

Approaching the Qur'an

by Safi Kaskas

If this is the first time you are reading a translation of the Qur'an, then you need to prepare yourself for a surprise, because it is unlike any other book you have ever read. This is an intimidating book for the skeptic who approaches it with preconceived notions, but can be very engaging to the one that seeks knowledge.

In his brilliant introduction to his book "Approaching the Qur'an", Michael Sells explains it best when he says "For Westerners who do not read or speak Arabic, the effort to get even a basic glimpse of what the Qur'an is about has proved frustrating. The Qur'an is not arranged in chronological order or narrative pattern. Indeed, the passages associated with the very first revelations given to Muhammad in his prophetic ministry, those learned first by Muslims when they study the Qur'an in Arabic, are placed at the very end of the written Qur'an. After a short prayer (*Al Fatihah*)¹, the written Qur'an begins with the longest and one of the most complex chapters, one from Muhammad's later ministry, which engages the full array of legal, historical, polemical, and religious issues in a fashion bewildering for the reader not immersed in the history and law of early Islam. For those familiar with the Bible, it would be as if the second page opened with a combination of the legal discussions in Leviticus, the historical polemic in the book of Judges, and apocalyptic allusions from Revelation, with the various topics mixed in together and beginning in mid-topic".²

The Qur'an refers the reader to events from the Bible, as if it is mandatory to read and understand the Bible if you are to keep up with the Qur'an's logic. It claims that it is from the same source of all biblical revelations and deals with subjects found in those previous books while setting itself up as the final

¹ Italic is mine

² Approaching The Qur'an. The Early Revelations. Introduced and Translated by Michael Sells. White cloud press, Ashland Oregon.

revelation and therefore the last word on these subjects. Hence, it considers itself the last testament.

The one who speaks in the Qur'an is not Mohammad but God himself speaking to Mohammad and to all of us. The first word revealed to Mohammad was "recite"³, in the imperative, making Mohammad the one addressed by the revealer: God himself. Muhammad is called in the Qur'an the messenger of God and in other places the prophet. His role is to deliverer the message given to him by the Holy Spirit⁴, the Archangel Gabriel⁵, also called in the Qur'an the Trustworthy Spirit⁶ or simply The Spirit⁷. The Holy Spirit, as it is said in the Qur'an, did not simply reveal the meaning to Mohammad but delivered the words as they were spoken by God and all Muhammad had to do is to utter them back to his people, making the Qur'an a book authored by God himself and given to Mohammed over a period of about twenty three years.

When contemporaries of Mohammad heard the Qur'an for the first time, they were astonished, as they had never heard anything like it before. It was not poetry that Arabs used to love and appreciate, nor was it similar to the speeches of the holy men (Kahens) who came to visit the Qa'bah. It was unique at the time of its revelation and still is for Arabic speaking people.

This uniqueness in style mesmerized the most sophisticated of Arabs, Muhammad's tribe the Quraysh. Listening to the recitation of the Qur'an melted their hearts and brought tears to their eyes. For some of them merely hearing few verses led them to accept it as the Word of God. In fact, this is what happened to 'Umar Ibn al Khattab, who later became the second caliph. He heard that his sister had decided to forsake the worship of idols and accept that the only one that is worthy of worship is God alone. He decided to go to her house and eavesdrop in order to confirm this. He was full of rage because this would have brought shame on him and the family. When he stood near her window, he

³ Qur'an 96:1

⁴ Qur'an 16:102

⁵ The Qur'an tells us that the Holy Spirit is the Arch Angel Gabriel.

⁶ Qur'an 195:193

⁷ Qur'an 40:15

heard her reading verses of the Qur'an. His rage slowly turned to wonder, however, and he decided to accept God as the only deity worth of worship and Muhammad as God's messenger.

"The Qur'an itself offers an explanation for its unusual effect on its audience. ... When a listener challenged Muhammad to prove he was a prophet by performing a miracle, the Qur'anic answer was that the Qur'an itself was the miracle. If anyone could produce anything like it, then the Qur'an was a human creation and Muhammad a false prophet. If, however, no one else could produce anything like it, then the Qur'an was clearly beyond the capacity of a human being, and Muhammad was not its author but simply its messenger".⁸ This challenge still stands and the Qur'an has been generally recognized as inimitable.

When one that is not well versed in Arabic read the Qur'an for the first time, this sense of a miraculous text is lost on him. No English translation was ever able to embody the spirit found in the Arabic text. The Qur'an does not have a clear beginning or a clear end in the familiar western sense. "The experience of finding oneself disoriented and quickly discouraged before the apparent disorder of the Qur'anic text is one that is absolutely common to every sort of reader, especially to the non-Muslim reader who has not grown up with this text since his childhood. The Qur'an does not unfold in a linear manner, as the progressive development of one or more themes, as Greek rhetoric taught us. In the Qur'an, the subjects are mixed together; no sooner is one theme mentioned than it is immediately broken off, perhaps to reappear later; and some passages introduce topics that are completely extraneous to the context."⁹

⁸ Approaching The Qur'an. The Early Revelations. Introduced and Translated by Michael Sells. White cloud press, Ashland Oregon.

⁹ *Michel Cuypers* spent twelve years in Iran, first in a house of care for lepers in Tabriz, and then studying Persian language and literature in Tehran. He received his doctorate in Persian literature at the University of Tehran in 1983. He then studied Arabic in Syria and Egypt, and in 1989 moved to Cairo, where he now resides. He is a researcher at the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies, founded in Cairo half a century ago by the Dominican Islamologists Georges Anawati, Jacques Jomier, and Serge Beaucueil.

Western scholars historically were not aware that the Qur'an has a highly sophisticated approach to the discussion of a variety of issues relevant to human beings at the time of its revelation as well as today. They did not consider it to be from God, which is why they were perplexed about its references to events from the Old and The New Testament. They expected it to be linear and progressively unfolding but it was not. Therefore, when a Western scholar approaches the Qur'an with these misconceptions, he immediately gets the impression of complete incoherence, and is drawn despite himself into trying to reorganize the text, at least in his mind, to fit his assumptions. This often ends with more confusion and additional assumption of incoherence and a conclusion that this book is not a book at all¹⁰.

During the last quarter of the twentieth century, the simplistic historical approach assumed by many Western scholars has given way to a realization that we need to continue to explore it using new and modern tools of knowledge that are continuously developing.

Michel Cuypers a researcher at the Dominican Institute for Oriental Studies who studied Arabic, moved from seeing apparent disorder in the Qur'an into seeing symmetry. He has been studying the composition of the Qur'an since 1994 in Egypt using a method called "rhetorical analysis," already used in biblical studies. "Biblical -- and, more broadly, Semitic -- rhetoric differs completely from that of the Greeks, which has marked all of our Western culture, and also Arab culture, after this opened itself to the Greek cultural heritage.

The rhetorical analysis of the text allows a contextual reading. The fragmentation of the text has been without a doubt the main reason why all the classical scholars comment on the Qur'an verse by verse, apart from any consideration of the literary context in which the verses are placed. This is the reason why they explain the verses through elements external to the text, what they technically call the "occasions of revelation": by resorting to anecdotes or events from the life of the Prophet, drawn from the traditions (hadith) attributed to the Prophet or to his companions, they explain the historical reason why this or that verse was revealed, thus attributing to it a specific meaning.

¹⁰ See Thomas Carlyle opinion about the English translation of the Qur'anic text, by George Sale. "*It is as toilsome reading as I ever undertook, a wearisome, confused jumble, crude, incondite. Nothing but a sense of duty could carry any European through the Koran.*"

Now, when a verse is put back into its context and enclosed within the textual structure of which it is part, its true meaning often seems to have no need for recourse to these "occasions of revelation," which, it can be conjectured, were often constructed "post eventum" in order to clarify the difficulties of the text.

I'll give an example. Verse 106 of Sura 2 presents these words of God: "We do not abrogate any verse, or cause it to be forgotten, without giving you a better or equal one." This verse has been presented by the jurists, the fuqahâ', as the Qur'anic foundation of their theory of abrogation, according to which certain verses of the Qur'an override others. This theory has permitted the resolution of apparent contradictions among verses, especially normative ones. It is considered, therefore, that the more recent verses override the older ones, and in order to determine which are the more recent, it was decided a priori that the tougher and more restrictive verses must be more recent, and that these should override the earlier, more mild or tolerant ones.

Returning to the cited verse, if this is put back into its context, it can be seen that the meaning is absolutely different: it is a reply to some Jews who had protested against Mohammed because he had included modified verses from the Torah in his proclamation of the Qur'an. To this accusation of "falsification," God replies that he is free to abrogate a preceding revelation by substituting a new and better one in its place. This is a matter, therefore, of the abrogation of the Torah on the part of the Qur'an, and not of the Qur'an within itself.

In spite of the fact that a number of Muslim scholars throughout the twentieth century, and still recently the French Islamologist Geneviève Gobillot, have forcefully denounced this error of interpretation, it continues to enjoy widespread popularity. This is a question of great relevance, because the Islamic extremists make use of this argument to assert that especially the harshest verses of Sura 9 (29 and 73), which incite Muslims to fight against the infidels, override roughly 130 more tolerant verses, which instead open the way to peaceful coexistence between Muslims and the other communities.

Faithful to the logic of abrogation as they understand it, the extremists (as ancient commentators had already done) consider Sura 9 as the last one revealed, which abrogates especially the more "open" and tolerant verses of Sura 5, while everything in this latter demonstrates that it is a text-testament that concludes the revelation.

A contextual and inter-textual interpretation permits one to leave behind an anecdotal reading and to arrive at theological dimensions that were ignored by the ancient commentaries, and yet are absolutely in keeping with the Islamic faith.

Muslims should rejoice in discovering that this text, so greatly criticized by some for its incoherence, is in reality well constructed, with great precision, sometimes even to the point of sophisticated refinement. This is obviously on the condition of accepting that there can exist within it other forms of logic and rhetoric, different from those of the Greek tradition. Certain Muslims could even interpret this ... as proof of the miraculous nature of the Qur'an"¹¹.

Cuypers is not alone in his views. We have among others Thomas Hoffmann, the associate professor at the Unit for Arabic and Islamic Studies, Aarhus University, Who devised the *portmanteau* word *chaordic* (chaos + order) in order to call attention to the fact that “what seems arbitrary and disorganized on the surface is in fact an intricate and well-ordered in-depth scheme¹²”.

Since the end of the twentieth century, many contemporary Muslim scholars such as Islahi, M. Mir, A. Haleem, A. Neuwirth, N. Robinson, A.H.M. Zahniser and S. El-Awa are using various new methods to arrive to a new understanding of the Qur'an's composition (nazm). After all one cannot get new results using the same methods.

Other contemporary scholars that did extensive work on comprehending and revising the way we need to approach the Qur'an in order to better understand it are Nasr Abu Zaid, Eng. Adnan Refai and Mohammad Shahrour. The most innovative yet comprehensive among the contemporary scholars, built their approach by assuming that the traditional Islamic exegeses have exhausted their resources long ago. Traditional scholars continue to repeat the comments of the first three or four centuries of the Hijra, but they are unable to respond in a meaningful way to new problems facing modern Muslims requiring new and innovative solutions. In addition, they assert, the tools of knowledge available

¹¹ For a Renewed Interpretation of the Qur'an: The Lesson of a Great Islamologist by Sandro Magister for **OrthodoxyToday.org**. Published June 4, 2007. The guest of the interview is Michel Cuypers, from Belgium, a member of the Little Brothers of Jesus.

¹² The Qur'an, Text History and Culture. *Sixth Biennial Conference on the Qur'an. 12–14 November 2009* Brunei Gallery Lecture Theatre.

today are far more advanced than those that were available when the great early exegetes like Al Tabari (838–923), Al Kortobi (Died 1272) or Ibn Katheer (1301–1373) wrote their exegeses. Other important exegetical principles applied in the new reading of the Qur'an include nonsynonymity, nonabrogation, that any reading of any verse in the text must never contradict either human reason (as fed by scientific data from the humanities, social and natural sciences) or empirical reality (that is, globally available to human perception). One must always read the Qur'an "as if it was revealed last night" based on the premise that the content of *al-qur'an* is always contemporary (being part of God's objective *Being* which irreversibly 'progresses' and 'becomes'. This is to reverse the traditional exegetical dogma which states that the closer the interpreters are to the semantics of the revelatory event in seventh-century Arabia, the more authoritative their interpretation becomes. In this new approach to understanding the Qur'an, the exact opposite is true.

Conclusion

What if we were looking all along at the Qur'an as a flat one-dimensional surface when it is multidimensional? Is it possible that the Western scholars saw incoherence or chaos because they assumed that they are looking at a simple document when in fact it is more complex than they ever imagined? It is like playing chess with one chessboard and getting good at it when suddenly you move to a digital computerized chess game with five or even ten boards. One needs more skill and years of practice to play such game. The Qur'an appears to have such complexity but it is not beyond human ability to continue to try to engage and understand it.

In order to be able to engage it, however, and allow oneself to be engaged by it, one needs to have more than basic knowledge about its main subject, namely, the Creator, His creations, and His revelations to human beings, mainly the Torah given to Moses, the Zibur (Psalms) given to David, and the Injil (Gospel) given to Jesus. The Qur'an claims to be the last of the revealed books by God. Hence, one needs to know these previous books, the subjects they are discussing, and the prophets who received them as revelations in order to then find in the Qur'an why additional revelations were needed. The Qur'an actually engages one in a discussion about faith, previous revelations and the future of human beings before one finishes reading even the first chapter. Therefore, if one is not prepared to be engaged in this advanced discussion, one may wonder, like many

others, what is going on with this book and why it is not following one's cultural expectations of a holy book. Again, the Qur'an is not organized chronologically like the Old Testament, nor is it biographical like the New Testament, and it is not about Muhammad the Prophet of Islam.

So what is it that one can hope to find in the Qur'an? This depends on the reader's education and the time and place it is read. The Qur'an claims to be a living miracle. It continues to reveal new meaning as time goes by, depending on the tools of knowledge available at the time one reads it and whether the reader uses these tools. Finding a new meaning to a 1400 years old book also depends on whether the reader is willing to search for one and whether he is willing to accept the new meaning once it is found.

What one usually finds is what one sets out to find. The questions we usually have are determined by our own culture and knowledge. No one asks questions simply to know and few are dedicated to knowledge simply for its own sake. Each one of us is defined by one's environment and the degree to which one engages one's surroundings.

This particular translation is unlike any other before it, because it has a specific purpose. This is to link the Qur'an to the Old and New Testaments through cross references in order to enable a Christian to relate to the Qur'an and enable a Muslim to understand the continuity of the revealed message. The translators meant to create through this translation a bridge between the followers of the three Abrahamic religions designed to bring them closer together. Hence, the translation of certain terms, while faithful to the original, emphasizes communality among the three religions. It also tries to be faithful to the intent of the entire message of the Qur'an, which focuses on the common message of divine revelation rather than on the exclusivity of some over others.

While engaging in this endeavor we were well aware of certain historic and contemporary views by some followers of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, that limit salvation and God's grace to the followers of their religion of choice. This ethnocentric view, we decided is not God's message to the human race. We understand God's message to be a message of love and guidance for all. One

should be able to choose freely one's religion if one is to be responsible for one's choice. God's says in the Qur'an 17:70 that He honored (privileged) all human beings. Therefore, we have no choice but to respect all others and their inalienable right to choose freely what to believe and in whom to believe. The Qur'an 2:256 states that there is no compulsion in religion.

end