

The QUR`AN - How it was Revealed and Compiled

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INTRODUCTION

Qur'an means reading or recitation. However, the word has specifically come to mean the Qur'an revealed to Prophet Muhammad. The Qur'an is the foundational book of Muslims and, in fact, of the Arabic language. Muslims believe that the Qur'an is the complete and authentic record of the original revelations, claimed by the Prophet to be the literal Word of God, and was organized in its current form by the direct instructions of the Prophet himself. They believe that no one has the authority to alter the Qur'an since every word in the Qur'an is the literal word of God.

Over the ages, the Qur'an has been translated in dozens of languages throughout the world, but only the Arabic text is considered the authentic Qur'an. There is complete agreement on a single text of this Arabic Qur'an by Muslims of all schools of law, of all theological and philosophical leanings, and of all ethnicities and nationalities. Notwithstanding a few detractors, the majority of non-Muslim scholars also agree that the current Qur'an is a faithful record of what the Prophet claimed to be the revelations to him from God, as they existed at the time of the Prophet's death.

The Qur'an is also memorized by hundreds of thousands of people and read by Muslims on all occasions; it is, perhaps, read by more people on a constant basis than any other in human history. The Qur'an, therefore, continues to be a book as well as a recitation. The two traditions reinforce each other and assure the protection of the integrity of the Qur'an and the failure of all attempts at altering or corrupting it.

ORGANIZATION

The Qur'an is organized in 114 chapters called Surahs which contain 6237 ayahs (verses or signs) of various lengths. More than three-fourth (86 out of 114) of the Surahs were revealed during the 13 years of the Prophet's mission in Makkah; the remaining 28 were revealed during the entire 10 years of his life in Madinah. The Surahs are foundational divisions. For convenience of reading the book in a month, it is divided into 30 equal parts (each called a Juz'), and for reading it in a week, it is divided into 7 parts (called a Manzil). It is said that the Makkan Surahs primary deal with the basics of the belief and the Madinan Surahs are about the practice of faith. This, at best, is an oversimplification.

This may be a good place to dispel some common misconceptions about the arrangement of the Qur'an. It is often said the order of the Qur'an is "roughly" in decreasing order of the size of the Surahs (except the first). It is true that most of the longest Surahs are in the beginning and most of the shortest are at the end. The longest Surah is the second one and has 286 Ayahs and the shortest (103, 108, and 110) are toward the end and have 3 Ayahs each. But, beyond this general observation, one can easily demonstrate a lack of order by size of the Surahs. After the 5th Surah, the order by size breaks down. For example, the 6th Surah (with 165 Ayahs) is shorter, and not longer, than the 7th (with 206 Ayahs); the 8th (with 75 Ayahs) is shorter than the 9th

(with 149 Ayahs); and the 15th (with 99 Ayahs) is shorter than the 16th (with 148 Ayahs). The reverse can be shown at the end of the Book. Surah 95 (with 8 Ayahs) is shorter, not longer, than Surah 96 (with 19 Ayahs) and Surah 103 (with 3 Ayahs) is shorter than Surah 104 (with 9 Ayahs).

It is also often stated that the Surahs are arranged in a “reverse” chronological order of the revelation. If this were true, Surah 9 would be Surah one or two, and all the beginning Surahs would be Madani and all at the end would be Makkan. But this is not the case. Seven of the first 20 Surahs are from the Makkan period and three of the last 20 Surahs (98, 99, and 110) are from the Madani period.

In contrast with the above mentioned speculations, the Muslims believe that the arrangement of the Qur’an was determined by the Prophet himself, under guidance from God. They see in this arrangement a coherence that is suitable for all people and for all times to come.

THE CONTENTS

The Qur’an deals with Divine nature, God’s intervention in history, and spiritual lessons learned from observation of nature, from life, and from history. It deals with major themes which are often illustrated with bits of relevant stories of previous prophets and of by-gone cultures, kingdoms, and empires. All of these themes are interwoven throughout the Qur’an, although, naturally, some Surahs deal more with matters of faith and others with matters related to living a good life. There is emphasis on regular prescribed prayers, on constant supplications, on deep self evaluation, on regular fasting, on pilgrimage, to the holy sites related to the origins of the worship of one God, on specific rules related to equity in inheritance, on constant charity, and on social justice for all irrespective of social status. Specifics and details of much of these are left to the Prophet to develop and demonstrate by practice. Beyond that, the Qur’an does not dwell much on matters of ritual per se or of laws and procedures.

The emphasis of the Qur’an can be seen from the names it uses for itself. Some of these names are: Al-Huda (The Guidance), Al-Dhikr (The Reminder), Al-Furqan (The Criterion-for judging right from wrong), Al-Shifa (The Healing), Al-Mau`iza (The Admonition), Al-Rahmah (The Mercy), Al-Nur (The Light), Al-Haqq (The Truth), and Al-Burhaan (The Clear Argument). It does not call itself a book of Law, of Science, or of procedural prescriptions. Only about 500 to 600 Ayahs are related to rules and regulations and less than 100 of these can be directly implemented through legislation. One needs the extensive Hadith literature and elaborate legal processes to derive legal rules and get them to a level where implementation issues can be discussed.

HOW WAS THE QUR’AN REVEALED?

The first revelation came to Mohammad when he was 40 years old and was on one of his customary retreats in the cave of Hira’ in the hills outside Makkah. It was one of the odd nights during the last ten days of the month of Ramadan. According to the reports recorded in the authentic Hadith literature, an angelic presence appeared before the perplexed Mohammad and said to him: “Iqra” (Read or Recite—the word Iqra’ has an ambiguous meaning). Mohammad replied that he could not recite or did not know what to recite. After the instructions to read or

recite were repeated two more times, Mohammad reports that the angelic presence held him and squeezed him so tightly that he felt that his breath was leaving his body. The angelic presence then instructed him to recite with him the words that are now recorded as the first 5 Ayahs of the 96th Surah Al-Qalam, (The Pen) of the Qur'an.

Read (or recite) in the name of your Lord who created (and continues to create); Created the humankind from a clot of congealed blood. Read and your Lord is The Most Generous; Who taught by the pen; taught humankind what it did not know.

These are the first words of the revelation that take Mohammad from an unassuming but generous and trusted member of his city to become Mohammad the Messenger of God, Al-Rasool Allah. A man with no worldly ambitions, and unknown for eloquence and speech, becomes the most eloquent and persistent critic of his society. He becomes a passionate advocate for reform based on the worship of one God and insisting on the dignity, equality and Justice for the slaves, the poor and the female.

The experience of this first revelation shakes him and stuns him. He hurries to his wife Khadijah and asks her to cover him with a blanket. When he recovers his composure, he relates to her the story of his experience. He is concerned that he may be hallucinating or losing his mind. She assures him that he is a very balanced person and that his experience must have some super natural explanation. She suggested that they go to visit one her old relatives know for knowledge of previous scriptures. Her relative, Waraqa ibn Naufal, tells Mohammad that his experience resembles that of Moses and the other prophets. He suggests that Mohammad has been chosen as a messenger by God. He warns him that the people would oppose him as they opposed the prophets before him. (More details of this are covered in the lectures on the Prophet's life).

An interval of several months passes after the above revelation. The Prophet is wrapped up in a blanket, feeling despondent and afraid of having been removed by God from his mission. This is when the revelation of Ayahs 1 through 7 of the 74th Surah Al-Moddaththir, (The One Wrapped), occurs.

O you wrapped up (in your cloak), Arise and deliver the warning. And proclaim the glory of your Lord. And purify and cleanse your garments. And shun all idolatry and filth. And do no favors, expecting gain in return. And for the sake of your Lord, be patient and constant.

Further revelations come over the remaining 13 years of the Prophet's life in Makkah and 10 years in Madina. By the time of his death, the revelations are composed of 114 Surahs. The last of these is Surah Al Taubah, now numbered the 9th. But the last words of the revelation are said to be in the third Ayah of Surah 5, Al Ma'idah.

Today I have completed for you your religion, fulfilled upon you My favors, and approved for you Al Islam as your religion.

RECORDING OF THE QUR'AN

The revelations were recorded contemporaneously by one of the scribes appointed by the Prophet for this purpose. After every revelation, the Prophet would come out to the public (unless he was already outside) and recite to the people the new verses. He would also instruct one of the scribes to write it down. According to authentic Hadith literature, he would tell them where the new revelation was to be positioned in relationship to previous revelations. He would

tell the Surah where the new revelation would go and the preceding and succeeding Ayahs. The scribes would write on whatever material was available at the moment. Thus the writing medium ranged from a stone, the leaf of a palm tree, shoulder-bone of a camel, the membrane on the inside of a deer-skin, a parchment or a papyrus. These writings were stored in a corner of the Prophet's room and later, perhaps, in a separate room or office near the Prophet's room.

It should be mentioned that while Al Qur'an means a recitation, it also calls itself "The Book". The root word for book, k-t-b, occurs in the Qur'an more than 300 times. The word and concept of Surah is also in the Qur'an; and so is the word Ayah.

The Makkans, being a merchant society, had a large pool of those who could read and write. There were as many as 11 scribes during the early part of the Madinan period also. The most prominent of these was an elderly gentleman, named Ubayy ibn Ka'b. The Prophet was then introduced to an energetic teenager named Zayd ibn Thabit. He was eager to learn and was placed directly under the Prophet's supervision. After he had accomplished his initial assignments in record time, the Prophet made him in charge of the Qur'anic record. Zayd became the principal scribe, organizer, and keeper of the record.

Hundreds of people memorized the Qur'an and many wrote what they learned. But keeping up with the new revelations and the changing arrangement of the Ayahs in the Surahs was not possible except for a few. To keep up, hundreds regularly reviewed the Qur'an they knew. Many did this under the Prophet's own guidance. Others did it under the supervision of teachers designated by the Prophet. Those from remote areas, who had visited once, or occasionally, may not have kept up. Some, who wrote what they had learned, may not have inserted the new revelations in the manner prescribed by the Prophet.

The Prophet was meticulous about the integrity of the Qur'an. He constantly recited, in public, the Surahs as they were arranged at the time. It is reported that angel Gabriel reviewed entire Qur'an with the Prophet once a year during the month of Ramadan. This review was done twice during the last year of the Prophet's life. And Zayd maintained the records faithfully, kept them properly indexed, and made sure they were complete according to Prophet's instructions.

At the time of the Prophet's death, Zayd had a complete record of all revelations except the last two Ayahs of Surah 9, the Al Taubah. The Prophet used to indicate the completion of a Surah by instructing the sentence, "(I begin) In the name of God, The Most Merciful, The Most Compassionate" be written at its beginning. This wording at the beginning of each Surah became both a separator from others and an indication that the Surah was now complete. This formulation is missing from the 9th Surah, indicating that no one wanted to add anything to the Qur'an that the Prophet had himself not ordered, even if seemed logical to do so.

FORMAL COMPILATION AS A "BOOK".

After the Prophet's death, the community chose Abu Bakr as their temporal chief, the Khalifah of the Messenger, the Caliph. About a year later, a large number of those known as authoritative memorizers were killed in a battle. According to authentic Hadith literature, Umar Ibn al Khattab (who became the second Caliph) was alarmed by this and concerned that the next generation may not have enough teachers of the Qur'an. He, therefore, approached Abu Bakr, and suggested that a formal compilation of the Qur'an be prepared on materials that would be

convenient to store, maintained, and used as a reference. According to the Hadith literature, Abu Bakr was reluctant to do something the Prophet himself had not undertaken. After a few days, however, he “became inclined” to the idea and asked Zayd to undertake the task. Zayd says he also hesitated but, after contemplation, also “became inclined” and agreed to undertake the work. A committee was formed to do the job. They compiled a collection by checking and double checking each Ayah of the existing record of the Qur’an with the memories of each member of the committee as well as of the other prominent experts. This copy was housed with the Prophet’s wife Hafsa. (She was a daughter of `Umar ibn al Khattab).

By the time of the third Caliph, `Uthman ibn `Affan, the Muslim population had spread over vast areas outside the core Arab regions and many people of other cultures were entering Islam. About 15 years after the first compilation, therefore, it was suggested that authenticated copies of the Qur’an be made available to major population centers in those areas. Zayd again was instructed to undertake the task. He again formed a committee. Instead of just making copies of the existing text, they decided to seek corroboration of each Ayah in the earlier compilation with at least two other written records in the private copies in the possession of known reputable individuals. It is reported that this comparison was successful for all Ayahs except one. For this Ayah, only one comparison could be found. But it was in the hands of a person who was considered so reliable by the Prophet himself that his lone testimony was accepted by the Prophet in a case requiring two witnesses. It is reported that, 7 copies of the collection were prepared and authenticated. One of these copies was given to the Caliph himself. One became the reference copy for the people of Madinah, one was sent to Makkah, one to Kufah, and one to Damascus. (I was unable to find references to the destination of the other copies).

We should mention that the committee, while doing its work, confirmed the general observation that all private copies were incomplete, some were out of sequence, some were in tribal dialects other than the standard Quraish dialect, and many had marginal notes inserted by the owners. They expressed concern that as time passes the context of these deficiencies will be lost. These partial copies may get into public circulation after the death of the owners of these records and become a source of schisms and create confusion. They, therefore, recommended that all such copies be destroyed. The Caliph issued orders to that effect but did not put in place any mechanisms for enforcing the orders. There is sufficient evidence that some people kept their copies and some were used by mischief makers to create controversies that did not succeed. Those Authentic copies of the Qur’an are known as the “`Uthmani” text. This text, however, did not have the short vowels that are even today left out of Arabic text used by those who know the language. In the absence of these short vowels, however, those not well versed in the language can make serious mistakes. These vowels were, therefore, inserted about 60 years later under instructions of the governor of Kufa, named Hajjaj Ibn Yusuf.

A Foot Note Regarding Required Qualifications for interpreting the Qur’an

The Qur’an, being considered the literal word of God, is taken very seriously by Muslims. It is not enough to just study the Arabic language to interpret the Qur’an. Muslims have agreed over the centuries that one must be well-versed in the following before one is considered qualified to offer a credible opinion.

- Mastery of classical Arabic. (Arabic of the Quraish of the time of the Prophet).
- Mastery of the entire book. (“The Qur’an explains the Qur’an”).
- A thorough knowledge of Hadith literature. (The Prophet’s interpretation is binding and those around him understood it better than the later generations).

- A deep knowledge of the life of the Prophet and of the first community. (No interpretation is valid that ignores the original context).
- A commanding knowledge of the exegetical notes and writings of the earlier scholars and of the traditions of earlier Muslim communities.