



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

Approaches to the Qur'an

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Qur'an, revelation, recitation of the Qur'an, recording and codification of the Qur'an, *tawhid*, theocentric, divine-human relationship, *shari'a*, legal principles, authority, *nass*, *Ahl-al Bayt*, *'ulama*, the role of the Imam, interpreting the Qur'an, guidance.

Abstract:

In order to understand the Qur'an, this scripture has to be looked at in the context in which it was revealed, as well as the purpose it serves and how it is interpreted by different sects of Muslims. This is what this article does; the author starts by looking briefly at the life of Prophet Muhammad to whom this religious text was revealed details including his temperament and his standing in Meccan society. Jiwa then covers issues such as the importance of recitation of the Qur'an, the method used for codification, what the Qur'an says about the divine-human relationship, the role of man and man's stature in relation to Allah. The contentious issue of who has the legitimacy or authority within the Muslim community to give guidance is also explored. The Shi'i idea is that guidance can only come from someone who has been bestowed with *'ilm*, whereas, the Sunni interpretation is that the *'ulama* (religious leaders) come to occupy this position of authority to interpret the Qur'an and give guidance in today's society to Muslims all around the world.

“O God, ease my heart with the Qur'an, fill my being with the Qur'an; illumine my sight with the Qur'an, and guide my tongue with the Qur'an. Grant me strength for as long as You allow me to live, for there is neither strength nor power, except in You.”

(A prayer by Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib (*alayhi-s-salam* (a.s.) – upon whom be peace)¹

The Qur'an-i Sharif is the foundational text for Muslims. It has shaped Muslim consciousness over the course of centuries. For Muslims, the Qur'an is the word of God, which entered human time and history. The Noble Qur'an has guided the thought and conduct of Muslims belonging to different communities of interpretation and spiritual affiliation, from century to century, in diverse cultural environments, lending itself to a wide spectrum of interpretations.² Muslims regard the Qur'an as being a unique phenomenon in religious history that considers itself the culmination of a series of revelations. It participates in human history in that it is an eternal book of guidance that must be understood and pondered if it is to serve as the moral and spiritual guide for human conduct. It also reflects the socio-economic, religious and political situation of seventh century Arabia. Accordingly, it is reflective of the historical circumstances of the life of the Prophet Muhammad and the experience of his community. In the library of world scriptures, the Qur'an is one of the most widely read, studied, revered and influential works of human history.

¹ Majlisi, VIII: 209 as cited in Ayoub, *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, XII: 179.

² His Highness the Aga Khan's speech at the Opening session of 'Word of God, Art of Man: The Qur'an and its Creative Expressions'. 19th October 2003.

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The Prophet Muhammad

According to Muslim traditions, Muhammad b. ‘Abd Allah, a man of stature and sincerity, belonged to the Banu Hashim clan of the tribe of Quraysh, who were among the most distinguished tribes of Arabia. His family had the distinction of being the caretakers of the Ka’ba.³ Many traditions concerning his temperament recall that his character was reflective of the societal impulses and that he was receptive to spiritual experience.

A well-respected merchant who took an active role in understanding and engaging with the issues of Meccan society, he nonetheless, habitually retreated from the humdrum of life to meditate on the higher truths that he felt were lacking in the worship of idols as it was practiced by the majority of the people of Arabia at the time. He gave voice to his disaffection with the prevailing civic order through his active involvement with the *Hunafa’* (seekers of truth) who were a group of people concerned with addressing the societal issues of the time. After fifteen years of this meditative practice, during one of his annual retreats in the cave of Hira just outside the city of Mecca, he received his first call of revelation on what subsequently came to be called *Laylat al-qadr* (the Night of Power).

The Revelation

The Prophet was beckoned to Prophethood with the following Divine call:

Read thou! In the name of thy Lord who created
He created man from a clot!
Recite and thy Lord is the Most Honourable!
Who taught with the pen
Taught man what he knew not.

(Sura 96: The Clot; Verses 1-5).

For the first three years of his calling, the Prophet focussed on summoning his immediate family members to Islam.⁴ Among the Prophet’s most staunch supporters during this time of great hardship, were his wife, Khadija, and his cousin and subsequent son-in-law, Imam ‘Ali b. Abi Talib. Among the multifaceted responsibilities that Imam ‘Ali undertook for Islam was recording and teaching the revelations as the Prophet received them. The Prophet continued to receive revelations over a twenty-two year period (610-32 CE). The revelations provided guidance to the Prophet and the believers, and often responded to the challenges faced by the nascent Muslim community. The Qur’an is thus closely linked to the historical circumstances of Prophet Muhammad’s life and the experiences of the Muslim *umma* (community) of that period.

Recitation and Recording of the Qur’an

As the Prophet received the revelations, he would usually recite them aloud. They were meant to be heard and recited. Not only would the Prophet recite what had been made known to him in the revelation experiences, he also urged the recitation of the revelations upon others as an expression of piety, associating the recitation with prayer. Recitation, therefore, was a means of preserving the revelations and a way of educating the community to their significance. The role played by recitation of the revelations in the community’s early life has continued through the centuries as a fundamental element of religious expression amongst Muslims.

³ The Ka’ba was considered an important place of worship in pre-Islamic Arabia to which people from all over Arabia flocked once a year for it housed 365 idols that were worshipped at the time. According to Muslim traditions, it was Prophet Ibrahim who had originally constructed it as the house of God.

⁴ “Islam” stems from the root “salama” meaning peace. One of its derived meanings is submission. Hence it is often translated as submission to the will of Allah.



While the recording of the text took place during the time of the Prophet, its codification into the *Mushaf* (the text of the Qur'an) occurred, according to historical accounts, in the time of the third Caliph 'Uthman b 'Affan (644-656 CE). Imam 'Ali b. Abi Talib had an instrumental role in facilitating this codification, as he is also believed to have been the compiler of the first recension (text). The *Mushaf* begins with 'Sura Fatiha' (the Opening) with the rest of the *suras* (chapters) arranged according to their length in an approximate descending order.

Divine-Human Relationship

One of the Qur'an's principal emphases is the relationship between the Divine and humanity. The Qur'an summons human beings to recognise the sovereignty of God over their lives and to invite their submission to His will. God's *tawhid* -- His unity, singularity and uniqueness -- is highlighted in the Qur'an. Many verses affirm this testament, such as this one: "God, there is no god but He."⁵ He is the Creator and Sustainer par excellence of this world and all the other worlds; in other words, everything that has ever been created or will be created. Consequently, the Quranic world is thoroughly and uncompromisingly theocentric: it owes its very existence to Allah who created it and sustains it and with whose signs it is filled. One of the key manifestations of God's *rahma* (mercy) is His communication with humanity. Divine communication occurs through His numerous *ayat* (signs) in the creation and through His Prophets. The Qur'an speaks of a series of prophets including Hazrat Ibrahim (Abraham), Hazrat Musa (Moses), Hazrat Da'ud (David) and Hazrat 'Isa (Jesus). The Jews and the Christians, who have previously received the Revelation, are referred to as the *Ahl al-kitab* (People of the Book) as they share with the Muslim *umma*, a common tradition that stems from Prophet Ibrahim.

In the Qur'anic view, although human beings have been created in the image of their Creator, they are clearly demarcated from Him. Human beings have been created and given the highest status in the cosmic order, that of *ashraf al-makhlūqat* (the noblest of creation). They have also been appointed the *khalifat Allah* (vicegerent of God on earth). This privileged position concurrently entails considerable responsibilities as well. Human beings are the caretakers of creation and accountable for its well-being to their Creator, who is the Sustainer of all the worlds.

Notwithstanding this grand stature, in relation to God, human beings are His '*abd* (servant and devotee).⁶ For a Muslim, the proper human attitude to God is, therefore, that of humility, subservience and dependence. This relationship is succinctly expressed in the word *islam* which signifies the inner act of self relinquishment to God. In addition to human beings affirming the principles of faith, *taqwa* (God consciousness) and *iman* (belief) are essential for the practice of the faith.

The Qur'an as a Foundational Source of Muslim Practice

The Quranic revelations cannot be reduced to a set of legal presumptions. However, in the responses that the Qur'an articulated to the challenges faced by the Prophet Muhammad and his nascent *umma*, it provided the basis for the genesis and articulation of legal principles and values, resulting in the formulation of a concept of *shari'a* (the way to be followed). The need to establish the *Shari'a* became paramount as Islam spread and became the primary faith of all the emerging Muslim societies of the Islamic empire. The codification of the legal principles began in the ninth century, and Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 765 CE) is credited as being one of its founding scholars. His student and contemporary, Abu Hanifa (d. 767 CE) is recognised as one of the earliest jurists, and believed to be the founder of the first school of Sunni law, the Hanafi School of law. There are four major schools of

⁵ Sura 2, Ayat 255. Other examples are: 3:2; 3:62.

⁶ This notion of being the servant of God needs to be understood as the human being submitting to God out of an abiding reverence and love for his creator and sustainer, and not as a matter of coercion.



Sunni law: the Hanafi, Hanbali, Maliki and Shafi'i. The Shi'i tradition has its own schools of law, such as the Zaydi and Ja'fari.

The Shi'i Interpretations of Authority

The issue of authority is an involved and complex one in all religions and Islam is no exception to this. According to the Qur'an, authority belongs first and foremost to Almighty God: *Rabb al-'alamin* (the Lord of the Worlds). He bestows it upon His prophets, the final one of whom is Prophet Muhammad, who is designated the *Rahma l'il-'alamin* (mercy to the worlds). It is then transmitted to those in authority who, according to Shi'i interpretation, are the imams from the progeny of the Prophet through Imam 'Ali and the Prophet's daughter, Fatima. This, according to Shi'i interpretation, is referred to in the following verse of the Qur'an: "*Ya ayyuhal ladhina amanu ati'ullaha wa ati'urrasul wa ulil amri minkum.*" (4:59) (O ye who believe! Obey God and obey the Messenger and those vested with authority from among you.).

The notion of authority is fundamentally linked to establishing the right guide who has the requisite knowledge and the legitimacy to interpret the Qur'an across the span of time. The need to do so is unequivocally accepted by all Muslims. However, there has been a range of views in the *umma* as to who are the most worthy of this legitimacy.

Broadly, according to the Sunni viewpoint, which developed over the course of time, it is the '*ulama* (religious leaders) who came to occupy this position of authority, which they in turn invested in various caliphs and rulers. From the Shi'i perspective, it is only the designated Imam from the *Ahl al-Bayt* (family of the Prophet), who is appointed by *nass* (Divine designation) and who possesses '*ilm* (divinely inspired knowledge), who has been granted this authority and privilege. In a tradition attributed to Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (d. 765 CE) he says, "God gave the knowledge of the Qur'an only to the true *Ahl al-Bayt* to whom it was sent down."⁷ Hence, in the Shi'i tradition, the prophets and imams are distinguished by the inheritance of the Divine knowledge and, consequently, the only ones worthy of interpreting the Divine word.

The Shi'a, like all Muslims, believe that since God created all creatures in order that they may worship Him, it follows that worship cannot be truly achieved without faith in God. However, according to this belief, faith cannot be attained without knowledge, which can only be communicated by a prophet who transmits God's message and thereafter, from a Shi'i perspective, by an imam who relates the Prophet's teachings and interprets the Divine message. Thus, the Shi'a believe the designation of the Imam to be divinely inspired by God who guides people to him and through him to Himself. In support of this view, the Shi'a refer to the following tradition attributed to the Prophet Muhammad: "I shall leave with you as proof after me the book of my Lord and my progeny, the people of my house. Hold fast to them both and you will never go astray."⁸

Interpreting the Divine message becomes paramount because the Divine word is understood to have layers of meanings. Whereas the apparent, exoteric (*zahir*) aspect consists of knowing the literal meaning of the Qur'an, the interior, esoteric (*batin*) comprises knowing the hidden or inner meaning of the Qur'an that leads to deeper insights of the faith. Notwithstanding this division into exoteric and esoteric understanding, each is seen as not only complementary to the other, but each is also intertwined with the other, as are body and soul. One cannot, therefore, exist without the other.⁹ The

⁷ Cited in Ayoub. "The Speaking Qur'an and the Silent Qur'an: A Study of the Principles and Development of Imami Shi'i Tafsir", in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an*, ed. A Rippin (Oxford, 1988), p. 179.

⁸ Majlisi & al-Ayyashi as cited in Ayoub, *op.cit.* p. 180.

⁹ Ja'far b. Mansur al-Yemen as cited in Poonawala, "Ismaili ta'wil of the Qur'an" in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'an*, ed. A Rippin (Oxford, 1988), p. 199.



role of the Imam as the interpreter par excellence is consequently critical. Ja'far b. Mansur al-Yemen, an Ismaili *da'i* from the early Fatimid period writes:

“Inasmuch as the Imams possess the true and limitless meaning of the Qu’ran, they keep alive the sacred Book as a moral and spiritual guide. They are the speaking (*natiq*) Qur’an while the Qur’an after the death of Muhammad remains the silent (*samit*) Qur’an.”¹⁰

In interpreting the Qur’an according to the time and age, the Shi‘a believe that the Imam continues to provide the *ta’wil* (interpretation) and the *ta’lim* (teaching) of the Qur’an that lights the *murid*’s path to spiritual enlightenment and moral upliftment. In the words of His Highness the Aga Khan, “it (the Qur’an) is concerned with the salvation of the soul, but commensurately also with the ethical imperatives which sustain an equitable social order.”¹¹

¹⁰ Ibid, pp. 182-3.

¹¹ His Highness the Aga Khan’s speech at the Opening session of ‘Word of God, Art of Man: The Qur’an and its Creative Expressions.’ 19th October 2003.