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The Qur'an as Experienced by Muslims

Motivated by the desire to understand Islam, our fictional hero acquired a translation of the Qur'an. The edition which he purchased was a Penguin Classic, one of a series of small black paperbacks which include well-known works of Greek, Latin, Russian and French literature translated into modern English – works such as Plato's *Republic*, Juvenal's *Satires*, Tolstoy's *Anna Karenin* and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, to name just a few which I can see sitting on my own shelves. Yet for orthodox Muslims, the Qur'an is not a literary work. Nor, strictly speaking, can it be translated. It is God's final Word to humankind, vouchsafed to the Prophet Muhammad in pure Arabic. Since the Prophet was illiterate, the revelations were heard, memorized and recited before they were written down and assembled into a book. For these reasons, Muslims do not experience the Qur'an solely, or even primarily, as written Scripture. Listening, and learning to recite from memory, precede the effort to understand – and this notwithstanding the place which the Qur'an enjoys as *the Book*.

1.1 *Listening to the Qur'an*

The aural-oral nature of the revelation is apparent from the frequent occurrence of the singular imperative *qul*, 'Say!', which is found more than three hundred times in the Qur'an. In most instances it is addressed to Muhammad and introduces various elements of the message which he was to relay to his audience. Moreover the Arabic word *qur'ān* is derived from the verb *qara'a*, which means 'to read', but also has the connotations of 'to recite' or 'to proclaim'. According to tradition, the first part of the Qur'an to be revealed was the beginning of Surah 96, the very first word of which is *igra* ('Read!' or 'Recite!'), the imperative of this same verb. The Prophet's young wife Ayesha relates how, after he had begun to experience visions in his sleep, he took to making spiritual retreats in a cave on Mount Hirā', on the outskirts of Mecca. One night towards the end of the month of Ramaḍān, when he was alone in the cave, the angel Gabriel appeared to him in the form of a man.

The angel came and found him and said, 'Read!' – 'I can't read,' he answered. 'The angel immediately grabbed me,' related the Prophet, 'and squeezed me until I lost all my strength, and repeated the word "Read" – "I can't read," I answered again. For the third time the angel grabbed me and squeezed me until he had taken away all my strength. Then he released me saying,

Read in the name of thy Lord who created.
He created man from a blood clot.
Read; and thy Lord is the most generous,
He who has taught with the pen
Taught man what he did not know.¹

Much is lost in my English rendering of the initial revelation, as I hope to show by comparing it with the Arabic which is given here in transliteration:

iqra' bismi rabbi-ka 'l-ladhī khalaq
khalaqa 'l-insāna min 'alaq
iqra' wa-rabbu-ka 'l-akram
al-ladhī 'allama bi-'l-qalam
'allama 'l-insāna mā lam ya'lam

First, it is immediately obvious that the original is characterized by rhyme. In fact the whole of the Qur'an is in rhymed or assonanced prose, and rhyme and assonance² are the basis for the subdivision of the surahs into āyahs. Second, although these five āyahs are of unequal length, there is a marked rhythm. Short of listening to a recitation, the easiest way to appreciate this is by counting the number of isochronic units.³ If each short vowel is counted as one unit (1 s. = 1 i.u.), and if each long vowel – indicated in my transliteration by a bar above the letter (macron) – is counted as two (1 l. = 2 i.u.), we arrive at the following equations:

$$10 \text{ s.} + 1 \text{ l.} = 12 \text{ i.u.}$$

$$8 \text{ s.} + 1 \text{ l.} = 10 \text{ i.u.}$$

$$8 \text{ s.} + 0 \text{ l.} = 8 \text{ i.u.}$$

$$8 \text{ s.} + 1 \text{ l.} = 10 \text{ i.u.}$$

$$8 \text{ s.} + 2 \text{ l.} = 12 \text{ i.u.}$$

There is thus a rhythmic symmetry, with the fifth āyah counterbalancing the first, and the fourth counterbalancing the second.

In addition to the rhyme and rhythm, which are largely lost in the translation, one should also note the very different range and distribution of consonants. In the translation, with the exception of *h* and *c*, all of the

consonants are formed in the middle or front of the mouth. The Arabic, on the other hand, has a high frequency of consonants which originate in the back of the mouth or the throat. These include: *k* (*kāf*), which is more or less the same as the English *k*; *kh* (*khā'*), which is the guttural *ch* as in Scottish 'loch'; *q* (*qāf*), which is like the English *k*, but pronounced as far back in the throat as possible;⁴ the glottal stop ' (*hamza*), which occurs in standard English at the beginning of words such as 'awful' and 'absolutely' when they are given particular emphasis; and ' (*ain*), a very strong guttural produced by compressing the throat and forcing up the larynx so that there is a feeling suggestive of slight retching.

Now let me make some simple observations about the distribution of the consonants. In the first two āyahs the rhyme words *khalaq* (created) and 'alaq' (clot) are almost identical. The only difference between them is the initial consonant, which is in both cases a guttural. In Arabic, the relationship between the creation and the clot is thus underscored by the similarity of the two words.⁶ Turning now to the fourth and fifth āyahs, note the similarity of the rhyme words *qalam* (pen) and *ya'lam* (know), both to each other and to the verb 'allama (he taught), a similarity which establishes a strong association between them. Note further that whereas the final three consonants in both āyahs one and two (*kh-l-q* and 'l-q) originate in the back, middle and back of the mouth respectively, those in āyahs four and five (*q-l-m* and 'l-m) originate in the back, middle and front. The fact that it is only the point of origin of the third consonant which differs radically, serves to highlight the contrast between the deep-throat *q*, which ends āyahs one and two, and the labial *m*, formed in the very front of the mouth, which ends āyah four and occurs no less than four times in āyah five. This shift from a preponderance of sounds originating in the throat to a preponderance of sounds issuing from the lips is highly appropriate in an oracle which encapsulates the onset of verbal revelation.

During Ramaḍān, Muslims flock to the mosque for the night prayers which are followed by extensive Qur'anic recitations. In the course of the month, they hear not just the first revelation but all 114 surahs in their canonical order, a thirtieth or more of the Qur'an being recited each night. It is beyond the scope of the present work to give a systematic account of the auditory qualities of the whole corpus. A few remarks must suffice. The first surah comprises seven brief āyahs, the first and third ending with the divine name *ar-Rahīm*, 'the All-merciful', and the remainder having a final assonance in *-īn*.

bismillāhi 'r-rahmāni 'r-rahīm

al-ḥamdu li 'llāhi rabbi 'l-'ālamīn (1.1f.).

Then comes Surah 2 with 286 āyahs and Surah 3 with 200. Together they constitute an eighth of the Qur'an. The most common assonances in both these surahs are *-ūn* and *-īn*, which are considered interchangeable.⁷ 75% of the āyahs in Surah 2 end in this way. For Surah 3 the figure is 60%. Most of the other āyahs end in words of the form *fa'il*⁸ – *'alīm*, 'all-knowing'; *ḥakīm*, 'All-wise'; *qadīr*, 'All-powerful'; and so forth – or with words ending in a long vowel followed by a consonant:

inna 'l-ladhīna kafarū sawā'an 'alay-him a-andharta-hum am lam tun-dhir-hum / lā yu'minūn.

khatama 'llāhu 'alā qulūbi-him wa-'alā sam'i-him / wa-'alā abṣāri-him ghishāwah / wa-lahum 'adhābun 'aẓīm (2.6f.).

The āyahs in Surah 2 range in length from 1 to 15 lines of the Arabic text, and are on average 2.44 lines long. None of the āyahs in Surah 3 is longer than 4 lines, and the average length is 2.04. The combined effect of the increase in the frequency of āyahs with non-standard assonances, and the decrease in the average length of the āyahs, is to produce a slight acceleration in what is still a fairly leisurely tempo.

After an interlude marked by Surah 4 (in which most of the āyahs end in words of the form *fa'ilā*⁹), Surah 5 reverts to the typical pattern encountered in Surahs 2 and 3. This pattern predominates until the end of Surah 66, with further interludes marked by Surahs 13, 17–20, 25, 33, 47–48, 50, 53–55 and 65. Surah 13 has assonance in *-ā* plus a consonant. Surah 17 is the first to exhibit true rhyme, with most of the āyahs ending in either *-ilā* or *-irā*. Surah 18 has assonance in *-ā*. Surah 19.2–74 has assonance in *-iyyā*, whereas 19.75–98 rhymes in *-dā* and *-zā*. Surah 20 has assonances in *-ā* and *-ī*. Surah 25 resembles Surah 17. Surah 47 is unique in having assonances in *-hum* and *-kum*.¹⁰ Surah 48 resembles Surah 4. Surah 50 has assonances of the form *fa'il* and *fa'ul*, the majority rhyming in *-d*. Surah 53 has assonance in *-ā*. Surah 54 rhymes in *-ar*, *-ir*, and *-ur*. Surah 55 is unique in having assonance in *-ān*.¹¹ Finally Surah 65.1–10 rhymes in *-rā*. The impression is therefore one of a progressive increase in the variety of assonance and rhyme.

From Surah 67 onwards – that is, in approximately the last seventeenth of the Qur'an – the state of affairs which we have observed so far is reversed. In other words the non-typical assonances and rhymes predominate, with brief interludes now marked by what I previously called

the typical pattern.¹² The surahs soon become much shorter, as do the āyahs of which they are composed. There is an increase in the number of rhymes formed with a short -a followed by a consonant (including -at, -ad, -ak, and -aq) which were not encountered earlier. Occasionally there is also alliteration – for instance 91.14b *fa-damdama 'alay-him rabbu-hum bi-dhambi-him fa-sawwā-hā* ('So their Lord crushed them for their sin and inflicted equal punishment on them')¹³ – and even onomatopoeia, as in the description of Satan as *al-maswasi 'l-khanāsi 'l-ladhī yumaswisu fī šudūri 'n-nās*¹⁴ ('the slinking whisperer who whispers in the breasts of man', 114.5). The effect created by these phenomena is a heightened sense of excitement and urgency as the Qur'an draws rapidly to a close. Because of this, it is the practice in some mosques to complete the recitation of the Qur'an on the twenty-seventh night of Ramaḍān, the date which is often identified as *Laylat al-Qadar*, 'the Night of Power' on which the first revelation occurred.¹⁵ Thus some of the most awe-inspiring surahs, including the first revelation, are recited on this most awe-inspiring of nights.

The nightly sessions in Ramaḍān are not the only occasions on which Muslims meet to listen to the Qur'an. In many mosques there are extensive recitations every week either before or after the Friday congregational prayers, and in some there are special reunions at other times to listen to a series of skilled reciters. In addition, wealthy patrons may invite their friends to their homes for the same purpose. Thus although listening to the Qur'an is first and foremost an act of devotion, to the connoisseur it is also to some extent a form of entertainment. It is therefore appropriate in this context to say something about the art of recitation. It should be evident, from my discussion of the gutturals in Surah 96.1–5, that the differences in the sounds represented by Arabic consonants is sometimes extremely subtle. The English reader may be comforted to learn that some of these subtleties pose problems even for native speakers of Arabic. For instance, in Lower Egypt and the towns of the Levant, *qāf* (q) is normally pronounced like *hamza* (ʾ), and in many regions *hamza* is not pronounced except at the beginning of a word. Similar problems arise with the voiced dentals *dhāl* (dh), *ḍād* (ḍ), and *zāʾ* (z), which natives of Iraq and the Arabian Peninsula pronounce almost identically.¹⁶ Thus in order to recite the Qur'an correctly it is necessary to expend considerable time and effort acquiring the correct pronunciation. The Prophet is reported to have said, 'Adorn the Qur'an with recitation, and ornament it with your best voices.'¹⁷ For this reason the art of recitation is known as *tajwīd* – literally 'making good' – and involves a number of refinements

not found in normal speech: the addition of a half vowel after *q*, *d*, *t* and *i* to make them resonate when they close a syllable,¹⁸ the artificial lengthening of some vowels, the nasalization of some consonants and the assimilation of others.¹⁹ There are three standard modes of recitation: *ḥadr*, the rapid mode which corresponds to normal talking speed; *tartīl*, which is slow; and *tadwīr*, which is at a medium pace. Finally, although it is forbidden to set the Qur'an to a preconceived melody – for this would involve making the Word of God subordinate to the dictates of music – a recitation is nonetheless a musical performance, the reciter improvising in such a way as to highlight the innate musical qualities of the revelation.²⁰

1.2 Having the Qur'an by heart

For a devout Muslim, the rhythm of routine existence is determined by *ṣalāt*, the ritual prayer, of which Qur'anic recitation is an integral part. *Ṣalāt* is performed five times a day, beginning with the dawn prayer before sunrise and concluding with the night prayer, which is usually completed before midnight. The basic unit of prayer is called a *rak'ah* (literally a 'bending'). It consists of a sequence of movements accompanied by Qur'anic recitations and the repetition of various set formulae in Arabic. On a normal day, a Muslim who observes all five prayer times will perform a total of seventeen compulsory *rak'ahs* and up to thirty-one additional ones. In the course of each *rak'ah*, he stands upright, bends from the waist, stands upright again, prostrates himself, sits upright, prostrates himself a second time, and returns to the sitting position.²¹ In the initial standing position he recites the *fātiḥah*, the opening surah of the Qur'an:

In the name of Allah the Most-merciful the All-merciful
 Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Worlds
 the Most-merciful the All-merciful
 the Master of the Day of Recompense.
 Thee only do we worship; Thee only do we ask for help.
 Guide us in the straight path,
 the path of those on whom Thou hast bestowed Thy favour
 not of those with whom Thou art angry and who have gone astray.

An additional passage, comprising a minimum of three āyahs, should be recited immediately after the *fātiḥah* in the first two compulsory *rak'ahs* and in each of the additional *rak'ahs*. The passages selected may be from

anywhere in the Qur'an, provided that the canonical sequence is respected.²²

The set formulae which accompany the prayer postures all have a Qur'anic ring about them. For instance although the exclamation *Allāhu aKBaR* 'Allah is greater!', which is uttered at the beginning of the prayers and at the transition from one posture to the next, does not occur in the Qur'an in this precise form, it is reminiscent of the Qur'anic assertions that 'acceptance from Allah is greater' (9.72), 'remembrance of Allah is greater' (29.45) and 'Allah's hatred is greater' (40.10), and the injunction to magnify Allah greatly (*KaBbiRa-hu taKBiRā*, 17.111). The formula 'Glory be to my Lord the Tremendous', which the worshipper repeats under his breath at least three times in the bending position, is based on a Qur'anic injunction (56.74, 96; 69.52), as is the slightly different formula, 'Glory be to my Lord the Most High', which he repeats in each prostration (87.1; cf. 92.20; 79.24). The words spoken in the sitting position of some of the *rak'ahs* are likewise rooted in the Qur'an. They include the testimony that 'there is no deity but Allah' (37.35; 47.19, etc.) and that 'Muhammad is His servant and His messenger' (cf. 53.10; 48.29), and the calling down of blessings upon him (cf. 33.56). In the final sitting of the last *rak'ah*, with his hands held palms upward in supplication, the worshipper petitions Allah. Here he is free to express himself in his own words, although it is preferable to choose one of several set forms. One which is very frequently employed is a prayer which the Qur'an attributes to Abraham:

O Lord! make me and my offspring steadfast in prayer. O our Lord! accept my supplication. O our Lord! forgive me and my parents and the believers on the day when the reckoning shall come to pass! (14.40f.)

For *ṣalāt* to be valid, the Qur'an must be recited from memory in Arabic. It is possible to fulfil one's obligations by knowing only the *fātiḥah* and a few other passages. A selection of short surahs from the end of the Qur'an are usually learnt for this purpose. However, many Muslims endeavour to memorize much more than this. It is a widespread practice for children, some as young as seven years of age, to attend a Qur'an class after school each day. There, squatting on the floor, their books resting on low wooden benches, they work at their own pace, reading or reciting aloud, each awaiting his turn to go up and be tested by the instructor. The first stage is to learn to pronounce each of the twenty-nine consonants of the Arabic alphabet in conjunction with the three short vowels and the

three long vowels: *ba, bi, bu, bā, bī, bū; ta, ti, tu, tā, tī, tū*, and so on. The next step is to learn to read whole words. After this the student works his way through the Qur'an. Only when he has read it from beginning to end and mastered the pronunciation does he attempt to commit passages to memory. At the end of three years some will have learned only a few short surahs, but others will know the whole Qur'an by heart and will have earned the coveted title of *ḥāfiẓ*. It is perhaps not surprising that some of the great figures from the past, such as the Persian philosopher Ibn Sina (Avicenna), achieved this goal at an early age.²³ Similar feats of memory are, however, performed today by school-children living in the deprived inner-city areas of Britain.

To learn the Qur'an by heart is one thing; to retain it is quite another. For as the Prophet warned, 'it can slip away from you more easily than camels can escape the cords with which they are hobbled'.²⁴ The celebrated Egyptian writer Taha Hussein, who finished learning the Qur'an when he was barely nine, recounts how his father humiliated him by asking him to recite the Surah of the Poets a few months later:

All that he could remember of 'The Surah of the Poets' was that it was one of three which began with *Ṭā Sīn Mīm*, so he began to repeat *Ṭā Sīn Mīm* over and over again, without being able to arrive at what came after it. His father prompted him by telling him some of the words which followed, but in spite of that he could not proceed at all. So his father said, 'Recite the Surah of the Ant, then.' Now he remembered that this Surah, like that of the Poets, began with *Ṭā Sīn Mīm* and he began to repeat this phrase. Again his father helped him, but he could not make any progress ... So his father said, 'Recite the Surah of the Stories, then.' He remembered that this was the third which began with *Ṭā Sīn Mīm*, and he began to repeat it again, but this time his father did not prompt him at all. Instead he said quietly, 'Go! I thought that you had learnt the Qur'an?'²⁵

The following day, his teacher rebuked him and began to instruct him all over again like a beginner. With application, however, he soon relearned all that he had forgotten, and passed a stringent test put to him by his father. But that was not the end of the matter. After an unspecified period of time, he was examined again, but without warning. One afternoon, when the lad absent-mindedly returned from the mosque without his shoes, his father asked him to recite the Surah of Sheba.

Now our friend had forgotten the Surah of Sheba with all the other

Surahs, nor did God help him at all. The sheikh said, 'Well, recite the Surah of the Creator.' Still God did not help him to speak. So the sheikh said gently and mockingly, 'You averred that you still knew the Qur'an properly. All right, recite Surah Yā Sin.' God helped him to recite the first verses of this Surah, but after that he became tongue-tied, and the saliva in his mouth dried up. A terrible quivering took hold of him followed by cold sweat pouring down his face.

Then the sheikh said quietly, 'Get up! Try not to forget your shoes every day. As far as I can see you have lost them just as you have lost your knowledge of the Qur'an.'²⁶

After that he was taught the Qur'an privately by a tutor who came to his home.

Despite Taha Hussein's unhappy experience, it is possible, by discipline and determination, to keep the Qur'an fresh in one's memory. This is best done by reading it through once a week or, failing that, once a month. To facilitate this practice, some editions have medallions in the margins to divide the text into seven parts of approximately equal length, and most have medallions to indicate the division into thirtieths. I have had the opportunity of testing two young Muslims who were reputed to know the whole Qur'an by heart and was unable to fault either of them. They were both British Asians born in Pakistan but residing in England. The first was an eighteen-year-old apprentice electrician whom I tested informally in my study in Bradford. The second was a fourteen-year-old schoolboy whom I tested while he was being filmed in a Leeds mosque. When I read an āyah picked at random, both were able to recite the following ten āyahs. I repeated this process with half a dozen passages from different parts of the Qur'an, and never met with the slightest hesitation.

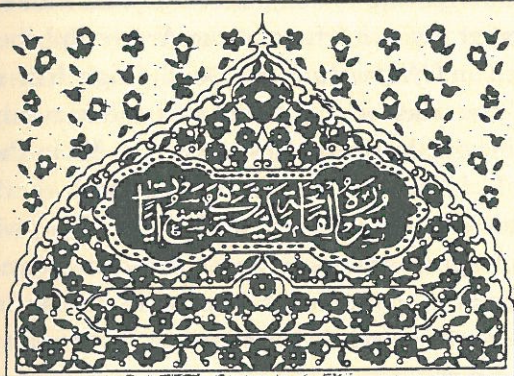
1.3 The Qur'an in everyday life

Comparatively few have the determination to learn the whole Qur'an by heart. Even fewer have the talent or the opportunity to perfect their recitation so as to reproduce 'that inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy'.²⁷ Many get no further than memorizing half a dozen short surahs well enough to recite them falteringly in their prayers. How does the Qur'an impinge on the everyday lives of ordinary Muslims like them? Modern technology has greatly increased the opportunities for hearing high-quality recitation throughout the year.

Recitation was first heard on the radio in 1934²⁸ and is now a regular feature of broadcasting throughout the Muslim world. Moreover, complete recordings of the Qur'an by famous reciters such as the Egyptian Mahmud Khalil al-Husari and the Pakistani Ghulam Rasul are readily available on cassettes. Before the advent of the radio and the cassette recorder, however, the Qur'an had already left an indelible impression on the Arabic language, and Qur'anic expressions had passed untranslated into the everyday speech of non-Arab Muslims, who outnumber Arabs by about seven to one. For instance, the Muslim greeting *as-salām 'alaykum*, which is Arabic for 'Peace be upon you', may be heard throughout the world over. In the Qur'an the Prophet is urged to use this formula when greeting believers (6.54), and it is said that the angels will address them in the same words when they enter Paradise (13.24; 16.32). Equally ubiquitous is the expression *in shā' Allāh* ('if Allah wills') which pious Muslims utter every time they declare their intention of doing anything. According to the Qur'an it was spoken by Abraham's son (37.102), Joseph (12.99), Moses (18.69), his future father-in-law (28.27), and the Israelites during the period in the wilderness (2.70). It also occurs in promises, and statements about God's future actions, which are addressed to Muhammad's contemporaries (6.41; 9.28; 33.24; 48.27). The exclamation *mā shā' Allāh* (literally 'what Allah willed!'), which is used to express surprise or congratulations, is likewise Qur'anic (6.128; 7.188; 10.49; 18.39; 87.7). So too is *al-ḥamdu li-'llāh* ('Praise be to Allah', 1.2, etc.), which may be heard in a variety of contexts.

Of all the Qur'anic expressions heard on the lips of Muslims, the most common is the *bismillah*: *bismillāhi 'r-raḥmāni 'r-raḥīm* ('In the name of Allah the Most-merciful the All-merciful'). In addition to being the first āyah of the *fātiḥah* (1.1), it occurs at the head of all the other surahs except one, and it is said to have been employed by Solomon in a letter to the Queen of Sheba (27.30). It is used as a grace before eating or drinking, and is often uttered on entering a room, opening a book or undertaking almost any activity. The one notable exception is the slaughter of animals, when the shorter phrase 'In the name of Allah' is employed. Because of this, and because the *bismillah* is not found at the head of Surah 9, in which the Muslims are called to fight against the Meccan idolaters, Muslim piety sees in its frequent repetition a reminder that man was not created for killing and torment, but rather for mercy and good recompense.²⁹

The *fātiḥah* in its entirety is also used very widely outside the set prayers, and no formal occasion would be complete without it. The Prophet is reputed to have said that anyone who recites it will gain as



بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ ①

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ ② الرَّحْمَنِ

الرَّحِيمِ ③ مُلِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّينِ ④ إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ

وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ ⑤ اهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ

الْمُسْتَقِيمَ ⑥ صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ ⑦

غَيْرِ الْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا الضَّالِّينَ ⑧

much merit as if he had recited two thirds of the Qur'an.³⁰ There are in fact many sayings attributed to the Prophet about the virtues of reciting various surahs or parts of surahs. In practice, after the *fātiḥah*, pride of place goes to the last two āyahs of Surah 2 (which are used as a prayer for forgiveness before retiring to bed), Surah 36, and Surah 112. Surah 36, called Yā Sīn after the two letters of the Arabic alphabet with which it begins, is recited on *laylat nisf ash-sha'bān*, the night half-way through the month of Sha'bān when it is believed that the heavenly tree of life is shaken, shedding the leaves of those who will die in the course of the coming year. It is also recited at funerals and to the dying. The Scandinavian traveller Knud Holmboe described how, when imprisoned in Libya on a charge of spying, he encountered six ragged Arabs 'whose faces shone with a sublime calm' as they listened in rapt attention to this surah, despite the fact that they were likely to be shot the next day.³¹ Surah 112, known as *sūrat al-ikhhlās* ('the Surah of Sincerity') because of its uncompromising affirmation of the absolute unity of God, may be repeated to gain blessings on one's own behalf or on behalf of others. In a rite known in Urdu as *isāl-i sawāb*, which is performed by many Muslims from the Indian subcontinent, the *fātiḥah* is recited once and Surah 112 three times in the hope that the merits accruing from the recitation will be attributed to a person who has recently departed.³²

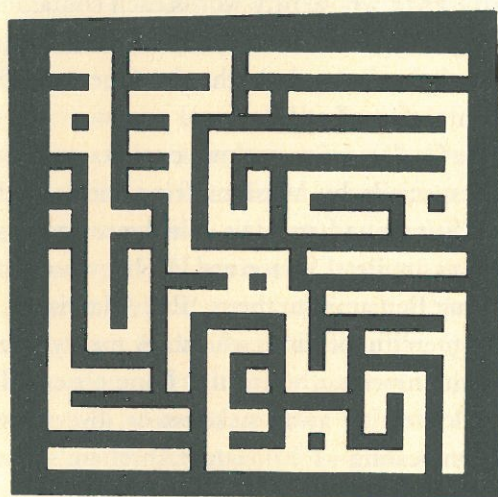
I have stressed the aural-oral aspects of the Muslim experience of the Qur'an in order to correct the common assumption that it is simply a book. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that the first revelation celebrates the generosity of Muhammad's Lord who taught man *with the pen*, and we shall see in subsequent chapters that Muhammad probably envisaged the production of a written edition of the Qur'an, although the task was probably not completed in his lifetime. Be that as it may, the written Word now plays an important part in Islam. Because of the prohibition of the visual representation of animate forms, Muslim artists have long found an outlet for their creative energy in calligraphy. Throughout the Islamic world, mosques and public buildings are adorned with quotations from the Qur'an, whether carved in wood, stone or stucco, engraved on metal, painted on tiles, or composed of glazed bricks. In shops, offices and private houses one may see calligraphic panels written with brush or reed pen, created by marquetry, or mass-produced in moulded metal or plastic. A dozen or more styles of writing are commonly encountered. They range from the easy-to-read *muḥaqqaq* and *naskhī* scripts, through the structured *jālī thuluth* with its elegant tangle of superimposed words, to the maze-like patterns of squares and linked

rectangles of 'square Kufic'. The mosque inscriptions draw on a wealth of different passages from the Qur'an, with a general preference for āyahs which assert God's unity, extol His generosity, wisdom and power, and call on Muslims to be steadfast in prayer. Inscriptions on or in other public edifices often have āyahs which have a bearing on the purpose for which they were built. For instance, a school might have, 'Say, "Allah increase me in knowledge"' (20.114); a hospital, 'We reveal by means of the Qur'an what is a healing and a mercy to the believers' (17.82); and a parliament, 'whose rule is consultation among themselves' (42.38). On ships one sometimes reads Noah's words, 'Embark in it! In Allah's name shall be its course and its berthing' (11.41), and written over the entrance hall of Cairo's international airport are Joseph's words of greeting to his parents when he was at last reunited with them, 'Enter into Egypt, if Allah wills, in security' (12.99). Inside shops and houses, the selection is usually more restricted, with a handful of āyahs being found over and over again. These are the *fātiḥah*; 'There is no god but Allah' (37.35) together with 'Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah' (48.29); Surah 112; the 'throne verse' (2.255), whose fifty words each contain fifty blessings;³³ 'Allah grants sustenance to whom He wills without reckoning' (2.212); and Solomon's words on being brought the Queen of Sheba's throne, 'This is of the bounty of my Lord' (27.40).

Passages from the Qur'an are sometimes copied out and used for superstitious practices, especially by Muslims from the more backward rural areas. For instance Surahs 113 and 114, which are prayers for protection from evil, are worn as amulets. So too are Jacob's words to his sons when reluctantly entrusting Benjamin to them, 'But Allah is the best protector, and He is the most merciful of those who show mercy' (12.64). In Egypt, in the first half of the nineteenth century, Lane observed that 'the most approved mode of charming away sickness or disease' was for various āyahs which mention healing – for instance Abraham's words 'When I am sick He heals me' (26.80) – to be written on the inside of an earthenware pot. Water was then poured into the pot and stirred until the writing dissolved, and the potion was administered to the patient.³⁴ Similar practices are occasionally encountered today amongst Mirpuri Muslims in Britain, although the āyahs are now written on slips of paper in washable ink.³⁵

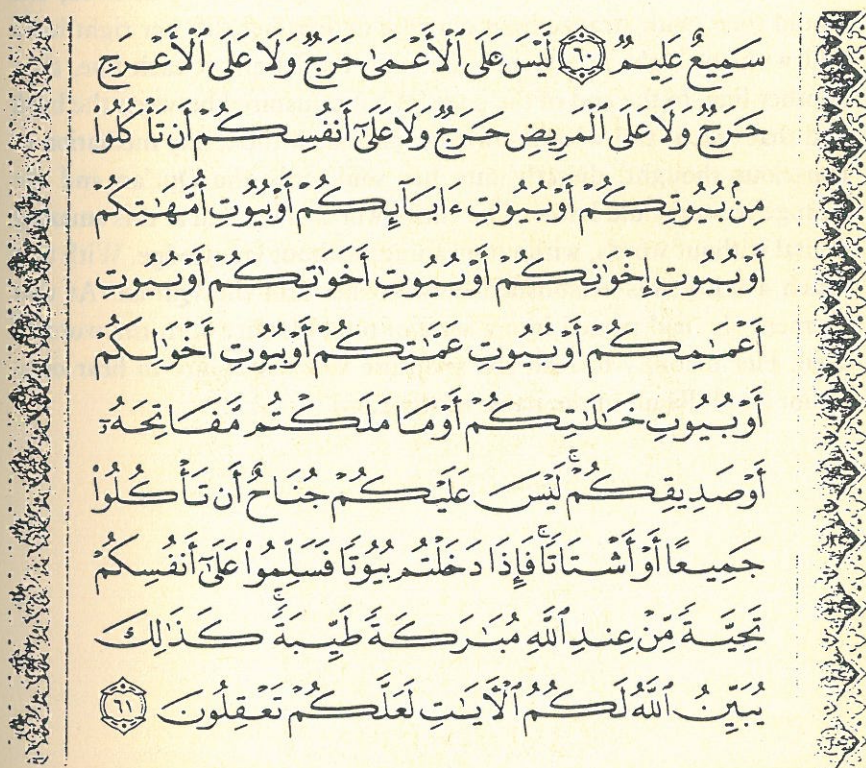
Written copies of the Qur'an are generally treated with immense respect. The statement that it is a book 'which none shall touch save those who are clean' (56.79) is often taken to mean that it should only be handled by those who have performed ablutions. It should never be placed on the floor and it is usually wrapped or kept in a box when not in

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ



Different styles of calligraphy

use.³⁶ Before reading from the Qur'an, as when reciting from memory, a Muslim says, 'I seek refuge with Allah from the accursed Satan' (cf. 16.98), and on completion of his reading he says, 'Allah the Mighty has spoken the truth'. The usual practice is to read out aloud. To help the reader, signs representing the vowels are printed above and below the consonants.³⁷ Moreover there are other signs indicating where it is permissible to pause, and drawing the reader's attention to some of the finer points of pronunciation such as the fact that *n* before *b* is pronounced *m*. Despite this profusion of diacritical marks, a page of the Qur'an often has an aesthetic appeal which cannot be reproduced in Roman script. For example 24.61 lists those in whose homes it is permissible to eat. In English it appears simply to be a list of relatives: 'your father ... your mother ... your brothers, etc.' In the Arabic text, however, there is often an impression of movement and life produced by the elongated bellies and slanted necks of the letter *kāf* (*k*) which appears again and again in the suffix *-kum*, meaning 'your'.



What I have said about the respect which ordinary Muslims show for the Qur'an, and about the dynamic appearance of the written text, is epitomized in this extract from a meditation by Hasan Askari. He was moved to write it when a young friend of his told him about his mother. The mother had never been taught how to read, yet before dawn she would rise and kindle a lamp, unfurl her prayer mat and remove her Qur'an from its green silk wrapping.

For a long time she would allow her eyes to rest on the two open pages before her. The letters in green ink from right to left, row beneath row, each shape mysteriously captivating, each dot above or below a letter an epitome of the entire scripture, each assembly of letters a group of dervishes raising their hands in zikr, each gap between two enigmatic shapes a leap from this world into the next, and each ending the advent of the day of Resurrection.

She would thus see a thousand images in the procession of that script and would move from vision to vision.

After spending much time in just looking at the open book, she would then, with strange light glowing on her face, lift her right hand and with the right finger start touching the letters of each line, then another line, to the end of the page. What transpired between the book and that touch, and what knowledge passed, without any mediation of conscious thought, directly into her soul, only the Qur'an and the strange reciter could know. The entire world stood still at this amazing recital without words, without meaning, without knowledge. With that touch a unity was established between her and the Qur'an. At that moment she had passed into a state of total identity with the word of God. Her inability to read the scripture was her ability to hear once again: Read! Read, in the name of thy Lord.³⁸

Part Two

Chronology

Anchoring the Revelations in Space and Time

2

2.1 Introduction

In Chapter 1, we saw that the 114 surahs are arranged approximately in decreasing order of length and that what is generally deemed to be the earliest of the revelations – the first part of Surah 96 – thus occurs near the end of the corpus. It was argued that, when viewed in the light of the time-honoured practice of reciting the whole Qur'an in the month of Ramadān, this arrangement makes liturgical sense. Nevertheless, although the surahs are not in chronological order, it is generally agreed that knowledge of the circumstances in which they were revealed has a bearing on their interpretation. In Chapter 4, we shall see that there is a wealth of traditional material which purports to furnish the relevant information. Most Muslims, however, do not derive their conviction that the Qur'an is firmly anchored in space and time from this technical literature, but from biographies of Muḥammad. This chapter will therefore be devoted to exploring the relationship between the Qur'an and the earliest extant biographies, on which all modern biographies of the Prophet are based. I shall begin with a discussion of the Prophet's miracles, in order to demonstrate why one should be cautious about reading the Qur'an in the light of biographical traditions. Then, I propose to comb the Qur'an itself for clues concerning the provenance and date of the revelations. Having done this, I shall outline the development of the biographical genre and explain why, in my view, it is not unreasonable to expect the extant biographies to yield reliable information about the dates of key events, particularly those which occurred during the last decade of the Prophet's life. Finally, I shall attempt, on the basis of these biographies, to construct a plausible chronological framework in which to view the revelations.

2.2 The miracles attributed to the Prophet

The Qur'an mentions several miracles, or 'signs' as it calls them, which previous prophets performed by Allah's permission. For instance, it narrates how Moses' staff turned into a serpent (7.107) and how Jesus created birds from clay, healed the blind and raised the dead (3.49). It seems to imply, however, that although Muhammad's contemporaries were clamouring for signs of this sort, none was forthcoming.

And those who disbelieve say, 'Why has a sign not been sent down to him from his Lord?' (13.7).

It is not for any prophet to bring a sign other than by Allah's permission (13.38).

They swear their strongest oaths by Allah that if a sign came to them they would surely believe in it. Say, 'Signs are with Allah, and what will make you [Muslims] perceive that if [a sign] came they would not believe?' (7.109).¹

The only miracle which was vouchsafed to him was the Qur'an itself, which the unbelievers are challenged to imitate (2.23, etc.), and which itself contained 'signs' or *ayahs* (24.1; 31.2; 41.3).²

Popular biographies of the Prophet, on the other hand, relate that Muhammad performed numerous miracles. They allege that he had his prayers for the onset or cessation of rain immediately answered; that he fed a large company with food hardly adequate for a single person; that he made the dry udders of goats distend with milk; that he produced water for his troops to drink or perform their ablutions; that he split the moon in two; and that he completed the 1600-mile journey to Jerusalem and back in the space of a single night.

The Qur'an does admittedly mention both the splitting of the moon and a mysterious night journey, but in neither case does it give sufficient detail to warrant the assumption that the occurrences were genuinely miraculous, or that they were perceived as such by Muhammad's contemporaries. The passage about the moon reads as follows:

The hour has drawn near and the moon is split (54.1).

According to tradition it was split into two pieces, which were clearly visible on either side of a hill, but that is not what is said here. There are two plausible explanations of the Qur'anic text. The first is that when Muhammad pointed to a partial eclipse of the moon as a sign of the

coming judgment, the unbelievers were unimpressed. In that case the following ayah must be translated thus:

And if they see a sign they avoid it, and say 'Continuous magic?' (54.2).

Alternatively, and I think rather more probably, the first ayah describes an apocalyptic sign which still lies in the future, but the perfect tense is used to express the certainty that the moon *will* split. In that case the second ayah must be translated:

But if they were to see a sign they would avoid it and say 'Continuous magic!'

What the Qur'an relates about the night journey is also tantalizingly brief:

Glory be to Him who caused His servant to travel by night from the inviolable place of worship to the furthest place of worship, the neighbourhood whereof We have blessed, in order that We might show him some of Our signs ... (17.1).

The reference is undoubtedly to a profound religious experience, but the precise details are far from clear. 'His servant' is almost certainly Muhammad, and the expression 'the inviolable place of worship' probably denotes the precincts of the Ka'bah in Mecca, but nothing is said about a winged mount, half-mule half-donkey, on which the Prophet rode to Jerusalem and back in a single night, or about his ascent through the seven heavens where he communed with earlier prophets. Nor, for that matter, does the Qur'an relate how he proved that his story was true by accurately describing a caravan which he had passed on the return journey. Finally, can we be sure that 'the furthest place of worship' was actually the Temple Mount in Jerusalem, as tradition unanimously maintains? I shall argue in Chapter 9 that this last detail seems to be borne out by a painstaking analysis of Surah 17 as a whole. Nonetheless, it must be admitted that Jerusalem is never explicitly mentioned in the Qur'an, and that it was not conquered by the Arabs until after Muhammad's death. Moreover, its importance as a pilgrimage centre for Muslims probably dates from CE 691, when the Caliph 'Abd al-Malik built the Dome of the Rock to assert his independence from the rebel leader Ibn az-Zubayr who had seized control of Mecca.³

The striking difference between what can be safely inferred from the Qur'an itself and what has frequently been read into it presents me with a serious dilemma. In the last chapter, I made a concerted effort to

convey to the reader how the Qur'an is experienced by Muslims. Ought I not, therefore, to continue in the same vein and draw on the biographies uncritically, so as to explain how the Qur'an is often understood by ordinary Muslims? If I were writing a book on popular Islam, I would have chosen that path. As I am more concerned with the Qur'an in its own right, I have chosen a different one.

2.3 Combining the Qur'an for clues to its provenance

If one approaches the Qur'an without any preconceptions based on subsequent tradition, one discovers that it contains very few clues to help to determine the provenance of the revelations with any accuracy. The fact that the revelations are in Arabic suggests that they originated somewhere in the Arabian Peninsula.⁴ The references to camels, bedouin, sand dunes, desert storms and date-palms, as well as to deities worshipped by the pagan Arabs, seem to bear this out, but they hardly help us to be more specific, although the frequent mention of ships is perhaps more telling. A handful of places – Yathrib (33.13), Becca (3.96), Mecca (48.24), 'Arafat (2.198), Badr (3.123), Hunayn (9.25) and al-Hijr (15.80) – are referred to by name, without any indication of their precise location. To these may be added al-Madinah (9.101, 120; 33.60; 63.8) and Umm al-Qura (6.92; 42.7), which mean 'the City' and 'the Mother of Towns' respectively. There are two references to 'the Ka'bah' (5.95, 97), which is also called 'the sacred house' (5.2, 97). It seems to be identical with 'the house' built by Abraham, which is in the vicinity of 'Safa and Marwa' (2.125–8, 158; cf. 22.26; 106.3). This 'house' is obviously a shrine within 'the inviolable place of worship', which is referred to as a centre of pilgrimage and sanctuary (2.144, 149, 191, 196, 217; 5.2; 8.34; 9.7, 19, 28; 22.25; 48.24–7).

Names of people who were alive at the time of the revelations are even rarer than toponyms. The Quraysh – who are bidden to worship 'the Lord of this house' (106.1–3) – are mentioned just once. So too are Abū Lahab (111.1) – about whom we can deduce very little apart from his wealth, his married status and his being destined to hellfire – and Zayd (33.37), who was apparently the adopted son of the messenger who received the revelations. It is a reasonable inference that the messenger was none other than Muḥammad. Curiously, however, this name occurs only four times (3.144; 33.40; 47.2; 48.29) and is never used when the messenger is addressed. There is a good deal of information about the messenger and the opposition with which he met, but none of it is very

specific. We may glean that he was an orphan (93.6) who had originally been poor (93.8), that he began to receive revelations relatively late in life (10.16), was expelled from his own town (47.13), emigrated and married several women (33.50), but remained without male heir (33.40; cf. 108.3). The situation is not quite as bleak as might appear from this brief inventory of the Qur'anic data. Two Surahs, 33 and 48, yield rather more clues than most, and therefore merit closer attention. Let us discuss them in turn. Surah 33 mentions 'the Emigrants' (v.6), 'Yathrib' (v.13), 'Muhammad' (v.40) and al-Madīnah (v.60). The opening section, vv.1-8, warns the Prophet not to defer to the unbelievers and hypocrites, and implies his high status by mentioning him in the same breath as Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus. The issues over which he was evidently at odds seem to have included divorce, adoption, the nature of the bond between the Emigrants and the [other] believers, his status and the status of his wives. The next section, vv.9-27, reminds the believers of Allah's mercy on them. There had been a concerted attack on Yathrib by a confederation of tribes while the Prophet had been present. The attack had struck fear in the believers' hearts and the hypocrites had fled from the scene of the fighting. Allah had, however, repulsed the attack, and once the siege lifted he had expelled the treacherous People of the Scripture. In the third section, vv.37-60, the themes adumbrated in vv.1-8 are dealt with in more detail. Note in particular the explicit mention of Muhammad:

Muhammad is not the Father of any of your men but the Messenger of Allah and the seal of the prophets (33.40).

This refers back to v.6, which affirms that despite the extremely strong bond between the Prophet and the believers, that bond does not amount to kinship. Note too v.60, with its warning to the hypocrites and alarmists in al-Madīnah. This refers back to v.1 but also to vv.12f. The implication is that, in view of the hypocrites' behaviour during the siege, they were lucky not to have been expelled along with the treacherous People of the Scripture, and that if they continued to oppose the Prophet they would certainly share their fate. Thus, if Surah 33 is treated as a unity, we may reasonably infer from it that al-Madīnah – 'the City' – is identical with Yathrib; that the Prophet Muhammad went there as an emigrant; and that there was a strong bond between him and the indigenous believers, despite the absence of any blood relationship.

The other key surah for our purpose is 48, or more specifically 48.18-27. These ten āyahs indicate that the believers pledged their

allegiance to Muhammad, but that their subsequent attempt to gain access to the inviolable place of worship was thwarted by the unbelievers who confronted them in the middle of Mecca. It does not actually say that the inviolable place of worship itself was in Mecca, but this is a plausible inference.

We have established on the basis of Surahs 33 and 48 that al-Madinah and Yathrib are identical, that the Qur'an links Muhammad with both Yathrib and Mecca, and that it probably locates the inviolable place of worship in the latter. But is there any evidence that the Qur'anic Yathrib and Mecca had the same geographical location as al-Madinah and Mecca in present-day Saudi Arabia? The most reliable pre-Islamic evidence – and indeed for Mecca the only evidence⁶ – is that of Ptolemy, the celebrated astronomer and geographer who lived in Alexandria in the second century CE. Ptolemy produced a geographical outline, which included maps and tables giving the co-ordinates of all the known places in the world. He mentioned Yathrippa and Macoraba. Yathrippa is almost certainly Yathrib, but the identity of Macoraba is more perplexing, for he situated it at about the right distance from Yathrippa for it to be Mecca, but too far east and hence too far inland.⁷ Nevertheless, in view of other distortions in Ptolemy's cartography, this was probably simply an error on his part. Moreover the name Macoraba may be derived from the South Arabian *mikrāb*, meaning 'temple', a name which would have been highly appropriate for a city which contained 'the inviolable place of worship'.⁸

2.4 Qur'anic clues to the date of the revelations

Determining the period in which the revelations occurred is scarcely less difficult than deciding on their provenance. That they are post-biblical is evident from the mention of Christians and Jews and the wealth of references to Mary and Jesus, as well as to Noah, Abraham, Moses and other individuals mentioned in the Jewish scriptures. But by how much do they post-date the rise of Christianity? Three passages contain possible clues, although none of them is decisive:

1. The story of the gardens of Sheba, in 34.15–17, is probably an allusion to the collapse of South Arabian civilization occasioned by the breakdown of the irrigation system between 451 and 542 CE.⁹
2. The 'men of the pit', mentioned in 85.3, are perhaps the henchmen of Dhū Nuwas, the Jewish King of Yemen, who martyred the Christians of Najran in fire-filled trenches in 523 CE.¹⁰