

Insight into the Qur'an

(This is a review of an important new book: *The Critical Quran*, by Robert Spencer. The the material below comes from a review by Danusha Goska and was found at the website Frontpagemag.com on 2/21/22. I have deleted some paragraphs to keep it under four pages. I did some underlining for emphasis.)

While it is true that the Qur'an is often not read or understood by most Muslims, Muslims do revere the Qur'an. Muslims may have little idea what the book contains, but they are ready to kill over it. When, in 2005, *Newsweek* circulated false rumors that Americans were flushing Qur'ans down toilets – which is of course impossible – at least seventeen people were killed in ensuing violence and *a council of more than 300 mullahs ...threatened to declare holy war*.

In the past, reading the Qur'an was difficult. Some translations used pseudo-King-James English, for example archaic forms like *thee, thou, thine*, in an attempt to make the Qur'an sound Biblical, and, therefore, holy. Some translations attempt to paper over the Qur'an's lack of clarity by adding parenthetical fixes. For example, Qur'an 2:1 begins *Alif Lam Meem*. No one knows what this means. One translation tries to *help* the reader with a parenthetical explanation: *Alif-Lam-Mim*. [These letters are one of the miracles of the Quran and none but Allah (Alone) knows their meanings]. The reader is left to wonder how the incoherent equals the miraculous. Translators try to draw a smiley face over darker Qur'anic passages. *Jihad*, which clearly means actual warfare to claim territory, booty, corpses, and slaves for Allah, is translated as *struggle*. Spencer's new translation avoids these pitfalls, and, on the sentence level, it is easy to read.

The Qur'an contains c. 77,430 words, making it less than one tenth the length of the Bible. Islam teaches that the Qur'an was never written by anyone. It is uncreated. Like God himself, the Qur'an has always existed and will always exist. There are numerous rules for handling the Qur'an. *Kufar* – Non-Muslims – should never touch the Qur'an in Arabic, but may touch *interpretations* in other languages. One must say *interpretation* because the Qur'an exists only in Arabic, the language of Allah. Muslims must perform ablutions before reading the Qur'an. The Qur'an must be stored in a specially designated place, and never be put on the floor or taken into a bathroom.

To say that the Qur'an was created, as opposed to eternally existing, is a death penalty offense. Even Western scholars have hesitated to explore the Qur'an's origins. For example, scholar Christoph Luxenberg must hide behind a pseudonym to protect his life. The Qur'an *leaves no room for dispute*; see also Qur'an 33:36. Indeed, the Qur'an suggests that even a second of doubt will lead to an eternity in hell (e.g. 49:15). Thus, rather than debating or discussing the meaning of the Qur'an, Islam places emphasis on memorization. A Muslim once said to Robert Spencer that he had memorized the entire Qur'an, and one day he was going to find out what it says. The hafiz, or Qur'an memorizer, did not speak Arabic, and had no idea of the meaning of the sounds he had memorized.

Mohammed Hijab, an Islamic apologist, demonstrated Muslim beliefs about the magic powers of the Qur'an in a November 10, 2021, YouTube discussion with Dr. Jordan Peterson. Hijab began to recite in Arabic, in the voice prescribed for reading the Qur'an. That prescribed voice is a singsong, nasal drone, with drawn out vowels. Peterson asked what Hijab's point was. Why recite Arabic to me, a non-Arabic speaker? Hijab said, *We believe that the Qur'an has divine qualities itself. We believe it is a physical cure.* Just exposing Peterson to the sounds of the Qur'an might cause Peterson to convert to Islam. Ibn Kathir, an important exegete, claimed that recitation of Sura 2 causes Satan to fart. It can be argued that Islam treats the Qur'an as if it were a divine, conscious agent.

Muslim history claims that Islam was founded by an orphaned, illiterate, seventh-century Meccan caravan driver named Muhammad who was visited by the angel Jibril (from the Biblical Gabriel) who ordered him to recite. Muhammad's followers wrote down his recitations and compiled them into the Qur'an. Textual criticism suggests that the Qur'an is a compilation of heavily edited, pre-existing material. Recent scholarship theorizes that, during the Arab Conquest, conquerors decided that their new, Arab empire, no less than the Christian Byzantine and Zoroastrian Persian empires, required a state religion. These Arab conquerors took bits and pieces of Jewish, Christian, Zoroastrian and Pagan material and compiled them into the Qur'an.

Christianity's early centuries were rocked by Christological debates. These debates asked, *What was the nature of Jesus?* Some said Jesus was human; others said he was divine; still others argued that Jesus was some combination of human and divine. Jesus' proposed divinity troubled many. They understood the divinity of Jesus as an assault on Judaism's monotheism. Some were offended by Jesus's divinity for a different reason. If Jesus was both fully divine and fully human, then God urinated and defecated. These bodily functions were seen as beneath a divinity.

Islam's emphasis on Jesus being merely a man, not a divinity, may testify to the influence of nontrinitarian Christianity on the formulation of Islam. The *shahada* is the Islamic confession of faith. *There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is the messenger of God.* Merely stating the shahada makes one a Muslim, yet it may be a buried statement of nontrinitarian Christian creeds. *There is not God but Allah* is a rejection of Jesus' divinity and the trinity. According to new theories, Muhammad is the messenger of God may be a reference to Jesus. *Muhammad* is translated as *the praised one* and *the messenger of God* is a denial of Jesus' divinity. *The*

praised one was but a messenger, not God himself. The nontrinitarian Christians' discomfort at the thought of God urinating or defecating is reflected in al-Wahidi's commentary on the Qur'an. *Our Lord does not eat or drink nor has He any need to relieve Himself but Jesus was fed like any other child, and then he ate and drank and relieved himself ... Then how could he be the son of Allah?*

The Old Testament recounts the history of the creation of the world and God's choosing the Jewish people as his own, and leading them out of slavery in Egypt. The New Testament offers Jesus' biography, a short history of the early church, and the letters of early Christians. No clear history of what is conventionally thought of as the early days of Islam is to be found in the Qur'an itself. There's no caravan driver, no Mecca, no new religious revelation, and *the word Muhammad is mentioned only four times*, and it is not clear that the word refers to a person or if it means, only, *praised one*. Many argue that early references to Muhammad may in fact be references to Jesus.

Muslims express exaggerated praise for the Qur'an. For example, Ibn Kathir said, *The Arabic language is the most eloquent, plain, deep and expressive of the meanings that might arise in one's mind. Therefore, the most honorable Book, was revealed in the most honorable language, to the most honorable Prophet and Messenger, delivered by the most honorable angel, in the most honorable land on earth, and its revelation started during the most honorable month of the year, Ramadan. Therefore, the Qur'an is perfect in every respect.*

In fact, though, the Qur'an is possibly the world's worst-written influential book.

What's wrong with the Qur'an? The Qur'an uses pronouns like *he*, *we*, and *they*, but the Qur'an offers few clues as to whom is meant by these pronouns. The Qur'an hops from topic to topic, not just paragraph by paragraph, but within the same sentence, for example in 4:29: *Do not squander your wealth among yourselves in vanity, except in a trade by mutual consent, and do not kill yourselves.* After telling men that they are superior to women and that men should beat their wives (4:34), the Qur'an offers, in 4:36, a sentence fragment, that is a sentence with a subject but no verb. *Kindness to parents.* Other translators rescue this fragment by adding the missing verb, e.g., *Show kindness to parents* or *Do good to parents.* Spencer makes so such rescue effort. Qur'an 6:143 is a similar sentence fragment. It reads, *Eight pairs two of the sheep and two of the goats.* There is no verb, and, therefore, no sense. Another sentence fragment, this one also missing a verb: *Those who chose unbelievers for their friends instead of believers.* Another fragment, 74:30, reads *Above it are nineteen.* Above what are nineteen what, exactly? There are more than a few verses that leave the reader scratching her head, e.g., *Would one of you love to eat the flesh of his dead brother?* 49:12, *We used to wade with waders* 74:45, and *Color from Allah, and who is better than Allah at coloring?* 2:138.

Scholar Gerd Puin estimates that twenty percent of the Qur'an is unclear to anyone. The Qur'an acknowledges its own lack of clarity in 3:7, in which Allah states that he alone knows the meaning of some verses. Which verses? He never says. Readers can only guess which verses they are understanding correctly and which verses whose meaning is beyond their grasp.

The books of the Bible are arranged more or less chronologically, with some thematic arrangement, and events in those books are also arranged chronologically. For example in Luke's Gospel, Jesus is first born, then he preaches and heals, then he is crucified, then he rises from the dead. The Qur'an is not arranged chronologically. With the exception of the very short first chapter, the Qur'an's chapters are arranged from longest to shortest. This bizarre choice confounds the reader seeking coherence. Given that chapter length appears entirely arbitrary – the chapters contain more or less the same material, repeated endlessly – why some chapters are long and others are short escapes the reader. Chapter titles do not relate to the theme of the chapter. One of the Qur'an's most notorious verses, *Kill them wherever you find them* is found in the chapter entitled *Women*. In any case, the phrase is repeated three times in the Qur'an. Sura 9, perhaps the most bloodthirsty chapter, is titled *Repentance*.

That a Qur'an chapter is titled *Women* should not mislead the reader. Women are afterthoughts; they exist as the possessions of men. They appear as child brides, as sex slaves, as Heavenly whores, and as war captives. In verse 43 of *Women*, females are identified as a source of pollution. Men should not pray if they have been sick, if they have urinated or defecated, or if they have had contact with a woman. After such contamination, men must cleanse themselves, possibly by rubbing their face and hands with dirt (a practice called *Tayammum*). Women are inferior to men (2:282, 2:228, 4:34, 4:11). The Qur'an instructs men on how to handle divorce from pre-pubescent wives with whom they have had sexual intercourse. Females are a *field* that men should enter however they wish. There are dozens of named male characters, but only one named female character: Mary.

The Qur'an chapter entitled *Mary* is, as is the case with other chapter titles, not closely related to Mary. In a commentary on this chapter, Mary is given voice to mourn that she is not an owned slave woman – she is unfortunate because she is not some man's property. The Qur'an confuses Mary, mother of Jesus, with Miriam, sister of Moses, who lived over a thousand years before Jesus' mother. The Qur'an tells Mary, *Do not grieve. Your lord has placed a stream beneath you.* It's not clear how this stream placement should cheer Mary up.

Spencer's footnotes show, the Qur'an includes repetitive, garbled fragments – not coherent retellings – of Jewish and Christian scriptural and folkloric material, and Zoroastrian and Pagan elements. The Qur'an offers repeated, fragmented mentions of the Exodus story from the Bible, and extra-biblical material like a folktale of Jesus making clay birds fly. A sixth-century Christian

legend, The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus, tells of seven men who retreated to a cave during Roman persecution. The men awoke two hundred years later and were surprised to find that Christianity was now the empire's official religion. The Qur'an's telling of this tale, found in 18:9-26, is so thoroughly garbled that a reader with no previous knowledge of the Christian source would not have any idea what these verses allude to. Don Richardson, author of *Secrets of the Koran*, estimates that if all repetitions were removed, the Qur'an would be forty percent of its current size.

Qur'an 4:157 states that Jesus did not die on the cross. Muslims believe that Allah placed either a dummy or a Jesus lookalike on the cross. Spencer's footnotes identify this belief as an appropriation from a third century Gnostic text, *Second Treatise of the Great Seth*. Gnostics were nontrinitarian Christians. As Spencer writes, they held an *abhorrence of the material world and the flesh, which led to their denying altogether the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation.* Jesus was too supernatural to suffer death on the cross.

Ex-Muslim Ridvan Aydemir insists that Qur'an 4:157 deals a devastating blow to the Qur'an's integrity. Aydemir argues that, yes, the Gnostics had a reason, that was consistent with their own belief system, to tell a story in which Jesus did not die on the cross. Those compiling the Qur'an borrowed that passage from a Gnostic document, but could not borrow the logic behind the passage. The Jesus of the Qur'an is not, as was the Gnostic Jesus, a supernatural creature, too rarefied to be crucified. The Jesus of the Qur'an is simply a human being, comparable to any other mortal. Aydemir quotes Qur'an passages that mention other prophets being killed; similarly, Jesus, a mere prophet, could have been killed. The Qur'an's logic, that prophets are killed and that Jesus is merely a prophet, as human as anyone else, does not support Jesus' not being killed on the cross. Aydemir points out that the Qur'an borrows other belief system's narratives without borrowing the logic informing those narratives.

The Qur'an has a limited number of themes that it hits upon with a thudding monotony. Those themes include the following. Allah is all powerful. Allah saves and damns arbitrarily. Allah created some people just to send them to hell fire. Muslims must not pray for these damned souls or feel sad for them. Compare this to the Bible, which records that God wants all to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4, 2 Peter 3:9, Ezekiel 18:23) If Muslims don't please Allah, Allah can kill them all and create a new group of people who will please him. In a footnote, Spencer points out that Allah says that he *loves* only those who fight for him in jihad, and he does not love unbelievers. Allah has a very thin skin and grouses about humans who *mock* and *ridicule* his *warners*. Allah promises sadistic tortures to scoffers. He will burn off their skins and replace those skins with new skins so that they can be burned off again *so that they may taste the torment* 4:56 He will turn white faces black. Kufar in Hell will consume boiling water, pus, and a fruit made of devils' heads. This fruit will boil in their bellies. *As for those who disbelieve, garments of fire will be cut out for them, boiling fluid will be poured down on their heads, By which what is in their bellies, and their skins too, will be melted, And for them are hooked rods of iron* (22:19-21). The Qur'an's narrator says that those who disagree with him should hang themselves (22:15). Allah promises an afterlife of pleasant gardens, fruits, and silk clothing to Muslim men. Heavenly beings with large, firm *–not sagging –* breasts will service Muslim men.

The Qur'an is ferociously hostile to non-Muslims. The Qur'an directs special fury at Christians and Jews. The very first chapter condemns Jews as having angered God, and Christians as having gone astray. Muslims who pray the full allotment of daily prayers repeat this condemnation of Christians and Jews seventeen times daily. Muslims are as superior to Christians and Jews as human beings are to animals (3:110, 98:6). Jews are so irredeemable that Allah turned them into apes and pigs. In 2:54, Moses tells sinning Jews to kill themselves; Ibn Kathir, a commentator, reports that 70,000 Jews lost their lives as a result of Moses' suicide command.

The Qur'an repeatedly emphasizes that one must not worship anyone but Allah. This point is hammered home in various ways. Don't assign a partner to Allah. Don't pray to anyone but Allah. Don't imply that Allah needs *helpers*. All of these phrasings have one target: Christians, and their belief in the Trinity. The Qur'an misunderstands the Trinity, suggesting that Christians worship God the Father, Jesus, and Mary. This is not the Trinity. The Qur'an also drastically misunderstands the purpose of the incarnation. To say that Allah has a son is a monstrous thing (19:89) because to do so is to imply that Allah has some weakness or need and his son is a *helper*. The incarnation of God as a human being was not so that Allah would have a *helper*. Rather, the purpose of the incarnation is expressed succinctly in John 3:16, *For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*

No other world scripture is so obsessed with condemnation of two other belief systems, in this case, Judaism and Christianity. Without its condemnations of Jews and Christians, the Qur'an would not be a book-length work, but a pamphlet.

Jihad is another main theme of the Qur'an. The Qur'an makes abundantly clear that jihad is warfare for the sake of expanding Islam's worldly power, not an interior struggle to, say, remain on a diet, a message promoted by a 2013 CAIR public relations campaign. The Qur'an says, multiple times, that believers should strike the necks of *kufar*, kill them wherever the Muslims find them, etc. As if these passages were not grisly enough, a Qur'an commentator offers, *Strike them on their foreheads to tear them apart and over the necks to cut them off, and cut off their limbs, hands and feet.* Other commentators are even more bloodthirsty, demanding that Muslims smite the very toes of the *kufar*.

Muslims should suspect even their wives and their children of being traitors to Allah (64:14). *Among your wives and your children*

there are enemies for you, therefore beware of them. Your wealth and your children are only a temptation, while with Allah is an immense reward. Other verses warn the believer against ties with parents and children who are not Muslims (9:23-24). Muslims are warned not to take Jews or Christians as friends (3:118, 5:51). Astute readers will, of course, recognize in these warnings the rules set down by cults, who demand that members sever ties with those not members of the cult.

The Qur'an is as remarkable for what it lacks as for what it contains. The Qur'an does not offer that new, world-changing expression of a timeless, soul-deep truth. There is nothing in the Qur'an that compares to the Jewish Ten Commandments, or tzelem Elohim, a loving God who creates humanity in his own image; or, the Christian Sermon on the Mount

In a 2006 lecture at Regensburg University, Pope Benedict quoted a Byzantine emperor, Manuel II Paleologos. *Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached.* Mohammad himself is said to have said something similar. In hadiths, Mohammad announced that he was *superior* to other prophets because he alone was made *victorious with terror* and the earth's treasures were made lawful to him; in other words, he could violate the most primordial taboos. He could kill, he could steal, and he could rape other men's wives.

Spencer's new *Critical Qur'an* doesn't offer only an accurate and accessible translation. It offers commentary by canonical Islamic experts, including Ibn Kathir, a fourteenth century exegete, and Syed Abul Ala Maududi, a twentieth-century author. Thus, the reader knows not just what the Qur'an says, but how influential Muslims understand it. Spencer's footnotes also draw the reader's attention to variations in the Qur'an. These variations are of a utmost importance, as it is a tenet of Islam that the Qur'an is a perfect, eternal, unchanging and unchanged document that exists in Heaven. Variations in the text give the lie to this tenet.

Spencer's footnotes relate Qur'anic passages to *taqiyya*; to Islam's intellectual stasis; to suicide bombing; to Muslims' resistance to Israel's right to exist; to why it is morally acceptable for Muslim men to harass non-Muslim women; to why it takes four Muslim male witnesses to prove a rape case; and to treatment of *dhimmis*, that is, non-Muslims who live in Muslim states, and who must be economically fleeced and publicly humiliated. As Spencer points out, Qur'an verses, for example 10:94, record that the scriptures of Jews and Christians in the seventh century were authentically divine products. And yet Muslims today insist that Jews and Christians *corrupted* their scriptures. The Qur'an contradicts current Muslim belief about Jewish and Christian scripture. David Wood describes this as the *Islamic Dilemma*.

Spencer's footnotes describe Islamic traditions designed to justify changes in the Qur'an, a book that Islam teaches is perfect, unchanging, and unchangeable. Again, one current theory is that the Qur'an was not written as one document, the product of one man, Muhammad. Rather, many scholars now think that the Qur'an was pieced together from pre-existing materials, materials that were then heavily edited to meet the needs of Arab conquerors. These changes occurred over time. Some early Muslims might have witnessed, and questioned, such changes. Traditions were invented to explain away the changes. For example, Muhammad's child bride Aisha is made to say that sheep ate some Qur'an verses that previously existed but then went missing.

Spencer points out the Qur'an's contradictions. Iblis is identified as a jinn, but, contrarily, as an angel. Sometimes one can intercede for another; sometimes one cannot. In one Qur'anic retelling of Exodus, Pharaoh survives. In another, he drowns. The number of days it took Allah to create the world varies, as does the substance from which Allah created mankind. Muslims insist that the Qur'an contains prescient scientific knowledge. In fact, though, as Spencer points out in a footnote, the Qur'an presents a pre-scientific picture of the earth and the solar system 13:2. For example, the heavens rest on *invisible supports* and the sun sets in a muddy pool, 18:86.

Spencer's footnotes also help bridge the gap between the English translation and the Arabic original, pointing out words of non-Arabic origin and places in the text where the rhyme scheme and other formal features break down, indicating interpolations into a pre-existing source document that was then patched into the Qur'an.

An Islamic website offers attractive quotes from the Qur'an. One of the quotes says *speak to people kindly*, but this appears in the midst of a text that calls non-believers apes, pigs, and the vilest of created beings, describes graphic tortures for them and tells Muslims never to befriend them, not even if they are parents or children. *Remember me; I will remember you*, says one quote. This from an Allah who states repeatedly that if Muslims displease him, he will destroy them utterly and take up a better group of people. *Wives are a garment for you*, says one quote. Yet this book includes instructions on how to divorce a pre-pubescent child; before dumping her, one must make sure that she has not somehow gotten pregnant. *Allah does not burden a soul more than he can bear*, says another quote. This same Allah repeatedly says that he creates people for the specific purpose of sending them to Hell, a Hell he describes with fiendish enthusiasm. *The life of this world is only the enjoyment of deception.* And yet Paradise is utterly earthbound. It's all about rivers of booze, delicious food, silk garments, and sex slaves with round, *not sagging breasts*. The only thing that's missing is big-screen color TVs. There is no description of what Heaven will entail for women. *Men are in charge of women* are superior to women, and should beat them, says 4:34. But this website translates that verse as saying that men should protect women.