



"THE HOLY QURAN"

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How and When the Quran was Revealed:

The original source¹ from which all principles and ordinances of Islam are drawn is the Holy Book called *al-Quran*.² The name *Quran* is frequently mentioned in the book itself³ which also states to whom, how, why, when, and in what language, it was delivered. It was revealed to Muhammad: "And (who) believe in that which has been revealed to Muhammad -- and it is the Truth from their Lord" (47:2). It was revealed in the month of Ramadhan on a certain night which thenceforward received the name of the *Night of Majesty*⁴ (*Lailat al-Qadr*): "The month of Ramadhan is that in which the Quran was revealed" (2:185); "We revealed it on a blessed night" (44:3); "Surely We revealed it on the Night of Majesty" (97:1). It was revealed in Arabic language: "So We have made it easy in thy tongue that they may be mindful" (44:58); "Surely We have made it an Arabic Quran that you may understand" (43:3). It was revealed in portions, every portion being written and committed to memory as soon as it was revealed, and the revelation was spread over twenty-three years of the Prophet's life, during which time he was occupied solely with the reformation of a benighted world: "And it is a Quran which we made distinct, so that thou mayest read it to the people by slow degrees, and We have revealed it in portions" (17:106). It was not the Prophet who spoke under influence of the Holy Spirit; it was a Divine Message brought by the angel Gabriel,⁵ and delivered in words to the Prophet who communicated it to mankind: "And surely this is a revelation from the Lord of the worlds. The Faithful Spirit has brought it on thy heart that thou mayest be a warner, in plain Arabic language" (26:192-195); "Whoever is an enemy to Gabriel -- for surely he revealed it to thy heart by Allah's command" (2:97); "The Holy Spirit has revealed it from thy Lord with the truth" (16:102).

¹ Generally the sources are said to be four, the Quran, the Sunnah or Hadith (Doings and Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad as preserved in collections of Tradition), *Ijma'* or *unanimous agreement* of the Muslim community and *Qiyas* or *reasoning*. The former two are called *al-adilat al-qat'iyya* or *absolutely sure arguments*, and the latter two as *al-adilat al-ijtihadiyya* or *arguments obtained by exertion*. But as *ijma'* and *qiyas* are admittedly based on the Quran and the Hadith (Tradition), the latter itself being only an explanation of the Quran, as well be shown later on, the Quran is actually the real foundation on which the whole superstructure of Islam rests, and being the only, absolute and final authority in every discussion relating to the principles and laws of Islam, it is perfectly right to say that the Quran, is the sole source from which all the teachings and practices of Islam are drawn.

² The word *Quran* is an infinitive noun from the root *qara'a* which signifies

primarily *he collected together things* (L.A.). It also signifies: *he read or recited*,

because in reading or reciting, letters and words are joined to each other in a certain order (R.). "According to some authorities, the name of this book al-Quran from among the world Divine books is due to its gathering together in itself the fruits of all His books, rather its being a collection of the fruits of all the sciences, a reference to which is contained in the words, 'an explanation of all things'" (R.). It also means *a book that is or should be read*, containing a prophetic reference to its being "the most widely read book" (En. Br.) in the whole world. The Quran speaks of itself under various other names. It is called *al-Kitab* (2:2) meaning *the Writing which is complete in itself*; *al-Furqan* (25:1) or the *Distinction between right and wrong and between truth and falsehood*; *al-Dhikra, al-Tadhkira* (15:9) or *the Reminder or a source of eminence and glory to man*; *al-Tanzil* (26:192) or the *Revelation from on High*; *Ahsan al-Hadith* (39:23) or the *Best Saying*; *al-Mau'iza* (10:57) or the *Admonition*; *al-Hukm* (13:37) or the *Judgment*; *al-Hikma* (17:39) or the *Wisdom*; *al-Shifa* (10:57) or the *Healing*; *al-Huda* (72:13) or the *Guidance*; *al-Rahma* (17:82) or the *Mercy*; *al-Khair* (3:103) or the *Goodness*; *al-Ruh* (42:52) or the *Spirit or the Life*; *al-Bayan* (3:137) or the *Explanation*; *al-Ni'ma* (93:11) or the *Blessing*; *al-Burhan* (4:175) or the *Argument*; *al-Qayyim* (18:2) or the *Maintainer*; *al-Muhaimin* (5:48) or the *Guardian*; *al-Nur* (7:157) or the *Light*; *al-Haqq* (17:81) or the *Truth*. Besides these it is mentioned by several other names; and there is also a large number of qualifying words applied to it. For instance, it is called *Karim* (56:77) or *Honourable*; *Majid* (85:21) or *Glorious*; *Hakim* (36:2) or *Wise*; *Mubarak* (21:50) or *Blessed* (lit. *a thing the goodness of which shall never be intercepted*); *Mubin* (12:1) or the *one making things manifest*; *'Aliyy* (43:4) or *Elevated*; *Fasl* (86:13) or *Decisive*; *'Azim* (39:67) or *of great importance*; *Mukarram* or *Honoured*. *Marfu'* or *Exalted*, *Mutahharah* or *Purified* (80:13, 14); *Mutashabih* (39:23) or *conformable in its various parts*.

³ 2:185; 10:37, 61; 17:106, etc.

⁴ The *Lailat al-Qadr* or the Night of Majesty is one of three nights in the month of Ramadan, 25th, 27th or 29th, *i.e.*, the night preceding any of these dates (Bu.32:4). The Prophet was, at the time when revelation first came to him, forty years of age.

⁵ It should be noted that the Quran uses the words Holy Spirit and Gabriel interchangeably. In one of the reports speaking of the first revelation to the Prophet the angel who brought the revelation is called *al-Namus al-Akbar*, or the great *Namus*, and *Namus* means *the angel who is entrusted with Divine secrets* (N.); the Divine secrets, of course, being the Divine messages to humanity sent through the prophets of God. The same report adds that it was the same angel that brought revelation to Moses. Thus both the Quran and the reports make it clear that Divine revelation was brought to the Prophet, as well as to the prophets before him, by the angel Gabriel who is also called the Holy Spirit or the Faithful Spirit or the great *Namus*. This clears up all doubts as to what is meant by the Holy Spirit in Islam; and in the mouths of the

Old Testament prophets, as well as Jesus Christ, it carried exactly the same significance. It is true that there is not the same clarity here as in Islam; but it is equally true that the orthodox Christian conception of the Holy Spirit was quite unknown to the Jewish mind, and in this respect Jesus Christ was a staunch Jew, his terminology being taken in its entirety from the Jews. In the Old Testament terminology, the form used is the Spirit or the spirit of God. In Ps 51:11 and Is. 63:10, 11 the form used is Holy Spirit which is also the form adopted in the Talmud and Midrash. The Holy Ghost is peculiar to the New Testament writers. The Jews looked upon it as one of the created things; it was among the ten things that were created on the first day (En.J.). The function of the Holy Spirit is described thus:

"The visible results of the activity of the Holy Spirit, according to the Jewish conception, are the books of the Bible, all of which have been composed under its inspiration. All the prophets spoke "in the Holy Spirit"; and the most characteristic sign of the presence of the Holy Spirit is the gift of Prophecy, in the sense that the person upon whom it rests beholds the past and the future. With the death of the last three prophets, Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi, the Holy Spirit ceased to manifest itself in Israel" (En. J.).

It is clear from this that the Jewish idea was that the Holy Spirit brought inspiration to the prophets, the only difference between this and the Islamic conception being that the latter looks upon the very words of revelation as proceeding from a Divine source, while the former apparently regards the words as being those of the prophet speaking under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus Christ and his disciples used the word in exactly the same sense. Jesus' first experience of the Holy Spirit in the form of a dove was the result of his baptism by John (Mt. 3:16) which seems to indicate its association with a certain stage in the spiritual development of man. The Holy Spirit did not descend upon him until he was baptised. The idea of a dove-like form is also met with in the Jewish literature. Moreover, Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit as inspiring the righteous servants of God: "How then doth David in spirit call him Lord?" (Mt. 22:43); "For David himself said by the Holy Ghost" (Mk. 12:36); the Holy Spirit is given to them that ask Him (Lk. 11:13). Even the disciples' first experience of the Holy Spirit is a repetition of the old Jewish tradition. As there we find the Spirit coming with "a voice of a great rushing" (Ezk. 3:12), so in the case of the disciples of Jesus "there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind" (Acts, 2:2). Thus the Holy Spirit as conceived by Jesus and his disciples was the same as in the Old Testament prophets, which again is almost identical with its conception in Islam, and the orthodox Christian view of the spirit as one of the three persons of the Godhead, co-eternal with God, is of later growth.

It is the Highest Form of Revelation:

Though the Quran was revealed piecemeal through Gabriel, yet the entire revelation is one whole. Delivered in one and the same manner. Revelation, we are told in the Quran, is granted to man in three forms: "And it is not vouchsafed to any mortal that Allah should speak to him, except by revelation (*wahy*) or from behind a veil, or by sending a messenger and revealing by His permission what He pleases" (42:51). The first of these three modes is called *wahy*, which is generally translated as meaning *revelation*. Since the different kinds of revelation are spoken of here, the word *wahy* is obviously used in its literal sense, its primary significance being a hasty suggestion (*al-isharat al-sari'ah*) (R.). Hence the inspired word, which enters the hearts of the prophets and of the righteous, is called *wahy* because it is like a sudden suggestion made directly to the heart of the inspired one (*ilqa-'un fi'l-rau'*). It is not a message in words but simply an idea which comes like a flash and clears up a doubt or difficulty, and it is not the result of meditation.⁶ The second mode is described as speaking from behind a veil -- a scene, carrying a deeper significance, is shown as in a vision (*kashf*), or in a dream (*ru'ya*), or words are heard by the person spoken to, as if coming from behind a veil. The third mode is that in which the angel bearing the message is sent to the recipient of the Divine revelation, and the message is delivered in words, and this is the highest form of revelation. As already stated, the angel entrusted with Divine message in words is Gabriel or the Holy Spirit, and this third mode of revelation is limited to the prophets of God only -- to men entrusted with important Divine messages to humanity -- while the first two lower forms of revelation are common to prophets as well as those who are not prophets. For the delivery of the higher message which relates to the welfare of mankind, a higher form of revelation is chosen, a form in which the message is not simply an idea but is clothed in actual words. The Prophet's faculty of being spoken to by God is so highly developed that he receives the messages, not only as ideas instilled into the mind or in the form of words uttered or heard under influence of the Holy Spirit, but actually as Divine messages in words delivered through the latter. In the terminology of Islam this is called "*revelation that is recited*" (*wahy matluww*) and the Quran was, from beginning to end, delivered in this form to the Prophet, as the quotations earlier given from the Book itself make it abundantly clear. It does not contain any other form of revelation. It is in its entirety *wahy matluww* or revelation recited to the Prophet distinctly in words, and is thus wholly the highest form of Divine revelation.

⁶ Raghīb suggests a slightly different interpretation. He makes *wahy* include not only an inspiration or a suggestion thrown into the mind but also *taskhir*, *i.e.*, making a certain thing follow a certain course in obedience to the laws of nature, an example of which is the revelation to the bee (16:68), and *manam*, *i.e.*, dreams. And the second form, *from behind a veil*, he looks upon as applying to the case of Moses to whom, it is thought, God spoke in a manner different from that in which He spoke to the other prophets, that is to say, He spoke to him being invisible to him. Now, as regards the revelation to the bee, it is a clear mistake, as the verse states only how God speaks to men. And the statement regarding the mode of revelation to Moses is also a mistake, for the Quran lays form as it had been granted to the prophets before him including Moses: "Surely We have revealed to thee as We revealed to Noah and the prophets after him" (4:163); and Moses is specially mentioned in this connection in v. 164. Hence the second mode, from behind a veil, refers to *ru'ya* or dreams and *kashf* or visions, because a certain sight is shown in this case which has a deeper meaning than that which appears on the surface. The dream or the vision carries with it a certain meaning, but that meaning is, as it were, under a veil and must be sought for behind

that veil. The dreams mentioned in the Quran (ch. 12) are an illustration of this. Joseph saw the sun and the moon and the eleven stars making obeisance to him, and this signified his greatness and his insight into things. A king saw seven lean kine eat up seven fat ones, and the meaning was that seven years of famine and hardship would follow seven years of plenty and eat away the hoarded corn of the country. Hence God's speaking from behind a veil means His revealing certain truths in dreams or visions. In a saying of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) these are called *mubashshrat*: "Nothing has remained of *nubuwwah*, i.e., receiving news from God, except *mubashshrat*." Being asked "what was meant by *mubashshrat*," the Prophet replied, "good visions" (Bu. 92:5). In this category are also included words which some righteous servants of God are made to utter or which they hear under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

Other Forms of Divine Revelation to Men:

As stated above, prophets also received the lower forms of Divine revelation. For example, we are told in reports that before the higher message came to the Prophet Muhammad -- i.e., before he received the first Quranic revelation -- he used to have clear and true visions. "The first of revelations that came to the Messenger of Allah were good visions so that he did not see a vision but it came out true as the dawn of the day" (Bu. 1:1). The Prophet's hearing of certain voices as mentioned in the Traditions⁷ belongs to the same category, while the details of laws as expounded by him, and as met with in his practice,⁸ belong to the first form of revelation, an idea instilled into the mind. This is called "*inner revelation*" (*wahy khafiyy*). In the lower forms, revelation is still granted to the righteous from among the followers of the Prophet and even to others, for, as will be shown later, in the lowest form revelation is the universal experience of humanity. There is also a difference as to the method in which the different kinds of revelation are received. While the two lower forms of revelation involve but little change in the normal condition of a man, whether awake or asleep, and he is only occasionally transported to a state of trance, the highest form, which is that peculiar to the prophets, brings with it a violent change; it does, in fact, require a real passing from one world to the other, while the recipient is in a state of perfect wakefulness, and the burden of revelation is not only felt by him but is also visible to those who see him.

⁷ Tradition -- *Hadith*, Sayings of the Prophet.

⁸ Practice -- *Sunnah*, Doings of the Prophet.

The Prophet's Experience of Revelation:

The Prophet first experienced the higher revelation while he was alone in the cave of Hira. Before this he had, from time to time, seen visions, but when the angel came with the higher message, he found himself quite exhausted: "He (Gabriel) seized me and squeezed me to such an extent that I was quite exhausted", and this was repeated thrice (Bu. 1:1). And even after he reached home, the effect of exhaustion was still upon him and he had to lie down covered over

before he could relate what had befallen. It was an equally hard experience when the second message came to him after an interval of some months. And even afterwards, the effect of the Spirit upon him was so great that on the coldest of days perspiration would run down his forehead: "I saw", says Aishah, his wife, "revelation coming down upon him in the severest cold, and when that condition was over, perspiration ran down his forehead"⁹ (Bu. 1:1). A Companion also relates that "he was sitting with his leg under that of the Prophet when revelation came down upon him, and he felt as if his leg would be crushed under the weight" (Bu. 8:12).

⁹ Some misdirected critics have represented this extraordinary experience of the coming of the revelation as an epileptic fit. The question is whether an epileptic could, when the fit came on, utter those grand religious truths which are met with in the Quran, or indeed make any coherent statement at all; whether he could have the strong will which made the whole of Arabia at last bow down to the Prophet, or possess the unparalleled energy which we witness in every phase of his life, or the high morals which were his, or be the master of that magnetic virtue under whose influence a whole country could be purified of the grossest idolatry and superstition; whether hundreds of thousands of men possessing the Arabs' independence of character would have taken him for a leader whose orders were obeyed in the minutest details of life; or whether he could produce men of the will and character of Abu Bakr and 'Umar and thousands of others, before whom mighty empires crumbled? The story of froth appearing from his mouth at the time of revelation is pure invention. Klein, writing in *The Religion of Islam* (p.8), makes the following statement on the authority of Bukhari: "Another tradition says that froth appeared before his mouth and he roared like a young camel." Bukhari makes no such statement, in the place referred to (Bu. 1:2). Elsewhere he says: "The face of the Messenger of Allah was red and he was snoring" (Bu. 25:17). Statements met with in traditions are similar to those quoted from Bukhari. For instance, we have in *Muslim*: "When revelation came to the Holy Prophet, he appeared to be as it were in distress and turned pale in the face." And according to the one report, "when revelation came to the Prophet, he would hang his head and his Companions would do the same; and when that condition was over, he would raise up his head." All these and other similar statements contained in other collections of traditions, only show that the coming of the revelation brought a real change in the Prophet which others also witnessed.

Another misconception may also be removed here. When the Prophet related his first experience to his wife Khadijah, he added the words: "Surely I have fear regarding myself, *laqad khashitu 'ala nafsi*" (Bu. 1:1). Some critics have misunderstood those words as meaning that the Prophet feared he was possessed by an evil spirit; and a rather foolish story from Ibn Hisham as to Khadijah's taking off the veil and the angel disappearing (which is without the least foundation and against all historical facts of the Prophet's life) is narrated in support of it. The story seems foolish inasmuch as the angel appeared to the Prophet in the solitude of Hira, and not in the presence of Khadijah. A cursory glance at the words quoted above would show that they could not possibly bear any such interpretation. The Prophet knew for certain that he had a message from on High for the reformation of the fallen humanity; all that he feared was lest he should fail in bringing about the desired reformation. That was how

Khadijah understood it, as she immediately comforted him: "Nay, by Allah, Allah will never bring thee to grief; surely thou dost good to thy relatives, and bearest the burden of the weak, and earnest for others that which they have not got; and art hospitable to guests and givest help when there is real distress" (Bu. 1:1). The faithful wife who had known him intimately for fifteen years enumerated these great virtues in him, as a testimony that a man of such a high character could not fail in accomplishing the task which was entrusted to him -- the task of uplifting a fallen humanity.

Nature of the Prophet's Revelation:

The next question is about the nature of the revelation itself. When Harith, son of Hisham, once enquired of the Prophet how revelation came to him, he replied: "It comes to me sometimes as the ringing of a bell and this is hardest on me, then he (the angel) leaves me and I remember from him what he says; and sometimes the angel comes in the shape of a man and he talks to me and I remember what he says" (Bu. 1:1). These are the only two forms in which the Quranic revelation came to the Prophet. In both cases, the angel came to him and was seen by him; in both cases a certain message was delivered in words which he at once committed to memory. That is the essence of the whole question. The only difference between the two cases was that in one case the angel appeared in the shape of a human being and uttered the words in a soft tone as a man talks to another; in the other case, it is not stated in what form he came, but we are told that the words were uttered like the ringing of a bell, that is to say, in a harsh, hard tone, which made it a heavier task for the Prophet to receive them. But still it was the angel who brought the message, as is shown by the use of the personal pronoun *he* in the first part of the report. In both cases the Prophet was transported, as it were, to another world, and this transportation caused him to go through a severe experience which made him perspire even on a cold day, but this experience was harder still when the deliverer of the message did not appear in human shape and there remained no affinity between the deliverer and the recipient. But whether the angel appeared in human shape or not, whether the message was delivered in a hard or soft tone, the one thing certain is that it was a message delivered in words; and the Quranic revelation is thus entirely one message delivered in one form. It should be noted that the Prophet often received the message while sitting with his Companions, but the latter never saw the angel nor ever heard the words of revelation.¹⁰ It was therefore, with other than the normal human senses that the Prophet saw the angel and heard his words, and it was really the granting of these other senses that is called transportation to another world.

¹⁰ There is only one report which seems to convey the idea that the Companions who were sitting with the Prophet once saw Gabriel in human shape, but that incident is not related in connection with a Quranic revelation. A certain man, according to that report, whom no one recognised, came to the Prophet and asked him several questions about *Iman*, *Islam* and *ihsan*, and lastly, when the Hour would come. He then disappeared and the Prophet is reported to have said: "That was Gabriel who came to teach you your religion." (Bu. 2:37). These words might mean that the answers given

by him were of Gabriel's teachings, not that the man who put the questions was Gabriel.

Arrangement of the Quran:

Though the Quran was revealed in portions, yet it is a mistake to suppose that it remained long in that fragmentary condition. As its name implies, it was a book from the first, and though it could not be complete until the last verse was revealed, it was never without some form of arrangement. There is the clearest testimony, internal as well as external, that every single verse or part of a verse and every chapter that was revealed had its own definite place in the Book.¹¹ The Quran is itself clear on this point: "And those who disbelieve say: Why has not the Quran been revealed to him all at once? Thus (it is) that We may strengthen thy heart by it, and We have arranged it well in arranging" (25:32). The arrangement of the Quran was thus a part of the Divine scheme. Another verse showing that the collection of the Book was a part of the Divine scheme runs thus: "Surely on Us rests the collection of it and the reciting of it" (75:17). It appears from this that just as the Quran was recited by Gabriel to the Prophet, in like manner, the collecting of its various parts was effected by the Prophet under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. History also bears testimony to the truth of this statement, for not only are there numerous anecdotes showing that this or that portion of the Quran was put to writing under the orders of the Prophet, but we are clearly told by 'Uthman, the third Caliph, that every portion of the Book was written and given its specified place, at the bidding of the Prophet: "It was customary with the Messenger of Allah (may peace and the blessings of Allah be upon him) that when portions of different chapters were revealed to him, and when any verse was revealed, he called one of those persons who used to write the Quran¹² and said to him: Write this verse in the chapter where such and such verses occur" (Ah. 1:57, 69).

¹¹ This subject has been fully dealt with in a separate booklet, in the Holy Quran series, *Collection and Arrangement of the Holy Quran*.

¹² Among those whom the Prophet used to summon to write down portions of the Quran immediately after their revelation are mentioned the names of Zaid ibn Thabit, Abu Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthman, 'Ali, Zubair, Ubyy, Hanzala, 'Abd Allah ibn Sa'd, 'Abd Allah ibn Arqam, 'Abd Allah ibn Rawaha, Sharhubail, Khalid and Aban, sons of Sa'id, and Mu'aiqab (FB. IX, p. 18). At Madinah, Zaid ibn Thabit was chiefly called upon to do this work, and in his absence any of the other amanuenses would take his place, and this was the reason why Zaid was chosen to collect the Quranic writings in the time of Abu Bakr, and again to do the work of transcription in the time of 'Uthman. At Makkah, in the earliest days, there were Abu Bakr, 'Ali, Khadijah, wife of the Prophet, and others who wrote down the portions revealed. The Prophet took the greatest care to have a writer and writing materials with him under all conditions, and even when he had to fly for his life to Madinah, he still had writing material with him (Bu. 63:45).

Arrangement in Oral Recitation:

In fact, if we bear in mind the use that was made of the Quran, we cannot for an instant entertain the idea that the Book existed without any arrangements of its verses and chapters in the lifetime of the Prophet. It was not only recited in prayers but committed to memory and regularly recited to keep it fresh in the mind. Now if an arrangement of verses and chapters had not existed, it would have been impossible either to recite it in public prayers or to commit it to memory. The slightest change in the place of a verse by a person leading the prayers (Imam) would at once call forth a correction from the audience, as it does at the present day. Since no one could take the liberty of changing a word or the place of a word in a verse, no one could change a verse or the place of a verse in a chapter; and so the committing of the Quran to memory by so many of the Companions of the Prophet, and their constant recitation of it, would have been impossible unless a known order was followed. The Prophet could not teach the Quran to his Companions nor the Companions to each other, nor could he or anyone else lead the public prayers, in which long portions of the Book were recited, without following a known and accepted order.

Complete Written Copies of the Quran:

The Quran thus existed in a complete and ordered form in the memories of men, but no complete written copy of it existed at the time, nor could such a copy be made while the Prophet was alive, and still receiving revelations. But the whole of the Quran in one arrangement was safely preserved in the memories of reciters (qurra'). It happened, however, that many of the reciters fell in the famous battle of Yamama, in the caliphate of Abu Bakr,¹³ and it was then that 'Umar¹⁴ urged upon him the necessity of compiling a standard written copy, so that no portion of the Quran should be lost even if all the reciters were to die. And this copy was compiled, not from the hundreds of copies that had been made by individual Companions for their own use but from the manuscripts written under the direction of the Prophet himself, and the arrangement adopted was that of the oral recitation as followed in his time. Thus a standard written copy was prepared, which was entrusted to the care of Hafsah, wife of the Prophet.¹⁵ But still no arrangement had been made for securing the accuracy of the numerous copies that were in circulation. This was done by 'Uthman¹⁶ who ordered several copies to be made of the copy prepared in the time of the first Caliph, and these were then sent to the different Islamic centres so that all copies made by individuals should be compared with the standard copy at each centre.

¹³ First Caliph of Islam, 11-13 A.H., 632-634 A.D.

¹⁴ 'Umar became the second Caliph, (13-23 A.H. 634-644 A.D.).

¹⁵ *Bukhari*, 66:3.

¹⁶ Uthman succeeded 'Umar as the third Caliph (23-35 A.H., 644-656 A.D.).

Standardisation of the Quran:

Thus Abu Bakr ordered a standard copy to be prepared from the manuscripts written in the presence of the Prophet, following the order of chapters which was followed by the reciters

under the directions of the Prophet, and 'Uthman ordered copies to be made from this standard copy. If there was any variation from that standard copy, it went no further than this that where the Quraish¹⁷ wrote a word in one way and Zaid wrote it in another way, 'Uthman's order was to write it in the manner of the Quraish. This was because Zaid was a Madinite while his colleagues were Quraish.¹⁸

¹⁷ Quraish: the leading tribe of Makkah, Prophet Muhammad belonged to the Banu Hashim branch of this tribe.

¹⁸ Here is an account of what took place: "Anas son of Malik relates that Hudhaifah came to 'Uthman, and he had been fighting along with the people of Syria in the conquest of Armenia and along with the people of Iraq in Azerbaijan, and was alarmed at their variations in the mode of reading (the Quran), and said to him, O Commander of the Faithful, stop the people before they differ in the Holy Book as the Jews and the Christians differ in their scriptures. So 'Uthman sent word to Hafsa, asking her to send him the Quran in her possession so that they might make other copies of it and then send the original copy back to her. Thereupon Hafsa sent the copy to 'Uthman, and he ordered Zaid ibn Thabit and 'Abd Allah ibn Zubair and Sa'd ibn al-'As and 'Abd al Rahman ibn Harith ibn Hisham, and they made copies from the original copy. 'Uthman also said to the three men who belonged to the Quraish (Zaid only being a Madinite), 'where you differ with Zaid in anything concerning the Quran write it in the manner of the Quraish, for it is in their language that it was revealed.' They obeyed these instructions, and when they had made the required number of copies from the original copy, 'Uthman returned the original to Hafsa, and sent to every quarter one of the copies thus made, and ordered all other copies or leaves on which the Quran was written to be burned" (Bu. 66:3).

As to what these differences were, some light is thrown on the point by Tirmidhi, one of the collectors of traditions, making the following addition to this report: "And they differed on that occasion as to *tabut* and *tabuh*. The Quraish members said that it was *tabut* and Zaid said that it was *tabuh*. The difference was reported to 'Uthman and he directed them to write it *tabut*, adding that the Quran was revealed in the dialect of the Quraish." It would be seen from this that these differences of reading or writing were very insignificant, but as the Companions of the prophet believed every word and letter of the Quran to be the revealed word of God, they gave importance even to a slight difference in writing and referred it to the Caliph. It may be added here that Zaid was chiefly called upon by the Prophet at Madinah to write down the Quranic revelations, and the word *tabut* occurs in a Madinah chapter (2:248). Zaid had written it *tabuh* as the Madinites did, but as the Quraish wrote it *tabut*, 'Uthman restored the Quraishite form. This incident further shows that Hafsa's copy contained the manuscripts written in the presence of the Prophet. These two reports furnish conclusive proof that if there was any difference between 'Uthman's standard copy and the collection made by Abu Bakr, it was a difference only as to the mode of writing certain words. In short, there was no change of words, no change of verses and no change in the order of chapters.

Difference of Readings:

A few words may be added as to the so-called differences of readings in the Quran. There were slight differences in the spoken language of different tribes, that of the Quraish being the model for the literary language. The Quran was revealed in the dialect of the Quraish, the literary language of Arabia. But when, towards the close of the Prophet's life, people from different Arabian tribes accepted Islam in large numbers, it was found that they could not pronounce certain words in the idiom of the Quraish, being habituated from childhood to their own idiom, and it was then that the Prophet allowed them to pronounce a word according to their own peculiar idiom. This permission was given only to facilitate the recitation of the Quran. The written Quran was one; it was all in the chaste idiom of the Quraish, but people belonging to other tribes were allowed to pronounce it in their own way.¹⁹

¹⁹ Some examples of these variations may be given here, *Hatta* (meaning *until*) was pronounced *attaby* the Hudhail; *ta'lamin* (meaning *you know*) was pronounced *ti'lamun* by the Asad; the Tamim read *hamzah* one of the letters, whereas the Quraish did not. In one report the meaning is made clear, where the following words are added from the lips of the Prophet: "Therefore recite it in the manner in which you find it easy to do so" (Bu. 66:5). In other words, the Prophet allowed a reader to pronounce a word in the way he found it easiest. In the proper sense of the word, these dialectic variations would not be readings at all. In exceptional cases, a person who could not pronounce a certain word, may have been allowed to substitute its equivalent. But even that would not be a case of a variant reading, since it was merely a permission granted to a particular individual, and such variations never found their way into the written text of the Quran.

There may have been certain revelations in which an optional reading was permitted. Readings belonging to this class can only be accepted on the most unimpeachable evidence, and the trustworthiness of the traditions containing such reading must be established beyond all doubt. But even these readings do not find their way into the written text, which remains permanently one and the same. Their value is only explanatory: they only show what significance is to be attached to the word used in the text; they are never at variance with the text. They are known to very few even of the learned, to say nothing of the general readers of the Holy Book, and are considered to have the value of an authentic tradition in explaining the meaning of a certain word occurring in the text. Thus, the so-called different readings were either dialectic variations, which were never meant to be permanent and, intended only to facilitate the reading of the Quran in individual cases, or explanatory variations meant to throw light on the text. The former ceased to exist with the spread of education in Arabia, and the latter have still the same explanatory value as they originally had.

Collective Testimony of the Purity of the Quranic Text:

Random reports that a certain verse or chapter, not to be met with in the Quran, was part of the text, have no value at all as against the conclusive and collective testimony which establishes the purity of the text of the Quran. These reports were in some cases fabricated by enemies who sought to undermine the authority of the religion of Islam.²⁰ In other cases, they may have been the mistaken conception of some narrator. However that may be, it is necessary to weigh the evidence as to whether or not a certain verse formed part of the Quranic text. It is a fact that every verse of the Quran was, when revealed, promulgated and made public; it became a part of

the public prayer and was repeated day and night to be listened to by an audience of hundreds. When the written manuscripts of the Quran were first collected into one volume in the time of the first caliph, and later on when copies were made from the original in the time of the third caliph, there was the unanimous testimony of all the Companions that every verse that found a place in that collection was part of the Divine revelation. Such testimony of overwhelming numbers cannot be set aside by the evidence of one or two, but, as a matter of fact, all reports quoted as affecting the purity of the text ascribe a certain statement to only one man, and in not a single case is there a second man to support that assertion. Thus when Ibn Masud²¹ makes an assertion, to this effect, Ubayy's²² evidence, along with that of the whole body of Companions, goes against him; and when Ubayy makes a like assertion, Ibn Masud's evidence along with that of the rest of the Companions goes against him. Thus there is not a single assertion impugning the purity of the Quranic text for which even one supporting witness can be produced.²³

²⁰ For instance, *Muslim* mentions a report ascribing to Abu Musa the statement that there was a certain chapter of the Quran, similar in length and force to the 9th chapter, of which only a single passage was all that he remembered. Now the *Mizan al-Itidal*, a critical inquiry about the narrators of the reports, shows that Suwaid, the immediate informer of Muslim, was a *Zindeeq* (i.e. one who conceals unbelief and makes an outward show of belief), and, therefore, the report, as its very subject-matter shows, is a clear invention. The four other reports speaking of similar passages, not met with in the text of the Quran, may be relegated to the same class.

²¹ & ²² Two of the persons to whom such reports are ascribed.

²³ In many cases even internal evidence would show that the report was not credible. For example, one report ascribes the following statement to Aishah: "The chapter of the Confederates (ch. 33) consisted, at the time of the Prophet, of two hundred verses: when 'Uthman wrote the *Mushaf*, he was only able to collect of it what it contains." Aishah could never have spoken these words, as she knew too well that 'Uthman never collected the *Mushaf*, he had only directed the making of copies from Hafsa's *Mushaf*. The false notion that 'Uthman collected the Quran is of later growth, and this affords the surest testimony that this report is a mere invention. Similarly, the words ascribed to 'Umar regarding the stoning of the adulterer are a fabrication. He is reported to have said: "If I were not afraid that people would say 'Umar has added something to the Book of God. I should write it down in the Quran" (A.D. 37:23). This assertion is self-contradictory. If it was really part of the Quran, why should people say that 'Umar had added to the Book of God?"

The Theory of Abrogation:

That certain verses of the Quran are abrogated by others is now an exploded theory. The two passages on which it was supposed to rest, refer, really, to the abrogation, not of the passages of the Quran but of the previous revelations whose place the Holy Book had taken. The first verse is contained in the sixteenth chapter (al-Nahl) -- a Makkah revelation -- and runs thus: "And when We change a message for a message²⁴ -- and Allah knows best what He reveals -- they say: Thou art only a forger" (16:101). It is a fact that details of the Islamic law were revealed at Madinah and it is in relation to these details that the theory of abrogation has been broached.

Therefore, a Makkah revelation would not speak of abrogation. But the reference in the above verse is to the abrogation, not of the Quranic verses but of the previous Divine messages or revelations, consequent upon revelation of the Quran. The context shows this clearly to be the case, for the opponents are here made to say that the Prophet was a forger. He was so accused by the opponents not because he announced the abrogation of certain verses of the Quran but because he claimed that the Quran was a Divine revelation which had taken the place of previous revelations. They argued that it was not a revelation at all: "Only a mortal teaches him" (16:103). According to them the whole of the Quran, and not merely a particular verse of it, was a forgery. The theory of abrogation, therefore, cannot be based on this verse which speaks only of one revelation or one law taking the place of another.

The other verse which is supposed to lend support to the theory runs thus: "Whatever message We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, We bring one better than it or one like it" (2:106). A reference to the context will show that the Jews or the followers of previous revelations are here addressed. Of these it is said: "they say: We believe in that which was revealed to us; and they deny what is besides that" (2:91). So they were told that if a certain revelation was abrogated, it was only to give place to a better one. And there is mention not only of abrogation but also of something that was forgotten. The words "or cause to be forgotten"²⁵ cannot refer to the Quran at all because no portion of it could be said to have been forgotten so as to require a new revelation in its place. There is no point in supposing that God should first make the Prophet forget a verse and then reveal a new one in its place. Why not, if he really had forgotten a verse, remind him of the one forgotten? But even if it is supposed that his memory ever failed in retaining a certain verse (which really never happened), that verse was quite safely preserved in writing, and the mere failure of the memory could not necessitate a new revelation. That the Prophet never forgot what was recited to him by the Holy Spirit is plainly stated in the Quran: "We shall make thee recite, so thou shalt not forget" (87:6). History also bears out the fact that he never forgot any portion of the Quranic revelation. Sometimes the whole of a very long chapter would be revealed to him in one portion, as in the case of the sixth chapter which extends over twenty sections, but he would cause it to be written down without delay, and make his Companions learn it by heart, and recite it in public prayers, and that without the change of even a letter, notwithstanding the fact that he himself could not read from a written copy, nor did the written copies, as a rule, remain in his possession. It was a miracle indeed that he never forgot any portion of the Quran, though other things he might forget, and it is to his forgetfulness in other things that the words except what Allah pleases, in the next verse (87:7), refer.²⁶ On the other hand, it is a fact that parts of the older revelations had been utterly lost and forgotten, and thus the Quran was needed to take the place of that which was abrogated, and that which had been forgotten by the world.

²⁴ The word *aya* occurring here means originally a sign, and hence it comes to signify *an indication or evidence or proof*, and is used in the sense of *miracle*. It also signifies *risala* or *a Divine message* (TA.) The word is frequently used in the Quran in its general sense of a Divine message or a Divine communication, and is, therefore, applicable to a portion of the Quran or to any previous revelation. It carries the latter significance here as the context clearly shows.

²⁵ Sale's translation of the words is misleading and has actually deceived many writers

on Islam who had no access to the original. He translates the words *nunsi-ha* as meaning *We cause thee to forget*. Now the text does not contain any word meaning *thee*. The slight error makes the verse mean that Almighty God had caused the Prophet to forget certain Quranic verses; whereas the original does not say that the Prophet was made to forget anything but clearly implies that the world was made to forget.

²⁶ The word "*except*" (*illa*) is sometimes used in Arabic to indicate *istithna munqati'*, lit. *an exception which is cut off*, the thing excepted being disunited in kind from that from which an exception is made.

Traditions on Abrogation:

"The traditions speaking of abrogation are all weak", says Tabrasi. But it is stranger still that the theory of abrogation has been accepted by writer after writer without ever thinking that not a single tradition, however weak, touching on the abrogation of a verse, was traceable to the Prophet. It never occurred to the upholders of this theory that the Quranic verses were promulgated by the Prophet, and that it was he whose authority was necessary for the abrogation of any Quranic verse; no Companion, not even Abu Bakr on 'Ali,²⁷ could say that a verse was abrogated. The Prophet alone was entitled to say so, and there is not a single tradition to the effect that he ever said so; it is always some Companion or a later authority to whom such views are to be traced. In most cases, where a report is traceable to one Companion who held a certain verse to have been abrogated, there is another report traceable to another Companion to the effect that the verse was not abrogated.²⁸ Even among later writers we find that there is not a single verse on which the verdict of abrogation has been passed by one without being questioned by another; and while there are writers who would lightly pass the verdict of abrogation on hundreds of verses, there are others who consider not more than five to be abrogated, and even in the case of these five the verdict of abrogation has been seriously impugned by earlier writers.

²⁷ Cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet. He succeeded 'Uthman as fourth Caliph.

²⁸ Some examples may be noted here -- 2:180 is held by some to have been abrogated while others have denied it (IJ-C); 2:184 is considered by Ibn 'Umar as having been abrogated while Ibn 'Abbas says it was not (Bu.); 2:240 was abrogated according to Ibn Zubair while Mujahid says it was not (Bu.). I have taken these examples only from the second chapter of the Quran.

Use of the Word *Naskh*:

The theory of abrogation has in fact arisen from a misunderstanding of the use of the word *naskh* (abrogation), by the Companions of the Prophet. When the significance of one verse was limited by another, the former was sometimes spoken of as having been "abrogated" (*nusikhat*) by the latter. Similarly when the words of a verse gave rise to a misconception, and a

later revelation cleared up that misconception, the word "abrogation" was metaphorically used in connection with it, the idea underlying its use being not that the first verse was abrogated but that a certain conception to which it had given rise was abrogated.²⁹ Earlier authorities admit this use of the word: "Those who accept abrogation (*naskh*) here (2:109) take it as meaning explanation metaphorically"³⁰, and again: "By abrogation is meant, metaphorically, explaining and making clear the significance".³¹ It is an abrogation, but not an abrogation of the words of the Quran; rather it is the abrogation of a misconception of their meaning. This is further made clear by the application of abrogation to verses containing statements of facts (*akhbar*), whereas, properly speaking, abrogation could only take place in the case of verses containing a commandment or a prohibition (*amr* or *nahy*). In the ordinary sense of the word there could be no abrogation of a statement made in the Word of God, as that would suggest that God had made a wrong statement first and then recalled it. This use of the word "abrogation" by the earlier authorities regarding statements of facts³² shows that they were using the word to signify the removal of a wrong conception regarding, or the placing of a limitation upon, the meaning of a certain verse. At the same time, it is true that the use of this word soon became indiscriminate, and when anyone found himself unable to reconcile two verses, he would declare one of them to be abrogated by the other.

²⁹ Many instances of this may be quoted. In 2:284, it is said, "whether you manifest what is in your minds or hide it, Allah will call you to account for it": while according to 2:286. "Allah does not impose on any soul a duty but to the extent of its ability". A report in *Bukhari* says that one of the Companions of the Prophet, probably 'Abd Allah ibn 'Umar held the opinion that the first verse was abrogated (*nusikhat*) by the second. What was meant by *naskh* (abrogation) in this case is made clear by another detailed report given in the *Musnad* (Ah. I, 332). According to this report when 2:284 was revealed, the Companions entertained an idea which they had never entertained before (or, according to another report, they were greatly grieved) and thought that they had not the power to bear it. The matter being brought to the notice of the Prophet, he said: "Rather say, We have heard and we obey and submit." And so God inspired faith in their hearts. As this report shows, what happened was this: that some Companion or Companions thought that 2:284 imposed a new burden on them, making every evil idea which entered the mind without taking root or ever being translated into action, punishable in the same manner as if it had been translated into action. 2:286 made it plain that this was not the meaning conveyed by 2:284, since, according to that verse, God did not impose on man a burden which he could not bear. This removal of a misconception was called abrogation (*naskh*) by Ibn 'Umar.

It may be added that there is nothing to show that 2:286 was revealed later than 2:284. On the other hand, the use of the words *we have heard and we obey* by the Prophet to remove the wrong notion which some Companions entertained -- these very words occur in 2:285 -- shows that the three verses, 284, 285, and 286 were all revealed together, and hence the abrogation, in the ordinary sense of the word, of one of them by another is meaningless. There are other instances in which a verse revealed later is thought to have been abrogated by a previous verse. But how could a later verse be abrogated by a previous one? Or what point can there be in giving an order which was cancelled before it was given? If, on the other hand, the *naskh* is taken to mean the placing of a limitation upon the meaning of a verse, or the removal of a wrong

conception attached to it, no difficulty would arise, for even a previous verse may be spoken of as placing a limitation upon the meaning of a later verse or as removing a wrong conception arising therefrom.

³⁰ RM, I, p. 292.

³¹ Ibid., p. 508.

³² One example of one statement being spoken of as abrogated by another is that of 2:284, 286 (for which see the previous footnote). Another is furnished by 8:65, 66, where the first verse states that in war the Muslims shall overcome ten times their numbers, and the second, after referring to their weakness at the time -- which meant the paucity of trained men among them and their lack of the implements and necessities of war -- states that they shall overcome double their numbers. Now the two verses relate to two different conditions and they may be said to place a limitation upon the meaning of each other, but one of them cannot be spoken of as abrogating the other. In the time of the Prophet when the Muslims were weak, when every man, old or young, had to be called upon to take the field, and the Muslim army was but ill-equipped, the Muslims overcame double, even thrice their numbers; but in the wars with the Persian and Roman empires, they vanquished ten times their numbers. Both statements were true; they only related to different circumstances and the one placed a limitation upon the meaning of the other, but neither of them actually abrogated the other.

Basis of Abrogation:

The principle on which the theory of abrogation is based is unacceptable, being contrary to the clear teaching of the Quran. A verse is considered to be abrogated by another when the two cannot be reconciled with each other; in other words, when they appear to contradict each other. But the Quran destroys this foundation when it declares that no part of it is at variance with another: "Will they not then meditate on the Quran? And if it were from any other than Allah, they would have found in it many a discrepancy" (4:82). It was due to lack of meditation that one verse was thought to be at variance with another; and hence it is that in almost all cases where abrogation has been upheld by one person, there has been another who, being able to reconcile the two, has repudiated the alleged abrogation.

Sayuti on Abrogation:

It is only among the later commentators that we meet with the tendency to augment the number of verses thought to have been abrogated, and by some of these the figure has been placed as high as five hundred. In this connection, Sayuti, one of the well-known commentators, says: "Those who multiply (the number of abrogated verses) have included many kinds -- one kind being that in which there is neither abrogation, nor any particularisation (of a general statement), nor has it any connection with any one of them, for various reasons. And this is as in

the words of God: 'And spend out of what We have given them' (2:3); 'And spend out of what We have given you' (63:10); and the like. It is said that these are abrogated by the verse dealing with charity (zakat), while it is not so, they being still in force".³³ Sayuti himself brings the number of verses which he thinks to be abrogated down to twenty-one,³⁴ in some of which he considers there is abrogation, while in others he finds that it is only the particularisation of a general injunction that is effected by a later verse; but he admits that there is a difference of opinion even about these.

³³ It. II, p. 22.

³⁴ Ibid, p. 23.

Shah Wali-ullah's Verdict on Five Verses:

A later writer, however, the famous Shah Wali-ullah of India, commenting on this in his *Fauz al-Kabir*, says that abrogation cannot be proved in the case of sixteen out of Sayuti's twenty-one verses, but in the case of the remaining five he is of the opinion that the verdict of abrogation is final. These five verses are dealt with as follows:

(1) 2:180: "It is prescribed for you, when death approaches one of you, if he leaves behind wealth, for parents and near relations, to make a bequest in a kindly manner." As a matter of fact, both Baidzawi and Ibn Jarir³⁵ quote authorities who state that this verse was not abrogated; and it is surprising that it is considered as being abrogated by 4:11, 12, which speak of the shares to be given "after the payment of a bequest he may have bequeathed or a debt," showing clearly that the bequest spoken of in 2:180 was still in force. This verse in fact speaks of bequest for charitable objects which is even now recognised by Muslims to the extent of one-third of the property.³⁶

(2) 2:40: "And those of you who die and leave wives behind, should make a bequest in favour of their wives of maintenance for a year without turning them out." But we have the word of no less an authority than Mujahid that this verse is not abrogated: "Allah gave her (the widow) the whole of a year, if she desired she could stay according to the bequest (having maintenance and residence for a year), and if she desired she could leave the house (and remarry), as the Quran says: 'Then if they leave of their own accord, there is no blame on you' " (Bu. 65, Surah ii:41). This verse, therefore, does not contradict v. 234. Moreover, there is proof that it was revealed after v. 234, and hence it cannot be said to have been abrogated by the verse.

(3) 8:65: "If there are twenty patient ones of you, they shall overcome two hundred", etc. This is said to have been abrogated by the verse that follows it: "Now Allah has made light your burden and He knows that there is weakness in you. So if there be of you a hundred steadfast, they shall overcome two hundred." That the question of abrogation does not arise here at all is apparent from the words of the second verse which clearly refers to the early times when the Muslims were weak, having neither munitions of war nor experience of warfare, and when old and young had to go out and fight; while the first verse refers to a later period when the Muslim armies were fully organised and equipped.

(4) 33:52: "It is not allowed to thee to take women after this." This is said to have been abrogated by a verse which was apparently revealed before it: "O Prophet! We have made

lawful to thee thy wives" (33:50). The whole issue has been misunderstood. As stated before, a verse cannot be abrogated by one revealed before it. Apparently what happened was this. When 4:3 was revealed, limiting the number of wives to four, should exceptional circumstances require, the Prophet was told not to divorce the excess number, and this was effected by 33:50; but at the same time he was told not to take any woman in marriage after that, and this was done by 33:52.

(5) 58:12: "O you who believe! When you consult the Messenger, offer something in charity before your consultation. That is better for you and purer. But if you have not the means then surely Allah is Forgiving. Merciful." This is said to have been abrogated by the verse that follows: "Do you fear that you will not be able to give in charity before your consultation? So when you do it not and Allah has turned to you mercifully, keep up prayer and pay the poor-rate." It is not easy to see how one of these injunctions is abrogated by the other, since there is not the slightest difference in what they say. The second verse merely gives further explanation to show that the injunction is only in the nature of recommendation, that is to say, a man may give in charity whatever he can easily spare, the legal alms (zakat) being the only obligatory charity. Thus the theory of abrogation falls to the ground on all consideration.

³⁵ Famous commentators of the Quran.

³⁶ This is discussed further in the chapter on *Inheritance*.

Interpretation of the Quran:

The rule as to the interpretation of the Quran is thus given in the Book itself: "He it is Who has revealed the Book to thee; some of its verses are decisive -- they are the basis of the Book -- and others are allegorical. Then those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part of it which is allegorical, seeking to mislead, and seeking to give it their own interpretation. And none knows its interpretation except Allah, and those firmly rooted in knowledge. They say: We believe in it, it is all from our Lord. And none do mind except men of understanding" (3:6). In the first place, it is stated here that there are two kinds of verses in the Quran, namely, the decisive and the allegorical -- the latter being those which are capable of different interpretations. Next we are told that the decisive verses are the basis of the Book, that is, that they contain the fundamental principles of religion. Hence whatever may be the differences of interpretation, the fundamentals of religion are not affected by them, all such differences relating only to secondary matters. The third point is that some people seek to give their own interpretation to allegorical statements and are thus misled. In other words, serious errors arise only when a wrong interpretation is placed on words which are susceptible of two meanings. Lastly, in the concluding words, a clue is given as to the right mode of interpretation in the case of allegorical statements: "It is all from our Lord" -- meaning that there is no disagreement between the various portions of the Book. This statement has in fact been made elsewhere also, as already quoted (see 4:82). The important principle to be borne in mind in the interpretation of the Quran, therefore, is that the meaning should be sought from within the Quran, and never should a passage be interpreted in such a manner that it may be at variance with any other passage, but more especially with the basic principles laid down in the decisive verses. This principle, in the

revealed words, is followed by "those well-grounded in knowledge."³⁷ The following rules may, therefore, be laid down:

-- The principles of Islam are enunciated in decisive words in the Quran; and, therefore, no attempt should be made to establish a principle on the strength of an allegorical passage, or of words susceptible of different meanings.

-- The explanation of the Book should in the first place be sought in the Quran itself; for, whatever it has stated briefly, or merely hinted at, in one place, will be found expanded and fully explained elsewhere in it.

-- It is very important to remember that the Quran contains allegory and metaphor along with what is plain and decisive, and the only safeguard against being misled by what is allegorical or metaphorical is that the interpretation of such passages must be strictly in consonance with what is laid down in clear and decisive words, and not at variance therewith.

When a law or principle is laid down, any statement carrying a doubtful significance, or a statement apparently opposed to the law so laid down, must be interpreted subject to the principle enunciated. Similarly that which is particular must be read in connection with and subject to more general statements.

³⁷ The subject of the interpretation of the Quranic verses is very appropriately dealt with in the opening verses of the third chapter which begins with a discussion with the followers of Christianity, for, it must be borne in mind, that it is on a wrong interpretation of certain allegorical statements that the fundamental principles of Christianity are actually based. The basic doctrine of the religion of all the prophets in the Old Testament is the Unity of God, but there are a number of prophecies couched in allegorical language having reference to the advent of Christ. The Christians, instead of interpreting these in accordance with the clear words of the principle of Divine Unity, laid the foundations of Christianity on the metaphorical language of the prophecies, and thus by neglect of the true rule of interpretation were misled to such an extent as to ignore the very essentials of the religion of the prophets. Christ was believed to be god on the strength of metaphorical expressions, and the doctrine of the Trinity thus became the basis of a new religion. The epithet "son of God" was freely used in Israelite literature, and was always taken allegorically. The term occurs as early as Gen. 6:2 where the "sons of God" are spoken of as taking the daughters of men for wives. It occurs again in Job 1:6 and 38:7, and good men are no doubt meant in both places. In Ex. 4:22 and many other places, the Israelites are spoken of as the children of God: "Israel is my son, even my first born." The expression is used in the same metaphorical sense in the Gospels. Even in the fourth Gospel, where the Divinity of Christ is looked upon as finding a bolder expression than in the synoptics, Jesus Christ is reported as saying in answer to those who accused him of blasphemy for speaking of himself as the son of God: "Is it not written in your law, I said, Ye are gods? If He called them gods, unto whom the word of God came, and the scripture cannot be broken; say ye of him, whom the Father hath sanctified, and sent into the world. Thou blasphemest, because I said, I am the Son of God?" (Jn 10:34-36). It is thus clear that even in the mouth of Jesus the term "son of God" was a metaphorical

expression, and by taking it literally the Church has destroyed the very foundation of religion. It is to this fundamental mistake of Christianity that the Quran refers by giving the rule for the interpretation of allegorical verses in a discussion of the Christian religion.

Value of Tradition and Commentaries in Interpreting the Quran:

In this connection, it may also be added that the Tradition also affords an explanation of the Quran but a tradition can only be accepted when it is reliable and not opposed to what is clearly stated in the Quran.³⁸ As regards commentaries, a word of warning is necessary against the tendency to regard what is stated in them as being the final word on interpretation, since by so doing the great treasures of knowledge which an exposition of the Quran in the new light of modern progress reveals are shut out, and the Quran becomes a sealed book to the present generation. The learned men of yore all freely sought its meaning according to their understanding and circumstances, and the same right accrues to the present generation. It must also be added that though the commentaries are valuable stores of learning for a knowledge of the Quran, the numerous anecdotes and legends with which many of them are filled can only be accepted with the greatest caution and after the most careful sifting.³⁹

³⁸ See also Chapter on *Tradition (Sunnah or Hadith)*.

³⁹ Such stories are mostly taken from the Jews and the Christians, and on this point I would refer the reader to my remarks under the heading "Reports in Biographies and Commentaries" in the next chapter, where I have shown that the best authorities have condemned most of this material as derived from Jewish and Christian sources.

Divisions of the Quran:

The Quran is divided into 114 chapters, each of which is called a surah.⁴⁰ The chapters are of varying length, the longest comprising one-twelfth of the entire Book. All the chapters, with the exception of the last thirty-five, are divided into sections (ruku'), each section dealing generally with one subject, and the different sections being interrelated to each other. Each section contains a number of verses (ayah).⁴¹ The total number of verses is 6,240,⁴² or including 113 verses "in the name of Allah (bismillah) with which the chapters open, 6,353.⁴³ For the purpose of recitation, the Quran is divided into thirty equal parts (juz), each of these being again subdivided into four equal parts. Another division is into seven portion (manzil), which is designed for the completion of its recital in seven days. These divisions for the purpose of recitation have nothing to do with the subject-matter of the Quran.

⁴⁰ Meaning literally *eminence* or *high degree* (R.) and also *any degree of structure* (LL.)

⁴¹ Meaning originally a *sign* or a *communication from God*.

⁴² There existed a slight difference in the numbering of verses in the different centres of learning. Kufah readers counting them 6,239, Basrah 6,204, Syria 6,225, Makkah, 6219, Madinah 6,211. But this is a difference of computation only, some readers marking the end of a verse where others do not.

⁴³ Every chapter of the Quran begins with the *Bismillah* verse, except the ninth

Makkah and Madinah Surahs/Chapters:

An important division of the Quran relates to the Makkah and Madinah chapters. After the Call, the Prophet passed 13 years at Makkah, and was then forced to migrate with his Companions to Madinah where he spent the last ten years of his life. Out of the total of 114 chapters of the Book, 92 were revealed during the Makkah period and 22 during the Madinah period,⁴⁴ but the Madinah chapters, being generally longer, contain about one-third of the Holy Book. In arrangement, the Makkah revelation is intermingled with that of Madinah; the number of Makkah and Madinah chapters following each other alternately, being 1, 4, 2, 2, 14, 1, 8, 1, 13, 3, 7, 10, 48. On referring to the subject-matter of the Makkah and Madinah revelations, we find the following three broad features distinguishing the two groups of chapters. Firstly, the Makkah revelation deals chiefly with faith in God and is particularly devoted to grounding the Muslims in that faith, while the Madinah revelation is mainly intended to translate that faith into action. It is true that exhortations to good and noble deeds are met with in the Makkah revelation, and in the Madinah revelation faith is still shown to be the foundation on which the structure of deeds should be built, but, in the main, stress is laid in the former on faith in an Omnipotent and Omnipresent God Who requites every good and every evil deed, and the latter deals chiefly with what is good and what is evil, in other words, with the details of the law. The second feature distinguishing the two revelations is that while that of Makkah is generally prophetic, that of Madinah deals with the fulfilment of prophecy. Thirdly, while the former shows how true happiness of mind may be sought in communion with God, the latter points out how man's dealing with man may also be a source of bliss and comfort to him. Hence a scientific arrangement of the Quran must of necessity rest on the intermingling of the two revelations, blending of faith with deeds of prophecy with fulfilment of prophecy, of Divine communion with man's relation to and treatment of man.

⁴⁴ Ch. 110 was revealed at Makkah during the Farewell Pilgrimage and therefore belongs to the Madinah period.

It may be added here that the idea that the proper arrangement of the Quran should be in chronological order is a mistaken one. Most of the chapters were revealed piecemeal, and hence a chronological order of revelation would destroy the chapter arrangement altogether. Take, for example, the very first chapter chronologically, the 96th in the present order. While its first five verses are undoubtedly the first revelation that came to the Prophet, the rest of the chapter was not revealed before the fourth year of his ministry. Similarly with the second chapter in the present arrangement; while the major portion of it was revealed in the first and the second years of the Hijrah, some verses were revealed as late as the closing days of the Prophet's life. Chronological order is, therefore, an impossibility.

The Place of the Quran in World Literature:

That the Quran occupies a place of eminence in Arabic literature which has not fallen to the lot of any other book goes without saying; but we may say more and assert with confidence that the place so occupied has not been attained at any time by any book anywhere. For what book is there in the whole history of the human race that, through thirteen long centuries, has not only remained admittedly the standard of the language in which it is written but has also originated a world-wide literature? The feat accomplished by the Quran is unique in the whole history of the written word. It transformed a dialect, spoken in a very limited area of a forgotten corner of the world, into a world-wide language which became the mother-tongue of vast countries and mighty empires, and produced a literature which is the basis of the culture of powerful nations from one end of the world to the other. There was no literature, properly speaking, in Arabic before the Quran; the few pieces of poetry that did exist never soared beyond the praise of wine or woman, or horse or sword. It was with the Quran that Arabic literature originated, and through it that Arabic became a powerful language spoken in many countries and casting its influence on the literary histories of many others. Without the Quran, the Arabic language would have been nowhere in the world. As Dr. Steingass says:

"But we may well ask ourselves, what would in all probability have become of this language without Muhammad and his Quran? This is not at all an idle and desultory speculation. It is true the Arabic language had already produced numerous fine specimens of genuine and high-flown poetry, but such poetry was chiefly, if not exclusively, preserved in the memory of the people ... Moreover, poetry is not tantamount to literature ... Divided among themselves into numerous tribes, who were engaged in a perpetual warfare against each other, the Arabs, and with them their various dialects, would more and more have drifted asunder, poetry would have followed in the wake, and the population of Arabia would have broken up into a multitude of clans, with their particular bards, whose love-and-war songs enterprising travellers of our day might now collect ... It seems, then, that is only a work of the nature of the Quran which could develop ancient Arabic into a literary language... But not only by raising a dialect, through its generalisation, to the power of a language, and by rendering the adoption of writing indispensable, has the Quran initiated the development of an Arabic literature; its composition itself has contributed two factors absolutely needful to this development: it has added to the existing poetry the origins of rhetoric and prose... But Muhammad made a still greater and more decisive step towards creating a literature for his people. In those surahs [chapters of the Holy Quran], in which he regulated the private and public life of the Muslim, he originated a prose, which has remained the standard of classical purity ever since".⁴⁵

There are other considerations which entitle the Quran to a place of eminence to which no other book can aspire. It throws light on all the fundamentals of religion,⁴⁶ the existence and unity of God, the reward of good and evil, the life after death, paradise and hell, revelation, etc. In addition to expounding to us the mysteries of the unseen, it offers a solution of the most difficult problems of this life, such as the distribution of wealth, the sex-problem, and all other questions on which depends in any degree the happiness and advancement of man. And the value of this copiousness of ideas is further enhanced when it is seen that it does not confront man with dogmas but gives reasons for every assertion made, whether relating to the spiritual or the

physical life. There are hundreds of topics on which it has enriched the literature of the world, and whether it discusses questions relating to spiritual existence or to physical life here on earth, it adopts a rational approach and convinces by argument and not by dogma.

More wonderful still is the effect which the Quran has produced. The transformation it brought about is unparalleled in the history of the world. A complete change was wrought in the lives of a whole nation in an incredibly short time -- a period of no more than twenty-three years. The Quran found the Arabs worshippers of idols, unhewn stones, trees and heaps of sand, yet in less than a quarter of a century the worship of the One God ruled the whole land and idolatry had been wiped out from one end of the country to the other. It swept all superstitions before it and, in their place, gave the most rational religion the world could dream of. The Arab who had been wont to pride himself on his ignorance transformed into the lover of knowledge, drinking deep at every fountain of learning to which he could gain access. And this was directly the effect of the teaching of the Quran, which not only appealed to reason, ever and again, but declared man's thirst for knowledge to be insatiable. And along with superstition went the deepest vices of the Arab, and in their place the Holy Book put a burning desire for the best and noblest deeds in the service of humanity. Yet it was not the transformation of the individual alone that the Quran had accomplished; equally was it a transformation of the family, of society, of the very nation itself. From the warring elements of the Arab race, it welded a nation, united and full of life and vigour, before whose onward march the greatest kingdoms of the world crumbled as if they had been but toys before the reality of the new faith. Thus the Quran effected a transformation of humanity itself -- a transformation material as well as moral, an awakening intellectual as well as spiritual. There is no other book which has brought about a change so miraculous in the lives of men.

⁴⁵ Hughes' Dictionary of Islam, art. Quran, pp. 528, 529.

⁴⁶ This subject has been fully dealt with in the second part of this book.

European Writers on the Quran:

To this position of the Quran in world literature, testimony is borne by even the most biased European writers:

"The style of the Koran is generally beautiful and fluent ... and in many places, especially where the majesty and attributes of God are described, sublime and magnificent.... He succeeded so well, and so strangely captivated the minds of his audience, that several of his opponents thought it the effect of witchcraft and enchantment".⁴⁷

"That the best of Arab writers has never succeeded in producing anything equal in merit to the Quran itself is not surprising".⁴⁸

"The earliest Mekka revelations are those which contain what is highest in a great religion and what was purest in a great man."⁴⁹

"However often we turn to it, at first disgusting us each time afresh, it soon attracts, astounds, and in the end enforces our reverence... Its style, in accordance with its contents and aim, is stern, grand, terrible -- ever and anon truly sublime... Thus this book will go on exercising through all ages a most potent influence".⁵⁰

"We may well say the Quran is one of the grandest books ever written... Sublime and chaste, where the supreme truth of God's unity is to be proclaimed; appealing in high-pitched strains to the imagination of a poetically-gifted people where the eternal consequences of man's submission to God's holy will, or of rebellion against it, are pictured; touching in its simple, almost crude, earnestness, when it seeks again and again encouragement or consolation for God's Messenger, and a solemn warning for those to whom he has been sent, in the histories of the prophets of old: the language of the Quran adapts itself to the exigencies of everyday life, when this everyday life, in its private and public bearings, is to be brought in harmony with the fundamental principles of the new dispensation.

"Here therefore its merits as a literary production should, perhaps, not be measured by some preconceived maxims of subjective and aesthetic taste, but by the effects which it produced in Muhammad's contemporaries and fellow-countrymen. If it spoke so powerfully and convincingly to the hearts of his hearers as to weld hitherto centrifugal and antagonistic elements into one compact and well-organised body animated by ideas far beyond those which had until now ruled the Arabian mind, then its eloquence was perfect, simply because it created a civilised nation out of savage tribes, and shot of fresh wool into the old warp of history."⁵¹

"From time beyond memory, Mecca and the whole Peninsula had been steeped in spiritual torpor. The slight and transient influences of Judaism, Christianity, or philosophical inquiry upon the Arab mind had been but as the ruffling here and there of the surface of a quiet lake; all remained still and motionless below. The people were sunk in superstition, cruelty, and vice... Their religion was a gross idolatry; and their faith the dark superstitious dread of unseen beings.... Thirteen years before the Hegira [migration to Medina], Mecca lay lifeless in this debased state. What a change had those thirteen years now produced ... Jewish truth had long sounded in the ears of the men of Medina; but it was not until they heard the spirit-stirring strains of the Arabian Prophet that they too awoke from their slumber, and sprang suddenly into a new and earnest life."⁵²

"A more disunited people it would be hard to find till suddenly the miracle took place! A man arose who, by his personality and by his claim to direct Divine guidance, actually brought about the impossible -- namely, the union of all these warring factions"⁵³

"It was the one miracle claimed by Mohammed -- his 'standing miracle' he called it: and a miracle indeed it is".⁵⁴

"Never has a people been led more rapidly to civilisation, such as it was, than were the Arabs through Islam."⁵⁵

"The Quran is unapproachable as regards convincing power, eloquence, and even composition... And to it was also indirectly due the marvellous development of all branches of science in the Moslim world."⁵⁶

⁴⁷ Sale, *Preliminary Discourse*, p. 48.

⁴⁸ Palmer, Intro., p. Iv.

⁴⁹ Lane's Selections, Intro., p. cvi.

⁵⁰ Goethe -- Hughes' *Dictionary of Islam*, p. 526.

⁵¹ Steingass -- Hughes' *Dictionary of Islam*, pp. 527, 528.

⁵² Muir's *Life of Mahomet*, pp. 155, 156

⁵³ *Ins and Outs of Mesopotamia*.

⁵⁴ Bosworth Smith's *Mohammed*, p. 290.

⁵⁵ Hirschfeld's *New Researches*, p. 5.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 9

Translation of the Quran:

Certain religious scholars (Ulama) have held that the Quran should not be translated into any language, but this position is clearly untenable. The Holy Book is plainly intended for all the nations; it is again and again called "a reminder for all the nations" (68:52; 81:27; etc), and the Prophet is spoken of as "a warner for the nations" (25:1). No warning could be conveyed to a nation except in its own language, and the Quran could not be spoken of as a reminder for the nations unless its message was meant to be given to them in their own language. Its translation into other languages was, therefore, contemplated by the Holy Book itself.⁵⁷

⁵⁷ Translations have actually been done into many languages by Muslims themselves. A Persian translation is attributed to Shaikh Sa'di, while another rendering into Persian was the work of the famous Indian saint, Shah Wali-ullah who died over 150 years ago. Translations were made into Urdu by other members of Shah Wali-ullah's family, Shah Rafi' ud-Din and Shah 'Abd al-Qadir, while many more have been added recently. Translations also exist in many other languages. The earliest translations in European languages have been listed as follows in Hughes' *Dictionary of Islam*:

"The first translation attempted by Europeans was a Latin version translated by an

Englishman, Robert of Retina, and a German, Hermann of Dalmatia. This translation, which was done at the request of Peter, Abbot of the Monastery of Clugny, A.D. 1143, remained hidden nearly 400 years till it was published at Basle, 1543, by Theodore Bibliander, and was afterwards rendered into Italian, German and Dutch.... The oldest French translation was done by M. Du Ryer (Paris, 1647). A Russian version appeared at St. Petersburg in 1776.... The first English Quran was Alexander Ross's translation of Du Ryer's French version (1649-1688). Sale's well-known work first appeared in 1734.... A translation by the Rev. J.M. Rodwell ... was printed in 1861... Professor Palmer, of Cambridge, translated the Quran in 1880" (p. 523).