



— GET TO KNOW ISLAM

Starting the Qur'an

A practical companion for reading the Qur'an for the first time: what it is, how it is arranged, how it was preserved, and five short chapters to begin with.

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Meet the Qur'an.

Muslims believe the Qur'an is God's revelation to Muhammad in Arabic. It invites reflection on God, human life, moral choices, and the world around us.

What kind of book is it?

The Qur'an is Islam's central scripture. Muslims believe it was revealed to Muhammad over a period of about 23 years. It is read, recited, memorised, and studied, and parts of it are recited in daily prayer.

Its 114 chapters are called surahs, and its verses are called ayahs. The chapters are not arranged as a chronological biography. Themes recur across the book: God's mercy, the lives of prophets, social responsibility, worship, and accountability.

Arabic text and translated meaning

For Muslims, the Qur'an itself is the Arabic revelation. A translation is a human rendering of its meaning. Different translators may choose different words for the same passage, especially where an Arabic term carries several related meanings.

Tafsir is explanatory commentary. It can address language, context, connections between passages, and traditions of interpretation. A translation and a commentary are useful in different ways; neither should be confused with the original Arabic text.

Three places to begin

Start with Al-Fatihah (chapter 1), a brief prayer for guidance. Next, read Al-Ikhlās (chapter 112), which focuses on the oneness of God. Then look at 49:13, a verse about humanity's shared origin and diversity.

Read a little, pause, and note your questions. You do not have to read the whole book at once. If a verse seems difficult, read the surrounding passage and consult contextual commentary rather than relying on an isolated quotation.

Read and listen with context

The resources below open Quran.com, where Arabic text, translations, audio recitation, and commentaries are available. It is an independent external service, not part of Get to Know Islam.

Our explanations are original introductory summaries. We link to published translations instead of reproducing an entire translation. We do not present a single English rendering as if it captures every possible nuance.

A small reading practice you can actually try

Set aside five quiet minutes and open chapter 1 in a language you understand. Read it once for its overall movement, then again for the relationship between the speaker and God. Make a note of one unfamiliar word rather than trying to resolve everything at once.

Next, compare another translation of the same passage. A difference in wording can reveal the work of translation. If you find a difficult claim, read the surrounding verses and a commentary; a short extract on social media may leave out the very context you need.

What not to expect from a first reading

You will not encounter a single continuous story in chronological order. The text moves between address, narration, moral teaching, reminders, and reflection. A reader accustomed to a modern textbook may need time to become familiar with that structure.

You also do not need to pretend that every passage is immediately clear. Write down questions about who is speaking, who is addressed, and what a key term means. Those questions can guide careful study with someone able to explain both the text and the limits of their interpretation.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 1 · Qur'an 112 · Qur'an 49:13 · Qur'an 96:1-5 · Quran.com — About the Qur'an

Five short chapters to begin with

Each of these chapters can be read in a minute or two. The Arabic is followed by a translation.

Al-Fatihah (The Opening)

1 بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allah, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful.

2 الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ

All praise be to Allah, the Lord of the worlds,

3 الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful,

4 مَلِكِ يَوْمِ الدِّينِ

Master of the Day of Judgment.

5 إِيَّاكَ نَعْبُدُ وَإِيَّاكَ نَسْتَعِينُ

You alone we worship, and You alone we ask for help.

6 اهْدِنَا الصِّرَاطَ الْمُسْتَقِيمَ

Guide us to the straight path,

7 صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ غَيْرِ الْمَغْضُوبِ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا الضَّالِّينَ

the path of those whom You have blessed; not of those who incurred Your Wrath, or of those who went astray.

Al-'Asr (Time)

وَالْعَصْرِ¹

By the time,

إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لِفِي خُسْرٍ²

man is in utter loss,

إِلَّا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ وَتَوَّصَوْا بِالْحَقِّ وَتَوَّصَوْا بِالصَّبْرِ³

except those who believe and do righteous deeds, and exhort one another to the truth and exhort one another to patience.

Al-Ikhlâs (Sincerity)

قُلْ هُوَ اللَّهُ أَحَدٌ¹

Say: "He is Allah, the One;

اللَّهُ الصَّمَدُ²

Allah, the Eternal Refuge.

لَمْ يَلِدْ وَلَمْ يُولَدْ³

He neither begets nor is He begotten,

وَلَمْ يَكُنْ لَهُ كُفُوًا أَحَدٌ⁴

and there is none comparable to Him."

Al-Falaq (The Daybreak)

قُلْ أَعُوذُ بِرَبِّ الْفَلَقِ¹

Say, "I seek refuge with the Lord of the daybreak,

مِنْ شَرِّ مَا خَلَقَ 2

from the harm of all what He has created;

وَمِنْ شَرِّ غَاسِقٍ إِذَا وَقَبَ 3

from the harm of darkening [night] when it spreads around,

وَمِنْ شَرِّ النَّفَّاثَاتِ فِي الْعُقَدِ 4

from the harm of the sorceresses who blow on knots,

وَمِنْ شَرِّ حَاسِدٍ إِذَا حَسَدَ 5

and from the harm of the envier when he envies."

An-Nas (Mankind)

قُلْ أَعُوذُ بِرَبِّ النَّاسِ 1

Say, "I seek refuge with the Lord of mankind,

مَلِكِ النَّاسِ 2

the Sovereign of mankind,

إِلَهِ النَّاسِ 3

the God of mankind,

مِنْ شَرِّ الْوَسْوَاسِ الْخَنَّاسِ 4

from the harm of the lurking whisperer,

الَّذِي يُوَسْوِسُ فِي صُدُورِ النَّاسِ 5

who whispers into the hearts of mankind,

from among jinn and mankind.”

Translation: Rowwad Translation Center (QuranEnc)

How long is the Qur'an, and how is it organised?

The Qur'an has 114 chapters, called surahs, and about 6,236 verses, called ayahs; counts differ slightly by convention. In English translation it runs to roughly the length of the New Testament. Apart from the short opening chapter, the surahs are arranged broadly from longest to shortest, not in the order of revelation.

For reading and recitation the text is also divided into thirty roughly equal parts, called juz', which allow the whole book to be read over a month. Each chapter has a name, usually taken from a word or theme in it, such as The Cow, Mary, The Cave, or Light.

Sources & further reading: Quran.com — About the Qur'an · Qur'an 1 · Qur'an 114

Why isn't the Qur'an in chronological order?

The Qur'an was revealed in portions over about twenty-three years, in response to events and questions, but it is arranged in a different order, broadly from longer to shorter chapters. Muslims believe this arrangement was fixed under the Prophet's direction and is part of the revelation, not an editorial accident.

The book is not a narrative or a history. It returns to its great themes, God, the prophets, judgement, and right conduct, from many angles, so that a reader meets them repeatedly. Scholars classify chapters as Meccan or Medinan according to when they were revealed, and a study edition will tell you which is which if you want to read with the chronology in mind.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 25:32 · Qur'an 17:106 · Quran.com — About the Qur'an

Which English translation of the Qur'an should I read?

No single translation is official, because Muslims regard only the Arabic as the Qur'an itself; a translation is one scholar's rendering of its meaning. For a first reading, choose a modern translation in clear English rather than an archaic one. Quran.com lets you switch between several translations side by side, which is often the most useful approach.

Notice who the translator is and whether notes explain context. When a verse surprises or troubles you, read the surrounding passage and compare a second translation before drawing conclusions. Our introduction to the Qur'an suggests three short passages to begin with.

Sources & further reading: Quran.com — Translations · Qur'an 12:2 · Qur'an 39:28

Why is Arabic so important in Islam?

Muslims believe the Qur'an was revealed in Arabic and that its wording, not only its meaning, is from God. Formal prayer includes recitation of the Qur'an in Arabic, so Muslims everywhere learn at least the short passages needed for prayer. Arabic also became the shared language of Islamic scholarship, as Latin once was in Europe.

Arabic is not a requirement for faith. Most Muslims are not native Arabic speakers, personal supplication can be made in any language, and translations and commentaries make the Qur'an's meaning available to everyone. Many people learn some Arabic over time because they want to meet the text directly, not because they must.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 12:2 · Qur'an 41:44 · Qur'an 30:22

Did Muhammad write the Qur'an?

Muslims believe the Qur'an is God's word, revealed to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel over twenty-three years, and that Muhammad conveyed it without adding to it. The Qur'an describes him as the unlettered prophet and states that if he had invented sayings against God, he would have been seized. Its style differs markedly from the Prophet's own recorded speech in the hadith.

This is a statement of Muslim belief; historians who do not share it offer other accounts of the Qur'an's origin. What is not disputed is that the text took shape in seventh-century Arabia, that it was recited publicly as it emerged, and that its hearers, including opponents, treated it as something distinct from Muhammad's ordinary words.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 7:157 · Qur'an 69:44-47 · Qur'an 53:3-4 · Qur'an 2:23

What is a hafiz?

A hafiz, or hafizah for a woman, is a person who has memorised the whole Qur'an, all 114 chapters, word for word in Arabic. Many begin in childhood and complete it in two or three years of daily study; many do not speak Arabic as a first language. Reciting correctly follows rules of pronunciation called tajwid.

Memorisation is how the Qur'an was first transmitted and how Muslims understand it to have been preserved. A hafiz leads night prayers in Ramadan, in which the whole book is recited over the month. Our guide to how the Qur'an was preserved explains the role of memory alongside manuscripts.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 54:17 · Qur'an 75:16-18 · Sahih al-Bukhari 5027

How the Qur'an was written down and preserved.

Muslims believe the Qur'an has been preserved exactly as revealed. Historically it was transmitted through memorisation and writing during the Prophet's lifetime, collected into a single volume soon after his death, and standardised under the caliph Uthman. Today it is read from one consonantal text and recited in a small number of recognised readings.

A recited book

The word Qur'an means recitation. The revelation was delivered orally, memorised by the Prophet's companions, and recited in daily prayer. Writing accompanied this from the start: companions recorded passages on parchment, leather, bone, and palm stalks as they were revealed.

This dual transmission, oral and written, is central to the Muslim understanding of preservation. Qur'an 15:9 states that God Himself guards the Reminder; Muslims read this as a promise fulfilled through the community that memorised and transmitted it.

Collection after the Prophet

After the Prophet's death in 632, and following the death of many memorisers in battle, the first caliph Abu Bakr commissioned Zayd ibn Thabit, a scribe of the Prophet, to gather the written records into one collection, checked against the memory of the companions.

Around 650 the third caliph, Uthman, had standard copies made from this collection and sent to the major cities, with instructions that other written variants be withdrawn. This established a single consonantal text, the Uthmanic codex, used by Sunni and Shia Muslims alike.

Early manuscripts

Fragments of Qur'an manuscripts survive from the first Islamic century. Several, including leaves held in Birmingham, Paris, St Petersburg, and Sana'a, have been radiocarbon dated or palaeographically assigned to the seventh century. Their text corresponds to the Qur'an read today, with early orthographic differences and, in some cases, scribal variants.

Over the following centuries the script was refined with dots to distinguish letters and marks to indicate vowels, making the text easier to read for non-Arabs. The content these marks encode had been fixed by oral transmission.

Recognised readings

Within the single Uthmanic text, small differences in pronunciation and vocalisation were transmitted by master reciters. Scholars recognised a limited number of these readings, the qira'at, as authentic. The reading of Hafs from 'Asim is the most widespread today; Warsh from Nafi' is common in North and West Africa.

These readings are not different versions of the book. They are transmitted ways of voicing one text, and Muslim scholarship documents them carefully rather than hiding them.

Memorisation today

A person who has memorised the entire Qur'an is called a hafiz. There are millions of them worldwide, including children and people who do not speak Arabic as a first language. Reciting with correct pronunciation follows rules called tajwid.

This living memory, continuous across fourteen centuries, is the heart of what Muslims mean when they say the Qur'an has been preserved. The printed page records what the community already carries.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 15:9 · Qur'an 75:16-19 · Qur'an 96:1-5 · Encyclopaedia Britannica — Qur'an · Sahih al-Bukhari 4986

What the Qur'an talks about.

The Qur'an returns again and again to a handful of great themes: the oneness of God, the stories of the prophets, accountability in the life to come, ethical and social guidance, and the natural world as a sign pointing to its Creator. Knowing these themes makes a first reading far less disorienting.

God

The Qur'an's first subject is God: who He is, what He has made, and how people should relate to Him. It affirms His oneness, describes His mercy and power, and rejects the worship of anything else. Chapter 112 states the core in four verses; the Throne Verse, 2:255, is among the most recited.

The relationship offered is direct. Qur'an 2:186 says that God is near and answers the one who calls. Gratitude, trust, and remembrance run through the book as the fitting human response.

The prophets and their peoples

A large part of the Qur'an retells the stories of earlier prophets: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, Solomon, Jesus, and others. Moses is mentioned more than anyone else. Chapter 12 tells the story of Joseph as a single continuous narrative; most other stories are told in episodes across the book.

These stories are not told for their own sake. They present a pattern: a messenger calls people to God and to justice, is opposed, and God's purpose prevails. Readers are invited to see themselves in the pattern.

The life to come

The Qur'an insists that life continues beyond death and that people will answer for their deeds. Many short chapters near the end of the book, such as 81, 82, 99, and 101, describe the Day of Judgement in vivid, compressed language. Paradise and hell are described as real destinations.

The purpose is to make the present matter. Choices have weight because they are seen, recorded, and judged with perfect justice tempered by mercy.

How to live

The Qur'an gives guidance for worship, family, commerce, justice, and the treatment of the vulnerable. It commands care for parents, orphans, the poor, and travellers; honesty in weights and measures; keeping contracts; and justice even against one's own interests. Qur'an 2:177 and 17:23–37 are compact summaries.

Legal passages make up a small fraction of the text. Much more space is given to shaping character: patience, gratitude, humility, generosity, and restraint of anger.

Signs in the world

The Qur'an repeatedly points to the natural world, the alternation of night and day, rain and growth, the stars, the diversity of languages and colours, as ayat, signs, that point beyond themselves to their Creator. Qur'an 30:20–25 lists several in sequence.

This gives the book a reflective tone alongside its commands and warnings. A reader is invited to look, think, and draw conclusions, not only to obey. Many Muslim scientists have cited these passages as encouragement for inquiry.

Sources & further reading: Qur'an 2:255 · Qur'an 2:186 · Qur'an 12:3 · Qur'an 2:177 · Qur'an 30:20-25 · Qur'an 99



Keep exploring

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