

Kazi Nurul Islam
University of Dhaka, Bangladesh

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON THE REVELATION OF THE QURAN

Muslims consider the Qur'an¹ as the infallible word of Allah, a perfect transcription of an eternal tablet preserved in the Heaven. It is the record of the verbal revelation vouchsafed by Allah to Prophet Muhammad at intervals over a period of twenty three years, between 610 and 632 CE. As the paramount authority for the Muslim community, and the ultimate source as well as permanent inspiration of Islam, the Qur'an has produced marvelous effect on the minds of those who came into contact with it and brought about an unparalleled revolution in the world and the uplift of many nations from degradations. Throughout the world it is the only religious text which compels its followers to have sincere faith in all other sacred texts along with the prophets, and declares that there should not be any compulsion in religion. The Qur'an, in the clearest possible terms, claims to be the greatest spiritual force which is ultimately destined to bring the whole of humanity to perfection.

Despite all these achievements and liberal approaches, the Qur'an has been misunderstood and vehemently criticized by the

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1. To understand the meaning of the Qur'an one must know the different names and epithets that are stated in the Qur'an itself. The Qur'an speaks of itself as al-Kitab, because its writing is considered to be complete in itself; al-Furqan, for it distinguishes between the right and wrong; al Huda, for it guides or makes one attain the goal. The Qur'an speaks of itself by many other additional names like al-Muhaimin or the Guardian (of previous revelation), al-Musaddeq of confirming the truth of previous revelation, etc. In Arabic the Qur'an is always mentioned with certain exalted appellations as al Qur'anul Karim, al Qur'anul Hakim, al Qur'anul Majid, al Qur'anul Adhim, etc. These mean 'the Bountious', 'The Full of Wisdom', 'The Glorious', and 'The Great' or 'Sublime' respectively. The non-Arabic speaking Muslims, very often describe the Book as "The Holy Qur'an". But one must remember that the corresponding Arabic word 'muqaddas' is never used in this sense. cf. Muhammad Khalifa, *The Sublime Qur'an and Orientalism*, Longman, London, 1983, P.5

non-Muslims, particularly in the West. They hold that the Qur'an is pure creation and concoction of Muhammad and his accomplice; nothing but the product of wishful thinking or the product of creative imagination and nothing but an arabized version of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Muhammad was a poet and the Qur'an a poem stored up in his unconscious mind; he was an epileptic or possessed by demons in his endeavour to explain the divine revelations and the revelation was simply an auditory visual hallucination. The present paper is a humble endeavour to examine some of these charges against the authority of the Qur'an.

Muslims believe that the Qur'an is a record from the beginning to the end of the revelation vouchsafed by Allah to Prophet Muhammad. The non-Muslim scholars, in most cases, quite persistently deny this and claim that the Qur'an was composed by Muhammad himself. G. Sale, for instance, writes: "That Mohammad was really the author and chief contriver of the Koran is beyond dispute....."² William Muir,³ Alfred Guillaume,⁴ S.C. Champion and D. Short,⁵ M. Rodinson⁶ and many others before and after hold similar views. It is claimed that the prophet Muhammad composed the Qur'an himself after being taught by some one with Jewish or Christian background. This charge was first raised in the Middle ages. In the middle of the present century R.V.C. Bodley⁷ and others raised the issue afresh. Bodley emphatically claims that because of his vast travels Muhammad could accumulate enough knowledge of Judaism and Christianity which enabled him to write the Qur'an. G. Sale asserts that during his first visit to Syria Muhammad learnt Christianity from monks. Other scholars like Bohira,⁸ Norman

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2. G. Sale, *The Koran: Commonly called Al-Quran; with Preliminary Discourse*, Fredrick Warne, London, 1899, p.50 (This book was first published in 1734).
 3. W. Muir, *Life of Mohamet*, Smith, London, 1860, Vol II, p.100.
 4. Alfred Guillaume, *Islam*, A Pelican Book, Middlesex, 1956, p. 56.
 5. S. C. Champion and D. Short, *Readings from World Religions*, Fawcett, Greenwich, U.S.A., 1959, p. 240.
 6. M. Rodinson, *Islam and Capitalism*, Pelican Books, Harmondsworth, 1977, p. 11.
 7. R.V.C. Bodley, *The Messenger: The Life of Mohammad*, Doubleday, New York, 1946, p. 4.
 8. G. Sale, Op. cit., p. 50.

Daniel,⁹ Alfred Guillaume,¹⁰ etc. hold the same view. But if we go through the history of Islam we find that Muhammad traveled to Syria twice at the age of 13 and 25. His visit to foreign countries took place long before his mission and as a result constitute little justification in this regard.

There are one hundred and seven foreign words in the Qur'an. Jalalu'd Din as-Syuti made commentaries on these words. Now, as there are so many foreign words in the Qur'an Cannon Sell¹¹ claims that the Qur'an has borrowed so many ideas from outside. In fact, R. Bell writes about Muhammad: "He had rather a liking for introducing unfamiliar words some of which he explains, others he leaves unexplained, a certain obscurity being appropriate to a divine revelation."¹² He also tries to show how Aramaic and Abyssinian words used by Christians have been borrowed.

It is true there are more than a hundred foreign words in the Qur'an. But, just because of this the Qur'an does not cease to be a revealed text. Because of the Kaba, Mecca was considered to be a sacred place for centuries. Even before the birth of Islam, people used to come to Mecca to perform Hajj. Moreover, the Arabs were traders and Mecca was one of the important business centres. As a result, the linguistic interactions were quite common and in the pre-Islamic Arabic literature we find many more foreign words than those are available in the Qur'an. It may be mentioned here that out of 77639 words used in the Quran, only 107 were foreign words and that too belonging to the languages of the neighbouring countries. Again, Bell and following him Sell claim that in the Qur'an Muhammad uses unfamiliar words, some of which he explains and others remained unexplained. Now, for the sake of logic, even if we accept that these words are of Muhammad, we cannot distort the fact that whenever he was asked to explain or clarify the meaning of any verse of the Qur'an he

9. Norman Daniel, *Islam and the West: The Making of an Image*, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1958, p. 5.

10. Alfred Guillaume, *Op. cit.*, p. 30.

11. Canon Sell, *Studies in Islam*, B. R. Publishing Corp., Delhi (Reprint), 1985, p. 226.

12. R. Bell, *The Origin of Islam in its Christian Environment*, Macmillan, London, 1926, p. 51.

gladly did so and never refrained from doing so. Only one thing he did not encourage and that is metaphysical discourses.

There is another theory regarding prophet Muhammad's being influenced by Christianity. Scholars like H.A.R. Gibb,¹³ Brodley,¹⁴ etc. are of the opinion that Muhammad had intimate acquaintance with Christianity through the Bishops and monks who were stationed on the Syrian borders of Arabian desert to conduct missionary activities in the vicinity. Both of them have referred to Bishops who were engaged in teaching Christianity from camelback during the annual fairs near Mecca. They have even named Qissben-Saidah as one of them. It is historically true that two Bishops used to preach Christianity from camelback during fairs near Mecca, but these Bishops did not have any opportunity to influence Muhammad directly, for both of them died over a century before the birth of Muhammad.¹⁵

Again Rodinson holds that in the Qur'an Muhammad has merely arabized the Judeo Christian tradition.¹⁶ Against this claim it can be argued that there is no clear evidence that Muhammad had any intimate knowledge of these traditions. Canon Sell writes: "It does not appear that Muhammad had any acquaintance with the contents of the canonical books of the Old and New Testaments".¹⁷ It may also be mentioned that the former was translated in 900 CE and the latter in 1171 long after Muhammad had died.¹⁸ Canon Sell, who holds that the Qur'an was composed by Muhammad, further contends: "There is no evidence that Muhammad ever had the Bible before him. The Old Testament traditions recorded in the Qur'an resemble more the embellished Haggadic tales than they do the original history, whilst the New Testament ones are quite legendary and are similar to the reports of the Apocryphal Gospels".¹⁹

13. H. A. R. Gibb, *Mohammedanism: A Historical Survey*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1961, p. 37.

14. R. V. C. Bodley, *Op. cit.*, p. 4.

15. Cf. Mohammad Khalifa, *Op. cit.*, p. 14.

16. Rodinson, *Mohammad*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, 1977, P. 88.

17. Canon Sell, *Op. cit.*, p. 209.

18. Cf. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, p. 223.

Moreover, there are many doctrinal differences between Christianity and Islam. For instance, the former advocates the doctrine of trinity and the doctrine of original sin, but the latter is completely against these doctrines. In this connection Mohammad Khalifa's observation is worth mentioning: "As it is, the drastic differences between the Qur'anic and biblical concepts of God, the contrasts between the biblical legends and the Qur'anic records, not to mention the extremely unfriendly attitude of the Jewish community of Medina towards the Prophet must surely furnish convincing evidence against the conjecture that the Jews and Christians helped him".²⁰

Again, had Muhammad learnt from a Christian monk or a Bishop and/or a Jewish scholar he would have definitely acknowledged it because he was quite famous throughout his life for preaching and speaking the truth. Moreover, his teachers could not have remained unknown for long 23 years, i.e., throughout all the years of the prophet's mission. Again, had there been Jewish or Christian teachers of Muhammad they would have been the first persons to declare that at least in order to prove that he was a fake prophet. Moreover, if Muhammad was not honest in his prophethood and sincere in delivering his revelation his friends and followers would not have remained with him and would not have clung to his teachings despite unspeakable hardship and persecution. Prophet Muhammad was a man of such a rare integrity and fair character that not a single friend ever deserted him or betrayed him.

There is another claim by F.J.L. Menzes²¹ and J. Garden.²² They hold that Salman, a Persian convert from Zoroastrianism to Christianity and finally to Islam helped Muhammad writing the Qur'an. This claim does not stand any scrutiny because Salman met the Prophet in Medina long after the latter had migrated there from Mecca and it should be mentioned here that the greater part of the Qur'an was already revealed in Mecca before this migration. Moreover, the Qur'an's literary style is so sublime that even the renowned linguists

20. Mohammad Khalifa, *Op. cit.*, p. 15.

21. F. J. L. Menzes, *The Life and Religion of Mohammad: The Prophet of Arabia*, Sands, London, 1911, p. 161.

22. J. Gardner, *The Faiths of the World*, Vol. I, Fullerton, 1920, p. 279.

who made several endeavours to imitate it have not been successful and ultimately embraced Islam. Therefore, it is simply unthinkable on the part of any non-Arab to help Muhammad in writing a book like the Qur'an. In fact, the sublime style of the Qur'an is such that it remained absolutely the same throughout the entire period of its revelation. It is just impossible on the part of Muhammad or any other human being to maintain such perfection of style consistently, persistently and for such a long time.

Von G. E. Grunebaum²³ claims that there is no dispute regarding the fact that the Qur'an was really the work of Muhammad. This is just a sweeping remark and he did not put forward any justification in this regard. Like him many others made this allegation in the past and may raise the same in future. That is why Muslim scholars should be asked a question: Is there any logic behind supporting the claim that the Qur'an was revealed to Muhammad and was transmitted to him without any change whatsoever?

In answer to this question one may put forward two arguments.(1) The literary style of the Qur'an is exalted above any other work including the sayings of Muhammad himself. Thousands of eloquent sayings of Prophet Muhammad are great treasures of Islam and they are so much revered that their position is next to the verses of the Qur'an. But "none of these bears the slightest resemblance to the revealed messages, the transcendent power of which impregnates the soul with quickening light. Even the infidels of the prophet's time acknowledged the substantive inimitability of the Qur'an and considered the form of the text such an extraordinary phenomenon that they used to call it 'magic'."²⁴ Even some of those who do not consider the Qur'an as a revealed text admired its utmost elegance and unique style. For instance, G. Sale states: "The style of the Qur'an is beautiful, it is adorned with bold figures after the Eastern taste, enlivened with florid and sententious expressions and in many places where the majesty and attributes of God are described, sublime and magnificent."²⁵ "That the best of Arab writers have

23. Von G. E. Grunebaum, *Islam: Essays in the Nature and Growth of a Cultural Tradition*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1955, p. 90.

24. Mohammad Khalifa, Op. Cit., p. 18.

25. G. Sale, Op. cit. p. 47.

never succeeded in producing anything in equal merit to the Qur'an itself is not surprising."²⁶

About the Qur'an D.S. Margoliouth writes: 'The language of the Qur'an is God's language, and its eloquence is miraculous..... it is an infallible guide to conduct; the authority for both statements and precepts is paramount. It is therefore absolutely and uniquely consistent; inconsistency, which would have been the sign of human effect, cannot be found in it.'²⁷ In the words of H. Hirschfeld, 'The Qur'an is unapproachable as regards convincing power of eloquence and even of composition',²⁸ The Qur'an has a documentary uncomplicatedness akin to its authoritarian directness and simplicity.²⁹ Because of all these unique qualities the Qur'an transformed the simple shepherds and the merchants and the nomads of Arabia into warriors and empire builders.³⁰ Indeed, the Qur'an succeeded so well in captivating the minds of the people that many critics thought it to be the effect of witchcraft and enchantment.³¹

(2)The subject matter of the Qur'an which covers such an infinite range of ideas and touches on topics then unknown to any human mind, could never have been conceived either by Muhammad or by any other scholar of his time. No human being on earth would have been ever capable of knowing the future in such detail

26. E. Palmer, *The Quran*, Oxford University Press, London, 1928, p. IV. (First published in 1888.)

27. D. S. Margoliouth, *Mohammedanism and the Islamic World*, Deep and Deep Publications, New Delhi, 1988, p. 63.

28. Qd., Maulana Muhammad Ali, *The Holy Quran*, Ahmadiyah Anjuman Ishraat Islam, Lahore, 1951, p. XVIII.

29. Kenneth Cragg, *The House of Islam* Dickenson Publishing Company, California, 1975, p. 37.

30. R. V. C. Brodley, Op. cit. p. 239.

31. K. W. Morgan (ed): *Islam Interpreted by Muslims*, Ronald Press, London, 1958, p. 27.

"It is meaningless to apply adjectives as 'beautiful' or 'persuasive' to the Qur'an. Its flashing images and inexorable measures go directly to the brain and intoxicate it. It is not surprising then that a skilled Qur'anic reciter can reduce an Arabic speaking audience to helpless tears, that for fourteen centuries it has been ceaselessly meditated upon or that for great portions of human race the High Speech of seventh century Arabia has become true accents of the Eternal". J. A. Williams (ed): *Islam*, Washington Square Press, Washington 1963, p. 2.

as to compose the Qur'an in the way it has been, and without revising any chapter or a verse or even a word.³² Had Muhammad been the author of the Qur'an he could not have challenged all men to compose a chapter like it and he would not have declared with certainty: "you can never do it". It is a matter of great pride for the Muslims that this challenge has never been met and this stands even today.

There is a group of non-Muslim scholars who hold that Muhammad was a poet of outstanding nature and he himself composed the Qur'an. They are J.W. Strobart, R. Bell, M. Rodinson, etc. Strobart claims that any Arab who is properly acquainted with the general outline of the Jewish tradition and the history of his own nation and is possessed of some poetic fire and tancy,³³ can easily write a book like the Qur'an. But we know that since the time of Muhammad many profound historians and theologians were born in Arab countries, but none of them even made the slightest attempt to replace the Qur'an by their own writings. Bell also holds that Muhammad was a poet who composed the Qur'an himself. But he does not consider Muhammad as a poet of the ordinary Arab type because unlike others his themes are related to religion and righteousness.³⁴ Bell knows it very well that Muhammad was liked by everybody for his truthfulness and he was teaching, preaching and practising righteousness. Then how come he blames Muhammad to be a pretender? Is it not a pity that he questions the honesty and integrity of Muhammad? M. Rodinson's view is quite extreme, because he did not and in fact could not appreciate the Qur'an except as poem stored up in Muhammad's unconscious mind.³⁵ Against this view one can boldly assert that if we accept this for the sake of logic we cannot but admit that Muhammad was the luckiest man on earth for the entire Qur'an was stored up in his unconscious mind.

Again, if the Qur'an is stored in his unconscious mind do we have any right to say that he has ever deceived us consciously? Moreover, anybody who is familiar with Arabic poetry of Muhammad's

32. Mohammad Khalifa, Op. cit., p. 26.

33. J. W. Strobart, *Islam and its Founder*, S. P. C. K., London, 1876, p. 108.

34. R. Bell, Op. cit., p. 96.

35. M. Rodinson, *Mohammad*, p. 94.

time is aware of the fact that the poets strictly followed the exact measures of syllabic sounds and rhymes even at the expense of grammar and shades of meaning. But any objective study will prove that the Qur'anic literary style is categorically different from the prevalent norms and practices of composing poems.

There is another theory held by San Pedro, Waltherius Guibert, Ricoldo Sigebert, M. Rodinson etc. Norman Daniel explains the views of some of them in the following way:

In some versions Muhammad had already convinced Khadijah of his 'latent divinity' by magic arts; in others he only claimed revelation after (and in order to explain away) his first epileptic stroke, which the judgment of God meted out to him. At its simplest, the story omitted Khadijah's part; they were just epileptic fits explained as angelic visitations. Serious writers were doubtful of the whole story, sometimes regretfully. Ricoldo referred it deliberately to authentic visions, but although he was always disposed to drag in every known argument and to utilise the nastiest, he even so gave it little prominence. Mark of Toledo had spoken more cannily of Muhammad's acting as though he suffered from epilepsy, *quasi morbum caducum patiens*; equally, he spoke of his rising from his fits, and rolling his eyes, *quasi demonio arreptus*.³⁶

William of Tyre remarks that Muhammad broke into such madness that he dared to lie that he was a prophet.³⁷ In this connection Daniel observes that there must have been something remarkable about his inspiration.³⁸ San Pedro and some other critics of the Qur'an belonging to the Middle ages and later categorically assert that Muhammad was an epileptic or possessed by demons, in an attempt to explain the divine revelations. But it may be mentioned here that whatever Mark owed to the epileptic theory, he refused to commit to it or to that of demonic possession. Rodinson had dubbed the revelation of Muhammad as auditory visual hallucination.³⁹ But there is not a single instance in the history of human civilization

36. Norman Daniel, Op. cit., pp. 27-28.

37. Cf. Ibid.

38. Ibid.

39. M. Rodinson, *Muhammad*, p. 77.

that anybody totally based on hallucination has written even an ordinary book, not to speak of the Qur'an which is "unique because of its novelty, its beauty, its poetry, its grandeur and its sweet, practical reasonable application to everyday experience."⁴⁰ Daniel's observation regarding epileptic theory is worth mentioning: "On the whole, epilepsy was the explanation of those who sought to amuse rather than to instruct."⁴¹

About the epileptic theory of the revelation of the Qur'an K.W. Morgan⁴² raises a question: Has epilepsy which is a sad and debilitating disease ever helped any of its victims to become a prophet or a law-giver, or rise to a position of the highest, prestige and power? It is scientifically proved that epilepsy leads eventually to mental deterioration in the form of poor and faulty memory and diminishing intelligence or irregularities of temper. On the physical side also the effects of the epileptic fits are often shattering on both the sufferer and the spectator. But there have been no signs of this kind in any of the details of Muhammad's life which we have come across through the centuries. On the other hand, even a scholar like W.M. Watt, who does not consider Muhammad to be a prophet, writes that Muhammad was clearly in full possession of his faculties to the very end of his life.⁴³ In fact, neither his physical strength (compared to his age) nor commonsense ever failed him. Therefore, the theory of epilepsy can never affect Muhammad's prophethood. In this connection the observation of Alfred Guillaume, who does not consider Muhammad to be a prophet, deserves especial attention :

Prophets are not normal people, but that does not authorize the assertion that their abnormal behavior is due to a morbid condition. Moreover, Muhammad was a man whose commonsense never failed him. Those who deny his mental and psychic stability do so only by ignoring the overwhelming evidence of his shrewd appraisal of others and of the significance of

40. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Qur-an*, Shaikh Muhammad Ashraf, Lahore, 1934, p. IV.

41. Norman Daniel, *Op. cit.*, p. 28.

42. K. W. Morgan, *Op. cit.*, p. 56.

43. W. M. Watt, *Muhammad: Prophet and Statesman* Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1961, p. 18.

what was going on in the world of his time, and his persistence in the face of constant opposition until he united his people in the religion of Islam. Had he ever collapsed in the strain of battle or controversy, or fainted away when strong action was called for, a case might be made out. But all the evidence we have points in the opposite direction, and the suggestion of epilepsy is as groundless in the eyes of the present writer as it is offensive to all Muslims. It may be added that most modern writers, as opposed to those of the last generation, are of this opinion. To base such a theory on a legend which on the face of it has no historical foundation is a sin against historical criticism.⁴⁴

From the discussion made so far, it should be clear that the Qur'an was not composed by any human being. It is neither a result of wishful thinking nor the product of creative imagination nor even an auditory visual hallucination or an arabised version of Judaism and Christianity. It does not seem to be rational to hold that Muhammad was epileptic and possessed by demons, in an attempt to explain the divine revelation. This should be evident from the above discussion that Muhammad did not compose the Qur'an with the assistance of Jewish or Christian sources. Had the Qur'an been the product of any human being it would not be so immune from flaws and so different from the Old Testament or the New Testament and it would have definitely followed Biblical lines. It should also be noted that no man fourteen centuries ago could have been in such a position to have guessed, conceived or known the scientific facts which are stated in the Qur'an.

Now a question may be raised: Regarding the revelation of the Qur'an why should there be so much misunderstanding? There may be many answers to this question. But two answers seem to be more relevant at this moment: (1) Some scholars have unhesitatingly put forward many conjectures before carefully and faithfully going through the Quran in detail. And (2) some scholars in most cases, start with a hypothesis and like a faithful advocate fight upto the last to establish it knowing fully well its merits and

44. Alfred Guillaume, *Op. cit.*, pp. 26-25.

and demerits. Moreover, they try to look at other traditions through a glass coloured with their own theological ideas and ideals. This kind of viewing at a particular religious tradition cannot but be misleading. To get rid of this and in order to understand the deeper meaning and significance of the Qur'an, the seeker must, "in addition to a certain degree of knowledge of the language and the principles of interpretation, cultivate purity of thought and action. The greater the purity of a person's life the deeper and wider will be his comprehension of the meaning of the Qur'an."⁴⁵ We know that there are scholars on Islam both Muslims and non-Muslims who spend their whole lives in studying the Qur'an and reflecting upon it and as they grow and develop both physically and spiritually they discover for themselves new meaning and implications of this Book. This kind of endeavour is indeed like climbing a mountain, the higher we climb, the further we see. Goethe's famous comment on the Qur'anic style was, "As often as we approach it, it always proves repulsive; gradually, however, it attracts, it astonishes, and in the end it forces admiration."⁴⁶ Let us conclude with an observation of Abdullah Yusuf Ali: "The Qur'an, indeed every religious book, has to be read, not only with the tongue and voice and eyes, but with the best light that our intellect can supply, and even more, with the truest and purest light which our heart and conscience can give us."⁴⁷

45. Muhammad Zafarullah Khan, *Islam: Its Meaning for Modern Man*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962, pp 88-89.

46. Qd. Mohammad Khalifa, Op. cit., p. 24

47. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, Op. cit, p. IV.