

Transcript: Sources, The Qur'an

The Qur'an

God created all human beings to find happiness in this world through obedience to the divine will and the reward of Paradise in the next. In his great mercy, he sent guidance to all humanity in the form of Books of revelation. The Qur'an is the last Book and the ultimate benchmark by which all earlier ones can be judged. It lies at the core of the Muslim faith and way of life. It was sent down by God to Muhammad who conveyed it to the world by speaking it aloud - the name Qur'an means 'the recitation'.

The revelation of the Qur'an began in the year 610, on a dark night towards the end of the month of Ramadan [Q. 2:185].¹ Muhammad had gone to spend time in deep meditation and spiritual retreat in a cave on Mount Hira, just outside Makka. A light appeared on the horizon and drew closer [Q. 53:3-10].² Eventually it was identified as the Angel Jibril (Gabriel). Jibril halted a distance away from Muhammad and spoke the word *iqra*, commanding him to 'recite' or 'speak forth'.

Muhammad did not know what to do. Jibril came closer and said again *iqra*. At this, Muhammad said that he didn't know what he was supposed to say. Like most people at this time, Muhammad had not received any formal book-based education. He was *ummi*, meaning that he had not received education on earlier scriptures and he was "unlettered". The significance of this is that what Muhammad was about to recite could not have come from him. He could not have made it up himself. It must have been given to him by God [Q. 10:37-38, 17:88, 45:2].³

¹ Q. 2:185 The month of Ramadan in which the Qur'an was sent down, as a guide to humankind, also clear [signs] for guidance and the criterion [between right and wrong] [is the fasting month]. So whoever amongst you witnesses the month; let him fast it. But whoever is ill or on a journey, let it be the same number of other days - God wants ease for you, He does not want hardship for you - so that you will complete that number of days and glorify Him for having guided you; and so perhaps you will be grateful.

² Q. 53:3-10 Nor does he speak out of [his own] desire: it is just a revelation that is revealed [to him], taught him by the One of great powers, possessed of sound judgement. He settled, while he was on the highest horizon. Then he drew nearer and nearer until he was within two bows' length or even nearer, where He revealed to His servant whatever He revealed.

³ Q. 10:37-38 This Qur'an could not have been forged by anyone besides God; rather it is a confirmation of what preceded it, and a clarification of the details of the Book, in which there is no doubt, from the Lord of the worlds. Or do they say, "He [Muhammad] has forged it?" Say, "Then bring a chapter like it, and invoke whoever you can, besides God, if you are truthful."

Q. 17:88 Say, "Should humans and jinn rally to bring the like of this Qur'an, they will not bring the like of it, even if they assisted one another."

Q. 45:2 This is the sending down of the Book from God, the All-mighty, All-wise.

Jibril then embraced Muhammad. During this embrace, the heart of Muhammad, as the seat of wisdom and knowledge, was purified in receiving the revelation from God. After the embrace, when Jibril again said *iqra* to Muhammad, the first verses of the Qur'an just welled up from his heart and flowed from his lips [Q. **96:1-5**].⁴ This was the start of the process of revelation that would go on for the next twenty-two years [Q. **17:106, 25:32**].⁵

As Muhammad was a pure being, his heart was a fit resting place for the revelation which was sent down to him without any fear of corruption or interference [Q. **2:97**].⁶ As it came from Muhammad's heart to his lips, it was preserved from error by the Angel Jibril acting as the 'Trusted Spirit' [Q. **26:192-195**].⁷ This process of revelation is called *wahy*, which is linked to the word *tanzil*, and refers to the 'sending down' of the Qur'an from God to our world in a human language, Arabic [Q. **12:2, 41:44, 42:7**].⁸

It's important to try to understand that Muhammad is the receiver and conveyor of the revelation, not in any sense the author. Authorship lies with God and control over the transmission of the words of the Qur'an until they came from the mouth of the Prophet. There is no scope for distortion. The words of the Qur'an were given to him by God [Q. 53: 3-6]. He did not have to memorise the Qur'an. It was simply 'there' in his heart and he knew it.

Maulana Raza speaks of the revelation of the Qur'an as the highest honour that could be shown to Prophet Muhammad.

⁴ Q. **96:1-5** Read in the name of your Lord who created; he created the human being from a clot. Read, and your Lord is the most generous, who taught by the pen, he taught the human being what he did not know.

⁵ Q. **17:106** We have sent the Qur'an in parts so that you may recite it to the people a little at a time, and we have sent it down piecemeal.

Q. **25:32** Those who reject faith say, "Why has not the Qur'an been sent down to him all at once?" So it is, that We may strengthen your heart with it, and We have recited it [to you] gradually.

⁶ Q. **2:97** Say: Whoever is an enemy of Gabriel [should know for certain that] he brought down the [revelation] upon your heart by God's permission, a confirmation of what preceded it, and guidance and glad tidings for the believers.

⁷ Q. **26:192-195** This is indeed [a Book] sent down by the Lord of the worlds, brought down by the Trusted Spirit upon your heart [so that you may be one of the warners], in a clear Arabic language.

⁸ Q. **12:2** Indeed We have sent it down as an Arabic Qur'an so that you may apply reason.

The revelation of the Qur'an to the Prophet is one of the highest honours and dignity for Prophet Muhammad. And as a result of this honour, I think that God has chosen and inspired the Prophet to receive, then understand, and preach the message, and for that very reason God made him a completely honest and truthful individual. This concept of revelation also makes Prophet Muhammad a medium between the creator and the creation.

Shaykh Bahmanpour parallels the descent of the Qur'an from God with the ascent of the Prophet's intellect to receive it.

The process of revelation is very difficult for us to grasp, I think, and that is because this is not an experience which is experienced by many people. It is just for those very few elect people, who can achieve the station of spirituality to receive revelation. Throughout the Qur'an, we have this idea of descent from God. This Qur'an is a concept which has descended from the high place, which is with God, to the Prophet. Now this idea of descent is matched with another idea of ascent of the Prophet. In a sense the Prophet (peace be on him), should ascend to a high level so that he could meet the minimum requirement for that descent of concepts coming from *Umm ul-Kitab* [Mother of the Book] to the heart of the Prophet, to receive that revelation. And this is of course not something which is specific to the Prophet of Islam. Every Prophet in the process of receiving revelation should ascend from the level of an ordinary human being to a level where it is possible for them to receive that descending revelation.

Muhammad told Khadija his wife what had happened. According to some sources, she asked her cousin Waraqa, who was a Christian, for his advice. After listening to Muhammad's account, he confirmed that in his Christian tradition such things are known when God calls a prophet to carry a message into the world. Khadija realised that Muhammad was God's messenger and became his first follower. At the same time, other sources stress that the Prophet knew and was certain about what happened; there is no room for doubt in his life [Q. 53:1-12].⁹

This first revelation is celebrated each year on the odd-numbered nights in the last ten days of Ramadan, often the 27th night. It is called the Night of Power (*Laylat al-Qadr*). Muslims devote this night to worship and according to the Qur'an, angels are

⁹ Q. 53:1-12 By the star when it sets: your companion has neither gone astray, nor been misled. Nor does he speak out of [his own] desire: it is just a revelation that is revealed [to him], taught him by the One of great powers, possessed of sound judgement. He settled, while he was on the highest horizon. Then he drew nearer and nearer until he was within two bows' length or even nearer, where He revealed to His servant whatever He revealed. The heart did not deny what it saw. Will you then dispute with him about what he saw?

sent throughout the earth to bring God's blessings to all those who are in prayer and to convey their requests to God [Q. 97:1-5].¹⁰

For a further twenty-two years, the Qur'an continued to come down to Muhammad in a series of revelations, with occasional intervals. These revelations came from God who has the capacity to communicate through the *Kalam Allah*; the speech or word of God from whom it can't be separated. It exists beyond time with God and not here on earth. By tradition, the *Kalam Allah* is contained on the Preserved Tablet, *al-Lawh al-Mahfuz* in Heaven [Q. 43:2-4, 85:21-22].¹¹ From here it has been sent down to Prophets in various languages throughout human history. The Qur'an is the earthly deposit of the Speech of God in Arabic.

The same process of revelation was used for all the earlier Books. So the Qur'an says that revelation was sent down, for example, to Moses, to Jesus and to Muhammad. The Angel Jibril was the agent in those earlier revelations too [Q. 2:97].¹²

The earlier Books and their Messengers

The guidance sent in all the Books was essentially the same although there were differences in specific application. We don't know how many Books were sent throughout human history or how many Messengers there were.

{The following text appears on screen only. Given here for the sake of the references.

The Qur'an mentions by name:

Abraham, who was sent with a Book referred to as *Suhuf* (sheaves or leaves)

Moses, who was sent with the *Taurat* [Q. 6:91]¹³

David, who received the *Zabur* [Q. 17:55]¹⁴

¹⁰ Q. 97:1-5 Indeed We sent it [the Qur'an] down on the Night of Destiny [Power]. What would make you understand what is the Night of Destiny? The Night of Destiny is better than a thousand months. In it the angels and the Spirit descend, with the permission of their Lord, with every command. It is peace until the rising of the dawn.

¹¹ Q. 43:2-4 By the Manifest Book: We have made it an Arabic Qur'an so that you may reason, and indeed it is with us in the Mother Book [and it is] surely sublime and wise.

Q. 85:21-22 Rather it is a glorious Qur'an, in a preserved tablet.

¹² Q. 2:97 Say: Whoever is an enemy of Gabriel [should know for certain that] he brought down the [revelation] upon your heart by God's permission, a confirmation of what preceded it, and guidance and glad tidings for the believers.

¹³ Q. 6:91 They [the Jews] did not appreciate God with the appreciation due to him when they said, "God has not sent down anything to any human." Say, "Who had sent down the Book that Moses brought as a light and guidance for the people, which you make into parchments that you display, while you conceal much of it, and [by means of which] you were taught what you did not know, [neither] you nor your fathers?" Say, "God [sent it down]"; then leave them to plunge deeper into their game.

Jesus, to whom was sent the *Injil* [Q. 5:46]¹⁵
And Muhammad to whom was revealed the Qur'an.}

Each of these originally was a complete guide to living a God-conscious life. Our problem is that we can't be sure that what we have in the Hebrew Bible or Gospels today is exactly the same as the original revelations. This is why the Qur'an was needed as the final and definitive text. It corrects earlier error and gives clear guidance on matters that have become unclear [Q. 2: 77-79].¹⁶

Recording the Qur'an

Muhammad recited the Qur'an to his immediate group of companions, some of whom memorised it. We might find this difficult to accept but that's because in our own times we place so little reliance on memory. In the past (and even today in less technically advanced societies) the power of memory was strong. People could remember huge amounts of material and recall it word for word.

In Muhammad's time, poets and storytellers would memorise hundreds of stories and long poems and then travel from one place to another reciting them for the entertainment and education of their listeners. These were the kind of men and women who memorised the Qur'an as Muhammad recited it. Muhammad checked them and they cross-checked one another. On several occasions the Angel Jibril came to Muhammad to hear him recite the verses of the Qur'an revealed so far. Thus, a reliable record of the Qur'an was established in the hearts of the memorisers.

Those amongst the early Muslims who could write began to build up their own collections of written verses. The Prophet organised this by nominating certain scribes to copy down revelations as they were sent down. Amongst these were Ali and Zayd ibn Thabit. They wrote on pieces of parchment, leaves, stone tablets, and any other materials that were available.

By the time the revelation of the Qur'an came to an end with the death of the Prophet in 632, there were two records: one that the memorisers had learnt by heart and one

¹⁴ Q. 17:55 Your Lord knows best whoever is in the heavens and the earth. Certainly We show some Prophets more favour than others, and we gave David the *Zabur* [Psalms].

¹⁵ Q. 5:46 And in their [the earlier Prophets] footsteps we sent Jesus son of Mary, to confirm that which was before him of the *Taurat* [Torah], and we gave him the *Injil* [Gospel] in which there is guidance and light, confirming what was before it in the *Taurat*, and as guidance and advice for the God-conscious.

¹⁶ Q. 2: 77-79 Do they not know that God knows what they conceal and what they make public? And there are among them illiterates, who do not know the Book, but [see in it their own] desires, and they do nothing but guess. Then woe to those who write the Book with their own hands, and then say, "This is from God," in order to make a small profit by means of it! Woe to them for what their hands have written and for the gain they make from it.

written down. A few of the scribes had complete copies of the Qur'an but most people had only collections of verses.

The Qur'an itself teaches that the earlier scriptures had been partially lost or distorted. To avoid this, there was a desire that it should be written down in book form to preserve it intact. This need was reinforced when eighty of the memorisers were killed in the Battle of Yamama shortly after the Prophet's death. Caliph Abu Bakr (r. 632-634) ordered that Zayd should make a complete copy in book form. As he did so, he cross-checked the written record with the one in the hearts of the memorisers to produce an accurate text. This "official copy" was put into the safekeeping of Hafsa (d. 667), one of the Prophet's wives and the daughter of the second Caliph, Umar (r. 634-644).

The third Caliph, Uthman (r. 644-656), was concerned that there were fragments of badly written Qur'anic verses in circulation. This was also a time of expansion of Muslim rule. There was the need for a "master copy" to be written, copied and circulated to various parts of the Muslim territories. This was drawn up in 647 from the copy kept by Hafsa and checked against the memorisers. Zayd was again involved in this and Ali approved the action, so there was unity amongst all parties of early Muslims. Once it was complete, Uthman ordered that all the earlier written records of the Qur'an be destroyed to avoid confusion. All except the copy in Hafsa's care, which was returned to her.

This "master copy" of the Qur'an was copied and sent to the five principal Muslim cities of that time. With each copy was sent a trained *qari* or reciter to show people how to pronounce it as the script was written without vowels. There developed a diversity of reading styles of the Qur'an, which can lead to a variation in the meaning of some words. The earliest manuscripts we now have probably date from the 8th century, and are now in museums in Tashkent, Sanaa, Mashhad and Istanbul.

God says that he will preserve the Qur'an intact for all time [Q. 15:9]¹⁷ and Muslims see this as a miracle.

The primary record of the Qur'an is that which is in the hearts of people who memorise it. Hence great importance is attached to clarity and precision in memorising and recitation.

The linguistic style of the Qur'an is partly poetic but truly unique [Q. 2:23-24].¹⁸ It is unlike any other form of literature in the Arabic language. Every piece of Arabic literature, before and after the Qur'an, is regarded as second-rate.

¹⁷ Q. 15:9 Indeed We have sent down the Reminder [the Qur'an], and indeed We will preserve it.

¹⁸ Q. 2:23-24 And if you are in doubt as to what We have sent down to our servant, then produce a Sura like one of these; and call your witnesses other than God, if you are truthful.

The Qur'an, as the Revealed Word of God, actually exists only in the Arabic language. So scholarly discussion must be based on the Arabic text alone. The Arabic in which it is written has become the standard classical language which is still understood throughout the Arabic-speaking world, in spite of the many different forms of spoken Arabic which have evolved through the centuries.

As with any major language, Arabic contains many shades of meaning which resist translation. To translate it is to interpret it – just as it is with any translation of a great work of literature.

Interpretation

The Qur'an was revealed over a period of twenty-two years, and the revelations appeared within a particular social and historical context. To know these is of great importance in interpreting the Qur'an. And so they have been recorded in the early works of scholarship.

The first and best interpreter of the Qur'an was the Prophet Muhammad himself. This means that careful attention is paid to the ways in which he put Qur'anic principles into practice in his life, teaching and judgements. These incidents have been recorded in the biographies of Muhammad and the Companions, and the great collections of Hadith, which contain what Muhammad said, did and the things of which he approved.

For Shi'a Muslims, the Imams were also infallible interpreters of the Qur'an and were able to give guidance under divine inspiration. This means that the body of interpretation built up by them, especially the sixth Imam, Ja'far al-Sadiq, is of great importance. Different schools of Muslims read the Qur'an with different emphases. Some look for the outer explicit meaning and others have traditionally seen hidden meaning in the text.

The Qur'an rarely says all it has to say on a topic in just one place. There's a danger in taking one verse in isolation. To understand the teaching of the Qur'an one needs to take every reference on a particular topic and interpret it within its own context and in relation to the whole. Then we need to draw out from this the 'golden message' of the Qur'an. This golden message needs to be applied in every new society as it engages with Islam. In order to achieve this, scholars need to study the new context to make sure that we achieve an outcome in accordance with the guidance of God.

Pious use of the Qur'an

But if you do not, and most certainly you will not do so, then fear the Fire whose fuel is men and stones, which is prepared for those who reject faith.

The Qur'an is not just 'a book'; it is the Word of God. Therefore respect is to be shown to the Qur'an in any format, especially to any printed or written verses [Q. 7:204].¹⁹ When the Qur'an is being read or recited, great respect is shown. Many Muslims follow the tradition of covering their heads whenever the Qur'an is spoken aloud or when the text is being studied.

Before a Muslim will handle a copy of the Qur'an, he or she will make the ritual washing or *wudu*. As it is intended for all humankind, non-Muslims are permitted to read and handle it. They are not required to do the ritual washing before doing so, but should treat it with great respect.

It should never be laid on the floor or any other unclean place. In a pile of books, it should always be on the top. Old and worn out copies of the Qur'an must be disposed of with respect, normally through burial. This also applies to any piece of paper or anything else on which a verse of the Qur'an in Arabic has been written, for example by putting such pieces of paper through a shredder.

In many Muslim houses, a copy of the Qur'an will often be wrapped in a special cloth or kept in a worthy box and then placed on a high shelf in a principal room.

Every Muslim learns some verses of the Qur'an by heart. But in every generation and society, some will make the effort to memorise the whole Qur'an under the guidance of a teacher. Someone who has completed this memorisation will be shown respect with the title *hafiz*, or *hafizah* for a woman, as they 'carry the Qur'an in their heart.'

To aid the process of recitation, the Qur'an has been divided into thirty parts called *juz*. During Ramadan, Muslims recite one *juz* each night so that the whole Qur'an is recited in the course of the month. Sunnis do this in a special congregational prayer called *tarawih*, whilst the Shi'a do their recitation in private or in groups with accompanying prayers.

In Arabic-speaking societies, the relationship to the words of the Qur'an is more immediate for the ordinary believer. Most educated people would be able to understand almost every word as it is read or recited. Only about fifteen percent of Muslims worldwide are native Arabic-speakers. Those who do not understand Arabic learn the Qur'an phonetically. This reminds us that the Word does not just speak to the intellect but also to the heart. By memorising and reciting the Qur'an, Muslims develop a relationship with God that goes beyond linguistic understanding and takes them into a spiritual communion with God.

Most schools of Islam do not allow figurative drawing or painting, and some don't permit photographs of animate objects. The art of calligraphy has been highly developed by Muslim artists; in this way the words of the Qur'an can be dignified in

¹⁹ Q. 7:204 When the Qur'an is recited, listen to it and be silent, maybe you will receive [God's] mercy.

their actual writing. There are several different scripts used in such calligraphy. Calligraphy is often used in mosque decoration and on ceramic tiles, which beautify the homes and public places of Muslims.