



Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Wash-
ington, D.C. 54.4—Battle Scene. Persian painting. Attributed to
the Tabriz school or Qazvin, 16th century. Painted
with gold on paper: 32.2 × 20.6 cm.

Meanings
...needs do you think are met
...such as an elegy?

Writing Response
... Write a brief elegy in
... of someone who has died
... keenly felt. You need not
... someone you knew personally;
... someone famous, like
... Jr. Use figures of

The Koran

c. A.D. 651–652

Courtesy of The Arthur M. Sackler Museum,
Harvard University Art Museums. Fund for the
Acquisition of Islamic Art



Page from a Koran, c. 1100.

To more than eight hundred million Muslims, the Koran (kə-ran') is the word of Allah, the Arabic name for God. According to Muslim belief, the Koran comes from tablets kept in heaven, dictated by the angel Gabriel to the prophet Mohammed.

Mohammed was born into a prominent family in the Arabian city of Mecca around A.D. 570. Despite his family's social position, Mohammed's childhood was filled with hardship and sorrow. By the age of six he was an orphan. Nevertheless, by adulthood he had managed to become a worldly and successful merchant.

When he was about forty, this prosperous

a hillside cave near his home. It was here that, according to Islamic belief, the angel Gabriel appeared to Mohammed and announced, "You are the messenger of God." Mohammed received numerous visions, or revelations, in the years that followed, and he dedicated his life to preaching the oneness of God and rejecting the beliefs that many Arabs followed in his day.

Mohammed recognized similarities between the messages he had received and the doctrines of Christianity and Judaism. However, more than these religions, Mohammed's preaching emphasized the power of divine judgment and the need for pious submission to the will of Allah. Hence, the name given to Mohammed's religion, *Islam*, means "submission." One who accepts Islam is a *Muslim*—"one who submits to God."

According to tradition, Mohammed could neither read nor write, so his followers memorized his utterances or jotted them down on whatever they could find—a leaf, a scrap of leather, a rock. After Mohammed died, his followers feared that his words would be lost forever if they did not gather all these versions and record them in a single authoritative Arabic text. Within twenty years, a group of scribes had accomplished this goal and had ordered the destruction of all other versions of Mohammed's revelations. They called this scripture the *Koran*,

Reader's Guide

from the KORAN

Background

Because of the Koran's divine authority, as well as the grace and power of its language, orthodox Muslims consider it perfect and unalterable. Consequently, when readers recite the Koran on public occasions, precise rules govern their tone and pronunciation. In addition, Muslims consider that translations can lead to distortion and can only approximate the words of Allah. Although the Koran appears in Turkish, Urdu, English, and many other languages, these translations are considered paraphrases and cannot be used for rituals or ceremonies.

Because of the Koran's importance in Islam, Muslim scholars have devoted their lives to the study of the text. This practice, known as *tafsir*, involves interpreting classical Arabic words and writing commentaries on various passages of the holy book. The purpose of *tafsir* is to ensure that Muslims understand Allah's revelation, but the scholars' work has served, as well, to confirm the Koran as the perfect model of Arabic grammar and diction.

The central theme of the Koran is that there is only one all-powerful God—Allah—who created the world. This God is merciful and compassionate, but he is also the God of Judgment Day. The proper response to Allah is to submit to his will, be generous to the poor, and lead an upright life. Every individual has a choice between following the good, which leads to an afterlife of eternal bliss, or giving in to evil, which leads to eternal damnation.

Oral Response

Discuss with your classmates the idea of an eternal struggle between good and evil. When have you been aware of such a struggle, either in your own life or in the world around you?

Literary Focus

Antithesis is a form of parallelism in which sharply contrasting ideas are expressed in grammatically balanced sentences. For example, the English poet Alexander Pope wrote "To err is human; to forgive, divine." The statement presents the antithesis between humans who err (sinners) and a divine God who forgives.

from the KORAN

translated by
N. J. DAWOOD

|| The Koran consists of 114 Surahs, or chapters. Notice that each of the following Surahs begins in the same way, with the line "In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful." Why do you think this is done?

THE EXORDIUM

IN THE NAME OF ALLAH
THE COMPASSIONATE
THE MERCIFUL

Praise be to Allah, Lord of the Creation,
The Compassionate, the Merciful,
King of Judgment-day!
You alone we worship, and to You alone
we pray for help.

Guide us to the straight path
The path of those whom You have favored,
Not of those who have incurred Your wrath,
Nor of those who have gone astray.

THE CESSATION

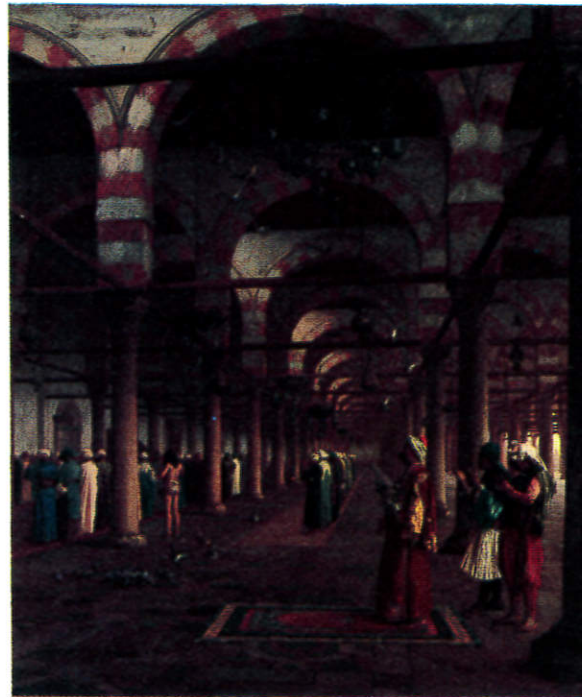
In the Name of Allah,
the Compassionate, the Merciful

When the sun ceases to shine; when the stars fall down and the mountains are blown away; when camels big with young are left untended and the wild beasts are brought together; when the seas are set alight and men's souls are reunited; when the infant girl, buried alive, is asked for what crime she was slain; when the records of men's deeds



Koran stand from Turkestan, eighth to fourteenth century.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1910 (10.218)



PRAYER IN THE MOSQUE OF 'AMR, JEAN-LÉON GERÔME (1824–1904).

What attitude toward Allah do these selections urge?

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Catharine Lorillard Wolfe, 1887. Catharine Lorillard Wolfe Collection (87.15.130)

are laid open and the heaven is stripped bare; when Hell burns fiercely and Paradise is brought near: then each soul shall know what it has done.

I swear by the turning planets and by the stars that rise and set; by the fall of night and the first breath of morning: this is the word of a gracious and mighty messenger, held in honor by the Lord of the Throne, obeyed in heaven, faithful to his trust.

No, your compatriot is not mad. He saw him¹ on the clear horizon. He does not grudge the secrets of the unseen; nor is this

1. He saw him: a reference to the Prophet's vision of Gabriel.

the utterance of an accursed devil.

Whither then are you going?

This is an admonition to all men: to those among you that have the will to be upright. Yet you cannot will, except by the will of Allah, Lord of the Creation.

DAYLIGHT

*In the Name of Allah,
the Compassionate, the Merciful*

By the light of day, and by the fall of night, your Lord has not forsaken you, nor does He abhor you.

The life to come holds a richer prize for you than this present life. You shall be gratified with what your Lord will give you.

Did He not find you an orphan and give you shelter?

Did He not find you in error and guide you?

Did He not find you poor and enrich you?

Therefore do not wrong the orphan, nor chide away the beggar. But proclaim the goodness of your Lord.

COMFORT

*In the Name of Allah,
the Compassionate, the Merciful*

Have We² not lifted up your heart and relieved you of the burden which weighed down your back?

Have We not given you high renown?

Every hardship is followed by ease. Every hardship is followed by ease.

When your task is ended resume your toil, and seek your Lord with all fervor.

2. We: Allah.

First Thoughts

Do these excerpts from the Koran remind you of any other examples of sacred literature that you have read elsewhere in this book? Explain.

Identifying Facts

1. In "The Exordium," what does the speaker ask Allah to do?
2. What does "The Cessation" say souls will learn when the earth ends?
3. According to "Daylight," what three things should a person do to show gratitude for the Lord's goodness?
4. What reassuring words does "Comfort" offer?

Interpreting Meanings

1. In "The Exordium," Mohammed seeks guidance to "the path of those whom You have favored,/Not of those who have incurred Your wrath." The righteous, described in the first prepositional phrase, stand in **antithesis** to the sinful, described in the second prepositional phrase. Find and explain one or two other examples of antithesis in these excerpts from the Koran.
2. Many of the sentences in "Daylight" and "Comfort" are punctuated as questions. How does the use of questions

reinforce the point being made in these passages?

3. Which of the images in these excerpts do you find most striking? What impact do you think these images are intended to have on readers?

Applying Meanings

In "The Cessation," Mohammed admonishes his followers to be "upright." In "Daylight," he instructs them not to "wrong the orphan, nor chide away the beggar." How might modern Muslims apply these teachings to decisions in their daily lives?

Creative Writing Response

Composing and Delivering a Sermon.

Create a brief **sermon**—a speech that addresses morals or responsibility—to deliver to your classmates. Begin by choosing for your theme some moral lesson: the necessity for personal responsibility; the need to consider the rights of others; the importance of working cooperatively. Decide how you want to motivate your friends—through fear of punishment, hope for reward, an appeal to their sense of fairness, or some other means. Then write your sermon. You might want to practice delivering your sermon at home before presenting it to the class.