

# Introduction

## *The Problem of Reading the Qur'an*

### Obstacles to Reading the Qur'an

The genesis of this book comes from a simple question: how should non-Muslims read the Qur'an? On one level, this would seem to be a relatively straightforward issue. The Qur'an is a sacred text, comparable to the Bible and the scriptures of other religious traditions, which are often read and studied in academic and literary contexts. From that point of view, the questions might seem to be primarily technical—how is the text organized, what are its primary features, and what is its audience and principal interpretive traditions? Surely the Qur'an should be approached like any other text.

But with the Qur'an the situation is different. The Qur'an is the source of enormous anxiety in Europe and America, for both religious conservatives, who are alarmed about a competitive postbiblical revelation, and secularists, who view Islam with deep suspicion as an irrational force in the post-Enlightenment world. Neither of those worldviews takes the Qur'an very seriously as a text; according to these views, it is instead a very dangerous problem. It is even the case that a number of attempts have been made to outlaw the sale and distribution of the Qur'an completely, as a text that promotes violence, an argument made by fundamentalist Hindus in India during the 1980s and more recently by a right-wing anti-immigration party in the Netherlands. In 2002, outside religious groups sued the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for violating the freedom of religion, when (at my suggestion) it assigned a translation of selections from the Qur'an as its summer reading program for all incoming students that year.<sup>1</sup> In 2010, an obscure Christian pastor in Florida drew worldwide attention when he threatened to burn copies of the Qur'an, claiming that it was the cause of the terrorist attacks against American targets in September 2001. These are only a few manifestations of contemporary nervousness about reading the Qur'an. I would argue that such an attitude of suspicion is hardly conducive to a fair-minded understanding of the text.

Hostile readers of the Qur'an use a literary approach that is the equivalent of a blunt instrument. They make no attempt to understand the text as a whole; instead, they take individual verses out of context, give them the most extreme interpretation possible, and implicitly claim that over 1 billion Muslims around the world robotically adhere to these extremist views without exception. This is, in effect, a conspiracy theory that has virally multiplied in significant sectors of modern Euro-American society. It is irrational, it is paranoid, and it is out of touch with the realities of the lives of most Muslims around the world

today. It ignores the existence of multiple traditions of interpreting the Qur'an in very different fashions (see chapter 1). Unfortunately, a small minority of extremists, who quote the Qur'an in support of terrorist violence, have been magnified by the media into a specter that is now haunting Europe (and the United States) more intensely than Marxism ever did.<sup>2</sup> In part because of these contemporary anxieties, it is difficult for most Europeans and Americans to read the Qur'an.

What is the Qur'an, actually? The historical evidence regarding the origin of the Qur'an is discussed in greater detail in chapter 1, but a brief summary is offered here for those who are unfamiliar with the text. The Qur'an (the title literally means "recitation"—the older spelling "Koran" is no longer used by scholars) can be described as a book in the Arabic language that is divided into 114 chapters known as suras; these suras in turn are divided into numbered verses (*ayas*), of which there are nearly 6,000 in all. While there is debate over exactly how the Qur'an was transmitted and collected, there is widespread agreement among both Muslim authorities and modern Euro-American scholars that the basic text emerged in sections during the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad over a period of some twenty-three years (roughly 610–32 CE). Then, by a process that is still quite unclear, these portions were assembled into the present form over the next few decades.<sup>3</sup> The text features numerous indications of oral composition techniques, such as repetition, argumentative ("agonistic") style, building blocks, symmetry, and formulaic utterances, which are often difficult for modern readers to appreciate.<sup>4</sup> In terms of chronological sequence, the most significant division of the suras of the Qur'an is marked by the emigration (*hijra*) of the Prophet Muhammad in 622 CE, when he left the unfriendly environment of pagan Mecca and took leadership over the town of Medina; this was roughly halfway through his prophetic career. The Meccan and Medinan suras show quite different qualities. The short and rhythmically powerful Meccan suras sustained the worship services of a small community of believers under pressure from a hostile pagan establishment. In contrast, the lengthy and prosaic Medinan suras debated scriptural and legal issues with Jews and Christians, at a time when Muhammad's followers were striving to survive as a community during a difficult struggle with opposing military forces and political treachery. The differing characteristics of the Meccan and Medinan suras will be crucial for understanding the changes in the way the Qur'an unfolded over time.

The other basic point to be made about the Qur'an is that it has a central importance in Islamic religious practice. Muslims (who number well over 1 billion souls today) consider the Qur'an to be the word of God, transmitted through the Prophet Muhammad. Although over 80 percent of Muslims worldwide are not native speakers of Arabic, all observant Muslims need to know at least portions of the Qur'an by heart in the original language, to recite in their daily prayers. Recitation of the Arabic text of the Qur'an is a demanding art; at the highest level,

virtuoso Qur'an reciters demonstrate vocal skills comparable to those of an opera singer. Handwritten copies of the Qur'an, often in lavish and lovingly created calligraphic styles, represent one of the most revered forms of Islamic art. The Qur'an is a major source of Islamic religious ethics and law, and it has had a pervasive impact on the literatures of Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, and many other languages spoken by Muslims.

In comparison with the Bible, the Qur'an exhibits much greater textual stability, and the variant readings found in different manuscripts are largely trivial differences in pronunciation or vocabulary. A number of theories have been advanced in recent years by European writers, questioning the traditional account of its composition. Some have proposed that the Qur'an was actually assembled as long as two centuries after the time of the Prophet Muhammad. This hypothetical argument has not gained much traction, because of a lack of supporting evidence. Other more bizarre theories have been advanced, claiming that the Qur'an is really based on a Christian text, or that it is not written in Arabic at all, but in a form of Syriac that is badly understood (see chapter 1). Scholars of biblical studies (and readers of *The Da Vinci Code*) are certainly familiar with breathless exposés that claim to overturn all of the history of Christianity. This kind of radical revisionism probably gets more of a hearing when it concerns Islam, in part because most people are less familiar with the subject, but also because of fantasy expectations about debunking the Qur'an; otherwise it is hard to understand why such eccentric publications would be featured on the front page of the *New York Times*.<sup>5</sup>

While the Qur'an overlaps with the Bible on certain subjects, it is unfamiliar enough in its distinctive narratives and in its stylistic peculiarities that many first-time readers have pronounced it to be impenetrable. The strangeness of the Qur'an for the Jewish or Christian reader lies in the fact that it does not repeat earlier biblical texts but instead makes brief allusions to them while providing a new and original synthesis that departs from familiar ways of reading the Old and New Testaments. Though the Bible, especially in the King James Version, has had centuries of powerful impact on the development of English prose, the Qur'an remains an unknown cipher for most English speakers, despite its tremendous influence on the literatures and languages of the Middle East, Africa, and Asia.

Given the blank slate of sheer unfamiliarity with the Qur'an among Americans and Europeans, it is perhaps inevitable that certain cultural habits have become obstacles to an understanding of it. In the mood of anxiety and fear of the post-9/11 era, it is perhaps understandable that one of these habits would be the temptation to find quick answers in this ancient text, to provide simple solutions to an urgent modern political problem. Unfortunately, nervous haste all too readily leads to serious problems of misrepresentation, as isolated phrases are made to stand in for a whole text, a single text is made to stand for an entire religion, and extremist individuals magnified by the media are taken to be representative of hundreds of millions of people in dozens of different countries. These are not trivial mistakes;

weighty and unfortunate consequences flow from any distorted prejudice that substitutes for real knowledge.

At this point, I would like to draw attention to several ways in which it has been common to approach a text like the Qur'an superficially. One is what Professor Peter Wright of Colorado College calls "religious tourism," which he defines as "the presumption shared by many people that learning about religion consists in hearing various dogmas and then arguing about whether or not one finds those dogmas compelling."<sup>6</sup> Put another way, religion is thought of as a marketplace in which the commodities are "beliefs," which supposedly can be determined and evaluated by a quick look at a few lines, regardless of their meaning in context. Obviously, one does not need to actually read much, or take any classes, in order to decide what one likes or does not like; advertising and the media typically fill in the blanks for consumers of religion, just as they do for buyers of other commodities.

But it turns out that texts like the Qur'an, which come from far away and which have been held in reverence by many people over centuries, have multiple meanings. There are major groups of believers who accept the Qur'an (or the Bible) as an authority but who have radically different understandings of what it is all about. To imagine that one can pick up a complicated text like this, read a few lines, and know what it "says" on any given topic is unrealistic, to say the least. As one early Muslim leader observed, the Qur'an does not speak, but it does require an interpreter (see chapter 1). One of the key points of this book is that the focus of the Qur'an underwent significant changes during the twenty-three years when it was being delivered. If in fact the Qur'an altered its expression and emphasis for changing audiences and circumstances on its first appearance, how could one decide what the Qur'an says on any given subject for all times? Another major conclusion of this book is that the central messages of the Qur'an are embedded in its structure, in the way that its component parts are put together, so pulling a random verse out of context is as likely as not to produce misinformation. The good news is that, with a little more effort, one can come to understand both the structures by which the Qur'an is composed and the changing literary and historical situations within which it had meaning for its audiences.

Another questionable assumption is the idea that if one understands the Qur'an, one understands the entire Islamic faith, and therefore one understands all Muslims. This breathtakingly simple concept, a by-product of Protestant views of scripture, is no doubt convenient; it means that in order to understand Muslims one does not really have to take seriously things like hundreds of years of history and politics, social and economic conditions, the cultures of different regions, and so on. It would be easy if, from a few lines in a sacred text, one could predict everything about the behavior of hundreds of millions of people in widely separated countries, as if they were programmed from a central computer. A simple thought experiment should indicate otherwise. What does the New Testament tell us about modern American Christian attitudes on issues like abortion, homosexuality, and

environmentalism? Since Christians fall on all sides of these issues (let alone the debate about which groups count as Christian), many additional factors would have to be introduced to provide convincing explanations of these questions. Likewise, the Qur'an by itself is far from explaining the history of Muslim majority societies. Even in a relatively specialized subject like classical Islamic law and ethics, the Qur'an is only one of several sources of authority. Those who wish to understand Muslims today will need to look at a great many other subjects besides the Qur'an.

Another obstacle that needs to be addressed is the assumption that the Qur'an, unlike the Bible or the Greek and Latin classics, is an exotic oriental text that is foreign to the traditions of "the West." Elsewhere I have attempted to point out that Islam plays a significant role in both European and American history, and that it would be a mistake to pretend otherwise.<sup>7</sup> More important, recent research is making it possible to understand how closely the Qur'an is related to other ancient texts, both biblical and later in origin. The intertextual relationship between the Qur'an and other writings of "Western civilization" is a controversial subject only in theology. That is, for Christian theologians, and later for post-Enlightenment European scholars, the Qur'an was viewed as an inferior derivative work, a travesty of the Bible. Conversely, for Muslim scholars, divergences between the Qur'an and biblical texts were proof of the distortions of the Bible. For neither of these groups has it been considered worthwhile to investigate the way that the Qur'an engages with earlier texts, as part of a shared civilization. If one sets aside such theological competition, however, once this barrier is removed it becomes wonderfully apparent that the Qur'an was aimed at an audience that was quite aware of a wide range of ancient religious literature that is also claimed by the West. Moreover, like other prophetic writings, the Qur'an engages in critical rewriting of those previous texts as a way of establishing its own voice. While we are far from having a comprehensive view of this intertextual relationship, one of the aims of this book is to acquaint readers with examples of the ways in which the Qur'an references and grapples with earlier sacred writings. Seeing the text in this way makes it clear that the Qur'an is in fact a part of the same tradition as the Bible.

The problem of reading the Qur'an is compounded by the fact that the scholarship surrounding this text is one of the most forbidding and technical fields of what used to be called Oriental studies. Much of the modern scholarship on the subject is published in German and French, and even the English-language materials are located mostly in specialized journals or in hard-to-find collections of articles. Moreover, Qur'anic studies as an academic field has been pursued by a relatively small number of researchers, so that it can scarcely compare with the vast number of publications that have been produced in biblical studies over the past



century or so. Still, there have been significant advances made in Qur'anic scholarship in recent years, which include the first specialized academic journal devoted to the subject, plus a number of excellent academic syntheses and reference works, including the extremely valuable *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*.<sup>8</sup> But it is still difficult for the average interested reader to get access to the most important available scholarship on the Qur'an. The media and popular writings about Islam are much more interested in oddball attempts at discrediting the Qur'an than in the more challenging task of reading the text seriously. Internet sites operated by religious organizations (whether attacking Islam or defending it) shed more heat than light upon the subject. What is needed at this point is a clear and straightforward presentation of the main issues and debates in modern scholarship concerning the structure and characteristics of the Qur'an, which will enable readers to come to a significant understanding of this complicated text, its relationship to other scriptures, and its historical context. That rather urgent need is the pretext for this guide to reading the Qur'an.

## Aims of This Book

This book is aimed at several overlapping groups of readers. The first audience I have in mind is college and university students taking a course on Islam, the Qur'an, Abrahamic religions, world religions, or comparative literature; this includes secondary school students who have the opportunity to take courses on some of these topics. Along with my students, several times I have worked through many of the problems explored in this book in my own course on the Qur'an as literature. An audience of students can be presumed to be intelligent and curious, though not necessarily as having any particular background on the subject. For them, my goal is to provide historical and literary access to the text, so that students can not only come to an understanding of significant parts of the Qur'an but can also develop the skills to read it (and other challenging texts) on their own. In accordance with the principles of the academic study of religion, this is presented in a nontheological fashion. It is not assumed that students or readers share any particular religious orthodoxy, and no judgment is made about whether or not the Qur'an is a divine revelation or the word of God. What is undeniable is the fact that the Qur'an is a very important text that has been taken seriously by hundreds of millions of people for well over a thousand years, and that it is related to a number of earlier scriptural texts. On that historical and literary basis, it is not only feasible but also important to pursue an understanding of how the Qur'an works. There are also quite a few general readers outside of the university who are genuinely curious about what kind of book the Qur'an is and how to understand it, and this literary and historical introduction is designed for them as well.

I am aware that there are other audiences, both religious and nonreligious, for this guide to reading the Qur'an who have interests that go beyond academic inquiry. For them too, I believe

that a historical and literary approach will be of great importance. Although my approach is nontheological, I will return to the question of the theological implications of the literary study of the Qur'an in the conclusion of this book. Increasingly, members of other religious faiths are realizing that the study of the Qur'an can be relevant to their own traditions. Thus, students in Christian or Jewish theological seminaries and divinity schools (and religiously minded readers in general) will find that many of the intellectual tools developed in this book have an interesting relevance to their own religious investigations. For them, the question of the relationship of the Qur'an to biblical texts can have considerable significance when it is carried out in a nonpartisan fashion without predetermined agendas.

Finally, there will undoubtedly be Muslim readers who are curious about what non-Muslim scholars make of the Qur'an, whether these readers are concerned to defend their own faith or to ask questions about it. Having always had Muslim students in my classes and among my graduate students, I want to underline the fact that this historical and literary approach is impartial and respectful, and that it seeks the understanding that is the basis for real communication. From that perspective, I hope this book will be useful to Muslim readers as well, even though it does not reproduce the authoritative views of the Qur'an that would be found in Muslim religious institutions.

This guide to reading the Qur'an by its very nature assumes a literary approach to the text, which is a method that has already been well developed for the study of the Bible as literature. By referring to the Qur'an as literature, I have something very specific in mind: the Qur'an as a text is formulated with a language and style that may be understood in terms of its literary forms and contents. Like other sacred texts, the Qur'an may be studied through its use of literary features, such as hyperbole, metaphor, allegory, symbolism, personification, irony, wordplay, and poetry.<sup>9</sup> Regardless of whether or not one considers the Qur'an to be a divine communication, the fact remains that it is a text expressed in human language and aimed at human audiences and that it appeared in a particular historical context. It is therefore possible for any reader to ask questions about its form and content and to come to a better understanding about how it would have been received at the time of its delivery. The related issues of how the Qur'an connects to literary traditions in the languages of the Mediterranean and western Asia and how the Qur'an has been interpreted by Muslim scholars over the centuries are separate questions (and immense subjects) that are outside the scope of this book. The great advantage of this literary approach is that it can appeal to nonspecialists, and it does not require readers to declare any particular religious allegiance in advance. No doubt, a literary and historical approach carries with it a series of assumptions about the nature of texts, and those assumptions may be debated. Nevertheless, this method has the advantage of offering a relatively open space for discussion that is not dominated by confessional or ideological concerns.

How does this book differ from other introductions to the Qur'an? Simply claiming to use a literary and historical approach is not enough, since literary and historical frameworks also characterize the hostile and condescending studies of European Orientalists, who have seen the Qur'an as both foreign ("Oriental," that is, not Western) and the product of an inferior colonized civilization. Instead, I am working from the perspective of a post-Orientalist and cosmopolitan approach to the study of Islam (chapter 1). What this boils down to is that the Qur'an, like many other influential and important works of the past, is part of a global heritage that is relevant to any educated person, regardless of his or her religious persuasion—or lack of it. By starting out with that assumption, I am stating that the Qur'an is a work that is worth studying, on its own terms and in its own context, without the negative preconceptions that are all too commonly applied to it. In this way, the Qur'an can be seen in terms of broad humanistic and social-scientific issues, so it can be integrated into the curriculum of knowledge rather than isolated as an exotic item.

By looking at the Qur'an as a literary work that exists in history, I am also taking it out of the context of scriptural authority. What is striking about most recent general publications on the Qur'an is the way they treat it mainly as an authoritative text that has a certain number of particular themes and messages that can be discovered and defined. That is, they consider the Qur'an from a postcanonical perspective, which means that it is a finished work to be seen primarily as an unchallenged source of teachings and commandments for the community that accepts it as a sacred text. Thus the majority of presentations of the Qur'an, by proposing to explain how Muslims understand the Qur'an, end up deferring to the historic interpretations of it that are found in the dominant traditions of Islamic thought. Although that is certainly a legitimate project, such a subject-oriented approach is open to the objection that it assumes that all of the Qur'an is to be treated as equally authoritative and consistent, and it tends to accept uncritically the interpretive conclusions of current forms of Sunni (and, to a much lesser extent, Shi'i) orthodoxy. Aside from the conspiracy theorists who wish to debunk and deconstruct the Qur'an, nearly all general treatments of the Qur'an (whether written by Muslims or by non-Muslims) adopt some notion of traditional Islamic scholarship as the baseline for interpretation. This observation is true of the anti-Islamic activists who wish to ban the Qur'an as a dangerous incitement to violence, and it is also applicable to fundamentalist Muslim engineers who think of the Qur'an as an instruction manual, which they distribute on numerous look-alike websites. All of these sources purport to tell the reader what the Qur'an "says."

What is missing from nearly all these approaches is any sense of the exciting scholarship that has been done on the Qur'an as a text that has developed over time and which unfolded in interaction and dialogue with a contemporary audience.<sup>10</sup> Instead of offering the reader



selections from the Qur'an organized around topical themes, I present a chronological reading of the Qur'anic text, following and building on the best research of modern scholarship. The historical approach to the unfolding of the Qur'an was initially proposed by Theodor Nöldeke a century and a half ago, and it has proven to be a sturdy method that continues to be fruitful, especially as developed more recently by scholars such as Angelika Neuwirth. This approach to the Qur'an offers an attractive alternative to the usual method of reading the text. This is because the official edition of the Qur'an arranges the 114 suras more or less in decreasing order of size, and it turns out that the parts of the Qur'an that were the last to be delivered are found at the beginning, since they are the longest. The result is that if one reads the Qur'an in its official order, it is extremely difficult for the new reader to understand what is going on; it is the equivalent of starting a novel by reading the last chapter first. But if one approaches the text chronologically, beginning with the short suras toward the end, which were the first to be delivered, a very different reading experience results that arguably makes a great deal more sense to new readers. This chronological approach also recapitulates the sequence of the Qur'an that was experienced by its first audience. That, in short, is the method adopted in this guide to reading the Qur'an. It is, of course, quite different from the ritual study of the Qur'an as a divine liturgy, as practiced in Muslim communities. There, accurate pronunciation and recitation of the richly poetic Arabic text according to complex rules provides an experience quite different from silently reading a prosaic English translation. But such a gap is to be expected in a literary and historical study that does not claim to duplicate the reading of an insider.<sup>11</sup>

There are four basic elements of the chronological and literary approach to the Qur'an used in this book: development, structure, intertextuality, and historical context. These four elements can be briefly explained as follows.

First, establishing the chronological sequence of the suras of the Qur'an, even in a rough fashion, permits an appreciation of the development of the text over time. This means that one can pursue the question of how the first sections of the Qur'an were received by its audience, prior to the formulation of the Qur'an as a completed book; this may be considered the precanonical understanding of the Qur'an. To give one simple example, the very word *Qur'an* ("recitation"), when it first occurred in the earliest Meccan suras, would not have signified to listeners the completed text "between two covers" that we know today, since only a portion of the text had come into existence at that time. By comparing the different meanings that such a term undergoes chronologically, or by looking at the distinctive styles, structures, and vocabularies of different periods, one can build up a sense of the way that Qur'anic discourse developed in relation to its audience. In addition, there is the very important phenomenon of later insertions in early suras, which in many cases can be explained as the result of questions

that listeners asked about passages that needed clarification or comment. Detecting these phases in the composition and construction of Qur'anic passages allows the reader to understand why the text took on its current form.

Second, appreciation of the internal structure and organization of the Qur'an is extremely helpful for grasping its overall message, and it offers ways to comprehend the relation of one passage to another. Within the chronological framework, the primary unit of analysis is the sura, which needs to be understood as a literary whole rather than a random assortment of unrelated verses. And the sura, which to the new reader may indeed look like a random composition, must be broken down into sections that illustrate the way meaning is expressed. Stylistic analysis, for example, has demonstrated that many suras of the Qur'an exhibit a tripartite structure, in which the opening and closing sections affirm revelation, while the central section often relates a scriptural narrative concerning prophecy and its reception. Having a sense of this kind of structure helps readers to understand the dynamics within a given sura. This threefold organization, especially in the Meccan suras, follows established models, evoking not only the performance of a monotheistic worship service but also the odes of the pre-Islamic Arabic poets (chapter 3). There are also many instances of distinctive literary forms and genres, such as oaths, end-times or apocalyptic, signs of God in nature, and debate (explored in chapter 1), that are helpful to understanding different expressions in the Qur'an. Especially noteworthy is the strong presence of symmetrical organization or ring composition in many sections of the Qur'an (discussed at length in reference to Medinan suras in chapter 4). This structural feature, in which central messages are surrounded by contrasting frame sections, is very helpful for determining the most important points of emphasis in the Qur'an; ring composition indicates that the central points have priority and furnish principles of interpretation that govern the apparently conflicting statements that are typically found in adjacent verses.

Third, intertextuality is the relationship of one literary text to another, which can range from outright quotation to the subtlest of echoes. The Qur'an contains extensive reflections on earlier religious texts, mainly the Bible and to a lesser extent other writings. Theological concerns over the possible corruption of earlier scriptures have led later Muslim commentators to discount these connections, in order to preserve the purity of the Qur'anic revelation. Hostile readers of the Qur'an have often overemphasized what they saw as the dependence of the Qur'an on biblical sources, which allowed them to depict the Qur'an as an inferior and derivative work. Leaving these agendas aside, it turns out to be surprisingly useful to examine the way that the Qur'an alludes to and revises earlier scriptures, presenting itself as their fulfillment. This is not a new technique. The New Testament takes much the same approach with the Old Testament; and within the Hebrew Bible, later prophets revise earlier ones.<sup>12</sup> This literary relationship by way of allusion also clarifies the way in which the Qur'an forms

part of a long tradition of scriptural reflection.

Fourth, historical context is extremely important in providing clues for the interpretation of particular passages. A great deal can be done with rhetorical analysis of internal elements of the text, such as formulas of address, and implied audiences, to provide convincing explanations of the significance of Qur'anic language. External sources need to be used with some caution, however, since some parts of the interpretive and historical traditions of early Islam seem to have been constructed precisely in order to fill in gaps and clarify unclear aspects of the Qur'an. Biographies of the Prophet Muhammad, for example, tend to be much more historically useful for the Medinan suras than for the Meccan suras.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, it is useful to consider information about historical context to provide interpretive frameworks for understanding the Qur'an.

When these elements of literary and historical analysis are applied in a careful reading of the Qur'an, new perspectives emerge on fundamental issues. Regarding the initial audience of the Qur'an in Mecca, archeological evidence of the widespread extent of tombs in the Arabian Peninsula (chapter 2), combined with analysis of debate passages from the middle and late Meccan suras (chapter 3), suggests that the "pagans" of Mecca were far more knowledgeable about prophetic religious themes than is commonly acknowledged. The existence of later insertions in early Meccan suras (chapter 2) indicates that the Qur'an was revised in dialogue with its first audience, who recited these suras frequently in worship services and asked questions about difficult passages. Application of this principle to sura 53 ("The Star") leads to the conclusion that the so-called Satanic verses in all likelihood never existed as part of the Qur'an (chapter 2). The intensive liturgical use of early Qur'anic texts is demonstrated by the many references that sura 15 (al-Hijr) makes to early Meccan texts, particularly the ritually important sura 1 (chapter 3). Sura 18 ("The Cave") draws upon mythical, folkloric, and epic narratives (the Seven Sleepers, al-Khidr, the romance of Alexander) from Christian and other Near Eastern sources and reframes them to provide a distinctive new interpretation. A close study of debates in selected Medinan suras (chapter 4) indicates that the sharp demarcations of religious identity that we assume today were not nearly as clear for listeners presupposed by the Qur'an. In fact, the evidence supports the notion that the "believers" in Medina who accepted the authority of Muhammad included Jews and Christians along with converted pagans. Rhetorical analysis in terms of symmetrical "ring composition" makes it possible to locate the central points of emphasis in the lengthy and complicated Medinan suras, revealing the Qur'an's firm articulation of the principle of religious pluralism, despite circumstances of historical conflict. The presence in the Medinan suras of revised versions of key liturgical texts from the Bible (including Psalms and New Testament canticles) illustrates a typical prophetic rewriting of previous revelations. These are examples of the conclusions resulting from the literary and historical analysis offered here.

In summary, the overall approach of this book is to provide the interested reader access to a

scholarly approach to the Qur'an based upon recent research, but without the jargon and overly technical language typical of specialized research in this field. This is what the French call *un livre de diffusion*, an accessible book that presents and clarifies some of the best academic work on the Qur'an, laying out the debates and what is at stake, in a way that empowers the reader to do more reading independently.<sup>14</sup> In pursuing this task, I have drawn selectively upon what seem to me the most compelling examples of modern scholarship, pushing their conclusions further with new applications and synthesizing their insights in a way that has not been done before. I use notes to indicate the sources that I bring to the table for this discussion, and also for a few detailed comments that will be of interest primarily to specialists. But the main argument of the book has been designed for the motivated general reader with no particular background. This task is approached not by a complete translation of the Qur'an but by a "reading" of selected suras of the Qur'an in chronological order, including a liberal amount of translation, examining internal textual structure and relationships with textual predecessors as well as with other portions of the Qur'an. I hope that this book can be used as a model, both in classes and by motivated individual readers, to set up reading strategies for exploring portions of the Qur'an that I do not directly discuss (some suggestions for course instructors and for individual readers are provided in appendix C). Since this is an introductory work, it aims to illustrate a particular literary approach to the Qur'an without attempting to be exhaustive, with the added intention of encouraging other scholars to carry out further investigations of those parts of the Qur'an that are not covered here.

The purpose of this literary reading is understanding rather than the taking of theological sides. The title of this book, *How to Read the Qur'an*, indicates both the problem outlined in this chapter and the method demonstrated in the remainder of the book. I use the term "reading" deliberately, to indicate that a literary engagement with the Qur'an is necessarily an act of interpretation. This is, after all, only one reading of the Qur'an as literature, and others will surely produce different readings that either complement or challenge the conclusions offered here.

## Style and Organization of This Book

My translations of passages from the Qur'an have several different formats, depending upon the focus of the argument at hand. Sometimes each verse is placed on a separate numbered line, especially in the case of the early suras with very short lines. Translations are also presented with short verses clustered in paragraphs, occasionally separated by slashes. For certain more complex and longer suras, each verse begins a new line, but successive phrases (the amount that can be easily recited in a single breath) start a new line that is indented beyond the first line. These different presentations are meant to clarify the structure of the sura. Because the

voice of the implied speaker shifts frequently throughout the Qur'an, pronouns clearly referring to God and titles for revelation ("the Book," "the Reminder") are capitalized in translations from the Qur'an, in order to avoid confusion for readers.

Reference to the Qur'an follows the verse divisions of the standard Egyptian edition: thus, 5:3 indicates sura 5, verse 3. Occasionally, for longer verses, decimal points are used to indicate sections within a verse; 5:3.1 would be the beginning of that verse, 5:3.5 is the middle, and 5:3.9 designates the end. All translations of the Qur'an are mine unless otherwise indicated (the sura titles in chart 1.1 are A. J. Arberry's translations, by way of comparison). Translations of the Bible are from the New International Version. Dates are given according to the Gregorian calendar or Common Era (CE).

The style of translation is generally plain and strives to be idiomatic in modern American English. This often means departing from the ponderous and archaic style, reminiscent of the King James Bible, which many translators often implicitly accept as the norm for English translations of sacred texts. For problematic terms and passages, I find it very useful to reflect on the etymologies and classical usages found in specialized dictionaries.<sup>15</sup> Translations of the Qur'an into other languages are also helpful. At times, I may resort to unusual translation strategies for the sake of making a particular point or illustrating an issue under discussion. Occasionally, I employ informal, blunt, and contemporary usage, which works well to convey the direct emotional power of the Qur'an's language. The stilted tone and formal affect of many English Qur'an translations fail to deliver the urgency and commanding presence that, to my ear at least, are such strong characteristics of its style in Arabic. At times, I deliberately depart from "word for word" equivalence and translate the same Arabic word differently, depending on context and effect. Sometimes, translation will highlight one particular semantic field associated with an Arabic word, which may not show up in other translations. All this is part of the normal challenge that faces the translator of a text that can be read in multiple fashions. None of these translations is proposed here as a "final" or definitive version, since questions will continue to be asked that require new approaches to translating this text. Serious readers are generally advised, in any case, to have more than one English translation of the Qur'an at hand while reading this book to get a sense of the possibilities and the gaps between the different versions.<sup>16</sup> In that sense, all translation is provisional and subject to revision; my aim is to produce versions of the Qur'anic text that are alive and directly accessible to a modern literary sensibility.

The organization of this book is largely focused on questions of the structure and style of the Qur'anic text. In this respect, my approach differs from subject-oriented doctrinal presentations of the Qur'an, which in effect assume a single homogeneous viewpoint that can be decoded by comparing selected passages. The subject-oriented approach is also characteristic of legal interpretation of the Qur'an, which looks to this text as the primary source of authoritative



Islamic teachings on religious norms and ethics. These legal interpreters have evolved elaborate interpretive strategies to flatten out the apparent inconsistencies between different Qur'anic passages, relying in particular on the notion of abrogation, discussed in chapter 1. That kind of harmonizing approach acknowledges a chronological dimension to the unfolding of the Qur'an, as is evident from the traditional labeling of suras as belonging to the earlier Meccan period or the later Medinan period. Abrogation also conveniently erases apparent inconsistencies by proclaiming the later text authoritative, leaving the significance of "abrogated" earlier verses unclear. Nevertheless, the commitment to finding authoritative rulings in the Qur'an is resistant to the notion of any development of Qur'anic style and message in dialogue with its audience. The rhetorical affirmation of scriptural authority, which is such a frequent message in practically every sura of the Qur'an, reinforces the expectation that the Qur'an, as the manifestation of the primordial heavenly book, should take on through time a form that had been decreed from all eternity.

The perspective offered in this book does not assume that canonical authority is the implicit and dominant characteristic of the Qur'anic text. Rather, it seeks to explore the initial reception of the text and the creative ongoing revision of prophetic messages as part of a dialogical process, which can be extrapolated from the internal evidence of the text itself. In other words, this book approaches the Qur'an not as it is constituted by its authoritative reception in later commentary and legal interpretation but in a pre-exegetical and precanonical sense, prior to the development of firm traditions of interpretation, and as a text that emerged in a particular historical context. Such a nontheological reading is not meant to be an antireligious rejection of the divine status of the Qur'an as accepted by Muslims. Rather, it brackets out the question of religious authority as something outside of the scope of the present inquiry. The literary understanding of the style and structure of the Qur'an is a question that any educated reader may explore, without having to make a theological commitment either for or against its sacred authority. In this sense, the study of the Qur'an should be no different than the study of the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament—in universities, these texts are not studied today primarily through the authoritative interpretations found in Midrashic commentaries or the writings of the Church Fathers, but as literary texts that emerged in particular historical contexts. In the same way, there is no reason why contemporary study of the Qur'anic text should privilege any particular later commentary tradition, if the aim is to understand how the text came together and was first received.<sup>17</sup>

The outline of the book follows the implications of the presuppositions just discussed. To begin, chapter 1 frames the Qur'an in its historical context and offers literary perspectives on its structure and chronological unfolding. This includes an overview of the literary forms present in the suras as the basic units into which the Qur'an is divided, and the chapter also

surveys the different ways in which the Qur'an may be read, from both religious and literary perspectives. This survey is followed by three separate chapters that offer a chronological reading of the Qur'an according to the conclusions of modern scholarship. Chapter 2 addresses the early Meccan suras, chapter 3 covers the middle and later Meccan suras (which are treated together, because of their relative similarity), and chapter 4 is concerned with the Medinan suras. In each case, representative suras are presented in translation with accompanying analysis, to bring out significant literary and structural aspects of their composition. These examples include both relatively typical suras and some that are quite distinctive, in form or in content. In addition, while this literary approach steers away from the subject-oriented analysis that is characteristic of legal and authoritative interpretation of the Qur'an, in each chapter, one or more topical questions is explored, affording the opportunity for interrogating the way that the Qur'an relates to its environment and its audience. These questions include the implications of the apocalyptic "punishment stories," the rhetoric of debate in relation to the implied audience of the Qur'an, and the development of religious identity and conflict in the Medinan suras. The book ends with a concluding chapter briefly addressing the implications of a literary reading of the Qur'an that situates it in its historical environment.

Although it is not possible to provide a detailed commentary on every sura of the Qur'an within the scope of this book, the method of reading that is demonstrated here can be replicated by readers who are interested in exploring more broadly the texts of the Qur'an. Appendix A, "Reading the Structure of the Meccan Suras," presents outlines of all the Meccan suras of the Qur'an in such a way that the reader can break them down into manageable units for interpretation and in this way pursue a more complete chronological reading of the text. The Medinan suras have not yet been analyzed to the same degree, but it is to be hoped that the methods proposed here will still prove applicable, particularly when it comes to strong compositional features of the Qur'an, such as symmetry or ring composition within the sura. Detailed outlines of some proposed solutions to the structures of two Medinan suras are provided in appendix B. Additional interpretive exercises, suitable for an individual or for reading groups or classes, are suggested in appendix C. These tools are designed for those who wish to read actively and ask questions about how this important text has been organized. It is all too evident that a mere passive reading of the Qur'an in its normal and canonical order is both frustrating and unsatisfactory to the reader who approaches it for the first time.

The outlines and structural analyses of the suras as described here may strike some readers as arbitrary modern impositions, which lack the credibility of traditional interpretations. For those who are only willing to understand the Qur'an according to certain recognized authorities (never mind the fact that there are numerous conflicting traditions of interpretation), this purely literary study may be irrelevant and even useless. But the fact remains that the Qur'an is a text that appeared in a particular time and place, which a particular audience heard and responded

to. This book seeks to understand to some extent how that happened, and it proposes a method to interpret the way that the Qur'an functioned as a literary document. This is not the only possible interpretation, but I hope it provides fresh ideas that readers can bring to the text. Those who may find unconvincing the particular analyses of the Qur'anic text offered here should take up the challenge of offering alternative explanations.

Finally, some readers may be surprised at the presence of a number of illustrations in this book, given that the Qur'an is itself not illustrated. These visual images are intended to indicate the connections that the Qur'an has with other cultural traditions, ranging from the monuments of Nabatean cities to portraits of Alexander the Great and memorials to the Seven Sleepers of Ephesus. The justification for the inclusion of these pictures is the presence of their subjects within the Qur'an. This in itself is another indication of the important links that tie the Qur'an to the legacy of a shared civilization.