1 Foundations
Prophetic Revelation

Islam, the youngest of the three Abrahamic faiths, grew out of a revelation to and through a prophet. The seed of that divine speech germinated, through Muhammad's recitation (*qur'an*) of it, into the scripture known as the Qur'an. Three aspects of the foundations of Islamic tradition occupy our attention in this chapter. First, I look at the Qur'an, the center of the whole tradition, as both text and source of inspiration for the calligraphic arts and the arts of book production. After a background sketch, I describe several principal ways that Muslims have interpreted the sacred word in the literary forms known collectively as Qur'anic commentary, then discuss the range of scriptural themes that bear directly on Islamic spiritual life as I have defined it. Second, I examine the significance of an extensive collection of literature known as Hadith. The term *hadith* embraces three distinct bodies of textual material: reports of the words and deeds of Muhammad called Prophetic Hadith; a much smaller collection of sayings attributed to the imams of Shi'i Islam; and a still smaller group of Sacred Hadith (*ahadith qudsiya;* s., *hadith qudsi*), sayings attributed to God but held distinct from Qur'anic revelation. Third, I explore several dimensions of the experience of Qur'an and Hadith—in literature, in speech, and in the visual arts, emphasizing the ways that the "living" Qur'an instills a palpable sense of the divine presence.

QUR'AN IN ISLAMIC SPIRITUALITY

In this chapter and throughout the book, I emphasize the experiential, relational, and developmental elements in Islamic spiritual discourse. The Qur'an is central to that discourse and to the formation of Islamic spiritu-

Figure 1. (*Opposite*) Scripture in stone: sections from Suras 36 and 48 on the entry facade of the Ince Minare madrasa (1260–1265), Konya, Turkey. The architect, Keluk ibn 'Abdallah, may have been a convert from Christianity. Thanks to Sheila S. Blair for identifying the texts.

ality. Three aspects of the scripture are especially critical to an understanding of its foundational role: the unfolding of the Qur'an as the uniquely Islamic revelation, the scripture's key spiritual themes, and the varieties of scriptural interpretation.

Sacred Scripture

Muslims believe that God has, since the beginning of time, actively communicated with and through all of creation in a variety of ways. Foremost, God communicates in the very act of creating, by suffusing the universe with divine signs. More intimately, God communes with each animated being by infusing those same signs into every individual. God has established, moreover, a history of revelatory communication embodied in a succession of prophets, beginning with Adam. Through that unbroken chain of spokespersons, God has continued his self-revelation through another sign, namely, that of the verses of the scriptures given to the principal prophetic intermediaries.

Some of these prophets (*anbiya'*) have been raised to the status of messengers (*rusul*) as well, in that God has delivered sacred books through them. The most prominent messengers are Moses, to whom God gave the Torah; David, whose scripture the Qur'an calls the *zabur* (Psalms); Jesus, who delivered the *injil* (Gospel); and Muhammad. The verses of a scripture are called *ayat* (signs). God is also said to reveal signs "on the horizons" (that is, in creation) and within the individual human being (as suggested in the honorific title *ayatullah*, "sign of God").

God's ongoing and intimate relationships with the prophets and messengers provide the fundamental paradigm of divine-human interchange. It has become a commonplace of Muslim religious discourse on the subject to insist that at no time have the personalities of the messengers influenced the message delivered. That is not to say, however, that God does not engage these conduits of divine revelation on an intensely personal level, or that the messengers do not in turn respond to the divine initiative in a fully human way. For example, when God commissions Moses to come to the mountaintop, Moses hears the divine voice and responds with the request, "O Lord, let me see You that I might look upon You." God declines, saying, "In no way can you look upon Me; fix your gaze instead on the mountain. If it holds firm in its place, then you can cast your eye on Me." But when God manifests his glory to the mountain, it crumbles to dust, and Moses nearly dissolves in astonishment. When he recovers, a transformed and humbled Moses says to God, "Glory to You! I repent before You and am foremost among believers" (Q 7:143).

In the Qur'an the relationships between God and the major prophetic figures are described piecemeal. Since the scripture's primary purpose is not biographical, one gets only occasional glimpses of the more personal dimensions of the prophets' responses to their encounters with the revealing God. One finds recurrent themes in stories of the prophets' experiences of the divine initiative. Prophets feel both awe and dread in God's presence. Often they are terrified of embarking on their missions, but they can count on divine protection in the face of sometimes violent resistance to the message they bring. Theirs is overwhelmingly an experience of transcendence and power, but also of a divine justice softened with mercy and forgiveness.

Especially in the case of Muhammad and his communication of the Qur'an, one perceives the progressive nature of God's self-revelation and of its gradual transforming effect on the human prophet. The scripture recounts that Muhammad's critics complained loudly that if this revelation were authentic, it would surely have come all at once. He is told not to back down when they confront him with their desire for a flashier, more externally compelling revelation granted in a single stroke (Q 11:12–13). On the contrary, the Qur'an suggests, human beings are not able to bear all the truth at once; the divine pedagogy accommodates itself to humanity's short attention span and unreadiness to hear the whole of the demanding message immediately. God says to Muhammad, "We will teach you in stages so that you will not forget, except as God wills; for God knows the apparent and the concealed" (Q 87:6–7). Muhammad himself is enjoined not to attempt to hasten the process by anticipating the message and thus preempting the divine initiative: "Do not move your tongue in anticipation of it (the revelation); indeed, its composition and reciting are up to Us. But when We have recited it, then you recite it in imitation; moreover, it is also for us to clarify it" (Q 75:16–19).

So critical is this progressive, unfolding dimension of the Islamic understanding of the divine-human relationship that it has been enshrined in the interpretative principle that distinguishes between the way two different kinds of texts function in the Qur'an. Sometimes a revelation given earlier appears superseded or replaced by a later revelation given under slightly different circumstances. Muslim interpreters say that the earlier text has been replaced (literally, "abrogated," *mansukh*) by a superseding (literally, "abrogating," *nasikh*) revelation. To resolve apparent internal inconsistencies or contradictions, exegetes search for evidence that suggests how one text can be seen as nullifying or reframing another revealed earlier. These interpreters conclude that either the abrogated verses are considered no longer binding or of diminished force, or that a slightly varied revelation

made under different circumstances has to be understood differently than the earlier revelation. For example, the early Muslim community prayed facing Jerusalem. Not long after the journey known as the Hijra (emigration) brought the community from Mecca to Medina (622 C.E.), an abrogating Qur'anic revelation informed Muhammad and the faithful that God would "turn you to a direction that will satisfy you. Direct your face toward the mosque of the sanctuary [the Kaʿba in Mecca]; wherever you may be, turn your faces in that direction" (Q 2:144; the text is visible above the niche of Sultan Hasan's *madrasa*—literally, "place of study"—in Fig. 7).

The notion that within the Qur'an, God tailors particular revelations for specific circumstances is striking. If God adjusts revelation, the divine communication, as he sees fit and according to the capacity of the recipient, does that mean that God has had a change of mind? Or perhaps that the revelation leaves human beings a good deal of room to bargain? Not quite. The implications of this remarkable idea might have had a far greater effect had early Muslim scholars not developed interpretative devices that were so precise that they discouraged interpreters from taking advantage of the divine flexibility. Some of Muhammad's critics evidently tried to do just that, as this text suggests (God is speaking): "When Our clear signs are put before them, those who are not hopeful of meeting Us say [to Muhammad], 'Bring us a different Qur'an, or alter this one.' Tell them, 'Changing it is not left to my whim, for I follow only what is revealed to me; and I fear an overwhelming day of retribution should I disobey my Lord'" (Q 10:15).

Nevertheless, Qur'an interpreters tend to emphasize that God's intention is not to increase the burden revelation places on the believer but to lighten the load. One pioneer of Islamic religious jurisprudence, Shafiʿi (d. c. 820), makes an important point. He notes that although God initially instructed Muhammad to keep vigil and recite the Qur'an for about half the night, God abrogated that requirement by acknowledging that such an expectation might be too strenuous. A new revelation instructed the Prophet: "Therefore recite as much of the Qur'an as will be more convenient for you. God knows that some among you may be in poor health, some traveling in search of God's bounty, and some engaging in battle in the cause of God" (Q 73:20).[1]

Interpreting Qur'an

Two questions help to understand the many ways Muslims have read their scriptures. Through what sorts of lenses have Muslims seen the divine message? And how has the ancient historic scripture helped Muslims make sense of their lives in the present? Several major interpretative styles have arisen

over the centuries, each in response to particular kinds of questions Muslims have put to their scripture. Jurists, philosophers, political theorists, theologians, mystics, grammarians, and historians—all have approached the Qur'an looking for specific themes and pronouncements germane to their interests. One common English technical term for this complex process of scriptural interpretation is *exegesis,* a Greek word that denotes "to lead or draw out" meaning.

Islamic exegetical tradition has developed a distinction between two categories of interpretation, *tafsir* and *ta'wil.* As the twelfth-century Iraqi scholar Ibn al-Jawzi (d. c. 1200) explains, the two terms were originally used almost synonymously to refer to Qur'anic interpretation, but they gradually came to designate significantly different approaches:

> Those educated in the religious sciences have held various views on whether the terms *al-tafsir* and *al-ta'wil* have the same meaning or two different meanings. A group whose proclivities were linguistic held the view that the two meant the same thing. This is the opinion of the generality of earlier exegetes (*mufassirun*). A group with primarily legal interests were [*sic*] persuaded that the two terms differed in meaning. They defined *al-tafsir* as "moving something out of concealment into full view" and *al-ta'wil* as "shifting discourse from its conventional signification to some allusion which may even neglect the literal sense of the utterance."[2]

By the middle of the thirteenth century, ta'wil was associated almost exclusively with a more mystical type of exegesis that, in the words of the Andalusian-born mystic Ibn ʿArabi (d. 1240), "varies with the state of the listener, his moments in the stations of his mystical journey [*suluk*] and his different degrees [of attainment]. As he reaches higher stations, new doors are open to him through which he looks upon new and subtle meanings."[3]

This distinction paralleled the idea that the sacred text has both an outward, obvious meaning and an inward, less apparent significance. That notion in turn arises out of the Qur'an's own statement (in Sura 3:7) that it contains both clear and unambiguous verses (*muhkamat*), and verses whose meanings are not quite so obvious (*mutashabihat*), and whose ta'wil only God knows.[4] Some of the major commentaries assert boldly that the former were revealed to abrogate the latter and thus remove all ambiguity, but the need to inquire into the ambiguous or metaphorical verses remained a significant theme in Islamic intellectual history.

The Islamic science of scriptural interpretation is both technical and subtle. The purpose of this discussion is not to become immersed in the science of exegesis but to emphasize its centrality to all spiritual pedagogy. Interpreting the Qur'an is not merely an academic exercise and a practical ser-

vice to the community of believers, but it is in itself a devotional act. Accordingly, a saying attributed to Muhammad advises that only "one whose right hand does good and whose tongue affirms the truth while his heart is upright" is fit to engage in scriptural interpretation.[5]

Muslim commentators have likened tafsir to a woman's unveiling her face for her spouse or to dawn's removal of darkness's veil from the night sky. Tafsir elucidates such questions as the immediate historical context of the revelation, its dating either in the Meccan (610–622) or Medinan period (622–632), its status as either a clear or ambiguous verse, its weight as either an abrogating or abrogated verse, and its applicability as either general or specific. All these matters pertain to a text's exoteric or outward meaning and application, and its transmission. Tafsir is sometimes related to various levels of knowledge. Texts convey truths that are plainly evident to speakers of Arabic or fundamental and universally binding moral norms or solely the province of religious scholars or known only to God.

Muslim scholars distinguish between two broad categories of tafsir. One is based on traditionally attested materials (*tafsir bi'l-ma'thur*). Sources for this kind of tafsir are generally arranged in a hierarchical order. The Qur'an is placed first, then Prophetic Hadith, followed by the sayings of Muhammad's Companions (the first generation of Muslims), then of his Followers (the second generation), and finally material from Jewish and Christian sources. The second category, inherently more controversial, is known as "interpretation by personal judgment" (*tafsir bi'r-ra'y*), based on the scholar's opinion and learned argument, which begins to cross into the realm of ta'wil.

Every religious tradition must concern itself not only with passing on its heritage intact but also with adapting that heritage to changing needs and circumstances. When a more conservative approach proves lacking in flexibility and applicability, a mode of inquiry more responsive to actual human experience will inevitably rise to the occasion. Developments in ta'wil represent just such an accommodation, for "it has been through ta'wil that Muslim scholars and mystics were able to bring the Qur'an into the hearts, imagination, and total life experience of the masses."[6] These developments have, however, remained under the ever critical eye of more cautious interpreters and have often been condemned outright as unjustifiably innovative, tendentious, or even heretical.

Two branches of esoteric Qur'an interpretation deserve specific mention here. Sufi, or mystical, exegesis began as a distinct approach as early as the eighth century, with the first full-scale commentaries dating to the late ninth and early tenth centuries. A number of classical authors developed a new literary genre sometimes referred to as allusions (*isharat*).[7] This new kind

of ta'wil went beyond the bounds of earlier understandings of esoteric exegesis in that the mystics allowed much greater latitude to interpretation based on personal experience. Sayings of the great mystics naturally became an important source for interpretation and came to be considered nearly equal in authority to sayings of Muhammad.

By a process of imaginative metaphorical association, the mystical interpreter unites certain key expressions from the Qur'an with imagery arising from the unconscious, producing evocative allusive expressions of the mystic's personal engagement with the scripture. The mystical interpreter reads the scripture with particular attention to any suggestion of God's immanence and of the possibility of an intimate divine-human relationship. As Gerhard Böwering describes it, speaking of the ninth-century mystic Sahl at-Tustari, "The process of reception of Qur'an recitals and reaction to their impact upon the Sufi's mind primarily implies the auditive energies of the Sufi and results in Sufi speech, sometimes manifested in ecstatic utterance. This auditive and oral process is transposed onto the plane of written record . . . where a succinct Sufi statement is jotted down next to a Qur'anic phrase."[8]

The mystical imagination finds allusive connections with the scripture. For example, the scriptural Verse of Light reads,

> God is the Light of the heavens and the earth; His Light is like a niche in which is a lamp, and the lamp is within a glass, and the glass is like a shining star kindled from a sacred olive tree neither of the East nor of the West, whose oil nearly glows though fire touch it not: light upon light; God guides to His Light whom He will. And God coins similitudes for human beings, and of everything God has knowledge.
>
> (Q 24:35)

One mystical reading of the text goes like this:

> The likeness of His light (refers to) the likeness of the light of Muhammad, since it is deposited in the loins like (in) a niche. . . . By the lamp He meant his heart and by the glass his breast. It is as if it were a glittering star because of the faith and wisdom that is included in it. It is kindled from a blessed tree, that is to say from the light of Abraham. Its oil wellnigh would shine, that is to say the prophethood of Muhammad wellnigh would elucidate mankind prior to his (actual utterance of) speech like this oil.[9]

The second branch of ta'wil has emerged from within the Shi'i community. Shi'i Muslims now make up about 10 percent of the total Muslim population. They began to form into a separate community within Islam in the early seventh century, shortly after Muhammad's death. A difference of opinion arose as to whether Muhammad had formally designated a successor before he died. The majority asserted that he had not, and that it was up

to the elders of the community to choose a leader. A minority held that Muhammad had indeed designated his cousin and son-in-law ʿAli. Soon this minority, called Shiʿi, became convinced that a legitimate successor to Muhammad must be from the family of the Prophet and be so designated by his predecessor. That interpretation of early Muslim history has naturally influenced the classic Shiʿi interpretation of the Qurʾan.

For Shiʿi Muslims, the underlying meaning of the scripture relates especially to the ways God has continued to be present and active in the world through the mediation of the family of the Prophet, as embodied in a succession of descendants known as imams. A principle of Shiʿi exegesis is that "the Qurʾan must always be shown to have relevance or applicability to some persons or situations."[10] Shiʿi interpreters read the scripture with a view to demonstrating how knowledge of the esoteric sense can relate virtually every text to some aspect of the life and teaching of one or more of the imams. The sayings of the imams have thus acquired an authority nearly equal to those of Muhammad himself as sources for the interpretation of the Qurʾan.

In addition, some of the symbolic and often expressly allegorical Shiʿi exegesis sees references to the imams and the family of the Prophet sprinkled throughout the Qurʾan. Consider, for example, the case of the Qurʾanic Verse of Light quoted above. A quintessential example of a Shiʿi approach attributed to the sixth imam, Jaʿfar as-Sadiq (d. 765), interprets the text allegorically. The exegesis bears some clear initial similarities to the Sufi interpretation just mentioned but then veers in a distinctively Shiʿi direction. Jaʿfar says that God's light is Muhammad, who is like a niche that contains the light of knowledge that is inherent in the office of prophecy. The reference to the lamp's containment in the glass means that Muhammad's prophetic knowledge passed from Muhammad into the heart of ʿAli, the first imam. Jaʿfar finishes his explanation this way:

> (The words) *the glass as it were a glittering star, kindled from a blessed tree, an olive that is neither of the east nor of the west,* according to as-Sadiq, are coined in reference to the Ruler of the Believers, ʿAli ibn Abi Talib, who was neither a Jew nor a Christian. (Regarding God's words:) *Whose oil wellnigh would shine, even if no fire touched it,* as-Sadiq says: The knowledge would wellnigh issue forth from the mouth of the knowing one of the family of Muhammad (that is, ʿAli), even if Muhammad had not spoken it. *Light upon light,* as-Sadiq says (means): Imam to Imam.[11]

Christian readers might see here an analogy to the way their tradition has found countless references to the Christ buried in the text of the Hebrew scriptures, and often interprets figures of the Hebrew scriptures as acting out of faith in the Christ.[12]

Scriptural Themes

One of the principal difficulties non-Muslims encounter in reading the Qur'an is in their search for a focus to help them trace the scripture's basic message. In the preceding section on Qur'anic interpretation I note that what one sees in the Qur'an depends a great deal on what one is looking for, yet it is essential to bear in mind that the Qur'an, like all sacred texts, seeks to communicate an experience. One way to draw a bead on the essential part of that experience is to read the Qur'an as both a sourcebook of prayer and as a prayer in itself.

As a sourcebook of prayer, the Qur'an lays the conceptual and practical foundations for all subsequent developments in the history of Islamic spirituality. (I speak of the scripture as a word spoken by God and addressed to human beings.) As a prayer in itself, the Qur'an becomes a divinely initiated word addressed to God in return. Prayer is also a theme in the sacred text, both a divine instruction in how humans ought to respond to God and a concrete prophetic example.

From earliest times, Muslim scholars distinguished between revelations that occurred during the Meccan period and those that occurred in the Medinan. They concerned themselves with establishing a chronological sequence in the delivery of the book's 114 chapters called suras. In more recent times, scholars have further broken those two periods into subperiods, early, middle, and later, for example. That sequence bears significantly on the concept of an unfolding revelation as implied in the concepts of abrogating and abrogated verses, since only a text known to be later can be said to abrogate another earlier text.

The implications of establishing a clear chronology are less momentous in the search for themes such as prayer, but one can still garner important insights into the nature of Islamic prayer by attending to the contexts in which examples appear in the Qur'an. Early texts concerning night vigil and recitation offer important clues to the development of the various forms of Islamic prayer. References to prostration and to various daily times for prayer also occur in early suras. For example, a sura dated to about the year 615–616 says:

> Therefore glorify God when evening comes and when you awake; for to Him belongs praise in the heavens and on the earth; and in late afternoon and as dusk begins to fall.
>
> (Q 30:17–18)

Such suggestions of what eventually developed into the five daily prayers receive more detailed attention in later suras, especially those of the Med-

inan period, when the growing Muslim community needed increasing communal discipline and instruction.

Examples of personal prayer, or what would come to be known as the prayer of invocation or supplication (*du'a'*), also abound in the Qur'an. During the middle and later Meccan periods, when Muhammad was experiencing growing opposition from influential members of the Quraysh tribe, stories of previous prophets and the enmity of their peoples toward them become crucial to the scripture's message. Those prophets serve as models of prayer, suggesting both when and how one ought to address God from the heart. The years 615–622 were times of particular hardship for the small Muslim community, and the prayers of the pre-Islamic prophets reflect and comment on that experience. Abraham's extended prayer at the core of Sura 14 is a prime example. He intercedes for the people of Mecca:

> My Lord, make this city secure, and protect me and my children from worshipping idols. My Lord, truly have they misguided many people. One who follows me is with me, but the one who rebels—but You are the Forgiving, the Merciful. . . . My Lord, cause me and my descendants to be given to regular communal prayer (salat), O our Lord, and receive my supplication (du'a'). Our Lord, be forgiving to me and my parents and all believers on that Day of Reckoning.[13]

From the Medinan period comes another, more generic prayer that seems to express the sentiments of a more firmly established community of believers:

> Our Lord, not in vain have You created this, may You be glorified! . . . We have heard the call of one inviting to faith, 'Believe in Your Lord,' and so we have believed. Our Lord, forgive our sins, cover our evil deeds, and let us die among the righteous. Our Lord, give us what You have promised through your Messengers and let us not be put to shame on Resurrection Day.[14]

Among the various essential attitudes the Qur'an recommends, the following deserve special mention: attentiveness, intention, striving, and gratitude. The theological equivalent of the attitude of attentiveness is uncompromising monotheism—belief in and acknowledgment of one God only, called *tawhid* in Arabic. Its opposite is carelessness, laziness, a spiritual torpor born of self-absorption, an insidious and destructive form of denial. Attentiveness means seeing things as they really are, with the eyes of faith; it means discerning in creation and in oneself, as well as in the revealed scripture, the signs of the Creator and Revealer.

Without that mindfulness and heedfulness no divine-human relationship is possible. Directly related to that attentiveness is right intention

(*niyya*). Any unthinking or mechanical action loses its fully human character and hence produces no spiritual benefit. Explicit intention precedes all fully human acts.

At the center of the human condition lies the need to struggle, to strive against one's baser tendencies and against the spiritual entropy born of the heedlessness that is endemic to the human race. This is the core of that most misunderstood of Islamic themes, *jihad.* The Arabic root *Ja-Ha-Da* (with the three consonantal root letters in uppercase) means "to exert oneself." Believers must struggle against whatever stands between the self and its origin and goal, and strive to overcome injustice and oppression. Battle against the fiercest of all enemies—the enemy that resides "between one's two sides," as a hadith puts it—ancient tradition calls the Greater Jihad. Combat against outward foes is known as the Lesser Jihad.

What could possibly motivate the hard work of rigorous spiritual discipline? One often hears Islam characterized as a religion of submission, whose adherents operate largely out of fear of a cold, capricious deity. While the Qur'an's emphasis on divine majesty and power has indeed sometimes given rise to a resigned fatalism, the scripture in no way recommends passivity. Prayer for forgiveness occurs often in the Qur'an, but a sense of gratitude to God is at least as significant a motive for ethical action as is fear of punishment: "God has given you all you have asked for; and were you to attempt to add up the kindnesses of God, you would fall short. Indeed, humanity is prey to injustice and ingratitude" (Q 14:34).

All positive virtues flow from the awareness that God is the beneficent and unstinting source of all good, who expects that those most blessed will in turn share their gifts most generously with others. To attain the experience of gratitude, one must be purified of any delusions of grandeur or self-sufficiency, as well as of selfish motivation in giving. The term that came to mean "almsgiving," *zakat,* derives from a root meaning "to purify oneself."

> If you give alms in public, for others to see, it is well; but if you conceal your alms, and give them to the poor, it is better for you. . . . Whatever of good you spend in alms shall be for your souls and you should not spend except out of longing for the face of God.
>
> (Q 2:271–72)

Gratitude ultimately flows over into praise of God, an attitude that suffuses both the Qur'an and ordinary Arabic speech. The Arabic term for thanks (*Sh-u-K-R*) is often said to be the direct opposite of that most ungrateful of acts, acknowledging a deity other than God—a sin called in Arabic *Sh-i-R-K,* a word composed of the same consonants as *Sh-u-K-R,* only slightly

transposed. These interior qualities of attentiveness, intention, striving, and gratitude have implications for human action.

The human spirit does not suffer isolation gladly; it naturally seeks expression in relationships to other persons and to the world. Generosity, personal responsibility, and diligence in the Lesser Jihad are manifestations of healthy engagement of the individual with his or her surroundings. Generosity is the outward result of inner gratitude: one can be truly generous only to the degree that one acknowledges God's primacy in giving.

> Give to kin, to the poor and the traveler what they need; that is best for those who seek the face of God. . . . What you give in the hope of profiting at the expense of other people will gain you nothing in God's sight; what you give as purifying alms [*zakat*] as you seek the face of God—that will produce abundant return.
>
> (Q 30:38–39)

All beneficence thus points not to the individual, who serves really as a broker, but to God. Generosity in turn is linked to a heavy emphasis on social responsibility (see, e.g., Q 2:177). The scripture condemns those who hoard their wealth in the hope that it will save them from their mortality (Q 104:1–3). Equally condemned are those "who do not treat the orphan with dignity nor encourage each other to feed the poor . . . [and who] greedily devour their inheritances" (Q 89:17–19).[15]

One of the Islamic ethical and theological issues most discussed over the centuries, from the earliest times, has been the tension between divine omnipotence, and human responsibility and moral freedom. In attempts to preserve God's transcendent sovereignty from any dilution, parties to the debate have sometimes gone to the extreme of virtually denying human freedom. On the other side, an overriding concern to safeguard individual moral responsibility has led some to the opposite extreme of suggesting that God's choices are limited by principles of absolute justice. As we have seen, one can interpret the Qur'an in many ways; but, on the whole, it maintains a paradoxical balance. God's power knows no bounds, but human beings both enjoy a wide array of options and must shoulder responsibility for their choices. Again and again, the scripture makes it clear that "God does not change a people's condition until they change the thoughts of their own hearts" (Q 13:11).

That responsibility leads to another outward dimension, willingness to engage actively in the hard work of stewardship over creation. Islamic tradition calls acceptance of the divine charge of accountability for the shape of things here on earth the Lesser Jihad. One cannot authentically enter into

this often mundane striving without first joining the battle within, the Greater Jihad. In practice the struggle involves acting on one's convictions about everything from the environment to human rights to electing the local school board. Muslim authors speak of the *jihad* of the pen, of the tongue, and, more recently, of the ballot box. Wherever human beings work for peace and justice, there is *jihad*. There is also the *jihad* of the sword. As a last resort, when all other means have been exhausted, *jihad* may also include the use of force; but violent means are carefully hedged with prohibitions against terrorism, mistreatment of prisoners, and wanton destruction of natural resources. War against an aggressor is justifiable because "aggression is more despicable than killing" (Q 2:193).[16]

HADITH IN ISLAMIC SPIRITUALITY

These thematic aspects of Qur'anic spirituality—attentiveness, intention, inner discipline, gratitude, generosity, personal responsibility, and the struggle for justice—represent only a small sample of the important issues the scripture offers for consideration. Many similar themes, presented in a different form, lie at the heart of Islam's second documentary wellspring, Hadith. The three principal developments in hadith literature are the massive collection known as Prophetic Hadith, the smaller body of hadith attributed to the Shi'i imams, and the little treasury of gems called Sacred Hadith.

Sayings of the Prophet

Next to the Qur'an, Islam's most important documentary source is known collectively as Prophetic Hadith (*al-ahadith an-nabawiya*). As literary source, Prophetic Hadith consists of thousands of reports of Muhammad's words and deeds as transmitted by generations of Muslims, beginning with firsthand accounts from among the Prophet's Companions, the first generation of Muslims. Each report comprises a chain (*isnad*) of transmitters, each individual listed by name, all the way back to the first witness; and a body (*matn*) of text that may run from a few words to several pages in length. On a library shelf, the main authoritative collections, called the Six, along with a number of minor works and several anthologized selections, would add up to fifty or sixty sizable volumes.

Scholarly compilers of these works employed several very different methods for organizing the material. A cursory glance at tables of contents of two or three of the major collections offers a fair impression of the prevalent themes and of those most germane to the study of Islamic spirituality. Hadiths cover everything from minute details for the performance of ordi-

nary ritual to the conduct of daily business to the most intimate secrets of the believer's heart and hearth. One that pertains to *jihad,* a tradition included in at least four of the authoritative collections, reports that Muhammad once said, "The most excellent Jihad is to speak a word of truth in the presence of a tyrannical ruler."[17]

Leafing through a several-volume set of hadiths can be a most rewarding experience, like panning for gold. The collections are full of surprises and small nuggets that can give the prospector a sense of the humanity of the people to whom these reminders of Muhammad mean so much. Some talk of prayer and of how God takes the initiative:

> 'Ali reported God's messenger as saying, "When the middle night of [the eighth lunar month of] Sha'ban comes, spend the night in prayer and fast during the day, for in it God most high comes down at sunset to the lowest heaven and says, 'Is there no one who asks forgiveness so that I may forgive him? Is there no one who asks provision so that I may provide him? Is there no one afflicted so that I may relieve him?'"[18]

There is also a great deal of wry wit sprinkled amidst the more serious matters, as in this earthy reminder of the importance of attentiveness at the moment the muezzin issues the call to one of the five daily ritual prayers. Muhammad's Companion Abu Hurayra, an active transmitter of hadiths, repeats these words of the Messenger:

> When a summons to prayer is made the devil turns his back and breaks wind so as not to hear the call being made, but when the summons is finished he turns around. When a second call to prayer is made he turns his back, and when the second call is finished he turns around to distract a man, saying, "Remember such and such; remember such and such," referring to something the man did not have in mind, with the result that he does not know how much he has prayed.[19]

Many Muslims explain that the sayings of Muhammad are, like the Qur'an, revealed by God; but in this instance, the revealed message is couched in the Prophet's own words rather than those of God. For that reason the hadiths are second in authority, so that, for example, one cannot rely on a hadith to abrogate a scriptural injunction. In case of an apparent conflict between Qur'an and a hadith on a particular issue, one accepts the scriptural text as definitive.

Sayings of the Imams

Second in importance and in sheer numbers to Prophetic Hadith comes a body of reports attributed to the succession of spiritual descendants of the

Prophet known to Shiʿi Muslims as imams. In the two main branches of Shiʿi Islam—the Imami, or "Twelver," and the Ismaʿili, or "Sevener," communities—these persons vary in number, either twelve or seven. Shiʿi Muslims were virtually unanimous in their acceptance of the authority of the first six imams, down to and including Jaʿfar as-Sadiq, whose interpretation of the Verse of Light is cited above. Jaʿfar designated his older son, Ismaʿil, as his successor. When Ismaʿil died before his father, around 760, a crisis arose. Jaʿfar designated a younger son, Musa; but a significant number of people refused to transfer their allegiance, claiming that Ismaʿil remained the legitimate seventh imam through his ongoing spiritual presence. For that faction, the line of imams officially ended with the seventh, Ismaʿil. Meanwhile, those who acknowledged the leadership of the newly designated Musa formed the nucleus of the community for whom the line of imams would end only with the twelfth. In the view espoused by the vast majority of present-day Iranians and over half of the inhabitants of Iraq, the twelfth imam entered a state of lesser concealment or occultation in 874. Until 940, the last imam communicated through a series of four intermediaries. When the last spiritual representative died without appointing a successor, the imam entered into greater concealment, a state from which Twelver eschatology says he will eventually emerge to usher in a new age.

Traditions ascribed to the imams (*al-ahadith al-walawiya*) supplement, rather than replace, the Prophetic sayings that are uniquely seminal in the Sunni community. These hadiths function in Shiʿi tradition as a historical projection of the authority and voice of Muhammad through his extended family. They are "not only a continuation but also a kind of commentary and elucidation of the prophetic Hadith, often with the aim of bringing out the esoteric teachings" inherent in them.[20]

The most influential and numerous of these materials are those attributed to Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, ʿAli, as anthologized in a tenth-century Arabic collection called *The High Road of Eloquence* (*Nahj al-balagha*).[21] Only a portion of the work consists of hadiths in the narrower sense used here; much of the collection is homiletical and epistolary. A sample of the spiritual wisdom attributed to ʿAli speaks of the negative way of knowing God:

> Praise belongs to God, whose laudation is not rendered by speakers, whose bounties are not counted by reckoners, and whose rightfully due . . . is not discharged by those who strive. Grand aspirations perceive Him not and deep-diving perspicacities reach Him not. . . . The first step in religion is knowledge of Him. The perfection in knowledge . . . of Him is to confirm Him. . . . The perfection of confirming Him is to profess His unity. . . .

> The perfection of professing his unity is sincerity . . . towards Him. And the perfection of sincerity towards Him is to negate attributes . . . from Him, because of the testimony of every attribute . . . that it is not that which possesses the attribute and the testimony of everything that possesses attributes that it is not the attribute.[22]

Four other tenth- and eleventh-century collections encompass a broader selection of traditions, and are parallel in authority, for Shiʿi Muslims, to the six basic anthologies of Prophetic Hadith mentioned earlier. In addition, at least three other anthologies, including one completed during this century, function as important sources. Materials traced to ʿAli's sons, Hasan and Husayn, and to subsequent imams, have sustained great popularity and authority throughout the centuries among Shiʿi Muslims. Among these traditions one finds, as among Prophetic Hadith, a sprinkling of those utterances of a separate category known as Sacred Hadith.

Sacred Sayings

Still another collection of texts represents sayings attributed to God, not to Muhammad or one of the imams. This Sacred Hadith remains distinct from the divine utterances that make up the Qur'an and is of decidedly secondary—some Muslims would even say tertiary—authority. Many of these traditions appear as separate sayings or are integrated into Prophetic Hadith in the standard editions, as in the hadith cited above, in which God descends to the lowest heaven and calls out to humankind. Others are considered extracanonical but have nevertheless achieved wide popularity. Sacred hadiths are most significant in the present context for the light they shed on the emotional tone of Islamic spirituality. The sayings tend to emphasize God's immanence and accessibility, and highlight the possibility of a loving relationship between creature and Creator. Precisely because some sacred hadiths seem to lean too far toward divine immanence, thus compromising God's transcendence, many Muslims have considered them spurious. They represent, nevertheless, some of the most beautiful and popular crystallizations of an important dimension of the Islamic spiritual genius.

In one of the most famous sacred hadiths, transmitted in several slightly different versions, God describes how supererogatory devotion establishes the most intimate bond between a servant and the Lord.

> My servant continues to come near to me by piety beyond what is required, so that I love him; and I show my love by becoming the eye with which my servant sees, the ear by which he hears, the hand with which he grasps. And if my servant approaches a hand's breadth, I go toward him

> an arm's length; and if he approaches an arm's length, I go forward the space of outstretched arms; and if he comes toward me walking, I go toward him running. And if my servant should bring to me sins the size of the earth itself, my forgiveness will be more than equal to them.

Other sacred hadiths are usually briefer but express sentiments equally lovely and convictions equally moving. God says, "Heaven and earth cannot contain Me, but there is room for Me in the heart of the believer"; "I was a hidden treasure and I wished to be known; so I created the world"; and "I am in the midst of those whose hearts are broken for My sake."[23] Such sayings convey a deep conviction that, as the Qur'an says, God is "closer than the jugular vein" (Q 50:16).

EXPERIENCING QUR'AN AND HADITH

To analyze the textual and visual products of a religious tradition from the perspective of an outsider requires careful study. To move beyond observation toward a more penetrating insight into the ways believers experience the tradition through those textual and visual expressions requires a great deal of imagination as well. Here I examine some ways in which Muslims encounter and express their tradition through text, recitation and meditative listening, and works of art—all of which celebrate the sacred message.

Sacred Literature

Questions about the degree to which a sacred text shares characteristics of such conscious literary productions as the novel, biography, lyric poetry, and so forth have not surprisingly raised much controversy in a number of global religious traditions. Many believers, regardless of their religious affiliations, reject the suggestion that one might subject their scripture to a literary analysis. The conclusion that the revealed word communicates through literary devices is unacceptable. They fear that any overt identification of the divine speech with mere human convention removes the transcendent meaning from the sacred text. To associate a scripture directly with the human imagination reduces revelation, they fear, to a fleeting creative impulse.

Still, virtually every religious tradition based on a scripture has devised ways of straddling the fence, of affirming that its scripture is of divine origin even as it represents in itself an enormous concession by God to the limitations of human communication. Islamic tradition has found the balance between transcendence and immanence in its two most sacred sources, Qur'an and Hadith.

Early Islamic tradition developed the notion of the Qur'an's inimitabil-

ity (*i'jaz*). Initially a theological concept intended to safeguard the divine content of the revealed scripture, the notion of inimitability gradually came to be interpreted in literary terms. This began a long history of investigation and criticism of the Qur'anic text as an Arabic masterpiece, with careful attention to the ways in which it surpasses all other works in that language. One difference between literary and theological approaches to scriptural interpretation is particularly important here. Literary interpreters presume *formal* continuity within the Qur'anic text until their study convinces them to the contrary. Theological interpreters are more concerned with unity of content than of form: "Under the assumption of [formal] continuity, one looks for links and connections between verses and pages, and only upon failing to find any does one concede that the text is discontinuous. But a typical Muslim theologian or lawyer searches for theological or legal content in the Qur'an, and, as soon as he finds such content, focuses on it, often in disregard of the context."[24] From the theological perspective it matters little whether the scripture manifests literary seamlessness. What theological interpreters presume in the text is that it represents a unified message. Exegetes must then demonstrate how the divine message fits together, as in the examples of the various styles of tafsir and ta'wil discussed earlier.

Muslims never approach the Qur'an as though it were a product of the literary imagination, of course. It is always a communication from God and therefore incomparable. But God is speaking to human beings in one of their languages and in doing so makes use of the various idiomatic and rhetorical devices that language uses to communicate clearly and evocatively.

When one reads the Qur'an with special sensitivity to its literary characteristics, a number of features become evident. First, a commentary that attends to the subtleties of the Qur'an's use of specific terms and idioms can highlight for the non-Arabic reader subtle colorations not available in most translations. The same may be said of frequent use of wordplay and terms chosen apparently for their multiple meanings. Much of the vivid imagery of the Arabic original does, nevertheless, come through in other languages, especially in the case of the more obvious use of figurative speech, such as the extended similes of the Verse of Light or the more metaphorical Verse of the Throne (Q 24:35–40 and 2:255). The latter reads in part:

> God—there is no deity but He; the Alive, the Eternal. Neither slumber nor sleep overcomes Him. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and on the earth. . . . His throne stretches across heaven and earth; and dominion over them does not tire Him, for He is the Exalted, the Magnificent. (See Fig. 2.)

Stirring images such as this and those of the Verse of Light have given

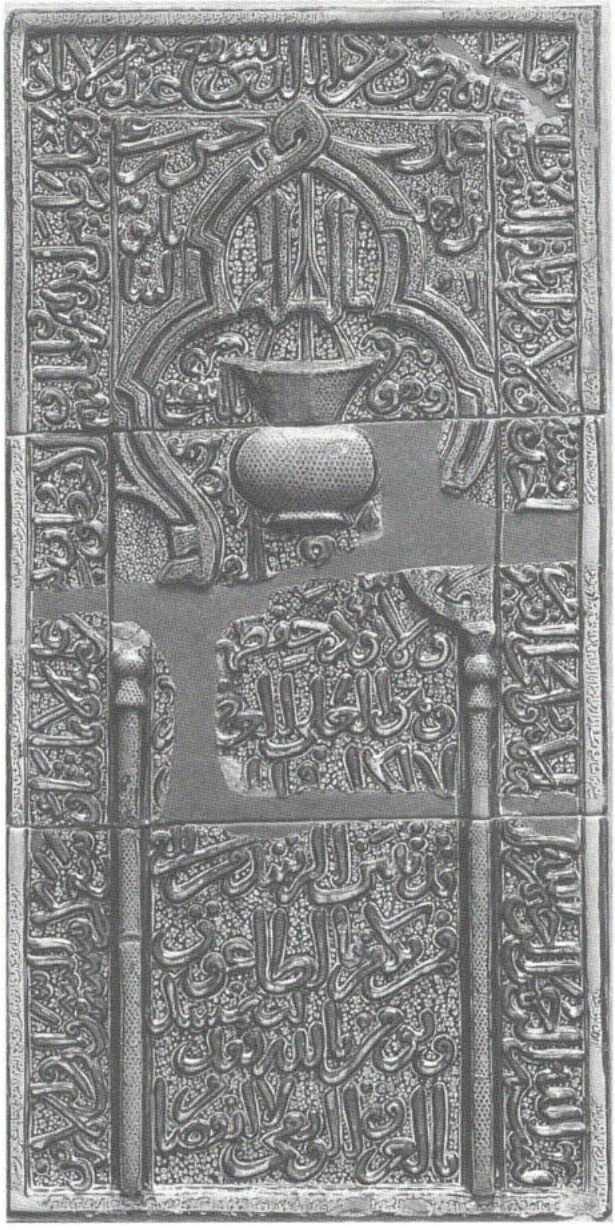

Figure 2. Tile niche (early fourteenth century) from Kashan, Iran, combines visual imagery of the Verse of Light (the lamp within the niche) with the text of the Verse of the Throne around the outside and within the niche. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund.

impetus to much potent personal response from Muslims over the centuries. Verbal imagery has the power to move people, and Muslims have always acknowledged the unique literary qualities of the Qur'an as integral to the overall experience of divine eloquence.

Important aspects of the emotional mood of the Qur'an emerge through its use of humor, satire, and irony. Humor and satire are not dominant devices, but they are evident and effective. The latter is easier to detect and interpret than the former. Numerous dramatic scenes abound in irony and paradox; the story of Joseph, occupying the whole of Sura 12, uses many of these devices. One of the most ironic scenes in the scripture describes the moment Joseph's brothers arrive at the Egyptian court and are granted an audience with the brother whose true identity remains unknown to them. Joseph contrives to keep his brother Benjamin behind by hiding a goblet in his sack and then having his soldiers feign a search for the missing cup. The brothers then are not only willing to believe that Benjamin is a thief but even allude to "another brother"—they refer to Joseph—they once had who was also a thief. Joseph is playing something of a practical joke on his brothers and is in no great hurry to let them off the hook. But he shows far more leniency to them than they deserve (Q 12:58–93).

This story also presents the best example of extended narrative in the Qur'an, though one can find dozens of briefer but equally arresting passages throughout the scripture. With the notable exception of the Joseph story, Qur'anic narration of a particular prophet's tale almost always occurs intermittently. Each episode or reappearance of the prophet either reinforces a particular theme in Muhammad's preaching or illuminates an event in his experience as prophet.

The use of dramatic dialogue is another important literary characteristic of the Qur'an. Some, such as the conversation between Moses and Pharaoh, recur in different contexts, not unlike the segments or retellings of a prophetic narrative account. As a device, dialogue therefore also serves as a thread of conceptual continuity through the scripture. Dialogue also facilitates another literary feature, namely, characterization. Something of the uniqueness of principal prophetic figures emerges in their verbal exchanges, especially with their adversaries. The most important dialogue occurs between a prophet and either his people or God, but there are also many examples of one-on-one conversations between human beings.[25] In one encounter, Pharaoh addresses Moses and his brother Aaron, and asks:

> Who, Moses, is the Lord of you two? He [Moses] said: Our Lord is the one who has granted to each being its features and then guided it. [Pharaoh]

> said: Then what about previous generations? [Moses] replied: That knowledge is with my Lord in a scripture; my Lord is never in error and never forgets. He it is who has fashioned the earth as a carpet unrolled for you. He has given you ways you may travel, and has sent down water from the heavens.
>
> (Q 20:49–53)

The Qur'an uses several exchanges between Moses and Pharaoh to underscore the gulf between faith and unbelief, qualities the two figures represent.

A number of other striking and, at first glance, puzzling rhetorical devices are readily discernible even in translation. Several figures of speech surviving in the scriptural text as remnants of pre-Islamic usage are often called oath-takings (technically known as asseverative clauses), conditional clauses, and soothsaying. (The Qur'anic texts themselves are not pre-Islamic, but they make use of communicative devices frequently employed by speakers of Arabic prior to the rise of Islam.)

Used most in the earlier, more poetic suras, such devices reinforce a point dramatically. They heighten tension by bringing the audience to a peak of expectation, revealing at last the kernel of the message. Sura 81 is a fine example of the conditional clause technique. This chapter comprises a series of thirteen short, explosive phrases, all but one beginning with the Arabic words for "when . . . and when" (*idha . . . wa idha*) and all ending in the same rhyme (in Arabic, *-at*). Each clause describes a condition (the first six are physical; the latter six, spiritual) that shocks and seems, to the nonbeliever at least, quite impossible. Foretelling a rude awakening for the heedless, the sura alludes to a future day of reckoning, heralded by an unimaginable train of apocalyptic events:

> When the sun is folded up,
> and when the fading stars fall away,
> and when the mountains disappear,
> and when camels ten months pregnant are abandoned,
> and when free-roaming creatures are corralled,
> and when the oceans turn to tidal waves,
> and when the souls (of all people) are divided (good together, evil together),
> and when the baby girl buried alive is asked for what sin she was murdered,
> and when the Scrolls are unrolled,
> and when the heavens are revealed,
> and when the infernal conflagration blazes,
> and when the Garden becomes closer . . .
> THEN the individual will know the import of his or her deeds.[26]

The expression "when hell freezes over" is perhaps the closest parallel now

in common use. Here the magnitude and seeming impossibility of the events described arrest the attention of the hearer or reader, and encourage serious reflection on human destiny and responsibility.

Soothsaying and oath-taking devices are related to each other in that both swear by, or call to witness, natural occurrences to emphasize a particular point. Like the conditional-clause device, these adjurations build in a series. The difference between the two is that in soothsaying, the speaker swears specifically by beings whose Arabic names are feminine in form in a series of rhyming images, and that the passage closes with a line of resolution that does not rhyme with the previous ones. The form is evidently a remnant of the practice of pre-Islamic seers called *kahins.* A sample of such a text is Qur'an 100:1–6, whose simile is extended and embellished:[27]

> [I swear b]y the coursing chargers panting, striking fiery sparks, and rushing forward on a dawn raid, raising billows of dust and scattering the gathered [foe]—indeed human beings are ungrateful to their Lord.

Soothsaying in this context differs from the oath-takings only in its poetic form, not in its function.

In English translation these soothsayings are difficult to distinguish from the more ordinary asseverative, since the gender of Arabic words does not ordinarily survive in English. The asseverative, which takes no account of the gender of the object by which the speaker swears, is more readily identifiable. Characteristically its speaker swears by contrasting pairs of natural phenomena, such as day and night, sun and moon, as in Sura 91:1–10:

> [I swear b]y the Sun, brilliantly shining, and the Moon as she follows him; by the Day reflecting (solar) brilliance, and the Night covering it over; by the Heavens wonderfully made, and the Earth spread abroad; by the Soul well-proportioned, and its awareness of good and evil—indeed, one who purifies it succeeds, and one who corrupts it fails.[28]

Finally, refrains appear in a number of texts. Sura 55, for example, presents a litany of divine blessings punctuated with the dramatic question "Which, then, of the blessings of your Lord will you deny?" And in Sura 77, there is the equally arresting warning "Woe on that Day to those who refuse the truth," interjected repeatedly.[29] Refrains like these focus the hearer's or reader's attention on some aspect of human response to God's deeds, in view of accountability at Judgment Day.

From a literary standpoint, most hadiths take one of several forms: pithy saying, brief dialogue, instruction, commentary on the meaning of a Qur'anic text, or apparently straightforward narrative varying in length

from several lines to several pages. Proverb-like sayings such as "The truthful and trustworthy merchant is the companion of the prophets, the righteous, and the martyrs"[30] enshrine nuggets of moral wisdom. Some sayings are apparently responses to specific questions Muslims asked the Prophet, and in some instances those responses take the form of mnemonic reductions of some essential teaching to a cluster—typically, three, four, seven—of easy-to-remember elements, similar to sayings collected in rabbinical works. For example, Muhammad advises that Muslims avoid the "seven noxious things." When asked what they are, Muhammad enumerates: Setting up a partner with God (idolatry); magic; killing a person declared inviolate by God without just cause; devouring usury; consuming the property of an orphan; deserting in battle; and slandering chaste women who are believers but who act indiscreetly.

Many hadiths are cast in the form of a give-and-take between one of the Companions and the Prophet. For example, Hudhayfa approaches Muhammad with a concern for the evil he fears might overtake him: "O Messenger of God, once we were in the age of paganism and evil, then God brought this good age to us. Will evil follow upon this good?" Muhammad answers, "Yes." Hudhayfa comes back, "And will there be good after that evil?" The Prophet replies, "Yes, but there will be smoke in it." Hudhayfa asks about the nature of the "smoke," and Muhammad explains, "People will follow a way of life that is not mine and give guidance that is not mine, so you will recognize some good in them as well as some evil."[31] This is an example of a narrative created around an alleged meeting between a widely known transmitter of hadiths, Hudhayfa, and the presumed source of all hadiths, Muhammad. In this instance Hudhayfa has not only transmitted the words of Muhammad but has also provided a narrative frame within which to report them, namely, a brief conversation.

What purpose do such conventions serve? One view is that by depicting Muhammad involved in all sorts of ordinary daily actions, narrative elements "create an atmosphere of the presence of a beloved hero. . . . In the context of some of those activities small miracles are performed, as when the amount of water miraculously increases for him in the ritual washing before prayer. Indeed, all the hadith about prayers create some sense of intimacy and friendly presence, as when he prays with a child near him or avoids waking a sleeping cat after praying."[32] Sometimes more elaborate full-scale stories unfold in a hadith, such as the accounts of Muhammad's Ascension to heaven, which are punctuated by his conversations with various prophets as he makes his way upward through the heavens. In the final analysis, even if one assumes that every hadith quotes the Prophet accu-

rately and faithfully, one may also reasonably assume that the transmitters exercised varying degrees of literary creativity in passing along the Prophet's utterance.[33]

Memory and Recitation

In the earlier consideration of scriptural themes I note that the Qur'an not only functions as a sourcebook of prayer but is itself the central prayer in the daily life of Muslims. That second dimension focuses on the notion of remembrance as a key to understanding the scripture as living prayer and as divine word now addressed back to God. The Arabic verb *Dh-a-K-a-R-a* and its various modifications, based on the root *Dh-K-R*,[34] convey a range of meanings. They include at least these four: that which reminds one of something; the act of remembering; the ongoing state of mindfulness or of spiritual presence; and the physical action of speaking that results in an audible mentioning of something.

Since human beings are by nature forgetful, the Qur'an serves as "that which reminds" them of their true origin and goal, and Muhammad's role is preeminently that of a "reminder." In Sura 87:9–15, God enjoins the Prophet (italicized words indicate translations of derivatives of the root *Dh-K-R*):

> *Remind,* therefore, if *reminding* is useful. The Godfearing will *be mindful,* while the one in direst straits will remain at a distance—that one will suffer the great Fire in which one neither lives nor dies. The one who is already purified flourishes and *calls to mind* the name of his Lord and offers prayer [all italics mine].

The phrase "offers prayer" is a translation of a word whose root came to be associated with the five daily ritual prayers known collectively as *salat.* The early Meccan text just cited suggests three meanings of the root *Dh-K-R:* the act of reminding, that of which one is to be mindful, and the state of mindfulness. The Qur'an developed these themes further during the middle Meccan period. In those later texts *qur'an* and *dhikr* are virtually synonymous, and *dhikr* is linked with the prayer of invocation (du'a') and with patience (*sabr,* a virtue the Qur'an associates strongly with the prophet Joseph).

In texts from the last Meccan period, during which Muhammad experienced growing intolerance from the ruling Quraysh tribe, it becomes even more clear that mindfulness is the attitude that separates believers from unbelievers. Out of mindfulness arises the requisite interior attitude for prostration before God, and for praise, according to Qur'an 32:15. The associa-

tion between dhikr of the heart and ritual prayer reaches its peak in the Medinan suras, as exemplified by Qur'an 62:9:

> You who have faith, set aside your trades and hurry to the remembrance [ḏhikr] of God when you are summoned to ritual prayer [salat] on Friday.

Mindfulness is therefore the soul and ritual prayer the body of a believer's grateful surrender (*islam*) to God.[35] Subsequent developments in Islamic tradition gradually came to distinguish among dhikr, salat, and du'a' as forms of prayer.

Against this backdrop, one can more readily appreciate the importance of both memorizing and reciting Qur'an, of both receiving the word and addressing it back to God. With respect to the revealed scripture these are the two sides of the coin of mindfulness, as beautifully suggested in this hadith: "There are no people assembled in one of the houses of God to recite the Book of God and study it together but that the *sakinah* (divine tranquility) descends upon them. Mercy covers them, angels draw near to them and *God remembers them* [italics mine] in the company of those who are with Him."[36] To learn the entire scripture by heart has always been a distant ideal for Muslims, and some still reach that goal. Another hadith says that anyone who has memorized a third of it possesses a third of prophecy; two-thirds of it, two-thirds of prophecy; the whole of it, the whole of prophecy, "except that no revelation is sent down" to that person.[37]

People who have memorized the Qur'an and are trained to recite it publicly have traditionally occupied a special place in Islamic societies. To them God has entrusted the ultimate treasure for safekeeping. Their impact has been so great that, as a group, these people and their religious responsibility have been the subject of much commentary and are mentioned in scores of hadiths. In more recent times, committing all the Qur'an to memory has become more and more the exclusive province of professional reciters specially trained in the arts of the two styles of recitation, measured (*tartil*) and embellished (*tajwid*). The social and religious importance of such public recitation, especially in more traditional Muslim societies, cannot be overestimated. The sound of Qur'an recitation remains one of the most entrancing, moving experiences in Muslim daily life, and it continues to sustain in Islamic spirituality an oral and aural substrate stronger perhaps than in any other global religious tradition.

As an art entirely separate from that of music performed for purposes of entertainment, Qur'an recitation creates its own unique atmosphere, even as it rests on a distinctive system of training. Though reciters are not usu-

ally professional scholars, effective vocal interpretation of the text naturally presupposes some familiarity with the tradition of tafsir. The simpler tartil style tends to be used for private occasions as well as during the five daily ritual prayers, and is ideally suited to assisting individuals to memorize the text. Tajwid, far more demanding and elaborate, serves a more public function in radio broadcasts, competition in recitation, and the communal Friday noon ritual prayer. It calls for spontaneous creativity and develops a high dramatic intensity. If one listens to a sura recited first in tartil, then in tajwid, the differences in cadence and feeling will be immediately apparent.[38]

The sheer massive energy in scholarly and practical discipline that Muslims have committed to the Qur'an and its living transmission is itself a marvel of Islamic spirituality. Muslims desire most of all to take the scripture into themselves, to receive it in a remarkably holistic manner, to be enveloped by its physical presence. God's word is not merely a book; it is an integral, sensible experience. The look of intensity on the face of an accomplished reciter and of responsive feeling on the faces of hearers epitomizes the impact of recitation. The recited Qur'an has an extraordinary power to move people to a sense of awe and longing. Kristina Nelson sums up the chief criteria for an effective performance: "The affecting recitation is that which the reciter recites with heartfelt and present enthusiasm, true concentration of the mental faculties, and readiness of the soul, not languidly or listlessly. Perhaps the hadith 'Recite the Qur'an as long as your hearts are united with it, and when you differ then arise from it' is a command to this reciting, for it calls for reciting as long as the heart is accepting and the mind alert, and the soul responsive, and if not, postponement is best."[39]

One way to appreciate the power of listening and recitation for Muslims is to liken the experience to the sacrament of the Eucharist or Communion with which many non-Muslim readers are familiar. To pronounce the Qur'an devoutly is to have the Word on one's tongue and thus to receive it most profoundly. Among the various specific qualities Muslim tradition associates with praiseworthy and meritorious recitation, the notion of *huzn* captures it best and most completely. It is a kind of bittersweet sadness, not a morose grief born of guilt, but a profound and moving intimation of one's frail, mortal humanity in awe before the transcendent God.[40] Several texts in the Qur'an allude to the emotional response its reception can elicit, even, according to one text, from non-Muslims. That text refers to the similarity between Muslims and humble, devout Christians: "when they attend to the revelation revealed to the Messenger, you will see their eyes overflow with tears as they understand the truth" (Q 5:86). A sense of awe and humility

accompanied by intense feeling are the hallmarks of listening to the scripture or of reciting it (see also Q 17:107–9). Muslims have often apparently disregarded the texts' original reference to non-Muslims, choosing to interpret them as referring to a universally desirable response to the divine revelation, and as a kind of incontrovertible proof of the inherent power of God's speech.[41]

Seeing the Word

Muslim artists have dignified even marginally religious objects in virtually every medium, from the largest building to the smallest clay vessel, by associating them with divine revelation and Prophetic wisdom. Non-Muslims frequently think of Qur'an and Hadith as books first and foremost. For Muslims, however, the words of God and Muhammad are a living presence, an atmosphere as pervasive as the air they breathe. The chief ways in which Islamic tradition has embodied that living presence overlap to some degree: epigraphy, calligraphy and illumination, and the creation of a range of related objects of practical as well as ritual and symbolic significance.

Epigraphy includes the application of inscriptions to buildings, tombstones, mosque lamps, prayer carpets, and a wide variety of other objects whose content is religious or whose function is sacred. Inscriptions on religious buildings appear typically on facades; around portals (see Fig. 1); around the drums, bases, and oculi of domes; on the qibla wall (indicating the direction toward Mecca); and around the mihrab (the niche in the qibla wall). Mosques, theological colleges (madrasas), residences for members of dervish orders (*khanqah* or *tekkes*), and shrines or mausoleums are the architectural functional types that most often receive extensive epigraphic treatment. Inscriptions are frequently placed out of easy reading range, and in many cases they are so visually complex as to be legible only to the specially trained reader. Still, building planners almost always choose their texts either according to a new creative design or in accord with long-established convention.

Some structures, such as the Taj Mahal (see Fig. 24), exhibit epigraphic programs of such intricacy as to remind one of the sculptural and stained-glass iconographic arrangements of cathedrals like Chartres and Notre Dame. Qur'anic texts speaking of death, judgment, resurrection, and forgiveness are placed in dramatic and tightly coordinated sequence, beginning at the arch around the monumental entry portal and culminating in the burial vault beneath the Taj Mahal's central domed chamber. Within the tomb, for example, one finds: "Blessed is He who holds the sovereignty, for He is

powerful over all things! He it was who created death and life in order to test you, to see which of you will be most upright in deeds; and He is the most powerful, the all-forgiving" (Q 67:1–3). All the texts used in and around the Taj Mahal represent thematically a textual integration that complements the visual and architectural integration of this artistic and religious masterpiece. According to one interpretation, the whole ensemble suggests an image of the Throne of God (alluded to in the Verse of the Throne), borne aloft by four angels at the far end of the heavenly plain of Judgment and Resurrection.[42]

One frequently used text is the basic creed, or *shahada* (witnessing): "There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God." A distinctively Shiʿi version, often used around a niche or on prayer rugs, alerts the viewer immediately that the building or object was created for a Shiʿi patron or public. That version adds a third phrase, "and ʿAli is the intimate friend of God." (See Fig. 3.) Two other inscriptions used most frequently on both buildings and objects are the Verse of the Throne (Q 2:255) and the Verse of Light (Q 24:35). The former appears often around mosque and mausoleum domes, and around the borders of mihrabs (see Fig. 2) and prayer rugs. The verse also appears on numerous everyday objects as a protection against evil. The Verse of Light occurs on enameled glass mosque lamps, on mosque and madrasa facades, and on qibla walls. Texts dealing with death and forgiveness occur regularly on tombstones and mausoleum walls, for example, in the Taj Mahal. A favorite short text, also often used on burial cloths for coffins, is: "Every soul shall taste death. We put you to the test with both good and evil as a trial, and to Us you shall return" (Q 21:35; cf. also, 3:185 and 29:57; see Fig. 11).

Some texts, however, have become conventional in certain settings merely on the strength of the occurrence of a catchword or phrase, even though the original meaning of the verse scarcely applies in its new visual setting. A prime example is the use of Qurʾan 3:37: "Every time Zakariya [father of John] went to her [Mary] in the mihrab, he found that she [already] had sustenance." Turkish mosques frequently locate the text over the niche of the mosque, even though in the Qurʾan the term *mihrab* evidently refers to a structure quite different in form and function from that of the mihrab in the qibla wall of a mosque. Hadiths occur far less often in epigraphy than do Qurʾan texts, and they are, in that respect, more telling when they do appear. A hadith such as "One who prays converses intimately with his Lord," or "One who believes in God and His Messenger and observes ritual prayer and the fast of Ramadan, God will provide entry to the

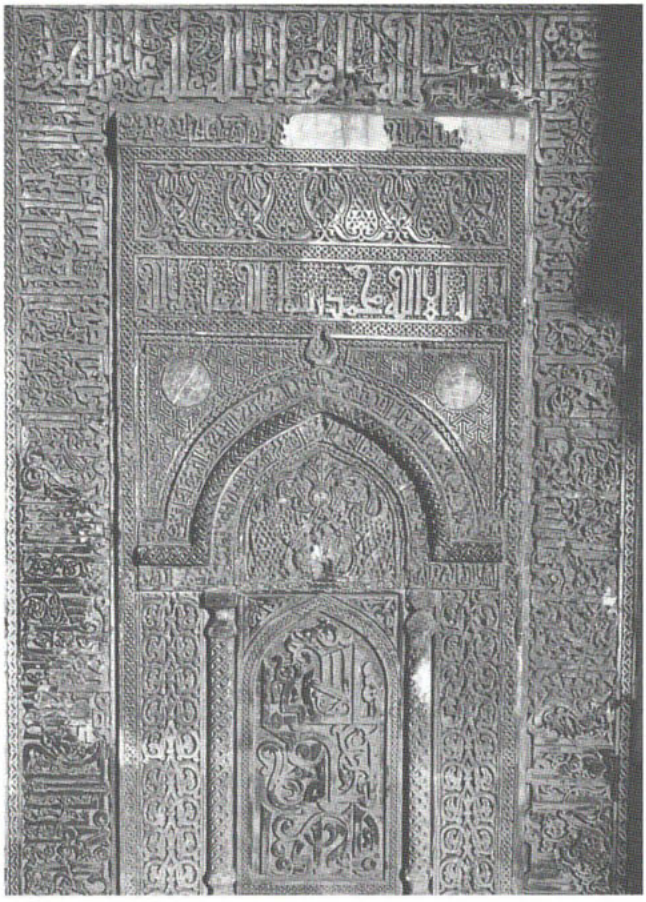

Figure 3. Fatimid votive niche (1094), mosque of Ibn Tulun, Cairo. Text of the shahada in horizontal panel just above the niche includes the distinctively Shi'i phrase "and 'Ali is the Friend of God."

Garden," emphasizes the religious function of the structures on which it appears.[43] Other popular texts include short formulas such as "Sovereignty belongs to God," "God alone lives eternally," "Praise to God," and "God is supreme," which frequently appear on the exterior drums of mosque, madrasa, and mausoleum domes in Iran and Central Asia, for example.

Calligraphic styles figure prominently in the creation of epigraphic in-

scriptions, and if they are understood from the perspective of style and formal qualities, one might say calligraphy encompasses epigraphy. (I use the term *calligraphy* here to refer specifically to texts written with pen or brush, on paper or similar media.) Designers have created over a dozen major styles of script, including several used almost exclusively for languages other than Arabic, that use the Arabic alphabet (such as Persian, Turkish, and Urdu). Crafting a beautiful Qur'an or a collection of favorite hadiths has been among the loftiest of devotional activities. Learning to write Qur'an has long been an essential ingredient in literacy education across the globe, especially but not only among Arabic speakers.[44]

Directly related to calligraphy in this restricted sense are the arts of illumination that create geometric and floral decoration as embellishment for the visual setting of the Qur'anic or Prophetic word. Illumination evolved along with the early decorative Arabic scripts, initially in the form of small bosses, medallions, and panels used to separate verses and suras. Eventually the panels used as sura headings developed into intricate combinations of floral and geometric background and setting for calligraphic indications of the sura's title, the number of verses, and the place of its revelation (Mecca or Medina).

In more lavish productions, these panels provide an opportunity for the illuminator to demonstrate imagination and creativity in the invention of design shapes and combinations. Along with more decorative panels within the text came the practice of making the opening sura and the beginning of the second sura an elaborate two-page spread. Artists also began to create separate decorative two-page frontispieces, typically including the text of Qur'an 56:77–80 in upper and lower panels: "This is a noble Qur'an in a hidden book; let none but the pure touch it; it is a revelation from the Lord of the Universe." The text thus came to serve as a talismanic device to warn off the unworthy. Such a use assumes that the word *pure* refers to ritual purity. But that interpretation virtually disregards the verse's original context, where *pure* apparently refers to the origins of the Qur'an, and therefore to its legitimacy and authority, not to its ritual function.[45]

Finally, one can identify a number of objects whose form and function relate directly to the calligraphic arts. Inspired at least indirectly by Qur'an and Hadith, these include brass pen boxes. Engraved and often inlaid with silver and gold, these boxes testify to the lofty calling and social prestige of those who have created Islam's sumptuous religious manuscripts. The most important examples come to us from the Middle East and south Asia. Earlier works, mostly from the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, are typically covered with geometric and floral patterns, sometimes serving as background

Figure 4. Brass pen box inlaid with silver (thirteenth century), Egypt or Syria. Testimony to the calligrapher's elevated place in society, the box is inscribed in plaited Kufic script with images of courtiers. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Joseph W. Drexel.

for a historical or proverbial inscription. In addition some have figural images, most often from the visual vocabulary of astrology (human figures or nonhuman symbols of the planets or zodiacal signs) but occasionally also from that of court life (such as musicians and hunters). (See Fig. 4.)

Another group of related objects that have received explicit artistic attention are book covers, principally in tooled and embossed leather or lacquer. From a formal point of view, these objects are related to the arts of illumination. Their designs usually consist chiefly, or only, of geometric and floral patterns, often modeled on those of central-medallion carpets (a design popularly associated with so-called Persian or Oriental rugs) and found also on front and end pages in Qur'an manuscripts.

Two other kinds of objects that bear Qur'anic epigraphy and have ritual functions are Qur'an boxes and stands. Muslim artists have produced elegant storage places for the scripture, in a wide range of shapes and sizes. Mostly of wood, the boxes are sometimes carved and lacquered, sometimes covered with engraved and inlaid sheet metal, sometimes inlaid with ivory or exotic hardwoods. Their shapes range from simple squares to tall, gable-roofed rectangular cabinets to elaborately architectural polygons with spherical or ogival domes. These boxes are of different sizes, reflecting variant traditions in Qur'an production, some including as many as thirty separate compartments for Qur'ans written in as many volumes (one for each major liturgical division of the text). Sometimes these boxes have a reading stand built in above the storage place. There are also beautifully carved portable folding stands (*kursi* or *rahl*).[46] (See Fig. 5.)

The foundational texts, their performative or oral significance, and the visual arts they have graced or inspired provide an entrée into a religious

Figure 5. Wooden Qur'an stand (1360), Turkestan. The name "Allah" appears four times in the upper panel. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund.

tradition of enormous breadth and richness. They express something of Islam's conviction of the divine initiative in establishing an ongoing relationship with humankind. Muslims have acknowledged and cultivated that relationship through the ritual and liturgical texts and objects that, in turn, speak of their religious devotion.

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Seven Doors to Islam

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