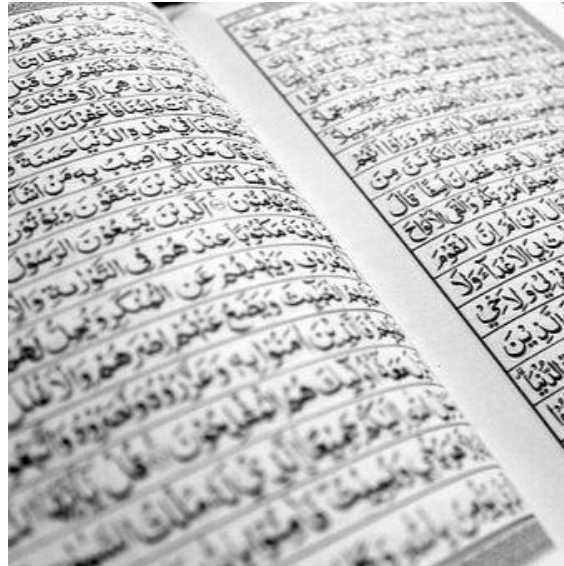


حكمة

Hikmah Study Guides

Muslims, Christians & ... the Qur'an

A short guide exploring Muslim and Christian attitudes towards the Qur'an and its history, authority and interpretations



Series Editor: Dr Richard McCallum

Centre for Muslim-Christian Studies, Oxford

CMCS Hikmah Study Guides

'Hikmah' is an Arabic word for wisdom. *CMCS Hikmah Study Guides* are an accessible way for the reader to develop a wise understanding of complex and potentially controversial topics which Muslims and Christian encounter together. Each guide is written with input from both Christian and Muslim scholars and is intended to be non-partisan whilst not ignoring difficult or controversial issues and histories. The guides can be read by both specialists and non-specialists in the field and can also be used as conversation starters for small groups. There will no doubt be Christians and Muslims who disagree with some points or find this guide less than comprehensive, since no short work of this length can cover all the complexities of such a topic. So additional reading is suggested for those who want to study further. The questions for reflection at the end are designed to help us all think more deeply about these important themes. Let the conversation continue!

Contents

Contents	3
Introduction.....	1
Muslims and the Qur'an.....	1
The authority of the Qur'an	3
Questions of interpretation.....	4
The Qur'an in life and worship.....	5
Christians and the Qur'an	6
Christian scripture and the Qur'an.....	7
The origin and nature of the Qur'an	8
The authority of the Qur'an	8
Questions of interpretation.....	9
Conclusion	11
Further Reading:	12
Muslims and the Qur'an.....	12
Christians and the Qur'an	12
Other writings	12
Questions.....	13
Questions for Muslims.....	13
Questions for Christians.....	13
Questions for all.....	13

Introduction

The Qur'an – literally, the “Recitation” – is the basis of Islam’s 1400-year-old civilization and is one of the most widely-recited, best-loved, most-studied and most-criticised books in human history. Viewing their scripture as relevant and authoritative in all places at all times, Muslims worldwide seek to order their lives according to its teachings. It has thus shaped the cultures of the many peoples that have embraced Islam. The Qur'an has even played a role in international politics both historically and in contemporary times. From any perspective, this makes the Qur'an one of the world’s most influential and important books.

A little over half the length of the New Testament,¹ the Qur'an shares common elements with the Bible’s Old and New Testaments through shared prophets and concepts, although those people and ideas are sometimes understood differently, despite sharing the same names. The Qur'an and Bible are also different in their literary forms, leading Muslims and Christians to differ over their concepts of scripture, how God communicates with humankind, and how that communication relates to scripture. The first section of this guide presents Muslim views of the nature of the Qur'an, its formation and authority. Muslims almost universally hold it to be God’s final word to humankind and differences usually only arise when it comes to matters of interpretation and application of the Qur'an. The second section explores Christian views of the Qur'an and here there is much greater variation, with some holding views that Muslims find disappointing or even offensive. Some of these opinions arise from Christians’ different views of the nature, authority, and interpretation of scripture, an idea explored further in the *CMCS Hikmah Guide* on [Christians, Muslims & the Bible](#).

It is important that Christians, Muslims, and others interested in Christian-Muslim relations understand the different perspectives and ideas that Muslims and Christians bring to thinking about the Qur'an. This *Hikmah Guide* explores these perspectives and tries to help people of both faiths and none see where they might have points of agreement, where they may differ and, equally important, where they might be talking past one another without even realizing it.

There will no doubt be Muslims and Christians who disagree with some points or find this guide less than comprehensive, since no short work of this length can cover all the complexities of such a topic. So additional reading is suggested for those who want to study further. The questions for reflection at the end are also designed to help you think more deeply about this important book.

Muslims and the Qur'an

According to Muslim tradition, the angel Gabriel appeared to an illiterate trader named Muhammad in a cave outside of Mecca in Arabia’s Hijaz region, in the year 610 CE (on his illiteracy see Q7:157-58, 29:48). Gabriel commanded him to “recite” the message he brought, and so Muhammad began proclaiming to his people the messages God sent him. The *sura* Al-‘Alaq (Q96) was the first of many messages Muhammad received over a period of 23 years in response to situations he faced, messages which proclaim themselves to be none other than the very Word of God. When the pagans accused Muhammad of making the messages up, his messages insisted that their origin was purely divine and that he was merely God’s messenger (Q3:3-4, 144, 6:92, 17:105-06, 38:29).

Muhammad called the Meccans to forsake their idols and worship the one creator God or risk suffering God’s imminent judgment. As Muhammad’s followers increased numerically, Mecca’s pagans began

¹ The Arabic Qur'an contains over 77,000 words, the Greek New Testament some 138,000 words.

persecuting them. Muslims believe God singularly honoured Muhammad during this period of Meccan opposition by taking him on a night journey in which he ascended to heaven to meet with God (Q17:1, 53:13-18).²

The Islamic calendar starts in 622, when, according to Muslim tradition, Muhammad and his followers emigrated to the city of Yathrib, later referred to as Medina. Here, in his role as the leader of a new community, his messages focused more on governance, including giving detailed legal rulings and instructions. Along with the growth of the Muslim community, the Medinan suras reflect three major events that happened during the years 622-32; first, the Muslims' military campaign against the Meccans, which ended with the Muslims' victory and subsequent purification from idols of Mecca's sacred shrine, the Kaaba;³ second, the emergence of the hypocrites (see Q63 *al-Munāfiqūn*, the Hypocrites); and thirdly opposition to Muhammad's rule from Medina's Jewish tribes. These events are reflected in the more polemical nature of the Medinan suras.

The Qur'an is composed of 114 *suras*, varying in length from a few lines to hundreds of verses (*ayāt*). Its *suras* are ordered not chronologically, but rather generally descending from longer to shorter *suras*, its longer ones being mainly Medinan, its shorter ones mainly Meccan. Most *suras* are named after a conspicuous word or name in their text such as "Yusuf" (Joseph, Q12), "the Forgiver" (Q40) or "the Bee" (Q16). All but one (Q9 *al-Tawba*) is preceded by the *basmala*—the invocation "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate"—and many begin with detached Arabic letters, *al-muqatta'āt*, of uncertain meaning. Muslims believe God—speaking mainly in the first person, as "I" or "We"—is the Qur'an's sole author.

The Qur'an stresses that it confirms the earlier scriptures of the Jews and Christians and clarifies anything that remained uncertain in them. It specifically names the Torah (*al-tawrāh*), the Psalms (*al-zabūr*) and the Gospel (*al-injīl*) as books given respectively to Moses, David, and Jesus, just as the Qur'an was given to Muhammad (Q2:97, 4:163, 5:43, 17:55). It also mentions the Scrolls (*ṣuḥuf*) of Abraham and Moses (Q87:19, 53:36-37). The Qur'an confirms and insists on beliefs such as God's oneness, the resurrection, final judgment, heaven and hell, and such practices as prayer (*ṣalāh*), fasting (*ṣawm*) and almsgiving (*zakāh*).

The Qur'an places Muhammad in the line of God's previous prophets, many mentioned also being found in the Bible. Besides Moses, David and Jesus, the Qur'an names Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Solomon, John the Baptist and others as prophets. It also speaks very highly of the Virgin Mary and retells some of the narratives of the Bible in its own style. The Qur'an declares that Jesus and both the Torah and Gospel foretold Muhammad's coming (Q7:157, 61:6) and that all of Muhammad's prophetic predecessors accepted him as, implicitly, God's ultimate prophet (Q3:81).

The fact that the Qur'an came to Muhammad as a series of separate messages has had two key effects on the Muslim community. First, because some earlier commands and rulings were modified or replaced by later ones, the majority of Muslims operate by the principle that a later Qur'anic passage may abrogate an earlier passage conflicting with it.⁴ So, the Qur'an says: "Any revelation We cause to be

² See also hadith such as Sahih Bukhari [Book 65 Hadith 238](#) and Sahih Muslim [Book 1 Hadith 321](#).

³ The Kaaba is the black, shrouded building at the centre of the Masjid al-Haram Mosque in Mecca.

⁴ Some modern thinkers reject this; on Sayyid Ahmad Khan's (d.1898) rejection of intra-Quranic abrogation see Ernest Hahn, "Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan's *The Controversy Over Abrogation (in the Qur'an)*: an Annotated Translation" in *The Muslim World* 64 (1974), 124-33.

superseded or forgotten, We replace with something better or similar.” (Q2:106).⁵ This principle, called *al-nāsikh wal-mansūkh* (the abrogating and the abrogated), was deemed vital to the development of the sharia.⁶

Second, while nearly all Muslims agree that the Qur’anic messages were written down during Muhammad’s lifetime, they hold different views on who compiled the messages into one book and when this happened. Most Sunni Muslims say the Qur’an was compiled under the supervision of Uthman ibn Affan, the third “caliph”, about the year 650, while the Shi’a say it was compiled by Muhammad himself and protected by Ali, Muhammad’s cousin and son-in-law and the first “imam” recognised by the Shi’a. However, all Muslims today accept that the compilation was done such that our present-day Qur’an includes precisely what God revealed to Muhammad. They are also confident that the Qur’anic text we have today remains fully intact, passed down to us without error, as originally given to Muhammad, since God himself promised to preserve it (Q15:9, 56:78-79, 85:22-23).⁷

There have, however, been variant readings, or *qirā’āt*, as the short vowels in the Arabic script were not traditionally marked in the text. So, today there are seven accepted ways to vocalise the Qur’anic text each with two modes, making fourteen in total. By far the most widely used, since its selection by the 1924 Egyptian government for its edition of the Qur’an, is that of Hafs (d. 180/796) from ‘Asim (d. 127/745).⁸

The authority of the Qur’an

In keeping with Muhammad’s claim that he delivered the messages he received verbatim, the vast majority of Muslims view the Qur’an’s authority as inherent in its revealed nature since it contains the very words of God and none of Muhammad’s thoughts or words.⁹ Thus, Muslims usually believe scripture cannot simultaneously be the product of both God and his prophet. It can be divine only if its origin is *not* human, and the Qur’an describes itself as a reflection of the eternal word of God written on a heavenly tablet (Q85:22), or the “mother of the book” (Q13:39). Further, all Muslims agree that only its Arabic text qualifies as being the true Qur’an. While non-Arab Muslims far outnumber their Arab counterparts now, and some non-Arabs make use of Qur’an translations, Muslims view such translations as mere aids to understanding their scripture, not equal to it in authority. To study the Qur’an itself, Muslims must learn classical Arabic since it is of the Qur’an’s essence that it is an Arabic scripture (Q12:2, 42:7).

The Qur’an speaks of its revelations in terms of their “descent” (*tanzīl*) from heaven, which signifies that its every word came to Muhammad from God above (e.g. Q2:23, 176, 3:3). When Muhammad’s enemies accused him of fabricating the messages, he replied with messages challenging them to produce something equivalent (e.g. Q2:23-24, 11:13, 17:88). Their inability to do so would be taken as validating the Qur’an’s inimitability (*i’jāz*), inspiration, and authority. Hence, Muslims implicitly accept that the Qur’an is the literal Word of God, perfect in nature, excelling all other books in language, style, beauty

⁵ Translation by Abdul Haleem.

⁶ See for example Abu Bakr al-Jassas, *Ahkam al-Qur’an*, vol 1 (Constantinople: Dar al-Khalifah al-‘Aliyah, 1917), 59.

⁷ In the past, some Shia Muslims held that the Qur’anic text underwent alterations and corruption during the early period after Muhammad’s death, but the Shia now accept that the text we currently have is corruption-free. See Rainer Brunner, “The Dispute About the Falsification of the Qur’an Between Sunnis and Shi’is in the 20th Century”, in *Studies in Arabic and Islam*, ed. Stefan Leder et al, (Leuven: Peeters, 2002), pp. 437-46.

⁸ See Shady Nasser, *The Transmission of the Variant Readings of the Qur’an* (Leiden: Brill, 2013). On the story of the prominence of this 1924 edition see Gabriel Said Reynolds, ‘Introduction’ in Reynolds (ed.) *The Qur’an in its Historical Context* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

⁹ For some variations on this view, see Khalil Andani, *Revelation in Islam; Qur’anic, Sunni, and Shi’i Ismaili Perspectives* (Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 2020).

and truth on every subject it addresses, often including scientific matters.¹⁰ They thus view it as utterly reliable, infallible (Q6:115, 10:64) and, hence, the ultimate authority for humankind (Q4:64-65, 12:104, 21:107, 59:7). For Muslims, these beliefs effectively make the Qur'anic text miraculous (Q29:51) and put it beyond the range of criticism since God has safeguarded its perfection from all human tampering.

Muslims accept the Qur'an's ultimate authority in everything. However, Sunni Muslims believe that infallible revelation ended when Muhammad died. Shi'a groups, by contrast, believe God continued to guide his community infallibly through a series of imams, beginning with Ali. However, in terms of a written scripture, the Shi'a too see the Qur'an as God's last word to humankind. The Muslim community's universal recognition of the Qur'an as its supreme authority has made it "the fundamental and paramount source of the creed, rituals, ethics and laws of the Islamic religion."¹¹

Questions of interpretation

Nonetheless, there is a broad range of Muslim approaches to Qur'anic interpretation. One challenging aspect of Qur'anic interpretation relates to the fact that its messages addressed very specific situations in Muhammad's prophetic career, but seldom specified what those situations were. Hence, besides Arabic grammar, close study of terminology, and rhetoric, mainstream Muslim interpretation has traditionally relied on the following three interpretive guides:

- **The Qur'anic context.** The immediate context of a verse or word is considered a crucial guide to sound exegesis. Furthermore, unclear passages are often clarified by other clearer passages within the Qur'an's total context.
- **The historical context.** Muhammad's Companions are traditionally understood to have recorded the occasions of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), giving the cause, time and place he delivered specific messages.¹² This helped scholars establish whether given passages were applicable a) only to Muhammad or his family, b) to certain other situations, or c) universally. It also allowed scholars to establish the chronological order of the *suras* to determine whether they had been abrogated, as explained above¹³
- **Muhammad's interpretations as found in the hadith, or traditional reports, and *sīra* (biographical literature).** The hadith are the collections of what Muhammad was believed to have said, done or implicitly condoned during his prophetic career and are highly valued since he is the perfect exemplar for believers and someone who perfectly understood the Qur'an (Q33:21, 68:4). So, in practice they represent Muhammad's commentary on the Qur'an. The hadith reports vary in their historical reliability, and classical scholars attempted to gauge each hadith's authenticity. Indeed, the study of hadith is still very important amongst Muslim scholars and different ones may emphasise different traditions.¹⁴ *Sīra*, or biographical literature, on Muhammad, such as that recorded by Ibn Hisham (d.833) and preserved in Ibn Ishaq, also contains reports, some not found in other hadith collections.¹⁵

¹⁰ On this, see Abdel Haleem, Muhammad, *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Style* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2011).

¹¹ Abdel Haleem, M. A. S., *Introduction to The Qur'an*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) p.ix.

¹² An important early work on this issue is al-Wahidi (d.1075) *Asbab al-nuzul*, available in various Arabic editions and translated by Mokrane Guezou (Louisville, Kentucky: Fons Vitae, 2008). This translation is available to search via www.altafsir.com.

¹³ For more on this topic, see "The Chronology of the Qur'an," <https://understandingislam.today/the-chronology-of-the-quran/> Accessed November 10, 2021.

¹⁴ It should be noted that Sunnis, Shia and Ibadis all have different hadith collections.

¹⁵ See Guillaume, Alfred, *The Life of Muhammad: a translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955)

To this, Shi'a interpreters would add the interpretation of their imams, beginning with Ali.¹⁶ The Shi'a view of the imamate may be best understood in terms of an imam's infallible interpretation of the Qur'an, equivalent to Muhammad's interpretation of it. The imams were appointed by God to reveal the Qur'an's esoteric or hidden meaning (*bāṭin*), in contradistinction to its exoteric or apparent meaning (*ẓāhir*). While the two levels of meaning are inseparable, the imams alone access and guide the community in its deeper meaning.

Additionally, Sufi interpretation seeks to unveil the Qur'an's esoteric meanings, related to the metaphysical dimensions of human existence and consciousness. Viewing their spiritual interpretations as the fruit of divine inspiration, Sufi commentators demonstrate the text's deeper insights in support of their mystical experience. For instance, spiritual experience is often described in terms of light that illumines the soul based on Q24:35. The endeavour is for the true person of light to become a mirror reflecting the Divine light to others.¹⁷

While most Muslim interpreters rely on the hadith and the traditional *sīra* (biography) of Muhammad, some Muslims thinking jettison the hadith either partly or entirely. Some modernist Muslims, such as Mahmoud Taha and Abdullahi an-Na'im, also argue for a "reverse abrogation" and contend that Muslims should view the more peaceable, pluralistic Meccan suras as normative, and the more legal-oriented, adversarial Medinan suras as limited to the situation in Medina.¹⁸

Islamist and feminist exegesis are two other types of modern Islamic exegesis which sharply criticize some traditional interpretations. Both Islamist and feminist interpretations emphasize the Qur'an's ongoing ability to offer humanity guidance in the modern period, but they do so in terms of what they see as the Qur'anic call for, respectively, a revolutionary implementation of an Islamic system of governance or a reordering of societal norms advancing women's rights and gender equality.¹⁹

The Qur'an in life and worship

As seen above, Muslims greatly revere the Qur'an as containing the very words of God and treat it in many ways as a sacred object. They decorate the scriptures beautifully, perform a ritual ablution before handling it, kiss it and never put it on the floor, preferring a high shelf or special stand (*rahl*). Children are encouraged to memorize the Qur'an and learn the rules of its recitation and pronunciation (*tajwid*). Quoting it lends respect to whatever one says in Muslim cultures and anyone memorizing the entire Qur'an is highly esteemed, recognised by the title *hāfiẓ*. The recitation of the Qur'an is a key element of worship in all traditions. Muslims listen to such recitation in the mosque, over the radio, online and at festivals, funerals, and other public events. Indeed, taking the beauty of its language as proof of the Qur'an's miraculous origin, Muslims have elevated Qur'anic chanting (*tartil*) to an art form and professional reciters perform in major venues and act as mosque leaders. One Qur'an translator captured

¹⁶ For Twelver Shia the "imams" were the 12 leaders who succeeded Muhammad, whereas for Sunnis an "imam" is someone who leads prayers. For other Shia groups such as the Nizari Ismailis the line of the imams continues to this day. For instance, the Aga Khan is considered to be the 49th imam. See the *Hikmah Guide* on [Christians, Muslims and Sectarianism](#).

¹⁷ See Keeler, Annabel and Sajjad Rizvi (eds.), *The Spirit and the Letter: Approaches to the Esoteric Interpretation of the Qur'an* (Oxford: OUP, 2016).

¹⁸ See Taha, Mahmoud, *The Second Message of Islam* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1987)

¹⁹ A famous Islamist commentary is Quṭb, Sayyid, *In the shade of the Qur'an (Fī ẓilāl al-Qur'ān)* (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 2001). A well-known feminist approach to the Qur'an is that of Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

the impact such recitation has on Muslims, describing the Arabic Qur'an as "that inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy."²⁰

This helps to explain why Muslims take great offence when the Qur'an is mocked, mistreated or desecrated in any way. When Qur'ans have been burned or publicly sullied there have been vocal protests and even riots in some Muslim-majority countries.

The most frequently recited passage is the *Fatiha*, or "The Opening." This, the Qur'an's first chapter, is on the lips of Muslims daily since it forms the core of their ritual prayers (*ṣalāh*). They memorize the prayer's rhythmic pattern and Arabic text, whatever their mother tongue. It can be translated as follows:

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.

*Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds, the Merciful, the Compassionate, Master of the Day of Judgment. You we serve and You we seek for help. Guide us to the straight path: the path of those whom You have blessed, not the path of those on whom Your anger falls, nor of those who go astray.*²¹

According to one Muslim, "the Fatiha is the opening to all good things".²² Since many Muslims recite the Fatiha five times daily, it becomes part of the very fabric of their lives. It is used in numerous life situations beyond daily prayers. For example, it is recited before taking exams, in contracting marriages, making commercial deals, seeking healing, in funerals, and remembering departed loved ones after their death. The *basmala* is also used in numerous situations such as giving thanks before meals, when leaving and returning home, speaking in public, delivering a baby, and laying the deceased to rest, as well as before sleep and sexual intercourse. Thus, by invoking God's help and protection by using the words of the Qur'an, believers actively include him in all they do.

Muslims also honour the Qur'an through calligraphic rendering of its texts, which lends beauty, grace, and gravity to whatever they decorate, from massive buildings to household objects and bumper stickers. In these and many other ways, corporately and individually, Muslims celebrate the Qur'an as God's incomparable gift to humankind.

Christians and the Qur'an

Christians naturally approach the Qur'an with the Bible in mind, and this affects the way they respond to it. Those at one end of the spectrum take a positive perspective, approaching the Muslim scripture as a complementary presentation of Biblical truth, specifically given to the Arabs. While these Christians generally look for all the points of agreement between the two scriptures, they usually view some *suras* as dependant on the Bible for either clarification or adjustment. Advocates of this perspective view the Qur'an as saying essentially the same thing as the Bible, only using different words, contextualizing Biblical teachings to fit Arab culture. This approach clearly seeks unity and concord with Muslims.²³ However, it implies that the traditional Muslim interpretation of the Qur'an is mistaken on several key doctrines—for

²⁰ Translator's Foreword in Pickthall, Mohammed Marmaduke, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran: An Explanatory Translation* (New York: New American Library, 1953) vii.

²¹ Qur'anic translation by A. J. Droge, *The Qur'ān: A New Annotated Translation* (Sheffield: Equinox, corrected reprint, 2017).

²² Haleem, Muhammad Abdel, *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Style* (London: I. B. Taurus, 2011) p30.

²³ For an example of this approach, see Basetti-Sani, Giulio, *The Koran in the Light of Christ: An Essay Towards a Christian Interpretation of the Sacred Book of Islam* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1977).

example, that Jesus is merely human, that Muhammad is greater than Jesus, and that the Qur'an abrogates the Bible and, hence, is God's Word for all humankind.

By contrast, Christians at the more critical end of the spectrum view the Qur'an as anything from a mixture of helpful but flawed teachings to a largely unreliable scripture. While some Muslims may consider that harsh, it is much like the popular Muslim view that the Bible is largely untrustworthy, and it is adopted for the same basic reason: they believe the other scripture contradicts their scripture on key doctrines. Christian exponents of this more critical perspective view the Qur'an as saying something radically different from the Bible, only using many of the same words. Positively, this view does take the Qur'an's universal truth claims seriously. However, it is sometimes married to anti-Muslim sentiment in times of heightened Christian-Muslim conflict or fear, such as occurred after 9/11.

Another effect of reading the Qur'an with the Bible in mind is that some Christians succumb to the temptation to judge the Qur'an by criteria relevant to the Bible, but not to the Qur'an. For example, the Bible typically gives some context, however brief, describing the situations its prophetic oracles address. The Qur'an includes no such explanations, but only the oracles themselves. So, it names Mecca only once. This has led some Christians to question the Muslim belief that Mecca was the Muslim community's original home and site of the Kaaba.²⁴ Similarly, some contrast the 900+ occurrences of Jesus' name in the New Testament with the rarity of Muhammad's name—it occurs just four times—in the Qur'an, to question if Muhammad was the Muslim prophet. However, the Qur'anic messages barely name any of its geographic locations, whereas the Bible frequently does. Further, the Qur'an typically addresses Muhammad as "the Messenger"—instead of by name—since establishing his status as God's prophet was an all-important concern. Such Christian questioning clearly represents an unwillingness to accept the Qur'an's uniqueness and to take it on its own terms.

Christian scripture and the Qur'an

Since the Biblical text was completed five centuries before the Qur'an, the Bible does not engage with the Qur'an in the way that the Qur'an engages with the Bible. The Bible explicitly mentions neither Muhammad nor Ahmad (as he is sometimes referred to in the Qur'an), although the Qur'an states that Jesus predicted his coming (Q61:6). Indeed, Christians believe that the Bible never predicts any successor of Jesus' stature.²⁵ On the other hand, the New Testament clearly allows for there being those with a "gift of prophecy" ([1 Corinthians 12:4-11](#)) long after the period in which the New Testament was written.

However, the New Testament sets out two truths as doctrinal touchstones for knowing whether these prophets can be trusted: they must affirm both that Jesus is God's Messiah ([1 John 2:22-23](#)) and that God became fully human in Jesus ([1 John 4:2-3](#)). Whilst the Qur'an calls Jesus "the Messiah", it does so without giving the term any meaning or definition and does not affirm anything like the Christian understanding of that title.²⁶ The second prophetic test is even more problematic as the Qur'an leaves no room for God to become human in the incarnation. For many Christians such questions are the crux of their response to the Qur'an. For instance, in his commentary on the Qur'an, Gordon Nickel includes sections that address the death of Jesus in the Qur'an and its response to the idea that Jesus is the Son of God.²⁷

²⁴ For a discussion see Anderson, Mark. 'Is Mecca Really the Birthplace of Islam?', Zwemer Institute, <https://www.zwemercenter.com/is-mecca-really-the-birthplace-of-islam> [accessed 5 August 2022]

²⁵ For a discussion of this issue see the *Hikmah Guide on Christians, Muslims and Muhammad*.

²⁶ The Hebrew *meshiah* means anointed. For Christians, the New Testament presents the Messiah as the divinely anointed king who came in fulfilment of Old Testament expectations to establish the Kingdom rule of God on earth.

²⁷ Nickel, Gordon (ed.), *The Quran with Christian Commentary: A Guide to Understanding the Scripture of Islam* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020)

Furthermore, in order to take seriously the Qur'an's claim to be the Bible's sequel, most Christians would expect its messages to be organically one with the Bible's redemptive teachings and somehow continue the Bible's metanarrative of the Israelite people in the Old Testament and the Church in the New Testament. However, for example, Durie in a lengthy study finds that there is no "kindred relationship" between the Qur'an and the Bible but rather the Qur'an "marches to the beat of its own theological drum".²⁸ This disconnection naturally raises questions, as does the Qur'an's distance from the Biblical concepts of sin, incarnation and salvation. Furthermore, whilst the Qur'an refers to the earlier Biblical scriptures, it is ambiguous as to whether it is affirming previous revelation (so Q2:41, 3:3, 4:47, 10:37, 35:31) or accusing Jews or Christians or both, of twisting, corrupting or even changing the words of their scriptures (e.g. Q2:41-42, 2:59, 2:75, 3:78).²⁹

The origin and nature of the Qur'an

Since most Christians have traditionally believed their own scriptures to be both fully divine and fully human, even those who hold the Qur'an to be divinely inspired in some sense consider it also a human book. Hence, Christians are keenly interested in the Qur'an's various cultural and linguistic aspects. As a result, Christians seek to understand the techniques and sources involved in the Qur'an's formation—even as they do those involved in the Bible's formation—and are typically critical of the traditional Islamic origins narrative to some degree. Some Christians accept the traditional narrative rather uncritically and others accept it in broad outline, while still others reject the traditional narrative for various reasons.

In either case, Christians seek to understand the Qur'anic text in terms of the process of its composition and linguistic influences. For example, one recent study views the fact that more than fifty percent of its text consists of repeated oral-formulaic material as demonstrating its use of oral folklorist techniques.³⁰ They are interested in the number of Qur'anic words that are of foreign origin, and the relationship between the Qur'an and pre-Islamic poetry.³¹ Christians are also interested in the sources of, or parallels to, the Qur'an's content, some of which they view as Biblical, others more broadly Jewish or Christian, pre-Islamic Arab, Zoroastrian, Gnostic, or Manichean. However, they do not necessarily view the derivation of such ideas as a case of direct borrowing.³²

The authority of the Qur'an

Not many Christians read the Qur'an but those who do tend to read and study it as an ancient book with a definite textual history, just as they study their own scripture's textual history, believing that God uses such study in the preservation of his word. A few Christian scholars examine ancient Qur'anic manuscripts aiming to ensure that our current text is authentic or as close to the original as possible and to assess which changes were made deliberately in the early Muslim programme to standardize the text.³³ They catalogue changes, corrections and variants in Qur'anic manuscripts and this work is sometimes used polemically by other Christians to attack the reliability of the Qur'an.³⁴ This all leads many Christians to

²⁸ Durie, Mark, *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Reflexes: investigations into the genesis of a religion* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018), 256.

²⁹ For a full discussion of this issue see the [Hikmah Guide on Christians, Muslims and the Bible](#).

³⁰ Bannister, Andrew G., *An Oral-formulaic Study of the Qur'an* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2014).

³¹ Jeffery, Arthur, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur'an* (Baroda, India: Oriental Institute, 1938).

³² The work of Gabriel Said Reynolds explores these textual relationships. See his *The Qur'an and its Biblical Subtext* (London: Routledge, 2010) and his *The Qur'an and the Bible* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), which includes an English translation of the Qur'an with related Biblical and other early texts noted.

³³ Small, Keith E., *Textual Criticism and Qur'an Manuscripts* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012).

³⁴ See for instance Brubaker, Daniel, *Corrections in Early Qur'ān Manuscripts: twenty examples* (Lovettsville, VA: Think and Tell Press, 2019) and its ensuing role in YouTube exchanges between Christians such as Jay Smith and Muslims such as Yasir Qadhi.

reject the standard Muslim belief that the Qur'anic text we now have is exactly that first uttered by Muhammad.

As previously noted, some Christians consider the Qur'an to be a sort of divine revelation.³⁵ Those who do so believe it illumines and enhances Biblical truth, standing alongside the Bible, not replacing it. Accordingly, they tend to view the Qur'an as given specifically to the Arabs, not to the entire human race and, hence, not equal to the canonical Old and New Testament books.³⁶ Others, whilst not necessarily affirming the Qur'an, suggest that it may form a "bridge" for Muslims to consider the Christian gospel.³⁷ Those Christians at the other end of the spectrum, who view the Qur'an more critically—and this group represents a majority worldwide—ascribe no divine authority to it. They do not view the Qur'an as in any way comparable to the Bible's testimony to Christ.

So, whilst it is tempting to see the Qur'an as the Muslim equivalent of the Christian Bible, this may not be helpful. Some Christians suggest that, in Christian thought, Jesus is the eternal Word of God made flesh, whilst, in Muslim thought, the Qur'an is the eternal Word of God made book.³⁸ For Christians, Jesus is the one God sent to save humankind, whilst, for Muslims, the Qur'an is sufficient to lead humankind in the straight path. Some Muslims use similar language and even speak of the Qur'an as eternally "begotten, not created," in a similar way that Christians speak of Christ.³⁹

Questions of interpretation

Christians ask three primary questions in relation to Qur'anic interpretation, the first being how the Muslim scripture is related to the traditional Muslim origins narrative. As noted above, the spectrum runs from those Christians who mostly accept the traditional origins narrative to those who totally reject it. The latter group typically views the Qur'an as evolving within a quasi-Christian or Judeo-Christian sect outside of Arabia, over a period of many decades. Those more open to the traditional origins narrative interpret the Qur'an as a scripture Muhammad brought to an either largely or partly pagan Arab society and use the traditional or similar chronology of the Qur'an much as Muslims do.⁴⁰

The second primary question is how the Qur'an is related to the Bible. Christians are again divided here. Some consider the Qur'an to be related organically, as a natural outgrowth of the Bible—part of the same "family tree." Some even go so far as to detect in the Qur'an support for teachings such as Christ's redemptive death. Others view the Qur'an more in terms of what might be called a re-arranging of Biblical teachings, in which we see many clear likenesses to Biblical materials, but all profoundly reconstituted to

³⁵ For instance, Louis Massignon. See Griffith, Sidney, 'Sharing the faith of Abraham: The 'Credo' of Louis Massignon', in *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 8/2 (Birmingham: Centre for the Study of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations, 1997) pp193-210. See also Kerr, David, 'Muhammad: Prophet of Liberation – a Christian Perspective from Political Theology', in *Studies in World Christianity* 6 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp139-74.

³⁶ Bavinck, for instance, saw Muhammad as a prophet who was faithful in Mecca but not so in Medina. See Bavinck, J. H., *The Church between Temple and Mosque: a study of the relationship between the Christian faith and other religions* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1966).

³⁷ For instance, Tennent calls it "a potential *preparatio evangelica*, which may yet serve as a bridge" in Tennent, Timothy, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: how the global church is influencing the way we think about and discuss theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007)

³⁸ For instance, Küng, Hans, *Islam: past, present and future* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), p89 and Chapman, Colin, *Cross and Crescent: Responding to the Challenges of Islam* (Nottingham: Inter-Varsity Press, 2007), p88.

³⁹ Esack, Farid, *The Qur'an: A User's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2005) 100.

⁴⁰ Though himself a revisionist, Mark Durie's study of Qur'anic chronology, completely independent of Islam's traditional sources, is largely supportive of the traditional chronology. Mark Durie, *The Qur'an and Its Biblical Reflexes: Investigations into the Genesis of a Religion* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2018).

give rise to something unique and different. Predictably, those who view the Qur'an as in some way divinely inspired generally view it as an organic development of Biblical teaching, while those who do not view it as divinely inspired tend to consider it a radical reconstitution of Biblical teachings.

How Christians answer these two questions will influence their interpretation of the entire Qur'an, at least indirectly, including on major points of doctrinal difference between Muslims and Christians. For example, Q5:73 and Q5:116-18 seem to support the common Muslim view that Christians include Mary in the Trinity and believe that Jesus told his followers to worship Mary and himself as "gods" alongside God, beliefs which no orthodox Christians hold.

However, accepting the traditional origins narrative in some measure does not necessarily mean accepting standard Muslim interpretations of the Qur'an uncritically. Thus, many Christians question popular Muslim interpretations of Qur'anic texts related to:

- **The identity of the *Injil*.** Christians question the identity of the Qur'anic *Injil* as a book sent down to Jesus, not directly related to the New Testament, since Q5:47 implies that the *Injil* was a book Christian contemporaries of Muhammad had in their possession.⁴¹
- **Jesus' alleged escape from crucifixion.** Most Muslims now take Q4:157-58 as a clear denial of Jesus' death, even though the text's grammar allows an interpretation congruent with his historical death, and some highly regarded Muslim scholars have either supported that interpretation or acknowledged its legitimacy.⁴²
- **The Bible's alleged corruption.** Virtually all Muslims understand passages like Q3:78 to teach that the Bible's text has been corrupted; but the earliest Muslim commentators understood them to teach that Jews and Christians usually corrupted not the Bible's text, but rather their interpretation of it.⁴³

The third question Christians ask in relation to Qur'anic interpretation is how Muslims interpret and apply their scriptures today. Some Christians point to Muslims with very literal interpretations of the Qur'an as the representatives of "real" Islam.⁴⁴ Others point to Muslims with more nuanced interpretations, depending on contextual factors, as being the true interpreters and suggest that we should "listen to the moderate voices of Islam and encourage the school of thought that calls for a peaceful Islam".⁴⁵ Still others recognise that this is a conflicted field within Muslim communities. For instance, Archbishop Anastasios of Albania, says that:

In our age, a number of Muslim intellectuals avoid referring to passages in the Quran that speak of 'holy war' or jihad. Nevertheless, they persist with equal vehemence on the revealed validity of their sacred text, encouraging an aggressive treatment of the 'unbelievers'... (However), today, moderate Muslims

⁴¹ On this see Martin Whittingham, "[What is the 'Gospel' mentioned in the Qur'an?](#)" CMCS Research Briefings, Spring 2016.

⁴² See Cumming, Joseph. 2001. '[Did Jesus Die on the Cross?](#)'.

⁴³ Nickel, Gordon, *The Gentle Answer to the Muslim Accusation of Biblical Falsification* (Calgary: Bruton Gate, 2014) pp19-90; Whittingham, Martin, *A History of Muslim Views of the Bible: The First Four Centuries* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021).

⁴⁴ See for example Mark Gabriel, *Islam and Terrorism: What the Qur'an Really Teaches About Christianity, Violence and the Goals of the Islamic Jihad* (Lake Mary, FL: Creation House, 2002), p39.

⁴⁵ Accad, Martin. *Sacred Misinterpretation: reaching across the Christian-Muslim divide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2019), p56.

emphasize that these passages from the Quran must be considered and interpreted in their historical context: namely, with a view to when, why, and to what end they were spoken.⁴⁶

Conclusion

This guide has explored the nature of the Qur'an, its perceived authority, and its interpretation. Muslims see it as containing the very words of God, in Arabic, given to the whole of humankind, which are authoritative in every sphere of life, albeit with careful interpretation and application. Christian views of the Qur'an differ greatly. These differences arise partly out of the fact that Christians view the nature, authority, and interpretation of scripture differently to Muslims. However, they also arise out of what they see as disagreement and discontinuity between the Qur'an and the earlier scriptures. In addition, Christians' own internal differences over issues such as the nature of scripture or prophecy help to shape their different responses to the Qur'an.

Though ongoing divergence between Muslims and Christians will surely continue, there is also great scope for constructive discussion and increased mutual understanding. Questions and issues raised by the Qur'an are likely to become an increasingly significant part of Muslim-Christian discussions because the Qur'anic text is now accessible to more people than ever before in both Arabic and a multitude of translations online. This impacts not only Muslims, but also Christians who read it for various different purposes.

⁴⁶ Archbishop Anastasios, Yannoulatos. *Coexistence: Peace, Nature, Poverty, Terrorism, Values* (Geneva: WCC Publications, 2021), 9-10

Further Reading:

Muslims and the Qur'an

- M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *Exploring the Qur'an: Context and Impact* (I. B. Taurus, 2017).
- M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Style* (I. B. Taurus, 2010).
- Shabbir Akhtar, *The Quran and the Secular Mind: A Philosophy of Islam* (Routledge, 2008).
- Seyyed Hossein Nasr, et al, *The Study Qur'an: A New Translation and Commentary* (HarperOne, 2015).
- Al-Khui, *The Prolegomena to the Qur'an* (OUP, 1998).
- Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 2nd ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2009).
- Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective* (Oxford University Press, 1999).

Christians and the Qur'an

- Mark Robert Anderson, *The Qur'an in Context: A Christian Exploration* (IVP Academic, 2016).
- Kenneth Cragg, *The Mind of the Qur'an: Chapters in Reflection* (George Allen & Unwin, 1973).
- John Kaltner, *Introducing the Qur'an* (Fortress Press, 2011).
- Daniel Madigan, *The Qur'an's Self-image: writing and authority in Islam's scripture* (Princeton University Press, 2001)
- Gordon Nickel, *The Qur'an with Christian Commentary: A Guide to Understanding the Scripture of Islam* (Zondervan, 2020).
- Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'an and the Bible: Text and Commentary* (Yale University Press, 2018)
- Keith Small, *Holy Books Have a History: Textual Histories of the New Testament and the Qur'an* (Avant, 2010).

Other writings

- Nicolai Sinai, *The Qur'an: A Historical-critical Introduction* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

Questions

Questions for Muslims

- How do you personally understand and interpret the Qur'an?
- How do you understand and deal with different approaches to interpreting the Qur'an on the part of different Muslim groups or individuals?
- What do you think might be difficult or unfamiliar for Christians as they read the Qur'an?
- Have you ever asked a Christian what they think about the Qur'an? What do you think a Christian you know might say?

Questions for Christians

- Have you ever read any of the Qur'an?
- How does it differ to the Bible in content, style, and message?
- Do you think Muslims have misinterpreted it?
- Have you ever asked a Muslim what they think about the Qur'an? Or the Bible?

Questions for all

- As you read this Hikmah guide, what surprised you?
- The Qur'an has had an undeniable impact on societies and cultures in many parts of the world. In what ways has it influenced these societies and cultures?
- Do you see the Qur'an and the Bible as essentially similar, teaching the same message, or are they essentially different?