovereign, Mighty, Sublime, Holy, and much more. Scholars of Islam have listed as many as ninety-nine names of God. These names describe the many attributes of God, helping us to better understand and relate to Him.

God's Unity

The resounding call of the Quran is that we should acknowledge Allah as the only God. The Arabs already knew of this God, but they worshipped others through idols and various representations. The Quran argues that only Allah can help them in any way. Their idols, made of stone or carved from wood, could neither hear their pleas nor move to fulfil their requests.

Some of the pagans had attributed sons and daughters to God. But the Quran's reply to this is that God is beyond having such relationships. There is only one God, and he is wholly unlike anything we can imagine. This message is summed up in a short chapter of the Quran: "Say: He is God. One! God is eternal. He begets not; nor is He begotten. There is none like Him." (112:1-3)

The Name "Allah"

Muslims commonly refer to God as "Allah." This is the most commonly occurring name for God in the Quran. "Allah" is also used by Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians to refer to God. The name is likely a contraction of al-ilah, meaning "The God." The Arabs before Islam believed in one high God and many lesser gods. They called the high God Allah. Islam's essential message is summed up in the first part of its faith declaration: "There is no god but The God," or "There is no god but Allah."

God's creation

From the perspective of the Quran, God created everything, and every creation is a sign of God. The Quran constantly invites us to observe the wonders of God's creation, even to travel and explore. All of this, the Quran insists, will lead to the inevitable conclusion that humans ought to celebrate the praises of God who fashioned the marvellous universe.

Contemplating the signs around us leads us to greater understanding - scientific, psychological, and of course, spiritual. The human response to the phenomena around us is to explore, contemplate, and discover the beauty and meaning within God's many signs.

“Surely, in the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the alteration of night and day, there are signs for people of understanding.” (3:190)

God's blessings

The Quran also encourages us to recognize the many blessings that God has surrounded us with. “Were you to count the favours of God, you would never be able to number them” (14:34). Our health, wealth, family and friends, comforts - all of these are God's blessings. We are helpless to obtain them on our own, and once we have them we can't prevent them from escaping us.

Of course there are good times and bad times. But overall, there is more good than bad. There could be many reasons for bad times. These may be tests of our patience. Or divine retribution for some of our sins. Or, perhaps this is the only way some of us will learn, in which case it is not really a punishment, but a way of helping us get better. But even in these difficult situations, God's blessings are still present and we should give thanks to God for them.

God does not gain anything by our thanking Him. Rather, we gain a great deal by approaching life with an attitude of thankfulness. We come to appreciate our blessings much more. At the same time, we are mentally prepared to cope by seeing the good in any situation, and by realizing that we are in God's hands.

Why does God matter, anyway?

Why do we need to be so concerned about God? Can't we live a good life without worrying about God?

According to the Quran, acknowledging God and worshipping Him is crucial. Acknowledging God amounts to a shift in our attitude and our orientation. We begin to notice that everything is connected to everything else through its relationship to God. We realize that we are not as powerful as we may have thought, but that we depend on God for success. We recognize that the things around us are God's creation and as such must be treated with dignity. We understand that we are not accidental creatures, but that we have a God-given purpose and ethical responsibility, and that this responsibility might sometimes require us to overcome our ego's baser desires. We acknowledge that our knowledge and abilities are limited, and that we must therefore seek God's guidance about how to live our lives. We appreciate the good in our life and attribute it to God, and overcome any hardship by trusting in God and hoping for His help. Acknowledging God, then, is not just a theoretical exercise, but a realization that changes our orientation and our approach to life as a whole.

Why are we here?

According to the Quran, God created us to worship Him and to receive His mercy. This requires some elaboration. We may think of God's mercy as an overflowing fountain: filled to the brim and running over. This overabundance of God's mercy calls for creatures to receive some. This is where we come in.

The idea that God created us to worship him is well known among Muslims. Muslims understand "worship" in an all-encompassing way. Anything that we do with good intentions in accordance with God's will counts as

worship. Helping a neighbour in need, or even simply smiling at someone, is an act of worship. Similarly, refraining from something that we know God dislikes is an act of worship. Worship, then, is about embodying that which is good, and aligning ourselves with the divine will.

Why, we might ask, does God need us to worship Him? Actually, He doesn't. We need to worship Him. Our worship of God is our way of connecting with Him; it is the channel through which we tap into His overflowing mercy. By doing good to others and improving ourselves through worship, we become recipients of God's mercy.

We human beings are, in the Quranic narrative, a special creation. When God announced to the angels that He would create Adam, they asked why He wanted to create a being that would cause corruption and shed blood (2:30). But God created us to represent His cause, to carry out His purposes, on earth. Unlike other creatures, we have the ability to choose between right and wrong. Thus our obedience and worship of God is special, because we could have chosen otherwise. Our purpose, then, is to choose to align ourselves with God's purposes, and in so doing, become recipients of God's mercy.

Prophets and Revelations

Much of the Quran is dedicated to the mention of prophets and the communities they were sent to. The Quranic worldview posits that God sent prophets and scriptures to continually point out the way to God's grace and to warn against the wiles of the wayward devil.

Prophets in the Quran are ordinary humans with the distinction that God has communicated with them in a manner clear enough for them to be conscious of this calling. They are virtuous people who seek no position of leadership or stature and their only aim is to convey God's message to their communities. The Quran states that a

prophet who has been given authority by God would never claim "Be servants to me rather than God," but instead he would entreat his people to be "faithful servants and worshippers of the Lord" (3:79). In fact, it grieves the prophets when their people pay no heed to their message and instead choose to reject and mock them and their followers for being believers (15:97 and 18:5). But the Quran tells the Prophet Muhammad to be patient and continue to worship God and strive in His cause. For it is by revealing His reality via prophets and scriptures that God ensures His guidance is available to all who would freely choose to receive it and live by it.

The Quran mentions some twenty-five prophets by name, including Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, David, and Jesus. Scriptures mentioned in the Quran include those of Abraham and Moses, the Torah, the Psalms, and the Gospel. These references seem to bear some correspondence to the Torah of Moses, the Psalms of David, and the Gospel of Jesus with which readers of the Bible are familiar. All Prophets before Muhammad were sent specifically to their people. Their message, while universal in the call to worship one God and live a life in harmony with God's teachings, was specific to their time and place. But Muhammad, the last

"And We have already sent messengers before you (Muhammad). Among them are those whose stories We have related to you, and among them are those whose stories We have not related to you. And it was not for any messenger to bring a sign or verse except by permission of God" (40:78).

prophet, is sent not just to his community, but to all humankind. The Quran's message, Muhammad's revelation from God, is eternal and applicable to all times and places.

Stories of past nations

In line with the Quran asserting itself as God's final revelation, Islam can be viewed as a culmination of the message of all prophets. Muhammad's message is not new or unique, and the Quran reminds him that the challenges he faces with regards to his community are those that have been faced by all previous prophets. In fact, throughout the text, the Quran describes how specific nations and communities responded to their prophets and the call of God. Some responded favourably and were rewarded by God while others repudiated God's message and ridiculed His messengers. God was patient with them, sending messengers and messages one after another. But when the recalcitrance of such nations crossed the tipping point, for example when they plotted to kill the prophets, God often responded with devastating consequences for such nations.

The stories of these past nations serve as a commentary on our present situation, for we have in our present world a microcosm of the past responses to the Quran. Some believe in it; others reject it, with the nature of their rejection spanning the spectrum between respectful disagreements on one end to hateful bigotry on the other end. In fact, one attack levelled against the Quran was that it was a mere book of tales, stories Muhammad may have heard from the people of old. But the Quran asserts that tales of the previous prophets and their nations are not mentioned in passing or in a casual manner, though it may appear as such to the cynic. Rather, they are meant for the reader to ponder upon and derive lessons that can be applied to our lives today. As an immediate benefit, the Quran offered consolation to Muhammad through these stories, showing him that great prophets of the past such as Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, all suffered in their quest to deliver God's message. By extension, the faithful are also taught that the path to God is not always easy and they may face mockery and ridicule for being true to God and His message, this being the case even in our modern times.

Is the Quran pluralistic in its outlook?

Though we live in a pluralistic world today where many religions coexist in harmony, this was not always the case. In many past societies one religion was championed to the detriment of all else. When the classical commentators set to work on the Quran they had in mind the worldview which we would describe today as exclusivist. But they recognized that Islam cannot be described as purely exclusivist. The term the Quran uses for followers of the faith is 'Muslim,' which literally means 'one who submits;' and in the Quran it has come to have the specific meaning of one who submits to God's will. As such, the Quran presents believers prior to the prophet Muhammad as being Muslims, meaning they submitted their wills to God. For example, the disciples of Jesus are said to be Muslims and even past prophets such as Abraham and Moses are presented in the Quran as Muslims.

Modern interpreters, faced with the fact of our pluralistic existence, and seeing this as a contributing factor to the global peace that we all desire, have turned back to the Quran to see if this human achievement can have divine sanction. Such interpreters do find that the Quran is far more pluralistic in its outlook than was appreciated by the classical commentators. Several verses teach that Muhammad and the Muslims are not to force their faith on others (2:256 and 10:92), but rather to accept that others will have a variety of different faiths (109:1-6). God has left the matter such that people will follow a variety of traditions here only to be judged for their choices when they return to God (5:48).

Personal Conduct

Much of the Quran exhorts towards righteous conduct. The Quran makes frequent mention of sound belief and good deeds in the same context, reminding that true belief in God must manifest itself in good works. By instilling a sense of personal responsibility and accountability before God, by calling people to develop their moral conscience, and by institutionalizing specific religious practices, the Quran aims to uplift people and transform them into individuals that radiate nobility and virtuosity.

“O you who believe, be conscious of Allah. And let every soul look to what it has put forth for tomorrow - and be conscious of Allah. Indeed, Allah is well acquainted with what you do” (59:18)

The Quran reminds time and again that everyone will be held personally accountable before God, who is well aware of all things. This notion of ultimate responsibility before God helps individuals to think through their actions in light of their ultimate consequences. Even if one could get away with lying to one’s spouse or get away with cheating a customer, one imbued with the Quranic sense of accountability before God would hesitate to do so. One conscious of God would also incline towards a higher moral standing, being forgiving, kind, and generous for God’s sake.

The Quran also calls upon people to reach a higher level of well-being by continuously strengthening their character and aspiring to a higher ethical standard. “Indeed, Allah orders justice and good conduct and giving to relatives, and forbids immorality and bad conduct and oppression. He admonishes you so that perhaps you will be reminded” (16:90). True believers in God, according to the Quran, are those who refrain from foul or obscene speech (23:3), protect their chastity (23:5), keep their trusts and promises (23:8), walk with humility and not haughtiness (31:18), and those who spend neither excessively nor stingily, but in moderation (25:67). They are

those who do not insult one another (49:11) or backbite and gossip against one another (49:12). All in all, the Quran provides both general and specific guidelines for the physical, intellectual, and moral well-being of people.

Specific religious practices have also been institutionalized in the Quran, as a means of maintaining one's spiritual connection with God and improving one's moral well-being. "O humankind, worship your Lord, who created you and those before you, that you may become righteous" (2:21). The prayer, required of Muslims five times a day, is a direct conversation with God – a means of recharging one's spiritual battery throughout the day, amidst the stresses of day-to-day life. Alms-giving, another rite specified in the Quran, is seen as a means of purification of one's self and wealth (9:103), and is often mentioned alongside with prayer, highlighting that one's relationship with God manifested through prayer must go hand-in-hand with their relationship with their fellow human beings, manifested through the giving of alms. These specific acts of worship are meant to improve the worshipper, and as such the Quran chastises those who pray, but do not show small acts of kindness to others (107:4-7).

"Righteousness is not that you turn your faces toward the east or the west (in prayer), but true righteousness is in one who believes in Allah, the last day, the angels, the book, and the prophets, and gives wealth, in spite of love for it, to relatives, orphans, the needy, the traveler, those who ask for help, and for freeing slaves; and who establishes prayer and gives alms; those who fulfill their promise when they promise; and those who are patient in poverty and hardship and during battle. Those are the ones who have been true, and it is those who are the righteous" (2:177)

Social Harmony

The Quran provides a framework for the protection of social harmony. This theme builds heavily upon the previous theme of personal conduct, for ultimately it is individuals and their actions that collectively define the well-being of a community or society. The recipe for social change, then, is personal change: “Verily, God will not change the condition of a people until they change that which is within themselves” (13:11).

The Quran makes mention of general ethical principles, such as justice: “O you who believe, stand firm for Allah as witnesses to justice, and do not let the hatred of a people prevent you from being just. Be just – that is nearer to righteousness. And be conscious of Allah; indeed, Allah is acquainted with what you do” (5:8). There is also mention of these principles in specific contexts – for example justice and fairness in business transactions: “Do not defraud people in respect of their goods” (11:85).

In addition, you will find in the Quran specific ethical-legal injunctions – rules – that serve to establish fairness and justice at all levels of society, and serve to protect the spiritual and moral well-being of society. At times, individual pleasures are curbed if there is fear of societal harm. Take the drinking of alcohol for example: “They ask you (O Muhammad) about wine and gambling. Say, “In them is great sin and (yet, some) benefit for people. But their sin is greater than their benefit” (2:219). The Quran tells people to “avoid it so that you may be successful” (5:90). Although the Quran recognizes that there may be some individual pleasure or benefit in drinking, a prohibition is laid down, aiming to protect from any adverse alcohol-related effects on both the individual and society.

“And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquillity in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy. Indeed in that are signs for a people who give thought” (30:21)

“And your Lord has decreed that you worship none but Him, and that you be dutiful to your parents. If one or both of them attain old age in your life, say not to them a word of contempt, nor shout at them but address them in terms of honour. And lower unto them the wing of humility out of mercy, and say: ‘My Lord! Bestow on them Your Mercy as they did take care of me when I was young.’” (17:23-24)

The Quran seeks to protect the family, seen as the building block of society.

This is why you’ll find many a verse dealing in detail with rules regarding marriage and divorce. Husbands and wives are, metaphorically speaking, garments for each other (2:187), caring for and protecting each other. As part of maintaining the family unit, the Quran enjoins on people kindness towards their parents, especially when they are in old age (17:23). A strong society, then, is one where individual family units are cohesive.

In preserving social harmony, the Quran brings to attention the needs of those who are often

marginalized or underprivileged in society. The Quran emphasizes time and again that individuals do have social responsibilities. The true servants of Allah are described as those who “give food, in spite of their love for it, to the needy, the orphans, and the prisoners” (76:8). Repeatedly, the Quran speaks for those in society whose voices are not heard, because it is only in fairness and in justice that society can thrive.

“Those who unjustly eat up the property of orphans, eat up a Fire into their own bodies: They will soon be enduring a Blazing Fire!” (4:10)

End of Times

Regardless of where you open the Quran, you won't have to read for too long before you come across mention of the afterlife – the theme of resurrection and life after death runs strong throughout the Quran. This is not a mere technical point of belief, but rather it forms the basis of other essential elements of the Quranic belief system, which itself is the driving force behind righteous conduct.

The Quran points out to us that the reality of life is much more than what we can experience through our senses: “And the worldly life is nothing but amusement and diversion; but the home of the Hereafter is best for those who are righteous. Will you not reason?” (6:32) Death, then, becomes the window through which people pass to the reality of the afterlife, in which we shall be resurrected before God to be held accountable for our deeds. “Every soul shall taste death. And We test you with evil and with good as a trial; and to Us you will be returned” (21:35).

The Quran makes frequent mention of the resurrection after death, a concept which the Arabs in the time of Prophet Muhammad had difficulty grasping. To this, the Quran responds: “Do they not see that Allah, who created the heavens and earth and did not fail in their creation, is able to give life to the dead? Yes. Indeed, He is competent over all things” (46:33).

Once individuals are brought before God, their deeds will be recounted to them: “And the record (of deeds) will be placed open, and you will see the

“Indeed, the Muslim men and Muslim women, the believing men and believing women, the obedient men and obedient women, the truthful men and truthful women, the patient men and patient women, the humble men and humble women, the charitable men and charitable women, the fasting men and fasting women, the men who guard their chastity and the women who do so, and the men who remember Allah often and the women who do so - for them Allah has prepared forgiveness and a great reward” (33:35)

criminals fearful of that within it, and they will say, ‘Oh, woe to us! What is this book that leaves nothing small or great except that it has counted it?’ And they will find what they did present before them, and your Lord does injustice to no one” (18:49). Those whose scale of good deeds weighs heavier than their evil deeds will be admitted into Paradise, where they will dwell forever as a gift from God, never to be discontinued. The Quran describes Paradise as a Garden where unimaginable pleasures are stored, waiting for the believers to enjoy. The sense of separation now seen between humans and God will be taken away, and the believers will enjoy the beatific vision. The greatest pleasure and satisfaction for the believers will come when God announces his pleasure with them. On the other hand, those scales are light with good deeds will have their abode in Hell for as long as God deems it just. This is a place of severe punishments all of which, the Quran warns, await those who turn away from God and follow their own desires or the whisperings of the devil.

The afterlife is where any justice that was not evident in this world becomes manifest. For the believer, though they may find difficulty and hardship in the life of this world, they find solace knowing that they will be enveloped in peace and comfort in the next life. “The angels will enter upon them from every gate, saying ‘Peace be upon you for what you patiently endured. Excellent is the final abode!’” (13:23-24).

Reading the Quran

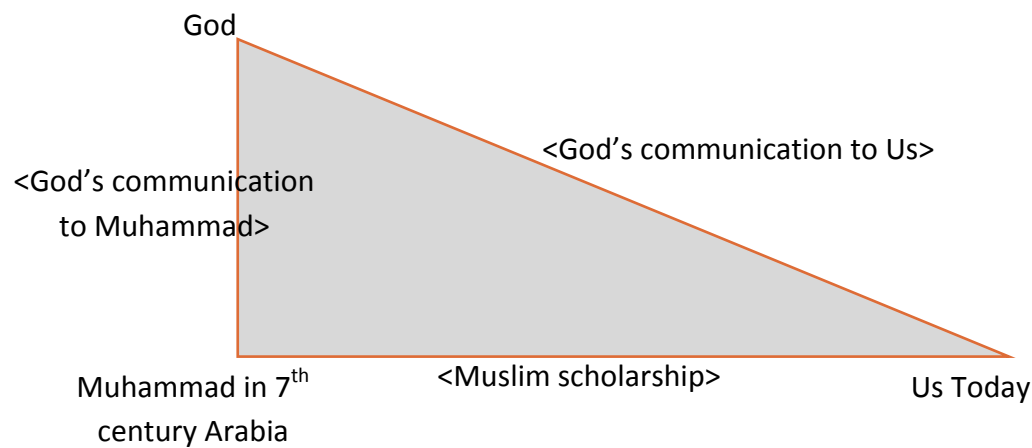
Muslims approach the Quran with reverence, hoping to attain God's blessings by reading it, and trying to understand and live its teachings. Before reading the Quran, many Muslims first perform a ritual washing, just as they would before performing prayers. They hope that this act will purify their minds and ready them to absorb God's message.

We can't demand that everyone treat the Quran with the reverence of a believer. But it is important to approach the Quran with the right frame of mind. Recognize that you are opening up a holy scripture, one that claims to be divine, and one that is revered as such by 1.5 billion people around the world. Ponder the meanings of the book with an open mind. The Quran challenges its readers to ponder its verses: "Will they not then ponder the Quran, or are their locks upon their hearts?" (47:24) It also declares that by its teachings God guides many people and misleads many others (2:26). Which of these two outcomes a reader obtains depends on his or her attitude. If a reader begins with a disdainful attitude, seeking to find something to criticize, he or she will derive no benefit from the book. On the other hand, we should approach the Quran with an open heart and a contemplative mind, and ask ourselves how we can benefit from what we are reading.

Questions? Don't be shy!
As you read the Quran, or as you read this guide, you may come across things that you don't understand. Don't hesitate to ask for clarification! We welcome your questions and will answer them as best as we can. Send us your questions at comments@quranspeaks.com.

When reading the Quran, consider that it is speaking directly to you, wherever you happen to be. Ask yourself, “what is the Quran’s message to me, here and now? How does its teachings apply to me?” When reading a story in the Quran, ask yourself, “why does the Quran mention this story? What lessons can I derive from this story? Do any of the characters in the story reflect my situation or attitude?” These sorts of questions will allow you to experience the Quran in a more meaningful and personal way.

Earlier in this guide we talked a bit about understanding the Quran’s historical context. We should stress, though, that you shouldn’t just read the Quran as though it were an ancient text. The Quran is still relevant today, touching the hearts of its many readers. Try to consider the Quran from various angles. First, we might consider the Quran in its historical context. How did the Quran address prophet Muhammad and the people of seventh century Arabia? What did its message mean to them? Next, how was the Quran and its interpretations transmitted and understood by Muslim scholarship over the centuries? Finally, how might God be speaking to us through the Quran today? We can think of these three modes of understanding the Quran as the three sides of a triangle:



The vertical line represents God's communication to seventh century Arabia. The horizontal line represents the transmission and contribution of fourteen centuries of Muslim scholarship. The oblique line represents God's direct communication to us today. Hence we have a complete triangle.

Some people misunderstand the Quran when they think only of the moment of revelation, the vertical line.

Others misunderstand the scripture when they ignore the oblique line and only consider the vertical and horizontal ones. They may insist that the interpretations of the Quran that were arrived at by the great scholars of old are the only valid ones. In this way they refuse to let the Quran speak to us in a new and fresh manner befitting the spirit of our times. It is important, therefore, that in our attempt to understand the Quran we perceive of the whole triangle of communication. We must in this way consider the revelatory moment, the exegetical history, and the contemporary situation.

Activity: Read the parable given in Quran 18:32-44. When you finish, come back and consider the following questions:

- 1. What lessons can you derive from this parable?*
- 2. When you read the parable, which character did you associate yourself with? Did you view yourself as the rich man or the poor man?*
- 3. If you subconsciously aligned with either the rich or the poor man, think about whether you might actually share some of the attributes of the opposite character.*
- 4. What does this reflection tell you about the way you consider and evaluate yourself? What does it teach you about your own attitudes?*

Am I getting the real deal from the translation?

A translation can only approximate the meaning of its source text. It cannot fully encapsulate the layers of meaning contained in the source text itself. Furthermore, it cannot always maintain the rhythm and flow of the original without sacrificing the literal meaning. For these reasons, scholars always study source texts in their original languages. In the case of the Quran, scholars consult the Arabic original. Recognizing the human limitations of translations, Muslims give special reverence to the Arabic Quran over and above any translation. Still, non-Arabic speakers get much of the Quran's meaning and can absorb its message by reading a good English translation.

Several good translations of the Quran exist. Each is suitable for a particular need. The translation by Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall is a very literal translation from the original. A major disadvantage of this translation, however, is its use of archaic English. The translation done by Yusuf Ali is widely used among Muslims. It is not very literal as Pickthall's, and is less archaic. Its footnotes often give much food for thought. Thomas Ballantine Irving's translation in American English is a decidedly modern translation, and much easier to understand than the foregoing. But the translation done recently by Maulana Wahiduddin Khan is put in the simplest English we have seen thus far. Moreover, many verses that were misunderstood in classical times, and even in some of the aforementioned translations, have received a fairer treatment in Khan's translation.

Need a Copy of the Quran?
If you don't have an English translation of the Quran already, what are you waiting for? Visit us at www.QuranSpeaks.com to obtain your free copy.

Let's take a look at how each of these four translators render Quran 49:12:

Marmaduke Pickthall: *“O ye who believe! Shun much suspicion; for lo! some suspicion is a sin. And spy not, neither backbite one another. Would one of you love to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Ye abhor that (so abhor the other)! And keep your duty (to Allah). Lo! Allah is Relenting, Merciful.”*

Yusuf Ali: *“O ye who believe! Avoid suspicion as much (as possible): for suspicion in some cases is a sin: and spy not on each other, nor speak ill of each other behind their backs. Would any of you like to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Nay, ye would abhor it ... But fear God: for God is Oft-Returning, Most Merciful.”*

T.B. Irving: *“You who believe, refrain from conjecturing too much; even a little suspicion forms a vice. Do not spy on one another, nor let any of you backbite others. Would one of you like to eat his dead brother's flesh? You would loathe it! Heed God, for God is Relenting, Merciful!”*

Wahiduddin Khan: *“Believers, avoid much suspicion. Indeed some suspicion is a crime. And do not spy on one another and do no backbite. Would any of you like to eat his dead brother's flesh? No, you would hate it. Fear God, God is ever forgiving and most merciful.”*

As we can see from this comparison, the variations in translation are largely stylistic and do not, in most cases, strongly affect the meaning of the text. You can understand the Quran by reading whichever of these translations you prefer.

Arrangement of the Quran

As mentioned previously, the Quran was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad a bit at a time over a period of twenty-three years commenting on a variety of circumstances and questions that were raised. In response to such questions and events the Quran did not need to spell out every detail, but could depend on the first recipients' knowledge of the situation and even of the sorts of questions that were being raised in their public discussions. Hence the Quran spoke on various aspects of any given topic a bit here and a bit there over the couple of decades of its revelation. When these revealed pieces were collected to form the complete text of the Quran, they were not arranged according to the historical order in which they were revealed, except for the fact that a broad distinction was preserved between the verses revealed in the Meccan and Medinan periods. It is easy to see that if a question was raised in Mecca, and another question about the same subject was raised again in Medina, there could be two Quranic passages dealing with the same subject, one in a Meccan chapter, and another in a Medinan one.

For this reason, one will find that the Quran is not arranged topically, as are most conventional books. Hence a subject may receive a brief mention in one place but a more systematic treatment elsewhere. Or, it may not receive a systematic treatment anywhere, but the reader may be expected to form a comprehensive view of the subject from the Quran's numerous references to it. It is important, however, that one reserves judgement on the Quran's treatment of a topic until one has become familiar with the Quran's complete contents. For one passage will serve to explicate what is perhaps obscure in another.

“God has revealed the most beautiful message in the form a Book, consistent with itself, yet repeating. The skins of those who fear their Lord shiver when they recite it or hear it; then their skins and their hearts soften to the remembrance of God. That is the guidance of God by which He guides whom He wills. And one whom God leaves astray, for him there is no guide” (39:23)

But as we have already seen, the Quran is not simply a textbook with formulaic laws and injunctions. While it does lay out some laws and rulings concerning matters of everyday life, much of the Quran is repetitive, recounting stories, lessons, morals and ethics, for the sole reason to inspire a spiritual response in the reader. No doubt, it is easy to get lost in the Quran as topics seem to change suddenly and seemingly disconnected verses and paragraphs are juxtaposed into chapters that don't seem to contain a running theme. But the Quran describes itself as a "reminder for those who fear God" (20:3), indicating that it is a book meant to be read continually and pondered upon deeply. So in addition to being aware of the fact that the Quran was revealed over two decades and is not arranged in the order in which it was revealed, it is important to bear in mind the fact that the Quran continually exhorts the reader to be reflective and delve deeper in an effort to understand what it is trying to convey. In this manner, one can realize that there is fluidity in the text – passages dealing with different topics are interconnected with diverse lessons being brought out in different locations. For example, the second chapter of the Quran contains an account of the creation of the heavens and the earth followed by the story of the Israelites. This story is relevant to the faith of Islam as Islam shares with the People of Israel a common religious heritage. Hence we can see that the Quran's second chapter deals with the creation of the heavens and the earth, then with the creation of human beings, and then with the spiritual development of humankind. In this way the chapter captures our physical, biological, and religious history. Only after this is done does the chapter move on to discuss the specific nature of the Muslim faith, for this can only be fully understood in the light of the foregoing histories.

How should I read the Quran?

There is no specific order to reading the Quran – many Muslims might have a schedule by which they complete a cover-to-cover reading, while others may have go-to chapters that they enjoy reading more often. Here are some recommendations to help you get started:

- If you are a new reader of the Quran, you may want to begin at end of the Quran where the shorter chapters are found. These chapters, being mainly the early Meccan chapters, do not require much context to understand, and they lay out the broad principles of faith and ethics which are the foundations for more detailed practices.
- You can read the Quran systematically, from start to finish.
- You can read chapters individually and jump from one to the other depending on what you find interesting. A Chapter, especially a long one, may not restrict itself to a single topic and may deal with a range of interspersed topics.
- If you are interested in a certain topic, it may be best to look up an index to the Quran and then trace the references to the main text. Many English translations are equipped with such indices.
- For further reading, you can also consult books on thematic studies of the Quran.

Conclusion & Recommended Readings

Thank you for reading The QuranSpeaks.com Guide to the Quran. We hope you enjoyed the read, and we hope that you were able to broaden your understanding and appreciation for the Quran.

You may find it helpful to have a copy of an English translation of the Quran. Please visit us at www.QuranSpeaks.com to obtain your copy at no charge.

If you have any feedback or questions, please do contact us at comments@quranspeaks.com.

The following books can aid in furthering your understanding of the Quran:

APPROACHING THE QURAN, by Michael Sells

UNFOLDING ISLAM, by P. J. Stewart

ISLAM: A CONCISE INTRODUCTION, by Neal Robinson

AN INTRODUCTION TO ISLAM, by David Waines

MUHAMMAD: A PROPHET FOR OUR TIME, by Karen Armstrong

ISLAM: THE STRAIGHT PATH, by John L. Esposito

THE EVENT OF THE QURAN, by Kenneth Cragg

Watch Let the Quran Speak
Every Saturday at 8:30 p.m. on CTS

www.QuranSpeaks.com