

AN INTRODUCTION TO ISLAM FOR JEWS

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Session 7: The Qur'an

1. INTRODUCTION

The Qur'an: basic facts

- Written in Arabic; consists of 114 *suras*, each of which is made up of verses (*ayat*, singular: *ayah*, 'sign'); non-narrative, non-chronological arrangement
- Muslims believe it was revealed to Muhammad bit by bit, between 610-32 CE
- Muslims believe it was collected after Muhammad's death and the text standardized c. 650 CE by the caliph 'Uthman ('the Uthmanic recension')
- The earliest surviving manuscripts date from before 750 CE (recently found in Yemen), and the earliest quotations from the Qur'an anywhere are in the mosaics of the Dome of the Rock, Jerusalem, dating from 690 CE.

Translations

Be careful of translations! Here is a good guide to them: Khaleel Mohammed, 'Assessing English Translations of the Qur'an', *Middle East Quarterly* (2005):

<https://www.meforum.org/717/assessing-english-translations-of-the-quran>

A widely available and decent translation is that by M.A.S. Abdel-Haleem, published by Oxford University Press.

For the best available study guide to the Qur'an, look at *The Study Qur'an: A New Translation and Commentary*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr (HarperOne, 2015).

Sample of traditional Qur'an recitation: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MHUGR3Ejly8>
By Mahmoud Khalil al-Hussary, a world-famous Egyptian *qari* (Qur'an reciter)

2. THE TRADITIONAL ACCOUNT OF THE FORMATION OF THE QUR'AN

Abu Muhammad al-Haqq ibn Atiyya (Spain, 1088-1147), *Commentary on the Qur'an*

At the time of the messenger of God, the Qur'an was dispersed in the hearts of people. People wrote some of it on sheets, on palm-leaf stalks, on pumice stone, on baked clay, and on other items like that. When the killing of the Qur'anic reciters intensified one day during the battle of al-Yamama, 'Umar ibn al-Khattab suggested to Abu Bakr that the Qur'an should be collected. He feared that the important Qur'an reciters like Ubayy, Zayd, Ibn Mas'ud and others like them might die. So the two of them delegated the task of collection to Zayd ibn Thabit. He collected it with great difficulty, without organizing the *suras*. It is reported that, in this collection, verses from the end of *surat al-bara'a* (9) were omitted until they were found in the possession of Khuzayma ibn Thabit. ... The sheets remained in the possession of Abu Bakr and were transferred to 'Umar ibn al-Khattab after him. Then Hafsa, his daughter, kept them during the rule of 'Uthman. It is well known that, during this time, sheets were also written in distant lands on the authority of the companions of Muhammad, such as the codex of Ibn

Mas'ud, what was written on the authority of the companions in Syria, the codex of Ubayy, and others like them. That is the source of differing opinions about the seven forms [*ahruf*] in which the Qur'an was revealed.... 'Uthman authorized the collection of the codex and appointed Zayd ibn Thabit to the task of collecting it.

Qur'an 17: 88

Say: If men and *jinn* banded together to produce the like of this Qur'an, they would not produce its like, not though they backed one another.

3. MODERN CRITICAL THEORIES OF THE FORMATION OF THE QUR'AN

Qur'an 5: 32

On that account: We ordained for the Children of Israel that if anyone slew a person—unless it be for murder or for spreading mischief in the land— it would be as if he slew the whole people: and if anyone saved a life it would be as if he saved the life of the whole people.

Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 4: 22a

For this reason [the first human being] was created alone: to teach that whoever destroys a single life is as though he had destroyed an entire universe, and whoever saves a single life is as if he had saved an entire universe.

4. READING THE QUR'AN: SAMPLE TEXTS

A. Qur'an 1: al-Fatiha (The Opening)

Qur'an 1: al-Fatiha (The Opening), trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1934)

¹In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful.

²Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds; ³Most Gracious, Most Merciful; ⁴Master of the Day of Judgement.

⁵You do we worship, and Your aid we seek.

⁶Show us the straight way, ⁷The way of those on whom You bestowed Your Grace, those whose [portion] is not wrath, and who go not astray.

Qur'an 1: al-Fatihah (The Opening), trans. Muhammad Muhsin Khan (1996)

¹In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

²All the praises and thanks be to Allah, the Lord of the '*Ālamîn*' (mankind, jinn and all that exists). ³The Most Gracious, the Most Merciful ⁴The Only Owner (and the Only Ruling Judge) of the Day of Recompense (i.e. the Day of Resurrection). ⁵You (Alone) we worship, and You (Alone) we ask for help (for each and everything). ⁶Guide us to the Straight Way. ⁷The Way of those on whom You have bestowed Your Grace, not (the way) of those who earned Your Anger (such as the Jews), nor of those who went astray (such as the Christians).

APPROACHING THE QUR'ÁN

1

THE OPENING

In the name of God the Compassionate the Caring
 Praise be to God lord sustainer of the worlds
 the Compassionate the Caring
 master of the day of reckoning
 5 To you we turn to worship
 and to you we turn in time of need
 Guide us along the road straight
 the road of those to whom you are giving
 not those with anger upon them
 not those who have lost the way

1	bi smi In the name	llāhi of God	r-raḥmāni the Compassionate	r-raḥīm the Caring
2	al-ḥamdu praise	li llāhi be to God	rabbi lord sustainer	l-'ālamīn of the worlds
3	ir-raḥmāni r-raḥīm the Compassionate the Caring			
4	māliki master	yawmi of the day	d-dīn of reckoning	
5	iyāka to you	na'budu we turn to worship		
	wa and	iyāka to you	nasta'in we turn in time of need	
6	ihdina guide us	ṣ-ṣirāṭa on the road	l-mustaqīm straight	
7	ṣirāṭa the road	l-ladhīna of those	an'amta you have given	'alayhim to whom
	ghayri not those	l-maghdūbi with anger	'alayhim upon them	
	wa la not	d-dālin those who have gone astray		

B. Some short Meccan suras (translations: Michael Sells)

Qur'an 107: al-Ma'un (The Small Kindness/The Neighbourly Needs)

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

Do you see him who calls the reckoning a lie?
He is the one who casts the orphan away
who fails to urge the feeding of one in need
Cursed are those who perform the prayer
unmindful of how they pray
who make of themselves a display
but hold back the small kindness

Qur'an 108: al-Kawthar (Given Fully/Abundance)

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

To you we have given fully [*al-kawthar*]
Pray to your lord and sacrifice
The one who reviles you is the one who is cut

Qur'an 112: al-Ikhlās/al-Tawhīd (Purity/Unity)

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

Say he is God, one
God forever [*samad*]
Not begetting, unbegotten, and having as an equal none

C. A LEGAL PASSAGE: QUR'AN 4: AL-NISA (WOMEN), 19-24 (TRANS. SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR)

¹⁹O you who believe! It is not lawful for you to inherit women through coercion, nor to prevent them from marrying [again], that you may take away some of what you have given them, unless they commit a flagrant indecency. And consort with them in a kind and honorable way; for if you dislike them, it may be that you dislike a thing in which God has placed much good. If you desire to take one wife in place of another, even if you have given to one of them a great sum, take back nothing from it. Would you take it by way of calumny and manifest sin? And how can you take it back, when you have lain with one another and they have made with you a solemn covenant? And marry not those women whom your fathers married, save for what is past. Truly it was indecent and loathsome, an evil way. Forbidden unto you [as wives] are your mothers, your daughters, your sisters, your fathers' sisters, your mothers' sisters, your brothers' daughters, your sisters' daughters, your milk-mothers and milk-sisters, the mothers of your wives, the stepdaughters in your care---born of your wives with whom you have consummated marriage, but if you have not consummated the marriage with them, then there is no blame on you---and the wives of your sons who are from your loins, and two sisters together, save for what is past. Truly God is Forgiving, Merciful.

Qur'an 97: al-Qadr (Destiny)

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

We sent it/him down on the night of destiny
And what can tell you of the night of destiny
The night of destiny is better than a thousand months
The angels come down—the spirit upon it/her—by permission of their lord
from every order
Peace it/she is until the rise of dawn

HEARING THE QUR'AN				
The Sura of Destiny				
	bi smi In the name	llāhi of God	r-raḥmāni the Compassionate	r-raḥīm the Caring
1	Innā indeed	anzalnā we sent down	hu fi him/it on	laylati l-qadr the night of qadr
2	wa mā adrāka and what can tell you		mā what is	laylatu l-qadr the night of qadr
3	laylatu l-qadri the night of destiny		khayrun is better	min alfi shahr than a thousand months
4	tanazzalu l-malā'ikatu come down the angels		wa r-rūḥu fihā and the spirit in her/it	
		bi idhni rabbiḥim by permission of their lord		min kulli amr from every order
5	salāmun <u>hiya</u> peace she	ḥattā until	maṭla'ī l-fajr the break of dawn	

Further reading

Michael Cook, *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction* (OUP, 2000)

Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Quran* (Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980)

Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations* (2nd edition) (White Cloud Press, 2007) (includes a CD with examples of Qur'an recitation)