

Sacred Scripture of Islam

The foundation of Islam is the Qur'an, the holy book given to Muhammad by God. Muslims believe that the angel Gabriel recited the Qur'an to Muhammad over a period of 23 years. For Muslims, the Qur'an is a declaration of God's voice. It guides the righteous and shows Muslims the way to happiness in this world and fulfillment in the life beyond.

In the Qur'an, God says, "Indeed this Qur'an guides to the path which is clearer and straighter than any other" (XVH:9).

Muslims believe that the Qur'an came directly from God and that the Qur'an's words are God's own words. Muslims would say that the Qur'an, which is written in Arabic, cannot be translated without changing its meaning. Because God sent his revelation in Arabic, the Qur'an cannot truly be understood in any other language. Translations are really "interpretations," Muslims would say.

When Muhammad received a passage of the Qur'an from the angel Gabriel, he recited it to his followers. They, in turn, memorized these words or wrote them down on whatever was handy: leaves, wood, parchment, stones, or the shoulder bones of camels. Then, they recited the words to others.

When Muhammad died, these reciters kept the Qur'an alive. About 633 C.E., when 70 reciters died in a single battle, Umar, one of the leading companions of Muhammad, realized that oral tradition was not a very good way to save something as important as the Qur'an. He persuaded Abu Bakr, the first successor to Muhammad, to compile all the parts of the Qur'an into one written text. Abu Bakr entrusted this job to Zayd ibn Thabit, chief secretary to the Prophet Muhammad.

The Qur'an has 114 *surahs*, or chapters, arranged by length with the longest first — except for the very first surah, which reads: "Praise to God, Lord of creation, the compassionate, the merciful." The titles of the surahs come from the subjects they treat or they incorporate a unique phrase taken from a passage in the surah. Examples are: "The Cow," "The Bee," "The Night Journey," and "Abraham."

The shorter surahs are from the earlier Meccan period and deal with the fundamental beliefs of Muslim faith. The longer surahs come from the later Medinan period (when Muhammad was in Medina). They tell of the events in the early history of Islam and set forth laws and principles for the good order of the community. This was important during this later period when the Muslims needed more practical answers to their real-life situations of running an Islamic society.

Reciting the Qur'an in Arabic is an important part of understanding it. In fact, the word "Qur'an" comes from an Arabic word that means "to recite." The verses are rhymed prose and they are spoken in an almost musical way. Even Muslims who do not understand Arabic are moved by hearing the Qur'an recited. Many Muslims begin memorizing the Qur'an at an early age.

After the Qur'an, the most important writing of Islam is the Hadith, the sayings and actions of Muhammad. Since Muhammad lived an ideal life in accordance with the teachings of the Qur'an, Muhammad's followers tried to remember every detail of what he did so they, too, could live ideal lives. Their recollections were written in the form of hadiths, or reports. Each hadith has two parts: The *isnad* is a list of the people who handed down the hadith from generation to generation, and the *matn* is the main text, which reports what Muhammad did or said.

To make sure that each hadith was true, Muslim scholars studied the credentials of the transmitters. A sound hadith has a chain of approved authorities going back to a companion of Muhammad. Thus, it is understandable that establishing the accuracy of the thousands of hadiths took more than two centuries and employed many scholars using a variety of academic disciplines, including oral history, geography, biography, and genealogy.

The hadiths cover every aspect of Muslim life: faith, religious practices, business transactions, food, clothing, behavior, marriage, and much more. Muslim children grow up following the traditions put forth in the hadiths as part of their daily routines. They obey the special rules for such activities as brushing their teeth and eating, and for behavior, including being kind and polite.

Together, the Qur'an and the Hadith provide the basis of Islamic authority, the *Sunnah*. The Hadith, in fact, forms part of the *Sunnah*, which may be defined as the custom by which Islamic belief and practice are regulated; that is, the cumulative tradition embodied in Muhammad's example.

So it is that, with the Qur'an and the Hadith as their guides, Muslims strive to make their lives as much like the life of the Prophet Muhammad as possible.

Shari'ah

Since Islam is both a religion and a way of life, the law, or Shari'ah, is important to all Muslims. The word "Shari'ah" means "The Way" and, in ancient times, meant the right way to the water hole — important knowledge for people who live in a desert. "Shari'ah" has come to mean "Islamic law."

As Islam expanded beyond Arab borders, it faced new issues. When the words of the Qur'an were too general to apply to specific situations, judges looked to the Hadith for guidance. Yet, not even the Hadith could answer all questions. To resolve this problem, sciences dealing with interpreting the Qur'an, called *fiqh*, developed. One *fiqh* emphasized the consensus of opinions of several jurists. Another *fiqh* looked for an

analogy, a similar situation that had already been judged. The only unbreakable rule was that nothing in the law could go against anything in the Qur'an or the Hadith.

Islamic judges are knowledgeable about the Qur'an and lead a blameless life. They are also fair and balanced in their judgments, with the result that a poor person and a rich person have equal standing before them.

The Shari'ah deals with many subjects, including ritual purity, marriage, theft, inheritance, and the rights of the poor. Islamic justice emphasizes the right thing to do, as well as the respect of one human being for another based on the belief that God created everyone equal.

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The Five Foundations of Belief in Islam

1. Belief in the oneness of God — there is no god but God.
2. Belief in angels. The two most prominent are Gabriel and the rebellious angel Shaitan (Satan).
3. Belief in the prophets or messengers of God. Muslims believe Muhammad was the last prophet.
4. Belief in the sacredness of the Qur'an.
5. Belief in the "Day of Judgment," the time when each person will be judged according to his or her actions on earth.

The Five Foundations of Practice in Islam

1. Reciting the *shahada* — "There is no god but God and Muhammad is a messenger of God."
2. Compulsory prayer. Every Muslim must turn toward Mecca five times a day (at dawn, at noon, in mid-afternoon, after sunset, and before bedtime) and pray.
3. Giving aid to the poor.
4. Fasting during the month of Ramadan.
5. Making a *hajj*, or pilgrimage, to Mecca, if health and finances permit.

illustrated by Cheryl Jacobsen