

Prof. Kecia Ali  
**NEJS 186a: Introduction to the Qur'an**  
Spring 2005  
MWTh 12-12:50

Office hours: MW 10:30-12, Lown 8  
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TF: To be announced

This course will introduce students to the sacred book of one fifth of the world's population: the Qur'an, believed by Muslims to have been revealed by God through the angel Gabriel to the Prophet Muhammad in seventh century Arabia. The Qur'an has been declared "inimitable" by Muslim scholars, and its recitation can bring the faithful to tears; at the same time it is frequently deemed by non-Muslim readers to be disjointed, repetitive, and hardly inspiring of sublime religious sentiment. One important aim of this course will be to explore the reasons for these divergent reactions to the Qur'an. Beginning with Muslim accounts of the biography of Muhammad and the revelation of the Qur'an, we will proceed to look at the Qur'an in its textual, exegetical, and experiential dimensions. By the time the semester is complete, students should have an understanding of: traditional Muslim accounts of the revelation and compilation of the Qur'an, as well as the challenges to this narrative by contemporary critical scholarship; the importance of recitation in the Muslim experience of scripture; the basic Qur'anic perspective on key themes such as God's "Oneness," creation, judgment, and the afterlife; the traditional Muslim view of prophecy and the relationship between Muhammad and the pre-Islamic biblical prophets; the basic outlines of the Qur'anic teachings on jihad and relations with non-Muslims, as well as the ways in which these teachings have been interpreted by classical exegetes; and historical and modern interpretations of crucial verses relating to women and the family, both conservative and feminist.

**Readings:**

It is vital that students come to class having done the appropriate readings, as lectures will build on this material, not repeat it. Additionally, classroom discussions will require familiarity with the readings.

Required texts (available for purchase at the bookstore and on reserve at the library):

Hamid Algar, *Surat al-Fatiha*

Ahmad Von Denffer, *'Ulum al-Qur'an: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'an*

Michael Cook, *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction*

Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman: Rereading the Sacred Text from a Woman's Perspective*

Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*

Thomas Cleary, *The Qur'an: A New Translation*

Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations*

Note: **Bring your Qur'an to each class session.** Though knowledge of Arabic is in no way a

prerequisite for this course, those students who read Arabic may want to acquire and bring to class a Qur'an in Arabic or with parallel Arabic text in addition to Cleary's translation. For reading outside of class, <http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/quran/> is an excellent online resource, containing three different English translations of the Qur'an. It is searchable by keyword, and can provide an alternate version of difficult passages.

Additional required readings are posted on WebCT.

You will also find "listening" assignments for some weeks. Some are found on the CD included with Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an*, while others are accessible online as MP3 files and can be found through the links in this syllabus.

### **Assignments and grading:**

*Attendance* at all class sessions is necessary, because lectures will cover materials not in the class readings. *Participation* in discussions is also an important element in this course. Together, attendance and participation will account for 15% of your grade.

*Weekly reflection papers:* Due at the beginning of class every Thursday. These reflections (2-3 pages long, typed, double-spaced) are an opportunity for you to comment on and analyze the week's readings, and will serve as a catalyst for our in-class discussions. These papers will be marked either acceptable (full credit) or unacceptable (no credit). They should not merely summarize the readings, but rather should address common themes in the readings, raise questions, present critiques, and/or highlight points that were helpful or confusing. Though they need not be formally structured or present an explicit argument, they should display proper grammar and spelling. Reflection papers should be *printed out and handed in* at the beginning of class on Thursday; late papers will not be accepted for credit. In total, these reflection papers will be worth 15% of your grade.

*Papers:* This course will have two 5-page papers, worth 20% of your grade each. The first will compare and contrast the biblical and Qur'anic accounts of the prophet Joseph. More specific guidelines will be distributed on **2/10**. The paper will be due on **2/28**. The second will address themes raised in feminist commentary on the Qur'an. More specific guidelines will be distributed on **3/17**. The paper will be due on **4/4**. These papers should be *printed out and handed in* at the beginning of class.

*Final exam:* There will be a take-home essay final, handed out on the last day of class, Thursday, **4/21** and due on Monday, **5/2** at 5:00 p.m. EST. Finals should be *submitted electronically* as Word documents to [alikecia@brandeis.edu](mailto:alikecia@brandeis.edu). The final exam will be worth 30% of your grade.

### **Policy on Late Work and Incompletes:**

Late work will be penalized by one complete letter grade for each day overdue (including weekends and holidays), except response papers, which will not be accepted late for credit. Extensions will be granted only in exceptional circumstances, and in no case after the original deadline for completion has passed. Students who anticipate difficulty in meeting deadlines

should contact me as far in advance of the due date as possible. A course grade of incomplete will only be granted for compelling reasons.

**University Statement on Academic Integrity:**

"Academic integrity is central to the mission of educational excellence at Brandeis University. Each student is expected to turn in work completed independently, except when assignments specifically authorize collaborative effort. It is not acceptable to use the words or ideas of another person—be it a world-class philosopher or your lab partner—without proper acknowledgement of that source. This means that you must use footnotes and quotation marks to indicate the source of any phrases, sentences, paragraphs or ideas found in published volumes, on the internet, or created by another student. Violations of University policies on academic integrity, described in Section Three of Rights and Responsibilities, may result in failure in the course or on the assignment, or in suspension or dismissal from the University. If you are in doubt about the instructions for any assignment in this course, it is your responsibility to ask for clarification."

**Disabilities:**

A student who requires accommodation for a documented disability of any type should see me *immediately* to discuss modifications to course requirements.

*Class sessions:*

**January 13**

**Introduction: Before revelation: Muhammad and the pre-Islamic Arabs**

**January 19, 20**

**“Recite!” The first revelation and aural dimensions of the Book**

Readings: Yahya Emerick, *Muhammad*, pp. 3-72 (WebCT); Qur'an, 96:1-5; Michael Sells, *Approaching the Qur'an*, 1-28, 145-50; Ahmad von Denffer, *'Ulum al-Qur'an*, pp. 8-29.

Listen to: Sells CD, Tracks 5, 10, 13, 18, 26, 29.

**January 24, 26, 27**

**The Meccan verses: Divine unity, divine signs, divine judgement**

Readings: Cook, *The Koran: A Very Short Introduction*, pp. 8-20; Sells, *Approaching*, pp. 44-141; Qur'an, S. 53:1-18, S. 81-114; Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 1-79

Listen to: Sells, Tracks 3, 4, 6-9, 11, 12, and 14-17.

**January 31, February 2, 3**

**Al-Fatiha (the opening chapter) and its interpretation**

Readings: *Qur'an*, S. 1; Sells, *Approaching*, pp. 42-3, 156-7; Von Denffer, *'Ulum al-Qur'an*, pp. 121-45; Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Qur'an and its Interpreters*, pp. 1-53 (WebCT); Hamid Algar,

*Surat al-Fatiha: Foundation of the Qur'an*, 1-43.

Listen to: Sells CD, Tracks 2, 23, 33.

**February 7, 9, 10**  
**Prophets in history**

Readings: *Qur'an*, S. 3, 10, 11, 13-21; Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 80-131.

Listen to: Surah 19, "Maryam" at <http://www.shapplus.com/free-quran-software/quran-mp3-software/QuranReciter/quran-mp3-4.htm>

*Guidelines for paper #1 handed out on 2/10.*

**February 14, 16, 17**  
**Surat Yusuf**

Readings: Qur'an, S. 12; Genesis 37, 39-47 (<http://www.bibleontheweb.com/Bible.asp> or another edition); Stowasser, "The Chapter of Zulaykha," pp. 50-6; Maududi's introduction to S. 12, <http://www.usc.edu/dept/MSA/quran/maududi/mau12.html>, Mustansir Mir, "Irony in the Qur'an: A Study of the Story of Joseph" (from Issa J. Boullata, ed., *Literary Structures of Religious Meaning in the Qur'an*, Surrey: Curzon, 2000) pp. 173-87; (WebCT); Mir, "The Qur'anic Story of Joseph: Plot, Themes, and Characters," [http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Q\\_Studies/Mirjoseph.html](http://www.islamic-awareness.org/Quran/Q_Studies/Mirjoseph.html); Sufia Uddin, "A Mystical Journey or a Misogynist Assault?," (WebCT).

**February 28, March 2** (March 3: Prof. Ali away)  
**Revelation and prophecy considered**

*Paper #1 due at beginning of class Monday, 2/28.*

No new readings for this week; we will tie up any loose ends from the first five weeks and discuss key themes.

**March 7, 9, 10**  
**Madinan revelation: community life and family life**

Readings Qur'an: Surah 2, all; 4:1-105; 9, 47-48; selections from Mohammad Mahmoud Taha, *The Second Message of Islam* (WebCT) and al-Tabari's commentary (WebCT).

**March 14, 16, 17**  
**Relations with non-Muslims**

Readings: Qur'an, S. 4:105-176, S. 5, all; selections from *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* at [www.tafsir.com](http://www.tafsir.com) (TBA); Baidawi on Q. 2:216 (in Helmut Gatje, *The Qur'an and its Exegesis*, pp. 212-4) (WebCT), Rahman, *Major Themes*, Appendix I and II, pp. 150-170; Jane Damien McAuliffe,

*Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis*, selections (WebCT)

*Guidelines for Paper #2 handed out on 3/17.*

**March 21, 23, 24**

**Text and context: Classical discussions of the “veil”**

Readings: First read Qur'an, S. 24:30-31; 33:53; and 33:59, then go back and read S. 24 and S. 33 in their entirety. “Women’s Modesty in Qur’anic Commentaries: The Founding Discourse,” by Soraya Hajjaji-Jarrah (pp. 181-213) (WebCT) and Linda Clarke, "The Hijab According to the Hadith," (WebCT).

**March 28, 30, 31**

**Feminist approaches to the Qur'an**

Readings: Amina Wadud, *Qur'an and Woman*, entire book; Asma Barlas, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Text*, pp. 93-128; and 167-202 (WebCT).

**April 4, 6, 7**

**The compilation of the text and textual variations**

*Paper #2 due Monday, 4/4 at the beginning of class.*

Readings: Cook, *The Koran*, pp. 119-140; pp. 62-76; von Denffer, *Ulum al-Qur'an*, pp. 31-66, 111-19, and 158-62. For additional information, see <http://www.uga.edu/islam/quran.html>.

**April 11, 13, 14**

**The Qur'an as living text**

Readings: Von Denffer, *Ulum al-Qur'an*, pp. 163-5, 177-80; Cook, *The Koran*, pp. 51-61, 77-94; William Graham, *Beyond the Written Word: Oral Aspects of Scripture in the History of Religion*, pp. 81-115 (WebCT); Kristina Nelson, *Reciting the Qur'an in Modern Egypt*, selections (WebCT).

Listen to: S. 36, Ya-Sin, at <http://www.shaplus.com/free-quran-software/quran-mp3-software/QuranReciter/quran-mp3-3.htm>.

**April 18, 20, 21**

No new readings for this week; we will tie up any loose ends from the last six weeks and discuss key themes.

*Final exam handed out in class on 4/21. Must be submitted via e-mail attachment to [alikecia@brandeis.edu](mailto:alikecia@brandeis.edu) by Monday 5/2 at 5 pm.*

