

What is the Qur'an?

Q: What is the Qur'an and why is it important to Muslims?

The Qur'an is the most important holy book for Muslims. They believe that it was revealed to Muhammad by God. It is seen as the perfect, literal word of God that gives people guidance on how they should live their lives. The Arabic word, 'Qur'an' literally means 'recitation' (saying something aloud). According to tradition, Muhammad could not read, but on the Night of Power the angel Jibril insisted, saying, 'Read!' – 'iqra!' – three times. Muhammad received a rush of energy and suddenly he was able to repeat the words aloud.



Muslims believe that the beauty and power of the Qur'an can only be fully experienced when it is recited aloud, because this is how it was received by Muhammad. As such, when Muslims read the Qur'an, they do so out loud. Huge respect is given to those who can learn the Qur'an by heart. They are given the special title 'hafiz' and will sometimes perform the entire Qur'an to other Muslims. Muslims think that the Qur'an can only truly be read in Arabic, because this was the language spoken by Muhammad when he received it. When the Qur'an is translated, it is no longer the words recited by Muhammad. Translations of the Qur'an, therefore, are seen only as interpretations of or substitutes for the Qur'an, and not the holy book itself.

How is the Qur'an arranged?

Muhammad received the Qur'an over a 23-year period of his life. Many Islamic scholars are interested in finding out when Muhammad received particular revelations. In Mecca, Muhammad and his followers were being persecuted, whereas in Medina they had the opportunity to establish their own community, and this is reflected in the revelations received.

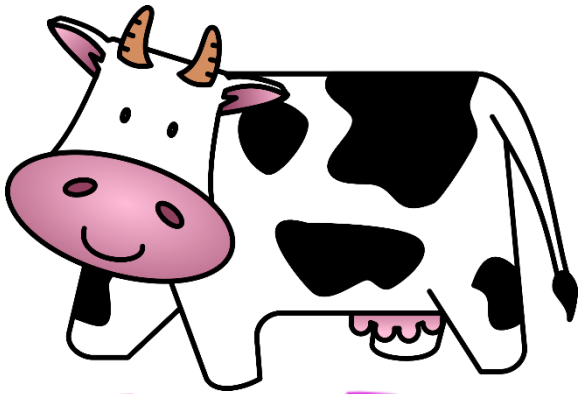
Fact

After Muhammad's death, the third caliph, Uthman, was worried about the Qur'an changing as new followers recited it in newly conquered regions. He created an official Qur'an and ordered that all other versions should be destroyed. All modern versions of the Qur'an are based on this official Qur'an.

Initially, the Qur'an was not written down, but was memorised and passed between people by word of mouth. However, towards the end of his life, Muhammad started to dictate chapters (surahs) to his companions so that they could write them down. These chapters would have originally been written down on pieces of

animal bone, leather and palm leaves. Each of the 114 surahs is split into verses. In total, there are over 6000 verses in the Qur'an.

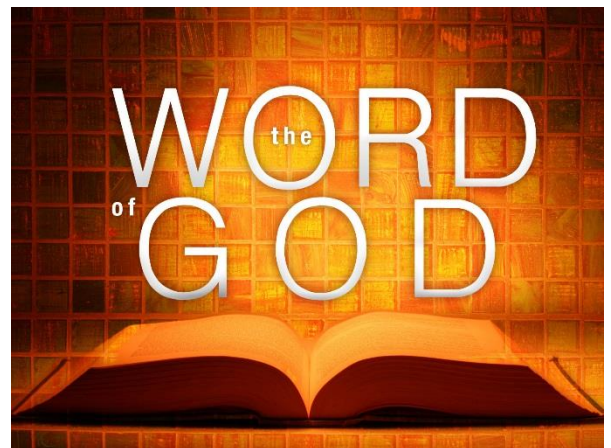
Chapters in the Christian Bible move chronologically through time, like a story. In the Qur'an, however, the surahs are generally arranged in order of length, with the longer surahs at the beginning and the shorter ones at the end. This can be a little confusing – for example, the surah that was revealed first to Muhammad is surah 96.



Each surah is named after an object or a subject within it. For example, surah 2 is called 'The Cow', because in it Moses tells people to sacrifice a cow. Surah 29 is called 'The Spider' and surah 35 is called 'The Creator'. The most important surah is the first, 'The Opening', which Muslims must recite five times each day.

The Perfect Word

Some part of the Qur'an are similar to stories found in Jewish and Christian holy books. However, Muslims believe these contain inaccuracies, so God gave Muhammad his perfect word in order to correct them. Muslims believe that Muhammad is the final prophet, whose message has been recorded with complete accuracy in the Qur'an. There will be no further prophets or revelations from God.



Respecting the Qur'an

In order to show respect to the Qur'an, Muslims will often wash before touching it and will keep it in a clean place with nothing on top of or above it. The Qur'an should be the only book on the top shelf of a book case. It is never placed on the floor and if someone drops or damages it, then he or she might kiss it as a sign of respect. Old, worn-out copies should not be thrown away. Most Muslims agree that old Qur'ans should either be wrapped in cloth and buried deep in the ground or placed in flowing water, weighed down with a heavy stone.



Quizzical Questions

1. What is the most important book for Muslims?
2. What does 'Qur'an' mean?
3. How was Muhammad made able to read?
4. Why do Muslims read the Qur'an out loud?
5. Why should the Qur'an be read in Arabic?
6. What are translations seen as?
7. How was the Qur'an initially passed to other people?
8. How were the Qur'an chapters originally written down?
9. How are the surahs named?
10. What makes the writings in the Qur'an 'perfect'?
11. How should the Qur'an be respected?

Key Words

➤ **Hafiz**

Someone who has memorised the Qur'an (a man is a hafiz and a woman is called a hafiza)

Tasks

France has banned the wearing of the niqab and burqa in public. Should Britain do the same? Yes/No? Why?

