

With the Name of Allah, All-Merciful, Most Merciful

REVELATION – Islamic Texts

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Translation of the Qur'an adapted from Abdullah Yusuf 'Ali

Themes of the Texts

Surah *Al 'Imran* (The Family of 'Imran^a, no. 3) is a Medinan surah and the second-longest one after its "twin" surah *al-Baqarah* (The Cow, no. 2), also Medinan. Both these surahs begin with the mysterious letters, A. L. M., open with a reference to revelation and pursue arguments and theological disputes with Jews and Christians as major themes. Stories of Mary, Zachariah, John the Baptist and Jesus Christ are recounted in this surah, as are lessons from the Battle of Uhud that was fought at the edge of Medina by the Muslims against the polytheists of Mecca.

A crucial point in ayah 7 can be read in two different ways, depending on where one stops:

- a) ... but no one knows its hidden meanings except Allah. And those who are firmly grounded in knowledge, they say: "We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord" ...
- b) but no one knows its hidden meanings except Allah and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge, who say: "We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord" ...

I have tried to render the English in such a way that both readings are possible; surprisingly, most translators do not do this, preferring the popular and theologically-safer reading (a). However, leading commentators almost always mention that (b) is also a valid possibility.

Surah *al-Shu'ara* (The Poets, no. 26) is medium-length Meccan surah with a large number of short ayat. A striking feature is the account of the stories of Moses, Noah, the Arabian prophets Hud and Salih, Lot and Shu'ayb of Midian in a similar format, emphasising the similarity of their message of Divine Unity and the fate of the people who rejected their message, all of whom were destroyed by Acts of God. Every account is followed by the refrain, "Truly, in this are Signs: but most of them were not going to be believers. And truly, your Lord is indeed the Mighty, the Merciful." The ayat selected here comprise the concluding passage of the surah, which immediately follows the above-mentioned stories of the prophets.

^a 'Imran is the father of Mary, mother of Jesus, as detailed in the surah.

Points to Consider

1. Does the mention of the Law (Torah) and Gospel (Evangel) in Al-‘Imran 3 provide a basis for engagement with Jews and Christians, as later passages in this surah do?
2. What does Al-‘Imran 7 tell us about the nature of God’s revelation? What significance do the two possible readings have here?
3. The revelation is to Muhammad’s heart (The Poets, 194). What does this mean?
4. The revelation is in clear Arabic, and could not have been revealed to a non-Arab (The Poets, 192-9). How is this consistent with the idea that the Qur’an is a universal message for all of humanity?
5. The final sub-passage of The Poets (210-227) contrasts revelation from God via angels with revelations via devils to deluded people such as faithless poets. What is the relationship, if any, between poets and prophets, between poetry and scripture?

Text 1: Surah Al ‘Imran (Chapter: The Family of ‘Imran, 3:1-9), Medinan

In the Name of God, All-Merciful, Most Merciful

1. A. L. M.
2. God (Allah). There is no god but He, the Living, the Self-Subsisting, Eternal.
3. It is He Who sent down to thee (step by step), in truth, the Book, confirming what went before it; and He sent down the Law^b (of Moses) and the Gospel^c (of Jesus) before this, as a guide to mankind, and He sent down the Criterion (of judgment between right and wrong).
4. Then those who reject Faith in the Signs of Allah will suffer the severest penalty, and Allah is Exalted in Might, Lord of Retribution.
5. From Allah, verily nothing is hidden on earth or in the heavens.
6. He it is Who shapes you in the wombs as He pleases. There is no god but He, the Exalted in Might, the Wise.
7. He it is Who has sent down to thee the Book: in it are verses basic or fundamental (of established meaning); they are the foundation of the Book: others are allegorical. But those in whose hearts is perversity follow the part thereof that is allegorical, seeking discord, and searching for its hidden meanings, but no one knows its hidden meanings except Allah and those who are firmly grounded in knowledge, they say: “We believe in the Book; the whole of it is from our Lord:” and none will grasp the Message except men of understanding.
8. “Our Lord!” (they say), “Let not our hearts deviate now after Thou hast guided us, but grant us mercy from Thine own Presence; for Thou art the Grantor of bounties without measure.”
9. “Our Lord! Thou art He that will gather mankind Together against a day about which there is no doubt; for Allah never fails in His promise.”

^b Ar. *Tawrah* or Torah. The translation of this as “Law” is by A. Y. Ali.

^c Ar. *Injil*, thought to be related to the Greek, “Evangel.”

Text 2: Surah *al-Shu'ara'* (Chapter: The Poets, 26:192-227), Meccan

192. Verily, this is a Revelation from the Lord of the Worlds:

193. With it came down the Spirit of Faith and Truth -

194. To your heart and mind^d (O Muhammad), that you may admonish.

195. In the perspicuous Arabic tongue.

196. Without doubt it is (announced) in the revealed Books of former peoples.

197. Is it not a Sign to them that the Learned of the Children of Israel knew it (as true)?^e

198. Had We revealed it to any of the non-Arabs,

199. And had he recited it to them, they would not have believed in it.

200. Thus have We caused it to enter the hearts of the sinners.

201. They will not believe in it until they see the grievous Penalty;

202. But the (Penalty) will come to them of a sudden, while they perceive it not;

203. Then they will say: "Shall we be respited?"

204. Do they then ask for Our Penalty to be hastened on?

205. Do you see? If We do let them enjoy (this life) for a few years,

206. Yet there comes to them at length the (Punishment) which they were promised!

207. It will profit them not that they enjoyed (this life)!

208. Never did We destroy a population, but had its warners -

209. By way of reminder; and We never are unjust.

210. No evil ones^f have brought down this (Revelation):

^d Literally, "to your heart."

^e Traditionally, this is a reference to the conversion to Islam of the Jewish rabbi, scholar and leader, 'Abdullah bin Salam, in Medina at the hands of the Prophet. Ibn Salam went on to become a respected Muslim leader and military commander. It is said that he was so tall that whilst sitting on a horse, his feet would touch the floor!

- 211.** It would neither suit them nor would they be able (to produce it).
- 212.** Indeed they have been removed far from even (a chance of) hearing it.
- 213.** So call not on any other god with Allah, or thou wilt be among those under the Penalty.
- 214.** And admonish thy nearest kinsmen,
- 215.** And lower thy wing to the Believers who follow thee.
- 216.** Then if they disobey thee, say: "I am free (of responsibility) for what ye do!"
- 217.** And put thy trust on the Mighty, the Merciful,-
- 218.** Who sees thee standing forth (in prayer),
- 219.** And thy movements among those who prostrate themselves,
- 220.** For it is He Who hears and knows all things.
- 221.** Shall I inform you, (O people!), on whom it is that the evil ones^g descend?
- 222.** They descend on every lying, wicked person,
- 223.** (Into whose ears) they pour hearsay vanities, and most of them are liars.
- 224.** And the Poets,- It is those straying in Evil, who follow them:
- 225.** Seest thou not that they wander distracted in every valley?-
- 226.** And that they say what they practise not?-
- 227.** Except those who believe, work righteousness, engage much in the remembrance of Allah, and defend themselves only after they are unjustly attacked. And soon will the unjust assailants know what vicissitudes their affairs will take!

^f Literally, "satans."

^g Literally, "satans."

Commentary

The Family of Imran

Ibn Taymiyyah and others easily reconcile the two readings of ayah 7 with reference to a teaching of ‘Abdullah bin ‘Abbas, the Prophet’s young cousin and disciple who later become one of the greatest authorities in Qur’anic commentary, traditionally due to the prayer and blessing of the Prophet himself in this regard. Ibn ‘Abbas said that understanding of the Qur’an applies at least four levels:

- 1- Basic knowledge of the teachings of the Qur’an that every Muslim must have, since this relates to the simple foundations of the faith.
- 2- Knowledge that only those versed in Arabic can fathom.
- 3- Understanding that only those firmly-grounded in knowledge can attain, as described in ayah 7, reading (b).
- 4- Knowledge that only God has.

The Poets

On the Arabic vs. non-Arabic issue, a significant clue can be found, as usual, in the basic Arabic words.

The root of the Arabic word for “Arabic” (*‘arab*) means: to wander (hence the Arab nomads), to express eloquently.

The word for “non-Arab” (*‘ajam*) means: a dumb beast.

The idea is that pure Arabic (as opposed to modern, colloquial Arabic!) is the purest and most expressive and eloquent of all human languages, which are elsewhere in the Qur’an described as signs of God in their diversity. Those who do not speak with such eloquence are, as it were, dumb.

The “descending” by devils upon deluded poets is analogous to the “descending” by angels with revelation and with God’s commands to carry out. These verses were thus quoted by the Prophet’s companions to describe some of the early false prophets who claimed to receive revelations, and Muslims have continued to respond to such claimants until today: “Yes, you are receiving revelations – from the Devil!”

Ayah 225 has obvious literal and metaphorical meanings.