



# Ramadan رَمَضَان

## A Guide to the Exhibit

April 13-May 13, 2021

### Introduction

#### 1. Qur'an. Bilingual: Arabic and Persian. Iran, 21<sup>st</sup> century.

This contemporary Qur'an (with an interlinear Persian translation in blue) is opened to the verses concerning the observance of Ramadan. The pertinent passage begins on the left-hand page, seven lines down from the top:

*It is the month of Ramadan in which the Qur'an was revealed, as a guide to humanity, and clear proofs for guidance and distinguishing right from wrong. And whoever among you is present, they should fast in the month; and whoever is sick or on a journey, should fast on other days. God wants ease for you and does not want hardship for you; but to complete the period of fasting, and to glorify God for having guided you; and so that you might be grateful. (al-Baqara 2.185)*

#### 2. Qur'an. Dated Muharram 1254 AH / ca. 1876 CE. (Special Collections, Friedsam Memorial Library, St. Bonaventure University)

This antique Qur'an is handwritten in black and red ink, with gold used for borders and the chapter (*surah*) headings. It is opened to the ninety-sixth chapter (*surah*) on the left-hand page. According to Muslim tradition, the first five verses of this chapter were the first revealed to the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) during the month of Ramadan in the year 610 CE in Mecca.

*In the name of God, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful: Recite! In the name of your Lord who created, created humanity from a clot. Recite! And your Lord is Most Generous, who taught by the pen, taught humanity what they knew not. (al-'Alaq 96.1-5)*

#### 3. Calligraphy pen. Wood. Tehran, Iran, 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Pens such as the one on display have been used for hand writing the Qur'an and creating calligraphic designs for centuries. Made in various widths and lengths, they allow the calligrapher to precisely shape letters in Arabic and Persian, and vary the thickness of the strokes depending on the style of calligraphy used.

## Fasting

Fasting is a practice associated with many religious traditions, including Judaism and Christianity as well as Islam. The Qur'an notes that fasting was prescribed for the faithful before the revelation of the Qur'an:

*O you who believe! Fasting was prescribed for you, as it was prescribed for those before you, so that you may become God-conscious. (al-Baqarah 2.183)*

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا كُتِبَ عَلَيْكُمُ الصِّيَامُ كَمَا كُتِبَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِن قَبْلِكُمْ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ

### 4. *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart, 1997.

This Hebrew Bible is opened to a passage in the book of Exodus that describes the fast undertaken by Moses:

*The LORD said to Moses: Write these words; in accordance with these words I have made a covenant with you and with Israel. He was there with the LORD forty days and forty nights; he neither ate bread nor drank water. And he wrote on the tablets the words of the covenant, the ten commandments. (Ex. 34.27-28)*

### 5. *Holy Bible*. Arabic. The Bible Society in Lebanon, 1993.

This Arabic Bible is opened to a passage in the Gospel of Matthew in which Jesus instructs his followers about the proper way to fast:

*And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matt. 6.16-17)*

### 6. *Angels bring food to Jesus in the wilderness*. From a Mirror of Holiness (Mir'at al-quds) of Father Jerome Xavier. Mughal, India, ca. 1602-04. (Cleveland Museum of Art, 2005.145.55.a)

In the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, the Mughal emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605) invited Portuguese Jesuit missionaries to court. Eager to learn more about the Christian faith they professed, he commissioned a life of Christ which was translated into Persian. A subsequent edition produced for his son Prince Selim was illustrated with sumptuous paintings.

This painting depicts Jesus in the desert where, according to the Gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke), he spent forty days and nights fasting. After he successfully resisted the temptations of Satan, angels came and ministered to him.

## 7. Dates.

The daily fast of Ramadan is broken when the sunset prayer (*maghreb*) is called. Traditionally, the fast is first broken with a few dates (as represented in the exhibit) and a cup of water.

See: Ali Budak, *Fasting in Islam and the Month of Ramadan: A Comprehensive Guide* (2006).

## Prayer

### 8. Prayer beads (*Misbaha/subha/tespih*).

As in other religious traditions, Muslims may use prayer beads in private devotions collectively known as *dhikr*, or “remembrance” – that is, remembrance of God (*Allah*). The strands comprise 33 or 99 beads, and are used for reciting the 99 “beautiful names of God.” Muslims may also use the beads for reciting the *tasbeih of Fatima*. In this prayer, attributed to Fatima, the daughter of Muhammad, three phrases are each repeated 33 times: *subhan Allah* (“Glory to God”), *al-hamdu li-Llah* (“Praise be to God”), and *Allahu Akbar* (“God is the Most Great”). Another set of *misbaha* (of blue glass beads) can be seen at the far right of the exhibit case.

### 9. *Turbah*. Clay. Iraq (Gift of Dr. Adil al-Humadi).

Among some Shi’i Muslims, it is customary to use *turbah* in prayer. These earthen or clay tablets are placed on the ground so that the forehead touches it during prostration. This serves as a reminder to humanity of its humble origins, made from the dust of the earth. Moreover, *turbah* are often made from the soil of Karbala, the Iraqi city where Muhammad’s grandson Husayn ibn Ali was martyred in 680 CE.

### 10. Ceramic tiles. Turkey, 20<sup>th</sup> century.

These tiles together form the Arabic phrase: *bismillah al-rahman al-rahim* – “In the name of God, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful.” This phrase is used at the beginning of every chapter of the Qur’an (except one), and is uttered by Muslims throughout the day before starting any important endeavor.

### 11. Lantern (*fanoos*)

Above all, these lanterns have come to symbolize the observance of Ramadan. Hung outside homes, business and across city streets, in various shapes, sizes and colors, the *fanoos* symbolizes the light of truth and wisdom conveyed by the Qur’an.

**12. *The Angel Gabriel.*** Detail from a copy of al-Sarai's *Nahj al-Faradis* (The Paths of Paradise) Iran, Herat; c. 1465 (David Collection, Copenhagen).

The revelation of the Qur'an to Muhammad is closely associated with the angel Gabriel (*Jibril*) who also figures in the Hebrew Bible and the Gospels. According to the Qur'an, it was on the "Night of Power" when Gabriel first spoke to Muhammad:

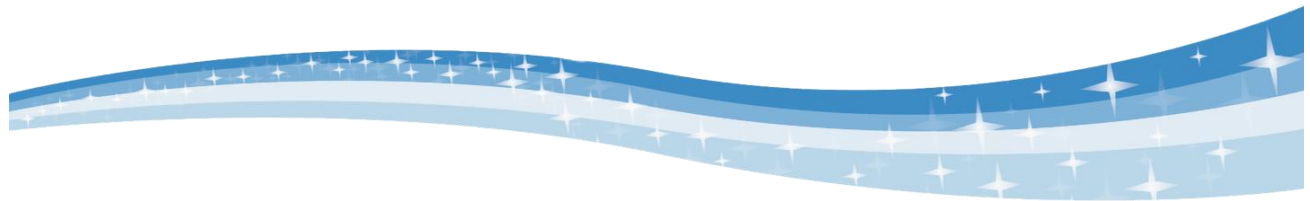
*We have indeed revealed it (the Qur'an) on this Night of Power. And what will explain to you what this Night of Power is? The Night of Power is better than a thousand months. The angels and the Spirit descend repeatedly that night by permission of their Lord in every task. Peace there is until the break of day. (al-Qadr 97.1-5)*

## Almsgiving

**13. Begging bowl (*kashkul*).** Copper. (On generous loan from Jack and Dea Hart, Olean, New York)

As in other religions, Islam has produced holy men and women who have undertaken a life of voluntary poverty and itinerancy, stripping themselves of base thoughts, actions and desires, and directing their hearts, minds, and bodies to the remembrance of God. These itinerants (*dervishes*) met their physical needs by collecting alms from charitable Muslims in a begging bowl or, *kashkūl* in Persian. The paper money and coins used in the exhibit comes from various countries, including: Egypt, Jordan, Turkey and India.

See: Amy Singer, *Charity in Islamic Societies* (2008).



## Conclusion

14. Washington Irving, *Mahomet and His Successors*. New York: Charles Putnam & Sons, 1896 (Originally published 1849-50).

Washington Irving is best known as the author of American short story classics such as: "Rip Van Winkle" (1819) and "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" (1820). Few are aware, however, that Irving authored what Syed Ashraf Ali (Islamic Foundation, Bangladesh) has called: "the first sympathetic biography of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) ever to appear in America." In the passage displayed here (righthand page), Irving describes the night in Ramadan when the Qur'an was first revealed to the Prophet.