

## Reading the Quran by Lesley Hazleton

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You may have heard about the Quran's idea of paradise being 72 virgins, and I promise I will come back to those virgins, but in fact here in the Northwest we're living quite close to the real Quranic idea of paradise – defined 36 times as “gardens watered by running streams.”

Since I live in a houseboat on the running stream of Lake Union, this makes perfect sense to me. But the thing is, how come it's news to most people?

Well, I know many well-intentioned non-Muslims who've begun reading the Quran but given up, disconcerted by its otherness. The historian Thomas Carlyle considered Muhammad one of the great heroes of the world, yet even he called the Quran “as toilsome reading as I ever undertook -- a wearisome confused jumble.”

Part of the problem, I think, is that we imagine that the Quran can be read as we usually read a book, that we can curl up with it on a rainy afternoon with a bowl of popcorn within reach as though God – and the Quran is entirely in the voice of God speaking to Muhammad – were just another author on the best-seller list.

Yet the fact that so few people do actually read the Quran is precisely why it's so easy to quote it. Or rather, misquote it – phrases and snippets taken out of context in what I call “the highlighter version,” the one favored both by Muslim fundamentalists and by anti-Muslim Islamophobes.

So last spring, as I was gearing up to begin writing a biography of Muhammad, I realized that I needed to read the Quran properly – or at least as properly as I could. My Arabic's reduced by now to wielding a dictionary, so I took four well-

known translations and decided to read them side by side, verse by verse, along with a transliteration and the seventh-century Arabic.

I did have an advantage. My last book was on the story behind the Shia-Sunni split, and for that I'd worked closely with the earliest Islamic histories, so I knew the events to which the Quran constantly refers, its frame of reference.

I knew enough, that is, to know that I'd be a tourist in the Quran -- an informed one, even an experienced one, but still, an outsider, an agnostic Jew reading someone else's holy book.

So I read slowly. I'd set aside three weeks for this project, and that, I think, is what is meant by hubris. Because it turned out to be three months.

I resisted the temptation to skip to the back, where the shorter and more clearly mystical chapters are, but every time I thought I was beginning to get a handle on the Quran -- that feeling of ah-I-get-it-now -- it'd slip away overnight, and I'd come back in the morning wondering if I wasn't lost in a strange land.

Yet the terrain was very familiar.

Since the Quran says that it comes to renew the message of the Torah and the Gospels, one third of it reprises the stories of figures like Abraham, Moses, Joseph, Mary, Jesus. God himself was utterly recognizable from his earlier manifestation as Yahweh, jealously insisting on no other gods. The presence of camels, mountains, desert wells and springs took me back to the year I spent wandering the Sinai desert. And then there was the language, the rhythmic cadence of it, reminding me of evenings spent listening to Beduin elders recite hours-long narrative poems entirely from memory.

And I began to grasp why it's said that the Quran is really the Quran only in Arabic.

Take the *Fatiha*, the seven-verse opening chapter that's the Lord's Prayer and the *Shma Israel* of Islam combined. It's just 29 words in Arabic, but anywhere

from 65 to 72 in translation. Yet the more you add, the more seems to go missing.

The Arabic has an incantatory, almost hypnotic quality that begs to be heard rather than read, felt more than analyzed. It wants to be chanted out loud, to sound its music in the ear and on the tongue. So the Quran in English is a kind of shadow of itself, or as Arthur Arberry called his version, an interpretation.

Still, all is not lost in translation. As the Quran promises, patience is rewarded, and there are many surprises. A degree of environmental awareness, for instance – and of humans as mere stewards of God’s creation – unmatched in the bible. And where the bible is addressed exclusively to men, using the second and third person masculine, the Quran includes women, speaking, for instance, of “Believing men and believing women, honorable men and honorable women.”

Or take the infamous verse about killing the unbelievers.

Yes, it does say that, but in a very specific context: the anticipated conquest of the sanctuary city of Mecca, where fighting was usually forbidden. And the permission comes hedged about with qualifiers. Not you must kill unbelievers in Mecca, but you can, you are allowed to, but only after a grace period is over, and only if there is no other pact in place, and only if they try to keep you away from the Kaaba, and only if they attack you first – and even then... God is merciful, forgiveness is supreme, and so, essentially, better if you don’t.

This was perhaps the biggest surprise: how flexible the Quran is – at least in minds that are not fundamentally inflexible. “Some of these verses are definite in meaning,” it says, “and others are ambiguous. The perverse at heart will eagerly pursue the ambiguities, trying to create discord by pinning down meanings of their own. Only God knows the true meaning.”

The phrase “God is subtle” appears again and again, and in fact the whole of the Quran is far more subtle than most of us have been led to believe. As in, for instance, that little matter of virgins in paradise.

Old-fashioned Orientalism comes into play here. The word used, four times, is *houris* -- rendered as "dark-eyed maidens with swelling breasts" or as "fair high-bosomed virgins." Yet all there is in the original Arabic is... that one word, *houris*. Not a swelling breast or high bosom in sight.

Now this could be a way of saying pure beings like angels, or it could be like the Greek *koros* or *kore*, an eternal youth. But the truth is, nobody really knows.

And that's the point. Because the Quran is quite clear when it says that you will be "a new creation" in Paradise, and that "you will be re-created in a form unknown to you." Which seems to me a far more appealing prospect than 'a virgin.'

And that number 72? It never appears. There are no 72 virgins in the Quran. That idea only came into being 300 years later, and most Islamic scholars see it as the equivalent of people with wings sitting on clouds and strumming harps.

Paradise is quite the opposite: it's not virginity, it's fecundity. It's plenty. It's gardens watered by running streams.



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