

Introduction to Islam

How does one begin the journey to understand Islam? The common answer is that one needs to read the Koran. After all, Muslims believe the Koran is the infallible, pure word of Allah, eternal and perfect and delivered through the angel Gabriel to the final prophet Muhammad. It consists of commands and instructions from Allah to the Muslims.

But if you have ever sat down and read the Koran on your own, you were likely either uncertain about the meaning of the verses or simply confused by what you were reading. This shows the importance of the *tafsirs* (commentaries on the Koran).

The Tafsirs (tahfseers)

The *tafsirs* explain the meanings and the contexts of verses in the Koran. *Tafsirs* have been used by Muslims for over a thousand years to gain an understanding of the Koran. The following *tafsirs* are used in this series:

Tafsir Ibn 'Abbas

Although this *tafsir* is often attributed to Ibn 'Abbas, an authoritative commentator on the Koran and Muhammad's cousin, its authorship is uncertain. However, there was a report of the text being in existence around 900. In spite of this it is considered "a pivotal work for the study of Islamic exegesis" (*Tafsir Ibn 'Abbas*, p. x).

Tafsir Al-Qurtubi, Vol. 1

Abu 'Abdullah Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Ansari al-Qurtubi lived from 1214-1273. His *tafsir* is "one of the great classical commentaries" which contains an "enormous wealth of traditional understanding" of the verses of the Koran (*Tafsir Al-Qurtubi*, p. xv). This volume covers Chapters 1 and 2 of the Koran and is the only part of his *tafsir* that has been translated into English.

Tafsir Ibn Kathir

Abu Al-Fida' 'Imad Ad-Din Isma'il bin 'Umar bin Kathir Al-Qurashi Al-Busrawi lived from 1323-1396. This ten volume collection

is the most popular interpretation of the Qur'an in the Arabic language, and the majority of the Muslims consider it to be the best source based on Qur'an and Sunnah.

Tafsir Ibn Kathir, Vol. 1, p. 5.

Tafsir Al-Jalalayn

This *tafsir* is the work of two people (the two Jalals):

Jalalu'd-Din Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Mahalli - 1389-1459

Jalalu'd-Din as-Suyuti - 1445-1505

This one volume *tafsir* of 1,378 pages

has, since its publication more than half a millennium ago, been considered the

essential first text in the study of the meaning of the Qur'an by teachers and students of the Qur'anic text throughout the entire Islamic world...It has always been held in the highest esteem by all the scholars of Islam...

Tafsir Al-Jalalayn, p. xi

You will note that these four *tafsirs* were written between the 10th and 15th centuries. Has the understanding of Koran verses changed over the last few hundred years? To determine if there has been any noticeable change, we have included in this series the following two *tafsirs* that were written in the 20th century:

Tafsir as-Sa'di, Vol. 1

'Abd ar-Rahman b. Nasir as-Sa'di lived from 1885-1956. This *tafsir* was written in the early 1900's. It is distinguished from other *tafsirs* by its simplicity of language and conveyance of the meaning of the verses with utmost clarity (*Tafsir as-Sa'di*, pp. xv-xvi). This volume covers Chapters 1-6 of the Koran and is the only part of his *tafsir* that has been translated into English.

Tafsir Ahsanul-Bayan

Salahuddin Yusuf was born in 1951. He originally wrote this *tafsir* in the Urdu language in 1995 with the purpose of focusing on the exact meanings of the verses (*Tafsir Ahsanul-Bayan*, Vol. 1, p. 9); it has since been translated into English and published by Darussalam Publishers in Saudi Arabia.

The *Sunnah* (soonah)

The *tafsirs* are fundamental to understanding the Koran and Islam, so we need to know what information the *tafsir* writers relied on to explain the meanings and contexts of the verses in the Koran. The answer is the *Sunnah*, the examples, ways, and teachings of Muhammad that have become rules to be followed by Muslims. There are two sources for the *Sunnah*: *hadiths* and *Sira*.

The *Hadiths* (hadeeths)

The *hadiths* are reports about the examples, ways, and teachings of Muhammad believed to have come from those who were with him and observed and heard them. There are six authoritative hadith collections, and they were not compiled until over 200 years after Muhammad died. Here are those collections:

Sahih Al-Bukhari - Muhammad bin Ismail bin Al-Mughirah Al-Bukhari (810-870)

Sahih Muslim - Abu'l Hussain 'Asakir-ud-Din Muslim bin Hajjaj al-Qushayri al-Naisaburi (821-875)

Sunan Ibn Majah - Muhammad bin Yazeed ibn Majah Al-Qazwini (831-895)

Sunan An-Nasa'i - Abu 'Abdur-Rahman Ahmad bin Shu'aib bin 'Ali bin Sinan bin Bahr An-Nasa'i (836-925)

Sunan Abu Dawud - Abu Dawud Sulaiman bin Al-Ash'ath bin Ishaq (824-897)

Jami' At-Tirmidhi - Abu 'Eisa Mohammad ibn 'Eisa at-Tirmidhi (827-901)

Sahih Al-Bukhari is considered the most reliable collection of *hadiths*, followed by *Sahih Muslim*.

So what does a *hadith* look like? It starts off with a sequential list of the names of the narrators going back to who first reported the *hadith*. Since the list named a chain of narrators over a 200 year time period, it could include a large number of names. The English translations usually list only the original narrator, for example:

Narrated Abu Hurairah: Allah's Messenger said, "The Hour will not be established until you fight against the Jews, and the stone behind which a Jew will be hiding will say, 'O Muslim! There is a Jew hiding behind me, so kill him.'"

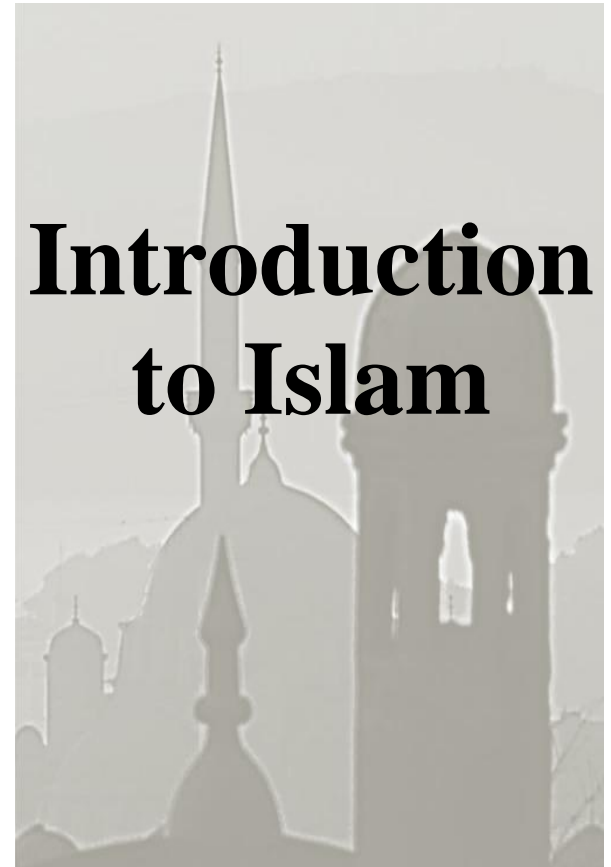
Sahih Al-Bukhari, No. 2926

The *Sira* (seerah)

The second source for the *Sunnah* is the authoritative biography of Muhammad, known as the *Sira*. It is titled *The Life of Muhammad (Sirat Rasul Allah)* and was written by Muhammad Ibn Ishaq (704-773) over 100 years after Muhammad's death.

So now when being told that "it's not in the Koran," implying that it is not a part of Islam, you can respond by mentioning the existence of the authoritative *hadiths* and *Sira*, which are second only to the Koran in importance to Islam, and are key to understanding Islam.

Dr. Stephen M. Kirby is the author of three books on Islam. His latest book is *Islam According to Muhammad, Not Your Neighbor*. His books are available on Amazon.com.



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