

## THE QUR'AN - A CLOSER LOOK

### PART 7

#### GOD ALWAYS GETS THE FACTS RIGHT

The Qur'an does not always seem to be able to distinguish the Jewish or Christian Scriptures from later and sometimes legendary books. At least, it treats as fact several stories which have, to say the least, a rather shaky historical basis. Examples of these are in 21:62-68, and 37: 91-98, about Abraham and the idol-worshippers. This story is not found in the Bible, but it IS found in a Jewish book containing folklore (Midrash Rabbah). The Qur'an also adds to the Tanakh's account of Cain killing his brother Abel, with Surah 5, verse 31, about a raven. This story is found in the Pirke of Rabbi Eliezer, part of the later Midrasheem, a collection of doubtful historicity.

In Surah 23, we find the story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba. Some readers may be more familiar with the Hollywood version of this than the original, found in the Bible at 1<sup>st</sup> Kings chapter 10, where it occupies only 13 verses. The Qur'an has a third different version. Interestingly, details such as the bird (Qur'an, 23:22) and the glass floor (verse 44) are not found in the Bible's account. But they are found in the Jewish H'aggadah. The standard collection of these in English was made by Louis Ginsberg, himself Jewish. Significantly, he called his volumes "*Legends of the Jews*".

The claim in the Qur'an (27:16-28) that Solomon was able to communicate with birds, and to subdue them to his will, is also not confirmed by the Jewish Scriptures. This too probably arose from the imaginations of later writers, and is again included in the H'aggadah. These books, as already mentioned, would have been well known among the Jews of Mecca. Fanciful stories do tend to arise over time, in all religions.

Surah 105 relates the fate of the "Companions of the Elephant". Yusuf Ali rightly says that these were the troops of Abrahah the Abyssinian, who tried to invade Mecca. But

his Note 6272 is a pathetic attempt to reconcile the Qur'an's story of birds dropping stones on their heads, with the statement from other historical sources, that they suffered from a simple outbreak of smallpox. Less bizarre, but more deadly.

The story of the Cave Sleepers is found in Surah 18:9-26. The "*Encyclopaedia of Islam*" (Brill, Leyden, Netherlands), says the first mention of this story was by one Dionysius of Tell Mahra, in a Syriac work of the fifth century C.E., something over a hundred years before the Qur'an (Muhammad had of course been to Syria on business). There is no solid evidence of any historical basis to it, and certainly no contemporary witness to its being factual. Yusuf Ali calls it "a wonderful story or allegory", though the Qur'an's expressions clearly make it real history. Yet note its uncertainty about the number of sleepers, and other examples of such vagueness in other Qur'anic stories. Does this sound like the All-knowing God?

We mentioned earlier the story about Jesus vindicating his mother's reputation, by miraculously speaking from the cradle. Another incident appears in Surah 3:49, where he makes a bird out of clay and breathes life into it, so that it flies away. This magical act, so different from the beneficial miracles ascribed to Jesus in the Bible, is not found there. Rather, it seems to have originated in the apocryphal "*Gospel of Thomas*", written by Gnostics about 140 C.E. in Syria. This location could be important - see below.

We can now state a general rule, to prove which in detail would make this study much longer and less readable. In nearly all places where the Qur'an's reconstructions differ from, or add to, the Bible accounts, the Qur'anic version is supported by the Talmud or other non-Scriptural books. It seems strange that Al'lah's revelations agree with what Jews and Christians themselves see, not as God's inspired word, but merely the result of pious but imaginative thinking by men. The Qur'an, seen by Muslims as purely the direct revelation of Al'lah, supports much later, and therefore unreliable, additions to Jewish or Christian Holy Writ, rather than the Holy Writ itself.

So even at this stage it may be permissible, without threatening the attempt to remain as objective as possible, to hint at another explanation of the Qur'an, to be kept in mind as we proceed.. The story of the Cave Sleepers just mentioned, reminds us that Muhammad had travelled to Syria on business. What if he had heard the story there? Or the other Jewish ones, from his neighbours in Mecca?

An even more confusing 'revised version' of the Bible is found in several other Qur'anic accounts. Once again, I confess to having obtained material on these from Christian controversial sources. But I have examined the references they give, and will lay out the comparisons at some length, so that readers can make up their own minds.

The first example is in 5:112, where the Qur'an reads like this: **"Behold! The Disciples said: 'O Jesus the son of Mary! Can thy Lord send down to us a Table set (with viands) from Heaven?' Said Jesus: 'Fear Allah, if you have faith'"**. And in verse 114, the purpose of the table, which was indeed sent down from Heaven, is said to be, **"for a solemn festival"**. Now compare this with the Last Supper, which was indeed a solemn festival, though there probably was no table, certainly not one sent from Heaven. This 'Last Supper' is recorded in all four of the Gospels in the Bible. Then notice Peter's vision of a sheet coming down, full of animals for slaughter and eating ("viands"), as recorded in Acts 10, verses 9-23. Does the Qur'an not seem to be confusing two quite separate events?

Another example of apparent mix-up, this time of two persons, occurs in Surah 38:41-42, which is about Ayub (Job, in the English Bible), who struck with his foot, at which water came out. This is not mentioned of Job in the Tanakh/Old Testament. But we do find Moses there, who is the only one recorded as striking a rock to obtain water (Exodus 17). See however Qur'an 7:160, which does ascribe the bringing of water from a rock to Moses; and in twelve springs, not just the single one of the Bible!

#### SOME GENERATION GAPS

Easily the most complicated of these mixtures occurs in 40:36-37. **"Pharoah said:**

**‘O Haman! Build me a lofty palace, that I may attain the ways and means - the ways and means of reaching the heavens, that I may mount up to the God of Moses’...**” (Note 3). Now, compare this with Genesis 11, the story of the Tower of Babel; and with the book of Esther, where Haman is the enemy of the Jewish people. One account occurs historically hundreds of years before the time of Moses and the Pharaoh; the other, many hundreds of years later. Also, Haman in the Old Testament/Tanakh served a king called Ahashuerus (otherwise known as Xerxes) in the Persian Empire, not the Pharaoh of Egypt. Three separate events or names separated by centuries have, to all appearance, been hopelessly muddled by the Qur'an. We should constantly be keeping in mind, in all these comparisons, that the Qur'an made its appearance several centuries after the Tanakh. Given that the Bible has not been deeply changed, this chronology must surely be decisive in assessing which is the true, historical account.

This same Pharaoh of Moses is also mentioned in Surah 7, as threatening to crucify people (verse 124). Here we do not need to rely on the Old Testament to discern an error. The first officially recorded instance of crucifixion was 7-900 years later than Moses, by Darius 1 of Persia in 519 B.C., though it may have been invented somewhat earlier by the Assyrians or Phoenicians. Egypt has an unrivalled legacy of court and judicial records, among many other remains. Crucifixion is never mentioned in these. In Surah 12:41, Joseph predicts this cruelty from another Pharaoh. But that was three hundred and fifty years earlier even than Moses.

There is an episode in Surah 12, about Joseph, and his father Jacob. The old man is being brought a garment by his other sons from Egypt, to prove Joseph is still alive. Long before it arrives, Jacob says, **“I do indeed scent the presence of Joseph: nay, think me not a dotard”**. Yusuf Ali calls this “telepathy”, but the word used seems to imply a real smell. Later, when the shirt arrives and is placed over his face, Jacob's blindness is cured. By

surely more than a coincidence, there is a story in the Bible of how Jacob himself deceived his own blind father, Isaac, with clothes belonging to his brother, and smelling of him, (Qur'an 12:94-96; compare Genesis 27:27).

Another discrepancy occurs in the Qur'an's account of Joseph as a youth. According to 12:15ff, his brothers threw him down a well, and he was discovered by one of a party of slave traders, who went to the well to draw water. Genesis in the Bible says the well was dry. He was then sold by his brothers, the Qur'an says, "**for a miserable price - for a few dirhams counted out**". But the dirham was never an Egyptian currency, only an Arab one.

In 38:21-24 we find the story of the two Disputants. In the Old Testament/Tanakh, the prophet Nathan convicted King David about his stealing Bathsheba, by telling a parable about two men, one with ninety-nine sheep, the other with only one lamb. See 2 Samuel, Chapter 12. The Qur'an, probably to preserve David's prophetic perfection and reputation, records it as an actual case, for arbitration by the king.

We can even go on to discover a complex mix-up over a whole group of quite different characters from both Old and New Testaments. It will be necessary to follow this carefully. In Surah 3, beginning at verse 35, we find a description of Mary, mother of Jesus, or Mariam/Miriam as she is called in Arabic/Hebrew (which are of course related languages). Yusuf Ali (his Note 375) asserts this Mariam was "presumably" of a priestly family, on the basis that her cousin Elisabeth was married to a priest. This is rather too large an assumption; marriage across tribes by the priests was allowed. Mary's own husband Joseph was , according to the New Testament (Luke 2:40, from the tribe of Judah, not the priestly one of Levi. It is rather more likely, she was too.

Then the Qur'an terms Mary's mother, "**a woman of Imran**". Yusuf Ali supposes that "Imran" was not only her husband's name (stated clearly in 3:35-37) but also the name of her ancestor, making her "a woman of Imran' in a double sense." Mary's line he traces "back to Aaron, the brother of Moses, and son of Imran". Now, why does he need to mention

Aaron? Because, in another place (19:28), the Qur'an calls Mary the “**sister of Aaron**”. How does Yusuf Ali account for this? By repeating, “Mary and her cousin Elisabeth (mother of Yahya) came of a priestly family and were therefore ‘sisters of Aaron’ or ‘daughters of Imran’, who was Aaron’s father”. Well, that is a very ingenious explanation. It becomes much less convincing, when we notice that the Aaron in the O.T./Tanakh also had a sister, and her name just happened to be - Miriam! (Exodus 15:20). Then Exodus 6:20 gives their father’s name as ‘Amram’, which seems remarkably similar to “Imran”. There seems little doubt that the Qur'an is again confusing persons of quite different historical periods.

The Qur'an's account of Mary and the birth of her son Jesus forms much of Surah 19, and has at least one other apparent mix-up in it. Verses 22 to 26 describe how Mary “**retired with him to a remote place**”, where she was miraculously supplied with water and dates (Compare also 23:50). Yusuf Ali knows that Jesus was, according to the Bible, born in Bethlehem, and attempts to make this “a remote place”. But he never tries to explain why Mary was on her own at this critical time of giving birth.

The Bible, by contrast, relates the town was so crowded for the census that Mary and Joseph her husband could find no room in any of the inns, and were forced to occupy a stable. It says that Joseph was with her later too, when they went through the desert to Egypt to escape Herod. So it seems very possible that the Qur'an is confusing Mary's story of giving birth, with that of Hagar and her son Ishmael, recorded in the Bible at Genesis chapter 21. The details here, of the mother, alone and dying until God intervenes, seem remarkably similar to the Qur'an's story; except that of course they relate to a quite different mother and child, in a different era.

In all fairness, it must be pointed out that a very similar story IS related about Hagar (in Arabic, **Hajira**). Not however, in the Qur'an, but in the Traditions. Remembering that the local Jews and Christians may have pointed out an inaccuracy in this story being ascribed to

Mary/Mariam, is it possible that Muhammad then recounted a somewhat similar one about Hagar, to disarm criticism of the Qur'an's accuracy? See last footnote to Chapter 13.

In Surah 3, verse 37 we read that in earlier life Mary was miraculously supplied with food while living with Zakaria(h), her cousin Elisabeth's husband. This may have originated in the Coptic "*History of the Virgin*". (Muhammad had a concubine who was a Copt).

Verse 44 of the same surah says the one charged with her care was chosen by casting arrows or rods (literally "reeds"), to decide the issue. Yusuf Ali wrongly states that Christian apocryphal writings describe how Zachariah won this lottery (his Note 385). The writings in question, "*The Protevangelium of James*", written many years after the event, actually refer to how Joseph, not Zakariah, was chosen. They deny the (more contemporary) account of Matthew's Gospel, about Joseph's dream, in which he was told to marry Mary, despite her being pregnant. (This is no doubt one reason why the Protevangelium is not included in the Christian Scriptures). (Note 3).

Speaking to the "People of the Book", Surah 5, verse 60 seems to be rebuking them for unbelief by a reminder of what God did earlier, and which presumably they should be well aware of. The surah reads, in part:

**"Say: shall I point out to you something much worse than this...? Those who incurred the curse of Allah and His wrath, those of whom some He transformed into apes and swine, those who worshipped Evil - these are (many times) worse in rank, and far more astray from the even Path!"**

But in fact, there is nothing even vaguely similar in the older Scriptures, for the Jews or Christians to remember. Again Yusuf Ali and other scholars are obliged to resort to calling This 'allegorical' And once again, there is nothing whatever here, (or even less, in the related 2:65), to indicate this is the proper explanation. Clearly, the Qur'an is treating these judgements as literal and historical ones, and assuming they occurred in Jewish or Christian history. It is talking about real transformation, into real apes and pigs. Yet no such events can be found in the older Holy Books, or other reliable sources. This great lack seems to be the real reason why the 'allegorical' or 'metaphorical' interpretation is put forward.

It would be very possible to continue examining several other instances of this kind. In some cases they demand an intimate knowledge of the Bible, which most of us don't possess. So we come finally to the story of someone called "**Talut**", in Surah 2, verse 249. >From the context, all would surely agree this must be the Biblical King Saul. The name "Talut" may be given to rhyme with "**Jalut**", the Qur'anic version of the Biblical "Goliath", who appears in the same passage.. Rhyming names are found elsewhere in the Qur'an. Talut is related to a word meaning "tall"; which Saul was, according to the Bible.

But a comparison with the Bible's account of Saul's campaign against the Philistines finds no mention of the testing of his men by the drinking of water. That very test was however done by Gideon, another Israelite leader, much earlier (Judges7:4-7, 1 Samuel, chaps. 16-17). What Saul did forbid his soldiers to do, in the Tanakh, was to eat anything before evening, while in pursuit of their enemies. But even that was on an earlier campaign, not the one mentioned in the Qur'an as involving Goliath, the giant soldier. (See 1 Samuel 14: 24-28).

I remind my readers again of several crucial facts:

1. There is no clear claim in the Qur'an that the Jewish or Christian Scriptures had been seriously altered in their text, still less completely re-written.
2. That would have been impossible, for reasons given earlier.
3. The Qur'an appeared more than five hundred years after the Christian Scriptures were written; several hundred years more, after the Jewish Scriptures.
4. Muhammad certainly had not read the older books, but did have many opportunities to obtain second-hand information about them, from people whose knowledge of their own Scriptures may have been shallow at best. From a scholarly viewpoint, there seems to be little question as to which of the opposing Scriptures are more likely to have the details of what happened right - and wrong. The accuracy of its reconstruction of historical events, rather

than more subjective and ideological criteria, is undoubtedly one of the best ways of assessing whether, or to what extent, any ancient Holy Book is likely to have been 'revealed' by God.

Footnotes:

1. Another writer suggests the Qur'anic reference is to the reported feeding of 5000 by Jesus.

This seems most unlikely, since there was no "table" involved there. Only marginally more likely, is the idea it refers to Jesus' statement about himself as "the living bread that comes down from Heaven", in John Chapter 6. If this is the incident the Qur'an has in mind, it displays a grave misunderstanding of the spiritual nature of the "bread" Jesus is talking about. Nor is there any mention in John 6 of a table.

2. Muhammad Asad, Qur'anic translator/commentator, comes up with the suggestion that the "tower" to be built was a pyramid. But the Pyramids were built long before the era of Moses' Pharaoh.

3. In "*New Testament Apochrypha*", Vol. 1, edited by Wilhelm Schneemelcher (James Clarke, 1991) we find this scholarly assessment of the Protevangelium of James:

"The book cannot have been written before 150 A.D. We may probably go back as far as its roots are concerned to the second half of the second century, though we must regard several chapters as later additions. Ignorance of the geography of Palestine and of Jewish customs...point to a non-Jew".

### MORE HUMAN ELEMENTS

The second Khaleefah, Umar, has already been mentioned, as having made the penalty for sexual transgression harsher, and the meaning of usury, wider. Always a forceful, strict and outspoken man, he may well have done much more than that. One early Companion, Ibn Merdaweeh, put it as revealingly as this: “Umar used to have an opinion on a certain subject and lo! a Qur’anic revelation came down in accordance with the same”. A longer quotation from Bukhari’s Traditions (Volume 6, no. 10) illustrates this: “Narrated Anas: ‘Umar said, “I agreed with Allah in three things”, or said, “My Lord agreed with me in three things. I said, ‘O Allah’s Apostle! Would that you took the station of Abraham [THE KA’BAH] as a place of prayer’. I also said, ‘O Allah’s Apostle! Good and bad people visit you! Would that you ordered the Mothers of the Believers to cover themselves with veils’. So the Divine Verses of Al Hijab (veiling of women) were revealed. “I came to know that the Prophet had blamed some of his wives, so I entered upon them and said, “You should either stop (troubling the Prophet) or else Allah will give His Apostle better wives than you”. When I came to one of his wives, she said to me, “O Umar! Does Allah’s Apostle not have that with which he could advise his wives, that you try to advise them?” Thereupon Allah revealed: - **“It may be, if he divorced you (all), his Lord will give him instead of you, wives better than you, Muslims (or, submissive ones)....”** (Qur’an, 66:5)

Umar was, as we saw earlier, also involved in establishing the practice under Shari’ah law of stoning to death (married) adulterers. According to 24:2, both they, and (unmarried) fornicators, merit only flogging, with 100 stripes. Umar claimed that another verse, commanding stoning for partners in such sexual transgression who are married, was originally part of Surah 33. “When this verse came down I went to the Prophet and said, ‘May I record this verse?’ But it seems he disliked it”. This is Tradition on the authority of Ubayy, Abu Imama ibn Saikal, as well as Zaid ibn Thabit, and of course Umar himself, who

“reinstated” it. Al Bukhari confirms this in different words:

“Abdullah ibn Abbas reported that Umar ibn Al Khattab sat on the pulpit of Allah’s Messenger and said: ‘Verily Allah sent Muhammad (p.b.u.h.) with truth and He sent down the Book upon him, and the verse of stoning was included in what was sent down to him. We recited it, retained it in our memory and understood it... I am afraid that with the lapse of time, the people (may forget and) may say: ‘We do not find the punishment of stoning in the Book of Allah’, and thus go astray by abandoning the duty prescribed by Allah...’ See Bukhari, Vol. 8, no. 816, and compare Saheeh Muslim, Vol.3.

Bukhari’s collection of Traditions also relates (Vol. 6, no. 311, page 295) that A’ishah, who was after Khadeeja’s death the favourite wife of Muhammad, and certainly the most acute and outspoken, once said to her husband:

“I feel that your Lord hastens in fulfilling your wishes and desires”. Although this apparently occurred just after a new revelation allowed Muhammad more freedom with the treatment of his wives, there is no need to suppose that she was just being cynical here. Later, A’ishah was one of the best sources of pious Tradition, and obviously believed her husband was a true prophet. Nevertheless her comment, even if motivated partly by admiration, is quite significant. She was also rather young at the time, and may not have realized the full implication of her words.

Other quotations from the Traditions and classic commentators are equally revealing about how at least some later parts of the Qur’an were received. Bukhari (Vol. 6, no. 512, pages 480-481) tells how, when Muhammad was first uttering the words in Surah 4, verse 95, “**Not equal are those believers who sit at home and receive no hurt...**”, a blind man, Amr ibn Um Maktun, complained that he could not fight for Islam.

Thereupon, the words “**except those who suffer from a grave impediment**”, were added. Here we need to turn to Pickthall and other translators, since Yusuf Ali has

deliberately omitted and concealed these last words.

On Surah 23:14, both Al Baidhawi's classic commentary and that of Zamakhshari mention a man named Abdullah ibn Sa'd Ibn Abi Sarh, who, while listening to Muhammad repeat this description of creation, was carried away and shouted out, "Blessed be Al'lah, the best of Creators!" Muhammad then repeated these words after the verse, and they became part of the Qur'an. As the rest of the surah is in the first person, this ascription of praise in the third person does sound rather out of place. Ibn Abi Sarh himself was so shocked by his words being put into the Qur'an, that he temporarily renounced Islam.

#### THOSE VERSES AGAIN

By contrast, there is the probability of a deletion. To introduce this, let us refer in passing to the notorious "Rushdie affair". In all the controversy surrounding this, the historical meaning of the title, "*Satanic Verses*", was virtually ignored by most protagonists. It seems, according to some Muslim biographers, that the Qur'an at one stage contained a phrase recommending the intercession of three goddesses from the older pagan religion of Arabia. Muhammad, within a short time, recognised that this compromised the unique Godhood of Al'lah. So he decided these words must have been revealed, not by Al'lah, but by Satan. They were removed, and the revised form can be found at Surah 53:19-23.

Most Muslims would deny this ever happened. But three early biographers, Ibn Sa'd, Al Waqidi, and Al Tabari, confirm it, two on the authority of the earliest biographer, Ibn Ishaq (died 151 A.H.). Here are two quotations from Ibn Ishaq's standard work, "*Seerut Rasool Al'lah*" ("Life of the Apostle of God"). Unfortunately, this survives only in Ibn Hisham's edition, written well after the lifetime of the original author:

"When the Apostle saw that his people turned their backs on him and he was pained by their estrangement from what he had brought them from God, he longed that there would come to him from God a message that would reconcile his people to him... When he reached His

words, **'Have you thought of al-Lat and al-Uzzah and Manat the third, the other?'**, Satan, when he was meditating on it, and desiring to bring reconciliation to his people, put on his tongue, **'These are the exalted cranes [probable translation of *gharaniq* - a graceful bird] whose intercession is approved'**. When Quraysh [*his own pagan tribe*] heard that, they were delighted...".

And, later on, "...Gabriel came to the Apostle and said, 'What have you done, Muhammad? You have read to these people something I did not bring you from God and you have said what He did not say to you'. The Apostle was bitterly grieved and was greatly in fear of God.

"So God sent down (a revelation), for He was merciful to him, comforting him and making light of the affair and telling him that every apostle and prophet before him desired as he desired and wanted what he wanted and Satan interjected something into his desires as he had on his tongue". (Guillaume's translation, pages 165-166).

The (later) editor, Ibn Hisham, complained that earlier biographers had "insulted" the Prophet". Ibn Ishaq may originally have been even more frank in his account, but been censored by Ibn Hisham.

The most esteemed collection of Traditions, Bukhari's, also refers to this event. In Vol.6, page 363, it is related that "The Prophet performed a prostration when he finished reciting Surah-an-Najm" (*the same surah, no. 53, in question*), "and all the Muslims and pagans and jinns and human beings prostrated along with him". Now, why did the pagans also bow? The PRESENT form of the verses would surely make them angry, rather than impressed, by its strong rejection of their goddesses.

Two later surahs may well refer to this compromise by Muhammad, and its result, which Muhammad would certainly never forget; 17:73-75, and 22: 52-54. See below, on Maududi.

Penguin Books, to atone for publishing “*Satanic Verses*”, have since published Dr. Rafiq Zakaria’s “*Muhammad and the Qur'an*”. His first chapter is largely devoted to challenging the above evidence, on the grounds firstly that the biographers were all quite unreliable. But why would biographers who were convinced Muslims, record or repeat a story open to exploitation by unbelievers? On the grounds, (as he seems to be saying) of a false rumour, spread by pagans and swallowed by these foolish biographers? This seems unlikely! And in any case, it is not only these four historians, but Bukhari, regarded by most as the supreme Traditionist, who records the delighted response of the pagans. Zamakhshari’s commentary also mentions it. The balance of probability is, that the incident did occur.

Rafiq Zakaria’s own attitude is all too clear from these words in his first chapter: “The Qur’an is...regarded by Muslims as immutable and unchangeable, not metaphorically or symbolically but literally. This is a matter of faith for them, and reason can never deflect them from it”. Surely a rather sad confession.

A fuller, much more scholarly treatment of this issue is found in Maulana A. A. Maududi’s comprehensive translation and commentary, “*The Meaning of the Qur'an*” (Tahfeem-ul-Qur’an), Volume 7, pages 213-220. Recognising the vital importance of the reported incident, Maududi constructs several arguments against it ever having occurred.

First, he says that, historically, it is poorly attested by contemporary witness. However, the record of Bukhari (above) came from one of Muhammad’s original Companions, Ibn Abbas.

Secondly, he says that the verses mentioned above, from Surahs 17 and 21, were revealed about seven, and nine, years after Surah 53. He therefore pours scorn on the assertion (by some scholars) that these later references are firstly a reproof to Muhammad, and then, an abrogation of the supposed “Satanic verses”. He does have a point; but only if the verses were not in fact altered IMMEDIATELY AFTER they were produced. If this was done immediately, then these later references in the Qur’an would be more in the way of

reminders to Muhammad that he had escaped compromising his whole mission, only by the intervention and mercy of God.

Maududi's third main argument is that the present form of the verses makes no sense, if the reference to the three goddesses is inserted again. This is true; but only if the half-verse (assuming it did exist) was simply withdrawn, with no alterations to what follows, to point a new and opposite lesson. However the whole of verses 19-23 could well have been changed too, before it was written down.

His fourth argument is a novel one. He claims that it was not just Muslim historians and biographers who took up a false rumour, planted by pagans, about what Muhammad had actually recited. Additionally, he says the pagans themselves were so carried away by the eloquence of Muhammad's recitation, that they did not hear the strong condemnation of their goddesses, but thought on the contrary the Qur'an was praising them! Readers studying the message of the verse as they now stand, may find that idea as unconvincing as the present author does.

The preceding discussion has been rather technical; but then the importance of this episode is considerable. It opens the possibility, at least, that other verses were not from God, but may not have been recognised as such by Muhammad.

## CONCLUSIONS

Here are a few sentences from a leaflet written by one Abdul Jalil, and published by the influential Islamic Foundation in U.K. and its associates in the U.S.A.:

“Islam affirms the same beliefs which the previous prophets including Abraham, Moses and Jesus (peace be on all of them) propounded, namely submission to and commitment to obey commandments of the one and only God. All who accept this are Muslims. But since the advent of Islam, only the followers of that religion are called Muslims”. And: “It is a universally recognised fact that the Qur'an, 1400 years later, still remains exactly the same as it was revealed by God to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). It is the only such revealed book in existence today. It describes itself as the Book of Guidance”.

Hopefully no one who has read the present study will subscribe now without question to such bold statements. The disturbing thing is that Mr. Jalil, if he is an Islamic scholar, should be aware of at least some of the historical facts from Muslim sources we have quoted earlier. Yet he is still making sweeping and untrue statements about the Qur'an.

When we read such sincere and eloquent words as these, from Yusuf Ali, we can quite see, too, how terribly difficult it is for persons brought up to love and reverence the Qur'an, ever to look at it with true objectivity:

“We can ignore blasphemy, ridicule and contempt, for we are on the threshold of Realities, and a little perfume from the garden of the Holy One has already gladdened our nostrils”.

Nevertheless, truth, not sentiment or stubbornness, is needed here. The words of another Indian scholar, like Yusuf Ali a “modernist”, seem particularly appropriate:

“It is not at all harmful or damaging to a true teaching to be exposed to the hottest controversy; it is preventing exposure that really harms it. When people are forced to hear arguments on both sides of a matter, there is always hope of justice, but when they hear only one side, falsehoods become obdurate and turn into prejudice”. (Sayyad Ahmed Khan, “*Azadi*

*Ra'i*").

However, as we said in the Introduction, people in our secular society too have been conditioned to adopt their particular way of life, not by rigorous intellectual testing, but because it suits their felt needs. Undoubtedly Islam does meet people's needs, or at least some important ones. Along with this, it gives what is seen as a much better basis for individual and community life. So its advocates, not necessarily from cynical motives, have had some success in persuading their own Muslim people against adopting modern Western critical and analytical methods (as well as the less useful aspects of Western culture).

Until it is subject to the kind of close scrutiny we have attempted, the Qur'an certainly bears very favourable comparison with any other religious book. Islam is an intellectually straightforward, and on the surface at least, logical religion.

It has, too, inbuilt defence mechanisms of tremendous sophistication, power and persistence. We left out earlier one very important element of the Qur'an's "teaching". The following are only four of many places where the Qur'an defends itself, and denies that Muhammad's own mind had anything to do with it:

**"Say; I am a man like yourselves, (but) the inspiration has come to me, that your God is one God..."**

(Surah 18, Al Kahf, verse 110a)

**"But the Misbelievers say: 'Naught is this but a lie that he has forged, and others have helped him at it'. In truth, it is they who have put forth an iniquity and a falsehood. And they say: 'Tales of the ancients, which he has caused to be written: and they are dictated before him morning and evening'. Say: The Quran was sent down by Him Who knows the Mystery (that is) in the heavens and the earth; verily He is Oft-forgiving, Most Merciful'"**

(Surah 25, Al Furqan, verses 4-6)

**"By the star when it goes down - your Companion is neither astray nor being misled, nor does he say (ought) of his own Desire. It is no less than inspiration sent down to him; he was taught by one Mighty in Power, endued with Wisdom, for he appeared (in stately form) while he was in the highest part of the horizon; then he approached and came closer, and was at a distance of but two bow-lengths or (even) nearer; so did Allah convey the inspiration to His servant - conveyed what He (meant) to convey. The Prophet's (mind and) heart in no way falsified that which he saw. Will ye then dispute with him (concerning) what he saw?"**

(Surah 53, Al Najm, verses 1-12)

**"Verily this is the word of a most honourable Messenger, endued with power, with rank**

**before the Lord of the Throne, with authority there, (and) faithful to his trust. And (O people!) your Companion is not one possessed; and without doubt he saw him in the clear horizon. Neither doth he withhold grudgingly a knowledge of the unseen. Nor is it the word of an evil spirit accursed”.** (Surah 81, Al Takwir, verses 19-25)

**“Who can be more wicked than one who invented a lie against Allah, or said, “I have received inspiration’, when he hath received none...”** Even in a later surah like this (6, verse 93), there is evidence that Muhammad himself was convinced he was still conveying words inspired by God. Muslim scholars say this verse refers to a pretender to prophet-hood, called Musalimah ibn Habeeb; but it reflects back on Muhammad too. If he were merely a cynical manipulator, writing entirely what he desired, it is rather unlikely that he would have so clearly written his own condemnation!

But is the only alternative that he was fully and always, just a channel for God to speak? The issue is not as simple as that, however forcibly Muslim apologists try to persuade us it is. There is certainly a third alternative.

#### THE MAN AND HIS MESSAGE

How then shall we assess Muhammad, who is after all the only direct witness that the Qur'an is indeed a Word from God immediately given (in the sense that he alone claimed to have seen the angel Gabriel, and to have heard God's words through him)? Muhammad's character is described in the Hadeeth (Tradition) and Seerah (biographical) literature, and is a very large study not within our present subject limitations. Very many others have already written volumes on the subject; though Muslims are of course not prepared to admit those written by non-believers.

Unsympathetic critics of Islam, particularly in the nineteenth century and before, suggested that the strange phenomena associated with the giving of the early Qur'an, were signs of epilepsy. This seems highly unlikely. An epileptic would scarcely have been accepted as a civic/religious leader in Arab society. It is a life-long disability, and control drugs were not then available.

Other critics, mainly advocates of Judaism and Christianity, say that it was not the

'Holy' Spirit who revealed the Qur'an to Muhammad, but an evil spirit, by which he became possessed. It is not the author's intention to assess this delicate and somewhat improvable assertion; I wish merely to report the idea that has been put forward. Readers can be left to form their own conclusions.

One opinion we can quite strongly venture. It is, that those who suggest Muhammad was merely a forger and con-man, are mistaken. Such a Book can scarcely be explained so simply. There seems little doubt that he was, in the early stages at least, a very sincere man, fervently seeking God and His will. Even those readers who are firm adherents of other religions will perhaps manage to admit the possibility that God did indeed answer Muhammad's yearnings, and reveal some important truths to him at that stage.

We must greatly admire too his steadfast character, leadership abilities, and firm adherence to his mission through great difficulties. Whatever faults non-Muslims may detect in his character, they certainly do not make him a charlatan.. Nevertheless, we cannot, in all honesty, and with the fore-going cumulative evidence in mind, submit to the Qur'an's own assertion that it owes nothing to any other book or source.

Some, who are unable to accept this last claim, may suggest instead that the Qur'an be received as just one more source of religious guidance, one "insight" among many. That is to patronise and insult such a Book. By its own challenge, we have only two alternatives. If it is the direct (and final) Word of God, we need to submit exclusively to it. If it is at best a mixture of the thoughts of God among those of Muhammad, we need not commit our whole lives and eternal destinies to it.

We return to the first surah of the Qur'an itself. It is often said to contain the kernel of the Book's teaching. It could also be thought to contain its own disproof:

**"Praise be to Allah, the Cherisher and Sustainer of the Worlds; Most Gracious, Most Merciful; Master of the Day of Judgement. Thee do we worship, and Thine aid do we seek. Show us the straight way, the way of those on whom Thou hast bestowed Thy grace, whose (portion) is not Wrath, and who go not astray".**

As already mentioned, this is the daily prayer of millions of Muslims. Tradition tells us it was Muhammad's own frequent petition. Now, numerous times in the Qur'an, Muhammad is told by Al'lah to pronounce something. He is addressed in the second person singular: "Qul" (Say). This "Fatihah" (Opening), however, has no such command prefaced. It is simply a prayer, addressed to God. And that surely indicates it is not Al'lah who is speaking, but a human? This part at least is not God's own Word. No, it is merely human words. Many other parts seem to be so, too. (Note 1).

There may be final and absolute truth about God to be found. If there is, it is surely our responsibility to continue seeking it. This study had had to conclude that it is not found in the Qur'an, the essential basis of Islam. That certainly need not mean that a final revelation of and from God, is not to be found anywhere.

Footnote:

1. Seyyed H. Nasr (*Islamic Spirituality - Foundations*) attempts to defuse this by saying that this prayer is given, by revelation, as an example of how to pray. He claims the concluding verses of Surah 2, and also 3:7-8 and 190-193, are other examples of prayers, not prefixed by "Say". But these are quite different from Surah 1. None are direct prayers at all. They are merely a recounting of the prayers of certain people. Surah 1 is quite unique in form.

**(END)**

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