The History and Importance of the Qur'an

How the Qur'an was revealed between 610 and 632, how it was compiled under Abu Bakr, Umar and Uthman, how it is used in law with the Hadiths, consensus and analogy, and why it is the basis of Muslim life.

The revelation of the Qur'an (610–632)

Qur'an means "recitation" or "that which is read". Muslims believe it is the **word of God**, revealed through the angel **Jibril** (Gabriel) to the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in **Arabic**, over about **23 years** (610–632).

- **First revelation (610).** At the age of about 40, the Prophet (pbuh) was meditating in the **cave of Hira** on Mount Nur near Makka. The angel Jibril appeared and commanded him to "**Read**" (the opening verses of **Sura 96**, *al-Alaq*). He was frightened, and was comforted by his wife **Khadijah** and her cousin **Waraqah ibn Nawfal**. This night is remembered as **Laylat al-Qadr** (the Night of Power) in Ramadan.
- **Pause and continuation.** There was then a short break (*fatrah*) before revelations continued. Early Makkan revelations are short and powerful verses on **God's oneness, the Last Day and moral behaviour**.
- **Makkan and Madinan suras.** In **Makka** (610–622) the verses stress **faith, Tawhid, the Hereafter and patience**. In **Madina** (622–632) they cover **law, family, worship, community and relations with others**. Makkan suras are mostly shorter, and Madinan suras longer.
- **How it was revealed.** Sometimes whole suras came at once, but more often verses came in **response to events or questions**. The Prophet (pbuh) **recited** each revelation to the Companions, who **memorised** it, and he told his **scribes** where it belonged.
- **The last revelation.** Revelation continued to the end of his life (632).

How revelation came

- Revelation was **not under the Prophet's control**. The Qur'an tells him not to hurry his tongue because God would gather and explain it (75:16–19).
- Companions saw signs of its coming: a **heavy weight** (once a camel could not carry him and a Companion felt his leg would be crushed), **sweat on his forehead even on a cold day**, and a **sound like the ringing of a bell**, which he said was the hardest kind. Sometimes the angel came in the **shape of a man** and spoke to him. He saw the angel in his true form only a few times, once at the Night Journey.
- Aishah and the scribe **Zayd ibn Thabit** both described these signs. After each revelation the Prophet had the scribe **read back** what he had written and corrected any mistake.

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- The Prophet also **told the scribes where each verse belonged**. For this reason the arrangement of the suras is not the order of revelation.
- Permission to **fight in defence** came in Madina (2:190, about 624). The last revelation is said to be 5:3 ("This day I have perfected your religion for you"), at Arafat during the Farewell Pilgrimage.

Why was the Qur'an revealed in parts? To make it **easier to carry and to remember** (the Qur'an says a mountain would have split if it had been sent down all at once, 59:21), to **strengthen the Prophet's heart** (25:32), to **answer questions and events** as they arose, and to give Muslims **time to understand and practise** each teaching.

Why was it revealed by word, not as a written book? Arabia had a strong **oral tradition**, so memory was a trusted way of keeping it. The Prophet could not read or write, so he **memorised** it exactly, and many Companions memorised it too. This protected the text from change.

Structure. The Qur'an has **114 suras** (chapters) of varying length, over 6,000 **verses** (*ayat*), and is divided into **30 parts** (*juz*) for reading. Sura 1 (*al-Fatiha*) opens it, and the rest are arranged roughly from the **longest to the shortest**, not in the order of revelation.

The preservation of the Qur'an in the Prophet's lifetime

- **Memory.** The Qur'an was passed on first by **memorisation**: the Prophet (pbuh) and many Companions (called **huffaz**, singular *hafiz*) knew it by heart. Every Ramadan Jibril reviewed the Qur'an with the Prophet (pbuh), and in his last year they did so twice.
- **Writing.** The revelations were also **written down** by scribes such as **Zayd ibn Thabit, Ali, Uthman, Ubayy ibn Ka'b** and **Mu'awiyah** on **palm leaves, flat stones, bones, pieces of leather** and parchment.
- **At his death** the Qur'an was **complete**, memorised by many people, and written in separate pieces, but it was **not yet gathered in one volume**.

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The compilation of the Qur'an under the Rightly Guided Caliphs

Caliph	What was done and why
Abu Bakr (632–634)	After the **Battle of Yamama** (about 633) many **huffaz** were killed. **Umar** feared that parts of the Qur'an would be lost and urged the Caliph to collect it. Abu Bakr agreed and asked **Zayd ibn Thabit**, who had been the Prophet's scribe and knew the Qur'an by heart, to collect it. Zayd checked each verse against **written records** and the **memory of two witnesses** and prepared a **single set of pages** (*suhuf*). It was kept by Abu Bakr, then by **Umar**, and then by Umar's daughter **Hafsah** (the Prophet's widow)
Umar (634–644)	Kept the collection safely (with Hafsah). Under him, the Qur'an was taught to the people of the conquered lands, and teachers were sent out
Uthman (644–656)	As Muslims spread over a vast area, people in different places recited with **different dialects and readings**, and a Companion, **Hudhayfah ibn al-Yaman**, was alarmed by quarrels on the Armenian front. Uthman borrowed Hafsah's pages and set up a committee led by **Zayd ibn Thabit** (with others from the Quraysh) to make **standard copies** in the **Quraysh dialect**. Copies were sent to major centres such as **Makka, Damascus (Syria), Kufa and Basra** (and one kept in Madina). Other versions were **withdrawn and burned** to prevent disputes. This is why the Qur'an today is called the **Uthmanic text**

NOTE

Shi'a Muslims also accept the Qur'an in the Uthmanic form. Shi'a tradition adds that **Ali** prepared his own collection soon after the Prophet's death. All Muslims agree the Qur'an today is **the same text** as that revealed to the Prophet (pbuh).

More detail on the compilations

- **Abu Bakr's collection.** Abu Bakr at first refused ("how can I do what the Prophet did not do?") until Umar convinced him. **Zayd ibn Thabit** was also reluctant and said that moving a mountain would have been easier. A group of Companions who knew the Qur'an by heart helped him. His **method** was to accept a verse only if it was **written down and also confirmed from memory**, backed by **two witnesses** who had heard it from the Prophet, and in the **Quraysh dialect**. Each sura was written on separate sheets (a *mushaf*, a name said to have come from Ibn Mas'ud).
- **Uthman's copies.** Zayd led a committee including **Abdur Rahman ibn al-Harith, Abdullah ibn al-Zubayr and Sa'id ibn al-As**. Where they differed on a word, the **Quraysh dialect** was followed. The finished text was **read aloud in the Prophet's Mosque** so that no one doubted it. Copies were sent with **teachers** to the chief cities, other versions were burned, and Uthman is called **Jami' al-Qur'an** ("the one who brought the Qur'an together").

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- **Why was Uthman right to burn the other copies?** Some criticised it as destroying God's word, but his aim was to protect the text from mistakes and quarrels. A wrongly pronounced word in Arabic can change the meaning, and rival versions would have divided the community.
- **Why is it important that the Qur'an is a book?** There is one **standard text**, copies can be made without mistakes, parts cannot be lost, people can read it anywhere (including by printing and digital copies), and Muslims everywhere use the **same words**.
- **Principles used by the compilers.** They kept to the **Quraysh dialect** of the original revelation; they **checked written copies against memory**; and they placed the suras in the order the Prophet had approved, which is roughly from longest to shortest.

Later developments. Diacritical (dot) marks and vowel signs were added under later rulers so that non-Arab Muslims could read the Arabic accurately. The text of the words has not changed.

Why was compilation important? It **protected** the Qur'an from loss, gave Muslims **one agreed text**, ended disputes about reading, and preserved the base of **Islamic law and belief** for all later generations.

The Qur'an and its major themes

The Qur'an teaches about **God** (his oneness, mercy and justice), **prophets** and earlier books, the **Last Day** and judgement, **worship** (prayer, charity, fasting, pilgrimage), **morality** (honesty, justice, care for the poor, family life) and **history lessons** (stories of earlier nations). Chapter 1 covers the themes of the set passages in detail.

The Qur'an in legal thinking

The Qur'an is the **first source of Islamic law (Shari'ah)**. It gives **general principles** and some specific rules (for example on prayer, inheritance, marriage, theft and interest). For matters it does not detail, scholars use three more sources:

Source	Meaning
The Qur'an	The word of God; the highest authority
The Hadiths (Sunnah)	The sayings and actions of the Prophet (pbuh): they **explain and apply** the Qur'an (for example, the details of how to pray)
Ijma' (consensus)	The agreement of the community's scholars on a question
Qiyas (analogy)	Applying a ruling in the Qur'an or Hadiths to a **new case** that is similar (for example, the ban on wine is extended to other intoxicants)

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Sunni schools of law accept all four sources. **Shi'a** scholars use the Qur'an, the Sunnah (including the sayings of the Imams), **consensus** and **reason** (*'aql*), and make less use of analogy.

Relationship between the sources. If a question can be answered directly from the Qur'an, the Qur'an is followed. If not, the Hadiths are used; if still unclear, **ijma'** or **qiyas** can be applied, but they must **never contradict** the Qur'an. *Ijtihad* is the effort of a qualified scholar to find a ruling.

The Qur'an as the first source of law

The Qur'an says it "guides to what is most upright" (17:9). It gives rules about **worship, society, crime, trade, marriage, inheritance and food**. Examples:

Area	Verse and rule
Worship	"Establish prayer and give zakat" (2:43)
Honest trade	"Give full measure when you measure and weigh with a straight balance" (17:35)
Crime and punishment	"Life for life, eye for eye..." (5:45); false accusation, theft (5:38)
Forbidden things	Intoxicants and gambling are the work of Satan (5:90); interest is forbidden (2:275)
Orphans' property	Those who unjustly eat it "eat fire into their bellies" (4:10)
Contracts and trusts	Put debts in writing and return deposits (2:282, 4:58)
Food	Which animals are lawful and unlawful (5:1)
Family	Inheritance (4:11–12), marriage and divorce

All the other sources get their authority from the Qur'an and **never contradict it**.

The Qur'an and the Hadiths in law

God commands Muslims to **take what the Messenger gives them** and refrain from what he forbids (59:7). The Prophet said that he had been given the Book "and something like it with it". The Hadiths **explain, fill in and sometimes qualify** the Qur'an. Five examples:

1. **Zakat.** The Qur'an orders zakat together with prayer (2:43) but does not give the amounts. A Hadith gives the **minimum (nisab)**: nothing is due below five *awqiyah* of silver, five camels or five *wasq* of grain.
2. **Theft.** The Qur'an says to cut off the hands of thieves (5:38). The Prophet explained that it is the **right hand, up to the wrist**.

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3. **Fasting.** The Qur'an says to eat and drink until the white thread is clear from the black thread of dawn (2:187). When Companions did not understand, the Prophet explained that it means the **light of day against the darkness of night**.
4. **Interest.** The Qur'an forbids interest (2:275). The Hadiths explain what counts, for example that exchanging goods or money must be done **hand to hand**.
5. **Inheritance.** The Qur'an tells people to leave a bequest to parents and relatives (2:180). A Hadith makes an exception: a **Muslim does not inherit from a non-Muslim, nor the reverse**.

The Prophet was the **first interpreter** of the Qur'an (*tafsir*). Muslims who obey the Prophet are also obeying God (4:80), for example when they pray as he prayed. The Hadiths in turn are the base for ijma' and qiyas, which are used only when they are silent.

Ijma' (consensus)

Meaning. *Ijma'* means "agreement". It is the **agreement of the qualified scholars of the community** on a new question, when neither the Qur'an nor the Sunnah gives a clear answer.

Basis. The Qur'an calls the community a **justly balanced** nation and the best of peoples because they enjoin good and forbid evil (2:143, 3:110). The Prophet said that **"my community will never agree on an error"**, and told Muslims to gather the righteous and decide matters by their counsel.

Kinds. Agreement on **beliefs** held by all Muslims (for example that the Qur'an is the word of God), and agreement on **legal rulings**.

Who may give it? Scholars have differed: the **Companions**, the **people of Madina**, the **Rightly Guided Caliphs**, the **scholars of any generation** (the common Sunni view), and for Shi'a Muslims the **Imams**.

Examples.

- A **grandfather** inherits in place of a dead father when the grandson dies, although the Qur'an does not say so in these words.
- A man may not marry a **grandmother or granddaughter**, extending the Qur'an's list (4:23).
- The Prophet used consultation at **Uhud** and the **Trench**; after his death, the Companions agreed to **collect the Qur'an**, Umar arranged **tarawih in congregation**, and Uthman added a **second call (adhan) on Fridays** because Madina had grown.
- In modern times scholars have used ijma' on new matters such as **IVF for married couples**.

Qiyas (analogy)

Meaning. *Qiyas* means "measuring one thing against another". A ruling from the Qur'an, Sunnah or ijma' (the **root, *asl***) is applied to a **new case (*far'*)** because they share the same **reason (*'illah*)**, giving a new **ruling (*hukm*)**.

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Basis. The hadith of **Mu'adh ibn Jabal**: sent as judge to Yemen, he said he would judge by the Qur'an, then by the Sunnah, and then **use his own reasoned judgement**. The Prophet approved. The scholar al-Shafi'i also pointed to the command to face the Ka'bah (2:150): a person who cannot see it must use reason to find the direction.

Examples.

Root (*asl*)	New case (*far'*)	Reason (*'illah*)	Ruling
The Qur'an forbids trade after the Friday call (62:9)	All kinds of business	They distract from prayer	Forbidden at that time
"Every intoxicant is *khamr* and every *khamr* is forbidden"	Heroin, cocaine and other drugs	Intoxication	Forbidden
The punishment for false accusation is 80 lashes (24:4)	Drinking wine (Ali's advice to Umar)	A drunk man speaks wildly and may slander	80 lashes

The root must always come from the Qur'an, the Sunnah or ijma'. Qiyas cannot overrule them.

Why some scholars (especially Shi'a) reject it: it depends on **personal opinion**, different scholars may reach different answers, and it does not have the support of the community's agreement.

Why it matters today. New questions (smoking, drugs, the internet) can be answered **without changing the revealed law**, so the Qur'an and Sunnah do not become out of date.

> **The [10] question "how the Qur'an is used with the other sources": give the Qur'an first (with 4:105 and 10:37 and one example), then the Hadiths (59:7 and two or three examples), then ijma' (meaning, basis, one example) and qiyas (meaning, the asl/far'/'illah/hukm method, one example), and end with the rule that the later sources never contradict the earlier.**

The importance of the Qur'an

- It is the **final and complete guidance** from God and the **basis of all thought and action** in Islam.
- It is recited in **every prayer** and during Ramadan, and read for guidance and comfort.
- It shapes **belief** (Tawhid, prophethood, the Last Day), **worship**, **law**, **morals** and **community life**.
- It created a **common language** and **sense of unity** among Muslims, and led to the growth of **learning** (grammar, calligraphy, recitation and the study of its meaning).
- Muslims treat the book with great **respect**: they wash before touching it, and learn parts or all of it by heart.

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Translation and interpretation

- Only the **Arabic** text is the Qur'an. A translation is treated as an **explanation of the meaning**, with no equal status. It is the Arabic that is recited in prayer.
- The best explanation (*tafsir*) of the Qur'an is **the Qur'an itself** (one verse explains another), then the **Sunnah**, then the sayings of the Companions and qualified scholars who know Arabic and the circumstances of revelation (*asbab an-nuzul*).
- The Qur'an itself warns (3:7) that some people will twist verses. A famous example is the **"verse of the sword"** (9:5), which people quote without its context: it concerns polytheists who broke their treaties, and the passage goes on to allow those who repent to go free. The Qur'an also says there is **no compulsion in religion** (2:256).
- Scholars sometimes differ over a passage. In Sura 108, **al-Kawthar** is understood as the abundance of blessings, the Qur'an, the river in paradise, or (by Shi'a Muslims) the Prophet's descendants through Fatimah.

Why the Qur'an is unique

The Qur'an confirms the earlier books (2:4, 5:48), but Muslims hold it unique because:

- It exists in its **original form**, and God promised to guard it (15:9).
- Its language, **Arabic**, is still spoken by millions.
- It is **universal** and addressed to all people for all time (39:2), unlike books sent to one people for a time.
- It is **complete**, covering belief, worship, law and morals (5:3).
- Its text and the circumstances of its revelation are **historically recorded**.

Hadith qudsi ("sacred hadith") is a report in which the Prophet relates what God said, in the Prophet's own words. It is **not part of the Qur'an** and is not recited in prayer. Examples: "My mercy overcomes My wrath" and "Pride is My cloak".

Why does the Qur'an stress knowledge? The first word is "Read", and the Qur'an says that God taught by the pen. People need knowledge to understand their duties to God and others and their own potential, so learning and teaching are acts of obedience.

Why is the Qur'an still relevant? Its guidance is universal (for example on honest trade), it links Muslims to God, and the pillars it commands also build responsibility and brotherhood.

> **Remember: revelation 610–632 → memorised and written in the Prophet's time → Abu Bakr collected it (Yamama) → Uthman standardised it (the dialect dispute) → today's text is the Uthmanic text.**

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TRY IT

Describe how the Qur'an was compiled after the death of the Prophet (pbuh). Why was the work of Uthman important?

Outline. *Abu Bakr:* after Yamama many huffaz died; Umar's suggestion; Zayd ibn Thabit collected the text, checked with two witnesses; pages kept with Abu Bakr, Umar, then Hafsah. *Uthman:* different readings in distant lands, Hudhayfah's warning; Zayd and a committee made standard copies in the Quraysh dialect and sent them to major cities; other copies were burned. *Importance:* one agreed text, unity, no disputes, and the preservation of the Qur'an as it was revealed.

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