

Discover the history, structure, and basic tenets
of Islam's sacred Scripture

The Koran

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Sohaib Sultan
Freelance journalist and
student of the Islamic tradition

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About the Author

Sohaib Nazeer Sultan has studied traditional Islam for several years while living in the Middle East and the United States. He has studied, both formally and informally, with esteemed scholars of Islamic theology and Islamic law.

During his undergraduate studies at Indiana University, Sohaib played a leadership role in the diverse religious community of Bloomington, Indiana, serving as Public Relations Chair, Vice President, President, and Student Advisor for the Muslim Students Union. Sohaib also organized and participated in numerous interfaith dialogues throughout the state of Indiana, including a forum called Healing Our Community in the wake of the tragic events of 9/11. Upon graduating, Sohaib was honored by Indiana University for his cultural diversity efforts and was asked to offer a Muslim prayer at the pre-graduation ceremony of the 2002 graduating class.

Currently, Sohaib lives in Chicago, Illinois, where he works on independent projects as a freelance journalist. He is often invited by churches and synagogues to speak about the Islamic faith and its role in the world today. Most recently, he served as an Islamic affairs analyst for the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) Radio in a series of dialogues on Muslim-Christian relations in the United States. Sohaib plans to begin his masters in Islamic Studies in the Fall of 2004.

The author invites and encourages constructive dialogue with his readers. You can contact him through e-mail at koranfordummies@yahoo.com.

Dedication

I dedicate this book to my family — my mother, Amra Sultan; my father, Talat Sultan; my sister, Sohaira Sultan; and my brother-in-law, Zubair Saeed. I will be forever grateful for their unceasing support, encouragement, and love.

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Contents

[Title](#)

[Introduction](#)

[About This Book](#)

[Conventions Used in This Book](#)

[Foolish Assumptions](#)

[How This Book Is Organized](#)

[Icons Used in This Book](#)

[Where to Go from Here](#)

[Part I : Revealing the Word of God: The Book](#)

[Chapter 1: Getting to Know the Koran](#)

[Receiving Revelation Straight from the Source](#)

[Guiding the Way: Prophet Muhammad](#)

[Discovering the Basic Messages of the Koran](#)

[Naming the Revelation](#)

[Hearing the Words: The Audience of the Koran](#)

[Knowing the Essentials about Islam and Muslims](#)

[Chapter 2: From Revelation to Written Book](#)

[Revealing the Koran to Muhammad](#)

[Collecting the Koran as a Book](#)

[Memorizing Miracles: Preserving the Koran throughout History](#)

[Experiencing the Koran as Divine Art](#)

[Chapter 3: Mapping Out the Structure of the Book](#)

[Discerning the Structure of the Koran](#)

[Discovering Surah Names and Themes](#)

[Finding Your Way Through the Moral Narrative](#)

[Simplifying the Moral Narrative of Shorter Surahs](#)

[Chapter 4: Discovering the Language of the Koran](#)

[Arabic: Plain, Clear, and Eloquent](#)

[Literary Style in the Sacred Scripture](#)

[Hearing the Voice of the Koran](#)

[Chapter 5: Relating the Koran to Abrahamic Revelations](#)

[Previous Revelations: Between Sacred and Corrupted](#)

[Linking the Three Faiths: Common Experiences in the Scriptures](#)

[Contrasting the Koran with Judeo-Christian Scriptures](#)

[Part II : Searching for the Soul of the Koran](#)

[Chapter 6: Interpreting the Koran](#)

[Coming to Know the Guidance](#)

[Drawing Out Interpretations](#)

[Chapter 7: Understanding Interpretations of the Koran Today](#)

[Getting to Know Famous Commentators of the Koran](#)

[Influential Movements of the Twentieth Century](#)

[Another School of Thought: The Shi'ites](#)

[Part III : Seeing the Koranic Worldview](#)

[Chapter 8: Meeting God, Prophets, and Mankind](#)

[Conceptualizing God](#)

[Prophets of God: Preaching a Divine Message](#)

[The Status and Nature of Man](#)

[Chapter 9: Divining Nature, the Universe, and the Unseen](#)

[The Divine Ways of Nature](#)

[Inheriting the Earth: The Role of Mankind in Nature](#)

[The Unseen World: Angels versus Satan](#)

[Accounting for the Soul](#)

[Chapter 10: Taking the Koranic View of Other Faith Traditions](#)

[Islam: One Religion under God](#)

[Honoring Freedom of Choice and Respecting Diversity](#)

[Examining Some Controversial Passages on Interfaith Relations](#)

[Part IV : Living the Koran](#)

[Chapter 11: Following in the Footsteps of Muhammad](#)

[The Scripture Speaks about Muhammad](#)

[Doing as God and His Messenger Do](#)

[Looking at Some Key Prophetic Sayings](#)

[Chapter 12: Putting Meaning into Ritual](#)

[Declaring Faith: More than Just Words](#)

[Conversing with the Divine: Prayer](#)

[Raising the Soul Over the Ego: Fasting](#)

[Purifying Wealth, Uplifting the Needy: Almsgiving](#)

[Journeying to the House of God: Pilgrimage](#)

[Chapter 13: Understanding the Koranic View of Self](#)

[Connecting the Three Dots of Self Awareness](#)

[The Seven Gates to the Heart](#)

[Blessed Is the Baby's Soul, a Soul without Sin](#)

[The Soul's Journey: From Pre-Birth to the Hereafter](#)

[The Muslim Self: A State of Being](#)

[The Kafir: A Faithless Self](#)

[Chapter 14: Achieving Koranic Ethics and Morality](#)

[Discovering Ethical Principles in the Koran](#)

[Leading the Life of Good Virtue and Character](#)

[Purifying the Heart](#)

[Chapter 15: Raising a Family the Koranic Way](#)

[Healthy Family Equals Healthy Society](#)

[Looking for a Spouse: Let the Search Begin](#)

[Celebrating Marriage as the Basis of Family](#)

[Bringing Up Children](#)

[A Matter of Inheritance: Who Gets What](#)

[Tackling Divorce in the Koran](#)

[Part V : Relating the Koran to the World](#)

[Chapter 16: Connecting the Koran to Society](#)

[Divining a Community of the Middle Path](#)

[Witnessing the Truth](#)

[Enjoining Good and Forbidding Evil](#)

[Uniting a Community with the Rope of God](#)

[Leadership and Citizenship in the Koran](#)

[Jihad: Struggling in the Path of God](#)

[Chapter 17: Purifying Society through Islamic Law](#)

[Defining Shariah](#)

[Extracting and Interpreting Sacred Law](#)

[Searching for Rulings and Principals](#)

[Exploring the Contents of the Sacred Law](#)

[Understanding the Islamic Penal Code](#)

[Looking at the Four Schools of Law](#)

[Chapter 18: Struggling for God: Jihad](#)

[Finding the Spirit of Jihad](#)

[Connecting Qital with Islamic Law](#)

[Understanding Martyrdom](#)

[Looking at Jihad in Today's World](#)

Chapter 19: Discussing Women in the Koran

[Finding Equality in the Scripture](#)

[Discerning Women's Rights in Divine Law](#)

Chapter 20: The Koran and Modernity

[Differentiating between Modernity and Modern Culture](#)

[Promoting Social Progress](#)

[Focusing on Issues of Modernity](#)

[Imagining an Islamic Democracy](#)

Part VI : The Part of Tens

Chapter 21: Ten Misconceptions about the Koran

[Misconception #1: Muhammad Wrote the Koran](#)

[Misconception #2: The Koran Is Incoherent and Unorganized](#)

[Misconception #3: The Koran Is Void of Reason](#)

[Misconception #4: The Koran Espouses Polytheism](#)

[Misconception #5: The Koran Says That God Belongs to One People](#)

[Misconception #6: God Is Wrathful and Unloving in the Koran](#)

[Misconception #7: The Koran Preaches Fatalism](#)

[Misconception #8: Jihad Means "Holy War"](#)

[Misconception #9: The Koran Discourages Interfaith Dialogue and Cooperation](#)

[Misconception #10: The Scripture Values Men More Than Women](#)

Chapter 22: Ten Ways to Dig Deeper into the Koran

[Comparing "Translations"](#)

[Listening to the Koran](#)

[Looking at Different Interpretations](#)

[Reading Books](#)

[Studying Arabic](#)

[Studying the Koran](#)

[Surfing Web Sites](#)

[Taking Classes](#)

[Talking to Muslims](#)

[Visiting Your Local Mosque](#)

[Appendix A: Glossary of Koranic Terms](#)

[Appendix B: Finding Prophets in the Koran](#)

Introduction

Let the exciting journey begin! *The Koran For Dummies* introduces you to the sacred Revelation revered by over 1.4 billion men and women worldwide.

The chapters in this book also guide you through the often complex and controversial perspectives of the Koran that has come under new scrutiny in a post-9/11 world.

I hope that this book answers all your questions about this sacred Book and provides you with a renewed understanding of the Islamic faith and the Muslim tradition.

About This Book

The Koran has been at the heart of Muslim life and culture for over 1,400 years. Interpretations of Islam and its role in the world today gain legitimacy among Muslims only when those ideas and theories can find their roots in the sacred Scripture.

As such, the Koran is probably the most used and misused Book in the world, not only by Muslims, but also by non-Muslim activists and intellectuals. By reading this book, you can gain basic, necessary, information on the

teachings of the Koran that continue to shape the debate on the world's future.

Muslims often claim that Islam offers a complete way of life that intertwines inner experiences with outer realities. Through this book, you can come to appreciate the Koran's intimate role in individual and communal Muslim life — a role that gives rise to intense spiritual treasures and core community values. The importance of this subject has taken on new meaning as Islam has emerged as the second largest world religion; many experts consider Islam the fastest-growing religion in the United States and Europe.

The Koran For Dummies provides a basic, practical understanding of the Koran's role in Muslim life and society. This book, as an introduction to the Scripture, doesn't discuss every interpretation found about the Koran in Muslim and non-Muslim circles.

I wrote this book as an American Muslim; my own religious experiences played a part in the writing of this book. However, *The Koran For Dummies* offers an objective, accurate portrayal of traditional Islamic views about the Koran.

Most books that you find on the Koran are either too academic for the average reader or too short for a comprehensive discussion of the Koran's style and content. This is what makes *The Koran For Dummies* unique. This book is organized in a simple, easy-to-read

style that tells you what you want to know about the Koran in a straightforward, but complete, way.

As a companion to this book, I recommend *Islam For Dummies*, by Malcolm Clark, published by Wiley. This book does an excellent job of explaining Muslim history, culture, and politics. It also includes a great introduction to the various sects within Islam.

Conventions Used in This Book

As you read this book, you should keep the following points in mind.

Muslims strongly believe that the Koran is the actual living word of God that was revealed through Angel Gabriel to Prophet Muhammad. Muslims use expressions like “the Koran says . . .” and “God says . . .” interchangeably to mean the exact same thing.

Throughout this book, I write from the Koran’s perspective, keeping in mind that most people who read this book are not Muslim. However, you should remain aware that for Muslims, the Koran represents God’s unaltered and eternal word.

I use three different words to refer to the sacred Revelation: Koran, Book, and Scripture. These three

words mean exactly the same thing — there is no difference between them whatsoever.

In this book, most Koranic passages that I explain are not direct quotations, but rather paraphrases of the basic overall meaning. Many of the passages that I do quote directly make up only part of the verse that helps explain any given subject, and not the whole verse, which often includes text that strays from the subject at hand.

The Koran is made up of chapters, called *Surahs*, and verses or lines, called *Ayat* (singular, *Ayah*). When I give references to the Koran, I write them like this: (*Surah: Ayah*) or (*Surah: Ayah-Ayah*). For example, if I quote *Surah* 1, *Ayat* 1 through 3, I cite the passage as (1:1-3).

The beautiful and unique Arabic language has amazing depth. Arabic words can be translated in more than one way. In this book, I translate concepts in a way that non-Muslims will find easy to understand. I could write an entire chapter, or even a whole book, to explain the complexity of some Arabic words (such as *Taqwa* — God-consciousness), but, for reasons of space, I use only a few words to reference each Arabic word.

When transliterating Arabic terms into English phonetics, I use transliterations commonly found in the West, so that you can recognize the word. For example, the proper transliteration of “Koran” is “Qu’ran.” And, the proper transliteration of “Mecca” is “Makkah.” But, for the sake of recognizability, I use the transliterations that may be most familiar to Western readers.

At times, to fully understand the Koran, you have to venture to outward sources. The most important of these sources is Prophet Muhammad, the primary interpreter and teacher of the Book. Throughout this book, I refer to the sayings of Muhammad to expand on basic ideas presented in the Koran. Sometimes I also refer to the words of Muhammad's close companions and famous scholars of the Islamic tradition.

Finally, this book doesn't necessarily tell you about your Muslim neighbor, friend, or co-worker. Nor do these chapters always reflect the condition of the Muslim world today. In fact, most Muslims contend that many in the Muslim world have stopped practicing the authentic teachings of the Koran and instead rely on their own tribal cultures for individual and communal guidance. This book seeks to present the Koranic ideal, which doesn't always translate into practice. However, if you want to understand the role of the Koran in society, and its ability to bring reform to the Muslim world, you must understand the ideals of the Scripture.

Foolish Assumptions

You don't have to be familiar with the Islamic faith or Muslim practice to read and enjoy *The Koran For Dummies*. In each chapter, I tell you the fundamentals that you need to understand what the Koran teaches and how it perceives the seen and unseen world.

If you're already somewhat familiar with the Koran, you'll enjoy an added experience of simplifying and breaking down major concepts and themes in the Koran that you may have questions about. Also, this book will provide you with valuable insight into the Koran's literary structure that will help you to feel more comfortable with the Book's narrative style. Finally, you'll find out about the basics of classical and modern interpretations of the Scripture, which will give you an added perspective into your experience with the Koran.

You have many questions about the Koran. You may have heard many stories and controversies in the media and don't know where the Koran stands on these issues. I answer frequently asked questions and respond from an Islamic perspective to common misconceptions that you may have come across.

I assume that you want an introductory look into the most essential issues related to the Koran. I don't offer you an academic critique that dissects every theory, view, and interpretation about the Koran. Instead, I explain traditional views and interpretations of the Scripture. But please remember, as you dig deeper into your exploration of the Book, that interpretations of its text are as diverse as the Muslim population that comes from every culture possible.

How This Book Is Organized

The Koran For Dummies is not a textbook. You don't have to read it from A to Z or even start from the beginning.

If you want to read about a particular topic regarding the Koran, you can find that subject in the Table of Contents or Index, flip to those pages, and get a quick explanation of the topic.

You don't have to read this book from cover to cover, starting with Chapter 1 and going straight through to the end. However, if you are just starting out in your exploration of the Koran, I advise you to look through the chapters in Part I of this book to get up and running.

Part I: Revealing the Word of God: The Book

This opening part introduces you to the basic themes of the Koran, and the history of its compilation. Here, you also discover the Book's unique style and language. Finally, you get a look into how the Book relates to Judeo-Christian Scriptures.

Part II: Searching for the Soul of the Koran

The Koran has always been open to interpretation and reinterpretation. This part surveys traditional methods of interpreting the Koran, and takes a look at modern movements of thought that seek to define the Will of God through the Koran.