



HFM 009 – What is the Quran and Why Do Muslims Riot Over it?

Michael Rank: This is the History in Five Minutes Podcast, the #1 podcast for learning about anything in history in no time at all! I'm your host, Michael Rank.

Today's topic is 'What is the Quran and why is it so respected by Muslims?' Muslims revere the Quran more than Christians do the Bible or Jews the Torah, they almost as significant to the level that Christians do Jesus. Understanding this place of respect and authority that the Quran holds in Islam explains a reason that Muslims have rioted in response to desecrations of the book in the last decade.

In 2005, Newsweek Magazine claimed that a guard at Guantanamo Bay flushed a Quran down the toilet. Less than a week later, protests went throughout the world in Afghanistan, for example, and they were chanting death threats against the US and burning American flags. This protest left 15 dead and 100 injured. The story of the Quran getting flushed on the toilet later turned out to be false, but similar protests for supposed desecrations of the Quran have happened all throughout the years, the most recent episode in Afghanistan against US soldiers who accidentally burned hundreds of Quran in February 2012 as part of destroying the personal effects of Afghani prisoners.

Why is it that burning this book causes people to go into protests and fits of rage and even kill others? There are a lot of reasons, but one of them is that the importance of the Quran to Muslims is in the category all of its own beyond that of the Torah to Jews and even the Bible to Christians. The latter believe that God communicated through Christians to share his message with Christians. However, Muslims believe the Quran is the literal word of God that existed in its entirety in Arabic for all eternity. For this reason, most Muslim scholars claim that a Quran cannot be translated from Arabic into another language the way that Greek and Hebrew manuscripts have been translated into all languages for the Bible which were the original languages of the Bible.

As the Quran is the perfect revelation of God according to Muslims, a translated Quran at all and merely an interpretation. Muslims claim that the Quran came down to Muhammad through a series of revelations that the Angel Gabriel gave to him starting in 610 AD at a cave near Mecca. His followers memorized these fragments and they were later compiled into a book a few decades later by the third Umayyad caliph, Uthman. That Muhammad was a literate and could narrate such a work is proof that Muslims used to substantiate the Quran as supposed divine origin.

The Quran is divided into suras which are much like books of the Bible. It's a bit confusing to read for the uninitiated such as the suras are arranged for the longest to shortest books, not by chronology. So it sort of jumps around in time not unlike the film Memento except it's not backwards or forward. It just sort of goes all over the place. The verses are separated into two groups, the Meccan suras and the Medina suras. The Meccan suras were written before the military growth in Islam when Muslims were not in a position of power or under pressure to accommodate multiple beliefs such as Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians and a whole bunch of other people that lived in Mecca at the time. It is these verses that often speak of love and tolerance of other religions.



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The latter written Medina suras came down at the time when Muslims had gained power. Here, much less tolerance and accommodation is shown to other religions. Superstition about the Quran abounds in Islam's history like the Torah has for Jews and the Bible for Christians.

In the 1500, a European diplomat who traveled to Turkey reported that while lodging at the Travelers Inn they noticed a strange site. The bricks and stones that made up the walls had hundreds of pieces of paper stuck in the cracks. The diplomat, Ogier Ghiselin de Busbecq asked an innkeeper about these curious wraps of paper and the paradoxically powerful effect they had on the tenants since nearly all of them were illiterate. The innkeeper responded that the tenants were afraid of these scraps of paper, that they could have Quranic verses written on them and to throw such holy writings would be to invite a curse upon their head on judgment day.

Here is what the diplomat says, "On the last judgment when Muhammad will summon his followers from purgatory to heaven and eternal bliss, the only road open to them will be over a red-hot gridiron where they must walk across with bare feet. A painful ordeal, me thinks. Picture to yourself a cock skipping and hopping over hot coals! Now comes the marvel. All the paper they have preserved from being trodden on and insulted will appear unexpectedly, stick itself under their feet, and be of the greatest service in protecting them from the red-hot iron. This great boon awaits those who save paper from bad treatment. On some occasions our guides were most indignant with my servants for using paper for some very dirty work, and reported it to me as an outrageous offense. I replied that they must not be surprised at such acts on the part of my Christian servants. What could they expect, I added, from people who are accustomed to eat pork."

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