

The Traditional use of Asbab al-Nuzul in Interpretation of Holy Quran and its Difference from Modern Historical Criticism

For Muslims, as for Muhammad himself, the Koran is the living word of God, and as such it not only contains the eternal Truth but also represents the most perfect achievement of literary style. That the Koran was inimitable became a dogma, and two men who were bold enough to challenge its uniqueness, ibn-al-Muqaffa and abu-al-Ala al-Maarri, were branded as blasphemous and heretical. To the Western critic, however, the literary value of the Koran is uneven; in its most ancient chapters (suras), where religious emotion is at its peak, and the dominant motifs are the praise of God's at its peak, and the dominant motifs are the praise of God's all-pervading majesty and the frightful expectation of the Day of Judgment, Muhammad appears as an artist, even in the choice of his formal means of expression, a kind of rhythmic and rhymed prose (saj), which he borrowed, substantially improving its original awkwardness, from the form of the forecasts of the Arab soothsayers. Although this feature is preserved until the more recent parts of the Koran, in them it loses much of its vigor and freshness and gradually deteriorates into a purely ornamental technique.

A spirit of dignified grandeur permeates the whole of the book, the traditional arrangement of which runs almost contrary to the chronological sequence, and sometimes attains a powerful effect; however, especially in the most recently recorded sections, mostly devoted to legal and ritual matters, eloquence falls into rhetoric. Nevertheless, the immense influence of the Koran upon the development of the later Arabic style makes of this earliest Arabic work a cornerstone, not only of the religion of the Arabs, but also of their literature. The period during which the Koran was composed (or, as Muslims would say, "revealed") covers more than 20 years, from about A.D. 610 to the year of the Prophet's death, 632.

The Koran is the holy book of the Muslims, its title being derived from Arabic Al-Qur'an ("reading," "recital"). That it was written in Arabic is basic to its character, according to its own words: "These are the signs of the perspicuous Book. Verily, we have revealed it, an Arabic Koran, haply ye may understand. We shall recount to thee the best of stories as We reveal to thee this Koran" (12:1-3). To the orthodox Muslim, therefore, the Koran is not a man-made book. It is not merely divinely inspired; it itself it is divine, uncreated, the manifest voice of the Deity.

Although produced in seventh-century Arabia, its ordinances, sanctions, and precepts were considered to be applicable to all men at all times. It is the textbook from which every Muslim learns to read. It is a fact, moreover, that ever since the earliest period of the faith, Islamic scholars have recognized the power of the Koran to captivate the hearts of men.

This influence was confirmed when the Arab race was intermingled with other groups. Foreign converts, like their Arab-co-religionists, came to feel strongly that the Arabic language should be respected. Accordingly, they study the literature and reduced the grammar to writing. The literary importance of the Koran is indicated by the fact that it was solely responsible for preventing the various Arabic dialects from falling apart into distinct languages as, for instance, Latin branched into the Romance tongues.

In Islamic belief the Koran is the standard miracle of the faith. Its 114 suras (chapters) are regarded as replicas of an eternal heavenly original. While not sharing this view of revelation, which makes of the Prophet a powerless instrument without responsibility for the creation of the Book, modern scholarship takes a definite stand. It considers the Koran to be the product of a sincere and brilliant mind. Muhammad put into the making of the word the exalted vision of a genuine seeker after the truth.

The first koranic utterances were memorized or written, perhaps on palm leaves and tablets of stone. The appearance of rival collections moved the Third Caliph, Uthman (644-656), to canonize the codex of Medina. Early in the tenth century an authorized version was established in Baghdad. In the matter of literary sources, the Koran seems to depend on pre-Islamic literature. Its descriptions of paradise resemble passages from the hearthen bards of Arabia on earthly carousal and revelry. Whether Muhammad actually drew upon these sources is debatable. In the earlier suras of the Koran there are vivid and moving descriptions of the doom of the wicked and the terror of the last judgement. Even through touches of Judaeo-Christian theology recur, the style was not basically strange to the Prophet's audience. In point of literary technique, the Koran indeed shunned the highly developed metrical poetry of the pagan age in favor of the oracular, rhymed prose of professional magicians and wizards. Such was the parentage of the first book in Arabic prose. It was a sacred text for believers, as were the Torah of the Jews and the Evangels of the Christians. But where the Biblical foundation of Islam is conceded, Jews and Christians have erred, it is believed by Muslims, in falsifying their scriptures.

The Koran stresses the unity and sovereignty of God: "Say, 'He is God alone. God, the Eternal. He begets not and is not begotten' "(112:1-3). God is robed in righteousness and power. His domain extends over the whole creation, both of the present and the infinite future. His judgments are inexorable. After death, man exists in an intermediate state leading to the Last Day, the Resurrection, and Retribution. In the hereafter the ungodly are visited with damnation, the faithful received into a garden of bliss. Central in the message is the injunction to worship God. The first chapter is an equivalent of the Lord's Prayer among Christians. Ritual prayers and the weekly Friday assembly are prescribed. True believers are those "who remember God

standing and sitting or lying on their sides” (3:192). In addition to devotional regulations, there are enactments for everyday living, the laws of mine and thine, the family, the market place, and society at large.

Islamic jurisprudence stems directly from and is based completely upon the Koran. Not less central to Islamic faith are precepts on divine election, the brotherhood of believers, and ethical practice. The Muslim community, called into being by God, was to be governed by His creed, and the edicts set down by Him defended at the risk of life itself. The brotherhood of believers embraced those of every race and class who are brought together by Allah. Islamic morality stressed the demands of God as they are enshrined in the Book. No one save by the authority of the Koran may speak of the spiritual realm.

The Muslims of the world are basically Koranists; since the appearance of the Book, Islam has been a religion without an ecclesia and without a central seer. There is no sacramental clergy, no priestly caste. Any believer, without any ritual of receiving the sacerdotal office, may become a mosque imam and member of the conclave of divines. Therefore Islam, largely through the iron-clad dogmatism of Koranic theology, has tightened the scriptural belt around its body.

Arabic grammar, lexicography, history, and literature, as well as Islamic philosophy and culture, owe much of their origins to Koranic studies and the closely related fields of tradition and exegesis. The distinguished Arab historian al-Tabari (838-922) compressed the Islamic thought of three hundred years into his prodigious commentary on the Koran. Al-Zamakhshari (1074-1143) employed his exposition to rid the Koran of determinism, anthropomorphism, and super-naturalism. These highly esteemed commentaries are surpassed by the work of al-Baidawi

(died 1286), which still shapes Muslim belief through its influence on scholars and theologians of the Koran.

As a literary masterpiece which mirrors the psychological, social, and economic aspects of Arabian life, as well as moral and spiritual elements, the Koran surpasses every other book. Among other details of everyday life, it displays familiarity with the commercial relations joining the Quraysh traders and the Syrians, Greeks, Abyssinians, and Persians. The Koran is foremost in the body of Arabic literature, though there are crudities of expression in it. Yet the significance of the Book is by no means merely that it was the first step towards an Arabic prose style. Nor is it originality that makes the work so powerful. Religious scholars have shown that the theory of revelation in the Koran was influenced by Judaism and Christianity. Its place in Arabic literature and world thought has been established by its meaning to Arab and Muslim, and by the revolution it set in motion. In the Islamic view, no writings can rival those that follow the Koranic literary forms.

While the style of the Koran reflects the pre-Islamic rhymed prose, its language is that of seventh-century Mecca. Though all of it bears the imprint of a great mind, the later sections differ considerably from the first. The early revelations show the Prophet's brilliant fancy, touches of profound thought and faith. Though the later chapters also carry the reader on dramatic flights of the imagination, such as the sudden departures to adore God for His power in nature, the later utterances reveal a mind that finally attained stability and maturity. It is precisely for this reason that the later chapters are open to adverse criticism when they show faulty logic and errors in judgement.

In the Koran are traces of the ancient Arabian soothsayers. Older chapters are prefaced with oaths invoking unexplored things, the fig and olive trees, Mr. Sinai, heaven, and the signs of

the zodiac and other pagan symbols. In addition to similes, the Koran contains maxims teaching simple lessons and sometimes gives the impression that God has established the phenomena of nature and history expressly for the moral instruction of mankind.

Islamic theology believes that the Koran is untranslatable. A modern Egyptian conclave of divines condemned the rendering of the book into any other tongue. The consensus of learned opinion among Muslims, however, does not fully agree with this position. Islamic law prohibits only the liturgical use of the Koran in a language other than Arabic, and translations of the Holy Book into other languages have been made by several leading Muslims.

Powerful Islamic movements today cry: Back to the Koran. Thus, the Egyptian Islamic reformation is committed to the belief that "Islam cannot live without a sound understanding of the Koran, based upon the continuity of Arabic." Muhammad Iqbal (died 1938), seer of Indian Islam, defined the purpose of the Koran as to awaken "in man the high consciousness of his manifold relations with God and the universe." The puritanical Wahhabi revival of Saudi Arabia since the latter part of the 18th century has sought to restore the Koran to its pristine authority. Understood in the light of Islamic tradition, sifted through the opinion of believers, honoured as a historical monument in literature, the Koran stands as the supreme authority of Islam.

Islamic studies in the East and West since the middle of the 19th century furthered a sounder evaluation of the position of the Koran in world literature. Rodwell's translation of the Koran into English in 1861 presented the chapters in chronological order. Palmer's version (1880) had a pleasing literary quality. Translations by several Indian scholars have since appeared, of which Muhammad Ali's the Holy Koran (1920), which reproduced the Arabic text alongside the English, is best known. The Meaning of the Glorious Koran (1930) by Marmaduke Pickthall, was the first English translation by an English convert to Islam. Richard Bill of

Edinburgh published a critical translation (1937-1939) in which the material in each chapter is re-arranged. Arthur Jeffrey's *Material for the History of the Text of the Koran* (1937) is the most conspicuous contribution to the field since theodor Noldeke's *Geschichte des Qorans* (1909-1919). Andrew Larwence Rippin, A Canadian Islamic scholar, wrote about the *Asbāb al-nuzūl* which provides a critical interpretation or exegesis (tafsir) that establishes the context in which some verses were revealed. It points to an exegetical concept rather historiographical and correlates the appropriate verses to general phenomena rather than to a specific situation.

Rippin's work is just one of the correct approach in to the exegesis of Koran, the others being the following:

1. An Awareness of the Rules of ~Arabic Grammar
2. An Awareness of the Meaning of the Words in the Qur`an
3. Exegesis of the Qur`an through the Qur`an
4. Examining the Occasion of Revelation of the Verses
5. Examining the Authentic A_j {d|th Testimonies of the Qur`an
6. A Consideration of the Harmony between all the Verses of the Qur`an
7. Examining the Context of the Verses of the Qur`an
8. Awareness of the Various Viewpoints and Opinions
9. Distancing Oneself from Any Form of Prejudgment
10. Awareness of the Philosophical and Scientific Theories
11. Understanding of the Early History of Isl{m
12. Familiarity with the Stories and the History of the Lives of Previous Prophets
13. Knowledge of the Historical Environment in which the Qur`an was Revealed
14. Knowing the Verses of the Qur`an which are "Makk|" and "Madan|"

Of particular reference is the original theme intended by the topic wherein a specific verse might bring a new topic but once the topic finishes, the whole discussion again reverts to the original theme. This has been aptly observed in most of the articulate speakers of Islam and therefore confirms the proposition that a revelation of a specific verse strengthens the essence of the original theme. Only scholars can make this marvellous exegesis and the whole idea of *Asbāb al-nuzūl* is said to be in conjunction with the true message of the Koran itself. However, it is believed that this shift in understanding is not widely popular but is pointing towards that direction. The lack of formal education and religious teaching for most Muslims could be the reason for its low popularity as Rippin's disquisitions about the subject matter stills needs popular elucidation. The book of Subhani provides a glaring example of how exegesis of the Koran or tafsir should be properly carried out in the midst of various historical inclinations and perceptions.

The Koran consists exclusively of the revelations or commands which Muhammed professed to have received from time to time as messages from God through the angel Gabriel. In obedience to divine direction, Muhammed relayed these revelations to his friends and followers. These divine messages continued to be given to Muhammed throughout his life (A.D. 570-632). The last portion was set down shortly before the prophet's death. The recitation and repletion of passages from the Koran is an essential part of Muslim daily prayers, and an integral part of the religious education of Muslim children. Muslims who can most accurately recite the Koran are entitled to lead the daily public prayers. Of the war dead, the one who was best versed in the Koran was always honoured with first burial. The retentive memory of Arab Muslims, and the practice of committing the prophet's messages to writing immediately, account for the belief that the present text is the same that Muhammed himself dictated and recited.

No faithful Muslim accepts the notion that the Koran can be translated. Its “ideas” may be explained in a tongue other than Arabic, but such interpretation is no substitute for the Arabic original. Throughout the Muslim world even non-native speakers of Arabic (Pakistani, Indians, Turks, Iranians, and Afghans) can recite the Koran only in Arabic. It is a common Muslim belief that the full significance of divine revelation can be imparted only in the language in which the Koran was originally written. The Koran is divided into 114 chapters, or suras, arranged, with the exception of the first chapter, in order of decreasing length. The current arrangement of the chapters does not correspond to the order in which the chapters were originally written. The original order coincided with events as they happened during the life of Muhammed. The present arrangement of the suras was done during the life of the third caliph, Othman Ibn Affan (644-656). At that time the Koran was transcribed from the original versions written on clay, leather, palm leaves, bones, and parchment. Besides stories about the lives of earlier prophets and pious disciples, the Koran postulates Islamic laws of marriage, divorce, inheritance, and other worldly dealings. The Koran explains rules of behaviour which Muslims should follow in this world so as to achieve happiness in the next world.

The Koran, a book of about the same length as the New Testament, is one of the most remarkable scriptures in history; it has moulded the lives of millions of people and given birth to a powerful and enduring religion known as Islam, which has helped to shape the modern world. Unlike the holy books of the Jews and Christians, which are collections of religious narratives, laws, poems, proverbs, prophecies and prayers, dating from different periods and written by different men, every word in the Koran was delivered to the world through the lips of a single man, the Prophet of Muhammed, over a 22-year period in the early seventh century. Some of the Koran’s chapters, or suras, are short and fiery warnings of doom, proclaiming a Day of

Judgement and demanding the worship of one God. Others discuss the Biblical prophets and the lessons of their lives; still others lay down detailed regulations concerning the family, property and justice. All are phrased in an hypnotic Arabic that helped to convince the Koran's original hearers – Arab tribesmen who prided themselves on eloquence as much as courage – that this was no human speech but the word of God himself.

The Koran is the heart of Islam – a word meaning, quite simply, “Surrender to God”. Islam began as a religious movement in the torrid wastes of Arabia and quickly spread through the Middle East. It encompassed many diverse peoples, who came to call themselves Muslims, or believers, welding them into a vast monotheistic State. In less than 10 years after the Prophet's death, through conquest and conversion, Islam shook the foundations of Byzantium and Persia, the two most powerful civilizations of the era. In less than a century it swept through parts of Asia, Africa and Europe, dominating an area larger than that of the Roman Empire at its peak. Eventually it was to make Arabic the common language of millions of people, to dictate a way of life for one out of every seven persons inhabiting the earth, and to exert a powerful influence on the West. This historical significance of the origin of Koran had made it more infallible among Muslims around the world. In the Koran a Muslim could read all the revelations the Prophet received from God, but few details concerning Muhammed himself.

According to Tabataba'i (no date), “The only way to discover the true order of the chapters, and whether they are Meccan or Medinan, is to examine the content of the chapters and to compare them with the circumstances and social reality before and after the migration. Such a method is effective in certain cases; the content of chapters “Man,” “The Coursers,” and the “Defrauders” testify to their being Median, although some of these traditions only establish them as Meccan” (xxxx). So irrespective of the origin of the order the chapters and the contents of the

Koran need to be correlated with one another to reveal the true meaning of the topic. It bears stressing that, as earlier pointed out, the Koran contains 114 chapters and each chapter deals with different topics ranging from The Cave, The Bee, The Prophets and many more. Tabataba'i also explains that improvements in certain diacritical marks and calligraphy of the Koran were made to eliminate ambiguity and the reading of the script.

Subhani (2006) extolled that confining the people to mere recitation of the Koran is a direct affront to the words of the Heavenly Book, and that commentaries and discussion as to its contents should be encouraged through the proper application of rules, appreciation of certain issues and the realization of various conditions. In order to have a clearer understanding of its contents particularly the verse, one must know the history of their revelation without intent of not being able to explain the Koran since the verses themselves provide the guidance to its understanding. It is only that the historical origin and significance can bring a clearer view of each topic. Sometimes a verse can bring out many questions in one reading and the answers can be found through the revelation of the verse. There is a precaution however on not to rely of unfamiliar sources in the historical trace because of their unreliability.

The modern historical criticism only points to the ambiguity associated with the use of the scripts, calligraphy and, to the extent appropriate, the order of the chapters contained in the Holy Book. The history of the topics could be an enlightening concept to follow but modern scholars agree that the writing of the text of the Koran evolved over time like the Christian's Bible and that diacritical points were added later. The evolution began to manifest after the death of Prophet Muhammed as distinguished from those who believe that it began at the time when he is still alive. This may indicate a conflicting positions on the matter of evolution which, however, is purely intrinsic matter. The addition of the diacritical points was an offshoot to the ambiguity

experienced by many Muslims in reading the text and such act could have caused the slight deviation in the interpretation process. Again it was postulated that history in itself had not had much influence on the evolution of Koran since it transpired only after the death of the prophet.

It would be a difficult, tedious and time-consuming task to dissect each verse of the Koran to be able to understand the message intended but then again one has to choose between following the Asbab al-Nuzul or the concept of modern historical criticism. For one who has not read the full book of the Koran, he can only speculate that the concept of Asbab al-Nuzul is more appropriate given that the situation as to popularity tilts in its favor rather than the modern concept. It is quite understandable that only scholars and the learned of the academe can use the modern concept because of their intellectual capacity and skills in interpreting the Koran but it is also unfair for the millions of Muslims who have relied on Asbab al-Nuzul for centuries for their enlightening and guidance. The difference, of course, is attributable to educational attainment, status in society and monetary considerations where scholars are in a better position than the ordinary Muslim. It would be futile for the latter to gain the capability of the former for obvious reasons but this fact has not without solution.

The Asbab al-Nuzul and the modern historical criticism may be narrowed down as to their differences but in the meantime what the majority of the Muslims need is an educational campaign to be conducted by the learned and the scholars regarding the explanation of the modern historical criticism to ensure that a consensus is reached in the future about the effectiveness of applying such interpretation. Leaving the situation as it is may not be feasible since every year the population of Muslims keeps on increasing. There would be not enough time to preach to every Muslim the modern concept of interpreting the Koran placing the scholars at a disadvantageous position continuously. An educational campaign should be initiated by the

government since funds and personnel need to be allocated in this extraordinary endeavour. Going back to history, orthodox scholars accepted the hadith, as the basis of belief; the Mu'tazilites' reasoning sometimes led them to startling new conclusions, to the horror of the Traditionists and bitter public controversy ensued. One issue around which conflict crystallized was the nature of the Koran: Was the Word of God eternal like God Himself, as Muslims had traditionally believed, or had there been a time when it did not exist? The Mu'tazilites shocked Muslim popular belief by arguing that the Koran was not eternal, and used Greek logic to prove it. In essence, they claimed that the traditional concept contracted the basic principle of the Koran itself that God alone is eternal.

While philosophers and theologians debated about intellectual questions, a mystical movement called Sufism originated among the people. Sufism's origins can be traced back to Muslims who, from the beginning of Islam, were drawn by certain mystical elements in the Koran; as early as the second century after the Prophet's death, some pious Muslims had sought salvation through lives of simplicity and poverty in imitation of Christian hermits. In the ninth century, Sufism attracted many devout Muslims and began to take definite shape. In effect, it was a reaction, not only against the rationalists, but against a tyrannical government seemingly supported by orthodox religious leaders, and against the mechanical observance of Muslims rituals by men more interested in worldly wealth and luxury than in a spiritual life. The Sufis, unable to find complete satisfaction either in rationalism or in ritual alone, turned to the cultivation of an inner, spiritual life, through which they tried to achieve union with God and experience Him directly and emotionally. They envisaged God as a Creator who loved His creatures and wished them to draw near Him; they quoted from the Koran, particularly the verse describing God as nearer to man than his neck vein.

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