



10-1-2001

The Language of God: Understanding the Qur'an

Daniel C. Peterson

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq>

Part of the [Mormon Studies Commons](#), and the [Religious Education Commons](#)
Commons

Network Recommended Citation

Peterson, Daniel C. (2001) "The Language of God: Understanding the Qur'an," *BYU Studies Quarterly*. Vol. 40 : Iss. 4 , Article 5.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/byusq/vol40/iss4/5>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *BYU Studies Quarterly* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

The Language of God

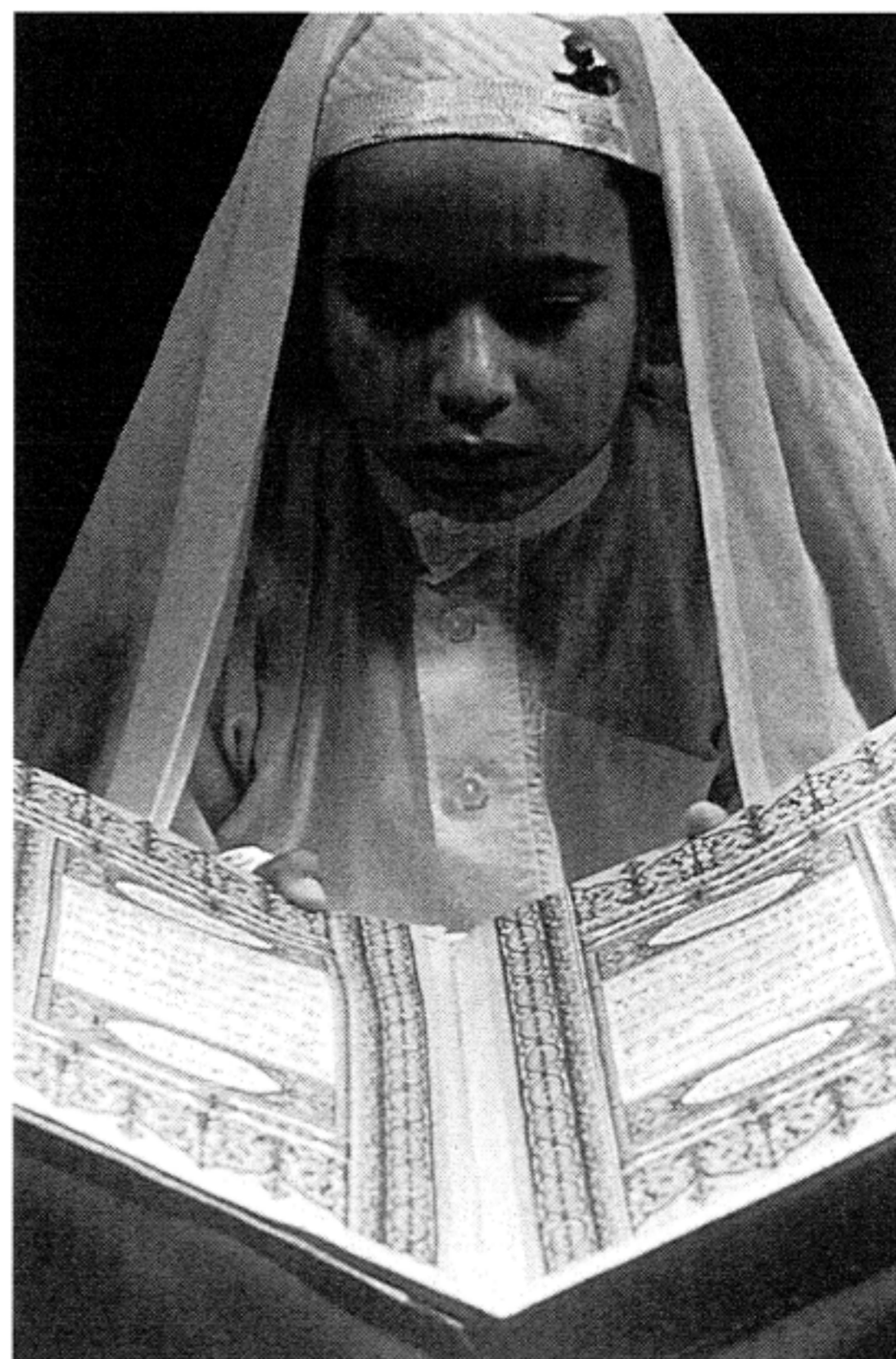
Understanding the Qur'an

Daniel C. Peterson

The faith of Islam, one of the three great "Abrahamic" religions, as they might be called, is closely akin to the other two, Judaism and Christianity. It is tightly bound to and thoroughly permeated by its holy book, the Qur'an. Strangely, though, despite the historical and contemporary importance of Islam and despite Islam's kinship with the faith that has dominated Western civilization, neither Islam in general nor the Qur'an in particular is well known in the West. Nor do Westerners typically know very much about the founder of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad.¹ Yet the story of Muhammad is a dramatic one, and Islam, fascinating in its own right, is both sufficiently different from Christianity and sufficiently similar to allow its study to throw intriguing light upon the faith even of non-Muslims who devote themselves to the subject. Much in the way that the study of a second language may enable students to better understand their own, reflection upon Islam, I am convinced, can profit Jews and Christians as well as Muslims.

In this essay, I shall concentrate upon what the Qur'an has to say and what its own nature discloses about Islam's view of the role and character of language. I do not restrict this discussion to human language, because, significantly, the Qur'an itself does not seem to distinguish in any rigid way between the language of God, the language of angels, and the language of mortal human beings.

The revelation of the Qur'an began in or near A.D. 610 and continued until the death of Muhammad twenty-two years later. In form and in the duration of reception, it bears



Courtesy Aramco Services Company

A child studies the Qur'an. The Qur'an is the heart and soul of Islamic life, devotion, and art.

a rough resemblance to the Doctrine and Covenants of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The Qur'an is composed of 114 separate, quite discrete *suras* (revelations) arranged according to a roughly (and inversely) chronological scheme; the *suras* only rarely, if ever, have a thematic relationship with one another. The Qur'an is neither a history book nor a chronicle nor a gospel, and the voice in it is never that of Muhammad but that of God.

Traditionally, the revelation of the Qur'an began with sura 96:1–5, spoken to Muhammad through the angel Gabriel, who found Muhammad meditating in a cave on Mount Hira' above Mecca. Already in this passage, we begin to learn something about a Qur'anic view of language:

Read! In the name of your Lord, who created,
Created man from a drop.
Read! By your most gracious Lord,
Who taught by the pen,
Taught man what he did not know.²

The twice repeated imperative *iqra'*, which I have translated as “read!” comes from the same root as the word *Qur'an* itself. It could just as accurately, and perhaps preferably, be translated as “recite!” For the pre-Islamic Arabs, an oral society if ever there was one, whose highest art form was poetry, did not read silently to themselves any more than their Western contemporaries did.

It is striking, in any event, that God is identified here, in the very first Qur'anic revelation, with the use of language and writing. Out of all of the self-designations that God might have chosen, and which, in fact, do occur frequently in the Muslim scripture—such as “the Creator of the heavens and the earth,” “the Omnipotent,” “the Omniscient,” “the Lord of the throne,” “the Merciful, the Compassionate,” and so on—the Qur'an has God choosing to describe himself first as the being who teaches humankind by means of the pen. Elsewhere in the Qur'an, God's capacity to speak is implicitly contrasted with the inability of idols, or false gods, to do so (21:63, 65; 37:92). Aaron's golden calf, the Qur'an points out, was unable to speak (7:148; 20:89).

The very language of Sura 96:1–5 is itself interesting. For one thing, it rhymes:

Iqra' bi-ismi rabbika alladhi khalaq
khalaqa al-insana min 'alaq
Iqra' wa-rabbuka al-akram
Alladhi 'allama bi-al-qalam
'Allama al-insana ma lam ya'lam.

The Qur'an as a whole takes the form of rhymed prose—that is, while it has end rhyme, it lacks meter. This style is known in Arabic as *saj'*, and it was

associated preeminently with the oracular utterances of the pre-Islamic soothsayers known as *kahins*. (The word is cognate with the Hebrew *cohen*, or “priest.”) To this day, the incantatory, almost musical, language of the Qur'an has a powerful impact on those who hear it and those who recite it.

Interestingly, the term *lugha*—the standard Arabic word for “language”—does not occur in the Qur'an. That absence might seem to discourage the writing of an essay bearing the title I have chosen. But the root *l-s-n* does occur, sometimes in its literal meaning of “tongue” and sometimes in the familiar extended sense of “language.”

The Power of Language

From one perspective, in the Qur'an language is morally neutral. It can be used for good or for ill. But the Qur'an unhesitatingly ranks language and its use according to a hierarchy of moral value and, it must be said, of obedience to God. While good words ascend to God (35:10), words can also be used to blaspheme (18:5). The word of unbelief or blasphemy is contrasted with the word of piety (compare 9:74 with 48:26). A good word, says the Qur'an, is like a good tree, while an evil word is like an evil tree (14:24–26).

The word *qawl*, meaning “speech,” can itself be used for good or ill. *Qawl* can refer to speech or discourse that is displeasing to God (4:108). For example, *qawl* is used when God is said to object to evil public speech (4:148) and evil utterance (5:63) and when he is said to dislike loudness (7:205; 49:2) and a “show of words” (13:33) as well as tawdry and deluding speech (6:112). But *qawl* is also used to denote “argument” or “debate” (34:31). And, says the Qur'an, the best of speech is that which summons God (46:18). Speech is graded or ranked according to its object, or, alternatively, by the moral character and godliness of the speaker. Indeed, *qawl* can also refer to divine utterance itself (36:58). It can be a divine decree or judgment (23:27; 27:82, 85; 28:63; 36:70; 37:31; 41:25). It can refer to revelation (28:51; 39:18) and to prophecy (32:13; 36:7). The Qur'an describes itself as “decisive speech” (86:13), as speech “sent down” from the presence of God (73:5). “Who is more truthful than God with regard to speech?” asks the Qur'an (4:122). Yet divine speech can sometimes be difficult to distinguish from counterfeits. “This is nothing but the speech of a human [*qawl al-bashar*],” say the skeptics, as quoted in the Qur'an itself (74:25). No, the Qur'an replies to such skeptics, it is the speech of a noble messenger, not of a poet or a soothsayer (69:40–42; 81:19). Nor is it the speech of a demon (81:25).

The Qur'an recognizes that language can be used to lie (3:38; 16:62, 116), to mock and to distort (4:46), to wound (33:19; 60:2), and to spread ignorant gossip (24:15). Human words may be empty of reference to reality (23:100). The Jews, the Qur'an says, have changed words from their proper places in order to distort the will and revelation of God (4:46; 5:13, 41). Of

another group, the Qur'an remarks that "they say with their tongues what is not in their hearts" (48:11). Believers, on the other hand, are to avoid vain, idle, or empty talk (23:3; 25:72; 28:55). The word of unbelievers will be made low, while that of God is made high (9:40). There will be no vain speech in paradise (19:62; 52:23; 56:25; 78:35). Muhammad does not speak whimsically (53:3). On Judgment Day, the wicked will be unable to speak or else will be prohibited from doing so, and thus, they will be unable to defend themselves against the charges that will condemn them. Presumably, too, they will be incapable of polluting God's presence with unclean speech (23:108; 27:85; 77:35). By contrast, the celestial book speaks the truth on the Day of Judgment (45:29).

The Holiness of Arabic, the Language of the Book

Variation in human languages is one of the divine signs pointing to God, says the Qur'an (30:22). Yet such variation also presents an obvious communication problem. Accordingly, God sends prophets in the languages of their people so that things will be clear (14:4). For itself, the Qur'an is fully conscious that it is in Arabic (46:12). "We have made [the Qur'an] easy in thine own tongue," says God to Muhammad (19:97; compare 44:58).

But Arabic is not merely one among the languages of divine revelation. There is something special about it, in the view of the Qur'an. Arabic is, as later Muslims insisted, *lughat al-mala'ika*, "the language of the angels."

The confession published by an early-twentieth-century translator of the Qur'an, an English Muslim convert with the improbable composite name of Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, is memorable in this connection. He wrote in the foreword to his translation:

The Koran cannot be translated. That is the belief of old-fashioned Sheykhs and the view of the present writer. The Book is here rendered almost literally and every effort has been made to choose befitting language. But the result is not the Glorious Koran, that inimitable symphony, the very sounds of which move men to tears and ecstasy. It is only an attempt to present the meaning of the Koran—and peradventure something of the charm—in English. It can never take the place of the Koran in Arabic, nor is it meant to do so.³

Accordingly, Pickthall named his translation *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran*, not presuming to claim that what he had written out in English could be identified with the speech of God. Other translators have taken the same humble approach. The great A. J. Arberry, for instance, called his highly literary and very beautiful effort *The Koran Interpreted*.

A vital part of every Muslim apologetic is the *i'jaz al-Qur'an*, the inimitability of the Qur'an. The book's unapproachability, its peerlessness as a paradigm of language, is said to be proof of its divine origin. For, ask Muslims, could an uneducated man have produced this book?⁴

The Heavenly Book

The Qur'an is conceived in Islam as a portion, brought to earth, of a celestial prototype. For orthodox Muslims, Muhammad had nothing whatever to do with its composition. It is the speech of God. Muhammad clearly understood and accepted the notion of a heavenly book, and he always saw himself as producing a book on earth to represent the heavenly original.⁵ In his view, the revelations of the Qur'an, like the Torah (*tawrah*) and the Gospel (*injl*, from Greek *euangelion*, "good news") before it, were "recitations" or "readings" from the very words of God, which were written in the "Mother of the Book" (*umm al-kitab*, 13:39; 43:4) and kept on a closely guarded tablet (*lawh mahfuz*) in the divine presence.

The concept of the heavenly book has taken various forms in the ancient Near East. It can be a book of wisdom, a book of laws, a book of foreordained destiny, a record of works, or a book of life. The heavenly book appears to be all of these, on various occasions. For example, the Qur'an declares:

Truly, this is a glorious Qur'an
In a preserved tablet. (85:21–22)

This Qur'an is not such as could be invented save by God. Rather, it is a confirmation of what came before it and an exposition of the Book [*kitab*], about which there is no doubt, from the Lord of the worlds. (10:37)

Qur'anic use of the term *kitab* reflects the basic meaning of the root *k-t-b*, which is associated with writing. But that root also bears the meaning "to prescribe," "to ordain," or "to decree."⁶ Thus, for instance, the Qur'an advises:

O you who believe! Retaliation is ordained [*kutiba*] for you in cases of murder—the free for the free, the slave for the slave, the female for the female. (2:178)

A few verses later, it adds:

O you who believe! Fasting is ordained [*kutiba*] for you as it was ordained [*kutiba*] for those before you. (2:183)

There is, thus, an intimate association in the Qur'an between the act of writing something down and the notion of making something permanent and authoritative. This association can often be detected in the way the Qur'an uses the term *kitab*. The connection surely figures in the Qur'an's use of the term to refer to the heavenly book, resting in the presence of God, in which all events—past, present, and future—and all existing things have been inscribed in advance:

With him are the keys of the unseen, which none but he knows. He knows whatever is on land or in the sea, nor does a leaf fall except he knows it. There is not a grain in the darkness [depths] of the earth, nor anything moist or dry, but what is in a manifest book. (6:59)

There is no animal on earth but what is dependent upon God for its sustenance, and he knows both its permanent abode and its temporary resort. All is in a manifest book. (11:6)

No female conceives nor bears without his knowledge. No one lives long, nor has his life foreshortened, unless it is in a book. (35:11)

This is also the book in which the deeds of each individual are recorded, for good or evil—a record that will determine the destiny of each individual on the Day of Judgment:

On that day, we shall summon all people with their leaders. And whoever receives his book in the right hand, these will read their book and they will not be wronged even slightly. (17:71)

And the earth will shine forth with the light of her Lord, and the book will be set out and the prophets and witnesses will be brought forward and judgment will be pronounced in truth between them, and they will not be wronged. (39:69)

The Qur'an was communicated orally to Muhammad, piece by piece over the course of slightly more than two decades, in an Arabic version (see 12:1; 13:37; 20:113; 26:192 ff.; 41:3; 44:58; and especially 91:44). The heavenly book was not given to Muhammad as a totality; he received only a portion (90:78; 4:164). Thus, the Qur'an did not exhaust it. Indeed, no finite book would be capable of doing so. Twice, Muhammad is commanded:

Say: If the sea were ink for the words of my Lord, the sea would be exhausted before the words of my Lord were exhausted, even if another sea of ink like it were brought. (18:109)

And if all the trees on earth were pens and there were seven seas stretching behind the sea, the words of God would not be exhausted. (31:27)

Other revelations to the “people of the book” (*ahl al-kitab*) were derived from the heavenly book and thus were, at least originally, consistent with it and confirmed by it. Notice that the reference is to the “people of the book,” in the singular, and not to the “people of the books.” The reference is unmistakably to the one heavenly book kept in the presence of God, rather than to the manifold and varying transcripts from that book found among the squabbling religious communities of earth. Islam teaches that unfortunately the Jews and the Christians corrupted the revelations they received.

Geo Widengren has noted that many parallels to the concept of the heavenly book can be found in the ancient Mesopotamian “Tablets of Destiny,” by which, at the festival season of New Year, the gods determine the fate of the cosmos and all that is in it for the next year:

Few religious ideas in the Ancient Near East have played a more important role than the notion of the Heavenly Tablets, or the Heavenly Book . . . [and] the oft-recurring thought that the Heavenly Book is handed over at the ascension in an interview with a heavenly being, or several heavenly beings, mostly gods (a god).⁷

Islamic tradition soon assimilated Muhammad's experience to the ancient model of a single, complete reception of a heavenly book during an ascension into the presence of God. This ascension was the famous *mi'raj*, undertaken, according to many traditions, from the place on Jerusalem's Mount Moriah that is now covered by the Dome of the Rock. Somehow, it was felt, the prophet had received the Qur'an all at once, in the sense that it had been brought down to earth on the night of the first revelation. That night, probably the twenty-sixth of Ramadan, was later described as "the Night of Power" or "the Night of Destiny" (*laylat al-qadr*):⁸

We have indeed revealed it in the Night of Destiny.
 And what will make you understand what the Night of Destiny is?
 The Night of Destiny is better than a thousand months.
 By God's leave, the angels and the Spirit come down in it on every kind
 of errand.
 Peace it is, until the rising of the dawn. (97:1–5)⁹

With all this in mind, it is not difficult to see in Islam the paradigmatic instance of "book religion." And that would not be untrue. But it would be too simple.

The Qur'an as Book and Speech

Quotations from the Qur'an are an absolutely essential part of Islamic art, which is, by and large, nonrepresentational. Snippets of the Qur'an often show up in almost talismanic uses. Calligraphy is one of the most important Islamic arts—perhaps, indeed, the dominant visual art—and can be seen in monumental stone architecture as well as in elegant illuminated manuscripts. I recall an experience at a shop in the Grand Bazaar of Istanbul where I was negotiating to buy a plate with a Qur'anic inscription on it, of much the same kind that one would see in Cairo or East Jerusalem. Suddenly, the Turkish-speaking shopkeeper eagerly asked me if I could translate the inscribed passage for him, and I realized with a bit of a start something that I had known intellectually but that had not really managed to sink in: I, the infidel, could read a Qur'anic verse that he, the Muslim resident of a Muslim country, could not. (I have had analogous experiences in Iran, another non-Arab but Islamic nation.)

But the written text does not exhaust the sacrality of language in Islam. There exists at the same time a vitally important oral dimension to the word of God as Muslims receive it. Writing and speaking are not mutually

exclusive. This is not an either-or situation, although our own modern sensibility may make that fact difficult for us to grasp. William Graham has observed:

For us the written word has become the basic form of language, not a secondary vehicle for its communication, not a mere “graphic representation of language” (de Saussure). So tied are we to the written or printed page that we have lost any awareness of the essential orality of language, let alone of reading. Not only do we want everything of moment “in black and white,” but we presume that that is the fundamental medium of language. There seems to be a basic human tendency for the visual to replace the aural, for writing to become more important than speech, and print seems to accelerate this tendency. “The speaker or writer can now hardly conceive of language, except in printed or written form; . . . his idea of language is irrevocably modified by his experience of printed matter.”¹⁰

The young Augustine of Hippo was astonished to see the older Saint Ambrose reading silently. “When he was reading,” Saint Augustine later recalled, “he drew his eyes along over the leaves, and his heart searched into the sense, but his voice and tongue were silent.”¹¹ Silent reading seems to have become dominant, at least in the West, only in the nineteenth century.¹² “It may be,” says Professor Graham, “that the earliest use of the written text is simply as an *aide-mémoire*.”¹³ Oral recitation of the Qur’an punctuates the Muslim’s daily life in ways that we in the West—even before the secularization of our culture—have never really known. The Qur’an is the Muslim liturgical book, the Muslim prayerbook, and the Muslim hymnal, as well as the Muslim book of scripture. Today, readings from the Qur’an begin, end, and ornament the broadcast day on both radio and television. Recitation from the Qur’an is among the chief features of a Muslim funeral. Standard printed editions of the Qur’an contain marks to help in oral recitation; notations in the margins divide the text into thirty *ajza’* or, alternatively, sixty *ahzab*, for reading and recitation.

Functioning alongside the Qur’an as authoritative texts within the Islamic faith (though, at least theoretically, subordinated to the Qur’an) are the *hadith*, or “traditions”—accounts of what the Prophet Muhammad or one of his associates said or did or taught. One of these hadith begins with the following words: “God has said: ‘Whoever is so absorbed in reciting the Qur’an that he is distracted from praying to Me and asking [things] of Me . . .’” Now, at this point, most of us would be tempted to complete the hadith in our minds with something bearing the general sense of “This is sin, for the worshipper should not be turned from the Signified itself to the mere Sign.” But our own cultural expectations mislead us. The complete hadith actually reads, “Whoever is so absorbed in reciting the Qur’an that he is distracted from praying to Me and asking [things] of Me, him I shall give the best reward [that is granted to] those who are grateful.”¹⁴

“He who does not recite the Qur'an melodiously is not one of us,” says another hadith.¹⁵ I well recall an experience that I had while studying in Cairo. Several of us foreign students had petitioned to have a course taught on the Qur'an, and finally the administration of the American University in Cairo had acquiesced. But on the day that we registered for the class, the professor, a rather well-known, progressive, Western-educated Muslim scholar, died suddenly from a heart attack. So the university scrambled and came up with a replacement teacher from the state-sponsored University of Cairo. He was a very pleasant fellow, and he immediately launched into a program of training us to pronounce the Qur'anic text properly. As tongue-tied foreigners, we didn't mind that. At first. As the course dragged on, though, we began to ask when we would actually get to the point of discussing the substance of the Qur'an. Soon, he assured us. Very soon. But we never got there. The entire class was devoted to pronunciation and memorization. It was, in many respects, an intensely frustrating experience. But it was also, as I have reflected upon it since, a revelatory one.

I mention these phenomena not to objectify them as strange nor in any way to dismiss Muslim fascination with the language and script of the Qur'an—apart from its meaning—as somehow magical or superstitious. I do not regard it as such in the least degree. But it is clearly different from our own accustomed approach. We do not transliterate the English Book of Mormon into *kanji*. No Christian group that I know sees anything salvific in memorizing the Greek New Testament.

I have in my possession a copy of the Qur'an that I bought two decades ago in Cyprus. I was looking then to improve my Turkish, and I went into a little shop on the Turkish side of the island and asked for a Turkish copy of the Qur'an. I came out with something that I thought filled the bill. Sitting in the front passenger's seat as we drove away, I began to read. And I was immediately astonished at how easy it was. I was amazed at how much Arabic had survived in the Turkish rendition. But then I realized that it *was* Arabic—written in the modified Roman alphabet that Turkey has used since early in the twentieth century. What could be the purpose of such a thing? I wondered. If a Turkish Muslim knew enough Arabic to understand the Qur'an, he or she would surely know enough to read the Arabic alphabet. So why print an Arabic Qur'an in Romanized letters? The answer is that it was done precisely because the book is *not* intended for Turks who know Arabic, but rather for those who do not. Reading it in their own familiar alphabet, such Muslims would now be able (at least approximately) to pronounce the sacred words—the very words of God himself from the Preserved Tablet, the Mother of the Book. I have watched young Turkish children learning to recite the Qur'an by rote memorization in the courtyard of an Istanbul mosque. They are not learning to understand the

Arabic, except in the broadest sense of the term, but to recite it, to make it sound right. Professor Graham notes:

Muslims . . . have insisted with remarkable consistency that every Muslim, whatever his or her linguistic or cultural background, must maintain the purely Arabic recitation of the Qur'an in formal worship (*salat*), even if the only Arabic he or she knows is the memorized syllables of a few short *surahs* necessary to *salat*. . . .

Why this fastidious fervor about the Arabic text? Because it is God's direct discourse, *ipsissima vox* [his very own voice]. He sent his revelation as a clear "Arabic recitation" (*qur'an 'arabi*) that was transmitted verbatim through His apostle. For humans to translate it amounts to unfounded and dangerous tampering with the very speech of the Almighty. Because of the fundamental holiness of the words of the Qur'an, the classical Arabic language [though, I would add emphatically, *not* the modern vernacular dialects] has taken on a sacrality felt in often quite visceral fashion by the Muslim who knows it as the sublimely beautiful and untranslatable language of God's perfect revealed word, even if he or she speaks no Arabic.¹⁶

The root *q-w-l*, which we encountered above in *qawl*, is the usual and very common root in the Qur'an (and beyond, in classical and modern standard Arabic) for "speech." It appears over three hundred times in the Qur'an as an imperative addressed to Muhammad. "Speak!" he is commanded. "Say!" he is told. The oral character of the Qur'an is very clear at this point. Although it is today a written book and although it comes, in Muslim belief, from a cosmic, heavenly book, its origin as an earthly phenomenon lies in oral commands to Muhammad that were to be transmitted orally to the people of Arabia.

Reverence for the Holy Book

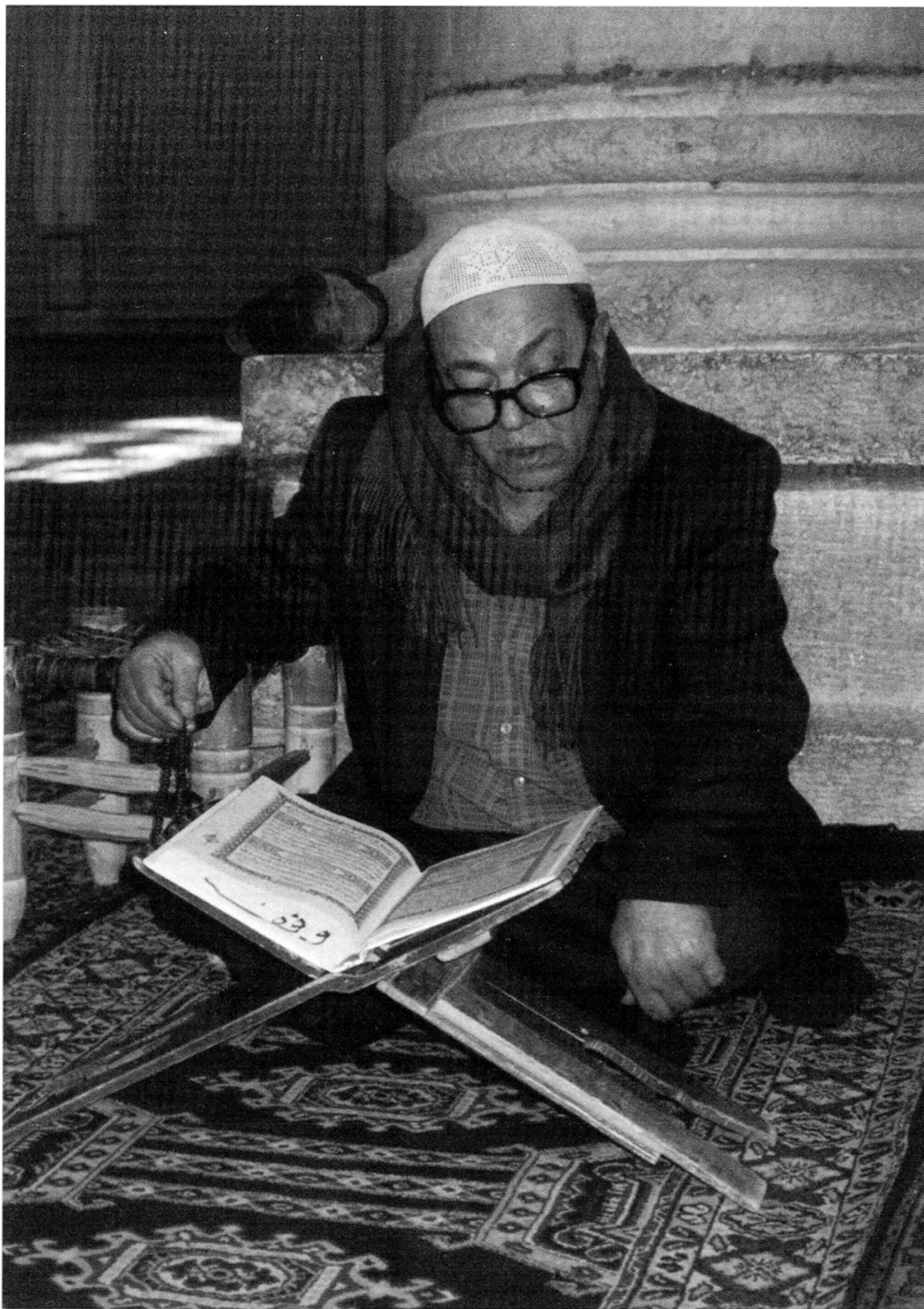
It should not be forgotten that the very name *Qur'an* comes from the Arabic verb *qara'a*, "to read" or "to recite," and that it can plausibly be translated as "reader" or "lectionary" or "book of readings." This is, after all, the sense of the cognate Syriac word *qeryana*, used in Eastern Christian congregations up to and beyond the coming of Islam.

Truly it is a clear recitation [*qur'an mubin*] in a written [or "fixed"] Book [*kitab maktub*], which none may touch except the purified—a sending down from the Lord of the worlds. (56:77–80)

Professor Graham thinks that our modern focus on written texts has impoverished our sense not only of the orality of scripture but of the sacredness of its written forms:

These relatively recent attitudes toward scripture go beyond a simple emphasis upon the written rather than the spoken use of the text. For example, something of the commonplace character of the modern book often attaches even to sacred texts. The casual familiarity with which we move among and

handle books as a part of everyday routine has bred in us its own kind of contempt for, or at least carelessness of, the unremarkable and ubiquitous printed page. In the specific case of scripture, the cheap and easy availability of myriad versions of the Jewish or Christian scriptures has done much to reduce the special quality of the physical text as an object of reverence and



Courtesy James A. Toronto

A Muslim man reading the Qur'an in the Umayyad Mosque, Damascus, Syria, 1998. In his right hand he holds a *misbaha*, a string of beads often used by Muslims to recall the names and attributes of God.

devotion in and of itself. Scripture's presence as a bound volume in a living-room bookcase, a church pew, or a hotel-room drawer may conceivably encourage Bible reading, but it also reinforces the primary image of scripture as but another printed book. The tracing of manuscript traditions and collation of textual variants has improved our understanding of the growth of scriptural texts, but it has also taught us how to treat them only as simply historical documents. Consequently, we have some difficulty empathizing with persons for whom a copy of a sacred text was or is a seldom and wonderful thing, perhaps a magical and awesome thing, to be handled with solicitude and to which the proper response is reverential deference or even worshipful veneration.¹⁷

Muslims, by contrast, for all their focus on scripture as oral phenomenon, have lost nothing of their reverence for the written text. Orthodox Jews and devout Muslims alike would be horrified at the common practice of Latter-day Saints, who, when they sit down in a classroom, not infrequently put their scriptures on the floor—something that Mormon citizens of the United States, at least, would presumably not do with an American flag. I recall the time that I took a paperback edition of the Arabic Qur'an to be bound in leather, out near the Khan al-Khalili area of Cairo where the bazaar is located. When I went to pick it up, I saw that engraved on the spine was not only the phrase *Qur'an Karim*, "noble Qur'an," but "Let none touch it but the pure" (56:79). At first I wondered whether this were a slap at me, an unbeliever, but I soon realized that, in fact, it was a simple but significant indicator of a dominant Muslim attitude toward the written word of God. I have heard of especially devout Muslims who would not use even newspaper to line a cage or wrap fish, for fear that the word *Allah* might appear therein. One thinks, too, of the *geniza*, the place in the synagogue where old Torah scrolls are placed. (Eventually, reverence for the written word spread to such things as land deeds, and they too were placed in the *geniza*, to the ongoing delight of modern archaeologists).¹⁸

The Qur'an as an Analogue and Explication of Creation

The Qur'anic word, to Muslim understanding, partakes of the divine. Consider the following passage, which seems to summon its hearers/readers to a kind of natural theology:

Truly, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of night and day and in the ship that sails in the sea, carrying things useful to the people, and in the water that God sends down from the sky so that he enlivens the earth after its death and disperses animals throughout it, and in the change of the wind and the subservient clouds between heaven and earth, there are signs [*ayat*] for thoughtful people. (2:164; compare 6:96–97; 45:3–5)

Significantly, the term used for the "signs" of the natural realm (*ayat*) is the same Arabic word used to denote the individual verses of the Qur'an.

Thus, nature, properly viewed, becomes a revealed “book” very much like the Qur'an itself, composed of individual “signs” or “miracles”:

Truly, in the creation of the heavens and the earth and the alternation of night and day there are signs [*ayat*] for those of understanding, those who remember God standing, sitting, and lying on their sides, and who contemplate the creation of the heavens and the earth: “Our Lord, you did not create this for nothing!” (3:190–91)

(The identification of miracles as signs pointing to the divine recalls the equivalent usage of the Greek word *semeia* in the New Testament gospel of John.) “Do they not look at the sky above them,” the Qur'an asks of the unbelievers, “how we have built it and adorned it without flaw? And the earth, how we spread it out and cast into it firmly-rooted mountains and caused to grow in it every delightful pair, as a sight and a reminder for every repentant worshiper?” (50:6–8; compare 67:2–5). Such passages imply that the ultimate condemnation of the pagan polytheists will be just, even if they never heard the message of the Qur'an itself, because they had before them the book of nature and its clear testimony to the existence, beneficence, and oneness of God.¹⁹

Moreover, we are admonished to read the signs of nature correctly: “Among his signs [*ayat*] are night and day, the sun and the moon. Do not bow before sun and moon, but bow before God, who created them” (41:37; compare 6:75–79). The symbols were not created for their own sake but are intended to point beyond themselves. God does not speak to unbelievers and will not do so even on the Day of Resurrection and Judgment (2:118, 174; 3:77).

Although the creation of the heavens and earth was, in some sense, a greater achievement than the creation of man (40:57; 79:27–30), that cannot mean that it was more difficult. For the Qur'an stresses God's utter freedom in creation and the sublime effortless with which he acts (4:133; 5:17; 14:19–20; 35:16–17; 42:49; 46:33; 50:38). The most dramatic assertion of his creative power in the Qur'an is the repeated declaration that he has merely to say to a thing “Be!” and it is” (*kun fa-yakun*) (3:47, 59; 6:73; 16:40; 19:35; 36:82; 40:68; 54:49–50). One can hardly fail to be reminded here of the divine command in Genesis 1:3, “Let there be light!” (*fiat lux*) or of Ptah's creation, by creative words, of the gods in the Memphite theology of ancient Egypt. (The name *Ptah* may indeed be cognate with the Arabic verb *fataha*, “to open.” The first sura of the Qur'an is the *Fatihah*, “the opener.”)

Traditional understandings to the contrary, however, it does not seem that such passages entail a doctrine of creation *ex nihilo* (creation out of nothing).²⁰ Indeed, in several of the passages where the phrase *kun fa-yakun* occurs, creation *ex nihilo* is excluded by the context; in no passage is

it required. Thus the subject of suras 3:47, 3:59, and 19:35 is the virginal conception of Jesus, whom, the second passage affirms, God first created from dust, *then* said to him *kun fa-yakun*. This order of creation points up a striking characteristic of passages containing this phrase: 2:117 is typical of them in stating that God “decrees a matter [*amr*]” and *then* “says to it [*la-hu*] ‘Be,’ and it is” (compare 3:47 and 40:68). Several other passages actually speak of a “thing [*shay*]” to which God says *kun fa-yakun* (6:73; 16:40; 19:35; 36:81–82; and 40:68; compare 54:49–50). There seems to be an underlying and preexisting substrate to which the divine imperative is addressed, as clearly is the case in the story of the Sabbath-breakers who are told “Be ye apes [*kunu qirdatan*]!” (2:65; 7:166). The command *kun!* would therefore seem to be determinative or constitutive rather than productive of something out of utter nothingness. But in either case, the power of the divine word, of divine language, is unmistakably manifest.

The Word: A Bridge between Christology and the Qur’an

In Islam, as with the *logos* of John 1, God creates the universe by his word. In the New Testament, though, it is the figure of Christ who is primary. The reference to him as *word* or *logos* is metaphorical. In Islam, it is actual language—God’s language—that is primary.²¹ It is nonetheless striking, I think, that roughly three centuries after the beginning of Christianity, Christian theologians were debating whether Jesus Christ, the Johannine Word of God, was created or whether he was consubstantial with God. The Arians, who, in the name of monotheism, held Christ to be a creature (albeit an unimaginably exalted one), eventually lost out in spite of several periods of imperial favor that seemed for a while to have assured their victory. They have effectively disappeared today. The Athanasian party, who insisted that Christ was *homoousios*, of the same substance with the Father, rather than merely *homoiousios*, of similar substance, triumphed.

Roughly three centuries after the mission of Muhammad, Islamic theologians were debating whether the Qur’an, as the word of God, was created or whether it was co-eternal with God as his uncreated speech. The Mu‘tazilites protested that the doctrine of an uncreated Qur’an, co-eternal with God, led to polytheism, or at least to dualism and, accordingly, to a compromise of the monotheism that is at the heart of Islam. For several decades, it seemed they had triumphed, but they ultimately lost. The Ash‘arites and their other enemies pushed them effectively into exile and oblivion. However, this development came at the cost of a considerable loss of clarity. As Ahmad b. Hanbal famously put it, Muslims were to assert the eternity of the Qur’an, as they were also simultaneously to affirm humankind’s moral responsibility for sin and human lack of freedom beneath the absolute sovereignty of God, *bi la kayf*—“without asking how.”

It is significant that, whereas a great deal of theological dispute within Christendom has centered on the dual nature, divine and human, of Jesus Christ, and on the virgin birth as a symbol and demonstration of Christ's deity, discussion in Islam (far less rancorous and far nearer to consensus than in Christianity) has focused on *i'jaz al-Qur'an*, the "inimitability" of God's word as revealed to the Prophet Muhammad. Moreover, Muslim attention has also directed itself to the "protection" from sin, or *'isma*, enjoyed by the prophet. Very much like the role of the virginity of Mary, the prophet's sinlessness has served to guarantee that God's word was transmitted purely and without blemish to humanity.²²

In fact, some Christians have been so concerned to maintain the utter stainlessness of the vessel through whom the divine Word came to earth that they eventually developed the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, which (contrary to common non-Catholic misunderstanding) refers not to the conception of Christ but to that of the Virgin Mary. In the words of the *Ineffabilis Deus*, a papal bull issued by Pope Pius IX on December 8, 1854:

Concerning the most Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God, ancient indeed is that devotion of the faithful based on the belief that her soul, in the first instant of its creation and in the first instant of the soul's infusion into the body, was, by a special grace and privilege of God, in view of the merits of Jesus Christ, her Son and the Redeemer of the human race, preserved free from all stain of original sin.²³

It is truly not far from such a doctrine to that of Muhammad's miraculously protective *'isma*. (Islam, lacking any doctrine of original sin, has no need of a device by which to protect the Prophet from inherited guilt. It is enough for Muslims that Muhammad committed no personal sins.)

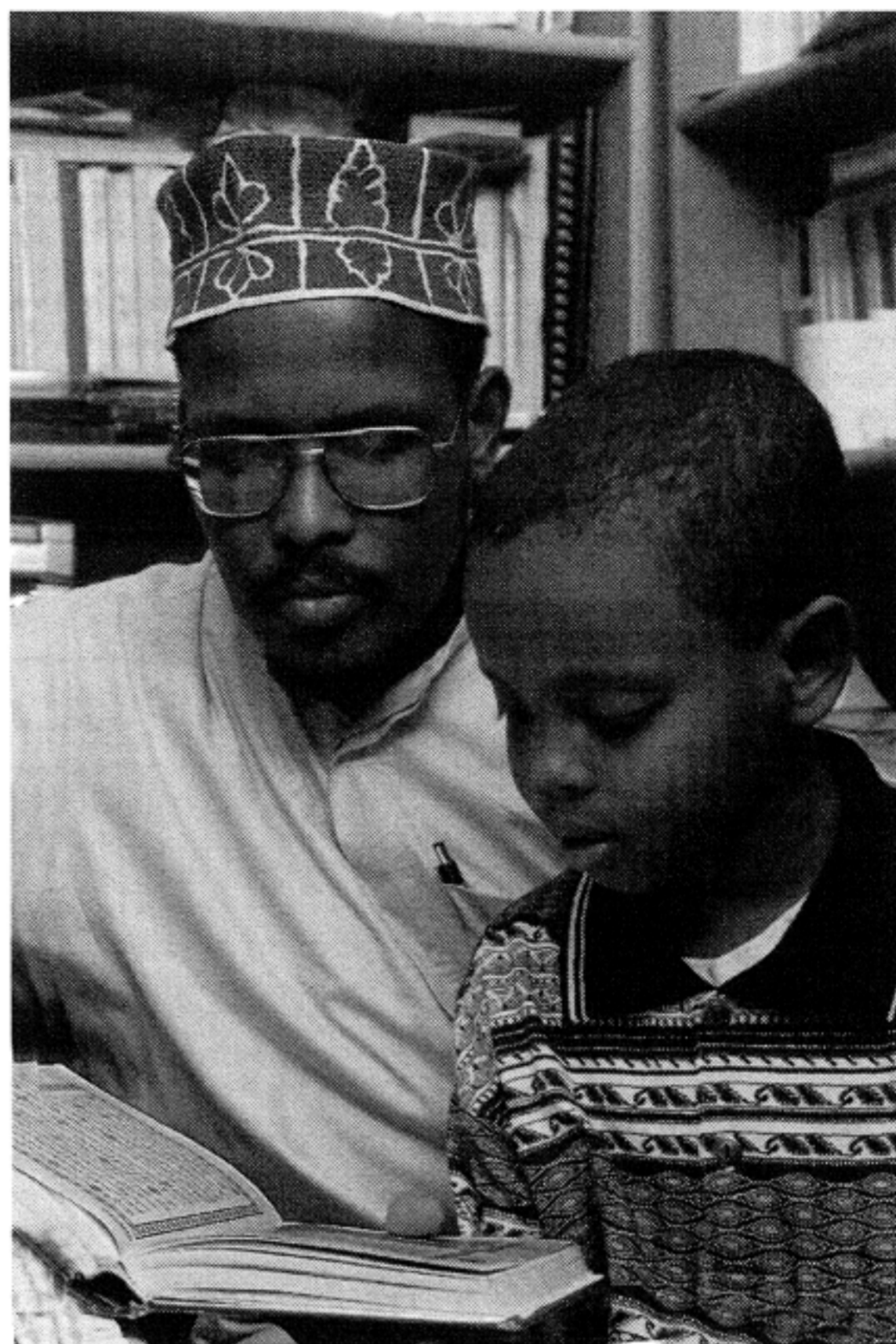
Professor Graham notes:

For Christians, the encounter [between God and humans] comes first and foremost through the person and life of Christ (which are accessible, but not exclusively so, in scripture). In Islam, on the other hand, it is in the concrete text, the very words of the Qur'an, that Muslims most directly experience God. Scripture for Muslims is itself the divine presence as well as the mediator of divine will and divine grace.²⁴

This perhaps helps to explain why the physical text of the Qur'an is to be treated with such respect. The closest thing in Islam to Christianity's notion of the Incarnation of Christ, of the incursion of God into this world from beyond, is the Qur'an. Professor Graham may not be far wrong when he compares the recitation of the Qur'an, its embodying in sounds, with the Eucharist.²⁵ Just as, for a Catholic, the consecration of the sacramental wafer or host makes it, in some intangible but nonetheless real sense, the very body (*verum corpus*) of the Son of God, to recite the Qur'an is to recite, in ceremonial formality, the very words of God.

Again, an analogy springs to mind between the role played by Christ in certain ancient strains of Christianity and that played by the Qur'an in Islam. Saint Athanasius of Alexandria and many other early Christian thinkers believed we are saved (and deified) by becoming one with Christ. God, it is said, became human so that humans might become divine.²⁶ In Islam, by contrast, the "Word" is the Qur'an, the pure utterance of God himself, which human beings may themselves read and recite and of which, thereby, they may become co-articulators. Though few if any contemporary Muslims would agree to this, it is difficult to escape the sense that the reciter of the Qur'an, in a limited but important way, is unified with God in the utterance of God's own words. It is a kind of deification through speech.

I cannot conceive of a higher view of language.



Courtesy William S. Dant

Father and son studying the Qur'an, 2002. After school, seven-year-old Ahmed joined his father, Sheikh Ali, at Ali's office in the Masjid Al Noor Mosque in Salt Lake City. Although Sheikh Ali speaks Arabic, over 75 percent of Muslims worldwide do not, but they strive nonetheless to read the Qur'an in its Arabic original and to memorize Arabic verses for use in prayer.

Daniel C. Peterson (daniel_peterson@byu.edu) is Associate Executive Director of the Institute for the Study and Preservation of Ancient Religious Texts at Brigham Young University. He received a B.A. in Greek and philosophy at Brigham Young University and a Ph.D. in Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at the University of California, Los Angeles. This essay is a slightly modified version of the annual James L. Barker Lecture in the Humanities, delivered on November 11, 1999, at Brigham Young University. I am grateful to those who selected me for this honor and who thereby propelled me to think about the Qur'an and language.

1. There are numerous biographies of the Prophet Mohammad. Not, I hope, among the worst is Daniel C. Peterson, "Muhammad," in *The Rivers of Paradise: Moses, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, and Muhammad as Religious Founders*, ed. David Noel Freedman and Michael J. McClymond (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 2001), 457–612.

2. All translations of the Qur'an are my own.

3. Marmaduke Pickthall, trans., *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1992), xxvii.

4. The question may perhaps bear a familiar ring to Latter-day Saint readers.
5. See the discussion and references in Geo Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1969), 568–69; and Geo Widengren, *Muhammad, the Apostle of God, and His Ascension (King and Saviour)* (Uppsala and Wiesbaden: A.-B. Lundequistska Bokhandeln and Otto Harrassowitz, 1955), 115–19.
6. See the discussion in William A. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 83–84.
7. Geo Widengren, *The Ascension of the Apostle and the Heavenly Book* (Uppsala and Leipzig: A. B. Lundequistska Bokhandeln and Otto Harrassowitz, 1950), 7. Compare Widengren, *Religionsphänomenologie*, 546–47; and Widengren, *Muhammad, the Apostle of God*, 199, 204. Obvious similarities can be identified between Moses' ascent of Mount Sinai and the old Mesopotamian idea; the notion persisted in Judaism in such texts as 1 Enoch, 2 Enoch, and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs. It existed among the Mandaeans and the Persians and in Islamic sectarian movements even after the death of Muhammad. See Widengren, *Ascension of the Apostle*, 10, 22–24, 26 n. 1, 27, 35, 42–43, 46, 58, 68, 72, 74–75, 84–85; Widengren, *Muhammad, the Apostle of God*, 29–30, 80–95. Daniel 10:21 may reflect a belief in the heavenly book. For background information on Muhammad's vision, see Daniel C. Peterson and Stephen D. Ricks, "The Throne Theophany/Prophetic Call of Muhammad," in *The Disciple as Scholar: Essays on Scripture and the Ancient World in Honor of Richard Lloyd Anderson*, ed. Stephen D. Ricks, Donald W. Parry, and Andrew H. Hedges (Provo, Utah: Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 2000), 323–37; compare Blake Thomas Ostler, "The Throne-Theophany and Prophetic Commission in 1 Nephi: A Form-Critical Analysis," *BYU Studies* 26, no. 4 (1986): 67–95.
8. The Islamic calendar is a lunar one, and its months thus move through the seasons and cannot be correlated with the months of the solar calendar.
9. For another account of the "Night of Destiny," see F. E. Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 205–7, 215–18.
10. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 9–10, quoting H. J. Chaytor, *From Script to Print*, 6.
11. Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. William Watts (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996), 273.
12. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 41.
13. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 15.
14. Cited in Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 79.
15. Cited in Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 79.
16. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 85.
17. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 46.
18. For a very readable narrative account of the Cairo Geniza, see Leo Deuel's fascinating *Testaments of Time: The Search for Lost Manuscripts and Records* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1965), 351–81. Standard scholarly treatments of the subject include Paul E. Kahle, *The Cairo Geniza* (London: Oxford University Press, 1947); and S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society: The Jewish Communities of the Arab World as Portrayed in the Documents of the Cairo Geniza*, 5 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967–1988).
19. Compare Paul's comments in Romans 1:18–23.
20. For a more detailed treatment of this question, see also Daniel C. Peterson, "Does the Qur'an Teach Creation *Ex Nihilo*?" in *By Study and Also by Faith: Essays in Honor of Hugh W. Nibley on the Occasion of His Eightieth Birthday, 27 March 1990*, ed. John M. Lundquist and Stephen D. Ricks, 2 vols. (Salt Lake City and Provo, Utah:

Deseret Book and Foundation for Ancient Research and Mormon Studies, 1990), 1:584–610.

21. Significantly, though, the Qur'an too knows Jesus as "a word of God" (*kalimat Allah*). But the designation plays no significant role in either the Qur'an or in Islamic thought generally.

22. See Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 85.

23. See, for example, "Ineffabilis Deus—The Immaculate Conception—Apostolic Constitution Issued by Pope Pius IX on 8 December 1854" at <http://www.catholicforum.com/saints/bvm00013.htm>.

Conservative Protestants, who pay no particular attention to the Virgin Mary, now focus very much on the inerrancy of the Bible. This issue merits attention in a comparative context with Islam and Catholicism, but such a discussion is beyond the scope of the present essay.

24. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 87.

25. Graham, *Beyond the Written Word*, 87.

26. On Athanasius, see Keith Edward Norman, *Deification: The Content of Athanasian Soteriology* (Provo, Utah: FARMS, 2000). There is a considerable literature on the concept of *theosis*, or human deification, in Christian thought. A form of the concept remains prominent in Greek Orthodoxy and is well represented in the Syriac tradition.



Courtesy Folco Quilici

A lone Muslim worshiper faces the *qibla*, direction to Mecca, as he performs one of the five daily prayers. This supplicant, finding himself far removed from a constructed mosque at prayer time, has delimited his own sacred space—a place of prostration, or *masjid* (from which the term mosque is derived), within a rectangle of stones.