

# **An Overview of the Qur'ān**

By  
Colin D. Smith

## Introduction

Islam is a centuries-old religion, and Muslims have been a part of Western society for nearly as long, and yet despite this, until relatively recently many have not felt the need to understand this religion and its teachings. Now it is evident that an understanding of Islam is vital not only for people to be able to relate to the growing number of Muslims in the West, but also for Christians to be able to effectively reach out both in ministry and in witness to Islam's adherents.

The first thing that needs to be understood is that Islam is not a religion based upon a person. While Mohammad is greatly revered among orthodox Muslims, and while he is considered to be a prophet chosen by Allāh to be an instrument of revelation, his role is simply that of revealer. He is an apostle, a messenger, a mortal man with a special commission. Essentially, Islam is about submission to Allāh and His commands as He has revealed Himself in the Qur'ān, the Islamic scriptures. Islamic law, society, and culture are founded upon the Qur'ān and its principles as elucidated by Mohammad and his followers. If one is, therefore, to gain an understanding of this religion and its adherents, it is vital that one understands the context and message of its scripture.

The purpose of this paper is to provide the reader with a grasp of the history, structure, and content of the Qur'ān. While the author is coming from a Christian perspective, the intent of this work is not one of Christian apologetic. The author has drawn not only from the Qur'ān itself, but also from sources that are either explicitly Muslim, or at least sympathetic to Islam so that the reader may appreciate how Muslims regard their holy book. The aim in doing this is to provide the reader with a clear picture of the Qur'ān as Muslims see it, with the hope that this will help the non-Muslim reader to better appreciate the Islamic perspective, which in turn will help the Christian apologist gain a more sympathetic hearing within the Islamic community.

This paper will first present an historical overview giving the basic facts of Muhammad's life, the Islamic perspective regarding the inspiration of the Qur'ān, and the subsequent rise of Islam in Medina and Mecca. The paper will then move to a basic outline of the Qur'ān, defining terms and providing the reader with a framework in which to understand the book. Finally, the paper will discuss important theological themes as they are understood in the Qur'ān, particularly the nature of Allāh, the nature of man,

salvation, and the afterlife. The discussion will pay particular attention to the way the Qur'ān views these issues in contradistinction to the Christian view. Again, the purpose in this is not apologetic, but to compare and contrast. The Christian apologist is encouraged to take these contrasts and develop them in his dialog with Muslim neighbors and co-workers.

### Historical Overview

By the middle of the first millennium, both Mecca and Medina had become thriving commercial centers within the Middle East. Situated close to the western coast of Arabia, Mecca was ideally placed for merchants, and Meccan merchants had control over the entire coastline from the Dead Sea to the Mediterranean. The people of Mecca were originally nomads and traders, and, therefore, not ignorant of other people or cultures. However, they had little sense of national identity, so they banded together into groups based largely on clan. One's clan could be a powerful source of protection, both against rival clans and against wild animals. Alone, a person would be easy prey, but within the clan there were rules that would bind one to another. A wrong committed against a member of a clan would be repaid by the entire clan. Mecca was also a place where the divide between rich and poor, opulent and oppressed, was sharply drawn, and social injustices were often overlooked.

Pre-Islam, Arabs were, on the whole, polytheists. They worshiped local deities, and may even have had a notion of a "supreme" god over all "lesser" gods. Judaism had already infiltrated the region, as had certain forms of Christianity (mainly in the commercial areas), but the vast majority of Arabs worshiped tribal and regional gods. Meccans in particular worshiped three goddesses: *al-Lat*, *al-Manat*, and *al-Uzza*. These three were considered daughters of the creator god, "Allāh," meaning "the deity."<sup>1</sup> Lesser spiritual beings, in particular angels and "jinn" were recognized as actively involved in the material world. Angels were perceived in very much the same way as the Old Testament authors describe, being sent by God to do His work, and hence largely agents of good. "Jinn," on the other hand, could be persuaded to work evil, and to them

---

<sup>1</sup> John B. Noss, Man's Religions, (MacMillan: Ny, 1956), p. 686.

was often ascribed the ability to turn men away from good. Fairies and ghouls also had a place in the supernatural realm of the ancient Arabs.

Mohammad was born in Mecca sometime around A.D. 570 into one of the leading tribes of the region, the Quraysh. His father, ‘Abd Allāh had already died by the time he was born, and his mother died when he was six years old. He was raised by his grandfather, and, after his grandfather’s death, by his uncle, Abu-Talib. Muhammad is considered to have been a man of great moral standards, to the extent that his first wife, Khadija, married him after he had impressed her with his honesty and integrity in business.

Although Mecca was materially prosperous, it had become, at least in the minds of many, spiritually bankrupt. Mohammad was one for whom this caused great consternation and he often spoke out about it.<sup>2</sup> It seems he also frequently meditated on the situation,<sup>3</sup> and it was while meditating in this way that he is supposed to have started to receive what he believed were messages from Allāh for the Meccans. These messages did not all come at once, but over the period from 610, through to the establishment of Islam in Medina. This is clear from the nature of the pronouncements which range from exhortations to worship Allāh, encouragement to the faithful during battle and persecution, and rules for the establishment of society.

These messages from Allāh were initially communicated from memory by Mohammad to his family and friends (i.e., those who shared his views and would be sympathetic to them). However, as time went on, the nature of the messages demanded a wider audience, and it was at this point that Muhammad started to face resistance. As Mohammad and his followers encountered opposition and persecution, the messages from Allāh started to take the form of warnings against the ungodly, the fate of the wicked, and the bliss to be looked forward to by the faithful who endure. Eventually, the protection Muhammad had enjoyed from his clan was removed, and opposition became

---

<sup>2</sup> H.A.R. Gibb, *Islam*, (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1969), p. 17. The Qur’ān responds to the love of money and the abuse of the poor by the wealthy in Mecca in a number of places (3:14; 9:38; 70:19-35; 11:87; et al.).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Bell and Montgomery Watt, *Bell’s Introduction to the Qur’ān*, (Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 1970), p. 10.

so fierce, that it seemed clear that the small band of the faithful would have to leave Mecca and find a home somewhere more accommodating to them.

Medina was also a prosperous commercial center, though embroiled for years in civil war between rival clans. The Medinans sent for Muhammad to come and resolve the dispute, in return for which he could settle there with his followers with the certainty that his religion would be respected. With nowhere else to go, in 622 Mohammad and his followers traveled to Medina where they were well received. Many Medinans accepted his claim to prophethood and established him as one of nine clan leaders. With help from the Medinans, he increased his power through military conquest, and eventually reached out to the Jewish clans in the region. Muhammad permitted the Jews to practice their religion provided they cooperate in the defense of Medina and show themselves loyal to Mohammad. However, the Jews in Medina showed little respect for the new religion, and were highly unreliable in times of conflict. In the end, the Jewish clans were expelled.

Once established in Medina, Mohammad turned his sights back to Mecca. Given its political and spiritual significance to Arabs, Mohammad wanted very much to win the Meccans to his side. With a base of operations and an army of willing fighters, he led a band of about three hundred men against a large Meccan army at Badr and was victorious. In retaliation, the Meccans attacked Medina and Muhammad's army lost the battle of Uhud. After an unsuccessful siege, six years later he led an army of ten thousand to march on Mecca, and he did so without much resistance. Since his aim was to bring the Meccans over to his side, Mohammad treated the people leniently, and many Meccans eventually acknowledged Mohammad as a messenger of Allāh.

Mohammad went on to lead his forces into other battles, gradually expanding his sphere of influence, such that at the time of his death in 632, he was effectively the ruler of most of Arabia. However, it is with the successful domination of Mecca that the historical period covered by the Qur'ān ends. It is against this setting that the doctrines and practices of the Qur'ān are placed, and should rightly be understood.

### The Structure of the Qu'ran

As noted previously, the Qur'ān is not so much a systematic book of history, doctrine, and exhortation, but rather a collection of sayings, speeches, and law compiled over a period of time. It consists of one hundred and fourteen suras<sup>4</sup>, which can be regarded like chapters, each of which is subdivided into *ayat*<sup>5</sup>, comparable to verses in modern editions of the Bible. The suras vary in length from three or four *ayat* (e.g., suras 91, 108, and 110) to the longest sura, 2, which has two hundred and eighty-six *ayat*.

The suras are not in chronological order, and their proper order is a matter of scholarly dispute, though there is little argument that some fall within the Meccan period of Muhammad's life, and others fall within the Medinan period. The standard presentation of the suras is, generally, from the longest to the shortest; however this does not represent the chronological order, and no Muslim would deny this fact. Given that the Qur'ān was revealed (as Muslims believe) in stages over a period of time, it is natural that the thematic content of each sura would depict the time in which it was written. On this principle, one can presume that the earlier suras would be more emphatic concerning the nature of Allāh, and asserting His unity and uniqueness over and above the pagan gods, and the later suras would have a greater emphasis on the Muslim community, with much more legal and disciplinary content.

Each sura has a title, usually drawn from the text or the theme of the sura. The purpose behind these titles seems to have been largely mnemonic, as they designate a distinguishing aspect of the sura that would, perhaps, make it memorable. For example, sura 19 is called *Maryam*, or "Mary." The mother of Jesus is not the only subject of this sura, which goes on to relate, among other things, stories pertaining to Abraham and Moses; it is the story of Mary, though, that makes this sura unique. Stories of Abraham and Moses abound in the Qur'ān, but Mary's story is seldom, if ever, repeated elsewhere. Sura 16, on the other hand, is called *Nahl*, or "The Bee," and it has a general theme of Allāh's supreme authority over all nature, and his giving of signs to demonstrate his

---

<sup>4</sup> The origin of the term *sura* with regard to the sections of the Qur'ān is shrouded in mystery. It is thought by some to relate to the Hebrew word for a row of bricks, as in a wall, designating a series of passages. Alternatively, the word *sura* could relate to the Syriac word for writing, or Scripture, *surtha*. Both suggestions, however, have their problems, and this remains a disputed topic (Bell and Watt, p. 58).

<sup>5</sup> *Ayat* is the plural form of *aya*, a word that commonly means "sign," or "wonder." Unlike the Bible, the verse divisions in the Qur'ān are deliberate and considered part of the received text, thus it is not hard to see that these divisions would be regarded as further signs of the revelation (ibid., pp. 60-61).

control over all things and provision for his creation. In the course of the discussion, the bee is set forth as an example of a creature that Allāh has created that provides a source of nourishment and healing for men in the form of honey (*ayat* 68-69). The reference to the bee was probably considered unusual and memorable, and hence the sura took its name from these few *ayat*.

Many editions of the Qur'ān have a title bar at the top of each sura indicating its numerical order, its name, an indication of its chronology in terms of Meccan or Medinan, and a count of the *ayat* in that particular sura.

All suras, except for sura 9, begin with what is known as the *bismillah*: *bi-smi llāhi r-raḥmāni r-raḥīm*, which can be translated, "In the name of Allāh, the Gracious, the Merciful." This phrase may well date back to the time of Mohammad, and its omission from the ninth sura might simply be explained by the fact that the first *aya* of that sura indicates the words following are from Allāh, thus making the declaration of the *bismillah* unnecessary.<sup>6</sup>

### The Qur'ān and the Old Testament

One of the prominent ideas set forth within the Qur'ān is that of continuity with previous revelation, namely Judaism and Christianity (e.g., sura 2:87-91). Sura 2 teaches that in the beginning all people were one community, presumably with a single religion<sup>7</sup>. Allāh provided mankind with a Book with which to judge disputes that arose among people, and sent prophets to show the way, and to warn the people when they disobeyed the revelation given to them (2:213; see also 35:24; 13:7).

In light of this, the Qur'ān draws particularly from stories concerning Old Testament prophets to illustrate Muhammad's warnings, and teach regarding obedience and faithfulness to Allāh and his commands. There are two things particularly noteworthy about the Qur'ānic use of the Old Testament: first, the stories are always presented as teaching tools to make a present-day (at least for Muhammad) point; second,

---

<sup>6</sup>ibid., p. 60.

<sup>7</sup>Malik's translation makes this implication explicit: "Mankind was one nation having one religion."

they are rarely, if ever, presented without embellishment—sometimes to the point where the original Old Testament story is barely discernible.

The lessons taught by the Qur’ān through the use of Old Testament stories revolve around similar themes: Allāh’s faithfulness to believers, and warnings against those who are unfaithful, or who reject the warnings of the prophets (or Prophet: Muhammad). Sura 38 laments the fact that people disparaged the Warner that Allāh had raised up within their midst. They neither gave him respect, nor believed the message he brought to them. In contrast, the Qur’ān sets forth a story wherein two men visited with David and asked him to arbitrate a dispute. One man had ninety-nine ewes, while the other had only one. The man with the ninety-nine demanded that the other give him his one. David rebuked the man for his selfishness then realized that God was using this dispute to point out his own sin. David fell down in repentance, and God forgave him his transgression. In other words, those who disparage Allāh’s Messenger should rather be like David, who recognized the divine purpose behind his visitors and turned from his sin.

The background for this story is David’s adulteress relationship with Bathsheba, and Nathan’s subsequent visit to David where he recounted the story of the two men as a means of bringing conviction to David’s heart over his sin (2 Samuel 12:1-15). The differences between the Qur’ān and the Bible are clear: in the Qur’ān there is no mention of Nathan, and the people in Nathan’s story become literal men. Also, the focus of the Biblical story is how God brought repentance and restoration to David after committing gross sin. The Qur’ānic version, however, places the emphasis on the faithfulness of the men who came to David<sup>8</sup>.

Sura 11:96-99 gives Moses as an example of a messenger sent by Allāh with “Clear Signs” and authority to Pharaoh and his “Chiefs.” The purpose of this example is to show that true prophets are often ignored and their messages are more likely to fall upon deaf ears. This was certainly the case with Pharaoh and his “Chiefs” since his “Chiefs” preferred to listen to Pharaoh than Moses, but Pharaoh was not equipped of Allāh to rightly lead.

---

<sup>8</sup>Interestingly, the men who approached David in the Qur’ān were not actually directly challenging him, as Nathan did in the Bible. They merely came to seek David’s counsel over a dispute; it was David who saw his own situation in their story and repented as a result.



In sura 21, the Qur'ān tells brief stories about Abraham, Lot, Moses, David, Solomon, and others to illustrate Allāh's provision of protection and a means of escape from the midst of difficulty. Some of these tales merely give an overview with little embellishment. For example, Allāh delivered Noah and his family from the evil people of his age by means of the flood, and Allāh rescued Lot from the town wherein the people "practiced abominations." Other stories give extra-Biblical details, or, in some cases, complete re-writes of the Biblical account. The story in Genesis 12 where Abraham leaves his home country at the Lord's bidding does not contain any reference to the idolatry of his people. However, sura 21:51-70 tells of Abraham breaking his father's idols and challenging his idolatrous kinsmen to converse with their idols. The people respond by attempting to burn Abraham, but Allāh thwarts their plan by making the fire a protection for him. This event is not recorded in the Genesis account, but is stated in the Qur'ān as a historical event demonstrating Allāh's deliverance of his faithful messenger.

Sura 12 is the most detailed retelling of an Old Testament story in the Qur'ān. It recounts the story of Joseph in a way that appears at first to be simply a paraphrase of the Biblical account, however, the story soon deviates from the Biblical narrative. Instead of being accused of molesting Potiphar's wife, Joseph is vindicated by eyewitnesses but chooses prison over being under her control (28-35).<sup>9</sup> The fate of the baker is that he would "hang from the cross" (41).<sup>10</sup> In Genesis 41, the cupbearer eventually remembers Joseph when Pharaoh asks for an interpretation to his dreams, and Pharaoh sends for him. In the Qur'ān, the cupbearer learns the interpretation from Joseph and reports back. However, somewhere between 12:49 and 12:50, Pharaoh learns that the interpretation is Joseph's such that he then sends for him. Joseph does not come immediately, recalling that he asked to be imprisoned rather than spend his time under the control of a woman who tried to blacken his name. He receives assurance that no woman would ruin his

---

<sup>9</sup>Joseph later appeals to the one released to mention him to the king, indicating that he no longer desired to be imprisoned. In his commentary, Yusuf Ali ascribes this change of attitude to the possibility that Joseph still had things to do for God, though this is neither stated nor implied in the text.

<sup>10</sup>The Arabic verb here is *ṣallaba*, which indeed means "to crucify." The original story in Genesis, however, says that the baker would hang, literally, "from a tree" (על-עץ). Evidently, the association between "hanging from a tree" and crucifixion made explicit in reference to Christ in Galatians 3:13 was a familiar one at the time this sura was composed.

reputation, and he would come into Pharaoh's presence directly, with honor and rank.<sup>11</sup> This is all, of course, absent from the Genesis account. Further, in the Qur'ān, Joseph demands to be set over the storehouses, whereas in Genesis Joseph merely recommends that someone be put in that position, and Pharaoh, finding no other worthy candidate, offers the job to Joseph.

There are many other examples of Old Testament stories that appear in a somewhat different form in the Qur'ān, but these few demonstrate the point more than adequately.

### The Qur'ān and the New Testament

There are far fewer direct references to New Testament figures in the Qur'ān than Old Testament. Most notable of these, though are Mary (Maryam), John the Baptist (Yahya), and Jesus ('Isa). A comparison between the Qur'ān and the New Testament reveals a similar methodology at work in dealing with these as with people from the Old Testament.

The birth of John the Baptist is preceded by the announcement of the angel to his father, Zacharias, who, according to Luke's Gospel, was struck dumb as a penalty for his unbelief. In sura 19, Zakarya requests a sign to validate the prophecy concerning his aged wife giving birth, and the sign is that he will be unable to speak; there is no mention of his unbelief. When Yahya was born, the Qur'ān says that he was given wisdom, and that he was devout and obedient to his parents. No mention is made of the ministry of John, his role as forerunner to the Messiah, his imprisonment, or his execution at the instigation of Herod's wife.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>11</sup>It might appear strange that so much effort seems to be expended in the Qur'ān to clear Joseph's name in the incident with Potipher's wife. However, this is quite in-keeping with the Islamic attitude toward the prophet. Speaking in the context of the Islamic denial of the death of Christ, Norman Anderson states that "the Quran regularly reports that earlier prophets had at first encountered resistance... but finally the prophets had been vindicated and their opponents put to shame. God intervened on their behalf" (Norman Anderson, *Islam in the Modern World*, (Leicester: Apollos, 1990), p. 219, quoted in Norman Geisler and Abdul Saleeb, *Answering Islam: The Crescent in the Light of the Cross*, (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, Mi, 1993), p. 67). In other words, God will not permit His prophet to be shamed. The idea of Joseph being accused and convicted of impropriety with Potipher's wife would be as unthinkable as a prophet being executed as a criminal on a common cross.

<sup>12</sup>Yusuf Ali mentions these things in his commentary on 19:7 and 19:13, but he is clearly dependent upon the Christian Scriptures for this information.

Sura 19 has the Arabic name “Maryam” since it contains the birth narrative of Jesus from the perspective of His mother. Most other references to Mary in the Qur’ān speak of her only in relation to Jesus (i.e. *‘Isa ibn Maryam*, Jesus son of Mary; see, for example, 2:87, 23:50, 33:7, 4:156-7, *et al.*). In this brief passage (19:16-34), however, the Qur’ān tells of the visitation of the angel to Mary and the prediction that she would bear a son even though “no man has touched me and I am not unchaste” (28). It also adds details not found in the canonical Gospels, notably the reproach of the people to Mary after Jesus had been born, and the baby Jesus jumping to Mary’s defense with an articulate response to those who accused her of promiscuity.<sup>13</sup>

The Qur’ān does not provide any record of Jesus’ life and ministry comparable to the New Testament Gospels. Aside from the account of His birth mentioned above, there are some notes about His character, and fervent denials of his divinity, but little else.<sup>14</sup> In agreement with the Gospels, the Qur’ān calls Jesus a prophet, and sets Him firmly in the line of other prophets such as Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Moses (e.g., 2:87, 2:136, 33:7). The Gospels, however, record explicit statements with regard to Jesus’ divine status, both in terms of commentary (e.g., Matthew 3:16-17, Mark 1:1; John 1:1; 20:28, 31) and direct affirmations from Jesus Himself (e.g., John 8:58; 14:6; 17:4). The Qur’ān even goes so far as to put denials of His divinity onto Jesus’ own lips:

And behold! Allāh will say “O Jesus the son of Mary! didst thou say unto men ‘worship me and my mother as gods in derogation of Allāh’”? He will say: “Glory to Thee! never could I say what I had no right (to say). Had I said such a thing

---

<sup>13</sup>The idea that the infant Jesus was able to speak and behave in a very un-childlike way, is, of course, contrary to the concept of Him growing and becoming strong (Luke 2:40). It can, however, be found in Gnostic writings (e.g., The Gospel of Barnabas 7, and The Infancy Gospel of Thomas, particularly the opening passage of the Latin text, where the two- and three-year-old Jesus is grinding wheat from a field, and commanding dried fish to move).

<sup>14</sup>The Qur’ān does mention on a couple of occasions that Jesus was enabled by God to heal the blind, heal lepers, and raise the dead. In this list, however, it also says that Jesus “makest out of clay as it were the figure of a bird by My leave and thou breathest into it and it becometh a bird by My leave” (5:110; see also 3:49). The canonical Gospels say nothing of Jesus doing this; rather, it is the Gnostic Infancy Gospel of Thomas that records such a feat: “This child Jesus, when five years old, was playing in the ford of a mountain stream... And having made some soft clay, He fashioned out of it twelve sparrows... And Jesus clapped His hands, and cried out to the sparrows, and said to them: Off you go! And the sparrows flew, and went off crying” (Thomas 2, from the First Greek Form; translation located at <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf08.vii.viii.html>).

Thou wouldst indeed have known it. Thou knowest what is in my heart though I know not what is in Thine. For Thou knowest in full all that is hidden.” (5:116)

In addition to this there are frequent assertions that Allāh would not bear a son, and that Allāh does not have “partners”<sup>15</sup> (e.g., 5:72, 13:33, 40:12). Also, contrary to the Gospel accounts, Jesus did not die on a cross, but only appeared to do so:

That they said (in boast) "We killed Christ Jesus the son of Mary the Apostle of Allāh"; but they killed him not nor crucified him but so it was made to appear to them and those who differ therein are full of doubts with no (certain) knowledge but only conjecture to follow for of a surety they killed him not. Nay Allāh raised him up unto Himself; and Allāh is Exalted in Power Wise (4:157-158).<sup>16</sup>

The reason Jesus' life and ministry is presented in this way relates directly to the Qur'ān's doctrine of sin and salvation, which will form part of the discussion of the theology of the Qur'ān below.

It is interesting to note, in light of the differences between the Christian Scriptures and the Qur'ān, that the Qur'ān refers to both the *Tawrat* (i.e., the Law, or the Old Testament) and the *Injil* (i.e., the Gospels) as revelations from Allāh (10:37; 2:4; 3:3). Furthermore, it is required that the faithful believe not only in the present revelation (i.e., the Qur'ān), but in those revelations that have preceded it (2:4). For the Muslim, however, there is no dilemma over which version is true: the Qur'ān is Allāh's Word. As for the *Tawrat* and the *Injil*, Muslim apologists will be quick to note that these words do not refer to the written documents of the Old and New Testaments, but rather the original words spoken to Moses, to David, and to Jesus. Further, they will side with modern liberal scholars in asserting that very few of the original words of these men appear in our Biblical texts:<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>15</sup> This is the Muslim doctrine of *shirk*, which is often ascribed to polytheists. The Qur'ān views the doctrine of the Trinity as a denial of monotheism (see 5:72-73, 116), so any Christian holding to Christ's divinity would be seen as one ascribing partners to God, and hence guilty of *shirk*.

<sup>16</sup> Once again, it appears that the Qur'ān is seeking to protect the reputation of a prophet. If Jesus died on a cross, then he would be cursed (Deuteronomy 21:23), and this would not be appropriate for a prophet of Allāh.

<sup>17</sup> Ironically, many of these liberal scholars would just as quickly deny the claims Muslims make about the authorship and reliability of the Qur'ān.

When we say that we believe in the Tauraat, the Zaboor [the Psalms], the Injeel and the Qur'ān, what do we really mean?... The Tauraat we Muslims believe in is not the “Torah” of the Jews and the Christians... We believe that whatever the Holy Prophet Moses... preached to his people, was the revelation from God Almighty, but that Moses was not the author of those “books” attributed to him by the Jews and the Christians... Likewise, we believe that the Zaboor was the revelation of God granted to Hazrat Dawood (David)... but that the present Psalms associated with his name are not that revelation... We sincerely believe that everything Christ... preached was from God. That was the Injeel, the good news and the guidance of God for the Children of Israel. In his lifetime Jesus never wrote a single word, nor did he instruct anyone to do so. What passes off as the “GOSPELS” today are the works of anonymous hands!<sup>18</sup>

Hence, for the Muslim, the only way to know what Allāh originally said to Moses, David, or Jesus, is to consult the Qur'ān.

### The Theology of the Qur'ān

Strictly speaking, the Qur'ān does not contain any kind of systematic theology that would compare with, for example, Romans or Hebrews in the New Testament. However, the Qur'ān does speak sufficiently about the nature of God, the condition of man, and the afterlife for the reader to form conclusions regarding its theological worldview. At best these conclusions are still general enough that many Muslims rely upon commentaries and the Hadith for more detailed exposition, but since any study of Islamic theology must begin with and be rooted in the Qur'ān, it is still useful to examine what the Qur'ān says about these things.

### *Allāh*

The term *Allāh* is used in the Qur'ān to designate the divine being worshiped by Muslims. The word is commonly thought to be a shortened form of *al-ilāh*, meaning “the

---

<sup>18</sup> Ahmed Deedat, The Choice: Islam and Christianity, Volume Two, (Woodside, Ny: Islamic Propagation Center International, Inc., 1994), pp.80-81.

god,” a phrase which already existed during Mohammed’s time, but which he imbued with greater meaning, incorporating concepts of sovereignty and unity<sup>19</sup>.

The Qur’ān directly rejects the doctrine of the Trinity<sup>20</sup>, along with any other idea that would suggest there is any being that is Allāh’s co-equal, either in nature (i.e., other gods), or in position. This includes the idea of Allāh having “partners,” discussed above, and of Allāh having offspring of any kind. All of these concepts, including the doctrine of the Trinity, constitute polytheism to the Muslim, i.e., a denial of Allāh’s essential unity.<sup>21</sup>

Muslim scholars object to the characterization of Allāh as an angry and vengeful being. Muslim scholar Fazlur Rahman noted:

The immediate impression from a cursory reading of the Qur’ān is that of the infinite majesty of God and His equally infinite mercy, although many a Western scholar (through a combination of ignorance and prejudice) has depicted the Qur’ānic God as a concentrate of pure power, even as brute power—indeed, as a capricious tyrant. The Qur’ān, of course, speaks of God in so many different contexts and so frequently that unless all the statements are interiorized into a total mental picture—without, as far as possible, the interference of any subjective and wishful thinking—it would be extremely difficult, if not outright impossible to do justice to the Qur’ānic concept of God.<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>19</sup>H. A. R. Gibb, Islam, p. 36. Also see Phil Parshall, The Cross and the Crescent: Understanding the Muslim Heart and Mind, (Gabriel Publishing: Waynesboro, Ga, 2002), p. 28, and Geisler and Saleeb, Understanding Islam, pp. 14-15. Aurang Zeb Azmi defines *Allāh* as “the Only God... known and used in the pre-Islamic literature as well as in the Islamic and modern literature.” He then defines *Ilāh/Ālihah* as “false god, deity” (Aurang Zeb Azmi, Glossary of the Qur’ān, (Goodword Books: New Delhi, India, 2003), p. 11). Alphonse Mingana argues that the term was originally derived from the Syriac word for God, *’lh*, pronounced *Allāha* in ancient Nestorian (Alphonse Mingana, “Syriac Influence on the Style of the Koran,” in Ibn Warraq (ed.), What the Koran Really Says, (Prometheus Books: New York, Ny, 2002), p. 179).

<sup>20</sup>Sura 4:171; sura 5:73.

<sup>21</sup>For example, in his translation of the Qur’ān, Yusuf Ali comments on sura 38:7: “Some Commentators interpret *millat akhirat* to refer to the last religion preached before Islam, viz. Christianity, which had itself departed from Monotheism to Trinity.” Also, on 68:41, he says: “Partners in Godhead: as in the doctrine of the Trinity, or indeed in any form of polytheism. Such a doctrine destroys the cardinal doctrine of the Unity of Allāh.”

<sup>22</sup>Fazlur Rahman, Major Themes of the Qur’ān, 2d ed., (Bibliotheca Islamica: Minneapolis, Mn, 1989), pp. 1-2.

It is true that the Qur'ān often speaks of Allāh's mercy, provision for all, and his love to all those who love and obey him (e.g., 3:31; 10:58-59; 14:31-34; 16:52-56, 61; 29:63-67; 57:28-29). However, since the Qur'ān does not contain a doctrine of Original Sin, which would ascribe to all men equal guilt before God from the time each person comes into existence, the nature of Allāh's "mercy" in the Qur'ān is ambiguous. For the Christian, God's provision of life, health, bounty, and so forth to both the sinner and the righteous (Matthew 5:44-45) is despite the fact that no person is born inherently deserving of such consideration from God. This is divine mercy as the New Testament understands it. In the Qur'ān, Allāh provides for the righteous (i.e., those who have made themselves worthy through faith and obedience), and the unrighteous (those who have rejected Allāh, and the message of the Prophet). But since the unrighteous are so either implicitly (by not being Muslim) or explicitly (by rejecting Islam), for the period of time prior to that conscious decision to reject, or to follow another path, the person would not qualify as one of the unrighteous, and would presumably be deserving of Allāh's blessing.<sup>23</sup> In other words, it seems that, according to the Qur'ān, Allāh is merciful and bountiful to all people, who may or may not be deserving of his mercy and bounty depending on whether or not they have earned it. Whereas for the Christian, no-one is worthy of God's mercy and bounty, and can in no way earn His mercy.

Further, where the Bible would connect God's mercy to all people to His love for His creation (Psalm 145:8-9; John 3:16; Acts 14:17), the Qur'ān does not suggest any particular motivating factor behind Allāh's general provision. Certainly, it appears that Allāh's love is far more specific than the love of Yahweh, since the love of Allāh is only spoken of in connection to those who obey him and are faithful to him (e.g., sura 3:31-32; 10:4; 42:23). This difference in understanding of mercy and love probably contributes to the Christian conception of Allāh as a wrathful tyrant, especially when combined with the Qur'ān's numerous warnings and descriptions of Allāh's wrath against the unbeliever, the backslider, and the idolater (e.g., 6:22-55; 14:27-30; the entirety of sura 67).

---

<sup>23</sup>This may sound like the "Age of Accountability," a teaching popular among many Christians that states a person only becomes accountable for sin when they reach an age where they are aware that what they are doing is wrong. However, this is not a Biblical concept, and is used more to try to deal with the issue of children who die in infancy. The Bible teaches that *all* have sinned (Romans 3:23), and are sinners from conception as a result of the Fall (Psalm 51:5; Romans 5:12-14).

### *Allāh's Sovereignty*

Of all the attributes of Allāh spoken of in the Qur'ān, his sovereignty is the one that draws the most attention. In the list of divine attributes provided in sura 59:22-24, which forms the basis of the so-called "Ninety-Nine Names of Allāh,"<sup>24</sup> "The Sovereign" comes close to the top. While the Qur'ān often speaks of man's rebellion, and warns men against being deceived and turning away, ultimately it is Allāh who is in supreme control. As Bell and Watt observe:

Man's will is completely subordinate to God's will, so that man cannot do or will anything unless God wills it. With regard to accepting the Reminder [i.e., Mohammad, or the message he brings] or believing men are told that "you will not so will except it be that God's wills."<sup>25</sup>

In the words of the Qur'ān:

Verily this is no less than a Message to (all) the Worlds: (With profit) to whoever among you wills to go straight. But ye shall not will Except as Allāh wills The Cherisher of the Worlds (87:27-29).

If it had been the Lord's Will they would all have believed all who are on earth! Wilt thou then compel mankind against their will to believe! No soul can believe except by the Will of Allāh and He will place Doubt (or obscurity) on those who will not understand (10:99-100).

This concept of absolute sovereignty also lends to the conception of Allāh as aloof, distant from his creation, and tyrannical in his treatment of people since he would impose his will upon his creation. Norman Geisler calls this "extreme determinism," and characterizes the relationship between Allāh and man in the Qur'ān as that of "Master and slave," where "God is the sovereign monarch and man must submit to him as an obedient slave."<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>24</sup>A complete list can be found at [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/99\\_Names\\_of\\_God\\_in\\_the\\_Qur'an](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/99_Names_of_God_in_the_Qur'an). These names were compiled from the Qur'ān and the Sunnah, and have been used for meditation and in conjunction with the *subha*, a string of prayer beads akin to the Roman Catholic rosary.

<sup>25</sup> Bell and Watt, p. 150

<sup>26</sup>Geisler and Saleeb, p. 140.



Some Muslim scholars try to distance themselves from this perception of Allāh's sovereignty in the Qur'ān. They will insist that the Qur'ān is equally adamant about the freedom of man's will, though not all agree on the resolution of this apparent paradox. One school of thought is that Allāh is sovereign, man has free will, and one must not dwell too much on the subject:

We should avoid discussing *qadar* [i.e., the doctrine of Predestination] in depth, because some aspects of it cannot be comprehended by the human mind, no matter how brilliant it may be, and others cannot be comprehended except with a great deal of difficulty.<sup>27</sup>

Rahman, on the other hand, sees Allāh's work of ordaining the paths of men as more of an "entrenching" of men into positions they have, of their own free will, chosen to take. His view is based upon the observation that once a person does either a good or an evil act, it is easier for that person to repeat that action and, conversely, harder for him to do the opposite.<sup>28</sup> He denies the possibility that the human nature is at all persuaded toward one kind of act or another, but recognizes that "gravitating down to the earth" is easier than "ascending to the heights of purity."<sup>29</sup> It is, therefore, in the "struggle" of man up to the "heights of purity" that Allāh willingly joins with man.

It is the view of this author, however, that the words of the Qur'ān are direct and to-the-point:

Allāh doth blot out or confirm what He pleaseth: with Him is the Mother of the Book. (13:39)<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup>Umar S. al-Ashqar, *Divine Will and Predestination in the Light of the Qur'ān and Sunnah*, tr. Nasiruddin al-Khattab, rev. ed. (International Islamic Publishing House: Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 2003), p. 63.

<sup>28</sup>Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>29</sup>*ibid.*, p. 21. Why it is that men find it easier to descend into sin than to "ascend to the heights of purity" Rahman does not appear to address, which is interesting in light of his assertion that there is nothing in his nature to persuade him toward one particular direction. One would have thought this an obvious objection to his position worthy of discussion.

<sup>30</sup>"the Mother of the Book," *Umm al-Kitaab*, contains the final and eternal decrees and will of Allāh.

Whom Allāh doth guide he is on the right path: whom He rejects from His guidance such are the persons who perish. Many are the Jinns and men We have made for Hell: They have hearts wherewith they understand not eyes wherewith they see not and ears wherewith they hear not. They are like cattle nay more misguided: for they are heedless (of warning). (7:178-9)

To Him is due the primal origin of the heavens and the earth; when He decreeth a matter He saith to it: "Be"; and it is. (2:117)

Those who give partners to Allāh will say "If Allāh had wished we should not have given partners to Him nor would our father; nor should we have had any taboos." So did their ancestors argue falsely until they tasted of Our wrath. Say: "Have ye any (certain) Knowledge? If so produce it before us. Ye follow nothing but conjecture: Ye do nothing but lie." Say: "With Allāh is the argument that reaches home: if it had been his will he could indeed have guided you all." (6:148-9)

While Muslims may differ on how the Qur'ān is to be interpreted, the fact of the matter seems plain: the Qur'ān teaches Allāh's absolute sovereignty over all creation, including who attains Paradise, and who is condemned to Hell.<sup>31</sup>

### *Man*

According to sura 15:26, Allāh created man "from sounding clay, from mud molded into shape."<sup>32</sup> Sura 2 speaks of the events in the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve were given the bounty of the land to enjoy except for one tree. Satan (*Shaitan*), however, caused them to stumble and fall from Allāh's favor, earning them expulsion from the garden. From that time on, at least "for a time,"<sup>33</sup> there would be enmity between people, and they would have to dwell on the earth.<sup>34</sup>

---

<sup>31</sup>For a more in-depth discussion of the Qur'ānic doctrine of *Qadar*, or Predestination, along with a critique of the doctrine from a Christian, Reformed perspective, see the series of articles by this author entitled "Predestination in Islam," located on <http://www.aomin.org> (March 21, 23, and 25, 2007). This series has also been compiled into a single article available at <http://www.colindsmith.com/papers>.

<sup>32</sup>The Arabic term *ṣalṣāl* refers to dry clay, or potter's clay.

<sup>33</sup>The Arabic word *hīn* designates an unspecified period of time: "a season."

<sup>34</sup>Some have speculated from this passage that, since man was condemned to dwell on earth as a result of his disobedience, the Garden of Eden must have been located somewhere other than this world. This author would suggest that this is simply a representation of the curse of Genesis 3, wherein man was told he would, henceforth, have to work the land for his food, and the serpent would be condemned to

This sounds very similar to the account of the Fall in Genesis 3, the most notable difference being in the consequences of Adam's sin. First, the Qur'ān seems to indicate that the time of Adam's exile was to be limited, whereas in Genesis 3, God barred entrance to the Garden of Eden permanently (Genesis 3:23-24). Second, the Qur'ān speaks of there being enmity between people, but says nothing of the relationship between man and Satan, or even man and God. It is also interesting to note that the Arabic slips from the singular in ayah 33 to the dual number in ayah 35, and then the plural in 36, indicating that the effects of Adam's transgression were felt by more than just him, or even more than just him and Eve; that all of his progeny would be affected by this sin.<sup>35</sup>

It would be wrong, however, to think that the Qur'ān supports a doctrine of Original Sin, whereby all of mankind shares Adam's guilt. On the contrary, the Qur'ān teaches that Allāh forgave Adam his transgression (2:37), indicating that while the consequences of the sin remain (dwelling on earth), Allāh's wrath is not set against mankind on account of his rebellion. In that case, one may wonder: why does man sin?

Since there is no concept of Original Sin in the Qur'ān, man has not "fallen" from a perfect state, and, therefore is born neither opposed to Allāh, nor a Muslim. The lack of great doctrinal passages in the Qur'ān akin to Romans 3, Romans 5, or Ephesians 2, leaves the Muslim theologian to piece together a doctrine of the original state of man from the various statements the Qur'ān does make, along with assorted commentaries and Hadith. From the Qur'ān he learns that man disobeyed Allāh in the Garden, but Allāh forgave him, so he does not remain under Allāh's condemnation. However, it is also apparent that not everyone submits to Allāh and follows after his prophets. The Qur'ān speaks of unbelievers, idolators, those who mock the prophets, those who are guilty of *shirk*, and those who believe but then fall away. If, by nature, man is not morally corrupt, something must influence him toward evil.

---

crawl around in the dust.

<sup>35</sup>See Yusuf Ali's comments on 2:26. Interestingly, he does not draw from this any concept of Adam's Federal headship over mankind, or any even vague semblance of a doctrine of Original Sin. Rather, he sees in this Adam as a type of all mankind, and leaves it at that.

The previous section mentioned Rahman's suggestion that it is easier for man to gravitate down than to rise up, drawing from psychology to interpret the Qur'ānic evidence. This still does not explain why man might be drawn in that direction. One source of influence upon mankind commonly offered up is the supernatural, either Satan directly, as in the Garden of Eden, or *jinn*.

The most salient idea that one gets from the Qur'ān is that the activities of Satan are all-pervasive in the human sphere and that man must constantly be alert and on his guard... Although every human is, to some extent and in some principle, as it were, exposed to Satan's tempting or beguiling, people who have *taqwā* (i.e., are on guard against moral danger) do not really lapse into evil but become quickly aware of Satan's machinations.<sup>36</sup>

*Jinn* are spiritual beings that, according to the Qur'ān, were created out of fire as opposed to clay, like man (55:13-14). Satan himself was a *jinn* who disobeyed the command of Allāh to bow down to Adam (18:50). Given this fact, along with the statements regarding man's need to beware of Satan, it is evident that in the Qur'ān, Satan's main enmity is with man, not Allāh. Hence, it should not be a surprise that Satan would try to draw men away from the path of Islam and the words of the Qur'ān, so that man might find himself rebelling against Allāh and end up in Hell.

Aside from Satan, the *jinn* are otherwise portrayed as morally neutral, just as able as men to hear the words of the Prophet and to either accept or reject them. The Qur'ān relates a story concerning *jinn* who heard the message of the Qur'ān and immediately went out to tell others about this book that can guide them to truth, and to warn them with regard to their sin (46:29-31). Sura 72 speaks of a similar event, but also points out that not all the *jinn* became Muslim (72:1-15). These "foolish" *jinn* who "swerve justice" could also influence men to sin:

Allāh has created His slaves in such a way that they are free from false beliefs, and has created them with the readiness to accept the sound beliefs, but when they are born, the devils from among mankind and the *jinn* surround them and corrupt

---

<sup>36</sup>Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'ān*, p. 124. Rahman quotes sura 7:200-201 for support: "If a suggestion from satan assail thy (mind) seek refuge with Allāh; for He heareth and knoweth (all things). Those who fear Allāh when a thought of evil from satan assaults them bring Allāh to remembrance when lo! they see (aright)!"

their sound nature (*fiṭrah*), but Allāh protects those whom He wishes to guide to the truth.<sup>37</sup>

This “corruption of the *fiṭrah*” could happen any time, though if one follows Rahman’s thinking with regard to the ease with which man falls, one can only conclude that people are naturally susceptible to corrupting influence, and for most, if not all, this happens quite early on in life. Precisely *why* men are more prone to negative influence than positive is not an issue the Qur’ān addresses.

### *Salvation*

Since, according to the Qur’ān, man is created without the stain of Original Sin, and since his future state is dependent upon the decree of Allāh and the degree to which he allows himself to be led astray into sin, it follows that there is no concept of a Savior in the Qur’ān. There is no Original Sin, so mankind does not need someone to come and pay the penalty for that sin on his behalf. Further, the sins men commit are brought to bear upon him, and he can indulge them, or turn from them; and even if he chooses to indulge them, if he later repents, Allāh might still forgive him. Indeed, there is no statement in the Qur’ān that would deny man’s ability to become Muslim without some internal work of conversion. Even if Allāh has ordained one’s path, He does not need to change a person’s heart to fulfill his destiny: Allāh will simply lead one along the path of faith until there is an expression of faith and obedience to Allāh and the words of the Qur’ān and the Hadith. Passages such as Ezekiel 36:26-27, John 14:6, and John 6:44 have no parallel in the Qur’ān.

It is for this reason that the Qur’ān presents Jesus the way it does, as one who came into the world as a prophet to draw people back to Allāh, and who did not die on a cross (see the discussion on pages 14-16). Matthew’s Gospel says that the very purpose of the Incarnation was so that “He will save His people from their sins” (1:21). The Qur’ān denies the necessity of this, so the whole purpose of Jesus’ birth, life, death, and

---

<sup>37</sup> ‘Umar S. al-Ashqar, *Divine Will and Predestination*, pp. 86-87.

resurrection as presented in the Christian Scriptures is completely re-written for the Muslim Scriptures.<sup>38</sup>

It would, however, be wrong to say that because the Qur'ān does not express the need for a Savior, there is no concept of salvation in the Qur'ān. While salvation in the Christian sense is mainly concerned with forgiveness of sin and restoration of sinful men to a right standing with God, salvation in the Qur'ānic sense is chiefly concerned with either deliverance from the various trials and troubles of this life, or deliverance from the pain and sufferings of Hell in the next life. Sura 21:76 cites Noah as an example of Allāh providing temporal salvation: “(Remember) Noah when he cried (to Us) aforetime: We listened to his (prayer) and delivered him and his family from great distress.”<sup>39</sup> Paradise is reserved for those who have passed away having faithfully resisted sin and obeyed the Qur'ān (19:72; 61:10-12). Both kinds of salvation are not given freely by Allāh; they are earned by devotion to Allāh, and a life of obedience (see 41:18; 11:66, for example).

Although the Qur'ān states that Allāh gives salvation in terms of temporal success to those who are faithful to him, it is true that those who would be considered enemies of Islam sometimes achieve temporal success, even to the detriment of Muslims. From the perspective of the Qur'ān, a defeat of Muslims (or the success of the enemies of Islam) is more a sign of Allāh's judgment on the Muslims than a sign of his support of their enemies:

The misfortune which befell you when the two armies met in the battle of Uhud was with the leave of Allāh, so that He might know the true believers and the hypocrites. When it was said to them (hypocrites): "Come fight for the cause of Allāh or at least defend yourselves," they replied: "Had we known how to fight we would certainly come with you." On that day they were nearer to unbelief than

---

<sup>38</sup>Sura 17:15, 39:7, and 53:38 state explicitly that “no bearer of burdens can bear the burdens of another.” Moreover, 6:70 states: “every soul delivers itself to ruin by its own acts: it will find for itself no protector or intercessor except Allāh: if it offered every ransom (or reparation) none will be accepted: such is (the end of) those who deliver themselves to ruin by their own acts: they will have for drink (only) boiling water and for punishment one most grievous: for they persisted in rejecting Allāh.” These statements stand opposed to the New Testament teaching that Christ is the One who takes upon Himself the sin burden of His people, and pays the penalty for sin in their place, that they may have the righteousness of Christ and thus enter Heaven (2 Corinthians 5:21; Ephesians 2:4-9).

<sup>39</sup>See also 61:14 where, interestingly, it is the portion of the Children of Israel that believed in Jesus who were granted strength in the face of their enemies.

to belief; for they uttered with their mouths what was not in their hearts. Allāh is quite aware of what they were concealing. (3:166-167)

### *The Afterlife*

Regardless of one's attitude toward Allāh, Mohammad, and the Qur'ān, all people will one day face a final accounting before Allāh. As a result of this assessment of their lives in light of the Qur'ān and their faithfulness to Allāh, all people will either be condemned to punishment in Hell, or be saved from this punishment and receive Paradise as a reward.

Mohammad Abdul Quasem<sup>40</sup> identifies three successive stages on the path to the Qur'ānic afterlife. The first stage occurs at death, when the person enters the grave, and he is separated from the world:

These people will never refrain from wrongdoing until when death comes to anyone of them, he will say: "O Rabb! Send me back, so that I may do good deeds in the world that I have left behind." Never! This is just a statement which carries no value, it will be too late because there will be a barrier between them and the world they have just left till the Day they are raised to life again. (23:99-100)

Various passages (chiefly 14:27 and 40:46) suggest that Allāh will hold the person to the mindset with which they entered the grave: the believer steadfast in his faith, the unbeliever staunch in his rebellion. During their sojourn in the grave, the dead are given a foretaste of the eternity they will experience. The Hadith elaborate on this, naming the angels that visit the dead, and describing the interrogation of each person with regard to their faith and life.

The second stage is the resurrection and judgment, where at the trumpet call on the last day, all people, living and dead, will be summoned forth to face Allāh,<sup>41</sup> where he will expose the sins of the unrighteous and elicit from them a confession of guilt.<sup>42</sup> Allāh

---

<sup>40</sup>Muhammad Abdul Quasem, Salvation of the Soul and Islamic Devotions (Kegan Paul International: London, England, 1983), pp. 22-29.

<sup>41</sup>Sura 17:99-105.

<sup>42</sup>Sura 42:47

will also do the same of the righteous, but Allāh will grant them forgiveness.<sup>43</sup> Not every case will be clear-cut, since one's acts of faithfulness will be mingled with acts of sinfulness. For this reason, there will be a weighing of one's deeds by means of scales, such that those whose evil deeds outweigh their good will be condemned to Hell, and those whose good deeds outweigh their evil will attain Paradise.<sup>44</sup>

The final stage is the entry into Paradise or Hell, depending on the judgment given in the previous stage. The Qur'ān provides various depictions of both Hell and Paradise, the former being described as having seven gates (15:44), wherein the unbeliever will suffer torment in fire (25:11-14), boiling water, scorching winds, black smoke (56:42-44), festering water to drink without being able to swallow (14:16), chains binding the unbeliever to others with his garments made of tar and his face covered in flames (14:49-50), and other such tortures.

Paradise, on the other hand, is depicted as a place where the believer will be adorned with silk and gold, where there is no more sorrow, no more toil and weariness (35:33-35), where there is an abundance of fruit and drink to consume at one's liberty (69:21-24), where they shall have "chaste spouses,"<sup>45</sup> and which is described as a garden with flowing rivers and plenty of shade (4:57). To attain Paradise is to be truly saved in the Qur'ānic sense, since the believer has received salvation not only from the trials of life, but also from the torments of Hell.

Finally, some believe that the "Heights" (*A'rāf*) mentioned in 7:46-48 is the abode of those who neither obeyed nor disobeyed Allāh—a sort of Islamic Purgatory.<sup>46</sup> Since true salvation is not simply an avoidance of Hell, but the attainment of Paradise, those

---

<sup>43</sup>See sura 27:83-90, which underlies much of what has been said here.

<sup>44</sup>Sura 7:8-9; 23:103.

<sup>45</sup>Sura 38:49 speaks of "bashful virgin companions of equal age," and 55:56 further describes the bashful virgins as ones "whom neither any man nor jinn has touched before." Sura 78:31-34 says, "On that Day, the righteous will certainly achieve their Heart's desires: beautiful gardens, vineyards; and young women of their own age; and overflowing cups..." The object of laboring this point about the abundance of young, chaste companions, as well as vineyards, is to underscore the range and nature of "pleasures" the Qur'ān sets forth for the believer. In other words, the rewards of Paradise in the Qur'ān are largely sensual, as opposed to spiritual, though nearness to Allāh is also mentioned (9:72; 56:11-12).

<sup>46</sup>Quasem, Salvation of the Soul and Islamic Devotions, pp. 27-28.



residing in *A 'rāf* cannot claim to be saved in the Qur'ānic sense.<sup>47</sup> However, not all Muslims are agreed on the interpretation of this difficult passage. It is possible that the *A 'rāf* referred to here are heights from which angels, or supremely spiritual men, can see the value of each soul and welcome the righteous into Paradise.<sup>48</sup>

### The Qur'ān and Textual Criticism

At the time of Muhammad's death, the various stories and sayings that make up the Qur'ān were held in the memories of his companions. Some parts had been written down, and he made use of secretaries in later years, as the story of the apostasy of Ibn-Abī-Sarḥ shows.<sup>49</sup> Popular tradition says that the Qur'ān was originally written on pieces of parchment, papyrus, flat stones, palm leaves, animal bones, and wooden boards.<sup>50</sup> It is also popularly believed that the first collection of these articles into an authoritative Qur'ān was undertaken by Abū-Bakr, under the direction of caliph 'Umar in 632-4. While it is not unlikely that such a collection was made, it is doubtful whether this was the first, or at least the only authoritative collection made at the time; the fact that 'Uthmān later needed to establish a final authoritative text demonstrates the existence of rival collections and readings prior to his work.

'Uthmān held the caliphate from 644-656, and it was during this period that he was approached concerning the trouble caused by the existence of variant Qur'ānic texts, bringing serious dissension among various groups. 'Uthman's response was to commission qualified men to gather texts and, under consultation with companions of Muhammad, create a version of the text that could be considered authoritative. The

---

<sup>47</sup>Some ṣūfīs argue that true salvation is preservation from the torments of Hell, and so it is correct to say that those in *A 'rāf* are saved. See Quasem, p. 28.

<sup>48</sup>See Yusuf Ali's note (number 1025) on 7:46.

<sup>49</sup>According to Bell and Watt (p.37), Muhammad was dictating sura 23 to Abī-Sarḥ when he was caught in the moment at aya 12 and proclaimed "blessed be God, the best of creators." He decided that this outburst was intended to be part of the revelation and directed his secretary to write it down, at which point Abī-Sarḥ began to doubt, and eventually left Muhammad and returned to Mecca, where he was later pardoned thanks to 'Uthmān.

<sup>50</sup>Bell and Watt, p. 32. They note that this is probably an exaggeration for the purpose of illustrating the relative poverty of the early Muslims compared to those even at the time of Abū-Bakr.

details regarding the names of those who formed the commission, their qualifications, the nature of the texts they examined, and the criteria they used to determine correct readings, are all matters of debate. The fact remains that they conducted their work, and at the end of the process, they produced a text of the Qur'ān that established not only the correct wording of each aya, but also the number of suras and their order. This was, and is to this day, considered the authoritative, Allāh-inspired Qur'ān. 'Uthmān ordered the destruction of all previous Qur'ānic texts, and the new, final version of the Qur'ān was copied and distributed.

In 1972, a group of laborers working on the restoration of the Great Mosque of Sana'a came upon a large collection of manuscripts in the loft. They gathered them into sacks and nothing more was thought of them for another seven years when the president of the Yemeni Antiquities Authority persuaded a visiting German scholar to look at them. It turned out that the manuscripts were actually thousands of fragments representing thousands of different parchment codices of the Qur'ān, some dating back to the first few centuries of Islamic history. Furthermore, on closer examination some of the texts revealed small variations from 'Uthmān's standard text, suggesting that these were readings pre-dating 'Uthmān's revision, and might even have a claim to being the original readings of the texts.<sup>51</sup>

In the field of New Testament studies, such a find would be embraced and cause excitement in Christian circles, since Christians recognize that God has preserved His Word in the thousands of manuscripts found over the centuries, and the more manuscripts that come to light, the more certainty Bible translators and scholars have over the few remaining questionable passages.<sup>52</sup> For Muslims, however, the existence of contrary

---

<sup>51</sup>This story is drawn from Toby Lester, "What is the Koran?" in Warraq (ed.) What the Koran Really Says. Evidently, there were those who took seriously admonitions within the Qur'ān such as 15:89-93, which warns against shredding the Qur'ān. It seems that instead of physically destroying their copies of the Qur'ān in response to 'Uthmān's edict, they preferred burying them so they would not be guilty of causing physical harm to the pages.

<sup>52</sup>It should be noted at this point that the remaining textual variants in the New Testament do not affect any major areas of doctrine; and further, the Christian can have confidence that within the current collection of manuscripts available, the original readings are present. Further manuscript finds will simply confirm which readings those are. For now, most critical editions of the New Testament (e.g., the United Bible Societies and Nestle-Aland editions) show the variant readings to each verse in their apparatus.

readings to the Qur'ān from a time contemporary to the establishment of the authoritative text undermines their belief in the integrity of the text of the Qur'ān.

In Muslim belief, the Qur'ān was delivered verbatim to Muhammad, and has been transmitted in such a way as to preserve the integrity of the text so that the words contained in 'Uthmān's collection, and hence in modern editions of the Qur'ān in Arabic, are exactly the same as those given to Muhammad. The existence of variant readings would, therefore, be as troubling to Muslims today as they were in the time of 'Uthmān. It would be even more troubling to Muslims if it could be demonstrated that some of these variants reflect an earlier, possibly more accurate, version of what Muhammad originally wrote. Some Islamic scholars do not appear to have a problem with this, but for the majority of Muslims, such textual activity on the Qur'ān can only be seen as harmful to the faith, and is, therefore, actively (and sometimes aggressively) discouraged.

There may be substance to these concerns. Gerd-R Puin, a German specialist in Arabic calligraphy and Qur'ānic paleography—the first scholar to seriously examine the Yemeni texts—has said that the new manuscript discoveries betray a Qur'ānic text that evolved over time, not a text that came to Muhammad directly over a space of a few years.<sup>53</sup> Naturally, such an assertion, if it can be substantiated from an analysis of the available documents, would be devastating to the Muslim claims regarding the Qur'ān.

### Conclusion

While the Qur'ān is not primarily a work of systematic theology, and contains little by way of doctrinal exposition, the stories, commands, and sayings it contains reveal an underlying theological mindset that was later brought out in the Hadith and traditions. The fact that there are a number of different Hadith collections, and various Muslim sects that hold to one or more or none of them, demonstrates that there is still a certain amount of ambiguity in some major areas of Muslim doctrine.

---

<sup>53</sup>Lester, "What is the Koran," pp. 108-109. He says that Puin's assessment is based on the script used to write some of the texts, and also the fact that they were palimpsests. Other articles in What the Koran Really Says go further into examining the pre-history of Islamic belief, using comparative linguistics to suggest alternative readings to difficult passages in the Qur'ān under the assumption that Arabic was not necessarily the only language around, and might not have been the original language of some of the Qur'ān.

Nevertheless, the doctrines examined in this paper are fundamental, and can be said to be definitional of the Islamic theological worldview. Only by grasping the importance of these doctrines can the Christian fully appreciate the message of the Qur'ān, and the extent to which Islam and Christianity differ. Perhaps the most fundamental difference is the Qur'ānic view of sin, which was touched on in the discussion above concerning man and the afterlife (and, to an extent, the discussion of the sovereignty of Allāh). Without a concept of the depravity of man, the Qur'ān struggles to explain man's natural inclination to sin, and also puts Allāh in the position of judging his creation based on sinful actions they may not originally have wanted to do.

If the Christian apologist is to deal honestly and fairly with Islam, he would do well to read the Qur'ān and study in particular the doctrines examined, albeit briefly, in this paper, that he may be able to fulfill the Apostolic command to always be ready to present the gospel "with gentleness and reverence" (1 Peter 3:15).