



DCA ACADEMIC BRIEF

AB-2024-04

What the Qur'an Is—and What It Is Not

Divine Revelation, Human Understanding,
and the Guiding Purpose of the Qur'an

AUTHOR

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Fatih Kanca

AFFILIATION

Faculty of Islamic Studies, Ankara Yıldırım
Beyazıt University
Counselor for Social and Religious Services,
Embassy of the Republic of Türkiye in Washington,
D.C.

BASED ON

“What the Qur'an Is and What It Is Not”



ABOUT THE SERIES

The DCA Academic Brief Series presents concise and accessible summaries of scholarly discussions hosted or supported by the Diyanet Center of America. The series seeks to make academic scholarship available to wider audiences engaged in religious education and community learning.

Executive Summary

The Qur'an occupies a central place in Islamic belief, intellectual thought, worship, ethics, and civilization. For Muslims, it is not simply one religious text among others, nor is it merely a historical record of the emergence of Islam. It is the divine speech revealed by Allah to the Prophet Muḥammad through revelation.

A sound understanding of the Qur'an therefore begins with the question of its nature. Before discussing its interpretation, historical setting, language, legal teachings, moral guidance, or social influence, it is necessary to clarify what kind of text the Qur'an claims to be and how it is understood within the Islamic tradition.

From an ontological perspective, the Qur'an is understood as a manifestation of Allah's attribute of speech. Its source is transcendent rather than human. It cannot therefore be placed in the same category as literature, philosophy, historical writing, political discourse, or any other form of human composition.

From an epistemological perspective, the Qur'an is a source of knowledge and guidance concerning the Creator, the human being, the universe, moral responsibility, and the purpose of life. Human reason, sensory perception, and transmitted knowledge all have important roles in Islamic thought. Revelation, however, provides knowledge concerning realities that cannot be established through reason or empirical observation alone.

The Qur'an is divine in both wording and meaning. Gabriel did not compose it, and the Prophet Muḥammad did not author it. Gabriel conveyed the revelation, while the Prophet received, recited, taught, explained, and embodied it.

The Qur'an is also both an oral address and a written scripture. It was first heard, recited, memorized, and proclaimed within the living circumstances of the first Muslim community. At the same time, it was recorded in writing, compiled, transmitted, and preserved as the Muṣḥaf.

Understanding what the Qur'an is also requires understanding what it is not. According to its own declarations and the Islamic scholarly tradition, the Qur'an is not poetry, the speech of a soothsayer, satanic inspiration, mythology, or the personal reflections of the Prophet Muḥammad. Nor should it be reduced to a book of law, science, history, or moral instruction alone. It addresses all of these areas, but its essential purpose is broader: to guide human beings toward faith, truth, moral responsibility, and a meaningful relationship with Allah, themselves, society, and creation.

For religious educators and Muslim communities, this understanding carries an important educational implication. Engagement with the Qur'an should not be limited to correct recitation, memorization, ceremonial reading, or isolated quotation. These practices retain their value, but they should be accompanied by understanding, reflection, moral formation, and responsible application.

KEY POINTS

- The Qur'an is understood in Islam as divine revelation and the speech of Allah.
- Its authority and guiding function are grounded in its divine origin.
- It is both recited revelation and preserved scripture.
- It cannot be reduced to literature, history, law, culture, science, or moral advice alone.
- Religious engagement with the Qur'an joins recitation with understanding, reflection, and moral responsibility.

CENTRAL QUESTION

What is the Qur'an according to Islamic belief?

CORE ARGUMENT

The Qur'an is divine revelation in both wording and meaning.

MAIN CONTRIBUTION

The study distinguishes the Qur'an's essential nature from reductionist interpretations.

PRIMARY AUDIENCE

Religious educators, students of Islamic studies, and interested readers.

2. Why the Nature of the Qur'an Matters

Discussions about the Qur'an often begin with questions about individual verses, legal rulings, historical events, scientific references, or contemporary social issues. These questions are important, but they cannot be addressed adequately without first establishing the Qur'an's status within Islam.

KEY INSIGHT

The way the Qur'an is defined shapes the way it is read.

If it is regarded primarily as a historical document, its teachings may be understood as expressions of a particular society and period. If it is regarded mainly as a legal text, its ethical, spiritual, and existential dimensions may be overlooked. If it is treated only as a devotional object, its call to knowledge, reflection, justice, and responsible action may be neglected.

The study “What the Qur’an Is and What It Is Not” therefore begins from a foundational premise: the Qur’an’s ontological and epistemological status must be clarified before its content and function can be understood properly.

The Qur’an’s ontological status concerns what it is and where it originates. Islamic belief identifies it as the speech of Allah revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad. Its epistemological status concerns its place as a source of knowledge. The Qur’an presents itself as guidance concerning realities that include, but also exceed, the limits of ordinary human experience.

These two dimensions are inseparable. The Qur’an possesses religious authority because it is understood to have a divine source. Its role as guidance is grounded in its status as revelation.

3. Revelation as the Foundation of the Qur’an

The Meaning of Revelation

The Arabic term *wahy*, generally translated as revelation, carries the meanings of communicating swiftly and secretly, conveying a message, signaling, and inspiring.

In Islamic terminology, revelation refers to Allah’s communication of divine truths and guidance to those whom He has chosen as prophets through a mode distinct from ordinary human learning.

Revelation is therefore not the result of philosophical reasoning, artistic creativity, psychological experience, or empirical investigation. It is a form of communication originating from Allah and directed to His chosen messengers.

The Qur’an presents Allah as the source of revelation, the prophets as its recipients, Gabriel as its principal angelic messenger, and humanity as the wider audience of the divine message.

KEY INSIGHT

Its ultimate purpose is guidance.

The Wider Qur’anic Use of Revelation

The Qur’an uses the concept of revelation in more than one context. It refers not only to the revelation given to prophets but also to forms of divine communication directed to angels, the mother of Moses, the heavens and the earth, and even the bee acting according to its created nature.

The Qur’an also uses related forms of communication in reference to gestures, inspiration, and whispering.

This broad semantic range should not obscure the distinctive status of prophetic revelation. Prophetic revelation communicates authoritative divine guidance to humanity through chosen messengers. It therefore differs from instinct, inspiration, intuition, and other forms of internal experience.

Revelation and Human Reason

Islamic thought does not require a rejection of reason in order to affirm revelation. The Qur'an repeatedly invites human beings to observe, reflect, compare, remember, and understand.

Reason can recognize order in the universe, consider the signs of creation, distinguish many moral values, and reach an awareness of the Creator. Sensory perception and reliable reports also contribute to human knowledge.

Yet human reason remains limited.

It cannot independently determine all matters concerning the unseen, the nature of the Hereafter, the full purpose of creation, the exact forms of worship, or the complete requirements of servitude to Allah.

Revelation does not eliminate reason. It guides it, corrects it, and provides knowledge in matters that reason cannot establish by itself.

4. What the Qur'an Is

The Qur'an Is Divine Speech

According to Islamic belief, the Qur'an is the speech of Allah revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad.

This is the most fundamental feature of its identity.

The Qur'an is not considered divine simply because Muslims admire it, recite it, or find spiritual meaning in it. Its sacred and authoritative character arises from its origin. It is understood as Allah's address to humanity.

For this reason, the Qur'an cannot be classified in the same way as texts produced through human experience. Human works emerge through the knowledge, limitations, historical circumstances, intentions, and creativity of their authors. The Qur'an, by contrast, is understood to originate in divine revelation.

Its linguistic form reached humanity in Arabic, but its source is not the Arabic literary environment in which it first appeared. Its first audience encountered it within seventh-century Arabia, but it does not identify itself as the product of that society.

Historical context is important for understanding many passages. It is not, however, the source of the Qur'an's existence or authority.

The Qur'an Is Revealed in Both Wording and Meaning

The majority position within the Islamic scholarly tradition holds that the Qur'an was revealed in both its wording and meaning.

This means that the Prophet Muḥammad did not receive only general ideas that he later expressed in his own language. Nor did Gabriel produce the Arabic wording independently.

Gabriel conveyed the revelation entrusted to him. The Prophet received and communicated it faithfully.

The distinction between source and messenger is essential. A messenger may recite or transmit a message, but this does not make the messenger its author.

- The Qur'an's descriptions of revelation emphasize that it originates from the Lord of the worlds and is brought by the Trustworthy Spirit to the heart of the Prophet. The Prophet's role is therefore one of reception, proclamation, explanation, and embodiment rather than authorship.

The Qur'an Is the Final Divine Scripture

- The Qur'an identifies itself as part of the wider history of revelation. It confirms the principle that Allah guided earlier communities through prophets and scriptures.
- At the same time, it presents itself as the final divine revelation sent to the Prophet Muḥammad.
- It was revealed gradually over approximately twenty-three years. This gradual process allowed the revelation to engage directly with the life of the first Muslim community.
- Its teachings were not delivered as an abstract collection separated from human experience. They accompanied the formation of faith, worship, moral character, family life, communal responsibility, and social order.

Gradual revelation also supported memorization, understanding, implementation, and spiritual formation. It strengthened the Prophet and the believers during changing circumstances and allowed the divine message to be received within the realities of individual and communal life.

The historical circumstances of revelation therefore help explain how particular passages were first heard and applied. They do not, by themselves, confine the Qur'an's guidance to the first generation of Muslims.

The Qur'an Is Preserved and Transmitted

The preservation of the Qur'an is among the defining elements of its identity in Islamic belief and scholarship.

Its preservation began during the lifetime of the Prophet. The revelation was memorized, recited, taught, and recorded in writing. The combination of oral and written transmission played an important role from the earliest period.

After the Prophet's death, written materials were collected during the caliphate of Abū Bakr. During the caliphate of 'Uthmān, standardized copies of the Muṣḥaf were prepared and sent to major Muslim centers in order to maintain unity in written transmission and prevent disputes.

The Qur'an was therefore transmitted through a combination of communal memorization, public recitation, written preservation, and mass transmission.

Its preservation should not be understood as a purely physical process involving manuscripts alone. The Qur'an has also been preserved through continuous worship, education, memorization, teaching, and recitation across generations.

The Qur'an Is Both Recitation and Scripture

The word "Qur'an" itself is closely associated with recitation.

The revelation was first encountered as something heard and proclaimed. The Prophet recited it to his companions, and they memorized, repeated, and transmitted it.

The Qur'an also describes itself as a kitāb, or book. This does not mean that it first appeared as a completed physical volume. Rather, its character as scripture was present within the revelatory process itself.

The Qur'an is therefore both oral and written:

It is recited and heard.

It is memorized and transmitted.

- It is written and preserved.
- It addresses individuals and communities.
- It exists as the text of the Muşhaf.
- It functions as a living divine address in worship and religious life.
- Reducing the Qur'an either to sound without meaning or to a written object without recitation fails to capture this relationship.

The Qur'an Is a Source of Knowledge

- The Qur'an guides human understanding of Allah, the human person, the universe, moral responsibility, and the purpose of existence.
- It offers knowledge concerning metaphysical realities that cannot be established through sensory observation alone. It also provides principles through which human beings can understand their responsibilities in this world.

Its epistemic role is not limited to the transmission of information. The Qur'an shapes the way human beings know, evaluate, judge, and act.

It calls attention to the signs of creation, the lessons of history, the consequences of moral choices, and the relationship between knowledge and responsibility.

In this sense, the Qur'an is not merely a source from which statements are extracted. It forms an intellectual and moral orientation.

The Qur'an Is Guidance

The Qur'an repeatedly identifies guidance as one of its central purposes.

Its concern is not simply to describe the world but to direct human beings toward a truthful and morally responsible way of living.

Its guidance includes:

Faith in Allah and recognition of divine unity,

Awareness of human dependence and responsibility,

Worship and spiritual discipline,

Justice and protection of rights,

Mercy and compassion,

Honesty and trustworthiness,

Responsibility toward family and society,

Reflection on creation,

Preparation for accountability in the Hereafter.

These themes are not isolated from one another. The Qur'an connects belief with action, worship with character, knowledge with responsibility, and individual conduct with communal life.

The Qur'an Is a Universal Address

The Qur'an was revealed in Arabic and first addressed people living within a particular historical and social setting. Yet it presents its message as guidance extending beyond that first setting.

Its universal character does not mean that every passage can be separated from language, context, or interpretation. Nor does it mean that historical circumstances are irrelevant.

Rather, universality refers to the continuing significance of the Qur'an's central message and moral principles.

5. What the Qur'an Is Not

Clarifying what the Qur'an is not protects its nature from interpretations that reduce it to familiar human categories.

The Qur'an Is Not Poetry

The Qur'an possesses rhythm, eloquence, powerful imagery, and a distinctive literary form. These qualities contributed to its profound effect on its first listeners.

Yet the Qur'an rejects the claim that it is poetry and rejects the description of the Prophet as a poet.

Poetry is a form of human expression produced through imagination, language, and artistic skill. The Qur'an, while linguistically powerful, identifies its source as revelation.

Calling the Qur'an poetry therefore does more than describe its style. It changes its claimed source from divine revelation to human composition.

The Qur'an's linguistic excellence should be recognized without treating literary beauty as an explanation of its origin.

The Qur'an Is Not the Speech of a Soothsayer

The Prophet Muḥammad's opponents also attempted to describe him as a soothsayer.

The Qur'an rejects this description.

A soothsayer claims access to hidden information through uncertain, obscure, or deceptive means. The Qur'an, by contrast, presents its knowledge of the unseen as revelation from Allah.

Its references to the unseen are connected to faith, responsibility, judgment, and guidance. They are not presented as entertainment, speculation, or prediction for personal gain.

The Qur'an Is Not Satanic Inspiration

Another claim rejected by the Qur'an is that its message was produced or conveyed by devils.

The content and purpose of the Qur'an contradict this accusation. It calls human beings away from arrogance, injustice, corruption, dishonesty, and the worship of false powers. It directs them toward Allah, repentance, moral discipline, mercy, and accountability.

The Qur'an also presents revelation as protected from satanic interference.

Its source, purpose, and moral direction are therefore entirely different from satanic whispering or deception.

The Qur'an Is Not the Personal Composition of the Prophet Muḥammad

Islamic belief does not regard the Prophet Muḥammad as the author of the Qur'an.

He is its recipient and messenger.

This distinction is supported by the nature of the Qur'anic discourse itself. The Qur'an frequently addresses the Prophet, instructs him, comforts him, and, in certain circumstances, corrects his judgment or conduct.

Such passages are difficult to explain as the deliberate self-expression of an author presenting his own ideas as revelation.

The Prophet's responsibility was to receive the revelation faithfully, communicate it without alteration, explain its teachings, and demonstrate them in his life.

His Sunnah is indispensable for understanding and applying the Qur'an, but his role as interpreter and exemplar does not make him the source of the revelation.

The Qur'an Is Not Merely a Historical Product

The Qur'an entered history. It was revealed in a particular language, to a particular prophet, among a particular people, and in response to real circumstances.

For this reason, historical study can assist readers in understanding its vocabulary, audience, events, and modes of address.

However, saying that the Qur'an has a historical context is not the same as saying that it is merely a historical product.

The first statement concerns the circumstances in which revelation was received. The second makes those circumstances the ultimate source of the text.

From the Islamic perspective, the Qur'an engages history without being generated by history. It speaks within human circumstances while originating from divine revelation.

The Qur'an Is Not Merely a Cultural Heritage

The Qur'an has undeniably shaped languages, literature, art, architecture, education, law, ethics, and social institutions across Muslim societies.

It is therefore a major source of cultural and civilizational heritage.

Yet describing it only as heritage can obscure its continuing status as revelation.

Heritage is often understood as something inherited from the past and preserved because of its historical value. Muslims do not relate to the Qur'an only as an artifact of their ancestors. They continue to recite it in worship, seek guidance from it, memorize it, interpret it, and organize religious life around it.

Its civilizational influence is a consequence of its religious status, not a substitute for it.

The Qur'an Is Not Merely a Book of Law

The Qur'an contains commandments, prohibitions, legal principles, and guidance for individual and communal life.

Islamic law cannot be understood without the Qur'an.

Nevertheless, the Qur'an is not a legal code in the modern technical sense, nor is every part of it concerned with formal legal rules.

Large portions of the Qur'an address faith, worship, moral character, stories of prophets, creation, human psychology, accountability, mercy, repentance, and the Hereafter.

Reducing the Qur'an to legal rulings can separate law from the moral and spiritual purposes that give it meaning.

The Qur'an does not seek merely to regulate external conduct. It seeks to form people who recognize Allah, act justly, control their desires, fulfill their trusts, and understand the moral significance of their actions.

The Qur'an Is Not Merely a Book of Science

The Qur'an repeatedly directs human attention to the heavens, the earth, living beings, human creation, natural processes, and the order of the universe.

These verses encourage observation, reflection, and recognition of divine wisdom.

However, the Qur'an is not a textbook of physics, biology, astronomy, or medicine. Its purpose is not to present technical scientific theories or replace empirical investigation.

Two reductionist approaches should therefore be avoided.

The first treats the Qur'an as having no meaningful relationship with reflection on the natural world. The second attempts to identify every modern scientific theory as a hidden scientific statement in the Qur'an.

The Qur'an's references to nature primarily direct the human being toward reflection, gratitude, humility, knowledge, and recognition of the Creator.

Scientific inquiry and Qur'anic reflection can enter into a meaningful relationship, but they do not serve identical purposes.

The Qur'an Is Not Merely a Book of History

The Qur'an recounts events involving earlier prophets, communities, rulers, believers, and opponents of revelation.

These accounts contain historical elements, but the Qur'an does not present them as a continuous chronological history.

Its narratives are selective and purposeful. They teach moral lessons, reveal patterns of human behavior, strengthen believers, warn against injustice and arrogance, and demonstrate the consequences of accepting or rejecting divine guidance.

The repetition of certain narratives in different contexts also reflects this educational purpose. Different elements of a story may be emphasized according to the message of a particular passage.

The Qur'an therefore uses history as guidance rather than recording history for its own sake.

The Qur'an Is Not Merely a Book of Moral Advice

Moral guidance is central to the Qur'an, but it is not offered as a collection of general ethical sayings detached from belief.

Qur'anic morality is grounded in the relationship between the human being and Allah.

Justice, mercy, honesty, patience, generosity, and responsibility are connected to worship, accountability, and the purpose of creation.

The Qur'an's moral teachings therefore cannot be separated entirely from its theological foundations.

It does not simply recommend good behavior. It explains why moral responsibility exists, before whom human beings are accountable, and how action relates to the life of this world and the Hereafter.

The Qur'an Is Not Only for Ceremonial Recitation

Reciting the Qur'an is an act of worship, and correct recitation has a central place in Muslim religious life.

Memorization, recitation, and listening are among the most enduring forms of Muslim engagement with revelation.

Yet the Qur'an was not revealed only to be recited in ceremonies, funerals, commemorations, or special gatherings.

It calls upon its audience to listen, reflect, understand, remember, and act.

Recitation should therefore open the way to reflection rather than replace it. Memorization should preserve and deepen the relationship with revelation rather than reduce it to verbal repetition.

The sound of the Qur'an, its meaning, its guidance, and its moral demands belong together.

6. Reading the Qur'an as a Whole

One of the difficulties in contemporary discussions is the use of individual verses without reference to their immediate context or to the Qur'an's wider teachings.

The Qur'an was revealed gradually, and its passages address different circumstances, audiences, questions, and stages of communal development.

Responsible reading therefore requires attention to several dimensions:

Language

The Qur'an was revealed in Arabic. Translation makes its meanings accessible to wider audiences, but a translation remains an interpretation of the Arabic text rather than an identical replacement for it.

Immediate Context

The verses surrounding a passage help establish its subject, audience, and direction.

Circumstances of Revelation

Reports concerning the occasions of revelation may clarify why a passage was revealed and how it was first understood.

Qur'anic Coherence

A verse should be read in relation to other passages addressing the same subject. One passage may state a principle, while another explains its conditions, limits, or application.

Prophetic Explanation

The Prophet's teachings and practice provide an essential framework for understanding how the Qur'an was interpreted and embodied in the first Muslim community.

Scholarly Tradition

The accumulated work of scholars in language, theology, law, hadith, recitation, and exegesis offers necessary tools for responsible understanding.

Reading the Qur'an as a whole does not eliminate legitimate differences of interpretation. It provides a disciplined framework within which those differences can be considered.

7. Contemporary Relevance

WHY THIS MATTERS TODAY

Contemporary discussions often approach the Qur'an through a single disciplinary category, treating it primarily as literature, history, law, culture, or a source of scientific claims. The study examined in this brief demonstrates the limitations of such reductionist approaches. While each of these fields may illuminate particular dimensions of the Qur'an, none of them independently accounts for its identity within Islamic belief as divine revelation and guidance.

This distinction remains especially important in educational and academic settings in which theological, historical, and literary approaches may overlap. A clear account of the Qur'an's status within Islam can help readers distinguish between examining one dimension of the text and reducing the entirety of the Qur'an to that dimension.

8. Implications for Religious Education and Community Learning

The study does not present a detailed institutional program. It does, however, highlight several considerations relevant to the teaching and study of the Qur'an.

Foundational Understanding of Revelation

Qur'anic education benefits from a clear explanation of revelation. Learners should understand why Muslims regard the Qur'an as divine speech, how prophetic revelation differs from ordinary inspiration,

and how the roles of Allah, Gabriel, and the Prophet Muḥammad are distinguished within the process of revelation.

Connecting Recitation and Understanding

Recitation and memorization hold an essential place in Muslim religious life. The Qur'an's guiding purpose, however, also calls for attention to meaning, reflection, and moral responsibility. These dimensions should be understood as complementary rather than competing forms of engagement.

Avoiding Reductionist Readings

Literary, historical, legal, and linguistic approaches can contribute to the study of the Qur'an. Educational settings should nevertheless distinguish between examining a particular dimension of the Qur'an and defining the Qur'an exclusively through that dimension.

Addressing Questions with Scholarly Care

Questions concerning revelation, preservation, authorship, language, history, and interpretation should be addressed through reliable sources and appropriate scholarly methods. Oversimplified answers may obscure the complexity of the subject, while dismissing questions may prevent meaningful learning.

9. Conclusion

A proper understanding of the Qur'an requires clarity concerning both what it is and what it is not.

According to Islamic belief, the Qur'an is the speech of Allah revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad through Gabriel. It is divine in wording and meaning, preserved through oral and written transmission, and communicated to humanity as guidance.

The Qur'an is not poetry, soothsaying, satanic suggestion, mythology, or the personal composition of the Prophet. Nor is it adequately defined as a historical document, cultural artifact, legal code, scientific textbook, historical chronicle, or collection of moral sayings.

It contains literary excellence without being poetry. It refers to history without being merely a history book. It establishes legal principles without being only a legal code. It draws attention to nature without functioning as a scientific textbook. It teaches morality while grounding moral responsibility in faith, worship, and accountability before Allah.

Its wording and meaning, recitation and understanding, historical context and enduring guidance, knowledge and moral responsibility must be considered together.

For religious education and community learning, this means that the Qur'an should be taught not merely as a text to be pronounced correctly, memorized, or quoted, but as divine guidance to be heard, understood, reflected upon, and embodied.

Such an approach preserves the traditional Islamic understanding of the Qur'an while enabling Muslims to engage thoughtfully with the intellectual, educational, and social questions of contemporary life.

About the Author

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Fatih Kanca is a faculty member in Islamic Studies at Ankara Yıldırım Beyazıt University and serves as Counselor for Social and Religious Services at the Embassy of the Republic of Türkiye in Washington, D.C.

Source Study



PRIMARY SOURCE

Fatih Kanca, “What the Qur’an Is and What It Is Not.”

This academic brief is an accessible presentation of the principal themes and arguments developed in the source study. It does not replace the full scholarly text or its detailed references.

Editorial Note

This brief is intended for educational use. It summarizes a scholarly discussion without presenting the Diyanet Center of America as a policy institute, think tank, or body issuing binding academic judgments.

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