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Introduction to the Qur'an

Course Guidebook

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Introduction to the Qur'an

Since Muḥammad first heard the word *Recite!* more than 1,400 years ago, the Qur'an has become one of the most influential and important texts in human history. It is the sacred heart of the Islamic faith. It has shaped cultures and created empires. But for many—especially non-Muslims—the Qur'an remains a mystery.

This course presents an introductory examination of the Qur'an from several angles. First, it examines the text as an object of history by traveling to 7th-century Mecca and exploring the culture in which Muḥammad lived and into which the Qur'an was introduced. You will discover how the Qur'an, originally passed on orally, inspired the rapid development of written Arabic in order to preserve the recitation as a text. You will confront tough questions about historical accuracy, translation, and the benefits and liabilities of taking a scholarly approach to a work that is sacred to so many.

The course then moves into the pages of the Qur'an itself. Many of the themes and characters in the Qur'an are already familiar to many non-Muslims in the West, including Adam and Eve, Satan, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus and Mary. You will examine how these characters overlap with their presentations in the Christian and Jewish traditions as well as how they diverge. You will explore how the Qur'an treats God and the nature of the divine, creation, prophethood, and the afterlife.

Finally, the course considers the Qur'an as a source of religious inspiration, practice, and controversy. While the Qur'an is central to the Islamic faith, it exists in complicated interaction with the practices of communities, traditions of scholarship, and evolving questions of

a changing world. You will discover how the Qur'an and the Hadith interact to inform Islamic practice and law. You will also tackle those concepts that can seem most frightening or off-putting to many non-Muslims: Sharia and jihad.

The course ends by exploring the rich intellectual and experiential traditions that have sprung from the Qur'an over the centuries. You will encounter the profound theological questions and controversies within Islam over the Qur'anic message. You will examine the extensive philosophical tradition that developed as Islamic intellectuals explored the relationship between reason and the Qur'anic message. And you will delve into Sufi mysticism, which explores the Qur'an by way of human experience.

Though it only begins to address the endless questions, issues, and insights that arise from the Qur'an, this course aims to introduce you to its theological depth, literary beauty, and cultural significance in a way that inspires further curiosity.

This course contains recitations of the Qur'an in a secular context.

LECTURE 1

Finding a Path into the Qur'an

According to traditional accounts, sometime around AD 610, a man named Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh, living in Mecca—a small city in central western Arabia—had developed a practice of spending time alone in the foothills outside the city walls. While on one of these retreats, Muḥammad heard a clear, sudden voice command: ʿ*iqra*!—which in Arabic means "to recite or read aloud." Bewildered, Muḥammad is thought to have asked, "Read what?" And the voice responded, "Read that which is written upon your heart."

It's said that Muḥammad then felt as if the following lines had been permanently inscribed within him:

> [ʿ*iqra*]! In the name of your Lord who created
> He created man from a clinging form
> [ʿ*iqra*]! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One
> who taught by the pen, who taught man what he did not know

Terrified by what he'd just experienced, Muḥammad fled to his wife, Khadija, to tell her what had happened, afraid that he'd been possessed by a spirit or suffered a hallucination. Khadija listened calmly, spoke with her husband, and—finding nothing else apparently amiss—assured him that he seemed healthy and himself. Perhaps, she wondered, he might listen to this voice.

This story about the origins of what eventually becomes the Qur'an—the text sacred to Muslims the world over—raises a number of important questions: What, or who, was the voice that spoke to Muḥammad? To whom was this message meant to be delivered? What happened after this initial moment of revelation to Muḥammad? Perhaps most importantly, what was the message of this encounter?

From the year 610 until his death in 632, Muḥammad is said to have received messages from this divine voice. These revelations were, we are told, unbidden and unexpected, reducing Muḥammad to a momentarily debilitated state until he emerged from the experience with new words from God.

Following Muḥammad's death, tradition holds that his close companions and successors engaged in a concerted effort to collect and codify the entirety of this 22-year period of intermittent revelation, resulting in a final, universally-agreed-upon text within perhaps two decades of the Prophet's death. Muslims believe the Qur'an was inerrantly passed from Muḥammad's lips to the written page and is passed on to us still today.

What Is the Qur'an?

While there is no doubt that the Qur'an is the central component of the Islamic tradition, it is trickier than you might assume to say what the Qur'an is. And to make claims about what the Qur'an says or means is fraught with problems, and perhaps impossible.

What we can do, however, is study the history of the text—from the cultural milieu into which Muḥammad was born through contemporary Islamic practice today—and trace how and why the Qur'an has been interpreted over the course of 1,400 years. The major themes, figures, tropes, and literary characteristics of the text can be examined, and the traditions and sources of authority used to interpret the text can be outlined.

If, as Islamic tradition holds, the Qur'an is the revealed word of God, then to make claims about knowing the true meaning or intent of the text is hubris that borders on heresy. But the Qur'an itself invites us to study it, ponder its meaning, and reflect on its implications. This we can—and perhaps must—do.

Reciting passages from the Qur'an is required for every ritual prayer, five times a day, in Islamic practice.

To begin, it's helpful to clear up a few common misperceptions about the Qur'an, the Prophet Muḥammad, and Islam in general.

First, if you are familiar with Christianity, then you might think that it shares clear parallels with Islam. For example, Jesus and Muḥammad are both central prophetic figures, each claiming to bring the word of God to a skeptical audience. The second parallel is between the Bible and the Qur'an: two books that record the word of God and that are read and adored by the practitioners of these two faiths.

Those parallels, however, are a false cognate: While Jesus and Muḥammad are both men and the Bible and the Qur'an are both books, that is where the similarities end for believers.

For Christians, Jesus is a man but also God—the divine made real on earth. To Muslims, while Muḥammad is adored and respected above all other humans, he is still just a man—a potentially fallible mortal. While Christians worship Jesus, Muslims believe that the worship of any human, Muḥammad included, would constitute idolatry.

In similar fashion, while many Christians accord the Bible the highest status, most recognize that it is the work of many hands over many years. In this sense, the Bible has a history—even if divinely inspired—that differentiates it from the incarnation of God in Jesus. But the Qur'an is God's word made perfectly manifest in this world.

For Christians, the Bible is the human vehicle through which is revealed the perfection that is Jesus; for Muslims, Muḥammad is the human vehicle through which is revealed the perfection of God's word, the Qur'an. The initial comparison is thus upended.

To put it differently and more accurately: As Jesus is to Christians, so is the Qur'an to Muslims; as Muḥammad is to Muslims, so is the Bible to Christians. This reversal is not perfect—the Qur'an is not worshipped as Jesus is worshipped—but if we use the analogy to understand how God is revealed and made real in this world, then the comparison is apt. Christians seek to know God through Jesus as told through the vehicle of the Bible; Muslims seeks to know God through the Qur'an as told through the vehicle of Muḥammad.

Keeping this in mind can help us better understand why questions about the nature of the Qur'an are perceived as so essential but also so problematic for many believers. For example, many Christians have grown used to the idea that the Bible has a history, but the belief in Jesus as divine is less open for debate. Similarly, it's acceptable for Muslims to investigate Muḥammad's life as a historical phenomenon, but an exploration of the history of the Qur'an is, in a sense, to call the text's divine status into question. In other words, to claim or believe that the Qur'an is the perfect and infallible word of God means that critical questions about the creation of the Qur'an involving human activity—and therefore the possibility of error—is to question the foundation of faith.

Avenues of Approach

The nature and history of Jesus, the Bible, Muḥammad, and the Qur'an should be objects of investigation. What believers claim about their central figures or texts should not be taken at face value. At the same time, at least in the scientific sense, there will never be proof about the divine nature of either Jesus or the Qur'an. When we raise questions about either one, we should be aware that we are treading on someone's sacred ground—polemical arguments are rarely helpful, and too often circular.

Instead, from a scholarly point of view, it's valuable to understand how a figure, text, or idea functions from within the tradition. For Muslims, the text of the Qur'an is simply what it is: a record of God's word delivered perfectly to Muḥammad and then perfectly recorded.

We arrive, then, at something of a dilemma. Believers accept a certain narrative about both the history of the Qur'an as well as what scholars call its hermeneutic status. Believers accept the Qur'an as a perfect vehicle. Scholars, often for good reason, resist both the traditional narrative about the Qur'an's formation as well as claims about the divine character of the text.

Essentially, *hermeneutic* means thinking about how we know what we know.

Thus, there is an inherent friction between how insiders and outsiders consider the nature of the text. Given this tension, how can we think about approaching or interpreting the Qur'an? What sorts of preferences or assumptions do we need to make about the history and nature of the Qur'an in order to understand it?

To help resolve this situation—at least for the purposes of this course—here are two suggestions for approaching the text:

- Arguing over the divine status of Jesus or the Qur'an can be counterproductive. Yes, we should examine the history of the Qur'an as a text, but making claims about its validity as a divine phenomenon isn't the job of a scholar—that's for theologians to debate. Instead, knowing the history of the transformation of the Qur'an from revelation to page can yield insights into the book for us as readers of it. In the same way, one can accept that a text is divine for a given group of people without needing to render a judgment for oneself.

Recognizing this, however, helps us understand how and why a text has been read over time while also revealing tensions in our contemporary thinking about it.

- We can suspend judgments about historicity or divinity and approach the text as it appears to us—as literature. This does not mean that we neglect these questions, but rather that we can note such concerns as they arise while remaining focused on what the text itself says, what the interpretive traditions have said the text means, and how Muslims today understand the text. This approach can also allow for a more personal interpretive approach, analyzing the text while equipped with historical and cultural information but without reliance on traditional or religious precedence. This is not an ahistorical or noncontextual reading, but rather one that preferences the text above and before what others have said the text means. Nor must such a reading tend toward literalism; it can instead reveal literary and rhetorical nuances unencumbered by traditionalist constraints. A literary reading is not without critique but does offer the possibility of encountering the text afresh.

Taken together, these two positions can make it possible to read the Qur'an in such a way that we respect the long and impressive Islamic interpretive tradition. At the same time, we need not be constrained by the expectations of one school of thought or another. Indeed, the Islamic tradition as a whole often exhibits disputes between different exegetical—that is, interpretive—schools. Highlighting the disputes between different interpretive traditions can be of great benefit, as it reveals to the outside reader the rich and various readings that surround and elaborate the Qur'an.

Indeed, the Qur'an has never been understood to say one thing and one thing only; instead, it demands interpretation, and the different interpretive methods born from this demand mean that the Qur'an remains a text open to dispute and argumentation.

Insider and outsider accounts of the text's creation, divinity, and meaning are disputed. This is not any different from any other religious text, but perhaps in our world today, answers about these questions seem more pertinent than ever. And even if answers prove to be difficult to come by, the investigation itself is relevant and enlightening.

Sura 1 was ultimately chosen to open the whole of the written Qur'an, and it is often thought of as a succinct summary of the text:

Bismillah ar-rahmani Raheem

In the name of God, the lord of mercy, the giver of mercy

Praise belongs to God, lord of the worlds, the lord of mercy, the giver of mercy

Master of the Day of Judgment, it is you we worship, it is you we ask for help

Guide us to the straight path, the path of those you have blessed, those who incur no anger, those who have not gone astray.

And thus, questions surely arise.

The Qur'an must always be understood as an object of interpretation. We can never say what the Qur'an truly says, because the history of the Qur'an illustrates that its many truths are debated and disputed. However, by exploring the means by which the Qur'an has been understood in both theory and practice, we can come to a better understanding of how and why it continues to play a central role in our common human experience.

READINGS

Afsarauddin, *The First Muslims*.
Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*.
McAuliffe, ed., *Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*.
Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*.
Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an*.

QUESTIONS

1. How are the origins of the Qur'an both different from and similar to accounts of other religious texts with which you're familiar?

2. How much does belief factor into our ability to understand and appreciate a religious text? Does disbelief change or impede our reactions to a text? What is lost and/or gained in a literary approach to religious texts?

7th-Century Mecca: Religion and Oral Tradition

Muḥammad's message did not erupt into a vacuum, but instead joined an already fervent conversation with a variety of preexisting religious, cultural, and political ideas. Indeed, to understand the Qur'an, it's necessary to understand the customs and practices into which it was originally introduced.

Religious Context of Mecca circa AD 610

Traditional accounts of Mecca's religious character at the time of Muḥammad's birth tend to emphasize the polytheistic practices common to the Arabian Peninsula. According to this account, the various tribes that populated Mecca and its immediate vicinity were accustomed to worshipping their own individual, tribal deities. In fact, Mecca as a flourishing community was economically reliant on this diversity of religious practice.

Despite lacking strategic, material, or environmental riches, Mecca's success as a polity hinged on an ancient stone structure within the city walls: the Kaaba. We are told this square building was used to house the

idols of the various tribal gods. The custom was that for one month of the year, local tribes would suspend any disputes between themselves and journey to Mecca to visit their deities—and to trade. In this way, Mecca's economy was built on this shrine to the gods, and the prohibition of weapons or fighting within the grounds of the city enabled a robust trading atmosphere.

Muḥammad was born into a tribe—the Quraysh—who were charged with the maintenance and protection of the Kaaba. However, neither of Muḥammad's parents were near the center of power, and when they died, leaving Muḥammad orphaned, his social standing was endangered.

Luckily for Muḥammad, he was taken in by his uncle, Abū Ṭālib, a relatively prominent member of the Quraysh tribe, enabling the future Prophet to avoid a bleak future.

The so-called polytheism of southwestern Arabia was a complicated affair, and our knowledge of it is somewhat opaque. It is believed that the local deity to whom the Kaaba was dedicated was called Hubal, but other figures that were honored or housed in the shrine might have included the goddesses al-Lāt, al-'Uzzā, and Manāt.

Some accounts suggest that, during Muḥammad's time, some 360 different deities were kept within the Kaaba, perhaps corresponding to the days of the year. Interestingly, it's also suggested that 'Isā and Maryam—Jesus and Mary—were also represented here, along with Allah.

Allah is the Arabic term for "the god." It's not the proper name of some particular deity but is instead a descriptor.

As a figure, there is scarce information about Allah's character prior to the Qur'anic revelation. How exactly Allah was understood in pre-Islamic times is largely unknowable.

Some of the deities worshipped at the Kaaba are figures that are still known and worshipped today. A few of these—most notably the goddesses—are specifically addressed in the Qur'an. Sura 53:19–23 reads in part:

> [C]onsider al-Lāt and al-'Uzzā, and the third, other one Manāt —are you to have the male and He the female? That would be a most unjust distribution! – these are nothing but names you have invented yourselves, you and your forefathers. God has sent no authority for them.

This verse is somewhat enigmatic, but the assertion that some gods are nothing but invented names without authority becomes a trope throughout the text, rejecting idols of all sorts. This reference illustrates the polytheistic practices believed to be customary in Mecca at the time of Muḥammad's birth.

Judaism in Arabia

In addition to localized polytheism, other religious practices circulated throughout the Arabian Peninsula during Muḥammad's lifetime. Perhaps the most immediately prevalent was Judaism.

Since at least the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, and perhaps dating all the way back to the first great Jewish diaspora in 586 BC, various Jews and Arab converts to Judaism made homes in Arabia. Often identified as distinct tribes, these groups likely exerted a noticeable, if modest, influence on Arabian religious life. Because these tribes were widely dispersed across the peninsula, it's also likely that most Arabs were familiar with Judaism as a distinct practice.

The initial and most significant impact of the presence of Jews and Jewish literature is fairly simple: familiarity. Many first-time readers of the Qur'an are surprised to find that it is replete with characters from the Hebrew Bible; Adam, Noah, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, David, and Solomon—to name a few—all play significant roles in the text.

And their presence answers a question about the original audience of Muḥammad's recitation: Had the inhabitants of Mecca been familiar with only the tribal gods previously mentioned, the recurring Qur'anic rejoinder to "remember Moses" or "remember Abraham" would have been baffling, but because the text treats these characters so familiarly, we can also assume that Jewish stories were already a prevalent part of the Meccan oral tradition.

Byzantine and Other Christianities

Jesus is one of the most prominent figures in the Qur'anic text, rivaled only by Moses and Abraham. Mary has an entire sura, or chapter, named after her, and she is repeatedly referred to as "the virgin." So, we can assume familiarity with Christian ideas and concepts.

But what sort of Christianity would have been present in Arabia in the 7th century? Here, too, we need to make inferences from a deficit of historical evidence, but we can make some educated assumptions.

Christianity at the time of Muḥammad's birth was anything but a settled affair. In fact, the ecumenical councils that debated orthodox Christian belief and practice were still ongoing, and the decisions from these councils was still reverberating through—and contested by—the growing movement.

Byzantine Christianity, from which we get Catholicism and the Orthodox traditions, was the most significant expression of Christian doctrine, but by no means was it the only. Many additional Christian communities clung to their now heterodox beliefs about the nature of God and Jesus. It was especially these outsider groups that might have made their way to Arabia, effectively outside the control of the Byzantine Empire.

In particular, disputes about Jesus's divinity were still raging, as were questions about the status of Mary. Was Jesus God and man combined? Was Jesus just a prophet? Was Mary holy in some particular manner? These debates within the broader Christian community matter for our understanding of the Qur'an because they lend some insight into what sorts of Christian ideas might have been familiar to Muḥammad's audience. For example, sura 5:17 reads:

> Those who say, "God is the Messiah, the son of Mary," are defying the truth. Say, "If it had been God's will, could anyone have prevented Him from destroying the Messiah, son of Mary, together with his mother and everyone else on earth? Control of the heavens and earth and all that is between them belongs to God: He creates whatever He will. God has power over everything."

In this text, Jesus is clearly identified as "the Messiah," a title he bears in the Islamic tradition. Furthermore, Mary is mentioned here twice, illustrating her importance, but is described only as Jesus's mother, without additional titles. Most importantly, Jesus's divinity is explicitly rejected; the Jesus of the Qur'an is absolutely the Messiah, but he is also absolutely not divine.

In this sense, the Qur'an is weighing in on the disputes about Jesus's character that were prevalent during and contemporary to Muḥammad's lifetime. At the same time, the mere mention of Jesus and Mary tells us that Muḥammad's audience would have heard of them; to have mentioned Jesus and Mary without context would have been confusing.

So, it's safe to assume that Meccans had indeed heard of Jesus and Mary and were at least passingly familiar with the fact that their nature was in dispute, even if the Meccan audience was not privy to the theological details.

In outlining the presence of both Jewish and Christian communities in 7th-century Arabia, some critics of the Qur'an in the past used this information to disparage the Qur'an and Muḥammad, suggesting he was only recombining bits and pieces of other traditions.

However, examining Jewish and Christian figures in the text is not meant to be evidence that the Qur'an is of divine origin or that it is a purely human invention. Instead, placing the Qur'an in its religious context helps explain why it treats these figures as it does.

As with Judaism, it seems as if the Meccan—and, later, Medinian—audiences for Muḥammad's revelation were already familiar with many of the main figures from the Christian narrative and had some broad understanding of the disputes about their natures.

Sassanid Zoroastrianism and Ahura Mazdā

In addition to the Byzantine Empire, the other great geopolitical force that bordered Arabia was the Persian—more properly, the Sassanid—empire. The dominant religious tradition of the Sassanids was what we today call Zoroastrianism, although at the time, it might more accurately be thought of as Mazdāism: the worship of Ahura Mazdā as the supreme Wise Lord, as proscribed by the prophet Zoroaster.

Ahura Mazdā

There is less evidence for the influence of Mazdāism in the Qur'an, save for one verse. Sura 22:17 says:

> As for the believers, those who follow the Jewish faith, the Sabians, the Christians, the Magians, and the idolaters, God will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection; God witnesses all things.

The reference to the Persian tradition is the Magians, from the word *magi*. As with the three magi in the Gospel of Matthew who visit the infant Jesus, magi were the high priests of the Persian tradition. There are a few, more-oblique references to "fire-worshippers," which might also be a reference to the role the sacred flame plays in the worship of Ahura Mazdā.

The other unfamiliar name here—the Sabians—is even more unclear. It likely refers to a group of Gnostic monotheists that were sparsely spread throughout Arabia and the Near East. They are perhaps related to the Mandaeans. Little is known about either tradition or practice, however.

So, the Qur'an is aware of a variety of competing religious claims. The verse suggests that one needn't be overly concerned about these disputes because ultimately God will decide, although the further implication, naturally, is that one would be safest accepting the Qur'anic message. The references to these traditions illustrate a kind of situational awareness on the part of the Qur'an: Introduced into a complicated and multireligious context, the Qur'an addresses this diversity head on.

Orality and Poetry in Arabia

Tradition holds that Muḥammad was illiterate, at least in the sense that we understand the term today; it's highly unlikely that he read or wrote with any great facility. And this would have been the norm not just in Arabia, but worldwide, as global literacy is really only a modern phenomenon. Instead, as with most people in the 6th and 7th centuries, Muḥammad and his fellow Arabs would have struggled with reading and writing but would have excelled at the literary art of storytelling.

The richness of the oral tradition cannot be overstated. The most popular form of entertainment at the time would have been recitations of poetry and heroic epics, usually public affairs that would gather large audiences. The audience, in turn, would have been adept at remembering these verses and tales and would likely have passed them along to friends and family. It was by word of mouth that news was spread, stories were told, and religious ideas were promulgated.

Indeed, it is in pre-Islamic poetry that we have our best-surviving examples of literature prior to the Qur'an, and it gives evidence of social mores and customs as well as insights into the grammar and vocabulary of classical Arabic.

These poems, as works of art, were most highly valued for their melodic eloquence and were often less concerned with narrative cohesion. In this sense, the literary traditions that preceded Muḥammad are also reflected in the Qur'an: short, verse-like phrases and snapshots that cohere as tonally evocative. And like other oral traditions, repetition and rhyme serve as mnemonic devices for the reciters and mental signposts for the audience.

It's important to recognize that the Qur'an anticipates its audience. This shouldn't be surprising. Any successful religious movement needs to speak to the people where they are; doing otherwise would be to doom a movement to failure before it began.

On the other hand, the Qur'an often challenges the assumptions of its audience. The simplest evidence of this is the repeated admonishment of idolaters and disbelievers. Remember, the foundation to Mecca's economy was the worship of tribal idols in the Kaaba, so to hear a warning against this practice would have been shocking.

Orality played a significant role in both the literary traditions of the time and in the creation of the Qur'an as a text. It's important to remember that the Qur'an was not composed as modern books were. It began as an oral phenomenon that was passed along among the growing adherents to Muḥammad's warning. When it came time to write the book down, the oral character of the text remained a feature, not a bug. If we are to understand the Qur'an on its own terms, its orality must remain central.

READINGS

Afsarauddin, *The First Muslims*.
Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers*.
Massumed and Rettig, eds., *The Art of the Qur'an*.
McAuliffe, ed., *Cambridge Companion to the Qur'an*.
Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*.
Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an*.

QUESTIONS

1 What role did other religious beliefs play in the context into which the Qur'an was introduced? How do you think this might have influenced that audience's reaction to the Qur'anic message?

2 How does the centrality of an oral tradition shape our understanding of the Qur'an? What is different between reading and listening to any text?

LECTURE 3

The Qur'an Becomes a "Book"

Any attempt to translate a text from one language to another will involve some level of betrayal to comprehension, meaning, or nuance. There are four main issues of translation regarding the Qur'an: the experiential difference between an oral text and a written text; the literary problem of transforming an oral text into a written text; the theological question of whether we can accept the Qur'anic text as we have it today as an accurate reflection of Muḥammad's recitation; and the contemporary problem of translation, or how non-Arabic readers can encounter a text that is deeply reliant on its source language for meaning and nuance.

Experiencing the Qur'an

One of the most remarkable features of the Qur'an as a historical document is the evidence we have for early written forms of the text. Some of the partial manuscripts date to the early 8th century, and some fragmentary writings date to the late and even mid-7th century. In other words, people were committing the revelation to the written page at the latest within 50 years of the Prophet's death. There is scholarly dispute about how we should consider the various fragments and pages that are still preserved.

Early written forms of the Qur'an appear in either what is called the Hejazi or Kūfic scripts. In both cases, these scripts lack the linguistic markings of modern Arabic and thus present various historical challenges. Was there any dispute about the meaning of particular words? Were some passages eventually excluded from what became the standardized text? Were some passages not authentic to Muḥammad?

While we cannot definitively answer these questions, we can adopt what scholar Michael Sells calls a "theologically neutral" stance toward the text, in which debate about authorship becomes secondary to the text itself. As he describes this, "Such attributions, now also common for the Bible, allow for a text to be discussed without constant and tendentious assumptions about its authorship."

It's useful to assume this position so that we can focus on how the Qur'an was experienced in its earliest, formative decades. The written fragments of the recitation were created for a specific and practical reason: as aides for the public recitation of Muḥammad's message, so that others might hear and perhaps memorize for themselves the revelation. Such public recitals were especially important following Muḥammad's death in AD 632.

The audience for this revelation was particular and specific in terms of their sophisticated appreciation for orality. It should be no surprise, then, that the Qur'an in recited Arabic plays on that expectation. Again turning to Michael Sells, from his important work *Approaching the Qur'an*:

> The complex Qur'anic sound patterns and the relation of sound to meaning—what we might call the "sound vision" of the Qur'an—are brought out and cultivated in Qur'anic recitation. No translation can fully capture this sound vision … a lyricism comparable to that of the Psalms.

There is something in the stylized recitation of the Qur'an that is impossible to convey in either the written Arabic or in any translation, no matter its literary felicity.

All the more reason, then, that the early written forms of the Qur'an capture the recitation as precisely as possible. The Hejazi and Kūfic scripts began to give way to increasingly sophisticated representations of the Arabic language. In this way, the development of the Qur'an as a written text was ineluctably related to the oral recitation of it. The early, fragmentary crib sheets quickly morphed into devices for spreading the text, and ever-greater orthographic detail and precision was necessary so that the memory of a companion of Muḥammad could be accurately transmitted to those who did not have the advantage of first-hand listening.

As a result, during the course of perhaps 150 years following Muḥammad's death, the writing of Arabic evolved to assure the accurate transmission of the oral phenomenon.

Similar to how the works of Shakespeare are often credited with the invention of English as a modern language, the Qur'an in this sense forced the invention of modern written Arabic.

At the same time, very few people—either in Arabia or globally in the 7th and 8th centuries—could read. The practical effect was that the dissemination of the Qur'an in both oral and written forms was tightly controlled by scholars who had worked hard to master the text in both its forms. The written texts were always at the service of the communal experience of reciting the revelation aloud to an audience, and the recitation itself likewise developed schools of transmission to ensure accuracy.

The Literary Qur'an

Following the death of Muḥammad, his close followers—those people who became the so-called Companions of the Prophet—had to address the issue of how they were to maintain and spread his message.

The tradition holds that Muḥammad was illiterate—meaning at least that he did not write down the revelations himself. In addition to Muḥammad's own memory, his Companions had taken to trying to memorize the revelation, and it's said that one of Muḥammad's wives, ʿĀ'ishah, possessed written versions of some of the revelations. But there was no composed, written, final version of the Qur'an in existence at the time of Muḥammad's death.

In this sense, our historical record aligns with the tradition: The Qur'an was not yet a "book" in the modern sense when Muḥammad died. And it's evident that Muḥammad's Companions recognized this as a problem.

At this point, however, the story becomes murky and contested. Some hold that Muḥammad's political successor, Abū Bakr, began to collect different fragments of the text. Perhaps the second successor, ʿUmar, did the same. Most Muslims agree, however, that it was the third successor, ʿUthmān, who—given the rapidly expanding empire newly under Arab

control—grew concerned that there were discrepancies being introduced into the revelation.

After all, military conquests had stretched the reach of a newly united Arab polity into Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, and beyond. This wide geographic sprawl meant that those who were closest to the Prophet weren't able to monitor and correct the spread of Muḥammad's message.

The tradition in Islam holds that, at this point, 'Uthmān deputized Zayd ibn Thābit to collect, correct, and preserve the revelation. Thābit is said to have served as Muḥammad's scribe in addition to having memorized numerous revelations himself. By asking Thābit to gather and sort all recorded and remembered versions of the revelation, 'Uthmān hoped to enshrine Muḥammad's message in an uncontested form.

Thābit's efforts apparently included gathering any written versions he could locate as well as interviewing and recording memorized portions of the revelation from trusted followers of Muḥammad. Weeding out specious or disparate lines, Thābit assembled a final compilation known as the 'Uthmanic Codex, copies of which are said to have been distributed to the major cities in the rapidly expanding empire.

Thus, according to traditional accounts, that initial *'iqra* had become the *al-qur'an*—"the recitation." This process was theoretically completed less than 25 years after the death of Muḥammad, a remarkably short amount of time in terms of religious history, and in this way, 'Uthmān and Thābit saved the revelation from corruption.

But here we encounter a major obstacle: There is no verifiable edition of 'Uthmān's codex still available to us. In fact, there is no existing whole and complete copy of the Qur'an until the early 10th century—some 300 to 400 years after the Prophet's death.

What we do have are pages and pages of the recitation—often loose-leafed and incomplete, though also highly standardized—written on vellum, palm leaves, and early paper; inscribed in stone; or painted onto decorative tiles.

These were the sorts of written versions that Zayd ibn Thābit would have been collecting in his effort to construct the whole of the Qur'an. Checked against his own memory or that of others, it would have been theoretically possible to collate an edition of the text that came relatively, perhaps even nearly perfectly, close to Muḥammad's utterances. But again, we have no copy of Thābit's efforts.

The literary question of the Qur'an hinges on the discrepancy between what tradition holds about Zayd ibn Thābit's collecting and standardizing efforts versus the evidence available to us. There is a historical gap of some 200 years between the earliest fragments of the Qur'an and a complete version of the text that corresponds to the Qur'an we know today.

But lack of evidence isn't evidence to the contrary. Indeed, the fragments of the Qur'an we do have, including manuscripts only found in the 1970s in the attic of a Yemeni mosque, illustrate a high degree of correlation.

During his time, no one would have thought Thābit's endeavor was impossible or unlikely on the face of it. Many Muslims still today make it a practice to memorize the whole of the Qur'an.

At the same time, there is evidence of variant readings, some of them also attributed to close and trusted Companions of the Prophet, that did not make the final version of 'Uthmān's codex. Why was this? Did Thābit manage to collect all or even nearly all of the Prophet's revelation? Or did editing occur? Were some verses or words changed or left out to support differing political or theological agendas?

Again, we can't answer these questions with certainty, but we now have a sense of how the text evolved from fragmentary pieces into a cohesive whole. The solution—whether at the hand of Thābit or some later, more gradual compendium—was to create thematically organized chapters, called suras. Some of them are clearly whole and complete moments of revelation, while others are pastiches of different revelatory moments.

After the Qur'an's prayer-like opening sura is a series of chapters in roughly descending length, which themselves roughly correspond, inversely, to the chronology of their revelation.

While order according to length might seem to be a strange way to organize a book, aside from one sura—the chapter on Joseph—there is no narrative arc followed from beginning to end in the Qur'an, and order or context of revelation is not necessary to understanding its meaning.

Theology of the Text

Didn't the revelation come to Muḥammad during a very particular time and in a very particular place? Does it not reflect that historical time and culture during which it was first recited? Were the words uttered by Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh nearly 1,400 years ago perfectly transposed in the editions we can buy or read online?

To ask these questions suggests that the Qur'an has a history. And to say the Qur'an has a history is to engage in a theological dispute.

While it wasn't always the case, over time, the orthodox view about the Qur'an became that the text was God's eternal (meaning that it has always existed) and uncreated (meaning its final form was not the work of human hands) speech.

The position of the Muslim community is that the Qur'an as we have it today is the inerrant word of God as transmitted to the Prophet Muḥammad. This inerrancy is most directly attributed to the oral version of the Qur'an, at least in the sense that this was the original mechanism for transmission. The written Qur'an is a reflection of, and thus secondary to, the oral text.

That's the theological stance; the scholarly opinion is more mixed. While there is a great degree of uniformity among the early fragments of the Qur'an, the variations that are known—and the lack of evidence between the earliest folios and the finished product—introduce sufficient doubt that the Qur'an as we know it is inerrantly reflective of Muḥammad's message.

The history of the Qur'an as a book has bearing on the interpretive tradition of the text. But perhaps the tension between tradition and historical evidence doesn't matter. In other words, whether or not the

printed text of the Qur'an as we have it today is perfectly representative of Muḥammad's message is less important than the fact that billions of Muslims have believed it to be so.

The Contemporary Qur'an

It's abundantly clear that parts of the Qur'an we have today were in wide circulation, well known, and agreed upon very early within the tradition's history. But we cannot know that the whole of the text is perfectly representative of the words recited by Muḥammad—and we will never know this with absolute certainty.

Today, we have a text shared by the nearly 2 billion Muslims the world over. Only a fraction of Muslims read and speak Arabic, however, so it is in translation that a great many Muslims and non-Muslims alike encounter the Qur'an. The text has been translated into a majority of the world's languages, and these translations all grapple with the history of the Qur'an as a text in different ways.

And perhaps this is as it should be. From a historian's point of view, it is reasonable to conclude that the final version of the Qur'an is the result of human effort: It was collated and collected, and perhaps edited, by people working in the wake of Muḥammad's legacy.

Indeed, many elements of the text that are today assumed—chapter divisions and titles, verse number indicators—are ipso facto inventions. Even if we assume the very best of intentions of Thābit and whoever followed him in the construction of the Qur'an, editorial—and thus interpretive—decisions were made.

READINGS

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Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*.
Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an*.

QUESTIONS

1 How do questions about the formation of the Qur'an as a physical object create problems for understanding and interpreting the text?

2 How do historical questions about the Qur'an create problems for both religious insiders and outsiders?

LECTURE 4

From Mecca to Medina: The Revelation Transforms

The revelation of the Qur'an is routinely divided into two distinct categories: those suras, or chapters, revealed in Mecca and those revealed after the hijra, or migration to Medina. This division is more than a geographic one, however, as the locale is also an indicator of tonal, thematic, and content differences in the revelations.

Once Muḥammad and his followers established residence in Medina, the community needed social and organizational guidance, and the Qur'an provided it. But before the text could provide a blueprint for how the community of believers should organize themselves, the community first had to be created.

The Meccan Suras

The Meccan suras are dominated by what might be called an evangelizing mission. The audience for Muḥammad's recitation was a community of diverse but specific religious and cultural customs. Predominately, the Meccans valued the various idols and figures housed in the Kaaba, which would likely have included a variety of Arabian deities as well as perhaps some Christian iconography.

In addition, because pilgrimage to Mecca was a primary source for the local economy, allegiance was not just to the figures themselves but also to the very practical benefit that being home to a site of ritual pilgrimage provided. In short, Muḥammad's revelation was both a religious and economic challenge to the entrenched powers of Mecca.

The Qur'an's message in the earliest suras radically challenged the status quo, disrupting Meccan social and economic customs and becoming, after a while, a dangerous endeavor for Muḥammad.

Additionally, the worldview of the Qur'an would have struck its earliest audience as strange and foreign, especially those passages that envision the end times and divine judgment. The vision of an ultimate Judgment Day—during which God will weigh our deeds and offer us entrance into a garden paradise or send us to an eternal punishment—was not common in 7th-century Arabia.

While some nominal notion of heaven and hell may have been familiar from Christian or Zoroastrian merchants, the more common belief was what might be called an "epic" ethos: Death is final and nonnegotiable, so one's legacy comes through fame, fortune, or family.

Furthermore, the language the Qur'an employs in its earliest suras exhibits a keen sense of audience. Public recitation of epic poetry was a popular and sophisticated art form during Muḥammad's time. Seemingly attuned to this, many of the Meccan suras employ tropes and figures of speech that would have been familiar to listeners at the outset, but the Qur'an often subverts the expected conclusions. The genius of the early Meccan suras is that they reverse both the assumed direction of the story and of the moral framework common to 7th-century Arabia.

> Time and again, the earliest revelations begin by playing to the expectations of the audience—using images and tropes one might hear during any poetry recitation—and then upend those same images with a clarion call for moral reevaluation.

The moral judgment is accompanied by another significant revision to pre-Islamic tradition: Prior to Muḥammad, either death was understood as an ultimate end, or if an afterlife was imagined, it paralleled the shadowy underworld familiar to us from Greek thought—a place of dim, ethereal existence where all are equally cut off from the joys of embodied life.

Perhaps the key innovation of the Qur'an revelation, then, is the repeated insistence on a day of reckoning: *yawm ad-din*. As sura 100 describes it, "when the contents of graves are thrown out, when the secrets of hearts are uncovered, on that Day, their Lord will be fully aware of them all." Here, death is not the final end; instead, God will remove us from the grave to judge. Muḥammad's audience did not readily accept this eschatological vision.

Another recurrent theme is the use of oaths as a kind of formula. For instance, sura 92 begins, "By the covering night, by the radiant day, by the male and female He created, the ways you take differ greatly." Here we are given contrasts—night and day, male and female—to serve a three-fold purpose: God is credited with the whole of creation; the stark contrasts serve to illustrate the sura's intention of distinguishing between the path of the believer and disbeliever, the latter of whom is bound for a "raging Fire"; and the invocation of an oath—"By the covering night"—serves as a declaration of truth and authenticity.

Just as we today swear an oath to "tell the truth" or "defend the Constitution," the Qur'an asserts its honesty in reference to all of the created world, and it does so many times. The compounding effect is an assertion of honesty and authenticity about the recitation of Muḥammad.

In addition to the revelation itself, God's role as creator of the universe and the reality of Judgment Day are the most prevalent themes of the earliest suras. Clearly, the task at the outset of Muḥammad's prophetic career was to advocate for the validity of this message in general and for these two theological principles in particular.

God's creative power and the truth of Judgment Day were so overtly emphasized likely because these two ideas were most fundamentally at odds with Meccan custom and belief at the time.

The existence of an afterlife was either discounted or minimized in the traditions of 7th-century Arabia, and the assertion that God—Allah—was the sole creator of the world was a direct affront to the pantheon of pagan Arab gods and to the economy of the city. This dual threat was likely responsible for the broad resistance to Muḥammad's message in the early years of the revelation. This new vision intended to completely upend the establish practices and traditions of Mecca—and it did.

Muḥammad in Medina

But before Mecca's pagan customs were abandoned, the entrenched powers in Mecca sought to expel Muḥammad and his growing cadre of followers. In AD 622, 12 years after beginning his prophetic preaching and after a variety of assaults, including an assassination attempt, Muḥammad sought refuge in a moderately sized city northeast of Mecca called Yathrib.

Tradition holds that this was a mutual agreement: Not only was Muḥammad searching for a place of physical safety, but the citizens of Yathrib had endured their own civic turmoil and were in search of new leadership. As the story goes, Muḥammad was invited to relocate to serve as a kind of mayor or governor of Yathrib, and his followers were welcome to come and establish their community without physical threat.

There is a longer story about this emigration, called the hijra, but the short version is that Muḥammad did manage to construct a new and relatively united polity in Yathrib—one that eventually grew strong enough to challenge Mecca militarily. The negotiations with, and suppression of, those who objected to Muḥammad's new political authority is an important historical detail because it sheds light on the shift in message of the Qur'anic verses that were revealed while Muḥammad was in Yathrib.

Because Muḥammad had been invited to the city and because he arrived with a band of committed believers, the main challenge was no longer convincing the people of the authenticity of the Qur'anic vision. Instead, Muḥammad had to establish an enduring community, and the revelations he subsequently received are often directed to this purpose. Instructions about marital and sexual relationships, inheritance, taxation and support for the poor, the proper conduct of war, and foreign affairs increasingly became main themes of the Qur'anic message.

Nowhere is this better exemplified than in sura 2, the longest chapter in the Qur'an. This important verse creates a relationship between the followers of Muḥammad—here called "the believers," or *mu'minun*—and others who hold the core beliefs of God's reality, Judgment Day, and the virtue of good acts. All of these, the message says, will be rewarded. The implication was—and remains—that the message given to Muḥammad was in concert with these other communities and that there needn't be inherent tension between them.

This description of what comes to be called the "People of the Book"—*ahl al-kitab*—is followed by various allusions to Moses and Jesus and the struggles they endured in convincing people of the truth of God's word. The implication here is clearly a struggle between a vision of a broad and inclusive community and the reality that Muḥammad's message was not universally accepted. Muḥammad was still working to unite disparate groups, so the appeal to the prophetic exemplars of Moses and Jesus had obvious rhetorical value.

As in other Medinian suras, references to Biblical characters are used repeatedly as reminders directed toward Jewish and Christian groups, as if asking: "Do you not recall how all the previous prophets were criticized? Do you want to make this mistake again?" The effectiveness of this line of argument was mixed. The Jewish tribes in Medina remained largely opposed to Muḥammad's message, but as the community of believers continued to grow, increasing numbers of both Jews and Christians converted. The early history of Islam was enriched by these converts, and the Qur'an's strategy of appealing directly to their most prominent figures seems to have been a success.

About a third of the way through sura 2, we are given a fascinating and somewhat surprising story. Starting with verse 125, the text reads:

> We made the House a resort and a sanctuary for people, saying, "Take the spot where Abraham stood as your place of prayer." We commanded Abraham and Ishmael: "Purify My House for those who walk around it, those who stay there, and those who bow and prostrate themselves in worship. ... As Abraham and Ishmael built up the foundations of the House, 'Our Lord, accept [this] from us. You are the All Hearing, the All Knowing. Our Lord, make us devoted to you; make our descendants into a community devoted to You.'"

This is a watershed moment in the history of Muḥammad's followers. While mentioned elsewhere in the Qur'an, the impact of what this story is meant to convey cannot be overstated.

In brief, Muḥammad had initially directed his followers to pray, like the Jews, in the direction of Jerusalem. However, following these new revelations, it came to be understood that the Kaaba in Mecca had in fact originally been built by Abraham and his son by the slave Hagar, Ishmael. The Hebrew Bible is silent on the fate of Hagar and Ishmael once they are driven from Abraham's tent by the jealous Sarah. The Qur'an picks up on this silence and fills the gap by telling how Hagar fled with a young Ishmael to Arabia, where Abraham apparently paid visits to his firstborn son. While on such a visit, it's argued that they together built a "House"—the Kaaba. This sanctuary to the one true God fell into idolatry in subsequent centuries, but the Qur'an argues for its restoration.

Once the Qur'an established this heritage, the community changed its direction of prayer away from Jerusalem and toward the Kaaba, which Muḥammad would subsequently cleanse of idols once Mecca submitted to the growing power of Muḥammad's community.

While the direction of prayer apparently upset some Jews who were inclined toward the revelation, the adoption of the Kaaba as part of the Abrahamic lineage meant that many Arabs felt reconnected to Muḥammad's message. Reasserting the sacredness of the Kaaba, establishing it as intimately connected to Abraham, apparently helped ease acceptance of the Qur'anic message.

While skeptics might call this blatant pandering, it can also—and perhaps more accurately—be read as political genius. Of course, the tradition maintains that this was God's genius, but whoever is responsible for it, the effect cannot be argued with: Before he dies in AD 632, Muḥammad not only brought Mecca into his political control, but he managed to unite, through various means, nearly the whole Arabian Peninsula. For a territory that had not previously known political unity, this was a monumental achievement, and it foreshadows the success of the community over the next thousand years.

Within 22 years, Muḥammad, a relatively minor member of society, transformed into the undisputed religious and political leader in Arabia. And even more remarkably, his success was driven by a religious message that was initially at odds with nearly all of the prevailing local traditions.

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Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an*.

QUESTIONS

1 The Qur'an plays on, and routinely upsets, the expectations of the original 7th-century audience. How do these rhetorical tropes read today?

2 The suras revealed in Medina are theologically and politically complex. How do you understand the references to various Biblical figures in service of the Qur'anic message?

God and Tawhid*: Divine Nature in the Qur'an*

By any measure, God is the central concern of the Qur'an. But at the same time, God in the Qur'an remains elusive and ineffable. God is rarely described in any concrete form, and the divine nature is made evident only through our interpretation of God's instructions to us. We are told what God is not: God is neither male nor female, not mortal, not plural, nor even imaginable. Is there a concrete and graspable notion of God that appears over the course of the Qur'anic revelation?

The Qur'anic Vision of God

The first revelation given to Muḥammad, sura 96, emphatically states that God is the Creator: "Read! In the name of your Lord who created: He created man from a clinging form."

If we add the *bismillah* to this passage—*bismillah ar-rahmani raheem*—we learn also that God is the most merciful: "In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy."

Thus, in two short lines, God is characterized as merciful, the Creator, and our Lord and is signaled using a gendered pronoun. In some sense, this is a fairly standard depiction of God—no different from Jewish or Christian notions of the divine.

But it is worth reflecting further on the first words of the *bismillah*. Michael Sells translates the Arabic, *bi smi Allah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim*, as "In the name of God the Compassionate the Caring." He then goes on to note:

> This phrase is frequently translated, "In the name of God the Compassionate the Merciful," but traditional scholars have emphasized that the terms *Rahman* and *Rahim* are based upon an Arabic etymology linked to the word for womb (*rahm*). In addition, "mercy as a quality of forgiveness has been strongly marked by Christian associations with the doctrine of original sin, whereas the Qur'an does not posit the notion of original sin. For these reasons, and for the purposes of euphony and alliteration, I have used the translation "the Compassionate the Caring."

Here, Sells uses the shared etymology of *Rahman* and *Rahim* to navigate a variety of important and interrelated points about God in the Qur'an. In addition to attending to the tricky question of how to convey the sonic quality of the Arabic Qur'an—here choosing the alliterative terms *Compassionate* and *Caring*—Sells's mention of the root word for *Rahman* and *Rahim* introduces interesting information about how the original Qur'anic phrase would deepen and complicate our understanding of God.

The association with *womb*—an inherently female attribute—pushes our image of God beyond the static associations that the male pronoun might suggest. God is creator, mother-like, and a Lord all wrapped into one.

Standard translations of the Qur'an are rarely shy about referring to God in gendered language—as *He*—but such a choice conveys neither the complexity of the Qur'anic vision nor the judgment of the theologians. As God is not like us, does not possess a body like us, God cannot be said to be male or female and is instead of another sort altogether, one for which human gender categories are simply inadequate.

The more standard translation of the *bismillah* as meaning "compassionate" and "merciful" suggests an additional, if still incomplete, vision. Compassion as a concept implies a horizontal relationship: We feel with, or, more literally, "suffer with," someone close to us. Mercy, on the other hand, suggests a vertical relationship, as mercy is handed down from above to the undeserving.

So, while these two terms do not indicate a maternal relationship, they do give a sense of how God is with and above us simultaneously. God feels our pain through proximity but extends mercy as our superior. This dual nature suggests the ways in which God is intimately involved in human life while at the same time utterly unlike humans—superior in every way.

Tawhid, the Oneness of God

If the nature of God that is beginning to emerge here is one in which God's character exceeds our capacity to understand, other passages of the Qur'an give more particular instructions. Sura 112, among the briefest in the whole text, is also bracingly direct. It reads in its entirety: "Say, 'He is God the One, God the eternal. He begot no one nor was He begotten. No one is comparable to Him."

Some traditions hold that this brief statement was considered by the Prophet Muḥammad to be "equal to one-third of the Qur'an," emphasizing as it does the most fundamental characteristic of God in the Islamic tradition: *tawhid*. *Al-ahad*, the word here translated as "the One," along with *al-wahid* or "the single," are the roots for *tawhid*, the idea of God's unitary singularity: one and only one, indivisible, admitting no associations, the like of which can be compared to nothing else. Theologically, much is packed into this simple declarative.

The assertion of God's *tawhid*, or oneness, is the positive affirmation of what might be called radical monotheism and is an explicit challenge to both the polytheism of 7th-century Mecca as well as Christian conceptions of a trinitarian divinity.

The final line of the text—"No one is comparable to Him"—continues and expands the understanding of *tawhid*. Because God is one, not only is nothing associated with God directly, but nothing should be associated with God.

If the Allah of the Qur'an is also the God of Abraham—as the text so emphatically insists—then Allah is in many senses the same God as is worshipped by both Jews and Christians, even if not all agree on the messengers of God.

Considering this, to use the word *Allah* when addressing English speakers creates an artificial distance, suggesting that Allah is some different God—an alternative or a competitor.

In Islam, there is a general anti-iconic tradition: the refusal to create images, statuary, or other physical representations of God's form. The resistance to physically representing the divine begins with this verse: Not only is no one comparable, but no *thing* can be said to represent the divine. God is beyond our ability to depict, and the danger of idolatry suggests we should not even try.

> The Islamic opposition to divine iconography has been historically consistent. While opinions have varied greatly regarding general figural representation—including that of the Prophet Muḥammad—the opposition to the depiction of God has been resolute.

God as Author

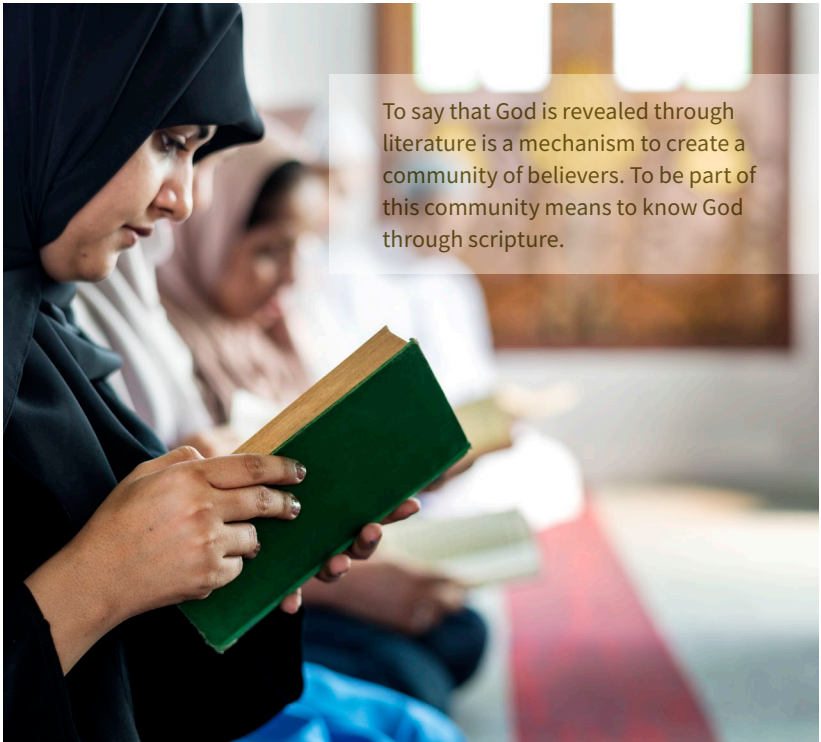
It is via recitation that God speaks to humankind. This is a rather remarkable feature: God reveals God's self to us through words—or, to be blunter, God is literary.

To characterize God as literary is an essential, and not just incidental, element of the Qur'anic vision. Take, for example, the repeated reference to the *ahl al-kitab*, the "People of the Book." This phrase is usually interpreted to refer to Jews, Christians, and Muslims in the collective, a Qur'anic version of the contemporary term *Abrahamic faiths*.

As the term evolved along with the expansion of Islam, the three traditions were understood as part of the same prophetic lineage. As such, Jews and Christians under Muslim rule were afforded special protection. Although they lacked the final revelation given to Muḥammad, they were recognized as being in possession of authentic messages from God and thus part of the broader community of "believers."

However, we can read much more into it: The People of the Book are the People of God, and God is in this sense equated with the Book. Insofar as Jews, Christians, and Muslims are all part of one community, they are collectively differentiated from the idolaters and polytheists. This is telling. God cannot be represented as a sculpture because God can be compared to nothing. God is not many, because God is by nature One. But God is of the Book. If your tradition has a "book" from God—the Hebrew Bible of the Jews or the Gospels of Christians—then you are of God's people.

The Qur'an does not limit God's text only to Muḥammad. It's therefore not only feasible but imminently reasonable to assert that God provided revelation to many others before Muḥammad.



To say that God is revealed through literature is a mechanism to create a community of believers. To be part of this community means to know God through scripture.

An example of God's literary character comes from the use of metaphor and comparison. In sura 2, the text says:

> God does not shy away from drawing comparisons even with something as lowly as a gnat, or higher: the believers know it is the truth from their Lord, but the disbelievers say, "What does God mean by such a comparison?"

One way of reading this passage is to recognize that the text is advocating for a literary imagination: God uses the natural world to make similes or allusions—to speak, in a sense, as a poet. An example of this comes from sura 95:

> By the fig, by the olive, by Mount Sinai, by this safe city, We created man in the finest state then reduced him to the lowest of the low but those who believe and do good deeds will have an unfailing reward. After this, what makes you deny the Judgement? Is God not the fairest of judges?

The evocation of the fig, the olive, and Mount Sinai are literary allusions. God is speaking in what might be called poetic language. The references to various biblical figures and events is another, different example of literary allusion. To say, then, that God's people are People of the Book is not just a reference to shared prophetic lineage, but is instead a suggestion that God's revelations—and thus God's nature—are literary.

God as Named and Unnameable

Another way to think about God in the Qur'an is through the names ascribed to the divine. Sura 20 says obliquely, "God—there is no god but Him—the most excellent names belong to Him." What are these names? Sura 20 doesn't tell us, so we must search the text for clues.

Probably the most comprehensive list of names, or attributes, of God comes in sura 59 and begins with an evocative metaphor:

> If We had sent this Qur'an down to a mountain, you would have seen it humbled and split apart in its awe of God—We offer people such illustrations so that they may reflect—He is God: there is no god other than Him. It is he who knows what is hidden as well as what is in the open, He is the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy. He is God: there is no god other than Him, the Controller, the Holy One, Source of Peace, Granter of Security, Guardian over all, the Almighty, the Compeller, the Truly Great; God is far above anything they consider to be His partner. He is God: the Creator, the Originator, the Shaper. The best names belong to Him. Everything in the heavens and earth glorifies Him: He is the Almighty, the Wise.

Here, perhaps at last, we are given an assertive vision of God's nature—a list of characteristics that might help us understand who God is. But if we look closely at the list, we are still left somewhat in the dark: "Creator," "Originator," and "Shaper" are all similes of a sort, and while there are fine distinctions between each, what new information about God are we really given? Likewise, "Guardian over all," "Almighty," "Compeller," and "Truly Great" are all sorts of superlatives—yes, God is stupendous, but who is God really?

In the Islamic tradition, one manifestation of the elusive character of the divine is what comes to be called the 99 "most beautiful names of God." These names—all derived from the Qur'an, although not wholly comprehensive of Qur'anic reference to the divine—are said to be the inimitable traits of God. But rather than being used as a sort of profile for God, they become ritualized; that is, these names are recited by the devout as a kind of meditative remembrance of God.

God in the Qur'an is not defined—indeed, God's nature is undefinable by nature—but instead, God is experiential. On an existential level, God is encountered on the last day, when we will be judged for the righteousness of our lives. On a theological level, God is indescribable, known only and forever impartially. Phenomenologically, God is literary, accessible to us—at least in part—by the texts' revelations, but with the caveat that any revelation is always and only partial.

Practically, God has qualities—such as Creator and Wise—and we can use these qualities to approach a knowledge of God's character, but only with the understanding that our sense of these terms is based on human experience, which God transcends absolutely. The words, again, will only get us so far.

As students of the Qur'an as a text, what we have in the end is a God who is central to the existence of the text—who is revealed somehow with every word—but in the end still remains hidden. People may be "of the Book," but God is beyond it. In this sense, the text can only serve as an introduction to an experience.

READINGS

Blair and Bloom, "Art and Architecture."
Ernst, *Sufism*.
Lawrence, *Who Is Allah?*
Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an*.

QUESTIONS

1. How do you understand the contention that God's nature is literary? How does this impact your reading of a text like the Qur'an (or any other revelatory book)?

2. How does God's undefinable character in the Islamic tradition complicate or challenge your understanding of the divine?

LECTURE 6

The Qur'anic Creation Story

Although they are presented in disparate snippets spread throughout the text, the story of Adam and Eve—and their temptation and disobedience—is given ample attention in the Qur'an. And inseparable from the story of the first humans, the story of Satan, typically called Iblis in the Qur'an, is more fully realized than in the Bible. The story of Adam, Eve, and Satan emphasizes two main features: the depiction of God as the creator and a discourse on obedience and disobedience.

God as Creator

When thinking about the beginning of the world in the Qur'an, there are at least three different choices for where one could begin. The first chapter of the Qur'an, *al-fātiḥah*, usually translated as "The Opening," is a logical place to start, but it acts simply as a kind of statement of faith and a prayer for beneficence and succor from God. This chapter begins the book, but not the universe. While God is praised as "Lord of the Worlds," there is no specific delineation of his role as creator.

However, if we turn to what most scholars believe to be the first revelation given to Muḥammad, there is something of the creative moment. Sura 96 reads:

> Recite: In the name of thy Lord who created, created Man of a blood clot. Recite: And thy Lord is Most generous, who taught by the Pen, taught Man that he knew not.

We see here, in the very first moment of the tradition, an insistence on God as the one who created—an association that not only demarcates this God from the false, noncreative gods of pagan Arabia, but also situates God as the one who created and taught via revelation.

The first revelation establishes God's creative power at the beginning and is combined with an echo of the Gospel of John's first verse: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God." In this sense, the first Qur'anic revelation combines the creation of humankind and the primacy of textual revelation into an inseparable whole: God created us, and we know God created us because God told us so. God's revelation to us is inextricably related to textualism.

If we piece together different moments in the Qur'an, this vision of divine character is reiterated with a recognition that this message had not yet been revealed to the Arabs. Sura 32 reads:

> This scripture, free from all doubt, has been sent down from the Lord of the Worlds. Yet they say, "Muḥammad has made it up." No indeed! It is the Truth from your Lord for you, to warn a people who have had no one warn them before, so that they may be guided. It is God who created the heavens and the earth

> and everything between them in six Days. Then He established Himself on the Throne. ... He runs everything, from the heavens to the earth, and everything will ascent to Him in the end, on a Day that will measure a thousand years in your reckoning.

In addition to asserting the divine origin of the revelation and trustworthiness of Muḥammad, we are here given the "six Days" of creation that are familiar from the book of Genesis. As the text continues to describe God's authority over all of creation, we are then given a reference to Judgment Day, which is said to measure "a thousand years in your reckoning."

This is not accidental. It suggests a metaphorical rather than literal reading of the days of creation, a reading supported by sura 70, in which the day of judgment is described as "a Day whose length is fifty thousand years."

For these reasons, the Qur'an can be read as technically endorsing the "six Days" of creation in Genesis but gives wide interpretive latitude for how we should understand the length of those days. We cannot say we know what a day entails, because the divine is not held to human understanding—God's measures are not our measures.

Sura 32 continues:

> He created man from clay, then made his descendants from an extract of underrated fluid. Then he moulded him; He breathed from His Spirit into him; He gave you hearing, sight, and minds. How seldom you are grateful!

There are three key elements in these verses:

1. The "extract of underrated fluid," elsewhere translated as "mean water" or "sordid fluid," is usually taken to be a reference to semen, and in this sense is simply descriptive of how human life is propagated after the initial creative act.

2. The description of humans as created from clay echoes the account of Genesis 2—what is sometimes called the second creation story—in the Hebrew Bible. The earthen character of humanity becomes a distinguishing characteristic in the Qur'an and differentiates humans from other beings, especially the jinn, or those spirits said to be created from fire.

3. The image of God breathing "from His Spirit into him" refers to the notion of God's Spirit being breathed into Adam.

We get the fanciful idea of genies from the jinn.

The "inspiration" of Adam in the Qur'an serves mainly as an opportunity for a larger drama. Sura 15 gives a more detailed account of this creation of humankind:

> We created man out of dried clay formed from dark mud—the jinn we created before, from the fire of scorching wind. Your Lord said to the angels, "I will create a mortal out of dried clay, formed from dark mud. When I have fashioned him and breathed My Spirit into him, bow down before him," and the angels all did so.

This account parallels the tale from Genesis 2 in terms of the material used to create the human, reiterating God's power and direct role in the generative moment. Likewise, God breathes his spirit into Adam, providing that divine spark of life that distinguishes humankind.

Obedience and Disobedience

Sura 15 continues:

> But not Iblis, he refused to bow down like the others. God said, "Iblis, why did you not bow down like the others?" and he answered, "I will not bow to a mortal You created from dried clay, formed from dark mud." "Get out of here!" said God. "You are an outcast, rejected until the Day of Judgment." Iblis said, "My Lord, give me respite until the Day they are raised from the dead." "You have respite," said God, "until the Day of the Appointed Time." Iblis then said to God, "Because You have put me in the wrong, I will lure mankind on earth and put them in the wrong, all except your devoted servants."

This, one of the longer accounts in the Qur'an of the story of creation, curiously focuses most intently on the dispute between God and Iblis, the disobedient angel who becomes synonymous with the Christian Satan or Lucifer. But the nature of Iblis's disobedience differs substantially from both Jewish and Christina accounts.

The refusal of Iblis to prostrate himself to the human creature illustrates the central theme of the Qur'anic creation narrative: obedience and disobedience of God's will.

In Genesis, an unnamed serpent tempts Adam and Eve into eating the forbidden fruit. Upon discovery, God curses the serpent, Adam, and Eve in turn and bars all three from the Garden of Eden. This serpent is later interpreted as Satan, and the eating of the fruit is understood—particularly by Christians—as the first sin, a hereditary stain on humankind.

In contrast, the Qur'an provides a backstory to this moment, a dispute centered on Iblis's refusal to worship God's creation. That refusal is the first act of disobedience, and Iblis's punishment for it leads him directly to the temptation of Adam and Eve, thus implicating them in a second act of disobedience.

This characterization of Iblis, or Satan, is uniquely Qur'anic: The rebellious angel cannot challenge God's power—by definition, such a challenge would be impossible and would be to equate something with God—but rather, in his refusal to obey God's command, Iblis becomes the preeminent challenger to humankind.

We are seduced by Satan into disobedience and away from our natural inclination toward obeying God's will. Rather than some notion of original sin that inherently tarnishes humankind, we are instead born predisposed in God's direction but are tempted by Iblis's whispers.

We are given another variant on the nature of this struggle in sura 2, this time with additional details that parallel the biblical story:

> When We told the angels, "Bow down before Adam," they all bowed. But not Iblis, who refused and was arrogant: he was disobedient. We said, "Adam, live with your wife in this garden. Both of you eat freely there as you will, but do not go near this tree or you will both become wrongdoers." But Satan made them slip, and removed them from the state they were in. We said, "Get out, all of you! You are each other's enemy. On earth you will have a place to stay and livelihood for a time." Then Adam received some words from his Lord and He accepted his repentance: He is the Ever Relenting, the Most Merciful. We said, "Get out, all of you! But when guidance comes from Me, as it certainly will, there will be no fear for those who follow My guidance nor will they grieve ...."

This iteration of the story most closely resembles the account in Genesis, including reference to a forbidden tree, Satan's role in tempting Adam and his spouse, and ejection from God's presence as punishment for their collective disobedience.

But what this story lacks is most telling: There is no curse put on the man or the woman. Instead, repentance and forgiveness happen almost immediately, and God assures his creation that guidance will inevitably come to them.

While the punishment of being banished from the garden is the same for both Satan and the humans, God's guidance and mercy are immediately extended to Adam, in stark contrast to the eternal punishment meted out to Iblis.

The Silence of Eve

Another detail that is missing from the Qur'anic account of creation is Eve. Nowhere in the Qur'an is she named, and her role in that initial act of disobedience is markedly different from that in the Bible.

Tradition holds that Eve's name in Arabic is Hawa—which is etymologically related to her Hebrew name, as Adam is related in both Arabic and Hebrew. Subsequent Islamic interpretations suggest that she might have played a central role in disobeying God's command, but none of that is included in the Qur'anic account.

Two other verses provide hints as to the Qur'anic understanding of Eve's creation and role. First, in sura 4, the text reads:

> People, be mindful of your Lord, who created you from a single soul, and from it created its mate, and from the pair of them spread countless men and women far and wide.

This alone is the most direct indication of Eve's creation alongside Adam, as no other passage in the Qur'an explicitly mentions her generation.

The Biblical account of Eve's creation presents an interesting contrast—and a quandary. In Genesis 1, male and female are said to have been created together. However, in Genesis 2, we get the more famous creation of Eve out of Adam. So, which is it? Were Adam and Eve created at the same time, or was Eve derived from Adam? The Qur'an does not explicitly endorse either option, nor does it offer a clear alternative to them.

The interpretive tradition contains a few references to the biblical account, seemingly to support Eve's secondary creation, but because this is never made explicit in the Qur'an, the question remains open and subject to debate. The net effect, however, is that Eve in Islamic thought is much less often portrayed as derivative of and secondary to Adam.

Because Adam consistently occupies the central role in the narrative of creation, Eve's secondary, almost invisible presence has the consequence of largely absolving her of primary blame for their disobedience. Adam cannot blame her for tempting him, as he does in Genesis: God instructed Adam, Satan tempted Adam, and then Adam and Eve ate together.

Theologically, the results of the differences between the Qur'anic and biblical stories are significant: The Islamic tradition has no concept of original sin, humanity is generally considered to have been created from the same substance (rather than Eve being derived from Adam), and the consequences of—and blame for—Adam and Eve's disobedience do not fall primarily on Eve.

Perhaps ironically, the emphasis on the male becomes a theologically liberating opportunity for the female. Eve's relative absence in the text means she cannot become a literary or theological scapegoat.

READINGS

Awn, *Satan's Tragedy and Redemption.*
Bodman, *The Poetics of Iblis.*
Lange, *Paradise and Hell in Islamic Traditions.*
Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an.*
Rustomji, *The Garden and the Fire.*

QUESTIONS

1 Satan—called Iblis in Arabic—is a more central and specific figure in the Qur'anic creation account than in the Bible. How does the story of Satan transform the creation story of the first humans?

2 Adam and his wife—unnamed in the Qur'an, but called Hawa in Islamic tradition—are treated as equals in the text, at least in terms of their disobedience and punishment. What are the theological implications for this depiction?

LECTURE 7

Judgment Day and the End Times: Yawm ad-Din

The most arresting words of the sura *fātiḥah*, the first chapter of the Qur'an, are *maliki yawmi ad-din*, which typical English translation renders as something like "Master of the Day of Judgment"—or, in other words, "that day when the absolute sovereign exercises absolute judgment in all matters." This moment, and its precise workings, becomes a central motivating theme throughout the whole revelation of the Qur'an. From the earliest revelations to the last, the Qur'an returns repeatedly to questions about the Last Day, Paradise, and hell.

Yawm ad-Din: Idea, History, and Context

On one hand, Qur'anic eschatology—the consideration of last things, or what happens when we die—was a radical departure from pre-Islamic tradition. On the other hand, it can be understood as a unique synthesis of various ideas that were percolating but not yet mature. Taken together, the Qur'an provides a fully realized description of the afterworld, one that is far more detailed and explicit than what is found in the Bible, either Jewish or Christian.

To set the stage, the standard history of 7th-century Arabian beliefs suggests that there simply wasn't a sense of life after death. From the scant evidence available, pre-Islamic literature is decidedly this-worldly, emphasizing glory, honor, and pleasure—as well as defeat, dishonor, and pain—as experiences of physical life on earth that cease upon death. One could be said to live on only through heroic fame or patrimony.

Where there is a suggestion of an afterlife, it seems to mirror the ancient Mesopotamian or Greek view of a shadowy existence in a netherworld, home for both the righteous and the wicked—a pale reflection of life on earth. To the extent that disbelief in an afterlife was the prevailing position, we can well understand both why the Qur'an emphasizes the Day of Judgment as well as Muḥammad's difficulty in convincing his kinsfolk of its reality.

However, this was not the only opinion available to Muḥammad's contemporaries. Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian ideas were also present in the region and provided an array of ideas about the afterlife.

- The Zoroastrian tradition pioneered the idea of divine judgment, eternal paradise for the good, and torment for wrongdoers. This relationship between sin and punishment—what is later called *contrapasso* in Dante Alighieri's exquisite treatment in his *Divine Comedy*—became later integrated into a wide variety of traditions.

- For Judaism, Sheol was the shadowy underworld where all souls existed after death, although by the 7th century, it had become common to imagine that there were different chambers or territories where one resided according to one's righteousness or lack thereof.

- For Christians, a more particular idea about resurrection had developed, although there was no agreement yet whether resurrection was of the soul alone or of soul and body together. This vision of the afterlife bears resemblance to the ancient Greek and Mesopotamian ideas.

The precise nature of the afterlife was an evolving concept, but one that was very much on the minds of many communities throughout the Near East. If we take this background as context for the Qur'anic vision, we might imagine that Muḥammad's audience consisted of a variety of opinions. Given this, it should be no surprise that the rhetorical emphasis of the Qur'an is on the reality of Judgment Day, particularly in the Meccan suras. This became a sort of first principle in the Qur'anic message: To be among the believers means to believe in God's judgment after death.

> As the Qur'an repeatedly says, "all those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good—will have their rewards with the Lord."

Descriptions of Judgment Day

One particularly evocative description of Judgment Day comes from sura 101:

> The Crashing Blow! What is the Crashing Blow? What will explain to you what the Crashing Blow is? On a Day when people will be like scattered moths and the mountains like tufts of wool, the one whose good deeds are heavy on the scales will have a pleasing life, but the one whose good deeds are light will have the Bottomless Pit for his home—what will explain to you what that is?—a blazing fire.

This sura, ascribed to the Meccan period, provides a synopsis of Judgment Day and its consequences, one elaborated upon elsewhere in the Qur'an as well as in the traditional interpretation of the text.

The Judgment Day is characterized as something specific and particular, a moment of apocalypse. The Qur'an itself offers only vague clues as to whether Judgment Day comes upon the death of an individual or if it is a universal day. Many passages in the text suggest a shared and precise moment, but the Qur'an is not unequivocal on this.

Regardless, on that day, the world is turned upside down in both literal and figurative ways. In sura 101, humans become like moths and mountains like wool, the tangible and solid transformed into ephemera. The disordering of the physical world is accompanied by a literal measuring of one's deeds, the scales weighted by our acts.

While faith is clearly a central concern for the Qur'an's vision, Judgment Day itself returns again and again to our actions. In this sense at least, there is a balance between thought and deed in the Qur'anic conception of eschatology.

The Garden

Al-akhira is the Arabic term for the afterworld, which we might translate as "The Last Place." In this place, there is both a heaven and a hell. Heaven, or Paradise, is most typically referred to as *al-janna*, or "The Garden."

This Garden is said, again and again, to be a place of lush repose: "We shall admit them into Gardens graced with flowing streams and there they will remain forever. They will have pure spouses there, and We shall admit them into cool refreshing shade." This description, from

sura 4, is typical of the references to the Garden, which nearly always feature water and regularly shaded places of rest. Elsewhere, it's said that the Garden is replete with food and drink in abundance. The vision of Paradise is unabashedly physical, a literal garden of delights.

Sura 56 provides a detailed and cohesive view of the Garden:

> On couches of well-woven cloth they will sit facing each other; everlasting youths will go round among them with glasses, flagons, and cups of a pure drink that causes no headache or intoxication; [there will be] any fruit they choose; the meat of any bird they like; and beautiful-eyed maidens like hidden pearls: a reward for what they used to do. They will hear no idle or sinful talk there, only clean and wholesome speech. ... They will dwell amid thornless lote trees and clustered acacia with spreading shade, constantly flowing water, abundant fruits, unfailing, unforbidden, with incomparable companions We have specially created—virginal, loving, of matching age—for those on the Right, many from the past and many from later generations.

Perhaps surprising to a non-Muslim, the text is unapologetic in its depiction of sensuous reward—a reward of the body. This physicality extends also to sex. The "beautiful-eyed maidens" is a translation of *hur'in*, the houris that are said to be companions in heaven. But believers are joined by their spouses. In other words, while never explicit, it is assumed that sexual pleasure would be a natural component of Paradise. Those who enter Paradise married will be joined by their spouses, while the unmarried—or those separated at Judgment Day—would have companions for them.

You might have heard of the infamous 40 (or even 72) virgins promised to martyrs, but there's no such passage in the Qur'an.

All those things that bring us pleasure in this world and this life are perfected in heaven and available for eternity. Spouses are said to be "made pure" for one another, and companions are divinely appointed for the rest. This speaks to the frankness about sexuality that is likewise a feature of the Qur'an: Sexual union and enjoyment are assumed to be good and righteous parts of life in this world, and that goodness extends to heaven.

The physical rewards of the Garden are central to the Qur'anic vision while also serving as a counterpoint for the opposite: the torments of hell.

The Fire

Hell in the Qur'an is a visceral, physical punishment. The Fire, called *al-nar*, is given a specific name in the tradition—*jahannam*, or Gehenna—and is referenced in some 400 different verses throughout the text. Typically paired with a reference to the Garden, the Fire recurs as the unambiguous place of punishment for those who reject God's message and commands. As recounted in sura 88:

> Have you heard about the Overwhelming Event? Some faces on that Day will be downcast, toiling and weary, as they enter the blazing Fire and are forced to drink from a boiling spring, with no food for them except bitter dry thorns that neither nourish nor satisfy hunger.

In many ways, the Fire is the inverse of Paradise: suffering and work instead of ease and repose, fire and boiling springs instead of shade and lush springs, bitter thorns instead of abundant fruits. Just after the

description of the Garden in sura 56, we are given an account of its opposite:

> They will dwell amid scorching wind and scalding water in the shadow of the black smoke, neither cool nor refreshing. Before, they overindulged in luxury and persisted in great sin, always saying, "What? When we are dead and have become dust and bones, shall we then be raised up? And our earliest forefathers too?" Say, "the earliest and latest generations will all be gathered on a predetermined Day and you who have gone astray and denied the truth will eat from the bitter tree of Zaqqum, filling your bellies with it, and drink scalding water, lapping it like thirsty camels. This will be their welcome on the Day of Judgment."

Elsewhere, the "pure spouses" or divine companions are replaced with the *zabaniya*, translated as the "Guards of Hell," who drag the sinners down to hell. The physicality of the torturers in hell—like the physical pleasures of heaven—are thus reliant on the literal resurrection of the body.

When that resurrection occurs is a question of some dispute—will the damned go immediately to the Fire, or will there be a brief reprieve in the grave prior to the *yawm ad-din*?—but the ultimate fate is unambiguous.

Perhaps the most innovative element of the Qur'anic hell is the *contrapasso* punishments. In sura 17, "those who were blind in this life will be blind in the Hereafter." The initial blindness in this life is clearly an unwillingness to see the truth of Muḥammad's revelation, a spiritual blindness made literal in the next life.

In other passages, the punishments for rejection and refusal are visited upon the body: Those who turned their metaphorical backs on the Qur'an have their backs or faces burned or roasted. The presence of *contrapasso* punishment in the Qur'an makes sacred this device as part of God's divine judgment.

To the extent that it echoes the tortures of the Fire as found in contemporary texts such as the apocryphal *Book of Enoch* or *The Apocalypse of Paul*, the Qur'anic vision of hell legitimizes popular and prevailing eschatological ideas from the 7th-century Near East.

The Qur'an's emphasis on and elaboration of *yawm ad-din*—Judgment Day—the pleasures of the Garden, and the terror of the Fire fueled apocalyptic imaginings for centuries to come.

At least as it's presented in the Qur'an, Judgment Day and the afterworld are a completely sensible set of consequences: All will be judged for their deeds, with the righteous rewarded and the evil punished. Reward and punishment are corporeal affairs, and lest we risk the latter, it behooves us to embrace the reality of God, God's message via Muḥammad, and the truth of God's ultimate justice. While belief in God and the Qur'an are obviously advantageous to avoiding the Fire, God's mercy will prevail for those whose goodness outweighs the bad.

READINGS

Lange, *Paradise and Hell in Islamic Traditions*.
Rustomji, *The Garden and the Fire*.

QUESTIONS

1 Ideas about the afterlife have long been contested and evolving. How does the Islamic afterlife compare to and contrast with other ideas with which you're familiar?

2 The Qur'anic afterlife is particular in its physicality, for both the Garden and the Fire. What is the effect of this vision on the Qur'an's audience? How do you react to hearing these very specific visions for the afterlife?

LECTURE 8

Abraham, Moses, and Qur'anic Faith

Both Abraham and Moses appear multiple times throughout the Qur'an and serve as key figures in the rhetorical strategies of the text. Abraham is often used as the ideal exemplar for submission to God's will and the rejection of idolatry, while Moses becomes the preeminent model for the career of a prophet, reflecting Muḥammad's many struggles and trials. Taken together, these two characters serve both as essential figures for important Qur'anic themes and illustrative guides for Muḥammad's prophetic career. The Qur'an combines familiar anecdotes about these two characters with new material that heightens their narrative value relative to Muḥammad's efforts.

Abraham and Ishmael

For the story of Abraham, there are three elements to highlight:

1. The Qur'an emphasizes a story about Abraham found in Jewish midrash, which is a tradition of stories explaining or expanding on the Bible proper.

2. The story of Abraham's sacrifice of his son Ishmael—perhaps the most well-known biblical tale of Abraham—takes an unexpected turn.

3. The Qur'an reveals a completely original story about Abraham's foundational role in Mecca and thus changes the orientation of Islamic practice forever.

The Qur'anic Abraham is said to be the son of Azar, an idol maker. When Abraham asks his father and family about this practice, Abraham gives a harangue on the subject of ineffectual idols and later plots their destruction.

Abraham's critique and destruction of the idols of his father and his people foreshadows the critique the Qur'an makes of the Arabian idol worships. It also foreshadows Muḥammad's destruction of the idols housed in the Kaaba in Mecca upon his successful overthrow of his opponents there.

While the tale of Abraham's idol smashing is not part of the biblical narrative, it is a familiar tale from Jewish midrash. The Qur'an's repurposing of this story thus draws a specific parallel between the great patriarch and Muḥammad as an advocate for radical monotheism.

It is not simply that both Abraham and Muḥammad smashed idols; it's that they did so despite the fierce defense of traditionalism argued for by their tribal relatives. Muḥammad's actions are justified not just by the revelation given to him, but also by the actions of Abraham—well known to at least some in his audience—whose example paved the way.

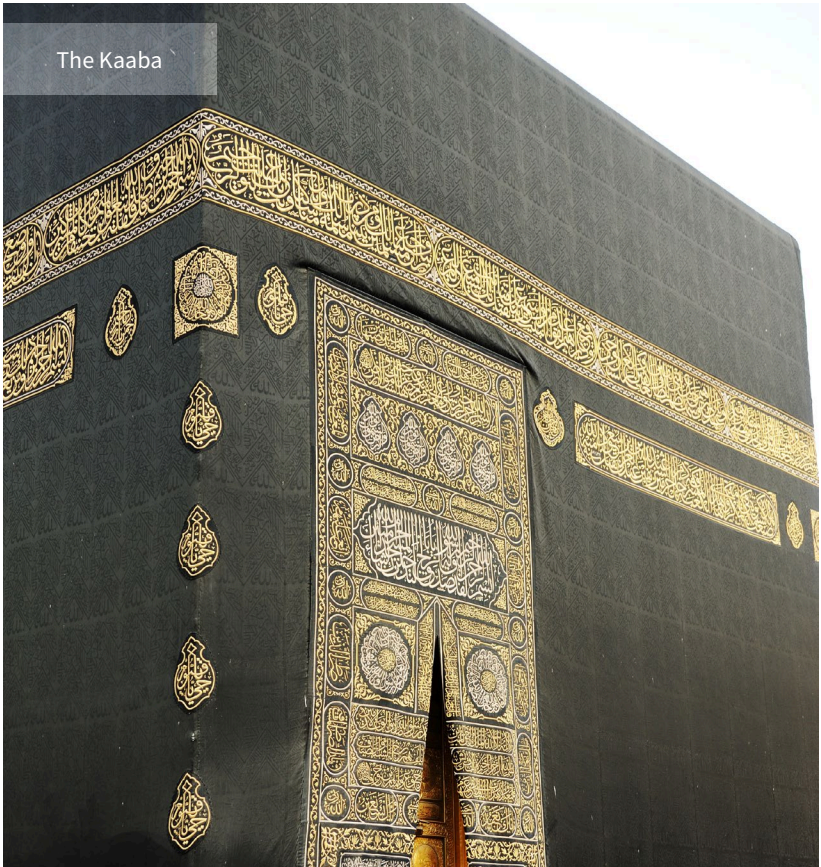
This parallel is further cemented, although with a unique twist, in another Abrahamic story. The Qur'an parallels the biblical tale of Abraham's two sons—Ishmael by his wife's slave, Hagar, and Isaac with Sarah—but offers a new and fascinating story about the fate of Ishmael and Hagar once they are forced to leave Abraham's tent. Where the Bible is silent on their fate, the Qur'an tells us that Hagar journeyed to Arabia, where, with God's intervention, she found sustenance and safety in what becomes Mecca. Furthermore, Abraham visits his son in this place, where sura 2 tells us they together built the Kaaba:

> As Abraham and Ishmael built up the foundations of the House [they prayed], "Our Lord, accept [this] from us. You are the All Hearing, the All Knowing. Our Lord make us devoted to you; make our descendants into a community devoted to you. ... Our Lord, make a messenger of their own rise up from among them, to recite Your revelations to them, teach them the Scripture and wisdom, and purify them: You are the Mighty, the Wise."

This addition to the arc of Abraham's story is momentous for a number of reasons. First, and most significantly for the future of Muslim practice, the identification of the Kaaba with Abraham paved the way for the redirection of prayer. Early on, Muḥammad and his followers had prayed—as do the Jews—in the direction of Jerusalem. However, after identifying the Kaaba as a house of God established by Abraham, the direction turned toward Mecca.

While this change unsettled some Jews who were contemplating Muḥammad's prophethood, it did help cement the conversion of those Arabs accustomed to thinking of Mecca as the center of religious practice.

The story about the origins of the Kaaba also integrated the pre-Qur'anic practice of pilgrimage to Mecca into the religious vision built by the Qur'an. Where many Meccans had previously found Muḥammad's prophecy to be displacing the centrality of Mecca and the Kaaba, this revelation preserved its religious, cultural, and economic importance.



The Kaaba

In addition to these practical matters—what might be thought of as the institutionalization of Islam—the identification of the Kaaba with Abraham further developed the parallel between Abraham and Muḥammad. Abraham's smashing of his father's idols to return his people to monotheism becomes Muḥammad cleansing the house of Abraham and restoring it to devotion to the one true God. In a sense, those Arabs reluctant to accept Muḥammad's message due to its apparent radical departure from custom could now see God's message as a kind of reclamation of original devotion.

The Story of Moses

Moses is mentioned more times in the Qur'an than any other figure. Moses's ubiquity makes him one of—if not the—preeminent character in the Qur'an, perhaps even more so than Abraham.

Like Abraham, the stories about Moses both echo and elaborate on the familiar biblical tales, and in two particular cases, the Qur'an provides completely new stories about Moses. But the most important thing to know about Moses's rhetorical presence in the Qur'an is how he so closely parallels Muḥammad's own personal circumstances.

1. Like Muḥammad, Moses was an orphan, taken in and raised by those in close proximity to power.

2. Like Muḥammad, Moses is called unexpectedly and somewhat reluctantly to a prophetic career.

3. Like Muḥammad, Moses must lead a caravan of followers to safety while pursued by enemies bent on his death.

4 Like Muḥammad, Moses must convince an audience prone to idolatrous backsliding of God's plan and power.

5 Like Muḥammad, Moses is given a text from God—the Torah—similar to the Qur'an delivered to Muḥammad.

In these five ways, Moses and Muḥammad are biographically linked, so it is little wonder that Moses plays such an outsized role in the Qur'an. If the text is looking for figures to rhetorically support the career and message of Muḥammad, Moses perfectly fits the bill.

There are a number of extended passages in the text that tell parts of Moses's story, and sura 7 in particular recounts the conflict with Pharaoh and the journey back to the promised land. However, the more evocative references to Moses are those brief moments where we are called to remember his story. These sections punctuate the Qur'an repeatedly, using the memory of Moses's struggles as warnings or reminders. For example, in sura 2, we are given brief recaps of Moses's prophetic career. At verse 53, the text reads:

> Remember when We gave Moses the Scriptures, and the means to distinguish [right and wrong], so that you might be guided. Moses said to his people, "My people, you have wronged yourselves by worshipping the calf, so repent to your Maker and kill [the guilty among] you. That is the best you can do in the eyes of your Maker." He accepted your repentance: He is the Ever Relenting and the Most Merciful. Remember when you said, "Moses, we will not believe you until we see God face to face." At that, thunderbolts struck you as you looked on. Then We revived you after your death so that you might be thankful.

This verse, along with verses 60, 67, and 83, highlights most explicitly the rhetorical use of the prophetic figures in the Qur'an, and Moses most especially: They are a reminder for us, a remembrance—*zhikr* in the Arabic original—of God's blessings and God's judgments, of God's mercy and God's forbearance.

Where Abraham is tested by God's command to sacrifice his son, Moses is tested by the hidden knowledge of al-Khiḍr. Abraham, God's most faithful servant, was asked to kill that most desired gift from God. Moses, to whom God's words were delivered in tangible form, cannot read the mind of God.

While Abraham and Moses both play important roles in shaping how we understand Muḥammad's prophetic career, perhaps their ultimate role in the Qur'anic text is a reminder to check our hubris and remain humble before God. Even the greatest of the patriarchs could not understand or predict all that God has in store.

In this way, the stories of Abraham and Moses are a reminder that even when given the clear text of the Qur'an, much will remain opaque. The only thing that is ultimately clear is that God's will is not ours to know.

The story of Moses in the Qur'an is a constant reminder of what God has given us, of how often we have fallen short of God's requests, yet also of God's continual mercy and generosity. Moses is made to embody these traits.

Moses also appears in the Qur'an in ways that are not reflected in the Biblical tradition. One of those stories is the story in which Moses encounters a mysterious stranger. Told over some 23 verses in sura 18, this story portrays Moses and a servant on a journey to the sea, where they encounter someone the text describes as "one of Our servants—a man to whom We had granted Our mercy and whom We had given knowledge of Our own." Moses asks if he can follow this man and is made to promise that he will not question any of the man's actions. As they travel along, the man punctures a fishing boat, kills a young boy, and repairs a wall in a town where they'd just been refused hospitality. Moses cannot restrain himself from asking about any of these bewildering actions.

Because Moses failed to keep his mouth shut, the stranger departs, but not before explaining his actions:

> [T]he boat belonged to some needy people who made their living from the sea and I damaged it because I knew that coming after them was a king who was seizing every [serviceable] boat by force. The young boy had parents who were people of faith, and so, fearing he would trouble them through wickedness and disbelief, we wished that their lord should give them another child—purer and more compassionate—in his place. The wall belonged to two young orphans in the town and there was buried treasure beneath it belonging to them. Their father had been a righteous man, so your Lord intended them to reach maturity and then dig up their treasure as a mercy from the Lord. I did not do [these things] of my own accord: these are the explanations for those things you could not bear with patience.

The story concludes here, with no further commentary or context. Who is this mysterious man? Aside from illustrating that God can work in mysterious—and sometimes distressing—ways, what are we meant to do

with this parable? The Qur'an is not as replete in parables as the Gospels are, so the story is somewhat anomalous. And why is Moses the prophet featured in this tale?

The commentary on the Qur'an has a nearly endless series of elaborations and fables about this figure—typically called al-Khiḍr, or "The Green One"—often portraying him as a mystic saint, an initiator into secret knowledge, or perhaps a companion of Elijah. Regardless of these extrapolations, a plain reading of the text—and if we remember the connection to Moses—is that God's revelation is not always for us to understand. Even a person as great and proximate to the divine as Moses cannot see the rationale for God's actions. If Moses was befuddled by al-Khiḍr, is it little wonder that we, too, feel so often confused by God's commands or workings in the world?

READINGS

Rippin, ed., *The Qur'an*.

Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'an and Muslim Literature*.

QUESTIONS

1 The story of Abraham in the Qur'an is notable for the inclusion of Hagar and Ishmael after they were forced to leave by Sarah. In what ways are these stories important for the Qur'anic vision?

2 The Qur'anic references to Moses are most notable as invocations to "remember." What is it about the life of Moses that is so important for the Qur'an's audience to recall?

LECTURE 9

Prophethood in the Qur'an: Jesus and Others

In addition to Adam and Eve, Satan, Abraham, and Moses, there is a long list of characters familiar from the Bible who are also detailed in the Qur'an, including Noah, Joseph, Jesus, and Mary. On top of these biblical figures, there are a number of figures often called the Arabian prophets, as they have no clear connection to either Jewish or Christian figures. However, no matter the textual prominence of the prophetic figures, either biblical or Arabian, their individual stories are all subservient to the principle of obedience to the divine.

In the Qur'an, no one—not Muḥammad, not Jesus—can be thought of as in any way approaching the power and majesty of God.

Noah

Noah's story in the Qur'anic account closely follows the biblical narrative in most of its major details: God has lost patience with the depravity of early humankind, save for one righteous man and his family. That man, Noah, is ordered to build a giant ark, and on it house two of every animal, so that they and Noah's family will be safe from an apocalyptic flood God intends to unleash. There is, however, one key distinction in this story that departs from the biblical narrative. Just as Noah began to load the Ark:

> Noah called out to his son, who stayed away, "Come aboard with us, my son, do not stay with the disbelievers." But he replied, "I will seek refuge on a mountain to save me from the water." Noah said, "Today there is no refuge from what God has commanded, except for those on whom He has mercy." The waves cut them off from each other and he was among the drowned.

While there is no hint of such tragedy in the biblical or midrashic texts, the dramatization of a lost son emphasizes a key Qur'anic theme: In the choice between familial ties and the word of God, God's will always triumphs. Once the waters recede and the ark has settled on a mountain, Noah beseeches God:

> "My Lord, my son was one of my family, and Your promise is true, and You are the most just of all judges." God said, "Noah, he was not one of your family. What he did was not right. Do not ask Me for things you know nothing about. I am warning you not to be foolish."

أبن عباس میگوید در کشتی هشتاد مرد بودند یکی از ایشان وهمه از اولاد شیث بودند وقاده میگوید نوح با زنه سه وسه پسر نام وحام ویافث با زنان خود اهل نوح ایزم شصت نفر بودند باقی کسانی که بنوح ایمان آورده بودند وعمش میگوید هفت تن بودند وزنه نوح را ذکر نمی کنند وبروفق ومان از انواع سباع وبهایم وصیور که احمد فیها من کل زوجین اثنین جفت جفت از انواع حیوان در آورده بودند یکی از فرزندان نوح که او را کنعان نام بود از غایت عتو وتمرد منعتا بعت وبد رکفت نوح را مهر بیراند بران داشت که شرط نصیحت با جای آرد کما قال یا بنی ارکب معنا ولا تکن مع الکافرین بجایی آورد چون نوح ضمیر فرزندش مجمل حروف وکلمات کفر کشف بود بای ذ رکشتی نهاد واز فوت صاعد وحدیبا عدحود حکایت کرده که ساوی الی جبل یعصمنی من الماء دست در کمر کوه زنم که کلاه جاه او با مثال این توفان تر نخواهد شد بالجمله بنا بر مز نگاه دارد نوح گفت قوله تعالی لا عاصم الیوم من امر الله الا من رحم گفت این فرمان خداست واز فرمان او کسی را باز توان داشت مگر انکه هم او رحمت کند کنعان قول خود را دروان تمنا باضافت رسانید واز حضیض کفر بر قله وی رفت وگوید اورا فرزندی صغیر بود بردوش گرفته چون آشیب حرکت آب بدیدهاش رسید فرزند را زیر پای نهاد دوصل ازجاز شیر بدان تلخی نرداشت نوح علیه السلام بسی قصد مناجات باز آمد وگفت رب انی من اهلی وان وعدك الحق وانت احکم الحاکمین ای خداوندی که سزای برده شکون موآت را ما وای باکان نیز زلت ومصعد آثقابن نیز علت کرد ما بنیاد حبه شود که در صدف صدق نهاد از بیر زا منقطب حسن اجابه سفته کردانی فرمان آمد انه لیس من اهلك انه عمل غیر صالح مخذول بد سیرت ومذموم طریقت را که دم بیکانکی میزند بتکلیف وتکلف با اخلاق مرضیه آشنا نتوان کرد نوح دل از فرزند بد عهد برکند ودر مقام استغفار واعتذار آمد وگفت رب انی اعوذ بك ان اسالك ما لیس لی به علم خداوند ملاذ ومنجای بندگان گناه کار خطا منست رحمت واشاعت رافت نیست اگر ملطفهٔ التماس کرم ملایم عرفتول بود ازین بندی بیارگاه جلالت

Although harsh, the message is clear: A new set of relationships has been established by God, and while they may tear apart the connections of blood, they reaffirm God's commitment to those who have accepted his warning. The Qur'anic narrative thus elevates the horror of the biblical story: Obedience to and trust in God is the only type of relationship that matters.

This poses a distinct challenge to those relationships that were so critical in the 7th century, and remain so today; the connection to kith and kin can often define our sense of social belonging and identity. Many of Muḥammad's earlier followers were likewise torn between faith and family. But here, God rejects a notion of family based on blood and replaces it with righteousness. Sometimes, the tale of Noah tells us, adherence to God's will means losing those we love the most, though what we ostensibly gain is life itself.

Joseph

Related with verve and detail in sura 12, the story of Joseph being sold into bondage is the most elaborate narrative in the Qur'an. And once again, in nearly all details, the Qur'anic series of events closely parallels the biblical account. And, as always, it is the subtle differences that are key to appreciating the ethical and theological vision of the Qur'an.

Following Joseph's enslavement in Egypt, and paralleling the biblical account, his master's wife attempts to seduce him, but without success. In Genesis, the wife then hatches a plot to accuse Joseph of attempted rape, which lands him in jail. The Qur'anic version tells us that the husband sees evidence—a shirt torn from the back rather than the front—that implicates his wife in the seduction, and he accuses her of treachery.

Sura 12 continues:

> Some of the women of the city said, "The Governor's wife is trying to seduce her slave! Love for him consumes her heart! It is clear to us that she has gone astray." When she heard their malicious talk, she prepared a banquet and sent for them, giving each of them a knife. She said to Joseph, "Come out and show yourself to them!" and when the women saw him, they were stunned by his beauty, and cut their hands, exclaiming, "Great God! He cannot be mortal! He must be a precious angel!"

So stunning was Joseph's beauty that the wife pleads her helplessness by parading Joseph in front of her friends, who in their rapture forget themselves and let the knives slice into their hands. This component of the story is unique, and its clever device of the neglected knife richly and succinctly captures the shock of seeing Joseph. But is that shock simply his physical beauty, or is there something else afoot in this story?

Although the text that follows this scene is somewhat confusing, it seems as if Joseph is only now put into jail, but mostly to protect him from the desire of the women, as well as save the master's wife from further temptation.

This peculiar rationale for imprisonment isn't simply dropped. Once Joseph's dream interpretation skills are made known to the king, Joseph asks that the women be called to testify in his defense:

> The king asked the women, "What happened when you tried to seduce Joseph?" They said, "God forbid! We know nothing bad of him!" and the governor's wife said, "Now the truth is out: it is I who tried to seduce him—he is an honest man."

In the interpretive tradition, the attention of the women is taken as the attractiveness of divine favor: Joseph is loved and desired because he is close to God. While such love may induce jealousy in others, we can read this narrative as a subtle but clever argument for how God's favor enlivens those it touches. Joseph is ever mindful that his powers and fortune are due to God's grace and mercy, and even his captivity in Egypt becomes a mechanism for the realization of God's will and the saving of his family from famine.

ʿIsā ibn Maryam

Both Jews and Christians had a presence in the world of Muḥammad prior to the revelation, although the extent of that presence is hotly debated. The presence of these communities offers some perspective on why the Qur'an depicts Jesus as it does: The Jesus of the Qur'an is in conversation with these other (and often competing) representations of Jesus. Muḥammad's revelation was but one more voice in an already complicated and competing religious narrative.

In the Qur'an, Jesus is called ʿIsā ibn Maryam, meaning "Jesus, son of Mary," with the reference to his mother being the rule rather than the exception; nearly every mention of Jesus includes this full name, an insistence on his matrilineal descent.

> Arab names routinely use *ibn* as a means to indicate lineage, but this device is almost always patrilineal. The reference to Mary in Jesus's name—ʿIsā ibn Maryam—is thus subversive of custom.

Jesus is referenced in 93 different verses in the Qur'an, more than Abraham and second only to Moses. It would be difficult, then, to overstate his prominence in both the Qur'anic and Muslim imagination. The titles

attached to Jesus are compelling and informative; among other things, Jesus is called the Spirit and Word of God and is consistently referred to as the Messiah.

As a point of contrast, Jesus is definitively not crucified in the Qur'anic account—nor is he considered divine by any measure. According to sura 4:

> They did not kill him, nor did they crucify him, though it was made to appear like that to them; those that disagreed about him are full of doubt, with no knowledge to follow, only supposition: they certainly did not kill him – No! God raised him up to Himself. God is almighty and wise. There is not one of the People of the Book who will not believe in [Jesus] before his death, and on the Day of resurrection he will be a witness against them.

This passage casts aspersions on both the Jews who were said not to accept the prophetic message of Jesus as well as those Christians who elevated Jesus too high, to the status of the divine. In a sense, the Qur'an seeks to resituate Jesus between the two poles of typical Jewish and Christian interpretation: Jesus is a prophet—nothing more, but certainly nothing less.

al-Rūh Allah, the Spirit of Allah

When Jesus is discussed in the Qur'an, he's often described in ways that would be very familiar to Christians: He is called both the Son of the Virgin Mary and the Messiah.

In terms of Qur'anic reference, Jesus looms larger than Abraham, David, and—at least textually—even Muḥammad himself.

By calling Jesus the Son of Mary, the Qur'an affirms Christian teachings about the miracle surrounding Jesus's birth. But

the Qur'an also dispenses with the Son of Man and Son of God terms. While his birth to a virgin was clearly a miracle, the Qur'an does not take that miracle to imply some kind of divine identity for Jesus. Indeed, the Qur'an's position is that Christians made a mistake in thinking that Jesus was also God.

Sura 3 labels Jesus as the Word and Messiah, honors him with proximity to the divine, and forecasts his miracles and prophetic character. Then, sura 3 continues:

> We relate to you this revelation, a decisive statement. In God's eyes Jesus is just like Adam: He created him from dust, said to him, "Be," and he was. This is the truth from your Lord, so do not be one of those who doubt. ... This is the truth of the matter: there is no god but God; God is the Exalted, the Decider. If they turn away, God is well aware of anyone who causes corruption. Say, "People of the Book, let us arrive at a statement that is common to us all: we worship God alone, we ascribe no partner to Him, and none of us takes others beside God as lords." If they turn away, say, "Witness our devotion to Him."

In this passage, Jesus's possible divinity is rejected outright. Like Christianity, Islamic tradition holds that Jesus will be the Messiah who comes at the end of days, a salvational figure who will eventually sit on a throne in Jerusalem, where he will serve as a universal judge, after which time itself will end. But the term *Messiah* is understood differently in the Qur'anic text.

In the Qur'an, Jesus is also often described using a very particular term: *al-rūh allah*, "the Spirit of God." The Arabic word for "spirit," *rūh*, is related to the Hebrew word *ruach*, meaning "spirit," but also "breath" or "wind." When God creates Adam out of the dust in Genesis 2, he

animates this lifeless clod by breathing into him his *ruach*, his spirit. Jesus, for Muslims, is that same breath or spirit of God. Jesus is presented to us as a new Adam, a new first man. Both Adam and Jesus are animated by the spirit of God, but Jesus is said to have been "strengthened" by this breath of God.

While the traditional Christian position holds that Jesus—God incarnate—is crucified, dies on the cross, is buried, and then rises again on the third day, the Islamic tradition holds that Jesus did *not* die on the cross. Instead, the Qur'an tells us that Jesus is taken up into heaven and that the body on the cross was a substitute, only an appearance of death—Jesus himself did not die. This lack of death—this mortal elevation to heaven—allows Jesus to return again as judge of the apocalypse, at least according to the hagiographies of the prophets that followed the Qur'an.

Such an association between a man—even one as remarkable as Jesus—and God borders on a kind of idolatry in Islamic tradition. And to make someone or something equal with God is to lessen the divine. Making Jesus a man, even one called the Spirit of God, is done so to preserve God's nature.

Christians are castigated for mistaking Jesus for God in the Qur'an, which explicitly rejects the Trinity or any other association with the divine. It is this error above all else that the Qur'an finds in Christian doctrine.

The Qur'an does not desacralize Jesus because it's opposed to him—quite the contrary. But the Qur'an does wish to limit the association so as not to sully God's oneness, or *tawhid*.

READINGS

Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus*.

Tottoli, *Biblical Prophets in the Qur'an and Muslim Literature*.

QUESTIONS

1 The story of Noah features an anecdote in which one of Noah's sons decides not to join them on the ark. What is the impact of this tale?

2 The Joseph sura is the most complete narrative in the Qur'an and includes a tale about Potiphar's wife (later called Zulaikha). What role does she play in establishing Joseph's character?

3 Jesus in the Qur'an is regularly depicted as countering the Christian idea that Jesus is God's son. What instead is the primary feature of the Qur'anic Jesus?

LECTURE 10

From the Qur'an to Islam: Creating a Practice

The Five Pillars are a mainstay in descriptions of Islam and a succinct summary of the Muslim community's ritual practices. How did these customs develop out of the Qur'an, especially when some rituals are elaborate and prescriptive but only sparsely described in the text? To answer these sorts of questions, the early followers of Muḥammad imitated his practice, and the record of these practices came to be called the sunnah. These practices are often contained in a different body of literature—the Hadith—that has come to assume an authoritative position second only to the Qur'an in terms of textual guidance for believers. Even with this, however, questions invariably arise. The process of interpretation of the Qur'an and Hadith, together with other authoritative sources, is called *ijtihād*.

Sunnah, Hadith, and *Ijtihād*

The sunnah is the practice or tradition of the community—in this case meaning the community of believers in both Mecca and Medina as well as the example of the Prophet himself.

For example, while the Qur'an repeatedly prescribes prayer, how to pray is never explained in the text. Helpfully, Muḥammad regularly prayed, and his followers learned the ritual practice of prayer from him.

This kind of rote education became the sorts of details the community would pass along from believer to believer. As Muḥammad's message spread, the community closest to the Prophet obviously could not attend to or control in person all the necessary information needed to instruct new believers in proper piety. As the needs for instruction grew, so did the body of literature in which the sunnah was contained: the Hadith.

While there is great overlap between sunnah and Hadith, some parts of community practice are understood as a consensus activity based on the Qur'an, Hadith, or tradition. Hadith is primarily a record of the words and deeds of Prophet Muḥammad and can thus clarify and explain sunnah, but it is not constitutive of the whole sunnah.

Hadith is an important, and complicated, part of the broader story of Islam. The Hadith tends to record sayings or actions of the Prophet, and sometimes those of his closest companions, but it is not exhaustive of the collective activity of the early followers. So, something can be part of the sunnah without having a precisely corresponding Hadith.

The Hadith literature vastly outnumbers the Qur'an in number of words and is interpretively a much more contentious affair. While some limited Hadith is broadly accepted in the global Islamic community, much of it is subject to great dispute. This body of literature is the established record of the Prophet Muḥammad's words and deeds and thus serves as the most authoritative interpretation of the Qur'an.

Ijtihād has a long and complex history. When questions about the Qur'an require reference to the sunnah or Hadith, or some combination of text and reasoning, we are then firmly in the realm of *ijtihād*, or "the struggle to understand."

In order to know how to be a Muslim, it's necessary to engage in *ijtihād*, combining the authoritative source text with other records, communal practices, and philosophical reflections to arrive at a detailed picture of Islamic praxis.

The practice of Islam does not arise fully clothed from the Qur'an alone, but is rather a combination and accumulation of traditions and interpretations. In this sense, *ijtihād* is a constantly evolving phenomenon. As new questions and issues arise, the community returns to these texts and traditions to find answers to everyday questions.

When combined, the Qur'an, sunnah, Hadith, and *ijtihād* provide the general parameters for the ritual practices that create Islamic identity.

Pillar 1: The *Shahāda*

Commonly called the "statement of faith," the *shahāda* is a two-part proclamation that signals one's adherence to the central tenet of Islamic identity: *lā 'ilāha 'illāl-lāh wa Muḥammadun rasūl al-lāh* meaning "There is no God but God, and Muḥammad is the messenger of God." This

phrase is said over both the newborn infant and the dying and is the statement a convert attests to in front of witnesses. It is, ultimately, what makes a Muslim a Muslim.

The *shahāda*, however, appears nowhere in the Qur'an in this form. What we do have in the text, however, are numerous passages or phrases similar to this passage from sura 112: "Say, 'He is God the One, God the eternal. He begot no one nor was He begotten. No one is comparable to Him.'" The assertion of God's oneness—*tawhid*—is repeatedly emphasized in the text and is indeed one of the primary rhetorical concerns of the Qur'an. The unequivocal monotheism of the Qur'an is perhaps its defining feature.

The second half of the *shahāda* is likewise found littered throughout the Qur'an. For example, sura 4, verse 170 reads:

> People, the Messenger has come to you with the truth from your Lord, so believe—that is best for you—for even if you disbelieve, all that is in the heavens and the earth still belongs to God. God has the knowledge to decide.

The word translated here as "Messenger" is *rasūl*, the same term used for Muḥammad in the *shahāda*.

The formulation of the *shahāda*, then, which foregrounds God's oneness and Muḥammad as messenger, is deeply rooted in the Qur'an, if not literally stated there.

Different iterations of the *shahāda* can be found on coins from the 9th and 10th centuries and came to be widely accepted as a ritual assertion perhaps in the 11th century.

Pillar 2: *Salat*

After the assertion of faith, prayer is the most regular, visible religious activity in the Islamic tradition, and it's mentioned numerous times throughout the Qur'an. Most of these occurrences, however, are in a rather general sense, akin to God observing rhetorically "you pray to your Lord" or in describing the activities of earlier prophets, such as "when Abraham prayed."

In a few passages, however, there is discussion of both the times of prayer and what might be called the ritual purity required to perform the prayer. Sura 17, for example, discusses prayer as a regular, recurring activity:

> So perform the regular prayers in the period from the time the sun is past its zenith till the darkness of the night, and [recite] the Qur'an at dawn—dawn recitation is always witnessed—and during the night wake up and pray, as an extra offering of your own, so that your Lord may raise you to a praised status.

Sura 62 also makes mention of what sounds like a particular day of prayer:

> Believers! When the call to prayer is made on the day of congregation, hurry towards the reminder of God and leave off your trading—that is better for you, if only you knew.

Despite this, the Qur'an is silent on when this "day of congregation" is, nor does it spell out explicitly the number of daily prayers. Both of these are left to the sunnah and Hadith.

The setting of five daily prayers comes, in fact, from perhaps the most famous extra-Qur'anic story about Muḥammad's life: "The Night Journey to Heaven," or *Miʿrāj*. It serves not only to tell how Muḥammad was given visions of the afterlife, but also to explicitly establish Jerusalem as a central location for Islamic religiosity. The tale, part of the classical biography of Muḥammad, informs the interpretive tradition of both the Qur'an and the Hadith.

The *Miʿrāj* is contained, among other places, in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (*Authentic Hadiths Compiled by al-Bukhari*), a compendium of Hadith related to the life of the Prophet that was composed sometime in the mid-9th century.

Pillar 3: The *Zakāt*

One noteworthy feature of the Qur'an is its concern for charity, especially the upkeep of orphans and widows. In a world where both might easily have been cast aside, the Qur'an centers our attention on these social outliers and commands that they receive largesse from the community. As sura 2 describes it, believers must "keep up the prayer, and give out of what We have provided for them."

This charitable giving is called *zakāt*, and it becomes an important, if exceedingly vague, concept. Later in sura 2, we are enjoined to "Keep up the prayer, pay the prescribed alms [*zakāt*], and bow down [to God] with those who bow." What exactly is "prescribed," however, is never explicitly revealed.

Many Muslims simply set aside two and a half percent of their income or worth and donate it to charitable groups every year. This regular act of piety has become the de facto response to the technically obscure but morally clear commandment:

> Give out of what We have provided for you, before death comes to one of you and he says, "My Lord, if You would only reprieve me for a little while, I would give in charity and become one of the righteous." God does not reprieve a soul when its turn comes: God is fully aware of what you do.

Pillar 4: Ramadan and *Ṣawm*

The most physically demanding ritual in the Islamic tradition is fasting during the month of Ramadan.

Abstaining from food or other necessities and pleasures is not unique to Islam. Indeed, various forms of fasting are familiar from any number of other religious traditions. In this sense, the Qur'anic injunction to fast is a common practice.

Most of the passages related to fasting suggest that it should be done as penance for some sin or moral failing. For example, sura 5 says:

> [T]he atonement for breaking an oath is to feed ten poor people with food equivalent to what you would normally give your own families, or to clothe them, or to set free a slave—if a person cannot find the means, he should fast for three days.

Where, then, does the fast—*ṣawm*—during the month of Ramadan come from, and how is it observed? Relative to the other pillars, the fast is given fairly detailed description in sura 2, where it's declared that fasting will occur from sunrise to sunset during the month of Ramadan—the ninth month in the Islamic lunar calendar—because this was the month when the Qur'an was first revealed. This Qur'anic rationale had another appeal. As Islamic historian Carole Hillenbrand says:

> At a purely practical level, when he was setting up his community of Muslims in Medina, Muḥammad's choice of Ramadan for the month of fasting was astute and far-sighted; this month was one of the pre-Islamic months of truce, when warring tribesman would lay down their arms.

In this way, fasting as an opportunity to reflect on God's generosity and the trials of the less fortunate corresponded with an already established time of peace and contemplation. For the fast itself, eating, drinking, and sexual intercourse—general physical pleasure—are allowed during the night but must cease once the "thread of dawn" is visible on the horizon. Allowances are made for those ill, pregnant, nursing, or traveling, and one can exchange fasting with additional charity or fasting on different days if necessary.

While the guidelines for fasting are clearly delineated in the Qur'an, the festive post-fast meals and lengthy additional prayers are not, though some are drawn from the Hadith.

Pillar 5: The Hajj

Visually arresting—and today a huge logistical challenge—the hajj, or pilgrimage to Mecca, is in many ways the most complicated of the pillars and has a combination of pre-Islamic, Qur'anic, and post-Qur'anic elements to it.

While only mentioned some 14 times throughout the whole Qur'an, the context of many of these verses suggests that the contours and traditions of the pilgrimage were well known to the Qur'an's early audience. And indeed, it was pilgrimage to the Kaaba in Mecca that had made this Arabian town a central place of religious activity during pre-Islamic times.

Thus, when the Qur'an references the pilgrimage, its general parameters and significance would have already been known. One key difference is that the Qur'an reclaims the Kaaba from the house of idols it was during the early 7th century, recasting it as having been originally built by Abraham and his son Ishmael. By doing this, the Qur'an establishes that the Kaaba itself, and many of the rituals that attend to the hajj, were initiated by Abraham—and Ishmael's mother, Hagar—and as such are simply a return to their original, monotheistic intent.

So, when sura 22 commands, "Then let the pilgrims perform their acts of cleansing, fulfil their vows, and circle around the Ancient House," the intent and context of this instruction would have been clear.

Multiple accounts of Islamic history tell of Muḥammad's own pilgrimages to Mecca in the years before his death. That evidence, combined with the established customs, became the foundation for the hajj as we know it today. As with all the other pillars, the details of this ritual practice are left vague in the Qur'an, but especially in the case of the hajj, there is a clear and well-known established custom to which would-be pilgrims could refer for their own practice.

> While the Five Pillars do not exist as such in the Qur'an, each one is firmly rooted in clear textual injunction.

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QUESTIONS

1 The Qur'an is not a handbook for daily practice, even though it encourages readers to perform certain acts. What interpretive acts are necessary to go from the Qur'an to everyday, lived Islamic practice?

2 What role does the biography of the Prophet Muḥammad play in interpreting the Qur'an and the establishment of the Five Pillars?

LECTURE 11

Sharia and Jihad: The Qur'an as Legal Text

What's so scary about the words *Sharia* and *jihad*? No other words in the Arabic language cause such widespread consternation in American society. Part of the problem is that they so often remain untranslated: "creeping Sharia" sounds foreign and unfamiliar to many ears, but "searching for God's will" would likely ruffle fewer feathers. Likewise, "global jihad" conjures images of the burning Twin Towers, but the "universal struggle for justice" is something we might all want to pursue. These two interpretations illustrate the divide between how the terms *Sharia* and *jihad* sound to those unfamiliar with them versus how they sound as concepts to many Muslims.

Starting with Definitions

The question of Islamic law is commonly, though a bit erroneously, called Sharia. *Sharia* can be translated rather simply as "divine will" or more literally as "path" or "way": what God wants from us and for us. As in Christianity and Judaism, this is more easily asserted than it is discerned. One scholar notes that *Sharia*'s original use meant "a watering place or path to water, a God-given, life-providing way."

For example, here is how it's used in sura 45 of the Qur'an: "Now We have set you on a clear religious path [Sharia], so follow it. Do not follow the desires of those who lack knowledge." In this example, Sharia is an almost existential concept: Once on God's trail, stick to it! This is the prevailing usage of *Sharia* in the Qur'an, and it both sounds and is a long way from some form of penal code or authoritative legal practice.

What occurred between these Qur'anic utterances and the concept as it's so often used today? The short version of a long answer is that an extensive interpretive tradition developed as Muslims attempted to derive ethical, legal, and political customs and institutions from the Qur'an.

However, the notion of Sharia as a system of punishment—*hudud* in Arabic—does have Qur'anic origins. To shy away from verses that command or allow for corporeal punishment would be dishonest. The trick is to understand how the Qur'an negotiates between the religious path of a believer and juridical pronouncements aimed at the community. If we can outline the rhetorical objective of the text, we can better understand how the sophisticated tradition of Islamic jurisprudence developed.

The same is true of the word *jihad*, which means simply "to struggle." And struggle, of course, can apply to many things: struggle against one's enemies, struggle to do the right thing, or struggle to learn a new

language. In the Qur'an, *jihad* is employed in all of these senses—physical force, moral effort, personal challenges—and it does not lay out any comprehensive system for understanding the term.

For example, sura 61 says:

> You who believe, shall I show you a bargain that will save you from painful torment? Have faith in God and His Messenger and struggle [jihad] for His cause with your possessions and your persons—that is better for you, if only you knew.

Ignoring any context, one could read this multiple ways: to engage in armed struggle on God's behalf, struggle to be generous to the poor or needy with your time and wealth, or struggle to avoid sin so that you might enjoy Paradise.

Additionally, there's another Arabic word, *qital*, which means more literally "to fight" that is used in the Qur'an, and it is quite distinct from the discussions of jihad. What seems evident in the text is that ideas about what we today call just war theory—the moral framework for aggressive action—are interspersed with broader concerns about what is incumbent on believers in their exertion on God's behalf.

Nevertheless, some interpretive traditions began around the 9th century that used the term *jihad* in more exclusively military ways. This was, as Asma Afsaruddin notes, "despite the fact that the term *jihad* in Qur'anic usage is clearly a multivalent word, and as even a cursory reading of some of the related literature reveals, was understood as such by early religious authorities and scholars."

And of course, the multivalence of the word is completely lost in the post-9/11, non-Arabic-speaking context. In this case, the subtleties of a

complex term are drowned out by the justifications of self-righteously murderous terrorists and, in a kind of supreme irony, also by those wishing to disparage all of Islamic tradition by equating Osama bin Laden with all Muslims. Obviously, we can—and need—to do better.

Interpreting Sharia

The debate about the Qur'an developed during the classical period, from the 8th to 12th centuries. What distinguishes the legal traditions from one another is how they prioritize the various sources of authority available to them. All schools accept the Qur'an as obviously preeminent, and the sunnah and Hadith are collectively the second source of authority, but here differences begin to emerge.

Some schools, in hoping to attain the fullest account of the time of the Prophet possible, sought out and accepted as legitimate vast amounts of Hadith sayings. Others were more suspicious of different Hadith collections and engaged in vigorous debate as to which sayings were acceptably authentic. This inevitably resulted in a smaller corpus of Hadith for some schools, and they thus turned to other forms of argument.

One of those sources of authority is *qiyas*, or argument by way of analogy, and the other principal option is *ijmāʿ*, or the consensus of the community. In addition to these, tradition in a broad sense—called *taqlīd*—a jurist's professional opinion (*ijtihād*), concern for the public good, or political authority might additionally supplement (or supplant) a line of legal opinion making.

Regardless of the order or weight given to any of these sources of authority, legal opinions also sort actions into five distinct categories: required, permissible, neutral, reprehensible, and forbidden.

Given all of these complexities, it should be no wonder that Sharia is an exceedingly complex and diverse phenomenon. Even within a given legal school, diversity of opinion tends to be the rule rather than the exception. For this reason, when fears about "creeping Sharia" are confusing. What is it that's creeping—some particular legal opinions? As is the case with any other legal system the world over, the opinions of lawyers only ever have effect when coupled with the power and authority to enforce those opinions.

Interpreting Jihad

This brings us to the question of jihad. While a jurist or scholar might opine about the necessity of "jihad," that opinion only has force when acted upon. And, as with so much else, reading the Qur'anic passages on jihad is especially complex.

Asma Afsaruddin, an expert on the Qur'anic and historic context for jihad, works through some of these complications for us. We can look, for example, at one of the more notorious passages from sura 2:

> Fight in God's cause against those who fight you, but do not overstep the limits: God does not love those who overstep the limits. Kill them wherever you encounter them, and drive them out from where they drove you out, for persecution is more serious than killing. Do not fight them at the Sacred Mosque unless they fight you there. If they do fight you, kill them—this is what such disbelievers deserve—but if they stop, then God is most forgiving and merciful. Fight them until there is no more persecution, and worship is devoted to God. If they cease hostilities, there can be no further hostility, except towards aggressors.

There's a lot to unpack from these verses.

- It's useful to note that *jihad* as a word is not employed here at all. The word translated as "fight" is *qital*, and it is quite distinct from *jihad*.

- Nearly all of the Qur'anic verses that countenance fighting—either *qital* or *jihad* when used in a somewhat martial sense—engage in this kind of oscillation between exhortation and dissuading. While fighting is sometimes endorsed, so is the cessation of fighting when aggression has ceased. Indeed, the Qur'an repeatedly counsels that God prefers peace.

- These verses are routinely interpreted to mean that fighting is legitimated only in response to aggression and that aggression itself—or preemptive war—is forbidden.

- Perhaps most importantly, Afsaruddin reminds us that many of the Qur'anic verses regarding fighting are read in historical context and are taken to refer to specific crises experienced by Muḥammad and the believers. In this case, some commentators understand these verses to apply exclusively to "Arab polytheists" during one particular moment and thus are limited by that occasion.

Afsaruddin goes on to illustrate how, after Muḥammad, the meaning and applicability of jihad, including whether or not offensive war was prohibited, became an object of intense juridical debate as the first two great Islamic empires expanded.

For instance, jurists from the Shāfiʿī and Ḥanafī schools disputed the concepts of Dār al-Islam and Dār al-Ḥarb, the "abode of Islam" and the "abode of war," respectively, within which fighting might be limited or justified. These ideas of places or lands where fighting would be

forbidden or allowed are not found in the Qur'an or the tradition but were promoted during the 'Abāssid empire's long rule as means of categorizing the various lands they conquered or engaged with during its imperial expansion.

In other words, some version of what we can call Islamic just war theory was developed based on ambiguous elements of a complicated text in relationship to the evolving political needs of a global empire. As history progressed, ideas about jihad likewise evolved, always contextually shaped, and they continue to evolve today.

One way in which jihad has been understood is by differentiating between two types of struggle, what have come to be called the greater and lesser jihads. According to this reading of the text, the lesser jihad is of the military sort, the kind of jihad a nation-state might engage in. The greater jihad, however, is more difficult, and is the "spiritual struggle against one's carnal self."

Numerous Hadith support this reading of jihad, and it became popular among theological, philosophical, and mystical interpreters of the Qur'an and Islamic tradition. And contrary to some assumptions, it remains the most prevalent view of jihad among Muslims today.

For the vast majority of Muslims, both today and throughout the past, reading the Qur'an and putting it into practice is the challenge of accepting God's will over and against our own selfish desires. Rather than a book of laws or political theory, the Qur'an is most often read as a meditation and reflection on our individual struggle to live in accordance with God's mercy and compassion.

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QUESTIONS

1 Both *Sharia* and *jihad* are often referenced by those looking to disparage the Islamic tradition. How did the discussion of these terms change your understanding of their nature and function?

2 *Sharia* can be thought of broadly as "divine will." What interpretive traditions were developed so that God's will could be derived from the Qur'an?

3 *Jihad* generically means "struggle," but it has taken on a wide range of meanings. How does historical context and development shape the definition of *jihad*?

LECTURE 12

Qur'anic Philosophy, Theology, and Mysticism

In the first two centuries after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad, debate grew about the nature of the text: If this is the revealed word of God, and if God is by nature eternal and unchanging, does this not mean that the Qur'an itself is eternal? An eternal Qur'an seems to require a belief in predetermined fate instead of free will. However, if we do not have free will, how can God be said to be just? If our fates are decided, then so, too, are our actions, both right and wrong. Is God judging us—and sending us either to Paradise or the Fire—based on decisions we are fated to make? Where is the righteousness in that? These questions—and there are many others—form the heart of the philosophical and theological consideration of the Qur'an. And a philosophical proposition about God's nature can reasonably lead to a quest for a mystical experience.

Theology: *Kalām*

The Islamic tradition holds the Qur'an to be unique and inimitable, called *i'jāz* in Arabic. This description of the text has taken a variety of forms, often relying on those suras that challenged skeptics to produce something akin to it.

As sura 52 says, "If they say, 'He has made it up himself'—they certainly do not believe—let them produce one like it, if what they say is true.'" This challenge was variously described as unmet or not accepted. In conjunction with this concept of inimitability, the Qur'an is also held to be uncreated and eternal, called *qadīm*.

As Farid Esack describes this concept, "No controversy has influenced Islamic scholarship in general, and Qur'anic scholarship in particular, as decisively as this one." The controversy Esack refers to here—whether the Qur'an is created or eternal—was simultaneously political and theological and in many ways was the foundational issue for the very development of *kalām* as an Islamic science.

There are two figures whose intellectual heritage became central to this dispute, and both rank among the most important figures in the early interpretative acts that created Islam as a religious tradition: Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī and Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal.

Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, most famous as a mystic and foundational figure for Sufism, was born perhaps a decade after the Prophet died and was said to have befriended many of the close companions of Muḥammad. While we do not have any of al-Baṣrī's original works today, a variety of texts were attributed to him. One is called *The Epistle to 'Abd al-Malik against the Predestinarians*. While likely written 100 to 200 years after his death, the title of the work suggests how al-Baṣrī's successors sided with those advocating for free will.

Although philosophy and theology are related and can overlap, philosophy—called *falsafah* in Arabic—is concerned with knowledge itself, whereas theology—in Arabic called *kalām*—is more interested in God's nature and will.

The mystic tradition in Islam is called Sufism—or *taṣawwuf*, meaning "to become a Sufi"—and it represents yet another, and quite prominent, interpretive approach.

Kalām, *falsafah*, and *taṣawwuf* are overlapping and complementary components in the quest for knowledge about God in the Islamic tradition.

The fundamental notion here is that in order to preserve God's justice, humans must have free will so that come Judgment Day, God can render righteous punishment or reward. This school of thought—which came to be known as the Mu'tazilah—emphasized a rational approach to interpreting scripture and its relationship to the divine. As Esack describes it:

> In dealing with the issue of God's attributes, therefore, and in particular with the attribute of speech, their primary concern was to uphold God's absolute unity, uniqueness, and immutability. To suggest that anything, even divine revelation, shared in any of these characteristics, they argued, would detract from God's utter beyondness. Their principle of divine justice resulted in a rejection of notions of God's arbitrary rule and predestination. If the Qur'an were eternal, they reasoned, it followed that all the events narrated therein were pre-ordained; the players in all of these events would thus all have had their fate sealed, even before birth.

The Mu'tazilites, having gained political favor in the mid-9th century, persecuted those who argued otherwise, although their heavy-handed techniques seem to have accelerated their demise. Nevertheless, their view staked a clear claim to one particular account for the nature of the Qur'an.

Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, whose name became associated with one of the primary schools of jurisprudence, vehemently opposed the Mu'tazilites' position. Instead, he articulated a vision of God and the Qur'an that emphasized God's absolute power and authority. For ibn Ḥanbal, free will would represent a limit to God's omniscience, which could not be countenanced. And because God knew all things—past, present, and future—ibn Ḥanbal understood the Qur'an as literally "God's speech." Refusing to support the notion of a created Qur'an, ibn Ḥanbal was imprisoned for dissent.

Over time, however, ibn Ḥanbal's position eventually won the day, and there have been a series of interesting repercussions for this, one of which is the idea that the Qur'an is timeless and thus cannot be interpreted as a product of its era. This has, at least in some circles, limited the interpretive options for the text. Thus, one strain of theological thought takes the text in a literalist fashion, adhering to the Qur'an in what might be called an "originalist" manner. It's this mode of interpretation that is often characterized today as fundamentalism.

Philosophy: *Falsafah*

However, even with accepting the Qur'an as "uncreated," a strict form of predestinarianism rarely took hold in Islamic societies. While this is partly because fatalism is a largely untenable position in any society, other factors include the other two modes of interpretation: philosophy and mysticism.

For its part, the Islamic philosophical tradition has often used the Qur'an in interesting ways to generate alternative methods for understanding nature, creation, and human society.

One basic but foundational principle relies on the word *āyah*, meaning "sign," which is most commonly known as the word used to demarcate verses in the Qur'an: A chapter is called a sura, a verse is called an *āyah*, or *āyāt* in the plural. Philosophically, the various *āyāt* of the Qur'an are understood as signs from God, but the *āyāt* of the Qur'an are not the only way God is revealed in the world.

Indeed, the Qur'an often uses the word *āyāt* to refer to the natural world. Sura 42 says:

> Among His signs (*āyāt*) is the creation of the heavens and earth and all the living creatures He has scattered throughout them: He has the power to gather them all together whenever He will.

Theology begins with the Qur'an and then expands on it with exegesis and application of the text. In this sense, it's the method that is most literally reliant on the Qur'an.

Philosophy also begins with the Qur'an but then adds human reason and reflection on the natural world as a supporting—or perhaps competing—source of revelation.

Sufism also begins with the Qur'an but interprets the text through human experience. Experience in this sense might also be heightened by specific practices, such as intensive prayer, ritual dance, or breathing exercises.

In another variation, in sura 2, Jesus is said to come possessing *āyāt*: "We gave Jesus, son of Mary, clear signs and strengthened him with the holy spirit." While it's possible the *āyāt* here refer to the "gospel" Jesus preached, it could—and is—also read as the miracles God empowered Jesus to perform. These miracles were the signs of God's presence and power.

The takeaway here is that God is revealed to humans in myriad ways. The Qur'an itself is the most obvious indication for the Islamic tradition, but it is not the only means by which God might be known. And for philosophers, the Qur'an can be read to encourage searching for additional signs of God. A passage from sura 3 is central to this enterprise:

> There truly are signs (*āyāt*) in the creation of the heavens and earth, and in the alternation of night and day, for those with understanding, who remember God standing, sitting, and lying down, who reflect on the creation of the heavens and earth.

This is taken to mean that "those with understanding"—i.e., the philosophically inclined—can find evidence for God in creation itself. *Falsafah* is thus the process of reflecting on the creation in order to learn more about God and God's nature.

Sufism: *Taṣawwuf*

Carl Ernst, one of the foremost scholars of Sufism writing today, notes that the question of Qur'anic interpretation has always been a multifaceted one and that:

> ... even the most literalist reading of the Qur'an had to deal with the problem of interpreting certain verses metaphorically. In particular, the verses that described God in human terms, referring to the face or hand of God, for instance, had to be understood metaphorically if they were not to be anthropomorphic. How should one understand the description of God sitting on the celestial throne?

The answer is that such verses can only be understood as symbol or metaphor, and thus even theological and philosophical interpretive approaches had to make recourse to these sorts of literary options.

The Sufis took these moments in the text as an invitation to read much of the Qur'an as metaphorical or symbolic and combined those readings with a keen appreciation for the human experience of divine presence. And just as the philosophers found portions of the text that seemed to confirm the need for rational interpretation of the natural world, Sufis found other passages that confirm a need for different sorts of methods. To illustrate, Ernst quotes from an early passage in sura 3:

> [I]t is He who has sent this Scripture down to you. Some of its verses [*āyāt*] are definite in meaning—these are the cornerstone of the Scripture—and others are ambiguous. The perverse at heart eagerly pursue the ambiguities in their attempt to make trouble and pin down a specific meaning of their own: only God knows the true meaning. Those firmly grounded in knowledge say, "We believe in it: it is all from our Lord"—only those with real perception will take heed.

This passage is different for many reasons. One is that we once again see *āyāt* employed in a way that seems specific to "verses," yet we recognize that not all *āyāt* are "definite in meaning," and this opens up—or even

demands—nonliteralist interpretation. Second, the term translated here as "ambiguous" is instead, and quite reasonably, translated by Ernst as "symbolic," thus begging the method, as it were.

If legal and theological interpretations of the Qur'an traffic in technical analysis of the text, and if philosophy combines the Qur'an with rational reflection, then Sufism can be thought of as the interpretive tradition that preferences knowledge gained through experience.

But most important is the final line of the passage: "only those with real perception will take heed." Interestingly, a version of this phrase is repeated in sura 3, referenced in the previous section about philosophy. Verse 190 references "those with understanding," but it turns out that the Arabic can be translated differently.

In other words, in Ernst's translation, verse 7 and 190 repeat the phrase "those who possess the inner heart" instead of "those with understanding." What his translation suggests, and something taken to heart by Sufis, is that understanding the Qur'an is not simply a matter of intellect, but is instead a matter of emotion and experience that there is knowledge and wisdom in the heart.

This emphasis on human experience as a guide to the Qur'an's message is elsewhere supported by the Qur'an itself. In one of the most famous passages for Sufis, sura 50 says: "We created man—We know what his soul whispers to him: We are closer to him than his jugular vein."

We are here again at the center of the human body, the heart and the jugular vein, through which our life literally flows. The proximity of God—God's very intimacy with human life, a kind of echo of the first creation of humankind—is thus a call for searching within ourselves

for knowledge about God. God is closer to us than we can know, so an inner examination of the self—or *nafs*, which is central to mystical interpretation—is a journey toward discovering God.

This, then, provides the third method for interpreting the Qur'an: Aside from the obvious, technical passages of the Qur'an, the text's symbolic and metaphorical passages require that we experience the text through our own self and the understanding of personal encounter with the divine.

While this approach to the text is not without its danger—indeed, some have taken this too far and found in the Qur'an evidence of pantheism and identification of the self with God—the intimate, personal reading of the Qur'an has had a vast and enduring appeal to Muslims across the globe.

The word *pantheism* means "a notion of divine presence in all things."

Indeed, the mystical reading of the Qur'an and its resistance to staid literalism or overly intellectual philosophizing has been perhaps the most widely influential approach to the text historically and globally. It's something completely other than a technical or political approach to Islam, and one that's very much at the core of everyday Muslim experience.

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QUESTIONS

1 Islamic theology—*kalām*—might be said to have developed out of an attempt to understand the nature of the Qur'an itself. What types of theological questions does the status of the Qur'an raise, and what are their consequences?

2 Philosophy in the Islamic tradition often seeks to combine the revelation of the Qur'an with an understanding of nature as an additional sign from God. How did the philosophical tradition balance these two forms of evidence for God and God's character?

3 Sufism is the interior experience of the divine. How does Sufism as an interpretive process read the Qur'an in particular ways?

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QUR'AN TRANSLATIONS

There are many different translations of the Qur'an available in English. However, Islamic tradition holds that no translation can be considered the "authentic" Qur'an, as translation always entails acts of interpretations. Thus, a number of well-known English translations are listed here, and you might compare two or three versions to see how even minor changes can affect meaning and understanding. This course primarily makes use of M. A. S. Haleem's edition.

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