

The Quran and its Message

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Salamun Alaikum (Peace be upon you)

FLUID BEGINNINGS OF ASBAB UL-NAZUL

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Much is made of Quranic revelations with respect to what time and for what purpose they were revealed. (Occasions / reasons - Asbab (plural of sabab) of revelation (nazul)). In my discussions, nothing demonstrates more the fluid nature of the knowledge of 'Asbab ul-Nazul' than the controversy that was generated with regards the very first surah of the Quran and what it was.

A typical Muslim response usually advanced, confidently asserts 96:1 as the first revelation. This may be true, but what is unknown to many Muslims who are uninitiated with early Islamic sources is that, quite interestingly, the earliest historians didn't seem to be quite sure.

One feels almost obliged to ask the question, 'If knowledge of the very first surah of the Quran was lacking surety, then what level of confidence can one place in the elaborate narratives that capture and necessitate the study of 'Asbab-ul-Nazul'?

An apt question indeed.

THE CONTROVERSY

In a nutshell, verse 96:1 'iqra bismi rabbika alladhi khalaq' was not the only contender amongst the earliest historians as the first revelation to the Prophet. There was another - "ya-ayyuha -l-muddaththir qum fa-andhir..." (74:1...). Muslim scholars seem to have stated rather than demonstrated that 96:1 was the first. Many have accepted narratives which support this on the authority of early historians such as Ibn Ishaq (d. circa 760s CE) that flesh out the stories. Later historians such as Tabari (d.923 CE), simply relied on earlier historians and as such questionable fluidity of information became cemented as fact, as names of these great historian giants became more important than a critical analysis of their works.

At best, this was salvation history that the earliest historians were attempting to recover, marred with serious political, social and personal influences on the narratives.

Surah 'Muddaththir' (74) being the first revelation to the Prophet also seems to be picked up by Ahadith traditions as noted in Sahih Bukhari.

SAHIH BUKHARI Volume 6, Book 60, Number 444:

Narrated Yahya bin Abi Kathir:

I asked Aba Salama bin 'Abdur-Rahman about the first Sura revealed of the Qur'an. He replied "O you, wrapped-up (i.e. Al Muddaththir)." I said, "They say it was, 'Read, in the Name of your Lord Who created,' (i.e. Surat Al-'Alaq (the Clot)." On that, Abu Salama said, "I asked Jabir bin 'Abdullah about that, saying the same as you have said, whereupon he said, 'I will not tell you except what Allah's Apostle had told us. Allah's Apostle said, 'I was in seclusion in the cave of Hiram', and after I completed the limited period of my seclusion. I came down (from the cave) and heard a voice calling me. I looked to my right, but saw nothing. Then I looked up and saw something. So I went to Khadija (the Prophet's wife) and told her to wrap me up and pour cold water on me. So they wrapped me up and poured cold water on me." Then, 'O you, (Muhammad) wrapped up! Arise and warn,' (Surat Al Muddaththir) was revealed." (74.1) [1]

Therefore, it is clear that some controversy seems to have existed with what the first revelation to the prophet was which can be better understood if a study is commenced. There is much scholarship work in this area and I don't wish to unnecessarily lengthen the article. I refer those with an appetite to dig deeper to some of the references provided below [2]

In parallel, what is interesting to note, is that it appears that the main focus for the earliest scholars and jurists seemed to be based on scripture alone and an understanding of the 'living tradition' that coexisted with it. This is in contrast to the 'popular stories' disseminated by professional historians (al-qassas) at their time.

Abu Hanifa, a well respected jurist amongst Muslims, who was born in Kufa (699 CE and d.767 CE), is well known not to have left much in the way of Ahadith both in terms of traditions or 'Qassas' (stories). However, even during his time, a parallel desire to capture 'stories' seemed to be garnering popular support.

Ignaz Goldziher (1850-1921 CE), highly recognised in Western scholarship as somewhat as the father of Hadith criticism (and 'matn' analysis), captures a very telling narrative which is interesting to note.

"Abu Yusuf, pupil of Abu Hanifa, was greatly interested in the Maghaz, tafsir and ayyam al Arab [1], so much so that he missed some of his master's lectures. One day after he had been absent for several days his teacher asked him: 'Now tell me, who was Goliath's standard bearer?' Abu Yusuf was ready with his answer. 'You are the imam,' he said, 'and if you do not stop teasing me, I shall ask you in front of all the people which battle was fought

earlier, the Battle of Badr or that of Uhud?. You will be unable to answer; yet this is the most elementary question in history.' [2]" [3]

If one were to ask a well read Muslim child the same question today, the answer would most likely roll off the tongue with considerable ease as 'accepted historical fact'. However, the above narrative clearly shows the detachment that religious theologians had with historical questions. Even at the time of Abu Hanifa, popular stories (hearsay) were not commonly known, or if they were, weren't given much importance by the learned scholars of the day. This narrative, if its veracity is to be accepted, also seems to infer that it was not so crucial to establish what the periods of revelation of the Quranic verses were. Rather, it was more important to capture an understanding of the Quran as a holistic narrative.

This is not so surprising if one consults the following basic timeline:

Time of Prophet's death d.632 CE

Ibn Ishaq (historian) writing his 'Sira' for Caliph Mansur (Abbasid Caliphate Ruler who died around c.775) on his order. The Sira (prophetic biography) was put together around 760-763 CE.

Abu Hanifa - Baghdad (d.c.767 CE)

Abu Yusuf (d.798)

Therefore, popular historians such as Ibn Ishaq had only collated such historical data late in the lives of well known jurists such as Abu Hanifa. However, it does appear, that even religious theologians such as Abu Hanifa increasingly turned away from 'popular stories' and seemed to have relegated them as useless entertainment, or simply, didn't know much about their contents. However, younger students such as Abu Yusuf, seemingly showed more interest.

Today, what is even more disconcerting are some of the incredulous popular examples found in the 'Sahih' Hadith canon with regards Asbab-ul-Nuzul.

As an example, verse 11:5 beautifully relates God's immense power of knowledge by capturing a condition of a people.

011:005

"No doubt! they fold up their chests that they may hide (their thoughts) from Him! Surely when they cover themselves with their garments, He knows what they conceal and what they reveal. Indeed! He is Aware of what is in the breasts (of men)"

The verse remains self explanatory and even more so if read in context with its surrounding verse. No explanation or purpose for its revelation is really required to derive its wisdom and God's knowledge of what is hidden deep within the clasps of the human psyche.

However, the reason for the revelation as recorded in canonised Hadith literature is as follows. (Reader discretion advised).

SAHIH BUKHARI Volume 6, Book 60, Number 203:

Narrated Muhammad bin 'Abbas bin Ja'far:

That he heard Ibn 'Abbas reciting: "No doubt! They fold up their breasts." (11.5) and asked him about its explanation. He said, "Some people used to hide themselves while answering the call of nature in an open space lest they be exposed to the sky, and also when they had sexual relation with their wives in an open space lest they be exposed to the sky, so the above revelation was sent down regarding them." [4]

SAHIH BUKHARI Volume 6, Book 60, Number 204:

Narrated Muhammad bin Abbas bin Ja'far:

Ibn Abbas recited. "No doubt! They fold up their breasts." I said, "O Abu Abbas! What is meant by "They fold up their breasts?" He said, "A man used to feel shy on having sexual relation with his wife or on answering the call of nature (in an open space) so this Verse was revealed:-- "No doubt! They fold up their breasts." [5]

So much for the sabab ul-nazul for this particular verse of the Quran. Even without critical enquiry, what level of confidence can one truly place on other narratives of similar ilk?

Related Articles:

- (1) [Ibn Ishaq's Sira of Prophet Muhammad ^{\(pbuh\)}](#)
- (2) [Timeline](#)

REFERENCES

- [1] KHAN, M. M - Bukhari, Volume 6, Book 60, Number 444. Translations available online and in appropriate bookstores.
- [2] JUYNBOLL. G.H.A, Studies on the Origins and Uses of Islamic Hadith (Published by Variorum) Page 167-171 XI Early Islamic Society as reflected in its use of Isnads. Quite a detailed survey is also provided by Noldeke/Schwally, Geschichte des Qorans, I, pages 78-84
- [3] GOLDZIHHER. I, (Muhammedanische Studien) Muslim Studies Volume II Edited by S.M.Stern: Translated by C. R. Barber and S.M.Stern (George Allen & Unwin Ltd) Page 193 - Cited as quotation 1: Abu I-Mahasin, I, p:508,7, Cited as quotation 2: Al Damiri, I, p.176 from Tarikh Baghdad
- [4] KHAN, M. M - Bukhari, Volume 6, Book 60, Number 203. Translations available online and in appropriate bookstores.
- [5] KHAN, M. M - Bukhari, Volume 6, Book 60, Number 204. Translations available online and in appropriate bookstores.

