

Approaching
The
Qur'án

The Early Revelations

INTRODUCED AND TRANSLATED
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WHITE CLOUD PRESS
ASHLAND, OREGON

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ONE AFTERNOON IN CAIRO, I found myself in an unusual situation. The streets of this noisy, bustling city were suddenly strangely quiet, yet the cafes were crowded with people clustered around televisions. For special events—the death of a great figure, an important soccer game—one might expect to find people in cafes following the event on television. What had drawn people from the streets into the cafes today was the appearance of one of Egypt's popular Qur'an reciters. When I returned to my hotel, the lobby was filled with men, some of them Egyptian Christians, watching and listening to the televised recitation with intense interest.

Such appreciation for the recited Qur'an stimulates a diversity of explanations. To devout Muslims, the recited Qur'an is the word of God revealed to the prophet Muhammad; its divine origin accounts for its hold over the listener. Some anti-Islamic missionaries attribute the extraordinary power and beauty of the Qur'an to a Jinni or even Satan. A Marxist revolutionary from an Islamic

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background, who was highly critical of all religion, insisted that the genius of the Qur'an resulted from Muhammad's alleged madness and resultant close contact with the unconscious. In Middle Eastern societies, what unites these opinions and seems beyond dispute is the fact that the recited Qur'an is a distinctively compelling example of verbal expression.

The Qur'an itself offers an explanation for its unusual effect on its audience. In seventh-century Arabia, a man named Muhammad began reciting what he said were revelations to him from God. These revelations referred to themselves as the Qur'an. They present Muhammad as a prophet in the line of prophets stretching back from Jesus to Moses and Abraham. The Qur'an recounts the stories of earlier prophets with descriptions of their miracles: the marvels of Moses before Pharaoh and Jesus bringing dead creatures back to life, for example. When a listener challenged Muhammad to prove he was a prophet by performing a miracle, the Qur'anic answer was that the Qur'an itself was the miracle. If anyone could produce anything like it, then the Qur'an was a human creation and Muhammad a false prophet. If, however, no one else could produce anything like it, then the Qur'an was clearly beyond the capacity of a human being, and Muhammad was not its author but simply its messenger. Although poets and others have taken up the Qur'anic challenge, including the famous and beloved poet nicknamed al-Mutannabi (the "Would-Be Prophet"), within Islam the Qur'an has been generally recognized as inimitable.

Most of the world's Muslims, including the majority of those who live outside the Arab world, learn the Qur'an in Arabic. For them, the sense of some extraordinary power and beauty in its language is readily recognized. Generations of Qur'anic commentators have tried to account for the compelling nature of the composition, articulation, or voice of the Qur'an in Arabic, but the fact that there was something special about it was assumed. It was apparent from the love of people for the Qur'anic voice; from the intertwining of the Qur'anic allusions and rhythms in the rich fabric of art, literature, and music; from the way the Qur'an is recited at great occasions and in the most humble circumstances of

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daily life; and from the devotion people put into learning to recite it correctly in Arabic. The sound of Qur'anic recitation can move people to tears, from 'Umar, the powerful second Caliph of Islam, to the average farmer, villager, or townsman of today, including those who may not be particularly observant or religious in temperament.

Yet for Westerners who do not read or speak Arabic, the effort to get even a basic glimpse of what the Qur'an is about has proved frustrating. The Qur'an is not arranged in chronological order or narrative pattern. Indeed, the passages associated with the very first revelations given to Muhammad, those learned first by Muslims when they study the Qur'an in Arabic, are placed at the very end of the written Qur'an. After a short prayer, the written Qur'an begins with the longest and one of the most complex chapters, one from Muhammad's later career, which engages the full array of legal, historical, polemical, and religious issues in a fashion bewildering for the reader not immersed in the history and law of early Islam. For those familiar with the Bible, it would be as if the second page opened with a combination of the legal discussions in Leviticus, the historical polemic in the book of Judges, and apocalyptic allusions from Revelation, with the various topics mixed in together and beginning in mid-topic.

This volume is an attempt to approach the Qur'an in two senses. First, in the translations and commentary I have tried to bring across some sense of that particular combination of majesty and intimacy that makes the Qur'anic voice distinctive. Second, I have sought to allow the reader who is unfamiliar with the details of Islamic history to approach the Qur'an in a way that allows an appreciation of its distinctive literary character. The selections presented here are the short, hymnic chapters or *Sūras* associated with the first revelations to Muhammad, most of which appear at the end of the written text and are commonly reached only by the most resolute reader. These short Suras are the sections learned first by Muslims in their study of the Arabic Qur'an. They also comprise the verses most often memorized, quoted, and recited. They contain some of the most powerful prophetic and revelatory passages in religious history. And they offer the vision of a

meaningful and just life that anchors the religion of one-fifth of the world's inhabitants.

These passages involve relatively little of the historical, political, and legal detail present in the Suras associated with Muhammad's later career, after he became the leader of a young Islamic state. In this sense they are the Suras that speak most directly to every human being, regardless of religious confession or cultural background. As opposed to the Suras of the later period with their distinctive long verses, these early Suras are characterized by a hymnic quality, condensed and powerful imagery, and a sweeping lyricism. Opposite each Sura in this volume, you will find a short commentary that explores some of its subtleties and context. An annotated index at the end of the introduction explains key Qur'anic concepts and gives the Arabic terms and the English translations used for them in this volume. The purpose of this introduction is to clarify the cultural and historical matrix in which the Qur'an came to exist, the central themes and qualities of the hymnic Suras, and the manner in which the Qur'an is experienced and taken to heart within Islamic societies.

Since the Qur'an first became known in medieval Europe, it has been involved in the struggle between Christian Europe and Islam that culminated in the crusades and continued through the period of colonial rule and beyond. In recent centuries Europeans and Americans commonly assumed that the Qur'an was composed or fabricated by Muhammad; they referred to Islam as "Muhammadanism." Muslims view the term "Muhammadan" as profoundly misleading; contemporary scholars point out that it is invalid, since it implies that Muslims worship Muhammad in the way Christians worship Christ. If there is any analogue to Christ in Islam, as the "word of God" and the guide to the just life, it is not Muhammad but the Qur'an itself.

In the past few decades, non-Muslim scholars of Islam have adopted a less polemical approach. The Suras are attributed, in a more theologically neutral fashion, to the Qur'an as a text, rather than to whomever the interpreter considered the true author. Such attributions, now also common for the Bible, allow for a text to be discussed without constant and tendentious assumptions about

its authorship. Even so, scholarly controversies continue. Thus, while most scholars treat the Qur'an as a text that was revealed or created in the time of Muhammad, a revisionist school views it as an oral tradition that may have extended beyond the lifetime of any single individual.¹

The purpose of this book is neither to refute nor to promote the Qur'anic message. Rather, the goal is to allow those who do not have access to the Qur'an in its recited, Arabic form to encounter one of the most influential texts in human history in a manner that is accessible. These Suras contain the essential world view of the Qur'an concerning the meaning of life and the possibility of justice—the two interconnected themes that are at the heart of Islamic thought. This volume is devoted to these early Qur'anic revelations.

I. Muhammad, the Qur'án, and the Poets²

According to traditional accounts, Muhammad was born in the year 570 C.E. in the trading town of Mecca, situated in a barren valley in central Arabia. Muhammad's father³ died before his birth. His mother died soon after. His grandfather, who had been appointed his guardian, also died while Muhammad was still a boy. He then came under the guardianship of an uncle. The Qur'an suggests that Muhammad's consciousness was deeply influenced by his experience of being orphaned in a society in which status, security, and life itself depended upon family connections.

Muhammad married Khadija, a prosperous widow and independent businesswoman who, along with her husband, was to exercise an enormous impact on world history. Muhammad had also taken to meditating in a cave in the rocky hills above Mecca and, around the year 610 C.E., he experienced his prophetic vision and first revelation. The vision is described in elliptic and allusive language (Sura 53). The first auditory revelation is believed to have been the Qur'anic words (Sura 96): "Recite in the name of your lord who created . . ." The term *Qur'ān*, given to the revelations Muhammad would convey, is related to the Arabic word for "recite." It might be translated as the Recitation.

The Qur'anic revelations present Muhammad as the "messen-

ger" (*rasūl*) of God, the culmination in a line going back through many prophets found also in the Bible (Jesus, Moses, and Abraham) and through others known only in the Arabian tradition. At first, Muhammad was dismissed with contempt and mockery. Gradually, however, he built a small circle of followers, including Khadija and his cousin 'Ali. The revelations believed to be the earliest were embraced by a small group of people in a region considered a no-man's land by the leaders of the great empires of the day (Roman, Persian, and Ethiopian). Within the span of a few decades, these revelations became the core of a major world religion and an international civilization extending from what is now Spain to Afghanistan; within a couple of centuries, that faith extended all the way to China.

When Muhammad began reciting the verses translated here, Arabia was a vast empty space on the geopolitical map, a region little known and of little concern to the three major civilizations that surrounded it. To the north and west was the Byzantine Roman empire; to the northeast the Sassanian Persian empire; and to the southeast the Abyssinian-Yemenite civilization. Each of these empires had satellite Arab tribes more or less under its political and cultural influence. Each had ancient Arab cities associated with it: the Nabataean cities of Petra in the North, the Yemenite civilizations of Sheba and the Ma'rib dam in the south, and the kingdom of al-Hira in what is now Iraq, which was the capital of the Persian-leaning Arab tribes.

In the center of this world, at the blank spot on the geopolitical map, were the bedouin. Over centuries they had developed a way of life adapted to the brutal conditions of the desert. The bedouin herded sheep and goats and developed sciences of horse and camel breeding. The sparsity of desert vegetation forced the tribes into continual migration and into a situation of negotiation, rivalry, and frequent warfare over valued pasture grounds. Yet, despite the physical impoverishment of bedouin life, the bedouin were viewed as the authentic bearers of culture. Even the townsmen of Mecca looked to the bedouin as the personification of Arab values (the word '*arab* originally meant a pastoral nomad), and Muhammad himself was sent out to live with the family of his wet

nurse in order to be educated in bedouin cultural values.

At the time Muhammad was reciting the first Qur'anic revelations to a skeptical audience in the town of Mecca, several developments were leading to a transformation of Arabia's place in the world. One was a technological revolution. Sometime around the period of Muhammad's life, the bedouin developed a new kind of camel saddle that allowed their camels to carry previously unimagined weight. Camels, which had been used largely for milk and transport of individuals and small loads, became the center of a transportation revolution. Within a hundred years, the Hellenistic and Roman worlds of transport and commerce, based on donkey carts and the upkeep of roads, were replaced by camel caravans. And the bedouin in Arabia, who had been traders with and raiders of the established civilizations, were to control the vehicle of trade and commerce in the Western world: the dromedary camel.²

Parallel to the technological revolution was a cultural and linguistic transformation. Muhammad recited to an audience that had developed one of the most finely honed and scrutinizing tastes in the history of expressive speech. This love for language had been associated with the prophetic utterances of pre-Islamic seers (*kāhins*) and especially with the poets (*shā'irs*) of Arabia who had developed, over unknown centuries of oral tradition, a poetic heritage that, along with the Qur'an, was to become the wellspring for the new Arabic-Islamic civilizations. Indeed, when Muhammad first began reciting verses of particular power and beauty, some called him a poet. A Qur'anic revelation made a distinction: poets speak out of desire and do not understand what they are saying, while a prophet speaks what is revealed to him by God (Sura 26).

Every year, at pilgrimage sites around Arabia, tribes gathered for religious observances, trade, and poetry contests. One of the major sites was Mecca, with its ancient shrine, the Ka'ba, an empty, square enclosure with a black rock embedded in one wall. The pilgrimage rituals in Mecca included the circumambulation of the Ka'ba (the ritual circling of the shrine), as well as the "stations" of pilgrimage around the precinct of Mecca itself that made up the larger ritual known as the *hajj*. As tribes came to Mecca dur-

ing the “sacred months,” all warfare and blood feuds were forbidden. During this period trade fairs and poetry contests were held outside of Mecca in a place known as known as ‘Ukāz. According to legend, the seven most admired poems were embroidered in gold on rare black cloth and suspended from the walls of the Ka‘ba. These “Hanging Odes” (*Mu‘allaqāt*) served as the epitome of pre-Islamic bedouin cultural values and verbal expression.

The poets, the bearers of the values, were the most dangerous and obdurate opponents of the prophet Muhammad. At some point Muhammad found a circle of poets to support him as well, and the ancient poetic tradition then became a central part of the struggle. One of the most important figures in the Arabia of Muhammad’s time was the poet Ka‘b bin Zuhayr. As the son of Zuhayr (author of one of the celebrated “Hanging Odes”) and a great poet in his own right, Ka‘b was viewed within bedouin society as a cultural authority. His opposition to Muhammad continued until it became clear that Muhammad’s political and cultural authority could no longer be challenged. By the standards of tribal code, as the spokesman for the losing side, Ka‘b was in grave danger. In a famous episode, Ka‘b went to the prophet Muhammad, offered his allegiance, and presented a poem in honor of the prophet. Muhammad then gave Ka‘b his mantle (*burda*), and the poem has since been known as the *burda* or Mantle Ode. This transaction, as much as anything in early Islamic history, symbolizes the passing of the old order, the rejection of some of its values, and the transformation of other values into the new Islamic world-view. Even so, the tradition begun with pre-Islamic poetry continued to develop through the history of Arabic literature, even as it played an important role within Persian, Ottoman Turkish, Urdu, and the other literatures of Islam.

The odes (*qasidas*) were constructed with three major sections: the remembrance of the lost beloved, the quest, and the boast. This poetry was heroic in values, lyrical in form, and dramatic in idiom. Remembrance of the beloved was based upon the broken relationship between lovers and beloveds. Love affairs begun when the bedouin tribes met at the fairs would be broken off as the tribes separated to pursue the year-long effort to find pasture grounds.

The abandoned ruins of the beloved’s campsite became the quintessential symbol of the former union with the beloved and her current absence, and the generative symbol for the entire poem. The poet might also remember the stations of the beloved’s journey away from him, and list them with ritual solemnity, as if they were the stations of a pilgrimage. The memory of the beloved, finally, would lead to a reverie, with a lyrical evocation of spring, of the oasis, of animals at peace—in other words, of a lost garden symbolic of the lost beloved.

The quest or “night journey” began when the poet broke out of his reverie and set off alone across the desert on a camel mare. These desert journey scenes involved an almost surreal evocation of the heat of the desert day; the terror of the night; the hunger, deprivation, and disorientation of the journey; and a confrontation with mortality—without consolation of an afterlife. The wearing away of the poet’s self was often symbolized by the emaciation of the camel mare. Other desert animals—such as the oryx, onager, and ostrich—were depicted with a complex symbolic depth and poetic texture.

The final section, the boast, featured the reintegration of the poet into his tribe and the singing of the tribal values of generosity, courage in war, and the willingness to stand before death unflinchingly. The boast often was based on a poetic evocation of the sacrifice of the bedouin’s camel and distribution of the meat to all the members of the tribe. The prime value was heroic generosity. The generous hero, the *Karīm*, was one who was willing to spend his fortune on a night’s feast, to sacrifice his camel mare (symbolic of the self) for the tribe. Indeed, the camel sacrifice became the most important ritual and heroic moment in pre-Islamic Arabia. The *Karīm* also was willing to give his life in battle. Yet the celebration of the heroic ethos in the battle sections of the poems often revealed a tragic undertone. Even as the heroism was proclaimed, intimations arose of the tragedy of intertribal warfare and its open-ended cycle of killing and vengeance. Intuited within the deeper symbolism, verbal resonances, and intense imagery of the poem was the tragic effacement of the boundary of kin and non-kin, self and enemy. The killing of an enemy in battle (however

heroically celebrated) led to an intimation of the fragility of kin boundaries (and boundaries between self and other) and the futility of a warfare that would end with the decimation of both tribes.

These odes are believed to have been composed, performed, and transmitted in an oral tradition similar to that of the jazz song or the Homeric epic, with each performance of a piece tailored, timed, and in part improvised to the audience. Gradually, the extraordinarily vivid images of the odes were configured in differing modes: comic, tragic, elegiac, ironic, and heroic. The development of these expressive modes led to the formation and discovery of a common nation. Different tribes speaking different dialects developed a common poetic language that expressed the range of human sentiment within shared cultural values and sensibilities. The notion of the Arab, as a name for the tribes speaking the Arabic language—not just in a lexical sense but in this more profound sense of common cultural bonds and expression—was being developed, even as the tragic element within the tribal heroic ethos was expressed and understood more deeply. The discovery of a common cultural bond among the tribes and an intimation of the tragic element in their cycles of warfare were culminating at the time the young man from Mecca heard what he understood to be revelations of God.³

The Qur'an retains key bedouin values such as remembrance, generosity, hospitality, and valor. But the social context for such values is transformed. The remembrance is no longer of a beloved and a lost tribal love affair, but of the deity who, even when figured in later poetry as a beloved, maintains a more explicitly transcendent character. The journey through the desert evolves into a moral and spiritual journey, a journey of the human being toward the divine lord. The generous hero, the *Karim*, is still the model of human excellence, but the hero is no longer the tribal chief or even the prophet, but the all-giving deity and the human being who imitates that generosity by working for social justice.

The tradition of the tribal Qasida remained a powerful and resonant force within Arabian society for centuries. Indeed, along with the Qur'an, it provides the warp and woof of classical Arabic

culture, sometimes serving as a counter text to the Qur'an, sometimes as a mode of expression of Qur'anic values. Yet the role of the Qasida would never be quite the same after the shift symbolized by the submission of Ka'b to Muhammad. Instead of being draped with the "Hanging Odes," the Ka'ba is now draped with another text embroidered on rare Egyptian cloth. That text contains quotes from the Qur'an, and the cloth that holds it, the Kiswa, has been a feature of the shrine in Mecca since the early Islamic period.

II. The Qur'an as Recitation

What was the spirit of those early Meccan verses that became central to the Qur'anic tradition? When the reader unfamiliar with Islam and unversed in Arabic picks up the standard English translation of the Qur'an, that spirit can be hard to find. What the person who learns the Qur'an in Arabic experiences as a work of consummate power and beauty, outsiders can find difficult to grasp, confusing, and in most English translations, alienating. The written Qur'an does not seem to have a clear beginning, middle, and end. It shifts thematic registers: from mystical passages to sacred history, from law to the struggles of Muhammad and his followers with little or no warning. Many of its chapters mix themes that sometimes begin in mid-topic. The Suras are arranged in what can seem a chronologically and topically arbitrary manner, with the longest Suras at the beginning and the shortest at the end.

The experience of the Qur'an in traditional Islamic countries is very different from Western attempts to read it as a story bound within the pages of a book with a sequence of beginning, middle, and end. For Muslims, the Qur'an is first experienced in Arabic, even by those who are not native speakers of Arabic. In Qur'an schools, children memorize verses, then entire Suras. They begin with the Suras that are at the end of the Qur'an in its written form. These first revelations to Muhammad express vital existential themes in a language of great lyricism and beauty. As the students learn these Suras, they are not simply learning something by rote, but rather interiorizing the inner rhythms, sound patterns, and textual dynamics—taking it to heart in the deepest manner.

Gradually the student moves on to other sections of the Qur'an. Yet the pattern set by this early, oral encounter with the text is maintained throughout life. The Qur'anic experience is not the experience of reading a written text from beginning to end. Rather, the themes, stories, hymns, and laws of the Qur'an are woven through the life stages of the individual, the key moments of the community, and the sensual world of the town and village. Life is punctuated by the recitation of the Qur'an by trained reciters who speak from the minarets of mosques, on the radio, and from cassettes played by bus drivers, taxi drivers, and individuals. The experience is a nonlinear repetition through recitation. The actual stories, which may seem fragmented in a written version, are brought together in the mind of the hearer through repeated experiences with the text. The most accomplished Qur'anic reciters are famous throughout the Islamic world, and their cassettes and CDs can be found in kiosks and music stores in any city with a large Islamic population.

This Qur'anic experience is intertwined through Arabic literature and civilization and, in an extended fashion, through the arts and civilization of other non-Arab Islamic societies. Qur'anic calligraphy, the visual manifestation of the Qur'an, is the basis for Arabic calligraphy and one of the most distinctive features of Islamic architecture. Qur'anic inscriptions can be found on almost any major work of architecture, offering yet another form of remembrance (*dhikr*). Almost all of the major works of art in the Islamic world draw on Qur'anic allusions. To cite just one example, love poets consider the Qur'anic story of Moses, who was overwhelmed and nearly destroyed by his near vision of the deity, to be a model for the power and intensity of love. The subtlest allusion to Moses on Sinai is enough to conjure up the entire context.

Qur'anic sensibility grounds popular culture as well. As we will see later, Qur'anic phrases have become central to popular language. The relation of the Qur'an to popular culture also is exemplified by Umm Kulthum, an Arab singer who was one of the most important cultural figures in Islamic societies in the modern age. Her singing permeated the Arabic world. Her funeral was the



Muslim boys and girls are taught to read and memorize the early chapters of the Qur'an. Here a young boy is reading from the Qur'an.

largest public event in Egypt's modern history. Umm Kulthum's lyrics combined the tradition of Arabic love poetry, contemporary forms of music, and a cadence she learned as the daughter of a rural Qur'an reciter. Umm Kulthum was also believed to have been an accomplished Qur'an reciter herself.⁴ In buses, cafes, and taxis throughout the Arabic-speaking world, cassettes of the songs of Umm Kulthum are almost as popular as cassettes of the Qur'an.

III. The Early Meccan Suras

The Qur'an traditionally is divided into three periods: the early Meccan Suras (most of the short Suras at the end of the Qur'an and other Suras or parts of Suras scattered through the rest of the Qur'an), the later Meccan Suras, and the Medinan Suras. The Qur'anic texts commonly put the terms "Meccan" or "Medinan" after the title of each Sura to indicate the phase of Muhammad's life in which it was revealed. The early and later Meccan Suras are believed to have been revealed to Muhammad before he made his famous emigration (*hijra*) to Medina in the year 622 C.E., Year One of the Islamic or Hijri calendar.⁵

The Suras from the early Meccan period focus on existential and personal issues. The later Meccan period brings in more extended discussions of sacred history and the prophets known in the Biblical traditions. The message of the Qur'an is more explicitly fitted into a prophetic lineage beginning with the creation of Adam, the first prophet in Islam, extending through the stories of Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, John the Baptist, and Jesus, prophets of the Arab tradition such as Hud and Salih, and ending with Muhammad. The Suras from the Medinan period reflect Muhammad's new position as a political, economic, social, and military leader and so address a wider range of societal, historical, and legal issues. As ruler of a state, Muhammad was faced with an array of specific problems, some of which are answered with Qur'anic revelations.

As Muhammad's career advanced, the ritual core of Islam was more fully articulated within the Qur'an. Of the "five pillars" of Islamic practice, three were discussed in the early Meccan Suras: the affirmation of the oneness of God, the ritual prayer (*salat*), and the obligation to give a pure offering (*zakāt*) of one's wealth to those in need. In later periods, the number of prayers required per day was fixed at five and the orientation of the prayers was set toward the shrine of the Ka'ba in Mecca; the obligation for fasting during the month of Ramadan (the month the initial Qur'anic revelations are believed to have been sent down to Muhammad) was enjoined on all able adult Muslims; and, finally, the Islamic pilgrimage or *hajj*, which contained many of the elements of pre-Islamic pilgrimage activities around Mecca, was ordained for all Muslims capable of it.

For the first generations living after the death of Muhammad, issues of interpretation and communal life could be resolved by referring to the Qur'an or to what they knew Muhammad had said or done. This tradition of Muhammad's words and deeds is called the *sunna* (path, example) of the prophet. But as Islam extended further from its original community in Medina, it became more difficult to resolve such issues by informal appeal to the *sunna*. As a result, the statements of Muhammad outside of the Qur'an (*hadīth*) were rigorously examined and codified. The *hadīth* liter-

ature was then combined with the Qur'an and principles of legal judgment (*fiqh*) to elaborate an Islamic way of life, *shari'a*, that would be valid in later times and more distant places. Such regulations could cover everything from dietary restrictions to details of family law, inheritance, divorce, and the ethics of investment and avoidance of predatory business practices. This world of codified principles of *shari'a* has been frequently compared to the rabbinic tradition that was codified in the Mishna and Talmud.

Although the Qur'an views itself as representing the prophetic tradition of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, as a document the Qur'an is approached differently than the Torah or the Christian Bible. Most Jews and Christians acknowledge that the Biblical texts may have been composed by a wide variety of authors over a long period of time, under divine inspiration certainly, but not necessarily by direct speech of the deity. On the other hand, most Muslims view the Qur'an as the direct revelation of God to Muhammad. Muslim scholars, as well as many non-Muslim scholars, stipulate that the Qur'an was composed within the lifetime of one historical personage, Muhammad, and that many of the events of the Qur'an are reflections of the life and struggles of Muhammad.

Another key difference between Qur'anic and Biblical traditions is in narrative style. The Qur'an does not narrate the sacred history of the prophets in a linear fashion. With the exception of the account of the prophet Joseph (Sura 12), the Qur'an scatters its tales of the prophets throughout the text. Aspects of the story of Moses, for example, occur in 44 different passages in the Qur'an, but are never brought together in a single Sura. This Qur'anic way of storytelling, unusual to those accustomed to the Biblical tradition, has aroused a number of conflicting interpretations and value judgments. The polemicist Carlyle remarked, "With every allowance, one feels it difficult to see how any mortal ever could consider this Koran as a Book written in Heaven, too good for the Earth; as a well written-book, or indeed as a *book* at all." On the other hand, Norman O. Brown recently suggested that it is this very scattered or fragmented mode of composition that allows the Qur'an to achieve its most profound effects, as if the intensity of the prophetic message were shattering the vehicle of human lan-

guage in which it was being communicated.⁶

To offer an account or overview of the entire Qur'an would require several volumes. The purpose here is to introduce the early revelations, those that ground the rest of the Qur'an and are most deeply embedded in Islamic life. When Muslims encounter the early Suras of the Qur'an, they encounter the early life and career of Muhammad. They learn about Muhammad's life as it is reflected in Qur'anic discourses on the ephemeral nature of human life, on the inevitability of a judgment on each human's life, and on fundamental values. In this spirit, rather than offering a detailed historical narrative, this volume presents the early Meccan Suras and offers explanatory comments that relate the Suras to the life and culture of the prophet.

The early Meccan Suras are hymnic. The complex Qur'anic sound patterns and the relation of sound to meaning—what we might call the “sound vision” of the Qur'an—are brought out and cultivated in Qur'anic recitation. No translation can fully capture this sound vision. The translation here attempts to bring across the lyricism of the hymnic passages, a lyricism comparable to that of the Psalms or passages from the Upanishads. In the Qur'anic context, the lyricism is related to the use of oaths involving a key set of what the Qur'an considers “signs” (*āyas*), clues to the mystery of reality. These signs include the patterns of day and night, male and female, odd and even, singular and plural. The Arabic construction for these oaths can be translated in a number of ways. I have used the phrase “by the,” as in Sura 89: 1-5:

By the dawn
By the nights ten
By the odd and the even
By the night as it eases away
Is there not in that an oath for the thoughtful mind? ⁷

The values presented in the very early Meccan revelations are repeated throughout the hymnic Suras. There is a sense of directness and intimacy, as if the hearer were being asked repeatedly a simple question: what will be of value at the end of a human life?

The framework for this question is the concept of a final moment of truth or day of reckoning (*yawm ad-din*) in which each human being will face what he or she has done and has not done. The premise of these passages is that the human being avoids the ultimate question through self-delusion and avoids acknowledging his own mortality by engaging in the pursuit of wealth and possessions—“thinking in his wealth he will never die,” as one Qur'anic verse puts it. The criticism of hoarding, the hoarding of one's possessions or one's life, was a standard in pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. The Qur'an keeps the value of the generous hero (the *Karim*) but redefines generosity. The key value of generosity is no longer to be shown through camel sacrifice, great feasts, or giving one's life in tribal warfare. Rather, it is to be channeled into a concern for social justice, a continual willingness to give a share of one's possessions to the less fortunate. This giving is a purification of oneself and one's possessions as well as a recognition that no one truly owns anything. The Qur'anic *zakāt* (literally, “purification”) is a purification of wealth in a ritual, communal, religious, and institutional sense through the organized giving and working for social justice. In the early Meccan Suras, the mechanisms and details of the obligation for *zakāt* are not yet worked out, but the importance of the obligation is made existentially present. The larger injunction to work for justice and the criticism of those who do not seek justice are categorical, as when the divine voice speaks of humankind in the following terms (Sura 90: 5-16):

Does he think there is no power over him
He says: look at the goods I devoured
Does he think no one sees him

Did we not endow him with eyes
lips and tongue
and guide him to the two high plains

And he did not climb the steep pass
What can tell you of the steep pass?

To free a slave
To feed the destitute on a day of hunger

a kinsman orphaned
or a stranger out of luck in need

A second premise of this ultimate question is that humans tend to hide, from others and from themselves, what they really are, but that Allah, the one God, sees into the inner being of each person and at the moment of truth will reveal each person, inside and out (Sura 100:11).

This day of judgment or moment of truth is an ontological reversal. What seems secure and lasting—the skies, the seas, the stars, the reality of death as contained in graves—is torn away. What seemed inconsequential—a “mote’s weight” of good or a “mote’s weight” of wrong (Sura 99:7-8)—is revealed as enduring and real. A classic example of such a moment is announced in Sura 82:1-5:

When the sky is torn
When the stars are scattered
When the seas are poured forth
When the tombs are burst open
Then a soul will know what it has given
and what it has held back

The Qur'an does not propound a doctrine of the original or essential sinfulness of humanity. Human beings are not born sinful, but they are forgetful. This forgetfulness can be countered only by reminder (*dhikr*), which the Qur'an calls itself. Qur'anic *dhikr* includes repeated questioning about the primary Qur'anic values: sharing one's wealth; attending to the orphan, the destitute, and the disinherited; performing the prayer; and carrying out just deeds (*salihāt*).

The proper and continual performance of ritual prayer (*salāt*) is urged throughout the early Meccan Suras. Although the early Suras do not offer detailed prescriptions for the prayer, *salāt* is a performance of *sujūd*, the movement of worship in which the person first kneels and then touches the head to the ground. This movement, performed regularly, breaks the cycle of normal pre-

occupations, enacts humility, and helps in the remembrance of more ultimate concerns.

Finally, the affirmation of the oneness of God is given voice in Sura 112. The oneness of God has a number of interpretations in Islamic thought. First, of course, it means that the deity has no partners or equals. Second, in the moral sense, it has been interpreted as having no other aims, goals, or thoughts beyond the one reality or one deity. In other words, any other object that becomes an end in itself is a form of false deity. Third, in the theological sense, it can refer to the interior unity of the deity, that in God all the attributes—such as seeing, hearing, knowing, and willing—are in some sense one; that in God, willing is knowing and knowing is creating, although these activities seem separate within language. For some Islamic theologians, to give the deity separate attributes threatens the unity of God. If those attributes are eternal, then there is a diversity of eternal, separate powers. If they are not eternal, then God can change—a notion many Islamic philosophers, influenced by Aristotelian ideas on the impassivity of deity, found inconceivable. Fourth and finally, in many mystical theologies, unity involves knowing and seeing nothing but the one deity, or arriving at a point where a person's own existence actually passes away into the infinite reaches of that one God that is all that truly is.

The Qur'anic reminders of a basic ethic are placed within a framework of lyrical meditation and existential confrontation. At the heart of the early Suras is a voice that expresses at once a sense of intimacy and awe. It is this combination of intimacy and awe that I have tried to make accessible to those who do not encounter the Qur'an in the original Arabic recitation.

Within the nuances of Qur'anic language one encounters a balanced and powerful gender dynamic. Arabic, like French, is based on grammatical gender; even inanimate objects are masculine or feminine. The Qur'an uses this grammatical gender in a way that allows the masculine and feminine to move beyond the grammatical gender and form a kind of subtle gender interplay. Using condensed masculine or feminine grammatical constructions, fitting them into key places of rhyme and rhythm, and align-

ing them with certain implicit metaphors (the earth—grammatically feminine—giving birth to her final secret), the Qur'an generates a sense of gender interplay that always hovers at the edge of personification. The earth, the sky, the night of destiny, the soul, the sun, and the moon, for example, are all grammatically feminine. These terms are not openly personified, but are pushed toward personification through an implied metaphor (the night of destiny becomes pregnant, the earth gives birth at the day of reckoning) and rhetorical structures.

In order to bring across the supple gender language of the Qur'an, a translator must render the pronouns signifying inanimate objects carefully. If they are translated consistently in a gendered way (as her and him, she and he), the grammatical gender would be distorted into a blatant personification not there in the original text. But if they are translated in a neutered fashion, as is done in many standard translations of the Qur'an, some of the most moving and profound aspects of the Qur'anic voice themselves are neutered. In the commentaries, I have indicated areas where I have chosen one direction or another—that is, where I have tried to walk a balance among the gender registers.

Finally, the Qur'anic voice shifts continually. Sometimes the One God is referred to in the plural first person as "we"; sometimes in the third person as "your lord," "Allah," or "him/it"; and sometimes in the first person singular as "I." These sudden shifts can be disorienting at first, but they have an important literary and theological dimension. The shifts prevent the deity from becoming defined in anthropomorphic terms. Given the way finite human characteristics are built into the structure of language, a single, constant form of reference would lead to a reified deity—an intellectual idol in the terms of Islamic theologians and mystics. In the Qur'an the divine voice is heard in a variety of manners through an extraordinary range of emotions and tones, but the form or image of the speaker is never defined—a literary feature that mirrors the Qur'anic affirmation that the one God is beyond being fixed in any delimited form or image.

Each Qur'anic Sura is preceded by the phrase, "In the name of God the Compassionate the Caring" or alternatively "In the

name of God the Compassionate Caring" (*bi smi Allāh ar-Rahmān ar-Rahīm*). This phrase is frequently translated, "In the name of God the Compassionate the Merciful," but traditional scholars have emphasized that the terms *Rahmān* and *Rahīm* are based upon an Arabic etymology linked to the word for womb (*rahm*). In addition, "mercy" as a quality of forgiveness has been strongly marked by Christian associations with the doctrine of original sin, whereas the Qur'an does not posit the notion of original sin. For these reasons, and for the purposes of euphony and alliteration, I have used the translation "the Compassionate the Caring."⁸

As noted earlier, I have attached a facing commentary to each Sura which takes up issues of interpretation, historical context, and key themes. When young Muslims learn the Qur'an, they learn the text orally, often before they know Arabic grammar or the history of Islam. There is a tolerance for terms or concepts that are not fully understood but can be appreciated within the context of the hymnic nature of the text. For this reason, it is worthwhile to read the text before reading the commentaries.

I have used the term "translation" here to refer to the English renditions presented in this volume. But the term itself is controversial. For Muslims the Qur'an is, as expressed in Sura 12:2, an Arabic revelation. To understand the practical implications of such an understanding, one can turn to Africa. There, Christian missionaries begin by translating the Bible into the native language of the area. In many cases these translators have been forced to invent an orthography for an essentially oral language and tradition. By contrast, Muslim missionaries begin by opening a Qur'an school in which the Qur'an is taught in Arabic. The goal is not to replace the local language, but to introduce the Qur'an in Arabic in the way that (in the view of the majority of Muslims) it truly exists. The primary encounter of most Muslims with the Qur'an throughout their lives is in Arabic; for many that encounter centers on the Suras presented here.

In a later chapter of this book, I have offered a full transliteration of six short Suras, accompanied by a word-for-word English gloss. Those who do not know Arabic can follow the Arabic recitation on the enclosed CD with the help of the transliteration and

gloss. I have made a practice of introducing in my classes a few Suras, with transliterations, English glosses, and recitations played on CD or cassette. Although only a small part of the Qur'an can be covered this way in a classroom setting, this method allows an encounter with the sound vision central to the Qur'an.

The translations and commentaries presented here are the result of fifteen years of work on these particular Suras and my experience attempting to present them in classes of non-Arabic speakers. Each Sura has gone through dozens of drafts. A translator is constantly forced to choose between terms that can only partially carry the full connotations of the original, between keeping or losing key literary affects (such as rhyme, interior assonance, and rhythmic movements), and somehow making compensation for elements that have to be given up in certain choices.

Of course, all translations are ultimately only approaches. One can never completely recapture an original in a new language. For some, adhering to a facile interpretation of the Italian cliché *traduttore traditore* (translator-traitor), the impossibility of perfect translation only shows the futility of trying. My own view is that translation—never complete, always only an approach—is an essential element of human existence. Even among those who speak our own language, we often find we have interpreted a word in a way other than it was intended. We can fully never capture or seize the perfected meaning. If we could grasp or seize it, we would soon find that the meaning has lost its magic in captivity. But the always renewed effort to come as close as possible is a reward in itself. For both theological and literary reasons, the Qur'an is particularly resistant to any notion of translation as a complete reproduction of the meaning and form of the original; what follows does not presume to be such a translation.

The history of English renditions of the Qur'an has been marked by the transference of the language of the King James Bible onto the Qur'anic text. Yet that idiom grew out of a literary tradition that was itself rooted in the Bible. To impose it on a completely different kind of text risks producing a language that is artificial or awkward, despite its scholarly accomplishment. The version presented here does away with some of the grander features of King

James rhetoric, particularly in the use of interjections, references to deity, and theologically motivated capitalization. It attempts an English that is natural and relatively idiomatic, yet formal enough to reflect certain high registers of Qur'anic diction.

But beyond these issues of translation style, another issue more deeply interweaves language and theology. A standard stereotype about Islam and the Qur'an, one that has been pro-pounded by anti-Muslim polemicists and missionaries, is that Islam is a religion of fear as opposed to Christianity, for example, which is (in their view) a religion of love. For Muslims familiar with the Qur'an in Arabic, the notion that it is centered on fear is not only inaccurate but astounding. Certainly, the Qur'anic emphasis on justice is continually intertwined in the early Meccan Suras with the affirmation of an ultimate meaning in life. At the day of reckoning, this meaning and justice are brought together. The Qur'an warns those who reject the day of reckoning and who are entrenched in lives of acquisition and injustice that an accounting awaits them.¹⁰ Yet these warnings are not more dire or grim than the warnings the Biblical Jesus gives in the parables about burning and gnashing of teeth. And in Qur'anic recitation, all Qur'anic passages on alienation between humankind and God are dominated by a tone, not of anger or wrath, but of sadness (*huzn*). Why, then, have the deeper resonances and reaches of these passages been reduced to only one aspect—that of warning?

One reason for this distorted emphasis is the way the early Meccan Suras were interpreted in the Middle Ages. Just as medieval Christians constructed an elaborate vision of the torments of hell from enigmatic statements in the Bible, so medieval Qur'anic commentators constructed their own visions of hell and heaven from the elliptic comments in the Quran about the day of reckoning. Yet, when one reads the early Meccan Suras, one finds that these references are of a literary and psychological subtlety and suppleness at odds with the spatially and temporally fixed notions of heaven and hell, reward and punishment.

The issue was epitomized by the Islamic writer Qushayri, who made crucial distinctions between fear and hope on the one hand, and awe on the other.¹¹ Fear and hope are emotions that concern

the future. Awe is an emotion or feeling that concerns the present. In a state of awe, a person is no longer even thinking about the future. What gives the early Meccan Suras their depth, psychological subtlety, texture, and tone is the way the future is collapsed into the present; the way the day of reckoning is transferred from the fear and hope of a moment in the future to a sense of reckoning in the present moment. The centrality of the day of reckoning to the early Qur'anic revelations is based on a prophetic impulse to remind humanity of the moment of truth. The impulse of reminder (*dhikr*) is not simply to talk about that moment, but allow the hearer to live and experience in this present moment the existential absoluteness of a mote's weight of good or evil.

In creating such a sense of the moment, the early Meccan Suras employ a distinctive way of referring to the day of reckoning and the afterlife or finality (*al-akhira*). There are references to the garden, *'Iliyyin*, the fire, *Jahim*, and *Jehenna* (a term related to the Biblical term *Gehenna* used for a pit of the dead and later as a term for punishment in the afterlife). But these references are placed in an allusive and elusive literary frame that gives them a depth far beyond any simple-minded notion of heavenly reward and hellish punishment. Indeed, the references to the day of reckoning are filled with key syntactical ambiguities that translators and commentators often remove, thus simplifying and freezing the text. When those ambiguities are respected, the day of reckoning passages become centered on a kind of questioning—a questioning that combines a sense of awe with a sense of intimacy. This translation and the accompanying commentaries focus on keeping the original sense of questioning alive in English.

One example of such questioning occurs in the Sura of the *Qāri'a*. The Sura includes two mysterious words, *qāri'a* (a word that could mean smashing, obliterating, crushing, or calamity), and *hāwiya* (a word that means variously a mother who has lost her first-born child, desire, abyss, and falling). The Sura begins with three staccato references to the *qāri'a*. It then asks what can tell what the *qāri'a* is. However it does not define the *qāri'a*. Instead it speaks of the day in which the *qāri'a* occurs as a day in which mountains are like fluffed tufts of wool and human beings

like scattered moths—an image evocative of the inversion of strong and weak that is characteristic of the early revelations.

The ending section of the Sura begins with a reference to the person whose mother is *hāwiya*. This reference has a range of connotations, including the loss experienced by the mother, the existential negation of the child whose mother has lost her child, and the more general sense of falling and abyss. Then the Qur'an asks what can tell us of the *hāwiya*. The next verse says simply "raging fire." There is a crucial ambiguity in syntax here between the two verses. Is raging fire something that can give us a glimpse of what the *hāwiya* is? Or is the raging fire to be equated with the *hāwiya*? As explained below, the power of these images is heightened by the "sound figure" created around the Arabic expression *hā*. The sound *hā* can mean "her," but it is a sound that occurs in interjections of sorrow and surprise. This sound is also the central sound figure in the Sura, culminating in its being part of the mysterious term *hāwiya*, a term that in some sense breaks apart under the stress of sound and meaning at this key moment in the text.

The Calamity (The *Qāri'a*)

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

The *qāri'a*

What is the *qāri'a*

What can tell you of the *qāri'a*

A day humankind are like moths scattered

And mountains are like fluffs of wool

Whoever's scales weigh heavy

His is a life that is pleasing

Whoever's scales weigh light

His mother is *hāwiya*

What can let you know what she is

Raging fire.

Most commentators and translators have explained away or covered over the ambiguity and simply equated the *hāwiya* with fire. They have also changed the text to "the fire," interpolating into it a definite article that does not exist in the Qur'anic text itself. They explain further that the word *hāwiya* is simply a name

for “the fire”; in other words, another name for hell. In the reduction of the word *hāwiya* to a synonym for hell, psychological complexity is lost. The reflection on the meaning of *hāwiya*, the resonances of a woman bereft of her child, an abyss, an infinite depth of desire, a falling into that depth, and, finally, the evocative ambivalence of those meanings in relationship to raging fire, are all reduced to a monotonic threat of punishment. Little wonder that many readers seeing the text in English have focused upon the notion of threat for those who misbehave, a notion that is hardly original or distinctive, and have missed the deeper questioning, literary power, and psychological subtlety of such passages.

The intimacy and awe evoked by early Meccan accounts of the day of reckoning are typical of all the Qur'anic passages that bring up the issue of spirit (*rūh*). In the Qur'an, spirit is associated with three moments: the creation of Adam through God's breathing; the coming down of prophecy, as on the night of destiny and especially in the prophethood of Jesus and Muhammad; and, finally, the day of reckoning. These three moments are boundary moments, that is, moments in which time meets that which is beyond time. Insofar as they converge in a world beyond time, the three moments of spirit collapse into one another.

My approach to the Qur'an presumes to make no judgment on the ultimate truth of these texts, which are among the more influential in human history. It engages them with the respect for literary and theological depth that a translator gains through repeated efforts to recreate some sense of the original. In that spirit, this volume is meant for a varied audience: for those who have wished to know something about Islam and who have little background in its history; for those who wish to study or teach the Qur'an in a classroom setting; and for Muslims who may find this version to capture some aspects of the text in a relevant way or who wish to share an approach to the Qur'an that is accessible with non-Muslim friends. My goal is to present in English some of the texture, tone, power, and subtlety of the Arabic text that is the Qur'an.

In any translation, there is a loss and an effort to compensate

for that loss. Some features in the original cannot be duplicated in the new language without artificiality. Thus, for example, there is no possibility of duplicating the end-rhymes in many Qur'anic passages in an English idiom in which rhyming is far more difficult and would require forced and awkward syntax. I have attempted to find compensations through assonance, partial rhyme, and other features more natural to current English idiom. You will note in the translations a minimum of punctuation. Classical Arabic does not use punctuation. In addition, these early Qur'anic Suras are at their most compelling when the exact relationship of one statement to another hangs in a balance and, instead of freezing into some clearly definable meaning, continues to resonate and pose questions that only a lifetime of searching can answer. The Suras are rendered in such a way that each line beginning flush left is a new verse. Any indentation indicates that the indented line is part of the previous verse. In this way, the verses can be indicated less obtrusively (with numbers of 5, 10, 15, etc. in the margin) and the reader can easily calculate the verse number of any line.

There are aspects of the Qur'an that elude translation and compensations, particularly those aspects focused on what I have called sound figures. In the facing commentaries and in the final chapters I discuss these aspects of Qur'anic language. In other works written in a more technical style, I have placed my understanding of Qur'anic sound figures within the traditional world of Qur'anic scholarship.¹² While the translations and commentary I offer are grounded in traditional scholarship, they also represent my personal understanding of the literary character of the Qur'an in areas (such as sound figures) that were not highlighted by Qur'anic commentators.

The early Meccan passages draw the hearer into a world of elemental transformations. Rather than limiting themselves to describing a future event (promise and threat), these passages make present the event in question. At the key point in the text, the language opens up around a semantic abyss. The event takes on immediacy. It is this immediacy that accounts for such diverse reactions as the German scholar Nöldeke's, who describes the effect of the Sura of the Calamity as making one feel “as if he saw

with his own eyes," and Fakhr ad-Din Rāzī's, who speaks of the word *qāri'a* in that Sura as overpowering "our hearts with the sense of awe."¹³

The proclamatory aspects of the early Meccan passages, the strange vocabulary, the semantic gaps, and the cosmic perspective establish a distance between text and audience. However, within the elusive discourse of sound figures that distance is both enhanced and overcome. As the proclamatory surface of the text "breaks apart" into sound figures, clustered basic sound units and implied personifications, a new tone is heard: whisperings, inferences, highly personal intonations of emotion and gender. It is as if the speaker, the hearer, and the subject of discourse were intimately known to one another; awe and intimacy are brought together.

Qur'anic reciters and commentators characterize the tone of the Qur'anic recitation as one of sadness (*huzn*). This is not a world-rejecting sadness. Indeed, the sadness is at its most telling in those passages in which the world's mystery and splendor are evoked. Yet there is a sense that somehow the splendor and mystery are too great for the human to encompass—or that the human heart has somehow forgotten it actually has the capacity to encompass that splendor and mystery. At this moment of reminder, the text expresses not fear but the sadness that comes with a personal realization of a loss that is part of the human condition. The day of reckoning contains the possibility that this loss will be overcome with a final reconciliation and sense of belonging, or that it will be revealed as permanent—and it brings into the present the reality of that moment of finality.¹⁴ This combination of a sense of awe with interior whisperings of intimacy and sadness may help account for the broadness of appeal of the early Meccan Suras as well as their distinctiveness as a form of apocalyptic language.¹⁵

Footnotes

1. Such an approach is rejected by those who accept the Qur'anic assertions that it was revealed directly to Muhammad, just as the effort to show multiple authors and historical periods for the first five books of the Bible is rejected by those in Biblical tradition who adhere most strongly to the view that the entire Torah was revealed by God to Moses. For a popular overview of developments and controversies in this particular area of Qur'anic studies, see Toby Lester, "What is the Qur'an," *The Atlantic Monthly* 23.1 (January, 1999), pp. 43-56.

2. See Richard Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1976). The fact that Arabia, because of its oil deposits, has once again become vital to the world's transportation system is an irony most dramatically illustrated by the bedouin who use four-wheel drive pick-up trucks to carry newly birthed camels and food for their camel herds.

3. See Michael Sells, *Desert Tracings: Six Classic Arabian Odes* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1989); Jaroslav Stetkevych, *Muhammad and the Golden Bough* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996); and Suzanne Stetkevych, *The Mute Immortals Speak* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); see also Suzanne Stetkevych, *Reorientations: Arabic and Persian Poetry* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

4. For recent work on Umm Kulthum, see Virginia Danielson, *The Voice of Egypt: Umm Kulthum, Arabic Song, and Egyptian Society in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997); and the film *Umm Kulthum: A Voice Like Egypt* (Waltham, MA : Filmmakers Collaborative, 1996).

5. Because the Islamic calendar is based on the lunar calendar, each Islamic year is shorter than the solar year and calculating the correspondence of Islamic calendars to the Common Era (c.e.) calendar requires a complex formula. When authors use both systems, they usually put the Islamic year first. Thus the famous mystic Ibn 'Arabi is said to have died in the year 638/1240. The letter H (for Hijri) is sometimes used to indicate the Islamic year: 638H/1240 c.e.

6. The quote from Carlyle is cited in Norman O. Brown, "The Apocalypse of Islam," *Social Text* 3:8 (1983-84): 155-171, the same article in which Brown gives his defense of the nonlinear character of Qur'anic discourse.

7. Alternative translations could be as simple as "and" as in "and the dawn," or as complex as "I swear by the dawn" or "I summon the dawn,"

or even, in agreement with usage in Arabic poetry, "how many a dawn."

8. These issues are described in more detail, with extended quotations from Islamic thinkers, in Michael Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism* (New York: Paulist Press, Classics of Western Spirituality), 1996, pp. 304-320.

9. The word *Allāh* is a proper noun in Arabic, thought to be based upon the phrase "the god" (*al-ilāh*). It is as if the definite article "the" had been partially squeezed into the word for deity. Considered as a proper name, it cannot, of course, be translated. But to render it Allah, in the context of a translation of the Qur'an, sets up a factor of alienation. For Muslims, the Allah of the Qur'an is the same God as the God of Abraham, Moses, and Jesus. Although in other contexts, it may be wise to keep the term Allah, or to vary between Allah and God, in this context it is vital not to set up a factor of alienation at the beginning.

10. In addition to its arrangement by Suras, the Qur'an also is arranged by parts. Each part (*juz'*) is the amount that should be recited in a day's recitation. This arrangement is by volume of text. The last part of the Qur'an, called the *juz' 'amma* after its first two words, consists of Suras 78-114. I have presented here—in addition to The Opening and the key vision verses of Sura 53—Suras 84-114 in full and in sequence. Of them, Suras 98 and 110 (and 99, though this is more controversial) are considered to be of a later period, but I have left them in to show the contrast with the later period and to give the full sequence of this section of the Qur'an.

I present here what I think would make a good introduction to the Qur'an, without attempting to introduce the entire *juz' 'amma*, the first Suras of which bring up issues that go beyond the boundaries of this volume. For an important interpretation and rendition of the entire *juz' 'amma*, see *The Awesome News, Interpretation of Juz' 'Amma —The Last Part of the Qur'an*, second edition, by Dr. Mahmoud M. Ayoub (n.p.: World Islamic Call Society, second edition, 1997).

11. The importance and usefulness of fear of punishment and desire for reward is a controversial issue in Islamic history. Some major theologians, such as Hasan al-Basri and al-Ghazali, believed that contemplation of the terrors of punishment and the bliss of rewards were essential to refining the human conscience. On the other hand, the famous mystic Rabi'a denounced any activity done out of fear of divine punishment or desire for divine rewards. She is known for a story in which she was seen walking down the street with a vessel of water in one hand and a fire in the other. When asked what she was going to do with the water and fire, she stated that she would burn paradise with the fire and douse the flames of hell with the water, so that never again would

anyone act out of anything other than pure love of God. Both perspectives, of course, are steeped in the Qur'an.

12. See Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism*, pp. 103-110.

13. M. Sells, "Sound, Spirit, and Gender in *Sūrat al-Qadr*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 11.2 (September, 1990): 101-139; *idem*, "Sound and Meaning in *Sūrat al-Qāri'a*," *Arabica*, 40 (1993): 403-430; and *idem*, "A Literary Approach to the Hymnic Suras of the Qur'an," in Issa Boullata, ed., *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an* (London: Curzon Press), in press. This volume is devoted to understanding and appreciating the literary aspects of the Qur'an. *Approaching the Qur'an* makes no attempt to adduce a catechism or doctrine of the Qur'an, nor does it claim any legal or religious authority or sponsorship.

14. Fakhr ad-Din ar-Razi, *at-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* (*The Great Commentary*), vol. 32 (Cairo: Itizām 'Abd ar-Rahman Muhammad, n.d.), p. 71.

15. *Huzn* is acknowledged by Qur'anic reciters as a major element in the recitation, and classical writers refer to it anecdotally. At times it is reduced to a subservient category to threat. I view the quality of sadness not as an aspect of threat but as an emotion evoked at the moment that threat opens up onto more complex emotive possibilities through the transformation of semantic and temporal categories —when the sense of loss is experienced in the present rather than as a threat of future punishment.

16. The early Meccan Suras, such as the Sūra of the *Qāri'a* may well share apocalyptic elements, common themes, images, and even vocabulary with other literatures or traditions. But the literary effect is due to the specific employment within the Sura of a complex set of interpermeating discursive modes. In calling this style distinctive, I am not suggesting it is unique. Such a claim would demand detailed comparative analysis with all the relevant apocalyptic material that has survived and all that may have been lost.

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ الرَّحْمَنُ الرَّحِيمُ
مَالِكُ يَوْمَ الدِّينِ إِنَّا لَنَعْتَدُ وَإِنَّا لَنَ
نَسْتَعْنِ بِمَنْ أَعْنَى إِنَّمَا الْمُصِرُّ أَمْسِكُ
صِرَاطَ الَّذِينَ أَنْعَمْتَ عَلَيْهِمْ وَغَيْرَ
الْمَغْضُوبُ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا الضَّالُّونَ

The first chapter of the Qur'án,
Sūrat al-Fātiḥa, The Opening.

Glossary

Annotated Glossary of Key Concepts

Day of Reckoning (*yawm ad-dīn*). This is the primary subject of the early Meccan Suras. The word translated here as reckoning (*dīn*) is related to a number of terms for borrowing and payment of debt, as well as to terms for religion and faith. The word for day (*yawm*) also can be a more general term for any length of time or a moment in time. The term has been translated as “day of judgment” and “day of accounting.” But it also has an implication similar to the “moment of truth”—that is, a time of indeterminate duration in which each soul will encounter the fundamental reality that normal consciousness masks. At that moment each person will know what he or she has given and held back, and every “mote’s weight” of kindness or meanness will take on its status as one’s true self and destiny in a moment of revelation and finality.

Deniers, Those in Denial, Those Who Call It (the day of reckoning) a Lie (*al-mukadhdhibūn*). Those who repeatedly reject prophetic messages, in particular the message of the day of reckoning, are those who put themselves outside the possibility of just relations among humans or between the human and the divine. The word for unbelievers (*kāfirūn*) has connotations both of concealing and of ingratitude. The unbelievers are depicted as active deniers (*mukadhdhibūn*) who are not content with refusing to assent to certain Qur'anic understandings, but who actively persecute those who do.

Generous Hero (*karīm*). Heroic generosity was the centerpiece of pre-Islamic Arabian tribal values. The generous hero (*karīm*) was one who would spend his fortune and sacrifice his camel mare (the most important possession and a symbol of himself) to feed others. He would give his life in battle. He would, in hyperbolic display, spend a fortune on a night of revelry with his friends. By contrast, hoarding (of one's wealth or one's life) was the fundamental mark of ignobility.

In the Qur'an, the central place of generosity is affirmed. On the day of reckoning, people will be asked what they have given and what they have held back, but the context of the generosity has shifted. Tribal warfare was outlawed. The pre-Islamic camel sacrifice yielded to the great sacrifice in honor of Abraham (introduced in later sections of the Qur'an). And the hyperbolic display of generosity was transformed into a socially mandated offering for those in society who are in need: in particular, the orphan, the widow, those lacking strong kin connections, and the traveler. The Qur'an turns the pre-Islamic satire against the greedy and ungenerous into a more existential critique, asking mordantly if those who consume their lives acquiring things think that their possessions will make them immortal (Sura 104).

Yet this human generosity is seen only as a proper response of human beings in sharing what has been given to them by the only true *karīm* in Qur'anic thought: Allah or God. "Karīm" is one of the principle "names of God" in the Qur'an and, because Muslims frequently take as their given name one of the names of God,

Karim and 'Abd al-Karīm (Servant of the Generous) have become popular names in Islamic societies.

Faith (*imān*). The word translated as "faith," *imān*, means more than assent to certain beliefs. It entails an active witness, as manifested in performing just works, carrying out the ritual prayer, and giving the pure offering (*zakāt*)—often in the face of adversity, mockery, persecution, and other difficulties. For this reason, I have used the English term "keep the faith" rather than the more abstract and passive "believe" for the many verbal expressions referring to "those who keep the faith" (*āmanū*). The word also carries connotations of safety, trust, and peace.

Humankind, Human Being Person, Someone (*insān*). The word *insān* refers to humankind in general, but also, in many instances, to any person, someone, or anyone. In the the translations below, when words like "anyone" or "someone" are used, they carry also the connotation of humankind, and when words for humankind are used, they can also be the more specific reference to any person as a representative of humankind. *Insān* is gender non-specific, but has traditionally been translated into English as "man" or "mankind," in accordance with traditional English language use of the word "man" in an intended gender non-specific sense. However, because the etymology and flavor of a word has a power beyond the intention of a human author or translator, to declare the English word "man" gender non-specific is not enough to overcome the set of associations (manhood, manly, be a man) that its use will invoke, at least subliminally. In order to preserve the intricate gender balance within the Qur'an, I have translated *insān* in gender non-specific terms throughout.

Jinn, Genies (sing. *jinnī*, pl. *jinn*). The Qur'an addresses itself to two species of sentient and rational beings: humankind and jinn. The *jinn*—semi-spirit beings translated in English as "genies"—are affirmed by the Qur'an as a fundamental aspect of the created world. In pre-Islamic Arabia, the *jinn* were associated with love, madness, and poetic inspiration. They could appear to the desert

traveler in a variety of forms, lure him off the path, and destroy him. The power of the *jinn* is immense, but they are neither pure light like the angels nor pure evil; indeed, the Qur'an presents the *jinn*, like humans, as embracing or refusing Islam. One species of *jinn* was known as the satans (*shayṭāns*). This figure is believed to have been transformed into a more purely malevolent being in Arabic folk culture and is associated in the Qur'an with the fallen heavenly being known as Iblīs.

Just Deeds (*sālihāt*). These constitute one of the major ethical injunctions of the early Meccan Suras, the other being keeping the faith. Several clear examples are given of carrying out just acts: feeding the poor, sheltering the homeless, protecting the orphan, defending the infant female child from infanticide, and urging others to join together to carry out such acts. The Qur'anic emphasis on just acts is repeatedly tied to ultimate questions of the meaning and justice of life itself as exemplified in the final reckoning or moment of truth.

Mindfulness (*taqwā*). The Qur'anic term *taqwā* derives from an Arabic root meaning "to shield oneself." It refers to consciousness of the divine, along with alert concern to avoid the egoism, injustice, and forgetfulness to which humankind is prone. The term has sometimes been translated as "fear of the lord," but the stress in the early Meccan Suras is less on fear than on vigilance. Later moral philosophers in Islam, such as Muhasibi, analyzed the subtlety and insidiousness of egoism in profound psychological detail as a way of explaining and exploring the Qur'anic emphasis on mindfulness.

Patience (*sabr*). The voice of the Qur'an continually evokes the need for patience. The prophet needs patience in the face of rejection of his message. Human beings need patience in the face of persecution or obstruction in their effort to "keep the faith and work justice." The deity exercises patience in allowing those who are unjust to prosper for a time. The Qur'an assures those who are suffering hardship that "after every hard time there is an easing."

Prayer (*salāt*). The ritual prayer or *salāt* enjoined in the early Meccan Suras is based on *sujūd*, in which a person first bows, then kneels, then touches the head to the ground in worship. A series of such movements is called a *rak'a*. Later Qur'anic passages defined more specifically the ritual prayer, set the number of observances at five times per day, and fixed the orientation of the prayer toward the Ka'ba. The prayer is a form of remembrance that encompasses spirit, mind, and body. It is meant to break into normal human preoccupations and reorient a person to matters of ultimate concern. Islam includes other forms of prayer (petitions, intimate conversations with the deity), but when the term prayer is used in the Qur'an, it almost always refers to the ritual prayer of *salāt*.

Muslims have explained the sense of peace and tranquility gained by performing the prayer in a variety of ways: comparing the movements to Yogic positions, the physical position to that of an infant in the womb, and touching the ground to an act of humility and an acknowledgment that the human is part of the world of creation.

Pure Offering (*zakāt*). In addition to keeping the faith, carrying out just deeds, and performing the ritual prayer, the early Meccan Suras command the *zakāt*. The etymology of *zakāt* is associated primarily with purity, and secondarily with flourishing or growth. In giving a share of one's property, in an organized fashion (rather than in a tribal feast) to those in need, a person purifies both self and property. The concept of *zakāt* was defined further in later Qur'anic revelations and became one of the five pillars of Islamic life, institutionalized as a form of tithing obligatory on all Muslims. Note that when the words for prayer and offering, *salā* and *zakā*, stand independently, they are pronounced without a final "t", but when it is used with a following word, the "t" is frequently added. However, because it has become standard in English works to keep the "t", I have followed that precedent and hereafter use the "t" in referring to both terms.

APPROACHING THE QUR'ÁN

Remembrance (*dhikr*). This is one of the core concepts of the Qur'an and of Islamic civilization. Remembrance of the beloved formed the first section of the classical Arabic ode, the major form of expression in pre-Islamic Arabia. In the Qur'an, *dhikr* is both reminder and remembrance. The Qur'an refers to itself as a reminder to humankind. Islamic rituals, such as the obligatory prayer, are forms of reminder. The recitation of the Qur'an and Qur'anic calligraphy are sensibly embodied forms of reminder. In Islamic mysticism (Sufism), *dhikr* as both remembrance and reminder centers as well on meditative practices, including breathing, reciting over and over certain phrases (called *dhikrs*), and sometimes dance-like movements.

According to the Qur'an the human being is born not sinful, but forgetful, caught up in cycles of acquisition and competition that obscure matters of ultimate concern, matters represented and condensed in an ultimate way in the day of reckoning or moment of truth.

THE GENEROUS QUR'ÁN

SURAS 1, 53: 1-18

SURAS 81-114

RENDERED INTO ENGLISH
WITH COMMENTARY

BY MICHAEL SELLS

THE OPENING

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

BECAUSE OF ITS ELOQUENT STATEMENT of devotion and the manner in which it pervades religious life, The Opening has been called the Islamic equivalent of the Lord's Prayer in Christianity.

The word translated "opening," *fatiha*, means the opening in the sense of the opening of a chapter or a story. Unlike the other early hymic Suras, The Opening occurs not at the end of the Qur'anic written text, but at the very beginning. It is the most recited of all Qur'anic Suras, not only in prayers and liturgy, but also in everyday life. After business transactions, for example, The Opening is recited by both parties as a mark of good faith and a solemn affirmation of the responsibilities affirmed by each partner.

The Opening is the only Sura in which the phrase "In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring" does not occur before the Sura, but is actually considered part of the Sura itself. Just as that phrase is woven into the pattern of simple activities as a form of reminder so "Praise be to God" (*al-hamdu li llāh*) has become part of everyday speech. It is used after any good news or any praise, and as a response to the greeting "How are you?"

The two qualifications of God are "lord of the worlds" (the creator deity) and "master of the day of reckoning" (the deity who brings finality to all acts and all lives). The response for those hearing or reciting The Opening is to turn toward God in worship and for refuge.

The "the road straight" frequently is translated as "the straight path." The term rendered here as road, *sirāt*, would have connoted something grand to the inhabitants of the Arabian peninsula. There are many words in Arabic for paths; the Arabs of Muhammad's time traveled through the desert on barely discernible paths. By contrast, the word *sirāt* means a paved road, such as the roads of the Romans which the Arabian travelers might come across in their journeys.

53: 1-18

THE STAR

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

By the star as it falls
 Your companion has not lost his way nor is he
 deluded
 He does not speak out of desire
 This is a revelation
 5 taught him by one of great power
 and strength that stretched out over
 while on the highest horizon—
 then drew near and came down
 two bows' lengths or nearer
 10 He revealed to his servant what he revealed
 The heart did not lie in what it saw
 Will you then dispute with him his vision?

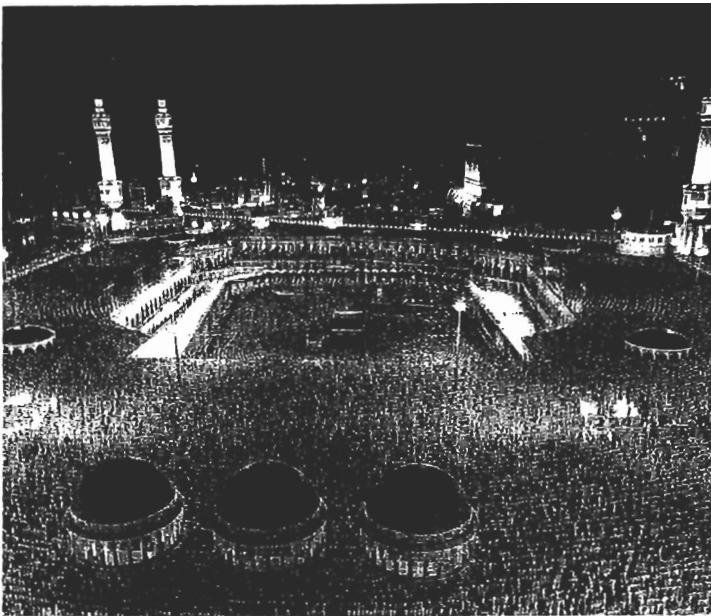
 He saw it descending another time
 at the lotus tree of the furthest limit
 15 There was the garden of sanctuary
 when something came down over the
 lotus tree, enfolding
 His gaze did not turn aside nor go too far
 He had seen the signs of his lord, great signs

COMMENTARY

THE FIRST EIGHTEEN VERSES of The Star are considered among the earliest revelations of the Qur'an and are the most explicit reference to Muhammad's prophetic vision. The Sura begins (1-12) with the divine voice swearing by the falling star that "your companion" has not gone mad or lost his way. "Your companion" is interpreted as Muhammad. His vision is also called a revelation (*wahy*) and is explicitly said to be rooted not in desire (*hawā*), which the Qur'an associates with the inspiration of the poets (Sura 26). The object of vision is never actually described. Instead, the text evokes the process of vision by tracing a movement along the highest horizon and then a descent and drawing near to the distance of "two bows' lengths." The passage ends with an affirmation of the validity of the vision: The heart of the prophet "did not lie in what he saw." This affirmation becomes a proof text for the claim among many mystics and philosophers that the locus of spiritual vision and mystical knowledge is the heart.

In a second passage (13-18), the divine voice, referring to Muhammad again in the third person, describes another vision ("He saw it descending another time"). Here, "the lotus tree of the furthest limit" is placed in or near the enigmatic "garden of sanctuary." We are told almost nothing about the tree, except that something came upon it in an enveloping manner. Of key importance is the "gaze" of the prophet, which does not "turn aside" or "go too far." This one verse became the paradigm for Islamic reflection on the proper state in contemplation. As in many evocative passages in the Qur'an, what is left unsaid is as important as what is said. Here, the power of the vision is evoked through a depiction of the gaze of the viewer, but the vision itself is never described in detail or given fixed form in a way that limits thought or imagination.

(Continued on page 47)



The Ka'aba, the spiritual axis of the Muslim world, at the center of the Sacred Mosque in Mecca. Pilgrims circle the Ka'aba as part of the pilgrimage rites.

When the Qur'an states "He saw it descending another time," the antecedent of the pronoun (*hu*, it/he) is unstated, and thus the referent of the "it" is not determinable from the passage. The identity of the referent became a matter of controversy, with the debate centering upon whether or not the deity can be seen in this world. Those for whom the vision of God can only occur in the afterlife tend to interpret the it/he as referring to the messenger-angel Gabriel.

THE OVERTURNING

In the Name of God the Compassionate the Caring

When the sun is overturned
 When the stars fall away
 When the mountains are moved
 When the ten-month pregnant camels
 are abandoned
 5 When the beasts of the wild are herded together
 When the seas are boiled over
 When the souls are coupled
 When the girl-child buried alive
 is asked what she did to deserve murder
 10 When the pages are folded out
 When the sky is flayed open
 When Jahím is set ablaze
 When the garden is brought near
 Then a soul will know what it has prepared
 15 I swear by the stars that slide,
 stars streaming, stars that sweep along the sky
 By the night as it slips away
 By the morning when the fragrant air breathes
 This is the word of a messenger ennnobled,
 empowered, ordained before the lord of the throne,
 holding sway there, keeping trust
 Your friend has not gone mad
 He saw him on the horizon clear
 He does not hoard for himself the unseen

(Continued on page 50)

COMMENTARY

THIS SURA OFFERS A COSMIC UNVEILING. The sky, the seas, the mountains, the normal order of life are pulled away, and the deepest secret within is revealed.

The English word *apocalypse* is derived from the Greek word for unveiling. In The Overturning, one mark of the apocalypse will be the question addressed to young girls who were buried alive. In ancient bedouin society, male children were valued more than female children. A female child could become a financial burden, and the family's honor was always vulnerable to attacks on her honor. As in other cultures, the disparity in social value led to practices such as infanticide. By placing the condemnation of this practice within the series of apocalyptic flashes, The Overturning makes it the epitome of human wrongdoing. The recompense for such extreme evil is called *Jahím*, one of several enigmatic terms the Qur'an uses in connection with the final reckoning (for further discussion of *Jahím*, see Sura 83 and the accompanying commentary on it).

After twelve verses marking the overturning, the Sura states that at that time each soul will know what it has prepared. By showing the ephemerality of what seems secure, the verses on cosmic unveiling attempt to reach that place within the self that is vulnerable before questions concerning ultimate value and reality. After a series of oaths, the Sura refers back to the key vision verses of Sura 53, the vision seen at the furthest limit:

Your friend has not gone mad
 He saw him on the horizon clear
 He does not hoard for himself the unseen

The word for "mad" (*majnún*) literally means possessed by the *jinn* (genies), who at the time of Muhammad were

(Continued on page 51)

25

This is not the word of a satan
struck with stones

Where are you going?
This is a reminder to all beings
For those who wish to walk straight
Your only will is the will of God
 lord of all beings

associated with amorous love, madness, and poetic inspiration. Thus the Qur'an is stating not only that Muhammad is not insane, but also that he is not a poet, inspired and possessed by *jinn*. Nor is he inspired by "a satan." Satans were considered a species of *jinn* and the Qur'an refers to "satans" or "the satan" as sources of empty ideas and egoistic inclinations. As in Sura 53 the object of the vision is unspecified. If the pronoun were translated as "him" rather than "it," the vision would refer to the angel Gabriel who brought to Muhammad the message of the Qur'an.

The Sura ends with the statement that it is a reminder (*dhikr*) to all beings, and with the question, "Where are you going?" This reminder occurs after the language of the Sura has challenged established patterns of human endeavor and human aspiration. The cosmos itself has been presented as a kind of veil, and its merely apparent solidity has been shown at a moment when that veil is torn away. The night sky and the morning air (cool, fresh, and fragrant in the desert) have been evoked as signs of a deeper reality. Only after this vision of cosmic unveiling and appeal to the signs of nature is the question about the direction of life posed.