

# Text and Context

## Introduction

The ultimate source of authority on all matters in Islam is the Qur'an, a text that Muslims believe was revealed by God in Arabic through the angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad over a period of twenty-odd years more than fourteen hundred years ago. Given the centrality of this text to Islam and the fact that the number of Muslims in the world is around the 1.5 billion mark and growing rapidly, one would anticipate the existence of libraries full of commentaries, guidebooks, primers and concordances devoted to elucidating the contents of this sacred text and to helping people apply the lessons contained in the Qur'an to their daily lives. To some extent this is the case. Given the nature of the Qur'an and the theology of the book that has developed around it, however, one finds that for the most part these secondary works are in Arabic; their style and content adhere to strict conventions and principles many centuries old. That is only part of the story.

As Ingrid Mattson indicates, “the Qur’an has retained its prominence in Muslim societies not primarily because it has been studied and transmitted in schools and seminaries, but because it is at the center of ritual life” (2008: 106). For the vast majority of Muslims, the Qur’an is an object of reverence; its contents are to be memorized and recited as part of prayer, and as part of virtually every other activity in which a person might engage. For the devout Muslim, to study the Qur’an means (more than memorization) to learn more of its language and literal content, to become immersed in the text as a spiritual quest. The idea that the Qur’an could be subjected to systematic objective analysis is viewed by many Muslims as tantamount to desecration, comparable to the act of physically touching the Qur’an in a state of impurity. Irrespective of its status as a sacred text, however, the Qur’an is, nonetheless, a text; as such its content continues to be cited, interpreted and applied in countless situations and circumstances. Those who are unwilling or unable to delve into the text of the Qur’an on their own will always be at risk of having their opinions shaped by others, others whose intentions might not always be clear.

It is not my intention either to confirm or deny the sacred status of the Qur’an. The fact that one-fifth of the world’s population believes that the Qur’an is the word of God is an adequate justification for me to be interested in learning more about this text, and to be concerned about how the text is being applied in matters of religion, politics, human rights and social welfare. What I wanted to know, and what I think others are interested in finding out, is the

extent to which the actual content of the Qur'an forms a basis for the beliefs and actions of today's Muslims. Clearly, pursuing this agenda requires reading the Qur'an, and one immediate hurdle to such a pursuit is that, doctrinally, the Qur'an is considered to be the Qur'an only in its Arabic form. All translations are considered to be interpretations, and thus not capable of transmitting God's pure and true message. However, as the focus of my inquiry was not on the idea and use of the Qur'an as a sacred object, I began my exploration from the position that a fairly sophisticated level of understanding about much of the content and intent of the Qur'an can be acquired by those who can only read the text in translation. And this is the approach that I recommend to others, whether Muslim or non-Muslim. I do want to raise two notes of caution, however.

First, a great deal of the content of the Qur'an will be familiar to those with even passing exposure to the scripture of the Jews and Christians—whether this was acquired through their own religious practice or through the unavoidable and ubiquitous presence of biblical stories and themes in the canon of Western literature and in nearly every aspect of traditional and popular culture in the West, if not the globe. Given the fact that Islam traces its prophetic heritage from Noah through to Abraham, Moses, Jesus and finally Muhammad, and that the Qur'an recognizes the Torah, the Gospel and the Psalms as prior revelations, we should be surprised if we did *not* find a great deal of common material. As I maintained throughout my previous book (Campbell 2009), efforts to understand the Qur'an and Islam as emerging in a vacuum or in a context

of pagan idolatry and tribal traditions are misguided. The Arabs of Makkah and the surrounding region had Christian and Jewish neighbours and trading partners; it only makes sense that worldviews would have been traded along with worldly goods. This position does not amount to a reductionist view of the Qur'an and Islam as derivative or defective copies of either Christian (Bell 1926) or Jewish (Torrey 1933) precursors, replete with numerous errors and omissions. On the contrary, frequent parallels as well as substantial differences should be expected. The important point is that every effort should be made to read the Qur'an on its own terms.

Second, and in a similar vein, a concerted effort should be made to separate what you read in the Qur'an from what you think you have learned about the Qur'an and Islam through media coverage of current events. As Sumbul Ali-Karamali expresses it: "Ludicrously unbalanced and fanatical characterizations of Islam in the media have been an increasingly insurmountable obstacle in an attempt to understand it" (2008: 218). Certainly since 9/11, not only has media attention on Islam reached unprecedented levels, a plethora of books have been written trying to present alternate understandings of Islam's past and present, especially with respect to Islam's relationship with the West. While some authors unapologetically set out to condemn Islam (Crimp and Richardson 2008; Ibn Warraq 1995; Spencer 2005), others make valiant attempts to uncover and reclaim a glorious past for Islam, based on the premise that the West would not be what it is today without the contribution of long forgotten Muslim artisans, scientists

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and thinkers (Menocal 2003; Morgan 2007; Wallace-Murphy 2006). For example, in the introduction to *Lost History*, Morgan states: “This book is not about Islam or any other religion. It is not about theology or religious doctrine. It is about a civilization in which Islam had a leading role” (2007: xv). The extent to which these initiatives might be viewed as disingenuous is an open question. At the very least, however, whether pro or con these efforts are often seriously hampered by an overly simplistic and monolithic view of Islam and the West as distinct identifiable entities. Again, the critical issue is to keep an open mind and to carry out your own exploration of the Qur’an and of Islam.

