
The Koran Commands And Orders

Mohammad Hassan Kaffashan
Mhkaffashan@yahoo.com

Department of Humanities, Shoushtar Branch, Islamic Azad University, Shoushtar, Iran

Abstract

THE KORAN admittedly occupies an important position among the great religious books of the world. Though the youngest of the epoch-making works belonging to this class of literature, it yields to hardly any in the wonderful effect which it has produced on large masses of men. It has created all but new phase of human thought and a fresh type of character. It first transformed a number of heterogeneous desert tribes of the Arabian peninsula into a nation of heroes, and then proceeded to create the vast politico-religious organisations of the Muhammedan world which are one of the great forces with which Europe and the East have to reckon to-day. The secret of the power exercised by the book, of course, lay in the mind which produced it. It was, in fact, at first not a book, but a strong living voice, a kind of wild authoritative proclamation, a series of admonitions, promises, threats, and instructions addressed to turbulent and largely hostile assemblies of untutored Arabs. As a book it was published after the prophet's death. In Muhammed's life-time there were only disjointed notes, speeches, and the retentive memories of those who listened to them. To speak of the Koran is, therefore, practically the same as speaking of Muhammed, and in trying to appraise the religious value of the book one is at the same time attempting to form an opinion of the prophet himself. It would indeed be difficult to find another case in which there is such a complete identity between the literary work and the mind of the man who produced it. That widely different estimates have been formed of Muhammed is well-known. To Moslems he is, of course, the prophet par excellence, and the Koran is regarded by the orthodox as nothing less than the eternal utterance of Allah. The eulogy pronounced by Carlyle on Muhammed in *Heroes and Hero Worship* will probably be endorsed by not a few at the present day. The extreme contrary opinion, which in a fresh form has recently been revived ¹ by an able writer, is hardly likely to find much lasting support. The correct view very probably lies between the two extremes. The relative value of any given system of religious thought must depend on the amount of truth which it embodies as well as on the ethical standard which its adherents are bidden to follow. Another important test is the degree of originality that is to be assigned to it, for it can manifestly only claim credit for that which is new in it, not for that which it borrowed from other systems.

Keywords: Koran, Muhammad, Command.

Introduction

With regard to the first-named criterion, there is a growing opinion among students of religious history that Muhammed may in a real sense be regarded as a prophet of certain truths, though by no means of truth in the absolute meaning of the term. The shortcomings of the moral teaching contained in the Koran are striking enough if judged from the highest ethical standpoint with which we are acquainted; but a much more favourable view is arrived at if a comparison is made between the ethics of the Koran and the moral tenets of Arabian and

other forms of heathenism which it supplanted.

The method followed by Muhammed in the promulgation of the Koran also requires to be treated with discrimination. From the first flash of prophetic inspiration which is clearly discernible in the earlier portions of the book he, later on, frequently descended to deliberate invention and artful rhetoric. He, in fact, accommodated his moral sense to the circumstances in which the role he had to play involved him.

On the question of originality there can hardly be two opinions now that the Koran has been thoroughly compared with the Christian and Jewish traditions of the time; and it is, besides some original Arabian legends, to those only that the book stands in any close relationship. The matter is for the most part borrowed, but the manner is all the prophet's own. This is emphatically a case in which originality consists not so much in the creation of new materials of thought as in the manner in which existing traditions of various kinds are utilised and freshly blended to suit the special exigencies of the occasion. Biblical reminiscences, Rabbinic legends, Christian traditions mostly drawn from distorted apocryphal sources, and native heathen stories, all first pass through the prophet's fervid mind, and thence issue in strange new forms, tinged with poetry and enthusiasm, and well adapted to enforce his own view of life and duty, to serve as an encouragement to his faithful adherents, and to strike terror into the hearts of his opponents.

There is, however, apart from its religious value, a more general view from which the book should be considered. The Koran enjoys the distinction of having been the starting-point of a new literary and philosophical movement which has powerfully affected the finest and most cultivated minds among both Jews and Christians in the Middle Ages. This general progress of the Muhammedan world has somehow been arrested, but research has shown that what European scholars knew of Greek philosophy, of mathematics, astronomy, and like sciences, for several centuries before the Renaissance, was, roughly speaking, all derived from Latin treatises ultimately based on Arabic originals; and it was the Koran which, though indirectly, gave the first impetus to these studies among the Arabs and their allies. Linguistic investigations, poetry, and other branches of literature, also made their appearance soon after or simultaneously with the publication of the Koran; and the literary movement thus initiated has resulted in some of the finest products of genius and learning.

The style in which the Koran is written requires some special attention in this introduction. The literary form is for the most part different from anything else we know. In its finest passages we indeed seem to hear a voice akin to that of the ancient Hebrew prophets, but there is much in the book which Europeans usually regard as faulty. The tendency to repetition which is an inherent characteristic of the Semitic mind appears here in an exaggerated form, and there is in addition much in the Koran which strikes us as wild and fantastic. The most unfavourable criticism ever passed on Muhammed's style has in fact been penned by the prophet's greatest British admirer, Carlyle himself; and there are probably many now who find themselves in the same dilemma with that great writer.

The fault appears, however, to lie partly in our difficulty to appreciate the psychology of the Arab prophet. We must, in order to do him justice, give full consideration to his temperament and to the condition of things around him. We are here in touch with an untutored but fervent mind, trying to realise itself and to assimilate certain great truths which have been powerfully borne in upon him, in order to impart them in a convincing form to his fellow-tribesmen. He is surrounded by obstacles of every kind, yet he manfully struggles on with the message that is within him. Learning he has none, or next to none. His chief objects of knowledge are floating stories and traditions largely picked up from hearsay, and his over-wrought mind is his only teacher. The literary compositions to which he had ever

listened were the half-cultured, yet often wildly powerful rhapsodies of early Arabian minstrels, akin to Ossian rather than to anything else within our knowledge. What wonder then that his Koran took a form which to our colder temperaments sounds strange, unbalanced, and fantastic?

Yet the Moslems themselves consider the book the finest that ever appeared among men. They find no incongruity in the style. To them the matter is all true and the manner all perfect. Their eastern temperament responds readily to the crude, strong, and wild appeal which its cadences make to them, and the jingling rhyme in which the sentences of a discourse generally end adds to the charm of the whole. The Koran, even if viewed from the point of view of style alone, was to them from the first nothing less than a miracle, as great a miracle as ever was wrought, that it is scholarly without being pedantic that is to say, that it aims at correctness without sacrificing the right effect of the whole to over-insistence on small details. Another important merit of Rodwell's edition is its chronological arrangement of the Suras or chapters. As he tells us himself in his preface, it is now in a number of cases impossible to ascertain the exact occasion on which a discourse, or part of a discourse, was delivered, so that the system could not be carried through with entire consistency. But the sequence adopted is in the main based on the best available historical and literary evidence; and in following the order of the chapters as here printed, the reader will be able to trace the development of the prophet's mind as he gradually advanced from the early flush of inspiration to the less spiritual and more equivocal rôle of warrior, politician, and founder of an empire.

But to return to our own view of the case. Our difficulty in appreciating the style of the Koran even moderately is, of course, increased if, instead of the original, we have a translation before us. But one is happy to be able to say that Rodwell's rendering is one of the best that have as yet been produced. It seems to a great extent to carry with it the atmosphere in which Muhammed lived, and its sentences are imbued with the flavour of the East. The quasi-verse form, with its unfettered and irregular rhythmic flow of the lines, which has in suitable cases been adopted, helps to bring out much of the wild charm of the Arabic. Not the least among its recommendations is, perhaps

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IT IS NECESSARY that some brief explanation should be given with reference to the arrangement of the Suras, or chapters, adopted in this translation of the Koran. It should be premised that their order as it stands in all Arabic manuscripts, and in all hitherto printed editions, whether Arabic or European, is not chronological, neither is there any authentic tradition to shew that it rests upon the authority of Muhammad himself. The scattered fragments of the Koran were in the first instance collected by his immediate successor Abu Bekr, about a year after the Prophet's death, at the suggestion of Omar, who foresaw that, as the Muslim warriors, whose memories were the sole depositaries of large portions of the revelations, died off or were slain, as had been the case with many in the battle of Yemâma, A.H. 12, the loss of the greater part, or even of the whole, was imminent. Zaid Ibn Thâbit, a native of Medina, and one of the Ansars, or helpers, who had been Muhammad's amanuensis, was the person fixed upon to carry out the task, and we are told that he "gathered together" the fragments of the Koran from every quarter, "from date leaves and tablets of white stone, and from the breasts of men." ¹ The copy thus formed by Zaid probably remained in the possession of Abu Bekr during the remainder of his brief caliphate, who committed it to the custody of Haphsa, one of Muhammad's widows, and this text continued during the ten years of Omar's caliphate to be the standard. In the copies made from it, various readings naturally and necessarily sprung up;

and these, under the caliphate of Othman, led to such serious disputes between the faithful, that it became necessary to interpose, and in accordance with the warning of Hodzeifa, "to stop the people, before they should differ regarding their scriptures, as did the Jews and Christians."² In accordance with this advice, Othman determined to establish a text which should be the sole standard, and entrusted the redaction to the Zaid already mentioned, with whom he associated as colleagues, three, according to others, twelve ³ of the Koreisch, in order to secure the purity of that Meccan idiom in which Muhammad had spoken, should any occasions arise in which the collators might have to decide upon various readings. Copies of the text formed were thus forwarded to several of the chief military stations in the new empire, and all previously existing copies were committed to the flames.

Zaid and his coadjutors, however, do not appear to have arranged the materials which came into their hands upon any system more definite than that of placing the longest and best known Suras first, immediately after the Fatthah, or opening chapter (the eighth in this edition); although even this rule, artless and unscientific as it is, has not been adhered to with strictness. Anything approaching to a chronological arrangement was entirely lost sight of. Late Medina Suras are often placed before early Meccan Suras; the short Suras at the end of the Koran are its earliest portions; while, as will be seen from the notes, verses of Meccan origin are to be found embedded in Medina Suras, and verses promulgated at Medina scattered up and down in the Meccan Suras. It would seem as if Zaid had to a great extent put his materials together just as they came to hand, and often with entire disregard to continuity of subject and uniformity of style.

The text, therefore, as hitherto arranged, necessarily assumes the form of a most unreadable and incongruous patchwork; "une assemblage," says M. Kasimirski in his Preface, "informe et incohérent de préceptes moraux, religieux, civils et politiques, mêlés d'exhortations, de promesses, et de menaces"-and conveys no idea whatever of the development and growth of any plan in the mind of the founder of Islam, or of the circumstances by which he was surrounded and influenced. It is true that the manner in which Zaid contented himself with simply bringing together his materials and transcribing them, without any attempt to mould them into shape or sequence, and without any effort to supply connecting links between adjacent verses, to fill up obvious chasms, or to suppress details of a nature discreditable to the founder of Islam, proves his scrupulous honesty as a compiler, as well as his reverence for the sacred text, and to a certain extent guarantees the genuineness and authenticity of the entire volume. But it is deeply to be regretted that he did not combine some measure of historical criticism with that simplicity and honesty of purpose which forbade him, as it certainly did, in any way to tamper with the sacred text, to suppress contradictory, and exclude or soften down inaccurate, statements. The arrangement of the Suras in this translation is based partly upon the traditions of the Muhammadans themselves, with reference especially to the ancient chronological list printed by Weil in his *Mohammed der Prophet*, as well as upon a careful consideration of the subject matter of each separate Sura and its probable connection with the sequence of events in the life of Muhammad. Great attention has been paid to this subject by Dr. Weil in the work just mentioned; by Mr. Muir in his *Life of Mahomet*, who also publishes a chronological list of Suras, 21 however of which he admits have "not yet been carefully fixed;" and especially by Nöldeke, in his *Geschichte des Qôrans*, a work to which public honours were awarded in 1859 by the Paris Academy of Inscriptions. From the arrangement of this author I see no reason to depart in regard to the later Suras. It is based upon a searching criticism and minute analysis of the component verses of each, and may be safely taken as a standard, which ought not to be departed from without weighty reasons. I have, however, placed the earlier and more fragmentary Suras, after the two first, in an order which has reference rather to their subject matter

than to points of historical allusion, which in these Suras are very few; whilst on the other hand, they are mainly couched in the language of self-communion, of aspirations after truth, and of mental struggle, are vivid pictures of Heaven and Hell, or descriptions of natural objects, and refer also largely to the opposition met with by Muhammad from his townsmen of Mecca at the outset of his public career. This remark applies to what Nöldeke terms "the Suras of the First Period."

The contrast between the earlier, middle, and later Suras is very striking and interesting, and will be at once apparent from the arrangement here adopted. In the Suras as far as the 54th, p. 76, we cannot but notice the entire predominance of the poetical element, a deep appreciation (as in Sura xci. p. 38) of the beauty of natural objects, brief fragmentary and impassioned utterances, denunciations of woe and punishment, expressed for the most part in lines of extreme brevity. With a change, however, in the position of Muhammad when he openly assumes the office of "public warner," the Suras begin to assume a more prosaic and didactic tone, though the poetical ornament of rhyme is preserved through out. We gradually lose the Poet in the missionary aiming to convert, the warm asserter of dogmatic truths; the descriptions of natural objects, of the judgment, of Heaven and Hell, make way for gradually increasing historical statements, first from Jewish, and subsequently from Christian histories; while, in the 29 Suras revealed at Medina, we no longer listen to vague words, often as it would seem without positive aim, but to the earnest disputant with the enemies of his faith, the Apostle pleading the cause of what he believes to be the Truth of God. He who at Mecca is the admonisher and persuader, at Medina is the legislator and the warrior, who dictates obedience, and uses other weapons than the pen of the Poet and the Scribe. When business pressed, as at Medina, Poetry makes way for Prose, and although touches of the Poetical element occasionally break forth, and he has to defend himself up to a very late period against the charge of being merely a Poet, yet this is rarely the case in the Medina Suras; and we are startled by finding obedience to God and the Apostle, God's gifts and the Apostle's, God's pleasure and the Apostle's, spoken of in the same breath, and epithets and attributes elsewhere applied to Allah openly applied to him self as in Sura ix., 118, 129.

The Suras, viewed as a whole, strike me as being the work of one who began his career as a thoughtful enquirer after truth, and an earnest asserter of it in such rhetorical and poetical forms as he deemed most likely to win and attract his countrymen, and who gradually proceeded from the dogmatic teacher to the politic founder of a system for which laws and regulations had to be provided as occasions arose. And of all the Suras it must be remarked that they were intended not for readers but for hearers-that they were all promulgated by public recital-and that much was left, as the imperfect sentences shew, to the manner and suggestive action of the reciter. It would be impossible, and indeed it is unnecessary, to attempt a detailed life of Muhammad within the narrow limits of a Preface. The main events thereof with which the Suras of the Koran stand in connection, are-The visions of Gabriel, seen, or said to have been seen, at the outset of his career in his 40th year, during one of his seasons of annual monthly retirement, for devotion and meditation to Mount Hirâ, near Mecca,-the period of mental depression and re-assurance previous to the assumption of the office of public teacher-the Fatrah or ause (see n. p. 20) during which he probably waited for a repetition of the angelic vision-his labours in comparative privacy for three years, issuing in about 40 converts, of whom his wife Chadijah was the first, and Abu Bekr the most important: (for it is to him and to Abu Jahl the Sura xcii. p. 32, refers)-struggles with Meccan unbelief and idolatry followed by a period during which probably he had the second vision, Sura

liii. p. 69, and was listened to and respected as a person "possessed" (Sura lxix. 42, p. 60, lii. 29, p. 64)—the first emigration to Abyssinia in A.D. 616, in consequence of the Meccan persecutions brought on by his now open attacks upon idolatry (Taghout)-increasing reference to Jewish and Christian histories, shewing that much time had been devoted to their study the conversion of Omar in 617-the journey to the Thaquifites at Taief in A.D. 620-the intercourse with pilgrims from Medina, who believed in Islam, and spread the knowledge thereof in their native town, in the same year-the vision of the midnight journey to Jerusalem and the Heavens-the meetings by night at Acaba, a mountain near Mecca, in the 11th year of his mission, and the pledges of fealty there given to him-the command given to the believers to emigrate to Yathrib, henceforth Medinat-en-nabi (the city of the Prophet) or El-Medina (the city), in April of A.D. 622-the escape of Muhammad and Abu Bekr from Mecca to the cave of Thaur-the *flight* to Medina in June 20, A.D. 622-treaties made with Christian tribes-increasing, but still very imperfect acquaintance with Christian doctrines-the Battle of Bedr in Hej. 2, and of Ohod-the coalition formed against Muhammad by the Jews and idolatrous Arabians, issuing in the siege of Medina, Hej. 5 (A.D. 627)-the convention, with reference to the liberty of making the pilgrimage, of Hudaibiya, Hej. 6- the embassy to Chosroes King of Persia in the same year, to the Governor of Egypt and to the King of Abyssinia, desiring them to embrace Islam-the conquest of several Jewish tribes, the most important of which was that of Chaibar in Hej. 7, a year marked by the embassy sent to Heraclius, then in Syria, on his return from the Persian campaign, and by a solemn and peaceful pilgrimage to Mecca-the triumphant entry into Mecca in Hej. 8 (A.D. 630), and the demolition of the idols of the Caaba-the submission of the Christians of Nedjran, of Aila on the Red Sea, and of Taief, etc., in Hej. 9, called "the year of embassies or deputations," from the numerous deputations which flocked to Mecca proffering submission-and lastly in Hej. 10, the submission of Hadramont, Yemen, the greater part of the southern and eastern provinces of Arabia-and the final solemn pilgrimage to Mecca.

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