

# THE KORAN

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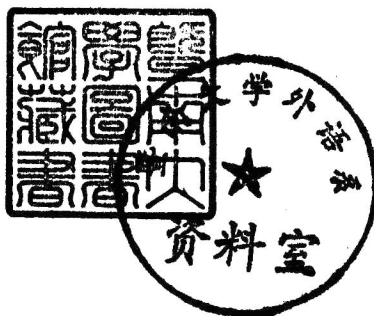
# The Koran

TRANSLATED FROM THE ARABIC BY

J. M. RODWELL

INTRODUCTION BY

G. MARGOLIOUTH



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历史

*EVERYMAN, I will go with thee,  
and be thy guide,  
In thy most need to go by thy side*



3319

**MUHAMMAD**

Born at Mecca in A.D. 567 or 569. His flight (*hijra*) to Medina, which marks the beginning of the Muhammadan era, took place on 16th June 622. He died on 7th June 632.

## INTRODUCTION

THE Koran admittedly occupies an important position among the great religious books of the world. Though the youngest of the epoch-making works belonging to this class of literature, it yields to hardly any in the wonderful effect which it has produced on large masses of men. It has created an all but new phase of human thought and a fresh type of character. It first transformed a number of heterogeneous desert tribes of the Arabian peninsula into a nation of heroes, and then proceeded to create the vast politico-religious organisations of the Muhammadan world which are one of the great forces with which Europe and the East have to reckon to-day.

The secret of the power exercised by the book, of course, lay in the mind which produced it. It was, in fact, at first not a book, but a strong living voice, a kind of wild authoritative proclamation, a series of admonitions, promises, threats, and instructions addressed to turbulent and largely hostile assemblies of untutored Arabs. As a book it was published after the prophet's death. In Muhammad's life-time there were only disjointed notes, speeches, and the retentive memories of those who listened to them. To speak of the Koran is, therefore, practically the same as speaking of Muhammad, and in trying to appraise the religious value of the book one is at the same time attempting to form an opinion of the prophet himself. It would indeed be difficult to find another case in which there is such a complete identity between the literary work and the mind of the man who produced it.

That widely different estimates have been formed of Muhammad is well-known. To Muslims he is, of course, the prophet *par excellence*, and the Koran is regarded by the orthodox as nothing less than the eternal utterance of Allah. The eulogy pronounced by Carlyle on Muhammad in *Heroes and Hero-Worship* will probably be endorsed by not a few at the present day. The extreme contrary opinion, which in a fresh form has recently been revived<sup>1</sup> by an able writer, is hardly

<sup>1</sup> *Mahommed and the Rise of Islam*, in "Heroes of Nations" series.

likely to find much lasting support. The correct view very probably lies between the two extremes. The relative value of any given system of religious thought must depend on the amount of truth which it embodies as well as on the ethical standard which its adherents are bidden to follow. Another important test is the degree of originality that is to be assigned to it, for it can manifestly only claim credit for that which is new in it, not for that which it borrowed from other systems.

With regard to the first-named criterion, there is a growing opinion among students of religious history that Muhammad may in a real sense be regarded as a prophet of certain truths, though by no means of truth in the absolute meaning of the term. The shortcomings of the moral teaching contained in the Koran are striking enough if judged from the highest ethical standpoint with which we are acquainted; but a much more favourable view is arrived at if a comparison is made between the ethics of the Koran and the moral tenets of Arabian and other forms of heathenism which it supplanted.

The method followed by Muhammad in the promulgation of the Koran also requires to be treated with discrimination. From the first flash of prophetic inspiration which is clearly discernible in the earlier portions of the book he, later on, frequently descended to deliberate invention and artful rhetoric. He, in fact, accommodated his moral sense to the circumstances in which the role he had to play involved him.

On the question of originality there can hardly be two opinions now that the Koran has been thoroughly compared with the Christian and Jewish traditions of the time; and it is, besides some original Arabian legends, to those only that the book stands in any close relationship. The matter is for the most part borrowed, but the manner is all the prophet's own. This is emphatically a case in which originality consists not so much in the creation of new materials of thought as in the manner in which existing traditions of various kinds are utilised and freshly blended to suit the special exigencies of the occasion. Biblical reminiscences, Rabbinic legends, Christian traditions mostly drawn from distorted apocryphal sources, and native heathen stories, all first pass through the prophet's fervid mind, thence issue in strange new forms, tinged with poetry and enthusiasm, and well adapted to enforce his own view of life and duty, to serve as an encouragement to his faithful adherents, and to strike terror into the hearts of his opponents.

There is, however, apart from its religious value, a more general view from which the book should be considered. The Koran enjoys the distinction of having been the starting-point of a new literary and philosophical movement which has powerfully affected the finest and most cultivated minds among both Jews and Christians in the Middle Ages. This general progress of the Muhammadan world has somehow been arrested, but research has shown that what European scholars knew of Greek philosophy, of mathematics, astronomy, and like sciences, for several centuries before the Renaissance, was, roughly speaking, all derived from Latin treatises ultimately based on Arabic originals; and it was the Koran which, though indirectly, gave the first impetus to these studies among the Arabs and their allies. Linguistic investigations, poetry, and other branches of literature, also made their appearance soon after or simultaneously with the publication of the Koran; and the literary movement thus initiated has resulted in some of the finest products of genius and learning.

The style in which the Koran is written requires some special attention in this introduction. The literary form is for the most part different from anything else we know. In its finest passages we indeed seem to hear a voice akin to that of the ancient Hebrew prophets, but there is much in the book which Europeans usually regard as faulty. The tendency to repetition which is an inherent characteristic of the Semitic mind appears here in an exaggerated form, and there is in addition much in the Koran which strikes us as wild and fantastic. The most unfavourable criticism ever passed on Muhammad's style has in fact been penned by the prophet's greatest British admirer, Carlyle himself; and there are probably many now who find themselves in the same dilemma with that great writer.

The fault appears, however, to lie partly in our difficulty to appreciate the psychology of the Arab prophet. We must, in order to do him justice, give full consideration to his temperament and to the condition of things around him. We are here in touch with an untutored but fervent mind, trying to realise itself and to assimilate certain great truths which have been powerfully borne in upon him, in order to impart them in a convincing form to his fellow-tribesmen. He is surrounded by obstacles of every kind, yet he manfully struggles on with the message that is within him. Learning



he has none, or next to none. His chief objects of knowledge are floating stories and traditions largely picked up from hearsay, and his over-wrought mind is his only teacher. The literary compositions to which he had ever listened were the half-cultured, yet often wildly powerful rhapsodies of early Arabian minstrels, akin to Ossian rather than to anything else within our knowledge. What wonder then that his Koran took a form which to our colder temperaments sounds strange, unbalanced, and fantastic?

Yet the Muslims themselves consider the book the finest that ever appeared among men. They find no incongruity in the style. To them the matter is all true and the manner all perfect. Their eastern temperament responds readily to the crude, strong and wild appeal which its cadences make to them, and the jingling rhyme in which the sentences of a discourse generally end adds to the charm of the whole. The Koran, even if viewed from the point of view of style alone, was to them from the first nothing less than a miracle, as great a miracle as ever was wrought.

But to return to our own view of the case. Our difficulty in appreciating the style of the Koran even moderately is, of course, increased if, instead of the original, we have a translation before us. Rodwell's seems to a great extent to carry with it the atmosphere in which Muhammad lived, and its sentences are imbued with the flavour of the East. The quasi-verse form, with its unfettered and irregular rhythmic flow of the lines, which has in suitable cases been adopted, helps to bring out much of the wild charm of the Arabic. Not the least among its recommendations is, perhaps, that it is scholarly without being pedantic—that is to say, that it aims at correctness without sacrificing the right effect of the whole to over-insistence on small details.

Another important feature of Rodwell's edition is its chronological arrangement of the Suras or chapters. As he tells us himself in his preface, it is now in a number of cases impossible to ascertain the exact occasion on which a discourse, or part of a discourse, was delivered, so that the system could not be carried through with entire consistency. But the sequence adopted was in the main based on the best available historical and literary evidence; and in following the order of the chapters as here printed, the reader will be able to trace the development of the prophet's mind as he gradually

advanced from the early flush of inspiration to the less spiritual and more equivocal role of warrior, politician, and founder of an empire.

G. MARGOLIOUTH.

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SIR WILLIAM MARTIN, K.T., D.C.L.  
LATE CHIEF JUSTICE OF NEW ZEALAND,

THIS VOLUME IS DEDICATED,  
WITH SINCERE FEELINGS OF ESTEEM FOR HIS PRIVATE WORTH,  
PUBLIC SERVICES,  
AND EMINENT LITERARY ATTAINMENTS,

BY

THE TRANSLATOR,

# TABLE TO FIND THE PLACE IN THIS EDITION OF THE SURAS AS COMMONLY NUMBERED

(EVERYMAN'S LIBRARY EDITION)

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## ADDENDA

Page 32, note 2.—The symbol *nun* may possibly refer to this letter as forming the Rhyme in most of the verses of this Sura.

Page 125, note 2.—This is the usual interpretation. Lit. *Lord of*, or, *possessor of stakes* (comp. li. 39 in Ar.), i.e., Forces. Dr. Sprenger ingeniously suggests that Muhammad's Jewish informant may have described Pharaoh as rich in *neçyb*, i.e., *fortresses*; whereas, in Ar., *naçyb*, means *an erection, pillar*, etc., for which Muhammad substituted the word for *tent stakes*. Vol. i. (470).

Page 391, verse 45.—Lit. *who my helpers unto God?* i.e., helpers of his religion (Beidh). If Muhammad had become, by any means, acquainted with the use of the Æth. *radeh*, *helper* or *disciple*, we have herein a probable interpretation of this passage, as well as of the word *Ansar*.

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