The Blackwell Companion to the Qurʾān

Edited by

Andrew Rippin
The Blackwell Companion to the Qur’ān
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The Blackwell Companion to the Qur’ān

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Andrew Rippin
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Preface

Andrew Rippin

The publication of a volume devoted to the Qur’ân in the “companion” genre marks the emergence of the text of Muslim scripture within the canon of world literature in a manner particularly appropriate to the twenty-first century. This companion is explicitly designed to guide the reader who may have little exposure to the Qur’ân beyond a curiosity evoked by the popular media. It aims to provide such a person with the starting point of a general orientation and take him or her to a well-advanced state of understanding regarding the complexities of the text and its associated traditions. However, a “companion” volume such as this is also an opportunity for scholars to extend the boundaries of what might be deemed to be the “accepted” approaches to the text of the Qur’ân because such a volume provides, it is to be hoped, the material which will inspire future generations of scholars who first encounter the Qur’ân in the classroom and for whom new avenues of exploration provide the excitement of research and discovery.

Organization

This companion has been organized in order to facilitate its usefulness for the groups of readers who may wish to embark on a deeper understanding of the Qur’ân in its historical context and as an object of scholarly study. Part I functions as an introduction to the text but its three chapters are oriented in different, yet complementary ways. All readers, but especially those who are coming to the Qur’ân with little foreknowledge of the text and/or the scholarly study of it, will find these chapters the place to start. “Introducing” the Qur’ân (chapter 1) means orienting the reader to the basic facts, themselves coming from a variety of perspectives both internal and external to the text. “Discovering” the Qur’ân (chapter 2) speaks to the experience of a student and considers how one might integrate the Qur’ân within a framework of religious studies. “Contextualizing” the Qur’ân (chapter 3) orients the reader to a Muslim scholarly perspective, putting the emphasis on the historical context in which the facts about the
Qur’ān are to be understood. Each chapter thus adds a level of complexity to the task of approaching the Qur’ān, although each chapter recognizes certain common elements which pose a challenge to the reader, especially the question of the choice of “lens” through which one should read the text.

Part II addresses the text of the Qur’ān on both the structural and the historical level, two dimensions which have always been seen in scholarly study as fully intertwined. Issues of origin and composition lie deeply embedded in all of these concerns because, it is argued, the structure of the text – which is what makes the book a challenge to read – must be accounted for through the process of history. However, the final aim of these attempts at explaining the Qur’ān is directed towards a single end, that of coming to an understanding of the text. The internal structure of the Qur’ān is the focus of chapter 4. These observations are complemented by an intricate series of observations about the nature of the text and its language, including the patterns of address used in the text (chapter 5), language – especially its use of literary figures – in chapter 6, the relationship between poetry and language as it affects the Qur’ān (chapter 7), and the range of the vocabulary of the text that is thought to come from non-Arabic sources in chapter 8. All of these factors – structure, language, and vocabulary – combine and become manifested in the emergence of a text of the scripture within the context of a community of Muslims (chapter 9), creating the text which emerges as sacred through the complex passage of history (chapter 10), which is then transmitted through the generations of Muslims, the focus of chapter 11. All of this happens in a historical context of the early community which is shown to be foundational to the understanding of the text in both the person of Muḥammad and his life (chapter 12) as well as that of the early leader ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (chapter 13).

Such details provide an understanding of the text on a linguistic and historical level but the overall nature of its message is fundamentally ignored in such considerations. Part III thus turns to consider some of the major topics which characterize that message. Muslims have, in fact, seen the Qur’ān as all-encompassing in its treatment of human existence and an inventory of themes can really only provide examples of ways of analyzing and categorizing the contents of the scripture: there is little substitute for a rigorous study of the text itself if one wishes to gain a clear sense of what it is really about as a whole. However, certain aspects do provide key ideas and provide the opportunity to illustrate methods of approach. Dominating all of the message of the Qur’ān is, of course, the figure of Allāh, the all-powerful, one God revealed in the Qur’ān just as He is in the biblical tradition (chapter 14), through a process of revelation brought by prophets (chapter 15), an important one of whom within the Muslim context is Moses (chapter 16), although, of course, figures such as Abraham and Jesus play a central role in the Qur’ān as well. The message those prophets (including Muḥammad in the Qur’ān) bring argues for belief in God (chapter 17) among reflective, thinking human beings (chapter 18). However, the prophets also bring a message of how life should be lived in both love (chapter 19) and war (chapter 20).

This text of the Qur’ān, as all of the preceding material has made clear, is a complex one that Muslims have always known needed interpretation. This might be said to be the nature of divine revelation which poses the problem of how the infinity and absoluteness of God can be expressed in the limited and ambiguous format of human
language. Such a situation calls for a hermeneutics that is elaborated within the framework of Islam (chapter 21) which can also draw its inspiration from a multitude of sources always filtered through Islamic eyes and needs (chapter 22). Differing approaches to Islam developed in the Muslim world, variations which the Qurʾān facilitated through its conduciveness to interpretation: thus Şūfīs (chapter 23), Rūmī, (chapter 24), Twelver Shiʿites (chapter 25) and Ismāʿīlīs (chapter 26) all sought strength and support for their ideas in the text of the Qurʾān and developed their own principles by which to understand the scripture.

However, the Qurʾān has far more significance within Muslim life than as an object functioning as a ground for exegesis. The world of the Qurʾān extends much further, becoming the basis of scholastic consideration and development of learning within the context of exegetical elaboration (chapter 27), theology (chapter 28), and jurisprudence (chapter 29). It is a touchstone for every discussion of ethical issues in the modern world (chapter 30) just as it was the basis for literary development in the classical world (chapter 31). Underlying all of that, however, is the status of the Qurʾān not so much as a rational launching pad for further thought but as a text of devotion as displayed in the attention to its orality and manifestation in recitation (chapter 32). The application of the Qurʾān thus extends through the many aspects of Muslim day-to-day life.

**Technical Considerations**

A work such as this depends upon a significant number of scholars interested in making their academic work accessible to a broad reading public and a new generation of students. As editor of the volume, I would like to express my appreciation to all of the contributors – a truly international gathering of scholars – for their efforts. There is a delicate balance in a work such as this between documenting and annotating every thought and being mindful of the variety of readers who are the potential audience; thus, the number of references and endnotes has been drastically reduced but not totally eliminated, for it is in such supporting apparatus that there lies one of the sources of research directions for future generations of scholars. As well, it is notable that there clearly continues to be a need to justify many points of discussion with reference to original and secondary sources; it is perhaps indicative of the still-developing nature of Qurʾānic studies that it is not possible to assume an agreed-upon core of basic data and interpretation that would simplify much of the documentation in a volume such as this.

In an attempt to eliminate some of the “clutter” that is often associated with academic work, the bibliographical references for each chapter have been consolidated into one overall bibliography at the end of the volume. The exercise of compiling this bibliography has been, for the editor, and for the publisher’s copy-editor as well, a task made all the more complex because of the lack of standard editions of many works of constant reference in the field – an aspect aggravated by the loose control over the reprinting of works by different publishers in many parts of the Arab world who make no reference to the source of the original print and who often times use slightly variant
page numbering even in direct reprints of a text; thus, for some items in the bibliography, several prints will be listed because those are the ones available to individual writers and only seldom has it been possible to consolidate different editions. The situation does not exist solely with reprints of Arabic texts in the Arab world, although it certainly afflicts that area far more extensively; the record of the European publishing project of the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* is equally complex, although the correlations between the multiple versions of that work are at least somewhat more straightforward. For ease of citation, all references to the *Encyclopaedia of Islam* New Edition (= second edition) in this book have been reduced to EI2 (2004) meaning the CD-ROM version which is a direct reproduction of the printed work in English which appeared in twelve volumes (plus supplements) between 1954 and 2004 (and which is now also available in a Web version). The now emerging third edition appears to be planned under English head words, so no correlation with that edition will likely be possible.

References to the Qur’ān are cited generally in the format “Q sūra number: āya number,” numbered according to what is commonly called the Cairo text. Dates are generally cited in the format “Hijrī/Gregorian” unless otherwise indicated.
PART I
Orientation

1  Introducing  
   Tamara Sonn  

2  Discovering  
   Christopher Buck  

3  Contextualizing  
   Abdullah Saeed
CHAPTER 1

Introducing

Tamara Sonn

The Qur’an (“Koran” in archaic spelling) is the sacred scripture of Islam. The term * Qur’an* means “recitation” or “reading,” reflecting the Muslim belief that it is the word of God, not of the prophet who delivered it. Although the Qur’an was revealed (or “sent down,” *munzal*, as the Arabic term has it) in the first/seventh century, Muslims believe that it is nonetheless timeless, the word of God, revealed word for word in the Arabic language through God’s final messenger, Muḥammad (d. 11/632). Sunnī Muslims (approximately 85 percent of the world’s Muslim population) believe the Qur’an is therefore uncreated; like God, whose speech it is, it has always existed. The Qur’an says that its words reflect a divine archetype of revelation, which it calls “the preserved tablet” (*al-lawh al-mahfūẓ*, Q 85:22). This allows for interpretation of the term * Qur’an* as “reading,” even though Muḥammad is described by the Qur’an as unlettered or illiterate (Q 7:157; 62:2). Rather than “reading” a message, Muḥammad is described as delivering a message that God had imprinted upon his heart (e.g., Q 26:195). At one point the Qur’an refers to Gabriel (Jibrīl) as the one “who has brought it [revelation] down upon your heart” (Q 2:97). As a result, traditional interpreters claim that Gabriel was the medium through whom Muḥammad received God’s revelation.

The Qur’an uses the term * Qur’an* seventy times, sometimes generically referring to “recitation” but usually referring to revelation. The Qur’an also refers to itself, as it does to the Torah and the Gospels, as simply “the book” (*al-kitāb*), a term used hundreds of times to refer to recorded revelation. Muslims therefore frequently refer to the Qur’an as “The Book.” Muslims also commonly use terms such as “noble” (*al-Qur’ān al-karīm*), “glorious” (*al-Qur’ān al-majīd*), and other terms of respect for the Qur’an. They commemorate annually the beginning of its revelation on the “night of power” (or “destiny,” *laylat al-qadr*), during the last ten days of Ramadān, the month of fasting. So important is the revelation of the Qur’an that the Qur’an describes *laylat al-qadr* as “better than a thousand months” (Q 97:4).

Muslims’ respect for the Qur’an is demonstrated by the fact that only those who are in a state of spiritual purity are allowed to touch it. It is the miracle of Islam: Muḥammad brought no other. The Qur’an tells us that when people asked Muḥammad
to demonstrate the authenticity of his prophecy by performing miracles, as other prophets had done, he offered them the Qurʾān. The beauty of its language is believed to be beyond compare, and impossible to imitate. (This belief is conveyed in the doctrine of the inimitability of the Qurʾān, ʿiʿjāz.) Whereas Jesus’ life was miraculous and forms the basis of Christianity, the Qurʾān itself is the basis of Islamic life. It forms the core of Islamic ritual and practice, learning, and law.

Structure of the Text

The Qurʾān consists of 114 chapters, called sūras (plural: suwar). The verses of the chapters are called āyāt (singular: āya). The chapters range in length from 7 to 287 verses. The first sūra is very short, but the remaining sūras are arranged roughly in descending order of length, that is, from longest to shortest, rather than in chronological order.

The chronological order in which the chapters were delivered is determined based on both internal evidence and traditional literature concerning the circumstances of revelation (asbāb al-nuzūl). Although not all scholars agree on the precise dating of all the verses of the Qurʾān, there is general agreement that approximately ninety of the chapters were delivered during the earlier period of revelation, while Muḥammad and his community lived in Mecca. The remaining chapters were delivered after the emigration (hijra) to Medina (1/622). Accordingly, scholars often refer to chapters as being Meccan or Medinan. The former tend to be shorter (and therefore placed at the end of the Qurʾān), poetic in form, passionate in tone, and characterized by general references to monotheism; the glory, power, mercy and justice of God (Allāh, from the Arabic al-ilāh: the [one] god); and the need for submission (islām) to the will of God in order to achieve the great rewards promised in the afterlife and avoid divine retribution. The Medinan sūras tend to be longer (and therefore found at the beginning of the Qurʾān), more prosaic in form, and deal with more practical issues such as marriage and inheritance.

Each chapter of the Qurʾān has a name, such as “Opening” (Q 1), “Women” (Q 4), and “Repentance” (Q 9). These names were ascribed after the Qurʾān was canonized (established in its authoritative form) and typically derive from major references in the chapters. All but one chapter (Q 9) begins with the phrase “In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate.” Twenty-nine chapters of the Qurʾān are also preceded by a letter or brief series of Arabic letters, whose meaning is unclear. Some scholars believe they refer to elements within the chapter itself, some believe they refer to early organizational components of the chapters, while others believe they have mystical or spiritual meanings. Whatever their significance, these letters are considered to be part of revelation itself.

Voice and Audience

The Qurʾān often speaks in the first person (“I” or “We,” used interchangeably), indicating that it is the voice of God. For example, as in the verse about the first night of
revelation (laylat al-qadr) cited above, the Qur’ān says, “Surely We sent it [revelation] down on the night of power” (Q 97:2). In this voice, the Qur’ān frequently addresses itself to Muḥammad, instructing him to “say” or “tell” people certain things, sometimes in response to specific issues. For example, when people were doubting Muḥammad’s role as prophet, the Qur’ān instructs him: “Say, ‘O people, indeed I am a clear warner to you. Those who believe and do good works, for them is forgiveness and generous blessing” (Q 55:49–50). The Qur’ān also offers advice to Muḥammad. When people accused him of being a mere poet or even a fortune-teller, the Qur’ān says, “Do they say that you have forged [the Qur’ān]? Say, ‘If I have forged it, my crimes are my own; but I am innocent of what you do’ ” (Q 11:36). The Qur’ān also offers encouragement to Muḥammad when his efforts seem futile: “Have we not opened your heart and relieved you of the burden that was breaking your back?” (Q 94:1–2). At other times, the Qur’ān speaks directly to the people about Muḥammad. Concerning the issue of the authenticity of his message, the Qur’ān addresses the community, saying, “The heart [of the prophet] was not deceived. Will you then dispute with him about what he saw?” (Q 53:12–13). The Qur’ān is the word of God throughout, but many of the longer verses appear in the voice of Muḥammad, addressing the community with the word of God and referring to God in the third person. For instance, we are told, “There is no compulsion in religion. Right has been distinguished from wrong. Whoever rejects idols and believes in God has surely grasped the strongest, unbreakable bond. And God hears and knows” (Q 2:257).

The audience addressed by the Qur’ān is assumed to be the community of seventh-century Arabia, where Muḥammad lived, although its message is meant for all times and places. Interestingly, and uniquely among monotheistic scriptures, the Qur’ān assumes both males and females among its audience, and frequently addresses the concerns of both. For example, it tells us that God is prepared to forgive and richly reward all good people, both male and female:

Men who submit [to God] and women who submit [to God],
Men who believe and women who believe,
Men who obey and women who obey,
Men who are honest and women who are honest,
Men who are steadfast and women who are steadfast,
Men who are humble and women who are humble,
Men who give charity and women who give charity,
Men who fast and women who fast,
Men who are modest and women who are modest,
Men and women who remember God often. (Q 33:36)

History of the Text

Unlike earlier scriptures, the history of the Qur’ān is well known. The Qur’ān was delivered by Muḥammad to his community in Arabia in various contexts over a period of twenty-two years, 610 to 632 CE. According to tradition, Muḥammad’s followers sometimes recorded his pronouncements, while others of his followers memorized and
transmitted them orally during his lifetime. After the death of Muḥammad (11/632), and with the deaths of some of those who memorized the Qurʾān (ḥuffāẓ), the prophet’s companions decided to establish a written version of the Qurʾān so that it could be preserved accurately for posterity. This process was begun by a close companion of Muḥammad, Zayd b. Thābit (d. 35/655), who collected written records of Qurʾānic verses soon after the death of Muḥammad. The third successor (caliph) to the prophet, ʿUthmān b. ʿAffān (d. 36/656), is credited with commissioning Zayd and other respected scholars to establish the authoritative written version of the Qurʾān based upon the written and oral records. Thus, within twenty years of Muḥammad’s death, the Qurʾān was committed to written form. That text became the model from which copies were made and promulgated throughout the urban centers of the Muslim world, and other versions are believed to have been destroyed. Because of the existence of various dialects and the lack of vowel markers in early Arabic, slight variations in the reading of the authoritative versions were possible. In order to avoid confusion, markers indicating specific vowel sounds were introduced into the language by the end of the third/ninth century, but seven slightly variant readings remain acceptable.

The Qurʾān was copied and transmitted by hand until the modern era. The first printed version was produced in Rome in 1530 ce; a second printed version was produced in Hamburg in 1694. The first critical edition produced in Europe was done by Gustav Flügel in 1834.

The numbering of the verses varies slightly between the standard 1925 ce Egyptian edition and the 1834 edition established by Flügel, which is used by many Western scholars. (Editions from Pakistan and India often follow the Egyptian standard edition with the exception that they count the opening phrase, “In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate,” of each chapter as the first verse. This is the numbering followed in the citations given in this text.) The variations in verse numbering comprise only a few verses and reflect differing interpretations of where certain verses end.

The Qurʾān is considered to be authentic only in Arabic. Even non-Arabic speaking Muslims pray in Arabic, the language serving as a great symbol of unity throughout the Muslim world. Nevertheless, numerous translations of the Qurʾān have been produced. The first Latin translation was done in the twelfth century ce, commissioned by Peter the Venerable, abbot of the monastery of Cluny in France. It was published in Switzerland in the sixteenth century. The Qurʾān is now readily available in virtually all written languages.

**Relationship of the Qurʾān to Other Scriptures**

The Qurʾān contains numerous references to the earlier monotheistic scriptures, which it identifies as the Torah and the Gospels, and assumes people are familiar with those texts. As a result, it does not recount their historic narratives. Instead, the Qurʾān uses characters and events familiar to Jews and Christians to make specific moral or theological points. References to Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses, and Jesus, for example, therefore appear frequently but not in chronological order.
The Qur’ān refers to the monotheistic tradition as simply “the religion” (al-dīn), meaning the monotheistic religion that began with the initiation of the covenant between God and humanity at the time of Abraham (Ibrāhīm). It informs its audience that Muḥammad’s revelation is part of the same tradition: “He has laid down for you as religion what He charged Noah with, and what We have revealed to you, and what We charged Abraham with, Moses and Jesus: ‘Practice the religion, and do not separate over it’” (Q 42:14).

The Qur’ān calls upon believers to recognize the religion of Abraham, clearly positioning itself as revelation in the same tradition:

And they say, “Be Jews or Christians and you shall be guided.” Say: “No, rather the creed of Abraham, a true believer: he was no idolater.” Say: “We believe in God, and in what has been revealed to us and revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac and Jacob, and the tribes, and what was given to Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord; we make no division between any of them, and to Him we surrender.” (Q 2:136–7; cf: 26:193–8)

Although this monotheistic religion was accurately revealed before the time of Muḥammad, the Qur’ān says that the communities that received those scriptures had become confused about it (Q 42:13). Whether through ignorance or by deliberately distorting the message, many Jews and Christians had fallen into disagreement, each claiming to have the truth. The Qur’ān advises that if they understood their scriptures properly, there would be no dispute and, what is more, they would recognize that the Qur’ān truly confirms what had been revealed before. “This is a blessed scripture We have revealed, confirming that which was before it” (Q 6:93).

The Qur’ān thus presents itself as confirmation and clarification of the true religion of monotheism, the religion of Abraham, which Jews call Judaism and Christians call Christianity but which is really a single tradition. “This Qur’ān narrates to the children of Israel most of what they disagree about. It is a guide and a merciful gift for believers” (Q 27:77–8). Muḥammad is presented as an integral part of the succession of prophets sent by God to reveal the divine will, just as Jesus and Moses were sent before him:

And when Moses said to his people, “O my people, why do you hurt me, though you know I am the messenger of God to you?” . . . And when Jesus, son of Mary, said, “Children of Israel, I am indeed the messenger of God to you, confirming the Torah that is before me, and giving good tidings of a messenger who shall come after me, whose name shall be Aḥmad;” then when he brought them clear signs, they said, “This is sheer sorcery.” (Q 61:6–7)

“Aḥmad” in this passage refers to Muḥammad. Muslims believe that the specific prediction of the coming of Muḥammad was deleted from Christian scriptures or, at least, that the general prediction of someone coming after Jesus (for example, John 16:6–33) has been misinterpreted. The Qur’ān makes a number of similar clarifications of the previous messages. For example, when Abraham demonstrated his submission (iṣlām) to the will of God by agreeing to sacrifice his son, the son in question is identified as Ishmael (Ismā‘īl), not Isaac (Ishāq), as Jews and Christians believe. As well, Abraham’s
act is described as personal; its reward was not bequeathed to successive generations. The patriarch serves as a model for others to follow, but each individual must earn her own reward from God by likewise submitting to the divine will:

Those to whom We gave the book and who follow it accurately, they believe in it; and whoever disbelieves in it, they are the losers. Children of Israel, remember My blessing with which I blessed you, and that I have preferred you above all others; and fear a day when no soul shall substitute for another, and no ransom will be accepted from it, nor any intercession will help it, and they will not be assisted. And when his Lord tested Abraham with certain words, and he fulfilled them. He said, “I make you a leader for the people.” He said, “And what of my progeny?” He said, “My covenant does not extend to oppressors.” (Q 2:122–5)

Similarly, the Qurʾān corrects those who believe that Jesus is the son of God. The Qurʾān says that Jesus was a great prophet; in fact, he is called “Messiah” (Q 3:46) and the Qurʾān recounts miracles he performed that do not appear in Christian scriptures. But the Qurʾān calls Jesus the “son of Mary,” not the son of God (Q 2:88; 2:254; 3:46, etc.). He was a messenger (Q 4:172). God is the creator of all that exists, the Qurʾān says, not the progenitor of children. Nor is Jesus above being a servant of God (Q 4:172–3). Furthermore, the Qurʾān says that Jesus was not crucified. The Qurʾān says that it only appeared as if he had been killed, but really God “took him up to himself” (Q 4:158).

The Qurʾān also refers to prophets unknown to Jews and Christians. For example, there is a chapter named for an Arab messenger, Hūd (Q 11), who warned his community to follow God, but they rejected him. The same community then rejected another messenger, Ṣālih, and they were punished with tragedy. Similarly, the Qurʾān relates the story of the Midianites, who were done away with when they rejected their messenger Shuʿayb. The point of these stories, like that of the people of Lot, is that people reject the message of God at their own risk.

The Qurʾān then confirms that it is the final clarification of the message. Those who accept the message brought by Muḥammad are called “the best community brought forth to people, enjoining good and forbidding evil, and believing in God” (Q 3:111). The “People of the Book” – those who have received the earlier scriptures – will suffer if they reject true prophets. “Some of them are believers,” the Qurʾān claims, “but most of them are sinful” (Q 3:112–13). The Qurʾān is the perfect expression of the divine will; no other is necessary. As the Qurʾān puts it in a verse delivered toward the end of Muḥammad’s life, “Today I have perfected your religion for you, and I have completed my blessing upon you and approved submission (al-īslām) as your religion. Whoever is forced by hunger to sin . . . God is forgiving, merciful” (Q 5:4). Therefore, the succession of prophets ends with Muḥammad. The Qurʾān calls him the “seal of the prophets” (Q 33:41). The fact that the communities of earlier prophets have separated over their interpretations is accepted as the will of God: “If your Lord had so willed, He would have made mankind one community, but they continue to remain divided” (Q 11:119; cf. Q 2:213; 10:19). Now, rather than disputing over doctrine, all who claim to believe should simply “compete with one another in good works.” Muslims believe this message is intended for all people and is sufficient for all time.
Themes of the Qur’ān

As noted above, the Qur’ān is the basis of all Islamic life. It provides guidance concerning worship and ritual, as well as personal piety, and family and community relations. In fact, the Qur’ān frequently refers to itself, as well as the Torah and the Gospels, as “guidance for humanity” (Q 2:186, for example). That guidance turns on a set of interrelated themes. Chief among them are the oneness of God (tawḥīd) and divine mercy (rāḥma).

The Arabic term for monotheism is tawḥīd. Derived from the Arabic term for “one,” tawḥīd does not appear as such in the Qur’ān (although other forms of the term do). But it conveys the rich complexity of the Qur’ān’s insistence on the oneness of God. Tawḥīd means not only that there is only one God, the god (al-īlāh), Allāh, but that God is without partners and without parts. None of the deities worshiped by the Meccans is actually divine, the Qur’ān asserts (see Q 53:20), nor is God part of a trinity, as the Christians believe (see Q 4:172; 5:74). But the oneness of God carries further implications in the Qur’ān, particularly in view of modern Islamic thinkers. There is only one God, and there is only one creator of all human beings. The one God is also the sole provider, protector, guide, and judge of all human beings. All human beings are equal in their utter dependence upon God, and their well-being depends upon their acknowledging that fact and living accordingly. This is both the will and the law of God. Modern Islamic commentators such as the Egyptian Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905), Muslim Brotherhood ideologue Sayyid Qutb (d. 1966), and Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini (d. 1989) stress, therefore, that tawḥīd implies that society must be ordered in accordance with the will of God. A tawḥīd-based society is one in which people devote themselves to serving God by safeguarding the dignity and equality in which all were created. Submission (islām) to that will is the route to our happiness both in this life and the hereafter.

Thus, tawḥīd not only describes God but also commands that humans create a society reflecting the divine will. Demonstrating God’s mercy, the Qur’ān provides the guidance necessary to do that. Although the Qur’ān frequently warns of perdition for those who violate the will of God and vividly describes the scourges of hell, its overriding emphasis is on divine mercy. “The Merciful” (al-rāḥmān) is one of the most frequently used names of God, equivalent to Allāh (al-īlāh). As noted above, all but one chapter of the Qur’ān begin by invoking the name of God, “the Merciful, the Compassionate.” Divine mercy is often paired with forgiveness. “God is forgiving and merciful” is a common refrain. At times, especially in the early Meccan chapters, the Qur’ān sternly warns people that they ignore its message at their own risk: “Woe to the slanderer and backbiter, who collects wealth and counts it continually. He thinks his wealth will bring him eternal life, but no, he will certainly be thrown into hell” (Q 104:2–5). “Have you seen the one who makes a mockery of faith? He is the one who neglects the orphan, and does not encourage feeding the poor. Woe to those who pray but do so only to impress others. They like to be seen [praying] but [then] do not give charity” (Q 107:2–8). The Qur’ān balances these warnings with expressions of understanding of the weaknesses of human nature: “Indeed, the human being is born
impatient. When evil touches him he is anxiety-ridden, and when good things happen to him, grudging” (Q 70:20–22). In this context it offers advice and encouragement:

As for the human being, when God tests him and honors him and blesses, he says, “My Lord has favored me.” But when God tests him and restricts his livelihood, he says, “My Lord has forsaken me.” No; you do not honor orphans or work for the well-being of the poor. you take over [others’] inheritance and are overly attached to wealth. (Q 89:16–21)

[When you are aboard ships and they sail with a fair breeze and they are happy about it, then a violent wind overtakes them and the waves come from every side and they think they are drowning, then call upon God, practicing religion properly [and saying] if you spare us from this we will be indeed grateful. But when He has rescued them, indeed they begin oppression on earth. O people, your oppression will only hurt yourselves! (Q 10:23–4)

At the same time, the Qur’ān promises mercy and forgiveness. “My mercy encompasses everything” (Q 7:157).

On the day when every soul is confronted with what it has done. good and evil, they will desire a great distance from [evil]. God asks you to beware; God is full of pity for servants. Say: “If you love God, follow me.” God will love you and forgive you your sins. God is forgiving, merciful. (Q 3:29–31)

Thus the Qur’ān describes God’s judgment and mercy as two aspects of the same phenomenon, both within the context of the divine command to submit to the divine will by establishing a just society. It also sets an example for people to emulate and provides specific guidelines for that society. Fair-dealing, honesty, and justice are central: “O Believers, be steadfast [for] God, giving testimony in justice, and do not let a people’s hatred cause you to act without justice. Be just, that is nearer to righteousness” (Q 5:9). “Believers, establish justice, being witnesses for God, even if it [works] against yourselves or against your parents or relatives; regardless of whether [those involved are] rich or poor, God has priority for you” (Q 4:136).

The Qur’ān places particular emphasis on justice and compassion for the most vulnerable members of society. It mentions orphans often, calling for their care and protection. Their well-being is routinely mentioned as the measure of the piety of both individuals and society. For example, the Qur’ān instructs Muḥammad to tell people when they ask about orphans: “Promotion of their welfare is great goodness” (Q 2:21).

True piety is this: to believe in God and the last day, the angels, the book, and the prophets, to give of one’s substance, however cherished, to relatives and orphans, the needy, the traveler, beggars, and to ransom the slave, to perform the prayer, to pay alms. And those who fulfill their promises, and endure with fortitude misfortune, hardship and peril, these are the ones who are true in their faith; these are the truly God-fearing. (Q 2:178)

The Qur’ān also acknowledges the institution of slavery but says that moral superiority lies in freeing slaves, as well as feeding the hungry and orphans (Q 90:5–17). Freeing slaves and feeding the hungry is enjoined as a way of making up for sins (Q 5:90).
Among the Qur’ān’s most detailed legislation is that designed to improve the status of women. The Qur’ān is the only major religious text to acknowledge misogyny and enjoin correctives. For example, the Qur’ān criticizes those who are disappointed by the birth of girls (Q 16:59–60; 43:18). It forbids female infanticide, a common practice at the time of Muhammad. Wives are not to be bought from their families, as they were in many cultures in the Middle East at the time; instead, the Qur’ān stipulates that the bridal gift (dower) be given to the bride herself in an amount to be agreed upon between the bride and groom (Q 4:25). The dower is referred to in the Qur’ān as the woman’s wages, indicating that women’s work is valuable and should be compensated. Nevertheless, the marriage relationship is not simply a contract for services. The Qur’ān describes it as mutually beneficial. Spouses are described in the Qur’ān as protective “garments” for one another (Q 2:188; 9:71). Their relationship is to be one of “love and mercy” (Q 30:22). Men are encouraged to be patient with their wives (Q 4:20). Divorce is allowed, but only after two trial separations, during which arbiters are chosen from both families to try to arrange reconciliation (Q 4:36; cf. 4:129). Then the couple may part, but without rancor, and the husband is required to provide support for the divorced wife, “according to justice, an obligation on those who are righteous” (Q 2:242). A woman may also obtain a divorce if she and her husband agree on a financial consideration (Q 2:230). Overall, the Qur’ān treats women and men as moral equals. It specifies that believing men and women “are protectors of one another. They enjoin good and forbid evil, and observe prayer, give charity, and obey God and his messenger” (Q 9:71). The social structure envisioned by the Qur’ān is unquestionably patriarchal. Women are granted rights “similar to those appropriately over them, but men are one degree higher” (Q 2:229). Similarly, men are considered to be “responsible for women because God has favored some over others and because they spend of their wealth” (Q 4:35). As a result, women must obey their husbands, and men have the right to discipline their wives or even divorce them for disobedience (Q 4:35). Nevertheless, the Qur’ān clearly insists that women, particularly in view of their financial dependency on males, be treated justly.

The Qur’ān stresses that people can be judged only by God and that God will judge based upon their efforts to comply with the divine command to “establish justice.” Those who “believe and do good works,” the Qur’ān states repeatedly, will have nothing to fear in the afterlife; they will be richly rewarded. “Believers, bow down and prostrate yourselves in prayer and worship your Lord and do good deeds, and you will prosper. And struggle for God as you should struggle” (Q 22:78–9). This struggle “on the path of God” (fi sabīl Allāh), as the Qur’ān often puts it, is the root meaning of the term jiḥād. Thus, the Qur’ān presents a challenge to humanity. Using Muḥammad as the model and remembering the forgiveness and mercy of God, people must strive to create a just society. As in the case of past examples, communities as a whole will be judged in history; God does not allow oppressive societies to flourish indefinitely. But individuals will be judged in the afterlife, based upon whether or not they attempted to contribute to this effort:

To God belongs whatever is in the heavens and earth. He forgives whom He will and punishes whom He will. God is forgiving, merciful. Believers, do not consume usury, doubling
and redoubling [the amount]. Do your duty to God and you will be successful. Protect yourselves from the fire prepared for disbelievers. And obey God and the messenger, and you will find mercy. And compete with one another for forgiveness from your Lord, and for paradise as great as the heavens and earth, prepared for the righteous. Those who spend in [times of] prosperity and adversity, and those who control their anger and who pardon others: God loves those who do good; and those who, when they commit an offense or wrong themselves, remember God and beg forgiveness for their sins – and who can forgive sins except God – and who do not repeat knowingly what they have done; these are the ones whose reward from their Lord is forgiveness and gardens with rivers flowing beneath, where they will abide, a great reward for those who work. Indeed there have been ages before you, so travel the earth and see what was the end of those who deny [messengers]. This is a clear sign for people and guidance and a warning to the righteous. Do not give up or grieve, and you will certainly prosper if you are believers. . . . And God will make clear those who believe and blot out the disbelievers. Do you think that you will enter heaven without God recognizing those of you who struggle and those who are steadfast? (Q 3:130–43)

Role of the Qurʾān in Islamic Life: Ritual and Art

The Qurʾān is the foundation of all Islamic ritual. It is the source of all prayer and the basis of communal worship. Muslims are required to pray five times daily, at sunrise, midday, mid-afternoon, sunset and evening. At each of these times, verses of the Qurʾān are recited in a specified order and number of repetitions (ranging from twice at morning prayer to four times at evening prayer). Extra prayers may be added individually but, again, they are based on the Qurʾān. The weekly congregational prayer (at midday on Fridays) follows the same pattern, although it includes a sermon (khutba), often based upon a Qurʾānic theme. As well, devout Muslims read the entire Qurʾān during the holy month of fasting, Ramadaṇ. The book is divided into thirty sections for this purpose.

Qurʾān recitation (tajwīd) and Qurʾānic calligraphy are the most respected art forms in Islam. Both follow traditional standards developed over the centuries and transmitted from master to student. Tajwīd follows set patterns of pronunciation and intonation, characterizing it as chanting rather than singing. Its basic use is to call worshipers to prayer at the appointed times, but “spiritual concerts” (ṣamaʿ) by respected chanters (qārīʾ; plural: qārīʾūn) are also common. Such concerts are particularly popular among Muslim mystics (Ṣūfīs) and those drawn toward spirituality. In addition to its spiritual purposes, the tradition of oral recitation of the Qurʾān has also allowed scholars to be certain of the correct pronunciation of Qurʾānic Arabic.

Muslims display enormous reverence for the Qurʾān. It is still common for young boys to memorize the entire Qurʾān. Such an accomplishment is often marked by great celebration, as a kind of rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. Popular Qurʾān chanters can attract great followings and are often invited to open important events in Muslim communities. Many people maintain belief in the miraculous protective power of the words of the Qurʾān itself. It is very common for Muslims to wear verses of the Qurʾān around their necks, and hang beautifully reproduced verses on walls, or have
them stitched into fabric, or carved into wood or stone as decorative or architectural elements of their homes or public buildings. Each year during the pilgrimage season, for example, a special cloth embroidered in gold with Qur’anic verses is created to drape the Ka‘ba (the sanctuary in Mecca which is the object of the annual Islamic pilgrimage, the ḥajj). Some people believe there are statistical miracles in the Qur’ān, for example, that there are exact equivalences in the mention of opposite terms such as “heaven” and “hell” or “angels” and “devils,” or that the proportion of the number of times the terms “land” and “sea” are used equals the proportion of the earth that is covered by each element respectively.

The Qur’ān in Law

Perhaps the most fundamental use of the Qur’ān in Islamic society is as the basis of Islamic law. As indicated above, the Qur’ān does provide some specific legislation, but it is not essentially a book of legislation. It uses the term “law” or “legislate” only four times. The Qur’ān describes the basic elements of Islamic life, including the essential duties of all believers (the “five pillars” of Islam: bearing witness that there is no God but God, prayer, charity, fasting, and pilgrimage). It also prohibits various actions that undermine both personal and social well-being, such as murder, theft, dishonesty, slander, adultery, drunkenness, and gambling. All such specific rulings carry the force of law in Islam. But much of the Qur’ān consists of moral guidance and ideals – such as justice, honesty, charity, mercy, and compassion – rather than specific rulings. Furthermore, the prophet and the community he established are presented as perfect examples of Islamic life (Q 33:22; 60:4–6). However, during the lengthy historical period of Qur’ānic revelation, from about 610 CE until Muḥammad’s death in 11/632, the prophet’s community progressed from being a small, marginalized group in Mecca to being the dominant power in the region. As specific historical circumstances changed, so did the Qur’ān’s judgment on specific topics.

Islamic legislators are therefore presented with a number of challenges. First, they must distinguish between those elements of the Qur’ān that describe specific, changeable historic circumstances, and those that contain eternal principles, applicable in all times and places. As scholars often put it, they must distinguish between description and prescription in the Qur’ān. For example, as noted above, the Qur’ān treats women and men as moral equals; they share the same religious duties and are equally responsible before God for their efforts in creating a just society. Yet the Qur’ān also claims that men “are a degree higher” in social responsibility, that men are responsible for women, that they may marry up to four women if the women are in need and the men can treat them equally, and that wives must be obedient toward husbands. Those who seek to replicate the Qur’ān’s example in different times and places must then determine whether or not the Qur’ān’s patriarchy is an ideal (prescription) or simply a reflection of the reality at the time of revelation (description), whose injustices the Qur’ān sought to offset by prohibiting misogynistic practices. Would the insistence on women’s subservience to men conflict with the Qur’ān’s overall egalitarianism if economic conditions no longer dictated that women were financially dependent upon men?
Islamic legislators must also determine which of the Qur’ān’s often diverse judgments on specific topics carry the force of law. A common example of such diversity is found in the Qur’ān’s statements about war. In sūra 16, Muslims are told that “those who emigrated in God’s cause after they were wronged, We shall surely lodge them in this world in a goodly lodging, and the wage of the world to come is better” (Q 16:42). No advice is given for seeking a redress of grievances. A little later, those who have suffered oppression are told to “call [the oppressors] to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good advice, and dispute with them in the better way. . . . And if you punish, do so as you have been punished; and yet surely if you are patient, it is better for those who are patient” (Q 16:126–7). However, Q 22:40 declares, “Permission is given to those [who fight] because they were wronged; surely God is able to help them.” Similarly, “Fight in the way of God those who fight you, but do not commit aggression; God does not love aggressors” (Q 2:191). In this instance, retaliation is allowed in cases of self-defense or defense of property. The chapter continues:

And kill [those who fight against you] wherever you find them and drive them out from where they drove you out; persecution is worse than killing. But do not fight them at the holy mosque unless they fight you there. Then, if they fight you, fight them. That is the recompense of unbelievers. But if they stop, surely God is forgiving and merciful. Fight them until there is no persecution and religion is God’s. Then if they stop, there [shall be] no aggression except against the oppressors. (Q 2:191–4)

Islamic legal scholars are therefore presented with a rich and complex array of precedent and advice from which to extract legislation suitable to diverse and ever-changing circumstances.

Principles and Practice of Qur’ānic Interpretation

Fortunately, the Qur’ān itself provides guidance for interpretation. It acknowledges that some verses are more difficult to interpret than others. The Qur’ān describes itself as containing different kinds of verses. The book is entirely from God and it contains the truth and confirms previous revelations carried in the Torah and the Gospel; it is guidance for people (hudan ʿl-ʾnās) and a means of distinguishing right from wrong (al-furqān). However, in a verse that is among the most difficult of the entire Qur’ān to translate, the Qur’ān says that it contains some verses that are muḥkamāt and others that are mutashābihāt (Q 3:4–8). Muḥkam (the singular of muḥkamāt) can be interpreted as “clear,” “decisive in meaning,” “accurate,” “solid,” “reinforced,” “perfect,” or “well-planned,” among other things. Mutashābih (the singular of mutashābihāt) can mean “ambiguous,” “indistinct,” or “obscure.” The verse in which these terms are used to describe some verses of the Qur’ān amplifies its meaning, saying that the verses that are muḥkamāt are “the mother” or “basis of the book,” while “no one except God knows the interpretation” of the mutashābihāt. The Qur’ān does not indicate which verses are which, or how many of each type it contains. This fascinating verse seems to be a caution against excessive confidence among interpreters. It seems to encourage instead the ongoing struggle to elicit inspiration from the Qur’ān.