

📖 Topic Page: [Koran](#)

Definition: **Koran** from *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate(R) Dictionary*

 [pronunciation](#)

(ca. 1615) : the book composed of sacred writings accepted by Muslims as revelations made to Muhammad by Allah through the angel Gabriel

Ko-ran·ic also **Qu-ran·ic** or **Qur'an·ic** \kə-■■ra-nik\ *adj*



Image from:

[Sudanese boy with verses inscribed on a wooden... in Need to Know? Islam](#)

Summary Article: **Qur'an**

From *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*

General

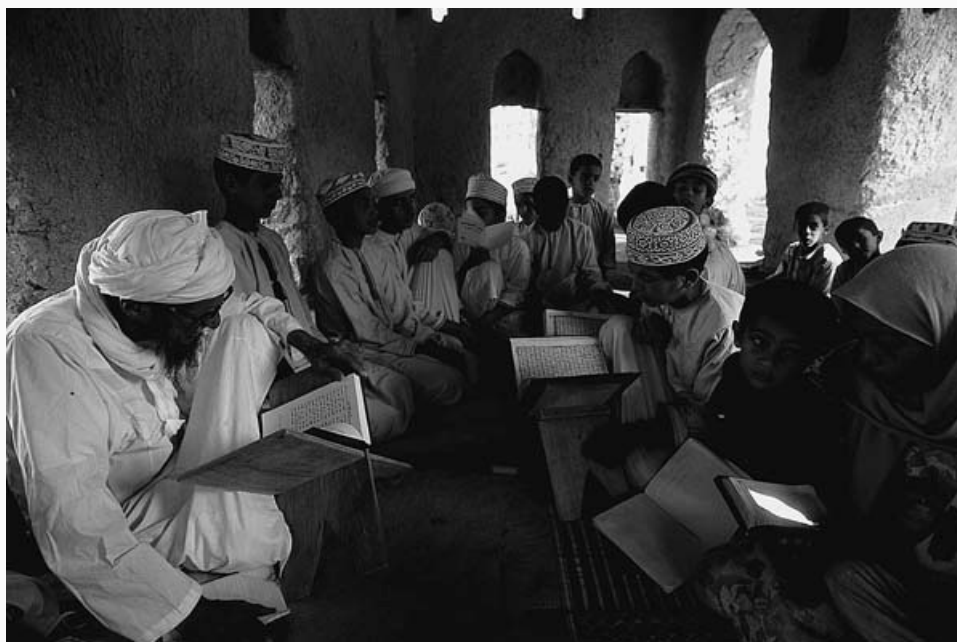
1. The Qur'an (in Ar., *al-Qur'ān*) is the sacred book of Islam. For Muslim believers, it is the word of the one God, Allah, revealed to the Prophet → Muhammad, 'in clear Arabic,' by the Archangel Gabriel. Its content may therefore not be touched. But through the centuries, it has been subject to various interpretations, just as it is today.

Its 114 'suras' ('chapters'), comprising from 3 to 286 or 287 'verses' (in Ar., *āyāt*, 'signs') are ordered in roughly decreasing length. The verses, as well, are of varying length. There are still two different verse-numberings today. Muslims designated the suras not by number, but by their names (e.g., "The Star," "The Table"). The latter come mostly from the verbal content of the suras. They are key words for the dominant verbal memorization and recitation, and for auditory memory, but only seldom say anything about the content, and do not belong to the recitation itself. The language of the Qur'an takes its orientation in the 'rhymed prose' of the ancient Arabic soothsayers, and in the early suras is characterized by passionate rhythm, and a vocabulary of high emotion. It is regarded as inimitable—the miracle confirming Muhammad's prophetic mission, and, for this reason, originally, untranslatable. Thus, the expansion of Islam brought the spread of Arabic into all conquered regions, from Spain to the valley of the Indus, and also amongst the Christians and the Jews. Even after the renaissance of the languages of Islam's convert peoples, Arabic remained the language of worship and the source of numerous loan-words from the region of worship and culture, as of most of the personal names. Although not very compatible phonetically, Arabic script was retained as cultural confession for languages such as Persian, Kurdish, Pashto, and (until Atatürk's reform of its script in 1926), Turkish.

History of the Qur'an

2. A scientifically undisputed history of the Qur'an remains to be written. According to Muslim tradition, it received its first written form from oral, and fragmentary written, testimonials—consisting in stones, bones, and palm leaves—under the regime of the third Caliph, 'Uṭmān (644–656). It is the first written work of Arabic literature. The oldest Qur'anic manuscripts (in the Arabian consonantal script), from the eighth century, are only partly vocalized (i.e., fixed in their pronunciation and, thus, meaning), and testify to different recitations (and therewith different textual interpretations). Oral recitation was always the precondition for written fixation. A fixed vocalization followed only in the tenth century.

The 'revelations' that Muhammad set forth orally, over the course of some twenty years, first in his Meccan, then from 622 his Medinan, environment, are of a communicative nature. Many suras imply that Muhammad had visions from God; in many Meccan suras God summons him to 'Speak!' In others, God is spoken of as 'my,' or 'our,' Lord. The Meccans, opponents as well as followers, are directly addressed. Later the Medinan community often is the addressee. The speakers are God, Gabriel, or 'the Spirit' (*rūḥ*), as messengers of God, as well as Muhammad himself. The earliest suras demand belief in the one God Allah, warn the wealthy Meccan merchants of God's punishment, appeal to their social responsibility, and promise Paradise to believing men and women who fulfill their religious duties.



A small Qur'anic school in the city of Bahla, in Oman. Until the nineteenth century, Qur'anic schools were Muslim children's only official opportunity for an education. With few temporary exceptions (Iran, India), they were open only to boys, who could enter them as early as the age of four. The most important material, throughout Islam, was the Qur'an, in the Arabic language (thus, also in areas whose language was other than Arabic), which, usually read aloud, was learned by heart, beginning with the Fātiḥa (opening sura), then the short suras at the end, back to the longest sura, the second. The children's parents often materially compensated teachers. Ever since the gradual introduction of a secular educational system in colonial times, and later with the introduction of universal obligatory education, governments, especially in larger places, influenced the expansion of the material to be learned, introduced examinations, and managed the linguistic and content integration of Islamic teaching, which continues to be regarded as the core of all education. Under Atatürk, Turkey closed the Qur'anic schools in 1926, but today recognizes the (voluntary) Imam Hatib religious schools for boys and girls.

A few short, Meccan suras are identical in content. The later, longer to long, suras consist of parts with different content and structures, whose temporal origin is unclear. Nevertheless, a development is perceptible in the Qur'anic thought construct. On occasion, early 'verses' were 'abrogated' by later ones, although usually left in the Qur'an. The 'Satanic verses,' in suras 53:19–21, became the best known, at all events in the Western world in recent times, through the homonymous fantastical-ironic novel by Indo-Muslim Salman Rushdie (1988). They name the three Arabian goddesses al-Lāt, al-'Uzza, and al-Manāt as really existing, while the following verses 22–27 mention them as having become obsolete. Verse 52 of sura 22 is supposed to have been revealed, for Muhammad's comfort, concerning this 'intervention of Satan.'

Content, Genres, Function

3. The “Sura of Opening” (*al-fātiḥa*), is a prayer of fundamental relevance for Muslim believers; they use it ritually in a way comparable to the Christian use of the Lord's Prayer. The two, very short, last suras, “The Day Break” and “Mankind,” are often applied in daily life as prayers for protection, like the Basmala (a formula presumably attached only later to most of the suras, “In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate”).

The Qur'an contains various literary genres, from formulae of swearing (81:15–20) and conjuration in the early suras, to other, formally summoning wording (82:1–5; 81:1–14), to rhetorical questions (104:5; 107:1; 83:4ff.), to maxims (10:35; 2:142), to narrative. These last are based on Near Eastern motifs or myths, and, usually in varying form, are also contained in the Hebrew Bible, such as variants of the temptation of the first human couple by the Devil in the form of a serpent in Paradise (not, therefore, Adam's temptation by Eve), and Noah (Nūḥ) and the Deluge. The creation story is not shaped as a seven-day sequence. The largest part of the Qur'an is formed by the tales of the Prophets, identified with several of the patriarchs of the Hebrew Bible: Adam, Abraham, Ismael, Moses, David, Job, Isaac, Jacob, Aaron, and Solomon. These tales vary in detail from those of the Hebrew Bible. Jesus (Isa) is likewise a Prophet in the Qur'an, but not the Son of God. The lengthiest tale of the Prophets is that of Joseph (Yūsuf), in sura 12. Its second part, on the whole, is more favorable to woman than it is in the Hebrew Bible. Figures of non-biblical origin are, for example, the Prophet Sāliḥ, the ancient Arabic hero and sage Luqmān, and the ‘Double Horned,’ presumably Alexander the Great. Parabolic material, such as that of the pillar city of Iram (89:6), was further shaped in the literature. Iram became the parable of earthly impermanence. References to the Last Judgment also appear in the Qur'an. In the popular genre “Tales of the Prophets,” Qur'anic stories of the Prophets, in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, took on characteristics of → fairytale or legend.

The Medinan suras contain cultic and social precepts, including particularly family law. These became the most important foundations of Islamic family law; they represent no complete legal corpus, however, as Muhammad unexpectedly died in 632. Some suras (e.g., 33:24), give glimpses of Muhammad's personal life conditions, such as his relationship with his wives, as well as his position in the community, and this became the cause of obligatory social directives or norms, such as, for example, the commandment of covering the hair and the bosom (→ Veil), gender separation, or punishment for calumny. The situations merely referred to in the Qur'an are more extensively portrayed in the Arabic, historical, and biographical literature, beginning in the eighth century. Works on the ‘causes of the revelations’ in Muhammad's life appeared from the tenth century onward. Commentaries on the Qur'an, beginning in the ninth century, reveal later religious and social developments and value judgments, for instance in the growing social deterioration of woman in the commentaries on sura 4:34.

On liturgical grounds, the text of the Qur'an was later divided into 7 *manāzil* (Ar., ‘steps,’ ‘stations’), 30 *ajzā'* (‘parts’), and 60 *aḥzāb* (‘portions’). During the month of fasting, Ramadan, one thirtieth is to be recited daily. The seven *manāzil* are meant as texts for recitation for the seven days of the week. The sixtieths, a relatively late ‘portioning,’ are meant to serve individual or collective recitation after ritual prayer. They are brought into association with the brotherhoods, but are accounted by many as *bid'a*, (illicit) ‘innovation.’ The melodic recitation of the Qur'an in the fashion of psalms by voice-trained ‘reciters’ is generally of great importance for Muslims' emotional life, since, from early times, orthodox Islam has rejected religious music (like figurative religious art).

4. The Qur'an impresses the art and literature of the Islamic Near East to the present, especially that of the Arabic countries. As for the prohibition of images (not yet formulated in the Qur'an), it is not only

sacred edifices that are decorated by citations from the Qur'an, and this in manifold calligraphic form: in literature, Qur'anic citations or allusions are often employed as metaphors, even, in the classic court poetry, in lighthearted, satirical, or erotic and sexual, even frivolous, fashion. Modern Arabic literature applies words from the Qur'an allegorically, in contexts ranging from social criticism to mysticism. Thus, they form a variety of codes, culturally specific, which stamp the community.

Qur'anic Schools

For hundreds of years, Qur'anic schools (*kuttāb*), in which the Qur'an was learned by rote, were the only educational opportunity for the lower social strata, for boys far more than for girls, who were married very early. Already in the classical Arabic literature, and still more in the modern, this school system led to the degrading of the image of the teacher, since it mostly educated neither in reading and writing, nor in thinking, but, with authoritarian methods and violence (flogging and caning), to unconditional subordination, and to the empty parroting of content that had not been understood. The teacher became the prototype of the dolt in older Arab literature, and the tyrant in modern.

The fact that every believing Muslim has learned the Qur'an by rote, leads to the words of the Qur'an being used as prayers, warnings, maxims, material for consolation, oaths, and instructions, as the basis for meditations and allusions in Muslims' everyday life, and thereby playing a great role, especially in Arabic countries. This renders them available for demagogic purposes, as well, in speeches by politicians, or, for example, during the First Gulf War, in the Friday preaching of Iranian mullahs supporting official governmental policy in Iran, and at the same time, in poetic encomia, in the style of the old Arabic poetry, of Saddam Hussein, which, propagated through the media, were to spur the Iraqi population on to heroism, and to instill in them the spirit of endurance.

Qur'anic Scholarship in Islam

5. In earlier centuries, the Qur'an had become the point of departure, in numerous works, for theological and philological discussion, historical biography, and (for instance, through the language of image) literary creation. Now, since the turn of the twentieth century, approaches to an Islamic Qur'anic scholarship have developed in the genre of historical criticism. However, it is narrowly bounded by doctrines of oral inspiration, inimitability, and miraculous character.

Especially with regard to the situation of woman, verses from the Qur'an have always been interpreted anew—for example in the Qur'anic commentary of Great Mufti Muhammad 'Abduh (d. 1905), in *The New Woman*, of Tunisian aṭ-Ṭāhir al-Ḥadḍād, or, since around 1985, by the Muslim feminists in the United States—such as Rif'at Ḥadḍād, Amina Waddud, and others—whose (re-) interpretation in the sense of a Qur'anic social parity and equality of woman and man (with observation of the biological differences) is impressive but not always defensible philologically.

Translation into Languages of Islamic Lands

6. a) Inasmuch as, for hundreds of years, the Qur'an was, and often still is, regarded by Muslim orthodoxy as untranslatable, commentaries on the Qur'an were translated before the Qur'an itself was. They were translated in other Near Eastern languages, since the tenth century into Persian. In the twelfth century, the entire Qur'an was first translated into Persian. Eastern translations of the Qur'an have been interlinear until the twentieth century. That is, the Arabic text always runs along with the foreign language. The 1928 founding of the Turkish Republic, and constitutional laicization of the country, paved the way for the printing of Turkish Qur'ans without the Arabic original. The 'Turkization' of the prayer ritual, however, met with the robust opposition of religious authorities, and has been

officially allowed only since the 1930s.

Translations into European Languages

b) The first translation of the Qur'an into Latin, done in 1142–1143, was the fruit of missionary intentions, and was made by Robert of Ketton, at the behest of the Abbot of Cluny, Petrus Venerabilis. The first translation into a living European language, Italian, was published in 1547 by Protestant-oriented printer and book merchant Andrea Arrivabene, of Venice, and rests on Ketton's translation. The latter was also the basis for the first German translation, that of Salomon Schweigger, who from 1578–1581 was ambassadorial preacher in Istanbul, and later preacher at the Church of Saint Mary in Nuremberg. In the wake of the Enlightenment, new translations, no longer fraught with hostility toward Islam, from Arabic into several European languages finally appeared in the eighteenth century.

→ *Bible, Book, Canon, Islam, Muhammad, Revelation*

Literature

- Abu-Hamdiyyah, Muhammad, *The Qur'an: An Introduction*, London 2000.
- Baljon, J. M. S., *Modern Muslim Koran Interpretation (1880-1960)*, Leiden 1961.
- Bell, Richard, *Introduction to the Qur'ān*, Edinburgh 1953.
- Cragg, Kenneth, *The Pen and the Faith: Eight Modern Muslim Writers and the Qur'ān*, London 1985.
- Idem, *The Event of the Qur'ān: Islam in Its Scripture*, Oxford 1994.
- Gaetje, Helmut, *The Qur'ān and Its Exegesis: Selected Texts with Classical and Modern Interpretation*, Oxford 1996.
- Hussein, Iqbal S., *The Qur'ān and Modernism: Beyond Science and Philosophy*, Lahore 2000.
- Jansen, J. J.G., *The Interpretation of the Koran in Modern Egypt*, Leiden 1974.
- Kassis, Hanna E., *A Concordance of the Qur'ān*, Berkeley 1983.
- Madigan, Daniel A., *The Qur'ān's Self-Image: Writing and Authority in Islam's Scripture*, Princeton 2001.
- Rippin, Andrew, *The Qur'ān and Its Interpretative Tradition*, Aldershot 2001.
- Robinson, Neal, *Discovering the Qur'ān: A Contemporary Approach to a Veiled Text*, London 1996.
- Sherif, Faruq, *A Guide to the Contents of the Qur'ān*, Reading 2 1995.
- Watt, William Montgomery, *Companion to the Qur'ān*, Oxford 1994.
- Welch, A. T. et al., "al-Kur'an," in *Encyclopedia of Islam* 2 5 (1986), 400-432.
- Wheeler, Brannon M., *Prophets in the Quran: An Introduction to the Quran and Muslim Exegesis*, London 2002.
- Zakaria, Rafiq, *Muhammad and the Qur'ān*, London 1991.

Wiebke Walther

APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA

Walther, W. (2005). Qur'an. In K. Von Stuckrad (Ed.), *The Brill Dictionary of Religion* (2nd ed.). Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/qur_an

BRILL © 2006 by Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands

BRILL © 2006 by Koninklijke Brill NV, Leiden, The Netherlands

APA

Walther, W. (2005). Qur'an. In K. Von Stuckrad (Ed.), *The Brill Dictionary of Religion* (2nd ed.). Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/qur_an

Chicago

Walther, Wiebke. "Qur'an." In *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*, edited by Kocku Von Stuckrad. 2nd ed. Brill, 2005. https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/qur_an

Harvard

Walther, W. (2005). Qur'an. In K. Von Stuckrad (Ed.), *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*. (2nd ed.). [Online]. Leiden: Brill. Available from: https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/qur_an [Accessed 13 November 2019].

MLA

Walther, Wiebke. "Qur'an." *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*, edited by Kocku Von Stuckrad, Brill, 2nd edition, 2005. *Credo Reference*, https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/qur_an. Accessed 13 Nov. 2019.