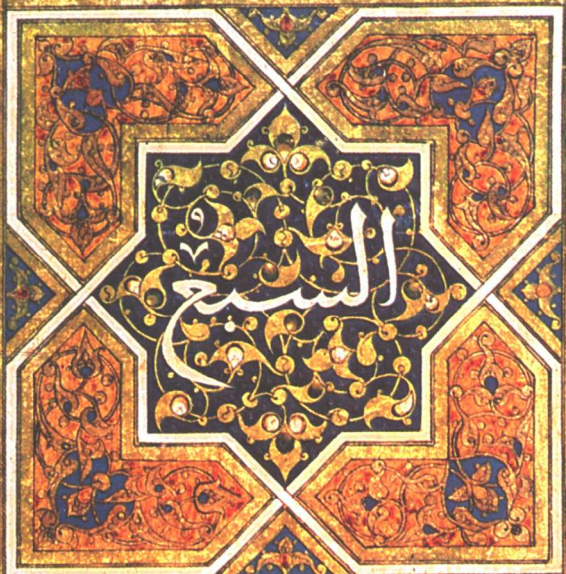




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# THE KORAN



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# THE KORAN

TRANSLATED BY N. J. DAWOOD

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The cover shows the title-page of an Egyptian Koran of 1304 in the British Museum  
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# CONTENTS

	Traditional Number of Chapter	Page
<i>Introduction</i>		9
<i>Chronological Table</i>		13
THE EXORDIUM .. .. .	1	15
THE EARTHQUAKE .. .. .	99	16
THE CATAclysm .. .. .	82	16
THE CESSATION .. .. .	81	17
MAN .. .. .	76	17
THE MERCIFUL .. .. .	55	19
NOAH .. .. .	71	21
THE WAR STEEDS .. .. .	100	23
DAYBREAK .. .. .	113	23
MEN .. .. .	114	23
THE FIG .. .. .	95	23
DAYLIGHT .. .. .	93	24
NIGHT .. .. .	92	24
THE DAWN .. .. .	89	25
COMFORT .. .. .	94	26
THE BLOOD CLOTS .. .. .	96	26
QADR .. .. .	97	27
WORLDLY GAIN .. .. .	102	27
THE DECLINING DAY .. .. .	103	27
THE SLANDERER .. .. .	104	28
ALMS .. .. .	107	28
ABUNDANCE .. .. .	108	28
THE DISASTER .. .. .	101	29
THE PROOF .. .. .	98	29
THE SUN .. .. .	91	30
THE OVERWHELMING EVENT .. .. .	88	30
THE CITY .. .. .	90	31
THE MOST HIGH .. .. .	87	31
MARY .. .. .	19	32
THE NIGHTLY VISITANT .. .. .	86	38
JOSEPH .. .. .	12	38

# CONTENTS

	Traditional Number of Chapter					Page
THE CONSTELLATIONS .. .. .	85	48				
THE RENDING .. .. .	84	48				
THE UNJUST .. .. .	83	49				
HE FROWNED .. .. .	80	50				
THE SOUL-SNATCHERS .. .. .	79	51				
THE TIDINGS.. .. .	78	52				
THOSE THAT ARE SENT FORTH .. .. .	77	53				
THE RESURRECTION .. .. .	75	55				
THE CLOAKED ONE .. .. .	74	56				
THE LADDERS .. .. .	70	57				
THE MANTLED ONE .. .. .	73	59				
THE INEVITABLE .. .. .	69	60				
THE PEN .. .. .	68	61				
JONAH.. .. .	10	64				
SOVEREIGNTY .. .. .	67	73				
THE STORY .. .. .	28	75				
THE ANT .. .. .	27	82				
CHEATING .. .. .	64	88				
THE HYPOCRITES .. .. .	63	90				
THE CAVE .. .. .	18	91				
ABRAHAM .. .. .	14	100				
FRIDAY, OR THE DAY OF CONGREGATION .. .. .	62	104				
BATTLE ARRAY .. .. .	61	105				
IRON .. .. .	57	107				
THAT WHICH IS COMING .. .. .	56	110				
THE MOON .. .. .	54	112				
THE STAR .. .. .	53	114				
THE MOUNTAIN .. .. .	52	117				
THE WINDS .. .. .	51	119				
QAF .. .. .	50	121				
MOHAMMED .. .. .	47	123				
AL-AHQAF .. .. .	46	127				
KNEELING .. .. .	45	130				
HOUD .. .. .	11	133				
THUNDER .. .. .	13	143				
SMOKE .. .. .	44	147				
ORNAMENTS OF GOLD .. .. .	43	149				

# CONTENTS

	Traditional Number of Chapter	Page
COUNSEL .. .. .	42	154
REVELATIONS WELL EXPOUNDED .. ..	41	159
THE FORGIVING ONE .. .. .	40	163
THE RANKS .. .. .	37	169
YA SIN .. .. .	36	174
THE CREATOR .. .. .	35	178
SHEBA .. .. .	34	182
ADORATION .. .. .	32	187
LUQMAN .. .. .	31	189
THE GREEKS .. .. .	30	192
THE SPIDER .. .. .	29	196
THE POETS .. .. .	26	201
AL-FURQAN .. .. .	25	209
LIGHT .. .. .	24	214
THE BELIEVERS .. .. .	23	220
TA HA .. .. .	20	226
THE NIGHT JOURNEY .. .. .	17	233
AL-HIJR .. .. .	15	242
THE HEIGHTS .. .. .	7	246
THE ELEPHANT .. .. .	105	264
QURAYSH .. .. .	106	264
FIBRE .. .. .	111	264
UNITY .. .. .	112	265
THE JINN .. .. .	72	265
SHE WHO IS TESTED .. .. .	60	266
EXILE .. .. .	59	268
SHE WHO PLEADED .. .. .	58	271
THE CHAMBERS .. .. .	49	273
VICTORY .. .. .	48	275
THE HORDES .. .. .	39	279
SAD .. .. .	38	285
THE CONFEDERATE TRIBES .. .. .	33	290
THE PROPHETS .. .. .	21	297
THE BEE .. .. .	16	304
THE SPOILS .. .. .	8	314
REPENTANCE.. .. .	9	320
THE COW .. .. .	2	334



## CONTENTS

Traditional Number of Chapter							Page
WOMEN	..	..	..	..	..	4	366
DIVORCE	..	..	..	..	..	65	385
THE TABLE	..	..	..	..	..	5	386
THE UNBELIEVERS	..	..	..	..	..	109	401
HELP	..	..	..	..	..	110	401
PILGRIMAGE	..	..	..	..	..	22	401
THE IMRANS	..	..	..	..	..	3	408
CATTLE	..	..	..	..	..	6	425
PROHIBITION	..	..	..	..	..	66	442

*An index of the chapters (suras) with their Arabic titles and in their traditional sequence appears at the end of the book, on page 445.*

## INTRODUCTION

THE Koran<sup>1</sup> is the earliest and by far the finest work of Classical Arabic prose. For Muslims it is the infallible word of God, a transcript of a tablet preserved in heaven, revealed to the Prophet Mohammed by the Angel Gabriel. Except in the opening verses and some few passages in which the Prophet or the Angel speaks in the first person, the speaker throughout is God.<sup>2</sup>

The posthumous son of Abdullah bin Abdul-Muttalib, of the tribe of Quraysh, Mohammed was born in Mecca about the year A.D. 570. His mother Aminah died when he was still a child, and he was brought up by his grandfather and then by his uncle Abu Talib. As a youth he travelled with the trading caravans from Mecca to Syria, and at the age of twenty-five married Khadija, daughter of Khuwailid, a rich widow fifteen years his senior. Meanwhile he had acquired a reputation for honesty and wisdom, and had come under the influence of Jewish and Christian teachings.

Long before Mohammed's call, Arabian paganism was showing signs of decay. At the Ka'ba the Meccans worshipped not only Allah, the supreme Semitic God, but also a number of female deities whom they regarded as the daughters of Allah. Among these were Al-Lat, Al-Uzzah, and Al-Manat, who represented the Sun, Venus, and Fortune respectively. Impressed by Jewish and Christian monotheism, a number of men known as *hanifs* had already rejected idolatry for an ascetic religion of their own. Mohammed appears to have been influenced by them. It was his habit to retire to a cave in the mountains in order to give himself up to solitary prayer and meditation. According to Muslim tradition, one night in Ramadhan about the year 610, as he was asleep or in a trance, the Angel Gabriel came to him and said: 'Recite!' He replied: 'What shall I recite?' The order was repeated three times, until the angel himself said:

'Recite in the name of your Lord who created, created man from clots of blood.

1. The Arabic name means *The Recital*.

2. God speaks in the first person plural, which often changes to the first person singular or the third person singular in the course of the same sentence.

## INTRODUCTION

'Recite! Your Lord is the Most Bountiful One, who by the pen taught man what he did not know.'

When he awoke, these words, we are told, seemed to be 'inscribed upon his heart'.

Mohammed, who disclaimed power to perform miracles, firmly believed that he was the messenger of God, sent forth to confirm previous scriptures. God had revealed His will to the Jews and the Christians through chosen apostles, but they disobeyed God's commandments and divided themselves into schismatic sects. The Koran accuses the Jews of corrupting the Scriptures and the Christians of worshipping Jesus as the son of God, although He had expressly commanded them to worship none but Him. Having thus gone astray, they must be brought back to the right path, to the true religion preached by Abraham. This was Islam - absolute submission or resignation to the will of Allah.

The Koran preaches the oneness of God and emphasizes divine mercy and forgiveness. God is almighty and all-knowing, and though compassionate towards His creatures He is stern in retribution. He enjoins justice and fair dealing, kindness to orphans and widows, and charity to the poor. The most important duties of the Muslim are faith in Allah and His apostle, prayer, almsgiving, fasting, and (if possible) pilgrimage to the Sacred House at Mecca, built by Abraham for the worship of the One God.

The Koranic revelations followed each other at brief intervals and were at first committed to memory by professional remembrancers. During Mohammed's life-time verses were written on palm-leaves, stones, and any material that came to hand. Their collection was completed during the caliphate of Omar, the second Caliph, and an authorized version was established during the caliphate of Othman, his successor (644-56). To this day this version remains as the authoritative word of God. But, owing to the fact that the kufic script in which the Koran was originally written contained no indication of vowels or diacritical points, variant readings are recognized by Muslims as of equal authority.

It is unfortunate that in preparing the contents of the Koran for book-form its editor or editors followed no chronological sequence. Its chapters were arranged generally in order of length, the longest coming first and the shortest last. Attempts have been made by Noldeke, Grimme, Rodwell, and Bell to arrange the chapters in chronological order, but scholars are

## INTRODUCTION

agreed that a strictly chronological arrangement is impossible without dissecting some of the chapters into scattered verses, owing to the inclusion of revelations spoken in Medina in chapters begun several years earlier in Mecca.

In preparing this new translation it has been my aim to present the modern reader with an intelligible version of the Koran in contemporary English. It is my belief that the Koran is not only one of the greatest books of prophetic literature but also a literary masterpiece of surpassing excellence. In adhering to a rigidly literal rendering of Arabic idioms, previous translations have, in my opinion, practically failed to convey both the meaning and the rhetorical grandeur of the original. It ought to be borne in mind that the Koran contains many statements which, if not recognized as altogether obscure, lend themselves to more than one interpretation. I have taken great pains to reproduce these ambiguities wherever they occur, and have provided explanatory footnotes in order to avoid turning the text into an interpretation rather than a translation. Throughout this rendering the standard commentaries of Az-Zamakhshari, Al-Beidhawi, and Al-Jalalein have been closely followed.

I have already described the mechanical plan according to which the chapters of the Koran were arranged after the Prophet's death. In this edition the traditional arrangement has been abandoned. The present sequence, while not following a strictly chronological order, begins with the more Biblical and poetic revelations and ends with the much longer, and often more topical, chapters. In short, the new arrangement is primarily intended for the uninitiated reader who, understandably, is often put off by such mundane chapters as 'The Cow' or 'The Table', which are traditionally placed at the beginning of the book. For purposes of reference the traditional number of each chapter will be found in the list of contents at the beginning of the book. The spelling of all Arabic words has been simplified.

Here a word should also be said about the cryptic Arabic letters which head certain chapters of the Koran. Various theories have been put forward by Muslim and Western scholars to explain their meaning, but none of them is satisfactory. The fact is that no one knows what they stand for. Traditional commentators dismiss them by saying, 'Allah alone knows what He means by these letters.'

Finally I should point out that in the foregoing paragraphs I have endeavoured to confine myself to a bare outline of the

## INTRODUCTION

facts regarding the genesis of the Koran and its subsequent preservation, without touching on such controversial issues as the nature of Mohammed's prophethood or his theological sources. It is the work itself that matters; and the intelligent reader, if allowed to approach it with a free and unprejudiced mind, should be able to form his own opinions.

*London, July 1968*

N. J. D.

## NOTE ON THE FOURTH REVISED EDITION

In this twelfth reprint, which is also the fourth revised edition, the major change I have made is to insert chapter and verse numbers at the head, middle, and foot of each page for easier reference to the Arabic.

*London, 1973*

N. J. D.

## CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE OF THE MAIN EVENTS IN THE LIFE OF MOHAMMED

a. 570	Birth of Mohammed (his father having died a few months earlier)
576	Death of his mother Aminah
595	Marriage to Khadija
a. 610	Beginning of Call
615	Flight of his followers to Ethiopia
619	Death of Khadija
620	Mohammed's reputed 'Night Journey' from Mecca to Jerusalem, and thence to the Seventh Heaven
622	The <i>Hijra</i> (Flight or Migration) of Mohammed and his followers to Medina, and beginning of the Muslim Era
624	Battle of Badr: the Quraysh defeated by the Muslims
625	Battle of Uhud: the Muslims defeated
626	The Jewish tribe of al-Nadhir crushed and expelled
627	'The War of the Ditch' – the Meccans' expedition against the Muslims in Medina. Attackers driven off
627	The Jewish tribe of Qurayza raided by Mohammed; some 800 men beheaded (only one Jew

## CHRONOLOGICAL TABLE OF THE MAIN EVENTS

- abjuring his religion to save his life) and all the women and children sold as slaves
- 628      The Treaty of Hudaibiyya: truce with the Quraysh, who recognize Mohammed's right to proselytize without hindrance
- 629      The Jews of Khaybar put to the sword
- 629      Mohammed sends letters and messengers to the Kings of Persia, Yemen, and Ethiopia and the Emperor Heraclius, inviting them to accept Islam
- 630      Truce broken by the Quraysh. Mecca taken by Mohammed – the entire population converted, and the Ka'ba established as the religious centre of Islam
- 631      'The Year of Embassies' – Islam accepted by the Arabian tribes
- 632      Mohammed's Farewell Pilgrimage to Mecca
- 632, 8 June      Death of Mohammed, three months after his return to Medina

## THE EXORDIUM

IN THE NAME OF ALLAH  
THE COMPASSIONATE  
THE MERCIFUL

1:1

*Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Creation,  
The Compassionate, the Merciful,  
King of Judgement-day!  
You alone we worship, and to You alone  
we pray for help.*

*Guide us to the straight path  
The path of those whom You have favoured, 1:7  
Not of those who have incurred Your wrath,  
Nor of those who have gone astray.*

\*



## THE EARTHQUAKE

*In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful*

99:1 **W**HEN Earth is rocked in her last convulsion; when Earth shakes off her burdens and man asks 'What may this mean?' – on that day she will proclaim her tidings, for your Lord will have inspired her.

On that day mankind will come in broken bands to be shown their labours. Whoever has done an atom's weight of good shall see it, and whoever has done an atom's weight of evil shall see it also.

## THE CATACLYSM

*In the Name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful*

82:1 **W**HEN the sky is rent asunder; when the stars scatter and the oceans roll together; when the graves are hurled about; each soul shall know what it has done and what it has failed to do.

O man! What evil has enticed you from your gracious Lord who created you, gave you an upright form, and well-proportioned you? In whatever shape He could have surely moulded you according to His will.

Yes, you deny the Last Judgement. Yet there are guardians watching over you, noble recorders who know of all your actions.

The righteous shall surely dwell in bliss. But the wicked shall burn in Hell-fire upon the Judgement-day: they shall not escape.

82:19 Would that you knew what the Day of Judgement is! Oh, would that you knew what the Day of Judgement is! It is the day when every soul will stand alone and Allah will reign supreme.