

## Study Guide

### *Introducing the Qur'an for Today's Reader* by John Kaltner

#### Introduction

##### *Summary*

The Qur'an is made up of 114 chapters, and Islamic tradition teaches that it was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad over the last twenty-two years of his life (610-632 C.E.). The text of the Qur'an shares a number of stories and characters with the Bible. A distinction is commonly made between the Meccan and the Medinan passages, with the shorter Meccan passages coming from early in Muhammad's career and the longer Medinan ones coming later. The Qur'an initially circulated orally, although parts of it were recorded during Muhammad's lifetime. It reached its final form, written in rhyming prose, after his death. Extra-qur'anic writings, particularly the *ḥadīth*, *asbāb al-nuzūl* and the *sīra* attempt to contextualize many Qur'an passages. Abrogation is an important concept for understanding the relationships among passages that disagree with one another. Some approaches to interpreting the Qur'an by Muslims and non-Muslims have led to new ways of thinking about the text. Muslims experience their sacred text through education, ritual, art, architecture, popular practices, and modern technology.

##### *Key terms*

Abrogation – the replacement of one passage of the Qur'an by another with which it disagrees

*allāh* – God

*asbāb al-nuzūl* – writings that identify when particular sections of the Qur'an were revealed

*āya* – a verse in the Qur'an; a sign

*basmala* – the phrase that begins every chapter of the Qur'an except the ninth one

*al-fātiḥa* – the opening chapter of the Qur'an

*ḥadīth* – reports that describe what Muhammad said or did during his lifetime

*hijra* – the journey Muhammad made with a small group of followers from Mecca to Medina in 632 C.E.

*i`jāz* – the inimitability of the Qur'an

*al-islām* – submission

Ka`ba – the black cube in the center of the Grand Mosque in Mecca

*khutba* – the sermon delivered on Friday during the noon prayer service

*madrasa* – an educational institution associated with a mosque

*miḥrāb* – the niche in the wall of a mosque that gives the prayer orientation toward Mecca

*muṣḥaf* – the written text of the Qur'an

*muslim* – one who submits

Night of Power – the night in the month of Ramadan when the Qur'an was first revealed

*al-qur'ān* – the Qur'an; literally, "the recitation"

*sīra* – biographical writings about Muhammad's life

*sūra* – a chapter in the Qur’an

*tafsīr* – commentary on the Qur’an

*tajwīd* – the set of rules that determine proper recitation of the Qur’an

*ta’wīl* – an interpretation that chooses one among several possible meanings of a text

*umm al-kitāb* – the source of all scriptures; literally, “the mother of the book”

### *Study questions*

Intro.1 What were some of the challenges Muhammad faced early in his prophetic career?

Intro.2 How is the Qur’an arranged and structured?

Intro.3 What is your reaction to the presence of biblical figures in the Qur’an?

Intro.4 What are some of the most important literary features of the Qur’an?

Intro.5 What is the traditional account of how the Qur’an reached written form?

Intro.6 What are some of the key concepts and ideas regarding the nature of the Qur’an?

Intro.7 How do the *sūra*, *ḥadīth*, and *asbāb al-nuzūl* contribute to study of the Qur’an?

Intro.8 Why is chronology such an important aspect of Qur’an study?

Intro.9 How does abrogation function within the Qur’an?

Intro.10 What are some of the new approaches modern Muslim scholars have adopted in their study of the Qur’an?

Intro.11 How has non-Muslim study of the Qur’an evolved over the centuries?

Intro.12 What are some of the ways that Muslims experience the Qur’an in their daily lives?

Intro.13 How does what you have learned in this chapter compare to what you know about the

Bible or other sacred texts?

## **Chapter 1**

### **The Natural Environment**

#### *Summary*

The Qur'an's understanding of the natural environment is shaped by a theocentric framework in which everything in creation comes under God's authority. The aspects of creation mentioned in the text include heaven, earth, light, darkness, sun, moon, stars, water, and animals. All of these elements of the created world submit to God's will, so some have argued that nature is Muslim in its essence. Angels and *jinn* are part of the supernatural order of the world, and in the Qur'an these beings sometimes interact with people. Humans are God's successors on earth, but this does not put them in an exalted position over the rest of creation. Human beings are to read the signs of God present in nature and, like all of creation, conform to the divine will.

#### *Key terms*

astrolabe – device invented by Muslims to determine the location of heavenly bodies in the sky

*al-fātiḥa* – the opening chapter of the Qur'an

*fiṭra* – the natural condition of humanity

Iblīs – the angel who refused to bow down to Adam in the garden

*jinn* – supernatural beings who interact with humanity in both negative and positive ways

*mathal* – a parable

*mi'rāj* – Muhammad's nighttime journey through the seven heavens

*muḥīt* – something that is all-encompassing

*shayṭān* – Satan

*shirk* – the sin of associating something or someone with God

*tawḥīd* – the unity of God

*umma* – the worldwide community of Muslims

*wahdat al-wujūd* – the unity of creation

### *Study questions*

- 1.1 What does it mean to say the Qur'an has a theocentric view of the created world? What are the implications of this for humanity?
- 1.2 What does the Qur'an say about how the world was created?
- 1.3 What is the tradition about Muhammad's night journey? How does it relate to the Qur'an?
- 1.4 What is the "light verse"? Why is it important?
- 1.5 How do the Muslim daily prayer times relate to the Qur'an?
- 1.6 What does the Qur'an teach about specific elements of the created world like the sun, the moon, stars, water, animals, etc.?
- 1.7 What does it mean to say that nature is Muslim? What do you think of this idea?
- 1.8 What are the main differences between angels and *jinn*?
- 1.9 According to the Qur'an, what is humanity's place in creation? How should human beings relate to the rest of the created world?

1.10 How does what you have learned in this chapter compare to what you know about the Bible or other sacred texts?

## Chapter 2 Family Matters

### *Summary*

The Qur'an contains many terms that describe various kinship relations. Love is an important concept in the text, and it is used in reference to relationships among people and between God and humanity. The roles and responsibilities of parents, spouses, children, and siblings are described throughout the Qur'an, sometimes in reference to characters who are also found in the Bible. The need to provide for widows and orphans is often cited in the text. On occasion familial titles are used to describe how members of the Muslim community should view each other. Marriage, divorce, and inheritance are frequently discussed, sometimes within legal texts that regulate and advise on matters of interpersonal relations. Members of Muhammad's family, especially his wives, are mentioned in a number of places in the Qur'an.

### *Key terms*

ʿAisha – wife of Muhammad who played a key role in the transmission of *ḥadīth*

*ḥanīf* – a morally upright person who is a strict monotheist

*ḥijāb* – a screen or separation; often used to describe the veil some Muslim women wear

Hijaz – western area of the Arabian Peninsula where Mecca and Medina are located

Khadija – Muhammad's first wife who was one of the first people to convert to Islam

patrilineal – a system in which family lineage is traced through the father's side

People of the House – term sometimes used to designate Muhammad's family

polygyny – marriage to more than one woman at the same time

Quraysh – the Arabian tribe Muhammad belonged to

*ṭalāq* – divorce

*Study questions*

- 2.1 In what sort of ways did the Qur'an's teachings on interpersonal relations challenge the status quo of its original audience?
- 2.2 What is the evidence suggesting that Arabian society was matriarchal before the rise of Islam?
- 2.3 How does the Qur'an treat the concept of love?
- 2.4 How would you map out the Qur'an's view of the relationships among the various members of a family?
- 2.5 How does the Qur'an's treatment of key biblical figures like Abraham, Moses, and Joseph help to illustrate its views on love and family relationships? How does it sometimes speak to Muhammad's personal situation in these passages?
- 2.6 Why might it be said that the Qur'an's view of the family, like that of the natural environment, is theocentric?
- 2.7 What does the Qur'an say about how to treat vulnerable members of society like widows and orphans?
- 2.8 What are some of the issues related to the Qur'an's permission for a man to marry up to four wives?
- 2.9 Does the Qur'an's teaching on divorce strike you as a fair and humane treatment of the topic? Why or why not?
- 2.10 What is your reaction to what the Qur'an says about Muhammad's wives?
- 2.11 How does what you have learned in this chapter compare to what you know about the Bible or other sacred texts?

## Chapter 3

### Gender and Sexuality

#### *Summary*

In recent years a feminist movement has emerged within Islam challenging the view that the Qur'an is a misogynistic text that privileges males. Many argue that at the core of the text is an egalitarian understanding of the relationship between men and women. Certain other texts that are no longer relevant for our time challenge this egalitarian view, and they have been extremely influential throughout history because they have been endorsed by the exegetical tradition. These problematic passages treat such issues as the role of women as legal witnesses, gender ranking, and physical abuse. Other topics addressed in the Qur'an that are sometimes misunderstood include how women should dress and menstruation. Qur'anic teachings on extra-marital sexual relations and homosexuality have also been influential in shaping attitudes and behavior regarding male/female interaction and notions about human sexuality.

#### *Key terms*

*'adhā* – a hardship or ailment

*daraba* – to beat, set an example, or go on a journey

*daraja* – level, degree, or step

*faḍḍala* – to prefer or favor

*fāḥisha* – an indecent or immoral act

*furūj* – euphemism for the sexual organs

*ḥijāb* – a screen or separation; often used to describe the veil some Muslim women wear

*jilbāb* – a loose-fitting article of clothing that covers the upper part of the body

*khimār* – a head-scarf or shawl

*maḥīd* – menstruation

*nafs* – Arabic term with many meanings, including “self,” “mind,” “heart,” “person,” and “soul”

*nushūz* – antagonism

*qānitāt* – devout

*qawwāmūna* – to be a provider

*rafath* – sexual intercourse

*sakana* – to find comfort in or to rely upon

*tafsīr* – commentary on the Qur’an

*taqwā* – piety

*umma* – the worldwide community of Muslims

*zawj* – a spouse or a couple

*zīna* – adornment or decoration

*zinā* – adultery

### *Study questions*

- 3.1 What are the three principles upon which the feminist hermeneutic of the Qur’an is built? Do these strike you as sound principles?
- 3.2 What is the basis for the opinion that there is an egalitarian core to the Qur’an’s view of gender relations?
- 3.3 How does the Qur’an’s version of the Adam and Eve story compare to that in Genesis?
- 3.4 Of the problematic passages discussed in this chapter which one presents the greatest challenge to the view that the Qur’an is egalitarian in how it understands gender relations? Which presents the least challenge?

- 3.5 In your opinion, which of the alternative ways of interpreting the problematic passages is most persuasive? Which is the least persuasive?
- 3.6 What are some of the problems with appealing to the Qur'an to support the practice of women wearing veils?
- 3.7 How would you characterize the Qur'an's understanding of what constitutes improper sexual activity? Do you think it can form the basis for sexual morality in our day?
- 3.8 What does the Qur'an teach about homosexuality?
- 3.9 Do you think the feminist Muslim scholars mentioned in this chapter do an effective job of proposing alternative readings of texts that have sometimes been used to subjugate women? What are their strengths and weaknesses?
- 3.10 How does what you have learned in this chapter compare to what you know about the Bible or other sacred texts?

## **Chapter 4**

### **Muslim/Non-Muslim Relations**

#### *Summary*

The Qur'an has much to say about the topic of Muslim/non-Muslim relations. The text uses several different terms that refer in various ways to religion or belief. Among the non-Muslim groups mentioned in the Qur'an are Magians, Sabians, Jews, Christians, the People of the Book, and unbelievers. The Qur'an is not always consistent in how it describes these groups and how Muslims should relate to them, and these different attitudes toward non-Muslims are best understood in light of the changing contexts of the early Islamic community. In recent times pluralism has become an important issue within Islam, and several Muslim scholars who have called for a pluralistic perspective have been influential in shaping attitudes toward other faiths and their adherents.

#### *Key terms*

*aḥbār* – scholars

*ahl al-kitāb* – People of the Book

*aslama* – verb that describes the act of submission

'*awliyā'* – allies

*bānū isrā'īl* – the Children of Israel

*dīn* – religion

*furqān* – distinction, criterion

*ḥanīf* – a morally upright person who is a strict monotheist

*injīl* – gospel

*kufr* – unbelief

*majūs* – Magians

*masīḥ* – messiah

*milla* – creed

*mīthāq* – covenant

*mushrik* – one who associates someone or something with God

*naṣārā* – Christians

*qissīsūn* – priests

*rahbānīya* – monasticism

*ruhbān* – monks

*sābi'ūn* – Sabians

supersessionism – the idea that one religion replaces or supplants all previous faiths

*taḥrīf* – falsifying or tampering with divine revelation

*tanzīl* – the act of revelation; literally, “sending down”

*tawrāt* – Torah

*yahūd* – Jews

*zabūr* – Psalms

*Study questions*

4.1 To what do the terms *dīn*, *milla*, and *ḥanīf* refer?

- 4.2 Who were the Magians and the Sabians, two groups mentioned in the Qur'an?
- 4.3 Why is it that the social and political context of Arabia must be kept in mind when considering what the Qur'an has to say about relations between Muslims and non-Muslims?
- 4.4 How does the term "covenant" function in the Qur'an?
- 4.5 How are the differences between the Bible and the Qur'an understood in the latter text?
- 4.6 Would it be correct to say that the Qur'an teaches that all people should embrace Islam?
- 4.7 Why is Najran an important site?
- 4.8 What does the Qur'an teach regarding the Christian concepts of incarnation and trinity? Why does it hold this view of these beliefs?
- 4.9 How does the term "People of the Book" relate to the Islamic understanding of revelation?
- 4.10 How does the Qur'an refer to and evaluate unbelievers?
- 4.11 What is your reaction to the ideas proposed by the four Muslim scholars mentioned in this chapter who espouse pluralism?
- 4.12 How does what you have learned in this chapter compare to what you know about the Bible or other sacred texts?

## Chapter 5

### *Jihād*

#### *Summary*

The term *jihād* has a more complex meaning than most non-Muslims realize. An examination of its use in the Qur'an indicates that it can describe two different forms of striving, one internal and non-violent, and the other external and violent that is permissible only under certain carefully prescribed situations. This has led to two different types of *jihād* in Islam referred to as "greater" and "lesser," respectively. Examples of lesser *jihād* are referred to in the Qur'an in the context of several wars and military encounters that occurred in the formative years of the Muslim community. In recent times, Usama bin Ladin is the most infamous among the Muslims who have called for a violent lesser *jihād* against the non-Muslim world. A careful reading of his rationale for this call shows he is guilty of misinterpreting this Islamic concept and misreading the Qur'an.

#### *Key terms*

Badr – a battle that occurred in 624 C.E.

*farḍ `ayn* – an obligation incumbent upon each individual Muslim

*farḍ kifāya* – an obligation incumbent upon the Muslim community as a whole

*fatwa* – a legal ruling

*ijtihād* – to exercise the power of reason in order to arrive at a legal opinion

*jahada* – to strive, put forth effort to achieve some goal

al-Khandaq – a battle that occurred in 627 C.E.

*maghāzī* – literature that recounts raids, battles, and wars in early Islamic history

*mujāhidīn* – those who struggle

*qatala* – to kill

*sabīl allah* – the way of Allah

*tajwīd* – the set of rules that determine proper recitation of the Qur'an

Uḥud – a battle that occurred in 625 C.E.

### *Study questions*

- 5.1 Why is the term *jihād* much more complex than is often assumed?
- 5.2 How many times does the word *jihād* appear in the Qur'an? What is the general sense the term conveys in those verses?
- 5.3 What does the Qur'an mean by the term *mujāhidīn*? How does this relate to its modern usage?
- 5.4 How does the concept of "God's path" function in the Qur'an?
- 5.5 What is meant by the terms "lesser *jihād*" and "greater *jihād*"?
- 5.6 Under what circumstances may Muslims engage in *jihād* in a violent manner?
- 5.7 What is the *maghāzī* literature? What role does it play in study of the Qur'an?
- 5.8 What happened at the battles of Badr, Uḥud, and al-Khandaq? How are they related to the Qur'an?
- 5.9 How can it be argued that lesser *jihād* is a form of sacrifice?
- 5.10 What is the difference between a collective duty (*farḍ kifāya*) and an individual duty (*farḍ `ayn*)?
- 5.11 How did Usama bin Ladin make use of the Qur'an in order to justify the attacks of September 11, 2001?

5.12 How does what you have learned in this chapter compare to what you know about the Bible or other sacred texts?

## Chapter 6 Violence and War

### *Summary*

Acts of physical violence are described and denounced in the Qur'an. Homicide and infanticide are mentioned repeatedly, and several texts appear to speak against suicide. Some legal passages permit violent punishment for those who violate the law like adulterers and thieves. The text of the Qur'an calls for a range of responses toward those who could pose a threat to the Muslim community, and these have formed the basis for an Islamic understanding of war. These texts have often been understood in an evolutionary manner that can lead to the conclusion that the early Islamic community became more violent as time went on. But recently an alternative model has been put forth suggesting that peaceful relations continued to be a valid option throughout Muhammad's lifetime.

### *Key terms*

*diya* – compensation, reparation

*farḍ `ayn* – an obligation incumbent upon each individual Muslim

*farḍ kifāya* – an obligation incumbent upon the Muslim community as a whole

*fitna* – persecution

*hudūd* – punishments

*jizya* – a special tax imposed on non-Muslims

*lex talionis* – the law of retribution, sometimes known as “an eye for an eye”

*munāfiq* – hypocrite

*naskh* – abrogation

*qiṣaṣ* – vengeance

*qitāl* – fighting

*sunna* – how the Prophet Muhammad lived his life; literally, “way” or “path”

*zulm* – injustice

*Study questions*

- 6.1 Why is context such a critical issue to keep in mind when considering the Qur’an’s view of violence?
- 6.2 How do the Arabic roots *q-t-l* and *z-l-m* function in the Qur’an?
- 6.3 How are vengeance and retaliation understood in the Qur’an?
- 6.4 What are some of the issues related to the punishments for such offenses as adultery and theft?
- 6.5 What light can the Qur’an shed on the topic of suicide?
- 6.6 What is the range of responses the Qur’an outlines for dealing with those who could pose a threat to the Muslim community?
- 6.7 What is the “evolutionary model” for understanding how the Qur’an’s various perspectives on war and peace interrelate? What are some of its strengths and drawbacks?
- 6.8 What is the alternative that Reuven Firestone proposes to the “evolutionary model”? Does it strike you as a viable reading of the Qur’an?
- 6.9 What is the “sword verse”? Why has it played such an influential role in shaping people’s attitudes about what the Qur’an teaches regarding violence?
- 6.10 How does what you have learned in this chapter compare to what you know about the Bible or other sacred texts?

## **Chapter 7**

### **Death and the Afterlife**

#### *Summary*

Islam has a highly developed notion of reward and punishment that is reflected on the pages of the Qur'an. Simply put, it teaches that one's actions have consequences and we will be rewarded or punished in the afterlife based on how we live our lives on earth. Repentance is always an option, but ultimately God can choose to accept or reject one's effort to do good and reject evil. Death is discussed frequently in the text, and elsewhere eschatological texts offer accounts of what will happen at the end of time. Some passages offer elaborate descriptions of the layout, inhabitants, and experiences that await one in both heaven and hell.

#### *Key terms*

*`adhāb* – punishment

*al-ākhirā* – the hereafter

*dahr* – fate, time

*darī`* - a dry desert plant found in hell

*ghassāq* – a dark and bitter drink of hell

*ghislīn* – an unappetizing food of hell

houris – female companions found in heaven

*intiqām* – vengeance

*`iqāb* – punishment

*jahannam* – hell

*jaḥīm* – blazing flames

*al-janna* – the garden; a word that describes heaven

*khālid* – forever, eternally

*mā' sadīd* – pus

*mawt* – death

*muqarrabūn* – those who are brought near (to God)

*nafs* – Arabic term with many meanings, including “self,” “mind,” “heart,” “person,” and “soul”

*al-nār* – the fire; a word that describes hell

*riḍwān* – pleasure, approval

*sābiqūn* – those who precede, go before

*salihāt* – good deeds

*taqwā* – piety

*tawba* – repentance, turning

*al-yawm al-ākhir* – the last day

*yawm al-dīn* – the day of judgment

*yawm al-qiyāma* – the day of resurrection

*zaqqūm* – a tree found in hell

*Study questions*

- 7.1 What are some of the ways divine justice is conceived in the Qur'an?
- 7.2 What is the Qur'an's view of repentance and forgiveness?
- 7.3 How did the Qur'an challenge pre-Islamic notions of death and human existence?
- 7.4 Why is the Qur'an's understanding of the soul complicated and not completely clear?
- 7.5 What terminology and images are most commonly used in the Qur'an's treatment of the last day?
- 7.6 How would you characterize the Qur'an's depiction of hell, its inhabitants, and the punishment that awaits them?
- 7.7 How would you characterize the Qur'an's depiction of heaven, its inhabitants, and the reward that awaits them?
- 7.8 Why is it wrong to claim that the Qur'an teaches that there will be virgins in paradise at one's beck and call?
- 7.9 What is the rhetorical intent of the Qur'an's presentation of the afterlife? Do you think it is successful in achieving its desired effect?
- 7.10 How does what you have learned in this chapter compare to what you know about the Bible or other sacred texts?