

What is the Holy Qur-aan?

The Holy Qur-aan is the Book that contains the Words of Allaah{footnote}Allaah is the name of the Infinite Creator who has created every finite thing and who was worshipped by all prophets and messengers such as Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muhammad. When His name is mentioned, we like to glorify Him by saying words such as mentioned in the text -- the Glorified and Exalted

{/footnote} (God, the Glorified and Exalted) revealed to Muhammad{footnote}Muhammad is the last messenger of Allaah to whom the Qur-aan was revealed by Allaah through angel Gabriel. As a matter of respect, we wish him peace and blessings when his name is mentioned.

{/footnote} (May God bestow peace and blessings on him) through angel Gabriel, the Trusted Spirit.{footnote}And indeed this (Book) is revelation from the Lord of the worlds. The trusted Spirit (Gabriel) brought it down upon your heart in perspicuous Arabic language so that you may become one of the warners (prophets). (The Qur-aan 26:192-195)

{/footnote} It is the only complete, all-inclusive and preserved version of God's revelations. With its revelation, the God has rendered the old books (like Torah, Psalms and Gospels) totally obsolete. Whatever good and truth was contained in those books is fully covered in the Qur-aan. No one, therefore, has any need whatsoever to refer to the old books.

The Qur-aan presents the Islamic faith, its paradigms and goals. It also contains laws, commandments and guidance for humanity from Allaah, subhâanahu wa ta'aalaa{footnote}Arabic for "the Glorified and Exalted"

{/footnote} (SWT), applicable to all times until the day of Judgment. It outlines the way of life that Allaah has decreed for human beings. Anyone who wants to worship and serve God as He wants to be worshipped and served has to follow the Qur-aan.

It has been named 'Qur-aan' by Allaah SWT Himself. The name means 'a coherent collection that is read/recited frequently'. What an appropriate name for the book that is read and recited by millions of Muslims daily within and outside of their five time worship. Hundreds of thousands of them know the whole book by heart from cover to cover and they keep reciting it daily to keep it fresh in their memory.

The Holy Qur-aan is the book that made a solitary, unlettered person, Muhammad{footnote}May God bestow peace and blessings on him

{/footnote}, the most effective leader of the world as well as the most ardently loved and most devotedly revered human being in history. He has been recognized by researcher after researcher as the person who has had the greatest influence in the world.

This book created an evolutionary revolution that has changed the map of the world for good. In the shortest time frame, it caused the world's only complete revolution in every aspect of the life of those it impacted. It thoroughly reformed its followers' personalities, changed their attitudes, revolutionized their way of life, refined their tastes, united their ranks, opened their hearts, raised their spirits, organized their community, stabilized their society and gave them the wisdom to lead the world. Its adherents became the supporters of the weak, the helpers of the poor, the emancipators of women, the liberators of the exploited, the redeemers of the slaves, keepers of the peace, enforcers of justice and fairness and the teachers of knowledge, science and wisdom. They are the people who brought light to the dark ages. In short, this book was instrumental in establishing the kingdom of God that Jesus had foretold about and for the establishment of which the Jews were waiting for the Messiah to come. They do not realize, but what was promised has already happened and what they have been waiting for has already arrived.

This is a book of fiery oration, passionate discourses, heart-moving impact, tear-flowing appeal, convincing reasoning, mesmerizing eloquence, exquisite literary style and charming prose. None of these adjectives is exaggerated. No superlative for it can be overemphasizing. The original listeners were stunned by its beauty. To resist its heart-piercing impact, for not wanting to believe the facts it presented, they used to plug their ears. Since it was so effective, the simple minded thought it was some kind of magic spell. The intelligentsia could not help exclaiming that it could not be of human origin.

Although it is a religious book, it has hardly any similarity to the books of other religions. Usually, people's approach to religion is emotional. When reading religious literature, they switch off their intellect so that they can blindly believe what the religion teaches. Not so with the Qur-aan! It does not appreciate blind followers. Rather, it challenges the reader to think, visualize and reflect instead of believing blindly or reading passively. It requires engagement of both emotion and intellect during the reading and reflection process.

Let us explore its salient features in a little more detail.

The Salient Features of the Qur-aan

The Holy Qur-aan is a unique book in terms of its being the literal Word of God and in terms of its premises, subject matter, objective, revelation, compilation, style and composition.

The Word of God

When Muslims say that the Holy Qur-aan is the Word of Allaah SWT, they do not mean that it

is merely God inspired word. It is not a case where the ideas inspired by God were written in human words. It is literally the 'Word of God'. Every word of the Qur-aan was revealed to Prophet Muhammad from Allaah SWT through Archangel Gabriel. It is the Eternal Word of the Eternal God. Not only did Allaah SWT reveal it, He also dictated its order of compilation and took it upon Himself to preserve it forever.

The revelation started coming to Muhammad when he was appointed to be the messenger of Allaah SWT at the age of forty. It continued for about twenty-three years until the revelation of the Qur-aan was completed. As the revelation was received, it was immediately dictated to the scribes of the Qur-aan and committed to the memory by the followers of Islam. During this time, Muhammad spoke his own words and delivered speeches that, although God inspired, were not the Word of God, and hence, were strictly distinguished from the Qur-aan.

The Premises, the Subject Matter and the Objective

Premises

Whether you believe in Islam or not, you must keep the Islamic premises in mind if you want to understand the message of the Qur-aan. The premises briefly are:

- The human beings and the universe they are living in are a planned creation of a Creator whose name is Allaah. Allaah, the Lord of the Universe, gave human beings knowledge, intellect and conscience along with freedom to choose and act.

- Life in this world is a period of test for every human being. The test is: Who, using one's free will, chooses to live a life of obedience to the Creator and who chooses to live otherwise. Those who choose to live in obedience of Allaah SWT will have a life of contentment and fulfillment in this world and a happy, joyous and comfortable life in the 'Gardens' in the Hereafter. That is the ultimate success. Those who choose to disregard their duty and responsibility to Allaah SWT will have an unsettled life in this world and will be punished in Hell in the Hereafter. That is an abject failure.

- To help people follow the right way, out of His mercy, Allaah educated the first human couple in the Islamic way of life. Afterwards, He sent various prophets and messengers to do the same thing for the subsequent generations. Each prophet and messenger was sent to encourage people to obey Allaah SWT. He was also to establish the kingdom of God^{footnote}A society living by the commandments of God and characterized by peace, justice, compassion, magnanimity, human equality and dignity.

^{/footnote} and was given appropriate instructions and/or book containing the guidance for people. Finally, Muhammad was sent with the Qur-aan for the same mission.

Subject Matter

From the perspective of these premises, the subject matter of the Qur-aan is guidance for humanity; i.e., identifying the appropriate and inappropriate ideas, attitudes, thoughts, actions and behaviours for people. Various traits of human behaviour are mentioned along with the

consequences they are going to bring and different kinds of human personalities are described indicating the types of personalities that are destined to eternal success and others that are heading to utter failure.^{footnote}We have revealed to you part by part the Book that explains everything and is Guidance, Mercy and Good News to the Muslims. (The Qur-aan 16:89)

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This is a book wherein you, as a person as well as a human being, are talked about. When reading it, you will see yourself individually described in different places.^{footnote}Indeed, We have sent down for you a Book in which is your description, so will you not understand? (The Qur-aan 21:10)

^{/footnote} If you are attentive and reflective during its study, you will find yourself at times as if you are seeing yourself in a mirror. There, it will also advise you how you ought to be.

Through this Book, God talks to you and instructs about what is good for you, warns of what is going to harm you, explains what is expected of you, and recommends the way you should respond to its message.

Objective

Its objective is to persuade people to adopt behaviour that will bring them success and salvation in the Hereafter while making this world a better place to live. For that purpose, it also wants to educate people to establish in this world a society permeated with love, fairness, generosity and peace (i.e. a kingdom of God). At the same time, its mission is to discourage people from bad behaviour by warning them of the terrible consequences in this world and the horrible punishment in the Hereafter.

Revelation

The nature of the revelation of the Holy Qur-aan is not such that Allaah SWT wrote a book and sent it down in a printed and bound form. Here is how it happened:

Allaah SWT selected a human being (Muhammad) to be His messenger. He entrusted Muhammad with the responsibility to reform a degenerated society, call people to God, organize them into a cohesive community and establish a kingdom of God based on the principles, laws and regulations given by Him. For this purpose, He gave His messenger guidance at every step of the way and every stage of his mission until the mission was fully accomplished.^{footnote}Say: The Holy Spirit (Gabriel) has brought down the revelation piecemeal, intact from your Lord, in order to strengthen the believers and as a Guidance and Good News to the Muslims. (The Qur-aan 16:102)

And We have sent down the Qur-aan piecemeal so that you may recite it to the people gradually part by part; and We have revealed it in stages according to the occasion. (The

Qur-aan 17:106)

Those who reject faith say: Why is not the whole Qur-aan revealed to him all at once? We have done so to strengthen your heart, and We have rehearsed it to you in slow, gradual stages. And no odd comment they bring to you but We bring to you the Truth (in response) and the best explanation thereof. (The Qur-aan 25:32-33)

{/footnote} The Holy Qur-aan is the collection of all those instructions, commentaries, rules, regulations, principles, commands, prohibitions, etc. given by Allaah SWT in His own Words throughout the mission of Prophet Muhammad. Thus, the Qur-aan was the God-given manifesto, main organ and mainstay of a great movement started by Muhammad. It was revealed little by little over a 23 year period, as and when a message was required to keep the movement progressing and on track. To appreciate the nuances of its style and the impact it created, the phases of the movement in which a certain part of the Qur-aan was revealed should be kept in view.

Initially, the verses were brief and the chapters were short. They were easy to remember but very effective in their impact on the listeners. As the capacity of the listeners to understand the message grew, the structure of the verses and the content changed accordingly. As the people became more accustomed to the Qur-aanic style and as the believers got more used to memorizing and reciting it, the length of the Soorahs (chapters) grew along with the believers' ability and dedication.

Preservation

The Holy Qur-aan is the only religious book (attributed to God) that has remained in its pristine form since it was revealed. People can doubt the fact of it being the revelation of Allaah SWT, but no one can ever challenge the fact that not even a letter has been changed, added to or deleted from it. The Qur-aan itself states categorically that it will always remain protected because Allaah who revealed it is its protector.{/footnote}Certainly, it is We Who have revealed the message piece by piece and We shall assuredly preserve it. (The Qur-aan 15:9)

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The preservation of the text of the Holy Qur-aan was achieved in multiple ways. One of the means was capitalizing on the keen memory power of Arabs. For example, they were famous for committing to memory not only their own genealogies but also those of their camels and horses.

God had bestowed with His Prophet with extraordinary ability to remember. Whatever revelation Muhammad received was imprinted indelibly in his memory, never to be forgotten.

In addition, immediately at the receipt of a revelation, Muhammad{/footnote}Keep in mind that he did not know how to read or write.

{/footnote} would call one of his scribes and dictate the text with the instructions as to where in the existing collection that revelation was to be placed.

Lastly, all Muslims had to learn the Qur-aan to be able to recite it five times a day in their prayers. Thus, it was immediately memorized word by word by the believers. Memorization of the Qur-aan is such an important aspect of worship, that the Muslims made special efforts to learn the whole Qur-aan word by word and keep repeating it throughout the year. By the time of the Prophet's death, hundreds of Muslims had memorized the full text of the Qur-aan.

Since the early days of Islam, there has never been a period that did not have thousands of Muslims who have memorized the whole Qur-aan in its entirety. Every year in the month of Ramadhaan, these people recite the whole Qur-aan in their prayers from beginning to the end. The recitation itself is so meticulously carried out that not even the mispronunciation of a single word or a syllable of the Qur-aan passes uncorrected by listeners. It is recited in the same exact pronunciation and accent as it was pronounced, voiced and accented by the Prophet. Hence, not only have the words been learnt, every detail about the pronunciation and accent has also been learnt, practised, documented and passed through the generations. Consequently, one can take a random sample of the expert reciters of the Qur-aan of different age groups from different corners of the world speaking different languages who have never met before and have them recite the Qur-aan and they will recite it exactly alike. And while you are at it, you can take copies of the Qur-aan printed in different parts of world at different times of the history and check the text while reciters are reciting, you will not find any difference whatsoever.

Thus, the Qur-aan was preserved in writing as well as through memorization by devoted followers whose learning chain from one teacher to the next has been authenticated and documented. Some original copies of the officially documented Qur-aan are still available in the museums of the world. This is the only religious book the authenticity of which can be proven anytime by checking it as described above.

Despite being an anti-Islamic orientalist, Sir William Muir, confessed, "There is probably in the world no other book which has remained twelve centuries (now 14) with so pure a text."

Style and Composition

From the brief note about the revelation of the Qur-aan, it is clear that the writing style of an ordinary book cannot be suitable for a multi-purpose book that is to guide a movement during its evolution, on its successful completion, and its adherents forever in the future. It should also be remembered that it was published, spread and propagated through recitation and spoken communication - not in the form of magazines, pamphlets and booklets. Hence, the Holy Qur-aan is not composed in a writing style, but in an oratory style.

Even the intent of the speech was not just to inform, educate, plead or argue a point of view like

a professor or a philosopher does. Above and beyond its informative, educational and advocacy roles, its objective was to create a revolution in the outlook, lifestyle and social paradigms of its audience. It was aimed at transforming the society by appealing to every aspect of human personality including heart and mind, intellect and emotions, scientific wisdom and artistic faculties, hope and fear, and logic and feelings. It had to sell its message to people of diverse attitudes, intellect, levels of understanding, backgrounds and perspectives. It was designed to concurrently accomplish multiple tasks of bringing the point home, changing the thoughts, eliciting the emotions, dismantling the opposition, training the followers, motivating the believers, winning the enemies, convincing the doubters, exposing the falsehood and eradicating evil and immorality through one discourse revealed according to the needs of the time.

That is why you will see the Qur-aan intermixing in the same sequence a variety of issues such as matters of faith, moral injunctions, rules of law, calls to religion, admonitions, criticism, warnings, glad tidings, evidence, history, cosmic phenomena, etc. You will notice one subject starts immediately after another without an evident transition; the speech keeps shifting suddenly between the first, second or third person; and, the speaker and addressee keep changing within the same discourse or paragraph. History is narrated unlike any book of history; philosophy and metaphysics are talked about in a non-philosophical fashion; law is given unlike any statutes of law we are accustomed to; politics, economics and civics are discussed unlike books of social sciences; and, human development and cosmic phenomena are mentioned unlike a book of science. We will describe the use of scientific facts in a subsequent chapter of this book, but let us see how it deals with history.

The Holy Qur-aan liberally uses some historical anecdotes, examples of previous civilizations and episodes from the lives and missions of previous prophets, but it does not describe those things in the manner in which a historical account is ordinarily given. This is because it is not a book of history. It is a book of morality and guidance. Its primary purposes of mentioning history are to:

- Explain the points it has to make about its subject matter;
- Support its conclusions; and,
- Underscore its assertions.

Thus, when the Qur-aan uses historical examples, it usually does not even give the full historical account. Concisely and briefly, it mentions only that episode of history or only that aspect(s) of the episode which is(are) essential for the point to be made. Even at that, it mentions only as little a part as possible for people of understanding to get the point. Sometimes, the same episode or the same aspect of an episode is repeated at several different places, but depending upon the points to be made or emphasized, different details of the episode are mentioned. At one place one aspect may be elaborated and other aspects hinted at briefly, while at another place some other aspect of the same episode may be given in more detail while the former aspect may be omitted or only briefly alluded to. Referring to the same episode in varying details at different locations might appear repetitious. But there are almost always subtle nuances in the points to be made, emphasized or underscored that a

discriminating reader, rather than finding them repetitious, appreciates the subtleties. Even when the same words are repeated, the context gives them a new emphasis. Putting all the pieces together, a coherent story emerges especially in the case of the episodes of the prophets of God.

Other Unique Aspects

The Holy Qur-aan is a unique book not only because of its features already mentioned but also because of the order of its compilation, the arrangement of its contents, its eloquence, its miraculous nature and many other aspects too numerous to cover here. To fully benefit from its study, it is necessary to become familiar with a few more of its unique characteristics.

Unlike Your Idea of a Book

People expect a book to be arranged in a style they have become accustomed to. The organization of the material in one book might differ somewhat from another depending on its subject matter, but the layouts are essentially similar. Books are usually organized into parts, chapters, section, subsections, etc. according to the topics and sub-topics covered in it. Not so with the Qur-aan.

The Holy Qur-aan is unlike any idea or perception of a book's layout that you might have in your mind. It is a unique book with a unique arrangement of its contents.

The basic units organizing the Qur-aan are Aayaat{footnote}Its singular is Aayah (a verse).

{/footnote} (verses) and Soorahs. The word 'Soorah' is roughly translated as 'chapter'. But a Soorah is not a chapter in the same sense as the chapter of a book is commonly taken to mean. Although each Soorah has an opening and closing and a main theme, most of the chapters keep on reiterating essential Islamic teachings and core values over and over again. Such reminders and admonitions are dispersed throughout the chapters well fitted in between the discussions of the main theme.

The Qur-aan has some 6236 Aayaat (verses) that are divided into 114 Soorahs (chapters). The Soorahs vary in length and contents. The longest Soorah consists of 286 verses while the shortest Soorah contains only three.

Every Soorah (chapter) has a name that does not necessarily represent the topic of the Soorah. It is usually only a symbol to identify a certain Soorah. Generally, all it signifies is "the chapter wherein such and such a word has occurred". For example, Al-Baqarah (the cow) is the name of the longest Soorah (chapter) of the Qur-aan. Its contents have nothing to do with a cow except for a brief anecdotal reference about the slaughter of a cow by the Jews. An-Naml (the ant) is the name of the Soorah wherein an incident in the life of Prophet Sulaymaan (Solomon) regarding an ant has been mentioned. Otherwise, the contents of the Soorah have nothing to do with an ant. All the name implies is 'the Soorah wherein Al-Baqarah (the cow) has been mentioned' or 'the Soorah wherein An-Naml (the ant) has been mentioned'. In fact, that is how Muslims used to refer to the Soorahs initially. But gradually, for the ease of use and brevity, the sentence was dropped in favour of the one identifying word. Almost all names are symbols for

the identity of Soorahs, not the topics or themes of the chapters. There are, however, a few exceptions. Some Soorahs like Soorah Al-Faatihah (the opening), Soorah Al-Ikhlaas (the pure unity) and Soorah Yoosuf (Joseph) are the names of the Soorahs as well as their topics.

Another clarification regarding the names of Soorahs is also warranted. Some people may think that, the Qur-aan being a sacred religious book, it must have used only sacred objects for the names of its Soorahs (chapters). This is not true. The use of a word to identify a Soorah in itself does not accord any sanctity or importance whatsoever to that word, or to the object represented by that word. Because Soorahs (chapters) are identified by names, not topics, we do not translate names. So far in this book, while quoting Qur-aan, we have been giving references using only chapter numbers and verse numbers, without using Soorah names. From now on, we will use Soorah names also while giving references.

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Unlike a Religious Book You may be Accustomed to

Canonical religious books (like Torah, Gospels, etc.) are mostly arranged in the style of history books and narrated in a story-like manner. The Qur-aan does use historical accounts and anecdotes to achieve its objective of providing guidance to mankind (as previously explained). However, unlike other religious books, its subject matter is NEITHER the history of mankind, NOR the history of certain people, NOR the report of the ministry of Muhammad, NOR any mythologies of religious nature. That is why its contents are not arranged like other religious books; for instance, it does not start with the human origin and end with the apocalypse; nor does it begin with the nativity of Muhammad and end with the completion of his mission or his death.

Compilation and Order

So far we have discussed that the Qur-aan is not written or arranged like any other religious or secular book since the usual style and arrangement is inappropriate for the purposes of the Qur-aan. Is it then compiled in the order its revelations were received? Shouldn't it have been? The answer to both of these questions is: Absolutely not! Yet the arrangement of its text is not arbitrary or haphazard either.

The order of every verse and every Soorah has been dictated by the Revealer, Allaah SWT Himself. As and when a Soorah (chapter), a portion of a Soorah or a discourse was revealed, Prophet Muhammad was told where the new revelation fits. Instructions accompanied every revelation indicating where the new verses will be placed -- in which chapter; before which verse; and, after which verse. In case of the revelation of a full Soorah, it was indicated where it was to be placed in the order of the Soorahs (chapters). Therefore, as soon as the last verse of the Qur-aan was revealed, the arrangement and the order of its verses and chapters was automatically and instantly completed as well.

Compiling the Qur-aan in its order of revelation would have been counterproductive to the purposes of the Qur-aan. The compilation in the order of revelation would have been useful to people only if a detailed history of its revelation and every minute detail of the circumstances in which it was revealed would have been documented and appended with the revealed word. Without such an appendage explaining the background in detail, the arrangement in the order of revelation would have been confusing and ineffective in providing full guidance. It would have created unnecessary gaps in the thought process of the reader impeding the understanding of the Qur-aan and would have reduced the text to a collection of incoherent messages and instructions. Appending every minute detail to capture the background and impact of the revelation fully, on the other hand, would have been beyond human capabilities. Such an appendage would have also defeated the purpose of God's revealing His own Word instead of His inspiring someone to write it. It would have created the same problems that previously revealed books suffered from -- the Word of God would have been contaminated with the word of historians and human writers. The book would have been comprehensible only to the doctors of divinity. It would no longer have been a book of pure words of Allaah SWT - a miraculous book available and comprehensible to every man and woman of every level of knowledge and understanding living in any part of the globe.

The guidance needs of a movement in its evolutionary phases are different in nature than those after the attainment of its revolutionary goals. Hence, the arrangement of the verses and Soorahs of the Qur-aan at the completion of the mission should naturally have been different than the order in which they were revealed. The order of the revelation was in keeping with the evolution of the Islamic movement and its needs. A new message to a new people unfamiliar with the message had to start with the education of basics in a gradual way.

After the completion of the movement, the Muslims needed to be frequently reminded of and refreshed about their obligations and responsibilities, and the laws and the regulations. They also needed to be on guard against the pitfalls and problems the believers before them, the Jews and Christians, were beset with. Hence, the Soorahs containing such details that were revealed towards the end of the mission were put in the beginning of the Qur-aan, while the Soorahs revealed in the beginning were mostly put towards the end. The difference between the order of revelation and compilation can be explained by the example of the construction and usage of a house. The way a house is initially constructed and the way its facilities are subsequently used require two totally different approaches. When construction begins, it starts with digging the place for foundations and laying of the foundations. Then it is built from ground up. Once the building is completed, the frontage of the house and the main useable area get the most attention, use and exposure. Foundations are attended to only when repairs and maintenance are warranted.

Looking at the arrangement of the Soorahs in the Qur-aan and finding that usually the longer Soorahs are in the beginning while the shorter Soorah are at the end, it may be speculated that the arrangement of the Soorahs is in descending order of the size. That is not true either. The arrangement of Soorahs has a much deeper significance than mere length.

The order of the Qur-aan is in fact an order of miraculous coherence and flow. Every verse of a chapter is in profound relationship to the verse before and after it. In the same manner, every

section and every Soorah has a strong relationship in meaning and theme to the section and the Soorah before it and after it.

Repetitious Variety

That brings us to the point of repetitions in the Holy Qur-aan. Some basic realities of faith are emphasized and repeated in the Holy Qur-aan to such a great extent that a person ignorant of its style and its objective may not be able to appreciate it. But those who understand the objective, the subject matter and the mission of the Holy Qur-aan can very well see the wisdom and the benefits of such repetitions.

First of all, every person has a different way of relating to issues. Different individuals need a point to be stated differently to fully understand it. The Holy Qur-aan being the guidance for all mankind has to cover the important points in such a way that any human being of any intellectual level and understanding has an equal opportunity to grasp the message. For that reason, the fundamental points are made in different contexts, in different styles and in different places.{footnote}We have explained the message in this Qur-aan through multiple styles and examples for the benefit of humanity, but man is, in most things, very contentious. (The Qur-aan 18:64)

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Secondly, the Holy Qur-aan was the guide for the mission carried out by Muhammad and his followers over 23 years. It was essential that the fundamental teachings were reinforced in various ways at every stage of the movement so that people do not lose sight of them under the pressures of the current circumstances. In addition to reinforcement, the repetition facilitated the training of new adherents joining the movement in the subjects already covered in the past.

Thirdly, because of the repetition of the core message, regardless of which part of the Qur-aan is recited, the reader is constantly reminded of the essential teachings again and again so that the message is inculcated in his/her mind firmly and solidly. It is also the miracle of the Qur-aan that the repetition is done in such a variety of modes, level of detail and different styles that it does not become a burden on the heart or mind. It always has some kind of newness in it.

These reasons for repetitions also explain in another way why the Qur-aan does not have the usual arrangement of a book. A book compiled according to set topics and sub-topics would have been devoid of all the benefits of variety mentioned herein.

Eloquence and Literary Excellence

The Qur-aanic prose is superbly elegant, eloquent and par excellence in literary quality. It is humanly impossible even for literary masters to produce such an extensive work of consistent quality with its intense poetic impact and soul-piercing force. This was in itself an explicit miracle for Arabs of that time - especially coming from the mouth of an illiterate person who had no such training in Arab poetry and composition.

Arabs as a whole had a superb literary taste. They were keen for literary excellence and appreciated its beauty. In fact, they were so proud of their linguistic capabilities and heritage that they thought of other nations around them as 'Ajam (dumb) people. They used to hold literary competitions, circles and symposiums. Out of their various competitions had emerged seven pieces of poetry that were considered the most superb of all. They were written down and hung in the Holy Ka'bah to acknowledge their unparalleled beauty and quality.

The creator of the last of those seven pieces was a poet named Labeed who was considered the top poet and the most eloquent person of his time. One of his stanzas was so greatly appreciated in a literary forum that all the celebrated poets in attendance at that time prostrated to him to acknowledge his unparalleled creativity and mastery of the language. After becoming a Muslim, Labeed quit his literary activities. When people wondered about his quitting, he exclaimed, how could he dare compose something after the revelation of the Qur-aan! Whatever he composed would have been no match to the beauty and elegance of Qur-aan, so why go through the trouble of doing it?

This is just one witness on the elegance and eloquence of the Qur-aanic language and composition. The beauty of Qur-aanic prose was one of the factors that were helping Prophet Muhammad open the hearts of people to hear his message. Some people even started plugging their ears when in the vicinity of Muhammad so that they were not impacted by the eloquence of the words or the excellence of the text. The combined impact of the beauty of the Qur-aan and the beauty of his personality was so effective that people started calling him a 'magician'.

One may wonder why the literary excellence of the Holy Qur-aan does not have the same impact on their hearts as it did on the Arabs at the time of Muhammad. There are many reasons for that. One of the reasons is lack of mastery of the Qur-aanic language. Though even in this day and age, the miraculous prose of the Qur-aan still bewilders people, moves their hearts and causes tears to flow from their eyes! People cannot, however, fully appreciate the beauty and forcefulness of the Qur-aanic style unless they master the authentic Arabic language, idiom and the literary style of the society at the time of the revelation of the Qur-aan. To appreciate fully the beauty of the Qur-aan, one has to be able to appreciate the subtleties of the styles of the celebrated poets of that time like Imra-ul-Qais, 'amr bin Kulthoom, Zuhair and Labeed as well as the style of the orators such as Qis bin Saa'idah.

For people who read the Qur-aan through translations, a lot of spirit and impact is lost in the process of translation. One of the reasons of loss is a few features of the above-mentioned literary Arabic style that have never been duplicated in any other language; for example, taking brevity and conciseness to its limits. The literary style par excellence was one where minimum possible words were used to convey what one had to say. Many parts of speech that an intelligent reader/listener should be able to understand from the context were dropped. The fewer the words used for a still comprehensible message, the more masterful it was considered. Explicitly using the words that could be understood implicitly was considered a flaw in the mastery of the language. Another feature of Arabic literary style was the scarce use of the conjunctive and other linking words that help in transition from one thought pattern to another. Again, the transition was implicitly assumed.

Peculiar features like these make the transfer of Arabic eloquence into another language while translating the Qur-aan a daunting task. The literal or word-by-word translations of the Qur-aan do not fill those gaps that are filled by the context in Arabic. Consequently, the translations may sometimes give an impression as if there is no continuity in thought, ideas or contents. Another reason that literal translations lose the spirit of the Qur-aanic words is that translations adopt the writing style to convey the meaning of a speech-style discourse. A lot of its impact is thus lost.

Another factor that causes the loss of the flow and meaning of the Qur-aanic text is the custom of listing the translated verses individually in columns, emulating the Biblical style. That style is not appropriate for the Qur-aanic prose, which should be printed in continuous paragraphs style in the same manner as ordinary writings are printed. You can take a beautiful paragraph of English prose, separate its individual sentences, put them into a column and you will see how much of its beauty is lost.

The Significance of the Arabic Text vis-à-vis Its Translation

The Arabic text of the Holy Qur-aan is the Word of God. That is the Qur-aan. Any translation, no matter who does it, is just a translation of the Qur-aan. It can never be the Qur-aan! Regardless of the knowledge, understanding and the piety of the translator, it is still just a human description of a human understanding of the eternal Word of God. It is a narration of how someone understood the Word of God, the Qur-aan, at a particular time in human history. It can never be a substitute for the Qur-aan itself for the following reasons:

- People understand and interpret things based upon their knowledge, background and information available to them. No human being has the perfect knowledge and information to know everything about the Qur-aan.
- As the human society progresses and its cumulative knowledge and understandings of things increase, the text of the Qur-aan suddenly begins to give new meanings which, because of the imperfection of human knowledge, were never evident before.
- Human beings can never translate the beauty and elegance of the original text and the miracles hidden in its original words.

Hence, any translation of the Qur-aan is always accompanied by the original Arabic text of the Book so that the real Qur-aan is always there for recitation as the Book of God. It also affords future readers the opportunity to re-evaluate, reconfirm and authenticate a specific human understanding of the Qur-aan in the form of the appended translation by comparing it to the real thing.

Many problems with the text of the Bible are caused merely by the reliance on translations of the translations without originals being available. Quite a few unscientific ideas have become part of the Biblical text as a result of the faulty understanding of the translators and writers of those texts, which at the time of writing might have been believed to be correct but were proved to be wrong by the subsequent scientific discoveries. The Holy Qur-aan has thus been preserved by God through preservation of its original text. The miraculous nature of its text that always stands the test of proven scientific facts while at the same time providing the perfect

guidance to every person of every age of every level of understanding and intellect is discussed further in a subsequent section.

The Qur-aanic Arabic - A Living Language

With the passage of time and the changes in human society, languages change drastically. Some of them die; for example, Aramaic or Syriac, the languages of Jesus, have long been dead. Even those languages that survive, change to such an extent that a text written a few centuries ago becomes incomprehensible specially for common people. Arabic is an exception to this rule. Although there have been some changes in the colloquial language, the language of the Qur-aan is still the literary standard all over the Arab as well as Muslim world. Its syntax, grammar and pronunciation, in fact, every thing has remained the same over the 1400 years. Any Muslim in the world can still learn the Arabic of the Qur-aan and communicate in that language without any difficulty or problem. It is still a living language providing full opportunity for everyone to understand the Book of God directly without reliance on translations. It also saves people from being left at the mercy of the special few who monopolize the knowledge of the books originally written in archaic languages, as has happened with other religions. Keeping its language alive and current is another unmatched miraculous aspect of the Qur-aan.

The Qur-aan—The Living Miracle

Every prophet and messenger of God was sent with miracles to show that he was a special person from God and to establish his credibility. Moses' staff turned into a snake and he was able to pass through the parted sea. Jesus cured the blind and lepers, and raised the dead. What were the miracles of Muhammad?

The life of Prophet Muhammad was full of miracles. The list of his miracles is long and they are as amazing as Moses' or Jesus' miracles. There was one miracle, however, which he always presented as his special miracle. Whenever the non-believers demanded a miracle, it was the one they were asked to look at. That miracle is the Holy Qur-aan, which in fact is a living miracle.

And they say: Why are not Signs sent down to him from his Lord? ... Is it not enough for them that we have revealed to you (O Muhammad!) the Book which is recited to them? Al-'Ankaboot 29:50-51

The miracles of Moses were performed but cannot be verified or repeated now. We can only read about them and believe in them. The same goes with the most astounding miracles of Jesus. But the Qur-aan is the only miracle that can be witnessed, experienced and validated by any sincere, willing person until the Last Day.

God gives his messengers the miracles suitable for their time. The miracles cover a field or an area of human endeavours that is highly regarded in a given society. A prophet's miracles astound the people and establish the prophet's supremacy in that area/field by exceeding and surpassing all the expected levels of excellence in that area. For example, during the time of

Moses, magic had gained pre-eminence in society; consequently Allaah SWT gave him the miracles that surpassed any performance of magic. Even the item to be used for that purpose was selected with the audience in mind. As indicated from the items discovered in the pyramids, snakes had special relevance to the Pharaohs. The snake on Pharaoh's crown was considered to have power to destroy his enemy. During Jesus' era, healing and medicine were the greatest areas of concern. Hence, Jesus' miracles were concentrated in that area. Arabs were enamoured with eloquence and literary excellence, therefore, Allaah SWT gave Muhammad the miracle of the Qur-aan, the literary book par excellence. There is, however, more to it than that. Because Prophet Muhammad was going to be the last Prophet during this intellectually oriented age of knowledge, he was given the appropriate miracle for the coming times, i.e. the miracle of knowledge that inspires the intellect.

The Qur-aan is a living miracle not only because people can witness its features such as: Its excellence of language, the beauty of its style, its impact on the hearts and minds, it being free from any inconsistencies, it being meticulously preserved, it being the only memorized religious book, the revolution it created, the lives it changed and keeps on changing, the universal principles it has taught to humanity, the moral standards it has set forth, the purity of its teachings, the validity of its reports, the awe it inspires, the fear it creates, the hopes it builds and the personality it prepares; but also because it is a living miracle from the scientific point of view as well.

It is the only religious book, and Islam is the only religion, that is not at odds with science. Rather, it encourages scientific thought and approach in its followers. Although it is not a book of science, it sometimes uses scientific facts to make its points and invites readers to reflect on them:

Surely, there are great signs in these for the thinkers. ... Surely there are many signs in these (phenomena) for the wise. Ar-Ra'd 13:3-4

In fact, it keeps showing its miracles with the passage of time and the advancement of human knowledge, as it claimed that it would:

We will soon show them Our signs in the Universe and within themselves, until it will become quite clear to them that it is the truth. Fuşilat 41:35

For examples, see my booklet about the Qur-aan "A Book Unlike Any Other".