

Quran calls “the Mother of the Book” is on a different plane of existence, outside of the flow of time as we know it. It is from this realm that the Quran descended to the Prophet’s (p) heart, and from there, degree by degree descended in the form of the specific words recited as the Quran. Nasir al-Din Qunawi writes, “The writing and the form of the letters and sounds originate in time, but what is written and recited is beyond time.” “**And behold, it is with Us in the Mother of the Book, sublime indeed, wise.**” (Quran 43:3)

When the Quran talks of past events it often speaks of them as if these events exist within our own memories or in a collective human memory as an integral part of our own selves and of our human heritage and nature. It has a unique methodology in that it asks us to recall some past historical occurrences in the same manner with which we remember events from our own lives, as if they exist in our own individual, personal storehouse of experiences. “**And remember** We gave Moses the Scripture and the Criterion between right & wrong (Quran 2:54)... **And remember** Abraham and Ismail raised the foundations of the House (Quran 2:127)...**And remember** We divided the sea for you (Quran 2:51)...**And remember** We took your covenant (Quran 2:63)... **Remember** Your Lord inspired the angels (Quran 8:12)...This is a word of remembrance to those who **remember** (Quran 11:114)...**And remember** Jesus, the Son of Mary, said....(Quran 61:6).” It uses a language and a direct mode of expression that encourages us to erase the distance between ourselves & these past events, these historical events, by pulling them to the forefront with a **compelling immediacy of attention**. It seems to be telling us, through its technique of expression, that this historical distance does **not** exist in any real, metaphysical, essential sense.

The Quran asks us to be present, in our own era, wherever truth requires us to be present and it requires that presence to be a deeply rooted presence, **not** a superficial, ineffective, fleeting presence. It asks us **not** to regard humanity’s past as merely “**tales of the ancients**” (Quran 83:13), or as quaint historical footnotes that are irrelevant to our times and our own modern notions about the nature of things, about the nature of society, of humanity, of morality. It presents the world as more than just matter, as more than a chronological string of occurrences. Rather, it posits an

essence and reality to certain events that lifts those events out of time, giving them a presence in a higher reality, in a deeper, more substantial layer of existence, and thereby makes their essential truths accessible to all times and places. So when the Quran speaks of Moses and Aaron, of Zachariah and Maryam, of the various Prophets and men of knowledge that have walked the earth it raises their stories out of **historical** time and into a **universal** time. It presents them almost as **universal memories** and then it asks us to remember, to recall.

Then it tells us that these memories are family memories – the family is that of Adam (p), and Abraham (p), Moses (p) & Aaron (p), Jesus (p) and Muhammad (p) and all the other messengers and their supporters recalled in the pages of the Quran. Between us and them there is to be no distance in love, respect, or honour. All distances are erased – the chronological time that separates us and them vanishes, like an ephemeral veil that dissolves at our touch. With the Quran’s methodology we are with Moses (p) when he confronts Pharaoh, we are with Abraham (p) when he destroys the idols, we are with the Prophet (p) as he struggles to deliver the message. We are with him as he tells the story of mankind and awakens the memories and lessons and truths of our own past within us.

So the Quran teaches us a new way to look upon history. It is not “ancient stories” but living truths. It teaches us to erase the distance between ourselves and the past and to call forth the past like memories, till a total picture of the history of truth is formed – a history which spans all times and all places, a history whose essence is imprinted in the substance of reality and which is not restricted by any earthbound chronology.

Memories are **not** distinct from us, they are an integral part of us, of our knowledge, of who and what we are. They define and shape us, they are **not** intellectual abstractions but are a living part of us, shaping our consciousness and our personalities. The Quran asks us to extend our memory beyond our individual selves and so unites our separate histories with the total history of humanity with the aim of giving substance to our ephemeral, fleeting lives and uniting us with the common thread of truth that weaves its way across the centuries.

HISTORY BECOMES NOT MERELY A DISJOINTED SEQUENCE OF EVENTS BUT IS BOUND BY PATTERNS & PRINCIPLES WHICH ACT AS A UNIFYING FORCE – A BRIDGE BETWEEN WIDELY SEPARATED GENERATIONS.

THE REMEMBRANCE

MEMORIES ARE NOT INTELLECTUAL ABSTRACTIONS

Anyone who studies the Quran is likely to be struck by the unique nature of its construction, its unusual and constantly shifting rhythms and the sudden transmutations and displacements in its subject matter. At first this ever changing literary terrain seems an obstacle to understanding, but the more time one spends with this Book, the more organic, the more natural the flow of its words feel. It is almost like flying over an ever-changing landscape – rolling valleys punctuated by jagged rocks, forests and plains giving way to upthrust mountains, high plateaus broken by deep lakes, deserts sprinkled with oases and cleft by canyons. To use local imagery: it’s like floating in a hot air balloon from Pakaraima’s peaks of power to Corentyne’s lush sands. Over undulating hills & expansive savannahs. Over many waters & waterfalls. Despite the variety of the forms, despite the startling contrast of adjacent features, a complex, organic, linguistic beauty underlies & unites all the various elements.

If you’re wowed by nature; you’ll be **blown away** by the Quran.

“HAD WE BESTOWED THIS QURAN FROM ON HIGH UPON A MOUNTAIN, YOU WOULD INDEED SEE IT HUMBLING ITSELF, BREAKING ASUNDER, OUT OF AWE OF GOD.”

“VERILY THIS IS NO LESS THAN A MESSAGE TO ALL THE WORLDS.

FOR WHOEVER WILLS AMONG YOU TO TAKE A RIGHT COURSE.”

Why dwell on the past?... Why put time and energy into remembering events that happened centuries ago?... Why not let the past be past and put it behind us once and for all?... Why does the Quran admonish us constantly to remember?

These are very legitimate questions and deserves careful consideration because the answer lies within the fundamental nature of Islam and of the Quran. It lies in the way the Quran views history and in the manner in which it illustrates history. The Quran is a book of rhythms and patterns both in its sound and construction as well as in its content and meaning. It does **not** view history simply as a linear process, as a sequence of events which succeed one another.

Rather it sees history as a pattern or series of patterns which occur over a period of time and which arise as the result of certain natural laws at work in society and within men. These patterns or rhythms in history are repeatedly illustrated in the Quran, for example, by references to past civilizations which have all followed the same pattern of rise, decay, and collapse. At the same time the Quran is a book of principles, of truths, which, if they are implemented, will allow people to understand, and perhaps for a time, break free of the repetitious cycles of history.

So in its approach to history the Quran does **not** reiterate historical events in great detail and length. But instead it distills the events down to their basic components in order to illustrate the principles to be learned from the events.

This can be seen most clearly in the way the Quran tells some of the stories found in the Bible. Whereas the Bible gives a detailed, linear account of an incident, the Quran boils the same story down to its

essential ingredients in order to concisely and clearly illustrate, in a few lines, the lesson to be found at the heart of the event. The Quran lays bare the patterns which rule history and the principles which can free us of this rule and which can lead people to a fuller understanding of historical processes and their place within them.

Just as the Hajj brings Muslims from all countries & of all languages & races together to create a form of social & spiritual Tauhid (unity), so too does Islam’s approach to history create a form of historical Tauhid (or historical unity). History becomes not merely a disjointed sequence of events but is bound by patterns and principles which act as a unifying force – a bridge between widely separated generations. **The “principles” or “truths” of history are not bound in the confines of one era or by the rules and customs of one society but span all times and all societies.**

For example...why did Muslims choose the Hijrah (or migration), where the Prophet (p) was fleeing for his life, as the event which pinpoints the beginning of the Islamic calendar? Why not choose the moment he received his first revelation, or the date of the first victory at Badr, or of the fall of Mecca to his army.

It is because the Hijrah was the transition point (the moment of a phase change) for a number of factors in the early stages of Islam. It marked the transition of the Muslim Ummah (community) from a handful of struggling individuals to a complete society in Medina. It marked the transition of the Prophet (p) from preaching to political, social, diplomatic, and military action. And it marked the transition from virtually no growth to explosive growth of Islam. Migration, or movement from stillness towards a specific goal is a key concept in the Quran & one whose truth is borne out by historical reality. All civilizations arise “...on the heels of a migration.”(Ali Shariati). From the Biblical Exodus or migration of the Jews from Egypt, and the subsequent creation of Israel, to the most recent examples of Canada and America both of which arose following a migration. The principle of migration is also true on an interior level in terms of the migration of our inner selves away from personal stagnation & towards an awareness of God.

But the important point to stress here is that by being a specific instance of a universal principle, the

Hijrah of the Prophet acquires a meaning and a force which lifts it out of historical time and makes it relevant as a principle to all times. Now there are many such principles in the Quran and all these principles have many layers of meanings at many different levels, such as the social level, the political level, the individual level. These are all principles which find historical focal points in various persons, in various places, at various times in history.

Our remembrance of the events described in the Quran is done in order to acquaint each new generation with these principles. These are learned through our hearts as well as our minds because an intellectual understanding is, by itself, a cold and incomplete understanding. But when Truth is perceived by the “heart’s mind”, to use a Quranic phrase then that truth comes alive in the individual and the centuries which separate him/her from the historical events and personalities melt away. This is why we remember events that happened so long ago and why we remember them the way we do. The Prophets and Imams were witnesses for the Truth, and their message to us is a message for all ages, all times, and all societies. Witness your time. Witness between the truth and falsehood of your age.

As already mentioned, the Quran does not follow a linear exposition & progressive timeline as, for example, the Bible does. It raises topics, not according to a successive historical progression, but according to its own unique inner pulse & rhythm. If it was in a historical, chronological order like a book of history or a biography, it would have been particularized to the chronology of history. The Quran, however, declares itself as timeless, as a book that cannot be particularized & limited to a specific historical context. **“Verily this is no less than a Message to all the Worlds.”** (Quran 81:27) Jafar al-Sadiq has said of it that “...it will continue on its course as long as Heaven & Earth endure, because it enshrines a sign & a guide for every person & group to come.”

The Quran breaks the chronological mould to declare itself free from the ties of time. It originates with God who encompasses time and is not constrained by it. The Book of the Realities of existence which the

“THIS IS A REMINDER TO THOSE WHO ARE MINDFUL OF GOD.”
(QURAN 11:114)

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