

Christianity vs. Islam – Lesson 5

What is the Qur'an?

The Qur'an—often spelled as *Quran* or *Koran*—is the primary holy text of the Islamic faith. According to Muslim beliefs, the words of the Qur'an were dictated to Muhammad, who relayed them orally to his followers. The term *Qur'an* literally means “the recitation.” This message was delivered by Muhammad approximately 600 years after the earthly ministry of Jesus.

Islam considers the Qur'an to be the perfect, eternal, beautiful message of Allah and the only necessary proof of Muhammad's status as a prophet. The words of the Qur'an were kept in purely oral form until after Muhammad's death. At that time, the text was assembled into writing through the efforts of several early Islamic leaders. The Qur'an is shorter than the New Testament of the Bible, but, according to Islamic theology, it can only be truly understood when read in its original Arabic dialect. Islamic theology is based on both the Qur'an and various oral traditions collected over the centuries.

Islam teaches that Muhammad was accosted by the angel Gabriel and told to memorize a certain message. For several years, Muhammad kept this message a family secret, sometimes wondering if he had been attacked by a demon. Once convinced otherwise, he began to preach according to these received words. Over the next twenty-plus years, Muhammad gradually delivered more and more of the message. His followers memorized his words, maintaining an entirely oral record of the Qur'an. Only minor portions were inscribed on leaves, rocks, and bones.

The central message of the Qur'an is that mankind has drifted from the truths that Allah presented to men like Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Per Muhammad, man has corrupted the words and message of Allah. This particular “recitation” is meant to be the final, authoritative statement from Allah to mankind. Man is called on to submit to Allah: the word *Islam* literally means “submission.” Muslims are also commanded by the Qur'an to follow Allah's instructions and to employ various methods of “struggle” (*jihad*) to spread this submission worldwide.

While the Judeo-Christian Scriptures include a large amount of history as well as theology, the Qur'an is overwhelmingly theological. Most of the text is devoted to statements about the nature of Allah, creation, mankind's obligations, and the afterlife.

Recording the Qur'an: Abu Bakr and Uthman

After Muhammad died, survival of his message was entirely reliant on the *hafiz*—

men who had memorized the entire Qur'an—and *qurra*—men who had memorized large portions of the text and were adept at reciting it. These sources rapidly dwindled. The Islamic Empire's rapid military expansion resulted in many *hafiz* and *qurra* being killed in battle. In response, Islamic leaders began the process of recording the Qur'an in written form. This involved the memory of the remaining *hafiz*, as well as collecting various written fragments. The result was a single manuscript, kept by the leader of Islam, Caliph Abu Bakr.

However, as Islam continued to spread, variations within the Qur'an began to arise. This was due to continued oral memorization, alternate writings on leaves and bones, and differences of opinion between Muslims on what Muhammad had actually said. These disagreements were serious enough to spark violence. A succeeding caliph, Uthman, ordered all written copies of the Qur'an, including scraps, to be collected. These were given to a panel of scholars who were tasked with determining the "correct" words and pronunciations. Afterwards, Uthman sent a single copy of the written Qur'an to each of the major regions of the Empire, and ordered all prior copies—in all forms—to be destroyed.

This entire process was completed within thirty years of Muhammad's death.

This stands in stark contrast to the history of the New Testament. The Qur'an was purposefully compiled—at least twice—after Muhammad's death. Neither process produced a large number of physical copies. This process was entirely under the direction of the leaders of the Islamic Empire. After the second collection, all prior records were purposefully destroyed. In short, this means that the Qur'an we see today is the result of a tightly controlled process, under the direction of a very few people, very soon after it was first written down. There is no way to know if or to what extent this might have changed from the original.

The New Testament, on the other hand, was originally written by various authors at various times and places. These words spread during a time when Christianity was functionally illegal. Texts were copied freely, independently, and often. This was done without any central control, and without any restrictions. The end result is what we see today: thousands and thousands of surviving manuscripts from an extremely broad geography. The advantage to this is that no one group, church, or government ever had the ability to control what those manuscripts said. Any copyist errors or changes stand out clearly. By the time the Roman Empire cared about the Bible—*three hundred years later*—manuscripts had been in circulation for centuries. At that point, it was impossible to replace the texts with some controlled version.

In short, this means it is far more reasonable to assert that the current text of the Bible represents the original words of the authors than to make the same claim about the modern Qur'an representing the original words of Muhammad.

Structure of the Qur'an: Ayat and Surat

The Qur'an is composed of 114 chapters, or *surat*. Each individual chapter, or *surah*, is typically given a name for easier identification, based on the content. Rather than being arranged chronologically, these chapters are ordered more or less from longest to shortest. Those with more verses, or more *ayat*, are generally the earlier chapters, while the shorter ones are placed at the end. As with the Bible, the length of any particular verse, or *ayah*, greatly varies. Not only are the Qur'an's chapters presented in non-chronological order, the topic under discussion from one verse to the next often varies wildly.

All together, the text of the Qur'an is much shorter than that of the Bible. Depending on whether one is counting words or letters, the relative size may vary. By most estimates, the Qur'an is slightly more than half as long as the New Testament and less than one-fourth the size of the Old Testament.

The Qur'an can be divided into two major categories of content: Meccan and Medinan. These correspond to the two major phases of Muhammad's ministry, the first in the city of Mecca and the second in the city of Medina. The character of Islam, of Muhammad's message, and the words of the Qur'an demonstrate a noticeable change when Muhammad left Mecca for Medina.

In Mecca, Muhammad was a relatively powerless, persecuted figure. Meccan *surat* tend to emphasize coexistence, non-coercion, peace, and so forth. These are the *ayat* most often cited by those claiming Islam to be a religion of peace. However, after moving to Medina, Muhammad became a powerful warlord. The later Medinan *surat*, from the end of Muhammad's life and the early days of the Islamic Empire, are notably more aggressive. These form the bulk of verses cited by those who believe Islam endorses aggression and violence.

Interestingly, Islam teaches a concept known as abrogation, or "replacement." Under this concept, a *surah* or *ayah* that is given later is considered more authoritative than *surat* or *ayah* given earlier. In literal terms, the later statement replaces and overrides the former. Abrogation is often referenced in discussions on contradictions within the Qur'an, especially with regards to the difference in tone between the earlier Meccan and later Medinan texts.

Interpretation and Use of the Qur'an: Hadith and Tafsir

The Qur'an does not occupy exactly the same place in Islamic religion as the Bible does in Christianity. There are strong parallels but also major differences. The Qur'an is believed by Muslims to be the eternal, perfect message of Allah, which is actually more a parallel to Jesus: the eternal, perfect message (Word) of God.

Interpretation of the Qur'an is more complex than for other religious texts. Most Muslims cannot engage in deep study of the Arabic Qur'an, just as most Christians cannot engage in professional-level studies of the original Hebrew and Greek manuscripts of the Bible. The vast majority of Muslims worldwide do not speak the Arabic dialect in which the Qur'an is written. Christians have access to translations of the Bible. However, according to Islamic theology, the words of the Qur'an can be fully understood only in their original Arabic dialect. According to Muslims, the miracle of the Qur'an is in its supposedly perfect language and structure. "Translating" the Qur'an, then, is impossible according to Islam. Any change of the text, such as into another language, makes the end result an interpretation. This is frequently offered as reason why non-Muslims fail to accept the miracle of the words of Allah.

The short length and primarily oral nature of the early Qur'an encouraged the development of *hadith*, or oral traditions. Islamic scholars collected various comments made by those who knew Muhammad personally and that purport to be memories of Muhammad's own remarks on the Qur'an and the correct application of Islam. These comments are generally from Muhammad's wives, lieutenants, or close associates. Not all of these traditional tidbits are accepted by every Muslim. In fact, the differences between major schools of Islamic theology can be coarsely summarized by which *hadith* they accept or reject.

Because of the language barrier, the chaotic nature of the text, and the existence of the *hadith*, the Qur'an is significantly more obscure than the Christian Bible. The average Muslim does not have access to all of the thousands and thousands of variant collections of oral traditions that form the *hadith*. However, it is reasonable to say that the Qur'an's role in Islam cannot be properly understood without the *hadith*. In this respect, the Qur'an is only part of a Muslim's religious texts, albeit the most important.

As a result, most Muslims rely heavily on some form of interpretation-commentary in order to understand and apply the Qur'an. These commentaries are called *tafsir*, which generally combine explanation of context with the opinion of various Islamic scholars.

Competing Claims: The Qur'an and the Bible

Islam has a complex relationship with the Bible, in no small part because of statements made in the Qur'an. In theory, Muslims believe that Allah (God) gave written revelations to men like Moses and David. This, for them, also includes Jesus, whom they refer to as *Isa*. In some places, the Qur'an seems to suggest that the books given to these earlier men ought to be studied. In other places, it seems to suggest that those words have been corrupted. It also claims Allah will not allow his words to be changed. In some places, the Qur'an suggests that Christians worship a trinity of God, Jesus, and Mary—a gross misunderstanding of Christian teachings.

In short, the Bible stands as the strongest empirical evidence against the validity of the Qur'an. There are copies of the Bible, available in museums today, written centuries before the birth of Muhammad. The claim that the text of the Bible has changed cannot be sustained. And yet that text does not agree with the Qur'an or the Qur'an's claims about it.

While the Qur'an is held in high esteem by Muslims, it does not represent exactly the same position within the Islamic faith as the Bible does within Christianity. Its composition, character, and history are extremely different from those of the Bible. And, in the end, the validity of the Qur'an simply cannot survive a sustained comparison with the Christian Scriptures.