Islam is one of the great monotheistic religions of the world together with Judaism and Christianity. Though they have a common belief in one God, each has its own sacred book at the core of its religion. The Hebrew Bible and the New Testament are respectively the holy books of Judaism and Christianity, while the Qur'an is the holy book of Islam. With millions of Muslims worldwide, it is unquestionably one of the world’s most influential texts. For those who live by its teachings, the text is considered the actual word of God and, in accordance with tradition, is read aloud; indeed, the word Qur’an derives from the Arabic verb ‘to recite’. The religion – Islam – takes its name from the Arabic word meaning ‘submission to the will of God’.

According to the Muslim faith, the teachings of Islam contained in the Qur’an were revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in the Arabic language via the archangel Gabriel. Muslim tradition also has it that Muhammad received the divine revelation over a period of time, between 610 AD and his death in 632, and that he received the first of these divine messages in the cave of al-Hira’, while wandering alone outside Mecca in the western Hijaz region of the Arabian Peninsula. At first his message was ill-received by the merchants and the religious authorities of the city, who objected to his religious and social teachings.
So great was the opposition and hostility, that Muhammad and his group of followers were later forced to migrate from Mecca to Yathrib, now known as Medina, where his message was more readily accepted. The migration—known as the hijrah—took place in the year 622. This is a significant date in the Muslim calendar, for the date of the migration, traditionally 16 July 622, marks the start of the Muslim era; all dates in the Muslim calendar are reckoned from it.

Initially, the divine revelations were committed to memory, transmitted from believer to believer. At the time of the revelations, the Arabs were mainly a tribal and nomadic society in which the spoken word was given precedence over the written as a means of communication. Reliance on memory, however, is hardly the most secure way of preserving and ensuring the accuracy of a divine message, particularly for future generations. This consideration was acutely pertinent to Muhammad’s early followers. Accordingly, the first caliph, Abu Bakr (r. 632–4), who succeeded Muhammad on his death, ensured that
the revelations were recorded in writing by ordering Muhammad’s secretary, Zayd ibn Thabit, to compile them in book form. Tradition has it that the original compilation of the text was collected not only from the oral recollections of Muhammad’s early followers, but also from early transmissions written on fragments of such readily available materials as parchment, papyrus, stone, canned bone, palm leaves and leather.

Within twenty years the number of Qur’an manuscripts in circulation hugely increased due to the spread of Islam into Iraq and Syria under Abu Bakr, and then into Egypt, North Africa, and Persia under the second caliph, ‘Umar ibn al-Khattab (r. 634–44). Given this situation, it became urgently necessary to establish a canonized text which would preserve the sanctity of the message and fix an authorized spelling of the text for all time. This task was promptly undertaken in the year 651 by order of the third caliph, ‘Uthman ibn Affan (r. 644–66); and the definitive canonical text, as recited today in mosques and privately throughout the world, was produced. The text is formally arranged in 114 surahs or chapters. Chapter one apart, these are traditionally arranged in order according to length, from the longest to the shortest, and not in the sequence in which they were revealed. Most of the shorter chapters were revealed to Muhammad in the hostile environment of Mecca before he migrated to Medina, whereas the longer chapters were revealed after he had settled there. With the exception of chapter nine, each chapter begins with an expression of piety, the bismillah, which reads ‘In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate’.

Being the supreme book of the Islamic faith, the Qur’an is central to the Muslim way of life. Together with the hadith – the collected traditions based on the sayings and actions of Muhammad and his followers – it influences all aspects of the daily life of the individual believer whether at home, in the mosque, the Qur’an school (khatibah), or the religious academy (madrasah). For Muslims living outside the Middle East it is often their first exposure to the Arabic language, while for all Muslims it is the primary text from which Arabic is taught. Indeed, it is incumbent on Muslims, whichever part of the world they live in, to learn to read and recite the Qur’an in Arabic.

Just as the text of the Qur’an is considered sacrosanct and invariable, the physical form of the book is also treated with reverence. Belief in the word of God and respect for the object containing the word of God – the Qur’an – are therefore inextricably related, unifying Muslims in all parts of the world. Devotion to the book is exemplified by the way Qur’an manuscripts have been devoutly and assiduously copied throughout the centuries, exhibiting diverse features of styles in calligraphy, illumination, physical format and page layout, which often reflect their place of origin and date of production. From the late seventh to the nineteenth century, the writing of Qur’an manuscripts was undertaken, as one would expect, in predominantly Islamic parts of the world and in countries with large Muslim communities. Today, with the geographical spread of Islam covering Arabia and the Near and Middle East, North Africa and Spain, sub-Saharan Africa, Iran and Central Asia, the Indian subcontinent, South East Asia and China (Fig. 3), and with the availability of printed copies throughout all these areas, the copying of Qur’an by hand is no longer necessary, but nevertheless continues where traditional calligraphy is still practised.

To a great extent, the history of Qur’an manuscripts is the history of Arabic script. For, in copying the Qur’an, calligraphers have made use of a wide range of styles, reflecting stages in the development of Arabic writing. Written from right to left, the Arabic language consists of twenty-nine letters and belongs to the Semitic family of scripts which include among others Hebrew, Aramaic and Syriac. A common feature of all these languages is the fact that their alphabets are composed almost entirely of consonants, vowel signs being added only later to facilitate reading.

The origins of Arabic script can be traced back to early Phoenician script in the twelfth century BC, which influenced, among other Semitic scripts, the script used for the Aramaic language. A version of this Aramaic script – called Nabatean Aramaic, because of its association with the official language of the Nabatean kingdom of Petra in Jordan (c. 100 BC–c. 100 AD) – was first used for writing Arabic in the fourth century AD. By the middle of the sixth century, however, Nabatean Aramaic had itself evolved through a number of transitional stages to what is recognizably the Arabic script of the Qur’an. The significance of the Qur’an in the development of Arabic script is reinforced by the fact that until the sixth century Arabic writing was mainly on stone, very few examples of which have survived to this day. The fact that Muhammad received his message in the Arabic language, and that the Qur’an was later committed to writing in the Arabic script, gave the language and its script a heightened level of religious significance and sanctity.