

The Quran and its Message

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Joseph A Islam www.quransmessage.com

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Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

SAJDA e-TILAWAT - UNDERSTANDING THE TRADITION

Joseph A Islam

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In the main, during congregational recitation (tilawat) of the Quran and at set points (verses), a 'sajda' (prostration) is traditionally performed when one encounters these specific verses. There exist minor differences between the various schools of thought as to when a prostration may be required. However, there is overwhelming agreement to its necessity in traditional Islamic thought.

The purpose of the article is not to challenge its requirement outright. That is left to the reader to decide. The purpose is to better understand the tradition which has developed as a compulsory requirement as understood by the Muslim masses today and to ascertain whether it has any support from the Quran.

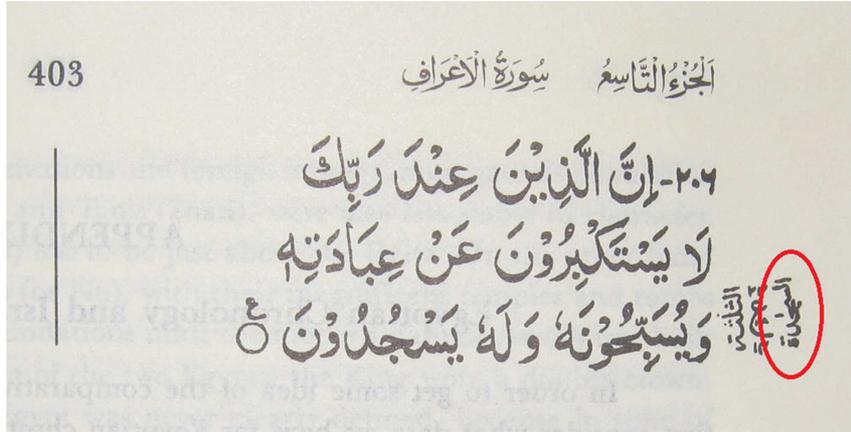
Generally, up to fifteen points in the Quran, a prostration is considered compulsory. (Numbers can differ depending on the school of thought). These are:

- (1) **Chapter 7 AL-ARAF (THE HEIGHTS) - Verse 206** [* Used in the examples below]
- (2) Chapter 13 AR-RAD (THE THUNDER) - Verse 15
- (3) Chapter 16 AN-NAHL (THE BEE) - Verse 50
- (4) Chapter 17 AL-ISRA (ISRA) - Verse 109
- (5) Chapter 19 MARYAM (MARY) - Verse 58
- (6) Chapter 22 AL-HAJJ (THE PILGRIMAGE) - Verse 18
- (7) Chapter 22 AL-HAJJ (THE PILGRIMAGE) - Verse 77
- (8) Chapter 25 AL-FURQAN (THE CRITERION) - Verse 60
- (9) Chapter 27 AN-NAML (THE ANT(S)) - Verse 26
- (10) Chapter 32 AS-SAJDA (THE PROSTRATION) - Verse 15
- (11) Chapter 38 SAD (THE LETTER SAD) - Verse 24
- (12) Chapter 41 FUSSILAT (EXPLAINED IN DETAIL) - Verse 38
- (13) Chapter 53 AN-NAJM (THE STAR) - Verse 62

- (14) Chapter 84 AL-INSHIQAQ (THE SUNDERING) - Verse 21
 (15) Chapter 96 AL-ALAQ (THE CLOT, READ) - Verse 19

In Quranic manuscripts throughout the world and digital Quranic media, the requirement to prostrate is generally indicated by a symbol or a sign.

* Surah (Chapter 7) Verse 206 - Yusuf Ali Quran [1]



* Surah (Chapter 7) Verse 206 - Quran Explorer (IndoPak Script) [2]

سُورَةُ الْأَعْرَافِ

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ عِنْدَ رَبِّكَ لَا يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ عَنْ عِبَادَتِهِ وَيُسَبِّحُونَهُ وَلَهُ يَسْجُدُونَ ﴿٢٠٦﴾

* Surah (Chapter 7) Verse 206 - Quran Explorer (Usmani Script) [3]

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EARLIER MANUSCRIPTS

The earliest manuscripts of the Quran were devoid of any diacritical points or vowel signs [See 4 below] so it would be futile to expect any such symbolisation denoting a prostration in these manuscripts. As revelation of the Quran and its primary propagation was oral, the written codex provided in most cases a memory aid to its revelatory counterpart. Both transmissions (oral and written) worked in tandem to stabilise the text. [Please see 5 below]

"All old Qur'anic script is completely without any diacritical points or vowel signs as explained above. Also there are no headings or separations between the *suwar* nor any other kind of division, nor even any formal indication of the end of a verse. Scholars distinguish between two types of early writing:

- Kufi, which is fairly heavy and not very dense.
- Hijazi, which is lighter, denser and slightly inclined towards the right.

Some believe that the Hijazi is older than the Kufi, while others say that both were in use at the same time, but that Hijazi was the less formal style. (4)" [4]

"...Thus, if the Qur'an had been transmitted only orally for the first century, sizeable variations between texts such as in the hadith and pre-Islamic poetry would be found, and if it had been transmitted only in writing, sizeable variations such as those in different transmissions of the original document of the Constitution of Medina would be found. But neither is the case with the Qur'an. There must have been a parallel written transmission limiting variation in the oral transmission to the graphic form, side by side with a parallel oral transmission preserving the written transmission from corruption. The oral transmission of the Qur'an was essentially static, rather than organic. There was a single text, and nothing, not even allegedly abrogated material, could be taken out, nor anything be put in..." [5]

However, any Islamic 'living' tradition which had its **source** in the Quranic text would be equally inappropriate to dismiss outright, without due consideration.

An absence of any symbolisation in an ancient manuscript **would not** be conclusive proof that the earliest Muslim communities were not prostrating at set points during a Quranic recitation.

Without subjecting the matter to an intense scrutiny of all Quranic manuscripts extant today, with the assumption that all are dated correctly, it would not be possible to pinpoint exactly when the symbolisation of prostrations started to appear in the Quranic manuscripts. However, a very cursory glance at some later manuscripts still show an absence of such symbolisation.

* **Surah (Chapter 7) Verse 206 - Bihari manuscript dated to the 8th century AD [sic]** [6]

[sic] - Possible reference expected AH. The Bihari script was used in India approximately in the 14th and 15th century AD (Approx. 8th Century AH)

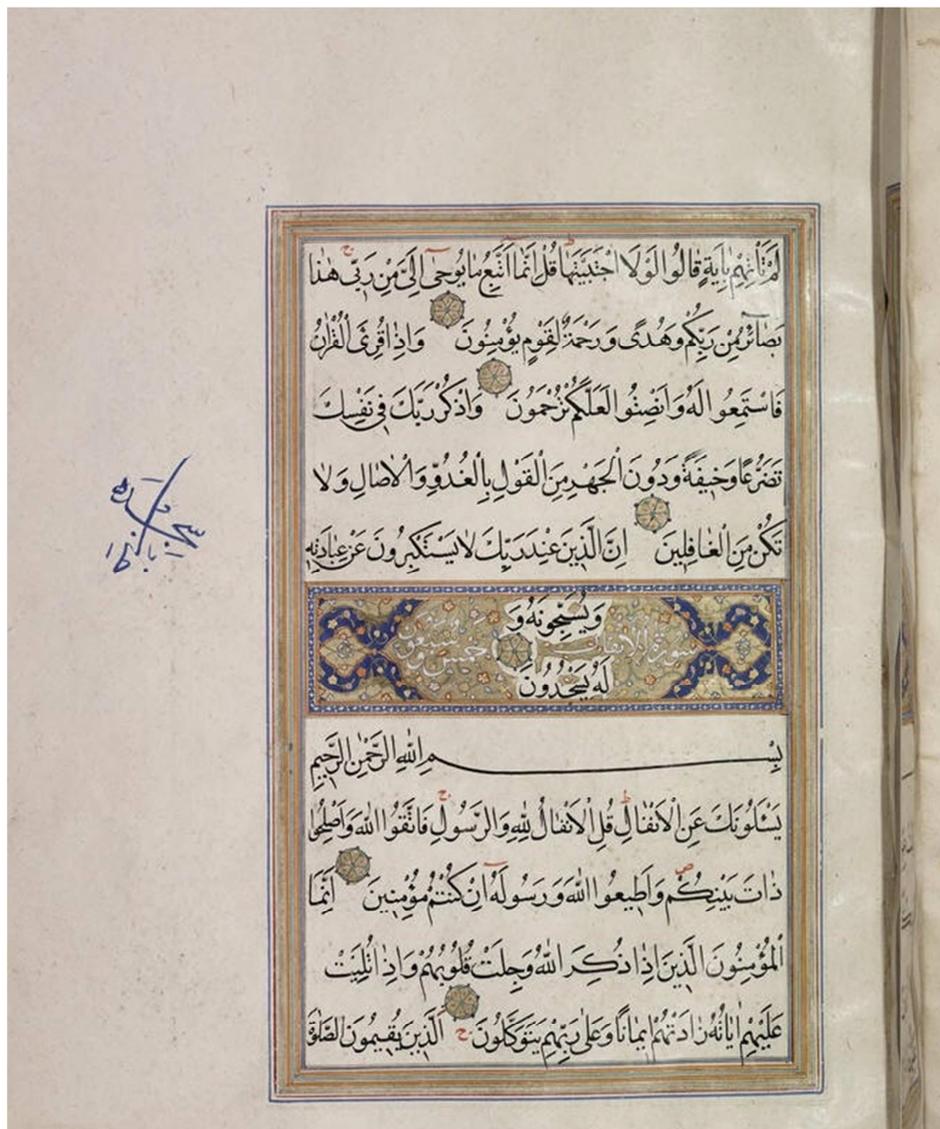
An absence of any symbolic indication that a prostration is required is noted at the end of verse 206 of Chapter (Surah) 7.



"This copy of the Quran consists of 246 pages sized 49.5x31 cm. with 15 lines to each page. Most of the script is written in black except for the word "Allah" which is in red ink throughout. Note also the exegetical comments in the margins taking the form of abstract geometrical designs. The "bihari"

script is said to resemble a sword or a ship. Located in the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia." [7]

However, some later medieval manuscripts do show 'Sajda' (prostration) markings within the margins. Please see below an excerpt from a Quranic codex at the Princeton University Digital Library of Islamic Manuscripts. [8]



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Physical Description:

- ii, 324, ii leaves: paper ; 484 × 328 (303 × 188) mm.

Origin:

- [Iran?], between 15--? and 16--?

WHAT IS THE QURANIC SUJUD (PROSTRATION)?

In the article [9] below, it is argued that the root word 'SJD' primarily means to **become submissive, humble, to make obeisance, lowly, or to pay respect**. In the context of prayer and God, it can be cogently argued from the Quran that the SJD constitutes a physical prostration by means of bending oneself towards the ground in complete subservience. However, when the word is used in relation to entities other than God, different shades of meaning are admitted.

سجد

1. سَجَدَ, (S, A, Mṣb, K, &c.,) [aor. 2,] inf. n. سَجُودٌ, (Mṣb,) He was, or became, lowly, humble, or submissive; syn. خَضَعَ, (S, A, K, TA,) or تَطَامَنَ, and ذَلَّ: (Mṣb:) or he bent himself down towards the ground: (Aboo-Bekr, TA: [and [or it has both of these significations combined; i. e. he was, or became, lowly, humble, or submissive, bending himself down; for] the primary signification of السَّجُودُ is تَذَلُّلٌ together with تَطَامُنٌ [or تَطَامَنٌ]. (Bḍ in ii. 32.) And اسجد He lowered his head, and bent himself; (AA, S,

Source: Edward Lanes Lexicon [10]

UNDERSTANDING THE TRADITION

Indeed, support for a compulsory prostration at set points in the Quran is well attested in [Islamic secondary sources](#). However, this is not the concern of this article nor is it considered a source of proof.

What is important to consider is the assertion that the 'prostration' is implicit (some argue explicit) by the text of the Quran itself. Any Quranic based assertion should not be dismissed without scrutiny.

It is argued that the tradition was primarily based on the **Quranic text** which clearly instructs believers to prostrate. In its secondary context it is argued, that when one encounters the powerful narratives in Arabic, a true believer feels compelled to prostrate at the awe of what is being narrated

in the 'voice' of Almighty God. For these assertions, some verses will be cited where the text is argued to appear instructive.

053.059-62

"Do you then wonder at this statement? And you laugh and (do) not weep? While you amuse yourselves? **So prostrate yourselves before God and worship Him!**" [prostration traditionally made - number 13]

084.020-21

"What then is the matter with them, that they do not believe? **And when the Quran is read to them, they do not prostrate?**" [prostration traditionally made - number 14]

From these examples above, it appears that the verse is not requiring one to physically prostrate per se, but rather, emphasise the importance and majesty of the Quranic dialogue which requires utmost humility and obeisance of its listeners. After all, the Lord of the Universe has spoken to mankind and the impact on the conscience mind should remain powerful during its recitation. It is noteworthy that verse 84:21 in particular, references the Quran as a whole and if a prostration was to be argued, from the narrative at least this would require the listener to prostrate whenever the Quran was read which would not be feasible and thus, could possibly not be its intended meaning.

However, one needs to appreciate what the earliest communities must have felt when they encountered these verses in a recitation. The awe of the narratives of the Quran in Arabic combined with the power of the dialogue would no doubt have left many weeping and spiritually shaken. This can also be experienced by those that are conversant with the Quran in Arabic and truly appreciate the power of the dialogue in its purest form.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Any Islamic tradition should be examined **through the lens of the Quran** which describes itself as a furqan (criterion between right and wrong 25:1). A tradition should not be dismissed merely because it is a tradition but should be understood within the scope of the Quranic narratives. Indeed, many traditions practiced today arguably find **little or no support** from the Quran but to dismiss all traditions outright as '**unquranic**' without due Quranic scrutiny, would be unwarranted.

It is also accepted that many traditions are vouched for as instructive by the traditional clergy and as part of God's ordained religion. This can be debated and indeed rejected, if no unequivocal support can be garnered from the Quran.

It is left to the reader to conclude on whether to appreciate or dismiss the tradition of the *Sajda e-tilawat* that has developed in the context of the Quranic narratives.

Whether the practice of a physical prostration after listening to *particular verses* is '**compulsory**', unequivocal support from the Quran remains unproven.

REFERENCES

[1] ALI. A.Y, *The Holy Quran, Text, Translation and Commentary, New Revised Edition, Published by Amana Corporation, Brentwood, Maryland, USA, 1989, Page 403*

The highlight marked in red is my own insertion. It has no bearing on the original text other than it emphasises relevance to the topic at hand. This is merely an illustration and has solely been utilised for educational and explanatory purposes.

[2] QURAN EXPLORER [Available online] <http://www.quranexplorer.com/Quran/Default.aspx>, [Accessed] 11th January 2012

The highlight marked in red is my own insertion. It has no bearing on the original text other than it emphasises relevance to the topic at hand. This is merely an illustration and has solely been utilised for educational and explanatory purposes.

[3] Ibid.

[4] DENFFER. A.V, *Ulum Al-Quran: Introduction to the Sciences of the Quran, Islamic Foundation; 2nd Revised edition (Nov 1994), Chapter 3, The Qur'an in Manuscript and Print, Early Manuscripts, Note (4): This is the view of N. Abbott: 'We can no longer draw a chronological demarcation line between what are commonly termed the Kufi and the Naskhi scripts, nor can we consider the latter as a development of the former. This ... now demands a more general recognition. Our materials show that there were two tendencies at work simultaneously, both of them natural ones' (Abbott, op. cit., p.16). See plates 5 and 6.*

[5] BROCKETT. A.A, *Studies in Two Transmissions of the Quran, University of St. Andrews, Department of Arabic Studies, Ph.D. thesis 1984, Chapter Conclusion, Page 142*

[6] WHEELER. B, *Centre for Middle East and Islamic Studies, Department of History, United States Naval Academy, Quran Manuscripts, Bihari Manuscript [Available online] http://www.usna.edu/Users/humss/bwheeler/quran/bihari_8.html, [Accessed] 11th January 2012*

[7] Ibid.

[8] Princeton University, Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, Princeton University Digital Library, [Available online] <http://pudl.princeton.edu/objects/2r36tx59x> [Accessed] 22nd February 2012

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[9] ISLAM. J, *WHAT IS THE QURANIC SUJUD (PROSTRATION)?* <http://quransmessage.com/articles/sujud%20FM3.htm> [Accessed] 26th May 2018

[10] LANE. E.W, *Edward Lanes Lexicon, Williams and Norgate 1863; Librairie du Liban Beirut-Lebanon 1968, Volume 4, Page 1307*

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[Joseph Islam](#)

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