

## Descent of the Qur'ān muzūl al-Qur'ān

### Definitions and Usage

The Qur'ān uses two augmented verbal forms of the trilateral root *n-z-l* to refer to its own descent, in both spatial and temporal senses: Form II: *nazzala*, and its verbal noun *tanzīl*; and form IV: *anzala*, and its verbal noun *inzāl*. Ibn Fāris (d. 395/1004) writes that *n-z-l* “refers to the descent of something (*hubūt*) or its falling down (*wuqū'uh*), [as in the phrases] ‘he dismounted his horse’ (*nazala 'an dābbatih muzūlan*) and ‘the rain fell from the sky’ (*nazal al-maṭar min al-samā'i*)” (*Maqāyīs*). It is also used to indicate arrival at a destination, halt during a journey, and generally to denote a descent from a higher to a lower plane (Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān*). Both verbal forms used by the Qur'ān for its own descent are transitive in the sense of sending something from above to below. This “fall” (*inḥiṭāl*) is the original meaning of “descent” (*nuzūl*), according to al-Rāghib al-Aṣḥfahānī (d. ca.502/1108):

Allah Almighty sending down (*inzāl*) His blessings (*ni'amah*) and His punishments (*niqamah*) on creation, [that is,] granting either to them. This can be realized either by sending down either the thing itself, as in the sending down of the Qur'ān, or the means and guidance to it, as in [the verses] *And We sent down iron* (Q 57:25); *And We sent down with them the Scripture and the balance* (Q 57:25); and, *And He sent down for you of cattle eight pairs* (Q 39:6). (*Mufradāt*)

Later lexicographers incorporate this definition of descent. 'Alī Muḥammad al-Jurjānī (d. 816/1413) differentiates between the two forms of *n-z-l* employed in the Qur'ān: “[form IV] *al-inzāl* is used to indicate a one-time action (*yusta'mal fī-l-daf'a*) whereas [form II] *tanzīl* is used for gradual action (*fī-l-tadrīj*)” (*Ta'rifāt*, no. 562). Muḥibb al-Dīn al-Sayyid Muḥammad Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī (1145-1205/1732-1790) says that the difference between the two verbal forms is with regard to their extension (*ṣiḡhat al-takthīr*) (*Tāj*). The Sevilan linguist Abū-l-Ḥasan Ibn 'Uṣfūr (597-669/1200-1297) also differentiates between their usage by specifying that form II (*tanzīl*) denotes an intensive (*lil-mubālagha*), extensive (*lil-takthīr*), or multiplicative meaning (*lil-ta'dīf*), whereas form IV (*al-inzāl*) expresses the factitive and causative meaning (*lil-ta'dīya*) (*Mumtī'*, Dhikr ma'ānī abniyat al-af'āl). This distinction has led some exegetes to postulate that in general when the Qur'ān uses form II for its descent, it refers to its serial revelation to the Prophet, one verse after another (*tanjīm*, as in Q 17:106: *And (it is) a Qur'ān, which We have divided (into parts), in order that you might recite it to people at intervals; and We have revealed it in stages*), whereas when it uses form IV it refers to a single sending down, as in Q 97:1: *Indeed, We sent it down (anzalnāhu) during the Night of Decree*, which by exegetical consensus refers to the Qur'ān's descent to the heaven of this world during that *Blessed Night* (Q 44:3).

Qur'ānic descriptions of the revelations of the Torah (*q.v.*) and the Gospel (see INJĪL) generally employ form IV, although the descent of the Torah is also mentioned once with form II (Q 3:93). This single exception notwithstanding, most exegetes take other verses, especially Q 3:3 (*He sent down (nazzala) upon you (Muḥammad) the Book, with truth, confirming what was before it and He sent down (anzala) the Torah and the Gospel*) and Q 4:136 (*and the Book which He sent down (nazzala) upon His Messenger, and the Book which He sent down (anzala) before*) as key indicators to differentiate two kinds of descent. The descent of the Qur'ān is mentioned here using verbal form II and the Torah and the Gospel using form IV, which is explained by the exegetes as referring to the serial revelation of the Qur'ān and the single descent of the Torah and the Gospel respectively. Jār Allāh Abū-l-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. 'Umar al-Zamakhsharī (467-538/ca.1074-1143), for instance, specifically says that the verbal forms employed differ “because the Qur'ān was sent down in smaller parts and at intervals (*munajjaman*), while the two [previous Books] were sent down all at once (*jumlatan*)” (*Kashshāf*, sub Q 3:3; also see *Tafsīrs* of Khāzin and Nasafī, sub Q 3:3; Rāzī, *Tafsīr*, sub Q 25:32). Andalusian exegete Abū Ja'far Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm Ibn al-Zubayr al-Gharnāfī (d. 708/1308) explains the usage in more detail:

If one asks why the Book (that is, the Qurʾān) is mentioned with the word *nazzala* and the Torah and the Injil with the word *anzala*, the answer to this can be: the verbal form *nazzala* (form II) entails repetition (*tikrār*) in an additive sense (*li-ajl al-taḍʿīf*) (...). In this respect the Words of Allah *He sent down upon you the Book* (Q 3:3) can be understood as referring to the division into sections of the thing being sent down (*mushīr ilā tafṣīl al-munazzal*) and to its being sent down in separate parts (*tanjīmih*)...and to the fact that it was not sent down all at once (*lam yunzal daḥḥatan wāḥidatan*)...whereas the verbal form *anzala* (form IV) refers to a single action, as in the case of Mūsā, upon him peace, who received the Torah all at once and in a single moment (*fi waqt wāḥid*), as attested to by the Words of Allah *And We wrote for him on the tablets all manner of admonition, clearly spelling out everything, and [We said:] “Hold fast unto them... (Q 7:145). Whereas the Mighty Book (the Qurʾān) was sent down in separate parts (fa-nuzzila muqassatan), beginning with the first words of the revelation, Recite in the Name of your Lord (Q 96:1), until the last words, This day I have perfected your Religion for you... (Q 5:3). And if one of these Books is mentioned alone (mufradan) without the mention of any other Book, or without the definite article, then that refers to something already mentioned in the text, [and for that] the verbal form *anzala* (form IV) is used, as in *And those who believe in that which was sent down (unzila) to you and that which was sent down (unzila) before you (Q 2:4). (Milāk, sub Q 3:3)**

Of the 293 occurrences of derivatives of the root *n-z-l*, examples of verses describing the descent of the Qurʾān, whether directly or through one of its names (e.g., *al-kitāb*, *al-dhikr*, *al-furqān*), include the following (for complete list, see ‘Abd al-Bāqī, *Muʿjam*, sub *n-z-l*):

- form II (*nazzala*): The Book sent down with truth (Q 2:176); sent down to the heart of the Prophet by the will of Allah (Q 2:97); by Allah Who will preserve it (Q 15:9); confirming what had come before (Q 3:3; 4:136; 7:196); *We have sent down to thee the Book explaining all things, a Guide, a Mercy, and Glad Tidings to those who submit (16:89); the Holy Spirit has brought it down from your Lord with truth (Q 16:102); sent down as the Criterion (Q 25:1); And those who disbelieve say, ‘Why was the Qurʾān not sent down (nuzzila) upon him all at once?’ [It is so] that We may strengthen thereby your heart; and We have rehearsed it to you in slow, well-arranged stages (Q 25:32); brought down by the Trustworthy Spirit (Q 26:193); sent down as the best discourse (Q 39:23).*
- form IV (*anzala*): *who believe in what has been sent down (unzila) upon you... (Q 2:4); Say: We believe in Allah and that which has been sent down to us... (Q 2: 136); sent down (anzala) upon you, containing clear, unambiguous verses (Q 3:7); sent down the Book and Wisdom (Q 4:113); Indeed, We have sent it down as an Arabic Qurʾān (Q 12:2 ); the Light We have sent down (Q 64:8 ) blessed (Q 6:92); sent down during a blessed night (Q 44:3); in the month of Ramadan (Q 2:185); the Revelation sent down during the Night of Qadr (Q 97:1); reference to those who conceal what Allah sent down of the Book (Q 2:174, 213); recalling the Divine favors and what He sent down of the Book and the Wisdom (Q 2:231); and verses specifying that it is Allah Who sent down the Book (Q 3:7; 4:113; 5:48; 14:1; 16:64; 18:1; 21:10; 29:47, 51; 39:2, 41; 42:15, 17).*
- verbal noun (*tanzīl*): *And a Recitation have We divided [into parts] (faraqnāhu), for you to recite it to mankind at intervals, and We have sent it down successively (wa nazzalnāhu tanzīlan) (Q 17:106). The verbal noun *tanzīl* denotes the revelation itself: it is a “successive revelation” (*tanzīl*) from the Creator (Q 20:4; 76:23), the Lord of the Worlds (Q 26:192; 32:2; 56:80; 69:43), the Mighty and Merciful (Q 36:5), the Beneficent and Merciful (Q 41:2), the Wise and Praiseworthy (Q 41:42), the Mighty and Wise (Q 39:1; 45:2; 46:2), the Mighty and All-knowing (Q 40:2); brought down in clear Arabic by the True Spirit upon the heart of the Prophet (Q 26:193-195).*

Al-Rāghib explains the difference between *inzāl* and *tanzīl* in reference to the descent of the angels and the Qurʾān: *tanzīl* “indicates the place (*mawḍiʿ*) to which its descent refers; and *inzāl* is the descent in separate and continuous sequence (*mufarraqa*), one time after another (*marratan baʿda ukhrā*)” (*Mufradāt, sub n-z-l*). According to ʿImād al-Dīn Ismāʿīl b. ʿUmar Ibn Kathīr (700-774/1300-1373), the Arabic noun *tanzīl* [the act of sending down] can be considered a synonym of the Qurʾān itself: “That is [the sending down of] the Qurʾān to you, O Muḥammad—the revealed Word of the Lord, Who possesses everything” (*Tafsīr, Q 20:4*). In addition, *tanzīl* has a spatial dimension: “Verily, this [Qurʾān] is the *tanzīl* of the Lord of the worlds” (Q 26:192), where, as per Ibn ʿĀdil (d. 880/1475), *tanzīl* means *munazzal* (“sent down”), as supported by Q 36:5, *a revelation (tanzīl) of the Exalted in Might, the Merciful*, which is explained as “the path (*al-ṣirāṭ*), the method (*al-manhaj*) and the Religion that you have brought, are sent down by the Lord of Might (*munazzalun min Rabb al-ʿizza*)” (Ibn ʿĀdil, *Iubāb* and Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr sub Q 26:192*).

### From the Preserved Tablet

The eminent Follower and early exegete Saʿīd b. Jubayr (46-95/666-ca.714) reported: “I asked Ibn ʿAbbās about *Indeed, We sent it down during the Night of Decree* (Q 97:1) and *We sent it down during a blessed night* (Q 44:3), and *The month of Ramadan in which was sent down the Qurʾān* (Q 2:185)—do these refer to [the descent of] the entire [Qurʾān] or a part of it? Ibn ʿAbbās replied, ‘Allah sent down the Qurʾān, all at once, from the seventh Heaven to the heaven of this world during the Night of Decree, and He set it by the setting stars; *So I swear by the setting of the stars*, (Q 56:75; see below), from where Jibrīl, upon him peace, brings it down...’ (Ibn Ḥātim, *Tafsīr, sub Q 2:185 and 25:32*). In a variant narration, Ibn ʿAbbās says, “The Qurʾān was detached from the Reminder (*fuṣūla al-Qurʾān min al-dhīkr*); then it was placed in the House of Might (*bayt al-ʿizza*) in the heaven of this world; then Jibrīl, upon him peace, began to bring it down to the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace” (Ḥākim, *Mustadrak, Tafsīr, bi-sm Allāh al-Raḥmān al-Raḥīm 2:242 §2881*, hadith classed by al-Dhahabī as sound of transmission (*ṣaḥīḥ al-isnād*), although Bukhārī and Muslim do not include it in their collections; Ṭabarānī, *Muʿjam al-kabīr 11:438 §12243*; Nasāʿī, *Sunan*, Faḍāʿil al-Qurʾān, kam bayn nuzūl awwal al-Qurʾān wa bayn ākhirih, 7:247 §7936).

Jalāl al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Suyūṭī (849-911/1445-ca.1505) writes, “The concealed secret in sending down the complete (*jumlatan*) Qurʾān to this heaven is to exalt its status (*tafkhīm amrihi*) and the status of him upon whom it was sent down. (This occurred by informing the dwellers of the seven heavens that this [Qurʾān] is the last of the Books being sent down, [sent down] upon the Seal of the Messengers (i.e. Muḥammad), to the most ennobled community. We brought it nearer to them [to the worldly heaven] in order to send it down upon him” (*Itqān, Type 16: fi kayfiyyat inzālih*).

The first descent of the Qurʾān occurred in Ramadan (Q 2:185), on a blessed night (Q 44:3), the Night of Qadr (Q 97:1). A hadith narrated by the Laythī Companion Wāthila b. al-Asqaʿ (22BH-83/600-202), one of the People of the Bench (*aṣḥāb al-ṣuffa*), provides specific details: “The Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, said: ‘The scrolls of Ibrāhīm, upon him peace, were sent down on the first night of Ramadan; the Torah on the sixth of Ramadan, the Gospel on the thirteenth of Ramadan, and the Criterion (*Furqān*, that is, the Qurʾān) on the twenty-fourth” (Aḥmad, *Musnad, Musnad al-Shāmiyyīn, ḥadīth Wāthila b. al-Asqaʿ, 28:191 §16984*; Bayhaqī, *Shuʿab al-imān, 3:521 §2053*; Ṭabarānī, *Muʿjam al-kabīr, 22:75 §185*; al-Sakhāwī, *Jamāl, Kayfiyyat inzāl al-Qurʾān*). Al-Ṭabarī adds: “the Psalms were sent down during the twelfth night of Ramadan” (*Tafsīr*). The Night of Qadr, which is *better than one thousand months* (Q 97:3), saw the descent of the entirety of the Qurʾān, according to many glosses (*cf. Ṭabarī, Tafsīr*). Other traditions relate that this descent was “all at once” (*jumlatan wāḥidatan*) (Ḥākim, *Mustadrak, Tafsīr sūrat Innā anzalnāhu*), “from the highest heaven to the heaven of this world (*ilā al-samāʿ*)” or “from the seventh heaven to Jibrīl in the lowest heaven (*fi-l-samāʿ al-dunyā*)” (for a detailed collection of these traditions, see Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr, sub Q 2:185 and 97:1-3*). Al-Shaʿbī said,

“The beginning of the descent of the Qurʾān occurred during the Night of Decree” (see Ibn ʿAṭīyya, *Muḥarrar*; Qurṭubī, *Tafsīr*, sub Q 87:1; Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, Type 16: fī kayfiyyat inzālih).

The Preserved Tablet (*lawḥ mahfūz*) (q.v.) from which the Qurʾān descended is mentioned only once in the Qurʾān: *Indeed, this is a glorious Qurʾān, upon a Guarded Tablet* (Q 85:21-22). Abū-l-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. Aḥmad al-Wāḥidī al-Naysābūrī (d. 468/1075) comments:

It is [guarded] by Allah and it is the Mother of the Book (*umm al-kitāb*), from which the Qurʾān and [other Divine] Books are transcribed. It is known as the Guarded Tablet, as devils cannot reach it; it is protected against any increase or decrease. (*Wasīl*)

### Revelation to the Prophet

From the worldly heaven, the revelation to the Prophet began on a Monday (hadith narrated by Abū Qatāda: Muslim, Ṣawm, istiḥbāb ṣiyām thalātha ayyam min kull shahr...) in 610 CE, when he was about forty years of age, and ended in 11/632, a few days before his death. It was a “descent by which light shone upon the world and the guidance of Allah Most High reached mankind” (Zarqānī, *Manāhil*, Tanazzulat al-Qurʾān).

Commentaries and traditions often use the verbal form II *najjama* and its derivatives to refer to the Qurʾān’s descent “in separate parts” (in the sense of “installments”); Q 56:75 (*Then I swear by the setting of the stars (nujūm)*) is figuratively interpreted to refer to the descent of the smaller parts (*nujūm*) of the Qurʾān (Tustarī, *Tafsīr*, Khuṭbat al-kitāb, 1:18; Ibn ʿAṭīyya, *Muḥarrar*, sub Q 97:1; for lexical meanings, see Ibn Manzūr, *Lisān*, sub *n-j-m*). Abū Shāma (d. 665/1266) cites Ibn ʿAbbās to the effect that ʿalā *mawāqīʿ* *al-nujūm* means “slowly” (*rasal*), “step by step” (*riḥq*), over days and months. Thus “by the setting of the stars” means “like the rising and setting of the stars,” that is, in separated parts (*mufarraḡan*) (*Murshid*, Fī-l-bayān ʿan kayfiyyat nuzūl al-Qurʾān; Suyūṭī, *Itqān*, Type 16: fī kayfiyyat inzālih).

The phrases *faraḡnāhu* and ʿalā *mukthīn* are explained by exegetes to demonstrate that the Qurʾān specifically describes its descent to the Prophet as being sequential: *And [this is] a Qurʾān that We divided (faraḡnāhu) [into parts] that you may recite it to people at intervals (ʿalā mukthīn) and We sent it down by stages (wa nazzalnāhu tanzīlan)* (Q 17:106). Regarding the first of these phrases, Ibn ʿĀdil writes, “Allah divided [the revelation] so that its memorization be easier and so that its understanding (*al-iḥāṭa*) and grasping its proofs, realities (*ḥaqāʿiq*), and fine points (*daqāʿiq*) be achieved in a more complete form” (*Lubāb*). Variant readings (see CANONICAL READINGS) of this verse (by Ibn ʿAbbās, Ubayy b. Kaʿb, and Ibn Muḥayṣin) have the form II verb *faraḡnāhu*, which intensifies the meaning; Ibn Kathīr glosses it as “sent down verse by verse” (*Tafsīr*). The disbelievers—either from the Quraysh or the Jews, as per Qurṭubī (*Tafsīr*)—receive the Divine answer: “We sent down the Qurʾān, one part after another;” and this is consistent with the aim of reciting it to people at intervals, this being what Allah desired from its descent (Ibn ʿAṭīyya, *Muḥarrar*, sub Q 17:106)

According to Fakhr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. ʿUmar al-Rāzī (543-606/1148-1209) the Qurʾān was sent down to the Prophet in parts, so that he could ponder over it, section by section, and so that he could recite it to people [in parts], and its memorization and comprehension of its mysteries and realities would become easier. He also cites Qatāda (d. 117/735) as saying, “The meaning [of *faraḡnāhu* in the verse] is, ‘We separated its parts (*gaṭṭaʿnāhu*), one verse after another and one sūra after another” (Rāzī, *Tafsīr*). Master exegete Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923) had already noted that this revelation in smaller parts is “that you may recite it to people unhurriedly (*ʿalā tuʿadatin*), in such a way that you can explain its recitation and its meanings” (*Tafsīr*). Muḥammad al-Ṭāhir Ibn ʿĀshūr (1296-1393/1879-1972) considered this a reason (*ʿilla*) for the division of the Qurʾān into parts (*Tafsīr*). His gloss sums up the received exegetal reflection on this phrase: “We made it separate parts (*jaʿalnāhu firaḡan*), that is, We sent it down at intervals (*munajjaman*), in separate parts (*mufarraḡan*) and not as a whole composed [book] in one moment (*ghayr mujtamiʿ ṣubratan wāḥidatan*)” (*Tafsīr*).

Another reason for the serial descent of the Qurʾān is given in Q 25:32: *And those who disbelieve say: 'Why was the Qurʾān not revealed unto him all at once (jumlatan wāḥidatan)? [It is] so that We strengthen your heart thereby; and We have arranged it in order (wa rattalnāhu tartīlan).* Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq b. Ghālīb Ibn ʿAṭīyya al-Andalusī (d. ca.542/1147) writes that it is reported from Ibn ʿAbbās and others that one of the objections of the Qurayshite disbelievers was that the Qurʾān should have been revealed at once (like the Torah and Gospel), were it truly from Allah. This verse likely refers to that objection, accounting for its descent at intervals and in parts (Ibn ʿAṭīyya, *Muḥarrar*). Ibn Kathīr says, “Allah Almighty answered them: He sent down the Qurʾān in separate parts (*munajjaman*) over twenty-three years, in accordance with the [needs arising out of] events and developments (*bi-ḥasab al-waqāʿi wal-ḥawādith*), and [to address matters] that needed Divine regulation in order to strengthen the hearts of the believers by [the Qurʾān]” (*Tafsīr*). Al-Suyūṭī glosses Q 25:32, “We sent it down, in this way, in separate parts (*mufarraḡan*) that We might strengthen your heart thereby: that is, ‘in order to consolidate your heart with it.’ If the Revelation is renewed for every event, it is fortifying for the heart, and it means greater care for him to whom it is sent. This requires that the Angel frequently descend to him and renew the knowledge with him and that [part] of the Message which he already had” (*Itqān*, Type 16: fi kayfiyyat inzālīh).

Authentic Traditions of the Prophet, upon him blessings and peace, historically attest to the gradual descent of the Qurʾān. For instance, accounts of the first revelation mention only three verses (Q 96:1-3) as having been revealed at that time (Bukhārī, *Badʿ al-waḥy*) (see REVELATION).

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**See also:** ALLAH MOST HIGH; AḤMAD; BOOKS; CANONICAL RECITATIONS; CRITERION; IBRĀHĪM, UPON HIM PEACE; INJĪL; JIBRĪL; MUḤAMMAD, UPON HIM BLESSINGS AND PEACE; NIGHT OF QADR; PRESERVED TABLET; QUR’ĀN; RAMADAN; REVELATION; SPEECH OF ALLAH; TORAH; ZABŪR.