

Beginners Guide to the Quran (part 1 of 3)

Description: A three-part lesson for beginners focusing on basic issues they face when approaching the Quran. Part 1: With regards to what is the Quran, its organization, major themes and style of presentation.

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Objectives

- To understand what exactly is the Quran.
- To learn the basics about Quran and how it is organized.
- To know the major themes inclusive in the Quran.
- To understand the style of the Quran in discussing its themes.

Arabic Terms

- *Surah* - chapter of the Quran.
- *Ramadan* - The ninth month of the Islamic lunar calendar. It is the month in which the obligatory fasting has been prescribed.
- *Juz'* - one of thirty parts of the Quran.
- *Aayaat* - (singular - *ayah*) the word *aayaat* can have many meanings. It is almost always used when talking about proofs from Allah. These include evidences, verses, lessons, signs, and revelations.

In three lessons, we will focus on some basic issues a beginner will face when approaching the Quran. What is the Quran and how is it organized? What are its major themes and its style of presentation? What are some good translations for a beginner, and what must we keep in mind when reading them? Can the Quran be interpreted freely according to one's heart? What if I don't understand something I read? Where do I go to get answers? Finally, what frame of mind should I have before I open and read the Quran?

Exactly What is The Quran?

The Quran is the literal, spoken Word of Allah revealed to the last Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him, through Gabriel, the Angel of Revelation, transmitted to us by numerous channels, both verbally and in written form. Inimitable and

unique, it is divinely protected from corruption. God says:

‘Indeed, it is We who sent down the message [i.e., the Qur'an] and indeed, We will be its guardian.’ (Quran 15:9)

The Basics

The first thing for a beginner to understand about the Quran is its form. The Arabic word, ‘Quran,’ literally means both ‘recitation’ and ‘reading’. Similarly, the Quran was both recited orally and written down in book form. The true power of the Quran remains in the oral recitation, as it is meant to be read aloud and melodiously, but still the verses were written down on available materials as an aid to memorizing and guarding it, and these were collected and arranged in book form both privately and, at a later stage, institutionally. The Quran was not meant to tell a chronological story, and thus, the Quran should not be viewed as a sequential narrative like the book of Genesis.

The Quran often repeats certain verses and themes, shifting topics between them, and often relates narratives in summarized form. We can see two reasons for this. First, it serves a linguistic purpose and is one of the powerful rhetorical techniques of classical Arabic. Second, all themes of the Quran, no matter how varied, are wrapped around one common thread running through the entire book: there is no true god but Allah, and Muhammad is His messenger. The Quran, unlike the Bible, is not concerned with genealogies, chronological events, or minute historical details, many of which don’t suit an oral discourse. The purpose is to use events, from past and present, to illustrate this central message. So when the Quran is discussing the healing properties of honey or the life of Jesus, neither topic is an end in itself, but each is related in one way or another to the central message – the Oneness of God and unity of the prophetic message.

Another important point to keep in mind is that the Quran was not revealed in one sitting, but rather it was revealed in parts over a span of 23 years. Many passages were in response to specific events. Often, Quranic revelation would come from the angel Gabriel to Prophet Muhammad as a response to questions raised by unbelievers. The Quran addresses these unbelievers, the People of the Scripture (a term used by the Quran for Jews and Christians), humanity at large, believers, and, finally, the Prophet himself - commanding him what to do in a certain situation or solacing him in the face of ridicule and rejection. Knowing the historical and social context of revelation clarifies the meanings contained in the text itself.

How is The Quran Organized?

The Quran is composed of 114 parts or chapters of unequal length. Each chapter is called a *surah* in Arabic and each sentence or phrase of the Quran is called an *ayah*, literally ‘a sign.’ Like the Bible, the Quran is divided into discrete units, referred to as ‘verses’ in English. These verses are not standard in length and where each begins and ends was not decided by human beings, but dictated by God. Each one is a discrete act of

locution of closed signification, or 'sign', denoted by the word *ayah* in Arabic. All *surahs*, except one, begin with *Bimillah hir-Rahman nir-Rahim*, 'I begin with the Name of Allah, the Most-Merciful, the Compassionate.' Each *surah* has a name that usually relates to a central theme within it. For example, the longest *surah*, *Surah al-Baqarah*, or "The Cow", is named after the story of Moses commanding the Jews to offer a sacrifice of a cow, which begins by God saying:

"And remember Moses said to his people: 'Allah commands that you sacrifice a cow.'" (Quran 2:67)

Since the various chapters are of various lengths, the Quran was divided by scholars of the first century after the death of the Prophet into thirty roughly equal parts, each part is called a *juz'* in Arabic. This division of the Quran was done in order for people to memorize or read it in a more organized fashion, and it has no influence on the original structure, as they are mere marks on the sides of the pages denoting the part. In the month of fasting, *Ramadan*, one *juz'* is usually recited every night, and the entire Quran is completed by the end of the month.

Style of the Quran

What topics does the Quran discuss? It covers various subjects. Most importantly, it talks about the Oneness of Allah and how to live a life pleasing to Him. Other topics include religious doctrine, creation, criminal and civil law, Judaism, Christianity and polytheism, social values, morality, history, stories of past prophets, and science. The most important features of Quran's style in discussing these themes are:

(1) The use of parables to stir curiosity of the reader and explain deep truths.

(2) More than two hundred passages begin with the Arabic word *Qul* - 'Say' - addressing Prophet Muhammad to say what follows in reply to a question, to explain a matter of faith, or to announce a legal ruling. For example:

"Say: 'O People of the Scripture! Do you disapprove of us for no other reason than that we believe in Allah, and the revelation that has come to us and that which came before (us), and because most of you are rebellious and disobedient?'" (Quran 2:59)

(3) In some passages of the Quran, Allah takes oaths by His marvelous creation, both to strengthen an argument or to dispel doubts in the mind of the listener:

**"By the sun and its brightness,
By the moon when it follows it,
By the day when it displays it,
By the night when it covers it,
By the sky and He who constructed it,**

By the earth and He who spread it,

By the soul and He who proportioned it...” (Quran 91:1-7)

Sometimes Allah takes an oath by Himself:

“But no, by your Lord, they will not (truly) believe until they make you, (O Muhammad), judge concerning that over which they dispute among themselves, and then find within themselves no discomfort from what you have judged and submit in (full, willing) submission.” (Quran 4:65)

(4) Lastly, the Quran has what is called ‘the disjointed letters,’ composed of letters of the Arabic alphabet which, if taken together, do not have a known meaning in the Arabic lexicon. This was one of the ways that Allah challenged the Arabs, who were the most eloquent of people in speech, to bring forth something to the Quran, which consisted of the likes of these disjointed letters. They appear at the beginning of twenty-nine *surahs*. For example, the first *ayah* of *Surah* al-Baqarah appears in different translations as:

Yusuf Ali: A.L.M.

Pickthal: Alif. Lam. Mim.

Muhsin Khan: *Alif-Lam-Mim*.

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