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THE QUR'ĀN

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The Qur'ān is the scripture of the Muslim community, revered by Muslims around the world and given authority to determine both faith and life. Many features of the Qur'ān can be fruitfully explored by the general reader. Other matters related to the Qur'ān, such as claims to its divine provenance and linguistic perfection, are matters of religious conviction rather than objective fact. At a number of points the Qur'ān plays an important role in the development of Muslim identity, both in the contents of the book itself and in the claims which Muslims make for their scripture. The Qur'ān is believed by Muslims to be the revelatory word of God, dictated by the angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muḥammad in segments between the years 610 and 632. Muslims believe that as Muḥammad recited the revelations, the words were memorized by his companions. They believe the recitations were later recorded word for word and are today found in the Arabic text of the Qur'ān in precisely the manner God intended.

General physical description

Consisting of 114 chapters, called *sūra*s, the Qur'ān is arranged approximately in order of length from the longest chapter (some 22 pages of Arabic text for *sūra* 2) through the shortest (only a single line for *sūra* 108). Acting as a short introduction to the text is the first chapter, called "The Opening," *al-Fatiḥa*, which is a prayer-like segment used within the Muslim *ṣalāt* ritual. Each chapter is divided into verses, *āya*s, the total number being reckoned somewhere between 6204 and 6236, differing according to various schemes of counting. These verse divisions do not always correspond to the sense of the text but are generally related to the rhyme structure of the individual *sūra*s. The rhyme is constructed through a vowel plus the final consonant at the end of each verse, although few chapters have a consistent rhyme scheme throughout and in the longer narrative chapters, the rhyme is created by the use of stock phrases such as "God is all-knowing, all-wise."

Twenty-nine chapters are preceded by disconnected letters of the Arabic alphabet, some single letters (Q – *qāf, sūra* 50; N – *nūn, sūra* 68) or up to five different letters together. The significance of these so-called mysterious letters has eluded traditional Muslim and modern scholarship alike. Also prefacing each chapter, with the exception of *sūra* 9, is the *basmala*, the statement, "In the name of God, the Beneficent, the Merciful." This phrase acts as an opening to all Muslim religious statements and is found within the Qur'ān itself as the opening phrase of the letter written by Solomon to the Queen of Sheba (Q 27:30).

The text as it is generally found today indicates both the Arabic consonants and the vowels according to a standard system of notation, along with a variety of other marks connected to recitation practices and verse divisions. Early manuscripts of the Qur'ān dating from the eighth and ninth centuries provide only a skeleton-like primitive written outline of Arabic, however. The standard, fully vocalized text of the Qur'ān was established only in the first half of the tenth century.

Organization

Apart from the mechanical arrangement of the Qur'ān by length of chapter, the organizational principle behind the text is unclear. Despite the best efforts of many scholars from both within and outside the faith perspective, the sense of an apparent random character and seemingly arbitrary sense of organization is hard to overcome. There seem to be no historical, biographical, thematic, aesthetic or poetic criteria by which one can understand the overall structure of the work. To the source critic, the work displays all the tendencies of rushed editing with only the most superficial concern for the content, the editors/compilers apparently engaged only in establishing a fixed text of scripture.

Traditional story of the collection

The Muslim tradition has provided an explanation for why the Qur'ān looks the way it does, although the contradictions created by the multiplicity of versions of the story have raised grave doubts on the part of many scholars as to their plausibility and motivation. Generally, Muḥammad himself is excluded from any role in the collection of the text. Zayd ibn Thābit, a companion of Muḥammad, is generally credited with an early collection of the scripture following the death of Muḥammad. Zayd is said to have worked with pieces of text written "on palm leaves or flat stones or in the hearts of men" (a standard way of expressing the idea, found in collections of *ḥadīth*). The pages of the text were then entrusted to Hafṣa, one of Muḥammad's wives. Under the instructions of ʿUthmān, the third ruler of the empire after the death of Muḥammad, the major editing of the text took place. The complete text (deemed to have survived in full) was then written out in full and distributed to the major centers of the expanding Muslim Empire. Thus, within 25 years of the death of Muḥammad, Muslims understand that the Qur'ān existed in at least its skeletal but fixed form; theologically, it is held that the form that the text was in at this point was an image of a heavenly tablet, suggesting that its form and content were precisely that which God desired for it. For some Muslims, the emergence of the written text is moot: they believe that an oral tradition preserved the full text from the time of its revelation, while the written form served only as a mnemonic device for memorization of the text.

The scholarly difficulties with this traditional account relate to both the state of the Muslim sources for the account and the historical evidence for its authenticity. The many accounts in *ḥadīth* collections and other sources from the early centuries contradict each other in the details of formation as well as in the protagonists to whom they give credit for the collection among the first four caliphs. Early Muslim sources also contain reports of the persistent survival of rival codices (*muṣḥaf*s) to the so-called ʿUthmanic *muṣḥaf*. These and other discrepancies have led some scholars to reject the

traditional account altogether, opting instead to suggest either a collection during the lifetime of Muḥammad or a longer process of formation and canonization during the first two centuries of Islam.

The earliest sources for the collection accounts are the *ḥadīth* collections of the third Islamic century. Though they claim to report traditions reaching back to Muḥammad himself through a reliable chain of transmission, the *ḥadīth* collections have come under close scrutiny by Western scholars and their historical reliability has been challenged. Added to this is a paucity of manuscript evidence for an early establishment of the Qur'anic text. Some scholars have suggested dating a number of leaves from ancient codices to as far back as the end of the first Islamic century, but paleographical study of the oldest codices has produced no clear and unambiguous results with respect to the dating of ancient Qur'ān manuscripts which are generally acknowledged by scholars. Further, the oldest manuscripts are too fragmentary to allow the conclusion that the earliest Qur'āns were identical in form, size and content to later Qur'āns. Finally, the text of the Qur'ān itself offers few clues – if any – to its authorship, transmission or editing. Scholars who seek to argue that the Qur'ān is the collection of Muḥammad's recitations have been obliged to return to the Islamic tradition to make their case.

The speaker of the Qur'ān

The difficulties in understanding the text are by no means confined to the issue of its organization. One other issue which confronts most readers is the idea of the "speaker" of the Qur'ān. Muslim theology understands that God speaks throughout the Qur'ān. Yet He refers to Himself in both the singular (Q 2:30) and plural (Q 12:2) first person forms, as well as in the third person (Q 5:10) as though we were dealing with an omniscient narrator. Furthermore, statements which a reader might have conceived to be Muḥammad's are frequently preceded by the word "Say," a stylistic device understood to be God giving the authorization for Muḥammad to speak through his own person while reciting the "dictated word" (Q 2:94). The identity of the addressee of the Qur'ān is not always clear: much of the text is in second person singular, but much also addresses a plural "you" and even a dual "you" (*sūra* 55); and some passages mix singular and plural (Q 2:155). Similarly, the reader encounters passages in which the voice of the text clearly cannot be God (*sūra* 1; 2:286; 6:104, 114), but the Muslim interpretative tradition has always been able to provide a corrective understanding to maintain a consistent presence of the divine voice throughout the text.

The Qur'ān contains a fair number of passages in which the speaker addresses "the messenger" regarding various aspects of a prophetic mission. These aspects include a commission, calls to patience and faithful recitation, words of comfort and encouragement, various directives, and even a rebuke. Along with these personal messages come self-conscious affirmations of the message which include rebuttals of accusations made by the messenger's contemporaries. Throughout the Qur'ān brief statements appear which assert the authenticity or veracity of the recitation, or its function as a reminder. A characteristic expression of this kind is the verse, "We have revealed it, a *qur'ān* in Arabic, that you may understand" (Q 12:2; cf. 20:113; 13:37).

Themes

A reading of the Qur'ān shows that it has a thematic preoccupation with three major topics: law, the previous prophets and the final judgment. The three topics appear to presuppose on the part of their readers some biblical knowledge along with a reference point within some variation of a native Arabian tradition.

Ruling over all of the Qur'ān, and the reference point for all the developments of its major themes, is the figure of God, Allāh in Arabic. The all-mighty, all-powerful and all-merciful God created the world for the benefit of His creatures, has sent messages to them in the past to guide them in the way of living most befitting to them and to Him, has given them the law by which they should live – and which has reached its perfection and completion in Islam, and will bring about the end of the world at a time known only to Him when all shall be judged strictly according to their deeds. The basic message is a familiar one from within the Judaeo–Christian tradition. This emphasis on the uniqueness of God, that Allāh is the only god who exists, is presented both in opposition to the Jewish–Christian tradition and in opposition to the polytheist Arabian idolaters who worshipped spirits (*jinn*, "genies"), offspring of God and various idols.

The reader of the Qur'ān in its canonical progression quickly encounters passages which contain a range of polemical forms and terminology and which seem to reflect polemical encounters. A prominent element in the Qur'ān appears to be polemical responses to resistance to the reciter's claim to prophethood and to the claim that the words he is reciting are from God. The antagonists are sometimes specified as Jews, Christians (*Naṣārā*), "associators," or simply as "disbelievers." *Sūra*s 2 through 7, the long *sūra*s which make up the opening fifth of the Qur'ān, contain a great deal of polemical material. In the midst of these passages, assertions are made for the truth of the recitations being "sent down" in response to the disbelief of the "people of scripture" and the associators.

The polemical passages show signs of being part of a larger process of the development of Islamic identity. On the one hand the recitations of the present messenger are said to "confirm" the scriptures of the Jews and Christians. The messenger is also portrayed as belonging to the same line as biblical messengers and prophets, and "no distinction" is to be made among these prophets (Q 2:136). The recitations of the messenger seem to be characterized in some passages as an Arabic translation of earlier scriptures (Q 26:192–7). On the other hand, Abraham is claimed for Islam while denied to Jews and Christians (Q 3:67–8). Frequently, Islam is put forward as the religion above all others: "You are the best nation ever brought forth to humankind" (Q 3:110); "Whoso desires another religion than Islam, it shall not be accepted of him" (Q 3:85); "Today I have perfected your religion for you, and I have completed my blessing upon you, and I have approved Islam for your religion" (Q 5:3).

The text at times gives the impression of an effort to measure up to the strong religions thriving in the Middle East at the time of the Muslim conquest, along with a simultaneous effort to distinguish the new religion and raise it above the others. The basic components of divinity, prophet/messenger and scripture are repeatedly signaled in the text of the Qur'ān. These are what the Jews and Christians were known to possess. The claim of the Qur'ān is not only that the new religion has achieved

these features as well, but also that the Muslim components are purer and more authentic: "It is He who has sent His messenger with the guidance and the religion of truth, that He may render it victorious over every religion" (Q 9:33).

Qur'anic polemic with the Jews centers mainly on Jewish resistance to the religious claims of Islam. Reference is made to the covenants which the "children of Israel" made with God in the past, and to the Torah which is "with them" (Q 4:47). In spite of the prophecies of the present messenger assumed by the Qur'ān to be contained in both their covenants and scripture, the Jews accept neither the messenger's prophethood nor his authority. One sub-theme of the polemical passages is that the Jews are "tampering" with the Torah in a variety of ways. The perceived obduracy of the Jews who are hearing the messenger's present recitations is said to match Jewish misdeeds of the ancient past. Polemical passages relating to the Jews begin with an extended passage taking up nearly one half of the Qur'ān's longest *sūra*.

Qur'anic polemic with Christians is not as abundant as with Jews, but it seems to already occupy a substantial portion of the third *sūra*. Polemic with Christians mainly concerns the identity of Jesus. Christian resistance seems to be related to their reluctance to accept the "true narrative" about Jesus which the messenger asserts. Polemic with a third group, the polytheists, is also reflected in many Qur'anic passages. The resistance of the polytheists seems to include skeptical comparisons of the recitations of the messenger with the orations of poets, *kāhin*s, or those possessed by *jinn*. "The disbelievers say, 'This is nothing but the fairy-tales of the ancient ones' " (Q 6:25). A rumor is circulating that another person is teaching the messenger what to say (Q 16:103). The polytheists also seem to demand a miracle to support the messenger's claims to prophethood. The harshest polemic against this group is for their sin of "associating" (*shirk*) with God that which is not divine. In contrast to the "people of scripture," polytheists in the Qur'ān appear to have no redeeming features. Instead, God's curse is frequently pronounced on them and their destination after the Judgment is consistently said to be hell.

The God of the Qur'ān is the God who communicated to the prophets of the past. Most of the stories of the past prophets as recounted in the Qur'ān are familiar from the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament but are presented shorn of the extensive narrative element. The Qur'ān tends to present summaries of the stories and to get directly to religio–moral points interpreted from them. This feature has led some modern scholars to suggest that the audience of the Qur'ān was assumed to have known the biblical stories, and perhaps much else from the Judeo–Christian tradition.

A number of prophets are named in the Qur'ān as having been commissioned or selected by God to spread the message of the true way of obedience to Him. A limited number of these people were given scriptures to share with their communities: Abraham, Moses, David and Jesus are clearly cited in this regard. Not all of the named prophets are familiar from the biblical tradition (or at least their identification with personages of the past is less than clear): for example, Hūd, Ṣāliḥ, Shuʿayb and Luqmān are generally treated as prophets of the specifically Arabian context prior to Muḥammad.

The stories of these prophets are frequently recounted through a formulaic structure. The prophet is commissioned by God and sent with a message to his people. The people reject the message. The prophet then confronts his people and warns them of

the consequences of disobedience. The people begin to manhandle the messenger. At the point of crisis, God destroys the people and saves the prophet and any persons faithful to his message. The story of some of the prophets is told in more expansive form, for example in the case of Joseph which is recounted in *sūra* 12 and is one of the most cohesive narratives found in the Qur'ān. Elaborations within the story indicate that the Qur'ān is not simply retelling stories read from the Bible, but is reflecting their popular form in the Near Eastern milieu of the seventh century.

Of all the biblical figures mentioned in the Qur'ān, Moses garners by far the most attention. His name appears some 136 times. In 36 of the Qur'ān's 114 *sūra*s Moses is mentioned in 50 separate pericopes totaling more than 500 verses. Even more striking than the abundance of material is the special profile which the Qur'ān seems to give to Moses. In the Qur'ān, God speaks directly with Moses (Q 4:164), and says to him, "Moses, I have chosen you above humankind by My messages and My word" (Q 7:144). In five extended versions of the Moses story, the Qur'ān relays different elements of the narrative in different sequences, with differences in the details within the narrative elements. These many Qur'anic versions – described by one scholar as "variant traditions" – contain elements which are familiar from the Hebrew Bible. Other details in the Qur'anic narratives match the details in extra-biblical tellings such as in midrash and Talmud, while some details are not known from any other recorded source. The frequency of the prophetic stories and the differences between them have led some scholars to speculate on what these phenomena might tell about the provenance of Muslim scripture. Scholars suggest a scenario of differing stories gathered from different sources, perhaps different regions of the Muslim Empire, collected and incorporated into scripture without either editing or selection of the "best" version.

The Qur'anic material on Jesus – called ʿĪsā in the Qur'ān – is concentrated in *sūra*s 3, 5 and 19. The greatest amount of attention is given to the circumstances of Jesus' birth, some of which resemble those of the first chapter of the Gospel according to Luke. Jesus is presented as a miracle worker who heals the blind and the lame, and who raises the dead "by leave of Allah" (Q 3:49). The Qur'anic report that Jesus created a bird from clay and blew life into it (Q 5:110) resembles a story in the apocryphal *Gospel of Thomas*. When it approaches the death of Jesus, the Qur'anic material appears ambiguous, ranging from verses which seem to assume his death (Q 3:55, 19:33) to an explicit denial that the Jews killed Jesus (Q 4:157). However, there is little ambivalence in the Qur'anic denial of Jesus' divinity. The Qur'anic Jesus is emphatically not God, not the Son of God, not to be "associated" with God, and not the "third of three." On the other hand, Jesus is given the name "Messiah" (Q 3:34) and is mysteriously called the "word" of God and "a spirit" from God (Q 4:171).

The Qur'anic prophets are generally portrayed as bringing the same message of the coming judgment for those who do not repent and follow the law of God. The message is a simple and familiar one. All people shall die at their appointed time and then, at a point known only to God, the resurrection shall take place at which all people shall be strictly judged according to the deeds they have performed on earth. The image of the weigh scale is brought in to emphasize that not even an "atom's weight" of good or evil (Q 99:7–8) will be neglected in the final reckoning. Pronouncements of judgment, along with the theological theme of the "God of justice,"

are touched on in approximately every third verse of scripture. Scenes of reward and punishment as a result of God's judgment are frequently painted in graphic style within the Qur'ān.

To be granted eternal existence in heaven, one must believe in the truth and the contents of the scripture and put those contents into action in day-to-day life. It is on the basis of one's intentional adherence to the will of God as expressed through legal requirements indicated in the Qur'ān that one's fate in the hereafter will be determined. The Qur'anic law contains elements familiar from Jewish law, such as the prohibition of pork and the institution of ritual slaughter, some purity regulations (especially as regards women) and the emphasis on the regulation of marriage, divorce and inheritance. In the discussion of law, however, the theme of Muslim identity appears to be a factor. For example, in the midst of a polemical discussion of the direction of prayer which draws in both Jews and Christians comes the expression, "We appointed you a midmost nation" (Q 2:143).

As well, various ritual practices of Islam are mentioned in the Qur'ān, but often only in an unelaborated form. The pilgrimage, the month of fasting, the institution of prayer and the idea of charity are all dealt with to varying degrees. In many cases the directives of the Qur'ān come from both "God and his messenger." Commands to obey, for example, hold God and the messenger together in all but one of 13 such occurrences. Overall, the law is conceived as a gift given by God to humanity to provide guidance in living the proper, fully human life.

Among the repeating imperatives of the Qur'ān are commands to fight and kill, as well as the command to "strive (*jahada/jihād*) in the way of Allah." These imperatives frequently appear in contexts which seem to reflect a battle situation. In the battle passages, the "believers" are exhorted to participate fully in the conflict: to "go forth" and to "expend" gold and silver in God's way. Those who hold back from the struggle are promised chastisement in this life and punishment in the life to come. God's way in these battle passages appears to be equated with the career of "the messenger," and opposition to this career is characterized as the way of Satan and promised harsh punishment. Not all of the uses of the verb "to strive" (*jahada*) come in the midst of battle passages, however. The command at Q 22:78, for example, appears to instruct Muslims to perform the religious duties originally prescribed to Abraham.

Symbolic language

Conveying these Qur'anic themes are vast complexes of symbolic language, the ranges of which have not been catalogued through any contemporary literary perspective. The mix of biblical and Arabian motifs renders the task a difficult one. Some scholars have tended to interpret the text as reflecting the contemporary situation of Muḥammad, and thus picturing the symbolism in materialist terms; others have emphasized the biblical (or general ancient near eastern) context and see the Qur'anic language as reflecting the nature of monotheistic language in that milieu. Clues to the latter approach include prophetic themes which are repeatedly signaled in the Qur'ān but seldom developed, such as retribution, sign, exile, and covenant. These materials seem to reflect a traditional stock of monotheistic imagery.

Doctrine of inimitability

The Qur'ān is, and has been from the beginning of the emergence of the religion, the primary source and reference point for Islam. Indeed, the Qur'ān in its function as a source of authority is the defining point of Islamic identity. The emergence of the Muslim community is intimately connected with the emergence of the Qur'ān as an authoritative text in making decisions on matters of law and theology.

Allusions to and direct quotations of the Qur'ān are pervasive in Muslim literature. While imitation of the Qur'ān is considered both impossible and sinful (because it is God's word), the contents of the Qur'ān and its particular form of classical Arabic create the substrata of literary production. The widespread knowledge of the words of the Qur'ān, traditionally instilled in most children through memorization, means that reverberations of the text are guaranteed to be felt by most readers. Direct quotations of the Qur'ān and the use of some of the text's striking metaphors abound in the literature of all Muslim languages.

Beyond deep appreciation for the sounds and contents of the Qur'ān, Muslims share a belief in the linguistic perfection of the Arabic text and advance this as a proof of its divine origin. This "miracle" of language is then brought in as a demonstration of the true prophethood of Muḥammad. The Islamic doctrine of the inimitability of the Qur'ān, in Arabic *i'jāz*, is also related to Muslim beliefs that the Qur'ān is eternal, uncreated, and kept safe from change or corruption in a heavenly tablet. These doctrines are supported with expressions from within the Qur'ān such as, "It is a glorious *qur'ān* in a guarded tablet" (Q 85:22). Muslim scholars also refer to a series of "challenge verses" which begins at Q 2:23: "If you are in doubt concerning what we have sent down on our servant, then bring a *sūra* like it." What may appear to non-Muslim readers as discrepancies or contradictions, or inexplicable changes of subject, voice and mood, are believed by Muslims to be aspects of the precise form which God gave the book. Claims to the status of the Qur'ān were at times matters of great controversy within the Muslim community during the early centuries. By the fourth century, however, an orthodoxy began to set in concerning these and other doctrines which has continued to the present day.

Interpretation

The meaning and applicability of the Qur'ān has not, of course, been immediately obvious in every situation. Encyclopedia of Religion, TAFSIR, Vol.14, p.237 Interpretation, *tafsīr*, aims to clarify a text. *Tafsīr* takes as its beginning point the text of the Qur'ān, paying full attention to the text itself in order to make its meaning clear. It also functions simultaneously to adapt the text to the present situation of the interpreter. In other words, most interpretation is not purely theoretical; it has a very practical aspect of making the text applicable to the faith and the way of life of the believers. The first of these two interpretive aspects is generally provoked by insoluble problems in meaning, by insufficient detail, by intratextual contradiction, or by unacceptable meanings. Interpretation that fits the text to the situation serves to align it with established social custom, legal positions, and doctrinal assertions.

Other practical reasons can also be cited for the initial creation of *tafsīr* as an entity. As the Muslim Empire expanded, Islam was embraced by a large number of people

who did not know Arabic; interpretation, sometimes in the form of translations (although this was officially frowned upon) and other times in a simple Arabic which did not contain the ambiguities and difficulties of the original scriptural text, fulfilled the purpose of allowing easier access to the book.

In addition, there was the basic problem of the text itself and how it was to be read. The early Arabic script was defective in its differentiation of the letters of the alphabet and in the vocalization of the text. In the tenth century Muslim scholars established an official system of readings *(qirā'āt)* which gave sanction to a basic seven sets of vocalizations of the text (with further set variations still possible to some extent). However, in the earliest period a greater freedom with regard to the text seems to have been enjoyed. This freedom extended to the consonantal structure of the text and was legitimized through the notion of the early existence of various codices of the Qur'ān, each with its own textual peculiarities. Differences between these versions and the text eventually given official status (as far as these could be cited by the exegetes), as well as the variations created by the different official vocalization systems, then demanded explanation and justification in order to establish claims that a particular reading provided the best textual sense. The end result was that *tafsīr* acted to establish a firm text of scripture within what became the set limits of the *qirā'āt*.

One of the earliest Muslim methods of interpreting the Qur'ān was to connect particular passages in the text with incidents in the story of Muḥammad. The name Muḥammad is only mentioned four times in the Qur'ān; in all four cases he is referred to in the third person rather than directly addressed. References to the career of Muḥammad in the Qur'ān are not sufficiently frequent to construct a biography of Muḥammad from its materials. However, Muslims have traditionally identified Muḥammad with "the messenger" or "the prophet" ubiquitously addressed in scripture; Muslims conceive of the Qur'ān as having been revealed not only through Muḥammad, but also according to the needs of his prophetic mission. The individual traditions which link Qur'anic verses with events in the career of Muḥammad are called the "occasions of revelation." These traditions are recounted in commentaries, in *Ḥadīth* collections and in special works of *asbāb al-nuzūl*. An overarching narrative framework, which incorporated and arranged chronologically the separate traditions, was provided in early works of both *sīra* and *tafsīr*. The most famous of the earlier biographical works is the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, an eighth-century work of Ibn Isḥāq (d. 767) which exists in a ninth-century edition.

Related to this narrative framework was the development of a scheme whereby the *sūra*s of the Qur'ān could be assigned to initial recitation in either Mecca or Medina. Within these two general categories each *sūra* was given a place in a continuous chronology from the first recitation through to the death of Muḥammad. This systemization of the contents allowed Muslim scholars to account for the abrupt changes of topic, voice and mood between *sūra*s – and indeed within a single *sūra* – in the canonical progression of the Qur'ān.

The concept of a Mecca–Medina chronology also allowed Muslim scholars a way to deal with the apparent inconsistencies and contradictions within the Qur'ān. If a specific injunction in a passage considered Meccan disagreed with the instruction in a "Medinan" passage, the discrepancy was explained as between passages

revealed earlier and later in the career of Muḥammad. The situation of the Muslim community in Medina was different from that of Mecca, reasoned the scholars, so the words revealed by God in Medina would naturally correspond to the new needs of the community. The later recitation was then considered to abrogate the earlier one.

For example, Muslim scholars speculated on the reasons for the differences among the various approaches to situations of conflict within the Qur'ān. They observed a range of approaches from patient tolerance to open warfare. The basic difference could be accounted for by the different circumstances in Mecca and Medina. In Mecca the Muslim community was small and could not mount a military action against its persecutors even if it wanted to. However, in Medina military action was not only possible, but was approved by explicit permission from God (Q 22:39, according to Ibn Isḥāq's *Sīra*). As for the differences among the postures of fighting, from defensive to aggressive, some Muslim scholars arranged the commands according to the dating of the Medinan *sūra*s in which they are found. Since the so-called "sword verse" (Q 9:5) is found, according to many schemes, in the final *sūra* to be revealed, some Muslim scholars gave it abrogating power over verses in all other *sūra*s which suggest less than total warfare.

Muslims at the start of the third millennium interpret the Qur'ān in a variety of ways according to their basic approaches to Muslim tradition and to the impact of Western civilization. Most Muslims would tend to interpret a text in line with the traditional medieval interpretation as represented for example by the fourteenth-century exegete Ibn Kathīr (d. 1373) and perhaps mediated by local Muslim teachers.

Modernist Muslims may seek to interpret the Qur'ān in line with recent Western sensibilities. The first modernist exegetes attempted to interpret the Qur'ān from the perspective of Enlightenment rationalism. In their commentaries the Qur'ān's miraculous elements, for example, were eliminated. Some modernist interpreters attempt to show the Qur'ān to be compatible with a modern scientific worldview; indeed, according to some authors the Qur'ān contains scientific facts divinely revealed a millennium before they were "discovered" in the West. More recent modernist interpreters will feature Qur'anic materials which they consider to affirm gender equality or democratic institutions. Post-modern Muslims may even look for a reading which is compatible with the philosophy of religious pluralism.

Several recent Muslim interpreters living in the West seek to lay traditional Muslim understandings to one side, return to the Qur'ān and the story of Muḥammad, and interpret scripture through an historical approach. In their view, God adapted the Qur'ān's narrations to the situation of Muḥammad and those who heard his recitations. Some Muslim authors suggest that the portions of the Qur'ān believed to have been revealed in Mecca provide the basic principles of Islamic faith, while the Medinan *sūra*s are historically specific and therefore not open to universal application. Such interpretations go against the traditionalist scheme of the forward flow of abrogation, and therefore generally have trouble finding a hearing in Muslim-majority societies. However, these interpretations allow modernist and post-modern Muslims to understand that the Qur'anic commands to fight and kill were meant for specific situations in seventh-century Arabia, and that these commands are not to be applied generally to the behavior of Muslims today.

Revivalist Muslims, including Islamists, similarly seek to return to the text of the Qur'ān and the story of Muḥammad, but reject both traditionalism and Western

modernity. Islamists take the Qur'ān to be God's message for the establishment of the Islamic system. They tend to prefer the *ḥadīth* materials from the exegetical tradition, because they understand these to be Muḥammad's own commentary. They find in "Medinan" passages the directives for the behavior of the Muslim community today. Such interpretations locate the primal vision of the Muslim community in Medina, and seek to revive the kind of state which Islamist believe to have existed in Medina under Muḥammad. The rule of Islamic law must therefore be established in the whole world by all the means understood by them to have been used by Muḥammad and the earliest Muslims. In seeking to prescribe behavior in situations of conflict, revivalist Muslims may highlight the scriptural commands to fight and kill and urge that believers today put them into practice. Their belief in a golden age in seventh-century Arabia trumps any fears of modern Western disapproval. Such interpretations of the Qur'ān, from famous Islamists like Mawlānā Mawdūdī and Sayyid Quṭb, tend to be the most popular among well-educated Muslim youth today.

As the global Muslim community continues to look to the Qur'ān as the source of truth and authority, many non-Muslims will share a lively interest in the interpretation of the scripture by various groups of Muslims. The Qur'ān promises to be a touchstone of Muslim identity well into the twenty-first century. The claims which Muslims make for their scripture are powerful and inspiring. The results of a more critical approach to the Qur'ān among Muslim scholars remain to be seen.

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