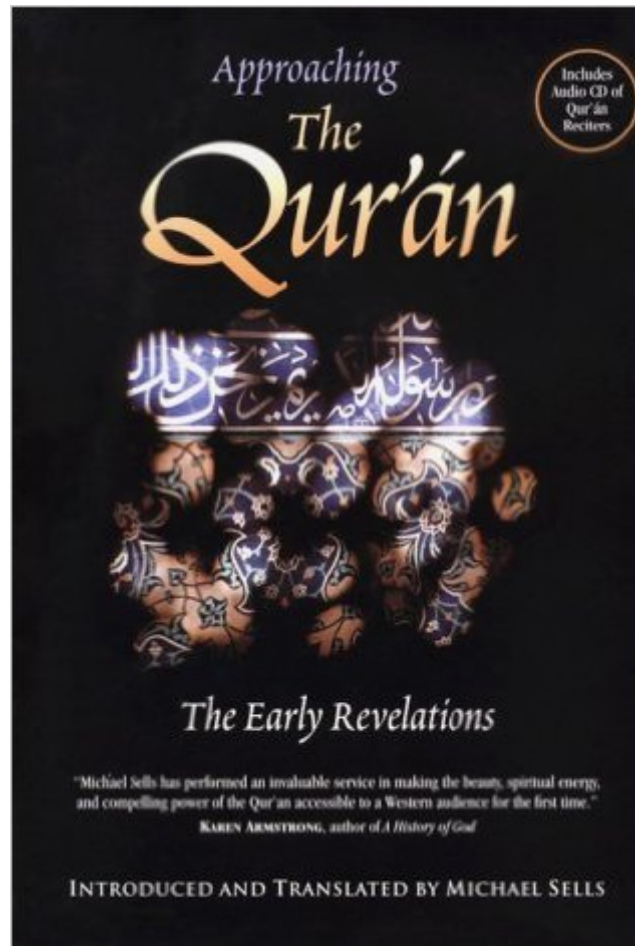


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# Approaching The Qur'an: The Early Revelations



## Synopsis

A timely publication that introduces the sacred book of Islam. Hailed by scholars as the best English translation of the Qur'an available today. Includes a 70-minute audio CD of Qur'an reciters. This is the book that was at the center of a national debate on teaching Islam, following its adoption for all incoming freshman at the University of North Carolina.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I heard Michaels Sells speak at Stanford (he's a religion professor at Haverford), and he said that when he teaches the Qur'an, his students start to get glazed eyes about halfway through the second surah (chapter). He said a colleague approached him and said, "Sells, I get to the second surah and I just lose it. I don't know what to make of it. What do you teach?" Prof. Sells said that the problem in translating the Qur'an comes from the huge grammatical differences between Arabic and English, the difficulty of translating poetry into another language, and the fact that the Qur'an has always been recited out loud. In English, he says, God in the Qur'an sounds angry, whereas in Arabic, God in the Qur'an sounds sad and compassionate. That's a big difference. Sells also says that the grammar in Arabic allows the tone of the Qur'an to achieve "ultimate majesty" at the same time as "personal intimacy." Because of the linguistic difference, that is very difficult to carry over into English. Therefore, this book is Sells' attempt to get around these difficulties in accessing the Qur'an. He gives the translation of the surah and then he gives his commentary and explanation of it. There's a CD in the back that has recitations in Arabic, so we can hear that it is poetry and it really does even rhyme and hear how the recited Qur'an can affect a person differently from the printed Qur'an. Sells said, in his talk, that students have actually come up to him with tears in their

eyes to tell him that they had previously never had any idea what the Qur'an was like. Although this is not the entire translated Qur'an, this book will give you a far better idea of what the Qur'an means and what it sounds like and where it comes from than if you pick up a translation of the Qur'an (even one with footnotes) and try to read it and understand it cold. (Many of us get glassy-eyed around the second surah.) This book will give you a much better understanding of the Qur'an than a translation will because it not only explains the meaning of the Qur'anic text, its unique approach solves the problems that those of us who don't speak Arabic have in understanding its nature and its meaning. Michael Sells said that whenever he's in Damascus, he sits on his rooftop at night and listens to the chanting of love poems drifting toward him from other rooftops, from all directions. Some of that chanting is because Arabic love poems have been around for millennia. But some of that chanting is practicing for the chanting of the poetry of the Qur'an. That's what Michael Sells has tried to capture in "Approaching the Qur'an."

I initially bought this book after hearing about the controversy surrounding the University of North Carolina. I was motivated more by curiosity about what was causing the controversy. As a Muslim, I am already familiar with the suras that are translated in this book, so I did not expect to learn much. But I was pleasantly surprised. The approach that Prof. Sells has taken is refreshing in that he treats the Qur'an as literature. Some Muslims may find this objectionable. But I find it helpful to be able to put the suras in the context of popular Arabian culture of that time. I had never actually thought of Qur'anic text in this way before, having learned it in the traditional fashion, by rote memorisation of the Arabic verses, and then later, reading commentary. The CD included with the text was also unexpected. I hadn't seen an analysis of the 'soundscape' of the Qur'an before. I do like listening to beautiful recitations of the Qur'an, but I hadn't considered an analysis of the sounds and how they are put together. I had come across something similar in English literature classes that I took in college; and it makes sense that if one is treating the Qur'an as poetry, one could use similar tools for analysis. The CD and the analysis of the sounds were the best part of the book. Even if one is not a Muslim, I think it is possible to appreciate the beauty of Qur'anic recitation. As an example I have been able to appreciate the beauty of Gregorian chants even though I did not know what was being said or recited. I am mystified by the controversy surrounding this book. I wonder if the people that brought the lawsuit against UNC ever actually bothered to read the book. Let's hope that this sort of reactionary ignorance doesn't prevail in our country. I am very grateful to Prof. Sells for such a fine book. It is a very good introductory text for someone who has never read anything about the Qur'an and wishes to gain some insight. But I would, also, recommend this book

as a valuable tool for Qur'anic study for someone who is already somewhat familiar with the contents of the Qur'an.

I bought this book because of the controversy surrounding it at the University of North Carolina. I did not expect to learn much since I was raised a Muslim and have read the Quran in Arabic and English. To my surprise, Michael Sells' "Approaching the Quran" has unveiled a very different way of understanding it. He included so much context and history to which I was oblivious. Things that I took for granted in Arabic has become so clear and gained deeper meaning with Sells' translation. I definitely recommend this book to any non-Arabic (and Arabic-speaking) person who wants to gain a deeper understanding of the main messages of the Quran and Islam.

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