

**Reading the Qur'an
in English**
AN INTRODUCTORY GUIDE

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Approaching the Text (Qur'an 108)

This book is intended to serve as a guide for those who are attempting to read the Qur'an in an English translation. I use the word "attempting" here because all too often people pick up one of the readily available translations of the Qur'an at their local library or bookstore with the best of intentions, only to be thrown off when they try to read it, by its unfamiliar structural and stylistic characteristics. Familiarity with the scripture of the Jews or Christians, or with standard literary forms such as the novel, builds a set of expectations about the use of narrative, description and dialogue to construct a story that appears to be breached by the Qur'an. Even though the potential reader might find much of the content to be familiar, the actual experience of reading the Qur'an

often proves to be too jarring for many people. Consequently, they put the book down and remain frustrated about their attempts to read the text and to learn about Islam through the text.

It is unquestionably the case that the best way to learn about Islam is through reading the Qur'an, but this poses a major problem, not only for non-Muslims, but also for the vast majority of Muslims around the world. In several places (e.g., 12:2, 39:28, 43:3, 44:58) the Qur'an reminds us that it was revealed in Arabic so that Muhammad and his immediate audience could understand it. However, the Qur'an is written in Classical Arabic, an old form of the language that not many speakers of modern Arabic dialects understand well enough to allow them to read and comprehend the scripture. At the same time, it is important to realize that Arabic is not the first language of the vast majority of the world's Muslims. Indonesia and Pakistan have Muslim populations much larger than all of the Arab nations combined, and furthermore, not all Arabs are Muslims.

Traditionally, as young children, Muslims learn to read the Arabic text of the Qur'an in part, so that they can recite portions of it during daily prayer. In this instance reading implies solely sounding out the text. Their knowledge of the content of the Qur'an tends to come from secondary sources written in their native languages. Nowadays, wherever there are large concentrations of Muslims, recitations of the Qur'an can be heard in the mosques and schools, and even in the streets. Beyond that, there are radio stations and

websites that broadcast qur'anic recitations 24/7, all around the globe. However, this does not mean that knowledge of the text is equally pervasive. Many young Muslims attempt to memorize large portions of the Qur'an, and their families and their communities hold those who learn the entire text by heart in high esteem. Yet, even those who have accomplished this impressive feat are unlikely to understand, to any great extent, what they are reciting. Thus, it is clear that the potential readership for translations of the Qur'an extends well beyond curious non-Muslims.

According to Islam, one of the most significant characteristics of the Qur'an as a divine revelation is that it was revealed in Arabic. The Arabic language is viewed as perfect and unsurpassed in purity of form and meaning, and thus it is viewed as the ideal and only appropriate medium for the transmission of what Muslims consider to be the last and final revelation of God's will to humanity (Omar 2003: 15D-17D). The question of whether the Qur'an was in fact a divine revelation is not our concern here. The fact that Muslims believe this to be the case is enough, and in many ways, this belief is one of the main reasons we might be interested in reading the Qur'an in the first place. However, because of the inseparability of the Qur'an from the Arabic language, any translation of the Qur'an is viewed as a human interpretation of the text, not to be confused with the sacred text itself. Having said that, it is unlikely that most Muslims today, not to mention the vast majority of non-Muslims, will take the opportunity to undergo the difficult and prolonged study of Classical

Arabic that would allow them to read and understand the Qur'an as it was revealed. As a result, it is important to determine if there is any merit at all in reading the Qur'an in translation.

Simply put, the answer is yes, but it is imperative to point out that one of the core assumptions of the present work is that reading the Qur'an in translation does not replace reading the Qur'an in Arabic. Rather, it is complementary to it. For one thing, there is an aesthetic aspect associated with reading and listening to the Qur'an in Arabic that is clearly impossible to reproduce no matter how skilled the translator (Nelson 2001; Sells 1999). On this point, I completely agree. Similarly, if we accept that the Arabic language is the perfect medium for the Qur'an, then it is likely that there are some theological and spiritual facets of the text that are dependent on this linguistic relationship. Regarding this point I would suggest that contemporary readers, even those well schooled in Classical Arabic, are not living in early seventh century Arabia and thus, they are just as removed from the original historical and linguistic context within which the Qur'an came into being as anyone else. These issues notwithstanding, much of the historical, legal, sociological and religious content of the Qur'an is accessible to us through reading a translation.

How is Islam related to Judaism and Christianity? Do these three religions share the same God? What prophets and personalities from history and other religious traditions are mentioned in the Qur'an, and what does it say about them? How is Islam to be practised?

How should Muslims relate to non-Muslims? Does the Qur'an advocate war? Does the Qur'an advocate the oppression of women? What does it say about this life and the next life? These are a few examples of the sorts of questions that we can hope to find answers to by reading a translation of the Qur'an, that is, by treating it as a source book through which we can increase our knowledge of a major religious tradition, one that is growing rapidly and is second only to Christianity in numbers of adherents around the globe. This, to my mind, is the greatest justification for attempting to translate sacred texts into modern languages and for learning to read these translations in such a way that we can increase our understanding of Islam.

My Approach

In my view, introductory books on the Qur'an are often hampered by one or more of the following characteristics. First, some books assume too much prior familiarity with the structure and content of the Qur'an, whether in Arabic or in translation. In other words, they appear to be written to those who, having read the Qur'an, are now trying to understand what they have read. Second, as implied by much of the preceding discussion, many books assume a fairly sophisticated understanding of linguistic theory and methodology, and more particularly Arabic language and linguistics. This limits the potential readership for such books to a small number of specialists and makes the books inappropriate even for many advanced undergraduate students of religion, let alone the general public. Third, these books tend to focus on

controversies around such issues as authorship, textual variants, circumstances of revelation, and abrogation, from both a scholarly and a sectarian perspective. Again, these matters only make sense once a high degree of familiarity with the Qur'an, the history of its analysis and textual criticism more generally, has been acquired. Very few introductory books respond to the basic questions of what is in the Qur'an and what might a contemporary reader find of interest or significance in the sacred text of Islam. Thus, there is still a need for truly introductory books on the Qur'an, especially ones that recognize that the majority of people interested in reading the Qur'an are going to be reading it in translation, with the intention of discovering just what it is that the Qur'an contains.

In an effort to meet this need, the present work is informed by the recent trend in qur'anic scholarship that Abdullah Saeed (2006) refers to as "contextualist." This approach to understanding and interpreting the Qur'an does not confine itself to purely linguistic criteria, nor does it support the notion that the experience and insights of the first centuries of Islam can somehow be transported forward to meet the needs of modern day readers. Rather, it is based on the idea that a broader understanding of the changing socio-historical context of the Qur'an, and of Islam more generally, needs to be taken into account when trying both to comprehend and apply the scripture to present circumstances.

In this book, I try to provide a way for readers to begin reading the Qur'an in translation that will en-

courage them to read further. I accomplish this in part through the order in which I suggest that passages from the Qur'an be read, and in part, by the various methods that I introduce as tools to help the reader analyze and understand what they are reading. It is important to remember, while reading this book and while reading the Qur'an, that I am making suggestions – I am not trying to argue for one particular way of understanding the Qur'an. At the same time, no one approaches a text as a blank slate. The lessons that people learn from reading the Qur'an will depend on what they bring with them to their study of the Qur'an, in terms of their religious upbringing, their educational background, and their basic motivation (historical, religious, socio-political) for wanting to read the Qur'an in the first place.

Unless otherwise specified, all excerpts from the Qur'an are taken from the English translation of Muhammad Abdel Haleem (2005). From this point forward, when I refer to the Qur'an, I mean the English translation of the Qur'an. I do not provide excerpts from the Qur'an or other sources in Arabic script, or as transliterations of Arabic words into Latin letters. Similarly, with the exception of a few words like *barzakh*, *basmalah* and *hadith*, for which I offer an explanation when they are introduced, I have avoided using Arabic terms to designate key concepts. I do however use the word *surah* as a designation for what are generally referred to as the individual chapters of the Qur'an. In a literal sense the word *surah* means wall, enclosure or step, and is related to a verb form meaning to climb

or elevate (Omar 2003: 277). As much as possible, in terms of sources throughout the text, I have tried to refer to books and articles by contemporary authors that are readily available in English. References to better-known ancient authors are generally made through secondary sources.

Over all, I choose to be a pragmatic realist with respect to certain elements of Islam. With well over a billion adherents around the world, it does me little good to question the fundamental beliefs and practices of Islam. From my perspective, there is little value in spending time arguing about whether Muhammad ever existed, or whether he was the author of the Qur'an. Scholars with different agendas have produced several volumes in which they entertain these issues. I am much more interested in looking at the contemporary situation through a sociological lens. In other words, I am concerned with the consequences that the belief in the divine nature of the Qur'an and its revelation to Muhammad, have for Muslims and non-Muslims in today's world. Thus, the basic premise of this book is quite simple: the more that people can learn about Islam through the Qur'an, and the more people that do learn about Islam through the Qur'an, the better.

I do however, operate under one assumption that some might find controversial. Following Gerald Hawting (1999), I take seriously the suggestion that as a religion, Islam emerged primarily within the context of competing monotheisms, Judaism and Christianity, rather than solely out of an environment of literal pagan idolatry and polytheism. Consequently, even though my focus is on the text

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of the Qur'an, from time to time, I refer to the scripture of the Jews and Christians as well as to aspects of the so-called 'period of ignorance' that preceded the establishment of Islam in Arabia (Sicker 2000).