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## What is the Qur'an?

(hence the name *'mu'allaqat'* which literally means 'hung' or 'suspended'). Now the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ was, as mentioned, a direct descendant of Ishmael ﷺ, but being from Mecca, where the poetry competitions were held, it is easy to see how he ﷺ and his tribe, the Quraysh, spoke the finest and purest Arabic in Arabia.

It remains to be said that the Qur'an tells us that the original language of human beings was originally a Revelation—or at least an inspiration—from God to Adam ﷺ. God says in the Qur'an:

*And He taught Adam the names, all of them; then He presented them to the angels and said, 'Now tell Me the names of these if you speak truly'. | They said, 'Glory be to You! We know not except what You have taught us. Surely You are the Knower, Wise'. | He said, 'Adam, tell them their names'; And when he had told them their names He said, 'Did I not tell you that I know the Unseen in the heavens and the earth?, And I know what you reveal and what you were hiding. (Al-Baqarah, 2:31-33)*

From this, we may assume that Arabic—and perhaps other ancient languages—were inspired languages. How else can its words 'be one' with what they name, in their 'sound, form and behaviour'? And how else could Arabic be the receptacle of a Revelation? After all, God says:

*Had We sent down this Qur'an upon a mountain, you would have surely seen it humbled, rent asunder by the fear of God. And such similitudes do We strike for mankind, that perhaps they may reflect. (Al-Hadid, 59:21)*

### THE ARABIC LANGUAGE OF THE QUR'AN

It is difficult to describe the Arabic of the Qur'an in another language because it is so unique. It is unique even in its use of Arabic, and differs not only from pre-Islamic poetry (of which there is a large corpus of least 20,000 verses extant) but also from the Arabic in *hadith* literature. The Arabic of the Qur'an also predates Arabic translations of the Bible (the first of these dating back to the ninth century CE) and differs greatly from all Biblical languages and translations. Nevertheless, a few things can be conveyed about it.

The first is that the Arabic of the Qur'an is not pronounced or read

in the same way that colloquial Arabic is. To start with, Arabic has 28 letters (with three minor vowels which are not written as letters), and each of these must emerge from 17 different points of the throat, mouth, tongue, teeth, lips and nose. There is a whole science dedicated to this (*Makbarij al-huruf*) which even children are taught, and it is this science that keeps the classical language pronounced the same way everywhere despite the passage of time.

Qur'anic Arabic is also read differently from standard written Arabic; there are special rules of pronunciation for different letters and different combinations of letters and words. This way of reading (*tajwid* or *tartil*) is ordained in the very first revelations of the Qur'an (see: *Al-Muzammil*, 73:4), and was the practice of the Prophet ﷺ and his Companions. The rules are too complicated to explain here so it suffices to say that their effect is to allow continuity in the reading of the text so that the words flow together more melliflously, to avoid jarring clashes of sound, and to emphasize the more sonorous and majestic syllables. Though there are natural variations in the speed of verses, every letter and every word is pronounced relatively slowly, and completely distinctly. There are also deliberate periodic pauses whose silence not only allow the reciter to breathe (independently from the recitation), but also allow for penetration into the depths of the listener's or reader's heart. Finally, there is the mandatory prolongation of the long vowels following certain letter combinations or positions—particularly the *alif* (the 'a' sound)—which infuses the sound of the Qur'an with, as it were, constant cries for transcendence. Consequently, the overall effect of Qur'anic recitation is said to be one of melancholy (*huzn*), but not out of melancholy from the loss of a worldly thing. Rather, it is out of longing for God, for His Beautiful Attributes, for the sacred and for paradise. Moreover, the sound of the language in itself is not only beautiful, but also majestic. It has splendour with dignity and gravity. It is full of poetic flow, cadence and rhythm without artifice, jingle or levity. It is calm but with immense power. For these reasons perhaps, just listening to the language of the Qur'an, *without even understanding the words*—and 80% of Muslims cannot speak Arabic—is said to be one of the four purposes of its revelation (the other three being to purify people's souls, to teach them scripture and to teach them wisdom). God says in the Qur'an:

## What is the Qur'an?

*Truly God was gracious to the believers when He sent to them a messenger from among their own to recite to them His verses, and to purify them, and to teach them the Book, and wisdom, though before, they were in clear error.*  
(*Aal 'Imran*, 3:164)

The second thing to be said about the language of the Qur'an is that it is filled with natural imagery—particularly desert, mountain, sky and sea imagery—and indeed seems to contain and recapture their beauty within its very words and in the magnificent sweeps of certain of its verses and chapters. But then, after being lyrical, it constantly comes back to simple and practical subjects and language. Ultimately, it uses the mundane and worldly as a bridge to the sublime and heavenly, and this too induces longing and yearning.

Third, there is a lot of variety in the forms of the language of the Qur'an, despite the relatively easy vocabulary (it contains only 1810 root words out of a total possible 70,000 Arabic root words). Some verses are extremely short (the shortest composed of words—55:1—being one word long; and the shortest composed of 'isolated letters'—20:1 and 36:1; and 40:1; 41:1; 42:1; 43:1; 44:1; 45:1 and 46:1—being two letters long), and some are very long (the longest—2:282—being a whole page of fifteen lines long). Equally, some chapters are very short (the shortest are three verses, or two lines, long); some are very long (the longest, *Al-Baqarah*, is almost 50 pages long). The verses of some chapters are all more or less the same length. In other cases they differ considerably in length. Some chapters end with the same rhyme and letter in every single verse (for example, the fifty-fourth chapter, *Surat al-Qamar*, which has 55 verses all ending with the letter 'r' preceded by a consonant). Other chapters use many different rhymes. Some verses flow lyrically, and others are more measured and staccato. And it is full of bewildering shifts between the two, each of which has its secret meaning and deliberate effect. Despite these shifts, however, there is always a clear consistency of tone and texture, so that it is unmistakably all part of the same, one 'book'.

Moreover, whilst the whole Qur'an is clearly a unity, each chapter (*surah*) often contains words and linguistic constructs that are unique to it and not found in any other chapter in the Qur'an. Indeed, the word '*surah*' is related to the Arabic word '*sur*' meaning 'wall', which suggests

a unique and particular identity to each chapter of the Qur'an. This can even be seen at the level of individual verses ('*ayat*'). The name for an individual Qur'anic verse is '*aya*' (meaning 'miracle'). This suggests that each verse is a miracle in itself. For although there are some verses that are repeated in the Qur'an, these actually mean, or refer to, different things in their different contexts. On the other hand, there are verses which are clearly unique and miraculous, in language and content, each in their own way. For example, the famous Throne Verse, *Ayat al-Kursi*, (*Al-Baqarah*, 2:255)—the 'greatest verse' in the Qur'an according to a *hadith* in *Muslim*—is a completely unique and systematic verse about God's Attributes. Equally, the Verse of Light, *Ayat al-Nur*, (*Al-Nur*, 24:35) is a unique parable about God's Light. In a different way, the Verse of Debt, *Ayat al-Dayn*, (*Al-Baqarah*, 2:282) is a uniquely long but complete instruction, in practical language, on how to record debts harmoniously. There are many other examples like this.

Fourth, the language itself is in a clear Arabic tongue (*Al-Shu'ara*, 26:195). Despite its internal variety of form, it uses a relatively small number of different words that are not complicated (even if they do not mean exactly the same thing as in modern colloquial Arabic). Moreover, the Qur'an is easy to remember (*Al-Qamar*, 54: 17; 22; 32 and 40)—the proof of this being the millions of Muslims who have memorized it. It has simple, powerful rhetoric, all the more powerful because it is so naturally and effortlessly compelling. It contains neologisms (i.e. new Arabic words—like the different names for heaven and hell) and new verbal forms as well as many new linguistic constructs (a number of which are mentioned only once in the whole Qur'an), but which are immediately intelligible and made totally clear by their contexts. It is pithily eloquent: it does not use more terms than necessary to say something, so that there is no redundancy. It has near-synonyms that reveal important distinctions without tautology. In other words, when the Qur'an seems to be repeating the same thing with slightly different words, it is actually not. Rather, it is making some subtle but precise distinctions. This is made stunningly clear in books like Al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi's (d. 320/932) *The Book of Impossibility of Tautology* (*Kitab Man'a al-Taraduff*) and his *The Book of Explaining the Differences* (*Kitab Bayan al-Farq*), and Al-Raghib al-Isfahani's (d. 502/1109) *Lexicon of Qur'anic Terms* (*Mu'jam Mufradat Alfazh al-Qur'an*).

Fifth, as regards the clarity of the language of the Qur'an, it will be noted that the Qur'an occasionally—but impeccably—uses the language of reason and even logical induction, particularly as regards proofs of God's existence (e.g. 27:60–5; 29:61; 52:35–37; 10:31–36) or His Unity (e.g. 17:40–43; 23:84–91), but this language flows naturally and is never belaboured like that of formal logic and syllogism, so that unless the reader or listener is a trained logician, he or she will never be aware that rigorous logical proofs are being used in the Qur'an.

Finally, the language of the Qur'an itself echoes the truth of its content. For example, the parables, similes, and metaphors it uses are perfect not only because they correspond exactly to what they name and bring its real essence to light, but because they usually correspond to something within human beings as well. The profoundness, nobility and consistency of its content are also maintained in the depth, dignity and harmony of its tone. On the other hand, its dramatic shifts and sudden turnarounds in style and in the length of its verses reflect the bewildering complexity of the truth and provoke shock and contemplation. Much more could be said here, but it is enough to say that there is something about the language and structure of the Qur'an that reflects the texture and the deep structure of the primordial human soul, or more precisely, spirit. This is necessarily so because the soul is the receptacle of the individual human spirit, and the Qur'an is the expression of the Universal Spirit in the Arabic language. This, incidentally, is the most profound reason why scholars and Qur'anic reciters have traditionally instinctively completely refused to let Qur'anic recitation turn into musical tones and melodies: music affects the soul and its sentiments, whereas the Qur'an aims to awaken the spirit.

All of this explains the direct challenge in the Qur'an—which has never been met—that no one can produce another book like it (17:88; 28:49); or even 10 chapters like it (11:13–14); or ultimately even a single chapter like it (2:23–24; 10:37–38). For the Qur'an is truly unique, not merely in its content—which . . . *has been revealed by Him Who knows the secret of the heavens and the earth . . . (Al-Furqan, 25:6)*—but also in its language. Anyone who really knows Arabic can see this.

It remains to be said that millions of intelligent people willingly and lovingly spend—and over the course of history, have spent—their entire lives learning, reading, reciting and contemplating the Qur'an. Some

people read it in its entirety once every three days, and can do this for a hundred years starting in childhood (making it possible to read the Qur'an 10,000 times in a lifetime). Most literate practising Muslims complete it once a month, meaning they read it some 500–700 times in their lifetimes (if they live 70 years or so). If all we have said above were not true, then surely Muslims would get bored with it, but they simply do not. Rather, they find new meaning in it every time they read it, and fall more and more in love with it. This is perhaps the most the unique thing about the Qur'an, and indeed the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said: 'Those who know cannot get enough of it . . . despite constant repetition, and its wonders never cease' (*Tirmidhi*).

### THE OBSTACLES IN READING THE QUR'AN

In addition to the language of the Qur'an, the form of the Qur'an is unique. It differs somewhat from previous revelations—and not just because it is in Arabic. When people (even Muslims) who have never read the Qur'an in their lives, start to read it with concentration, their first reaction is often one of surprise and even confusion. Some people cannot seem to make sense of it at all. This is because there are obstacles to overcome in reading the Qur'an. These obstacles are not difficult to overcome, but it helps to be aware of them.

In fact there are three kinds of obstacles that prevent people from understanding the Qur'an. These are: (1) obstacles in the act of reading; (2) obstacles in the reader; and (3) obstacles in the Qur'anic text itself.

As regards (1) **obstacles in the act of reading**, we should briefly consider the following:

(a) The Qur'an is in Classical Arabic in the dialect of the tribe of Quraysh (notwithstanding a few well-known words of non-Arabic origin). It is not the same as colloquial or Modern Standard Arabic. Because of its linguistic richness it cannot be translated properly (its 'translations' are all only 'interpretations'). Qur'anic Arabic has to be learnt anew even by native Arabic speakers. Nevertheless, this is usually a question of a limited number of Arabic words.

(b) The Qur'an was an oral revelation, set in an oral culture. Without hearing it read aloud according to its own rules of recitation, the reader

## Chapter 12

### WHAT IS GOVERNMENT?

*Verily, God commands you to restore trusts to their rightful owners. And when you judge between people, that you judge with justice. Excellent is the instruction God gives you. God is ever Hearer, Seer. (Al-Nisa', 4:58)*



### THE IMPORTANCE OF JUSTICE

As we have seen in Chapter 10, justice is at the root of all rights in Islam, and the five aims of the *shari'ah*. Justice is also essential in other religions. For example, in the Torah (and thus the Bible) we read:

*You shall not distort justice; you shall not be partial, and you shall not take a bribe. . . / Justice, and only justice, you shall pursue. (Deuteronomy 16:19–20)*

It remains to be said that all human beings have an instinctive yearning for justice. Children have it, older people have it, and most of all, young people have it. Even when people cannot put it into words, they can generally identify it when they see it. In short, justice is a universal right, essential for the proper functioning of any society, because it is an innate conviction of the human soul. That is why no government and no institution can last without justice.

Conversely, the lack of justice—*injustice*—inevitably leads to discon-

tentment, protests, rebellions, revolutions and civil wars. This has been true throughout history. Injustice makes people angry and creates hatred. 'Angry young men' (and women) are usually angry because of an injustice—real or perceived. For example, a large proportion of *takfiri-jihadis* become radicalized because of an injustice: often cruel mistreatment in prison, or the death or mistreatment of one of their relatives or friends (as explained in the annex). Nothing is more dangerous and destabilizing than injustice. God Himself punishes injustice wherever it occurs, even when inflicted on people who do not believe in Him. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said, remarkably:

Beware of the prayer of someone who has been wronged—even if he [or she] be a disbeliever—for there is no veil between it and God. (*Ahmad*)

This *hadith* is remarkable because it is as if to say that even a disbeliever will pray—or at least curse—when wronged, and that God listens to this prayer and answers it because injustice is so inherently wrong. Indeed, God Himself says (in a *hadith qudsi*):

My servants, I have made injustice forbidden to Myself, and I have forbidden it to you, so do not be unjust. (*Muslim*)

### THE 'EXCELLENCE' OF JUSTICE

God says in the Qur'an:

*Verily, God commands you to restore trusts to their rightful owners. And when you judge between people, that you judge with justice. Excellent is the instruction God gives you. God is ever Hearer, Seer. (Al-Nisa', 4:58)*

This verse is so foundational and conveys so much, of such importance, that entire books have been written on it. Even as recently as 2015, the leading Malaysian philosopher, Syed Naquib Attas, wrote a short book commenting on it. Before attempting to plunge into it, we note that the verse is one of the few times God gives a categorical command ('*amr*') to all people, and this command refers to justice. It is also the only time in the whole Qur'an that God praises His own instruction with the word 'excellent' ('*ni'imma*' literally means 'how fine!', 'how good!', 'how beautiful!'),

## What is Government?

‘how excellent!’), and does so in praise of justice. Moreover, elsewhere in the Qur’an the very point of revelation is identified with justice:

*We have verily sent Our messengers with clear signs, and We revealed with them the Scripture and the Balance, so that mankind may uphold justice.*  
(*Al-Hadid*, 57:25)

All this is to indicate the unparalleled importance of justice in the Qur’an. Furthermore, in a well-known *hadith*, ‘the Just’ is one of God’s own 99 Divine Names (*Tirmidhi*). Nothing, then, is more ‘excellent’ than justice in human affairs.

## WHAT IS JUSTICE?

But what exactly is justice? Obviously, it is important to be able to express it clearly in words, in order to clear up confusion and avoid the exploitation of perceived injustices to create greater injustices — as often happens nowadays. So in order to implement justice and convince people of it, it is necessary to be able to say exactly what it is — that is, to *define* it.

There is generally no legal or philosophical agreement on what exactly justice is. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines justice as ‘behaviour or treatment that is morally right and fair’. This of course begs the questions ‘What is right?’, ‘What is fair?’ and ‘On what is morality based?’. The classical, ‘natural’ definition of justice is usually taken from Plato’s definition of it, or from Cicero’s elaboration of Plato. In *The Republic*, the character of Socrates says that justice is: ‘doing one’s own job and not intruding elsewhere’ (433a). Cicero (in *De Natura Deorum*, III, 15) actually puts it more elegantly: it is the ‘virtue which assigns each thing its due’ (*sum cuique*). One of the truly astounding things about the Qur’anic verse which this chapter is based on is that before commanding *And when you judge between people, that you judge with justice, God commands you to restore trusts to their rightful owners*. That is to say that God gives a *definition* of justice before commanding people to enact it. In other words, justice is *to restore trusts to their rightful owners*. This encompasses both the dictionary and classical definitions of justice, since it includes morally fair behaviour or treatment that gives everything its due. But it goes beyond that, by viewing everything as a ‘trust’ (*amanah*). Now a trust is something of

intrinsic value and given by God, to be benefited from temporarily, but not wholly owned. It cannot be disposed of at will; we do not have an absolute right to throw it away or waste it. It is something to which we have rights and responsibilities in equal part. So regarding everything as a 'trust' lends to things dignity, inherent rights as well as a reminder of their fragility.

But what specifically are 'trusts'? The Qur'an shows how 'trusts' include everything, even — or perhaps especially — things which are not a matter of law. These start with the trust of the very human state and of human life. God says in the Qur'an, about humanity's creation:

*Indeed We offered the Trust to the heavens and the earth and the mountains, but they refused to bear it and were wary of it; but man bore it. Truly he has proved himself an ignorant wrongdoer. (Al-Abzab, 33:72)*

The 'trust' here is considered by many commentators to be faith in the One God and knowledge of Him. We have already cited the verse about God's pre-temporal covenant with human beings of knowledge of Him and faith in Him:

*And when your Lord took from the Children of Adam, from their loins their seed and made them testify against themselves, 'Am I not your Lord?' They said, 'Yes, indeed we testify', lest you should say on the Day of Resurrection, 'Truly, of this we were unaware'. (Al-A'raf, 7:172)*

In other words, *the Trust* is 'connected to' God's *Spirit* that He breathed into human beings giving them life *with hearing, sight and hearts* (*Al-Sajdah*, 32:10), in a *dwelling place and a repository* (*Al-An'am*, 6:98) of time and space on the earth. It implies first God's 'right' to be worshipped by human beings, and then the sacredness of human life created by God with an innate knowledge of Him in their deepest spirit. This means that human life itself is the first of all terrestrial trusts. That is why no one may violate human life — not even with suicide — so that:

*Whoever slays a soul for other than a soul, or for corruption in the earth, it shall be as if he had slain mankind altogether; and whoever saves the life of one, it shall be as if he had saved the life of all mankind. . . . (Al-Ma'idah, 5:32)*

'Trusts' also obviously include the five 'aims of the *shari'ah*' as discussed

earlier (namely, the fundamental rights to (1) life; (2) religion; (3) family, procreation and honour; (4) reason, and (5) property—with all the freedoms and protection that each of these rights imply). ‘Trusts’ include all the rights of the neighbour as well—his or her right to *Ihsan* from us as discussed in the previous chapter.

In fact, the concept of ‘trust’—and therefore justice itself—also means spending time with family or friends, relaxing, looking after one’s body and spending time with one’s spouse. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said: ‘Your family has a right over you; your guest has a right over you; your soul has a right over you’ (*Abu Dawud*), and ‘Your eye [i.e. sleep] has a right over you; your body has a right over you; your spouse has a right over you’ (Al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, *Al-Muttafiq wa l-Muftariq*). And of course this concept of ‘trust’ extends justice to every legitimate aspect of one’s personal needs; to social interactions; to one’s profession or vocation; to one’s time itself (as we have seen), and to every other aspect of human life. Finally, and perhaps most obviously, wealth and money are a ‘trust’ and not something which we have an absolute right to dispose of—or hoard—without moral responsibility. God makes this crystal clear in the Qur’an:

*Believe in God and His messenger and spend from that over which He has made you trustees. For those of you who believe and spend theirs shall be a great reward. (Al-Hadid, 57:7)*

## THE ECOLOGY OF JUSTICE

Beyond that—and, crucially, in our age of climate change and impending environmental collapse—the *Trust* applies to human beings as God’s *vicegerents of the earth* (*Al-Naml*, 27:62). This means that justice itself demands that human beings exercise responsible, compassionate and *sustainable* stewardship of the earth and of all the myriad creatures, flora and fauna which inhabit it. Joyce Kilmer (d. 1886) wrote (in ‘Trees’):

I think that I shall never see  
A poem as lovely as a tree.  
A tree whose hungry mouth is prest  
Against the earth’s sweet flowing breast;

A tree that looks at God all day,  
 And lifts her leafy arms to pray;  
 A tree that may in Summer wear  
 A nest of robins in her hair;  
 Upon whose bosom snow has lain;  
 Who intimately lives with rain.  
 Poems are made by fools like me,  
 But only God can make a tree.

He was right (except of course the part about being a fool!). Every living thing on earth, including plants, is God's creature and creation, not ours. In a *hadith* in *Bukhari*, a tree stump in Medina was heard to cry by the Companions when the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ left it. So all creatures have their own lives and their own inherent value regardless of their utility to human beings. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ warned:

A woman was tormented because of a cat which she had confined until it died and [for this] she entered hellfire. (*Muslim*)

And conversely he said ﷺ:

A prostitute happened to see a dog on the verge of dying of thirst, circling a well. She removed her shoe, drew water with it, and gave it to the dog to drink. She was pardoned because of this. (*Muslim*)

We may have a right to eat and use some plants, but we don't have a right to destroy them wantonly. We may have a right to eat and domesticate some animals, but we certainly do not have a right to torture them, unnecessarily harm them, annihilate entire species, or destroy their habitats. We do not have a right to hunt them for 'sport'. The fact that over a third of all human food produced is thrown away—to say nothing of overeating and obesity—means that wealthy people at least have no legitimate reason to hunt wild animals or birds for fun, and then eat them and pretend that was the real reason they hunted them. Equally, human beings have no right to despoil, plunder and pollute the earth itself or the mountains or the atmosphere. For we know *the heavens and the earth and the mountains . . . refused to bear the Trust and were wary of being wrongdoers like ourselves*. We should then view the earth and the mountains—and by extension

the atmosphere which is part of *the heavens* and the seas which cover the earth—as somehow innately conscious in their own way. Consequently, we should consider that nature, the earth, the seas, the mountains, the atmosphere and animals and plants have their own rights, and humanity should think seriously about safeguarding these rights through international legislation—especially since we live off them, and their preservation is essential for our survival. Equally, we should think about universal conventions and legislation for the protection of plant, marine, bird, and even insect life. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said:

An ant had bitten a prophet (one amongst the earlier Prophets) and he ordered that the colony of the ants should be burnt. Then God revealed to him: ‘Because of an ant’s bite you have burnt a community from amongst the communities which hymns My glory?’ (*Muslim*)

And God Himself says in the Qur’an:

*There is no animal on the earth and no bird that flies with its wings, but they are communities like you. We have neglected nothing in the Book; then to their Lord they shall be gathered. (Al-An’am, 6:38)*

A real community is a group whose members *communicate* with each other. Animals, birds and insects—as we now know—communicate with each other. Even trees communicate (see Colin Tudge’s wonderful book *The Secret Life of Trees*), albeit not like us or through sounds. Knowing that animals, birds, insects and perhaps even trees are communities should make us empathize with them and protect them. In doing that, we will also be protecting ourselves. God warns in the Qur’an:

*Corruption has appeared in the land and in the sea because of what people’s hands have perpetrated that He may make them taste something of what they have done that perhaps they may repent. (Al-Rum, 30:41)*

In short, in Islam, human beings have a strict religious obligation to treat animals and all living things—and nature itself—with every possible mercy and consideration, and to avoid unnecessary harm to animals and living beings, as well as to avoid polluting, disturbing or destroying the natural environment. The Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said: ‘There is a reward [from God] for [service to] every living animal’ (*Bukhari; Muslim*).