

## Article in The Times, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2004

### The Qur'an

At the beginning of the seventh century of the Common Era, in Makkah, a market town in Arabia, lived a fairly well-off, yet unlettered, businessman, Muhammad.

Increasingly troubled by the manifold injustices he saw around him, and longing also for answers to other more universal questions, Muhammad began to embark on periods of retreat among the hills and caves in the neighbourhood of Makkah, to reflect on some of the issues that were disturbing him.

One of his biographers, the Pakistani, Abdul Hameed Siddiqui, writes that in those caves, "Muhammad's soul was struggling to comprehend the mystery of creation, of life and death, of good and evil."

One night, during the month of Ramadan in the year 610 C.E., while in the cave of Hira at the summit of a rugged mountain, Muhammad saw an angel holding a book in his hand. 'Read!' the angel commanded.

"I cannot read." Muhammad replied.

The angel squeezed Muhammad in a tight embrace and once again, repeated, "Read!"

"I cannot read." Muhammad repeated.

The angel squeezed him again.

The command 'Read!' was made once more and the reply remained the same, whereupon the angel uttered these words in Arabic:

*"Read! In the name of your Lord who created,  
Created the human being from something which clings,  
Read! And your Lord is the Most Bounteous,  
Who has taught the use of pen,  
Taught the human being what he did not know."*

These were the first five majestic verses of the Qur'an (96: 1-5) that were revealed to - the now Prophet - Muhammad. The Arabic word *nabi* (prophet) refers to one who has been given naba' (news or revelation) from God.

The revelations were to continue, at varying intervals, for the next twenty-two years, and would be collated to form the text of the Qur'an, a book roughly the length of the New Testament. The Qur'an would also become the most recited book in the world.

At the heart of the Qur'an's message was an insistent call on mankind to reflect, as Muhammad had done, on the dynamic universe all around them, and recognise that this was the marvellous creation of One God to whom alone worship was due.

It was He before whom all human beings would be raised up in the Hereafter for judgement as to how they had conducted themselves in their fleeting lives while on this earth.

This was not a new-fangled doctrine, the Qur'an explained, but a confirmation of the teachings of previous prophets like Moses, David and Jesus, all of whom had preached the same monotheistic message. They too had received revelations from God, respectively called the *Tawrah* (Torah of Moses), *Zabur* (Psalms of David) and the *Injil* (Gospel of Jesus). The core teachings were common to all of them but had become gradually distorted by human folly over the passage of time. The Qur'an had been sent down to restate the original pristine guidance for mankind, and this time round it would not be forgotten.

From the beginning, the Qur'anic text was written on scraps of parchment and leather, tablets of stone, ribs of palm branches, camels' shoulder-blades, pieces of board and the 'breasts of men'. The last refers to the retentive powers of the Prophet's immediate followers who committed the Qur'an to memory – a practice that continues to this day among Muslims the world over.

At the beginning of the eighth century, less than a hundred years following the blessed Prophet Muhammad's death in the year 632 C.E., the Qur'anic message had spread across an vast swathe of land that stretched from what is now Portugal to what is now Pakistan. Throughout much of that diverse realm, Arabic became the language of culture, and the Qur'an the bedrock of faith.

Today, fourteen hundred years since it was first revealed, the Qur'an continues to represent the core of identity and continuity for the world's 1.5 billion Muslims.

With its focus on the human being and his/her behaviour, its discourse on who we are, our potential, limitations, motivations and our ultimate future, the Qur'an is a message that demands to be given the opportunity to be heard by all in the human family.

George Sale, who published an English translation of the Qur'an in 1734 felt it necessary in his Introduction to reassure his readers that they – of all people – need not be afraid of the Qur'an's ability to speak directly to the hearts of its readers and win over new adherents. He wrote:

“They must have a mean opinion of the Christian religion, or be but ill-grounded therein, who can apprehend any danger from so manifest a forgery.”

The Qur'an describes itself as a *tadhkirah* – a reminder – to humankind about their true responsibilities while sojourned on God's earth.

They must have a mean opinion about God who would think that human beings would be left without guidance from their own Creator.

**By Inayat Bunglawala**