

Qur'an and Qur'anic Recitation

Summary: Muslims treat their holy book, the Qur'an, with respect. To handle the Qur'an, Muslims must perform a ritual ablution, and they cannot put the Qur'an on the floor. Recitation of the Qur'an is encouraged, beginning in early childhood, through memorization at home, Islamic schools, and hifz classes. Professional reciters, or qaris, perform in major venues and act as imams for mosques around the world.

For Muslims, the Qur'an is God's word spoken as guidance for humanity. Muslims believe that God has communicated with humans through prophets, beginning with Adam and including Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, and Jesus, among many others, known and not known. Each time God revealed the same message, but people corrupted or lost that message, straying from the path of moral responsibility, thereby neglecting to worship God. To Moses, David, and Jesus, God gave revelations, but the followers of these prophets failed to protect the revelation from distortion. God revealed the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad in clear Arabic as the final and incorruptible word.

Muslims point to the beauty of the language as evidence of the Qur'an's miraculous origin. The Qur'an may be interpreted in other languages, but it may not be translated and retain the same power; therefore, the true Qur'an is in Arabic. As the Word of God, the Holy Qur'an must be treated with respect: one should perform ablutions, or *wudu*, before handling the Qur'an, and one should never place the Qur'an on the floor.

The Qur'an is a word to be heard; in fact, the word *qur'an* means "recitation." The angel Gabriel commanded Muhammad to recite (*iqra'*) the words he was given. Before the written verses were collected into the book we now know as the Qur'an, the passages were preserved in the memory of the Prophet's Companions, members of the early community. These Companions taught their children the Qur'an, both its memorization and its meanings, who then taught their descendents, and so on. This practice has been passed down to this day, and around the world, Muslim children from a young age are taught to memorize all or parts of the Qur'an. Some go on to become professional reciters, known as *qaris*, who perform for special occasions, such as festivals, public gatherings, and funerals, and act as prayer imams in mosques. While strict rules govern the reciters' pronunciation, the style, tone, and

melody varies with each reciter. This method of recitation is separate from musical art in both form and intent.

To listen to the Qur'an is to experience the presence of God. The text of the Qur'an is divided into 114 *surahs*, arranged roughly from the longest to the shortest. They include praise, warnings of judgment, exhortations, directives, and occasional short narratives. Every Muslim must learn to recite the opening surah of the Qur'an, al-Fatihah, and some of the shorter ones to perform the ritual prayers properly.

At the Darul-Uloom Al-Madania in upstate New York, a secondary school and institution of higher Islamic education, students can enroll in a three- to four-year course to memorize the entirety of the Qur'an. In the program, they study and implement the art of Qur'anic recitation, known as *tajwid*. Those who complete the program, which entails both proper pronunciation and implementation of the rules of recitation, in addition to perfect memorization, receive *hifz* certification, and become known as *hafiz* ("guardian of the Qur'an"). Highly exceptional students may receive an *ijaza*, a certification of recitation that includes their name in a list of teachers reaching back to the Prophet Muhammad, which enables them to formally teach others. Many students enrolled in the secondary school participate in this program concurrently. Other institutions and Islamic secondary schools throughout America have similar programs.

Today, one can also learn and hear Qur'anic recitation online, from a variety of different sources. YouTube, smartphone apps, and Qur'an websites, have proven to be extremely useful mediums for transmitting the Qur'an, allowing listeners around the world to hear celebrated recitations by famous *qaris* - such as Qari Abdul Basit 'Abd us-Samad of Egypt, or Qari Abdul Rahman Al-Sudais of al-Masjid al-Haram in Mecca - and sincere renderings by unnamed followers and students of the Qur'an.