

Concept of History in Islam: A Study of Some Relevant Qur'anic Text

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Abstract: Islam is a revealed religion and its principles are universal and permanent. These principles provide guidance and fashion life in all ages and all times. Islamic history is the discipline which informs us about our heritage, makes us conscious of links with the past, makes us aware of our origin, and provides us with a course of direction for the future. In this research paper, an attempt has been made to describe the concept of history in Islam by highlighting the Qur'anic concept of history as well as the Muslim consciousness of history.

Key-Words: History, Islamic history, Qur'anic concept of history, and Muslim consciousness of history

1. Introduction

Islamic history is the study of impact of Islam on the Muslims, Muslim cultures and their environments. The holy Qur'an, through the mouth and example of the Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) stressed the importance of relating what has happened to nations and civilizations of the old as a warning for mankind so that historical knowledge will serve as a moral exhortations to the believers and it was due to Qur'anic historical message that the Muslim historians approached history with utmost care and sincerity and produced a vast literature of history of considerable merit at a time when there was not much flair for history among the civilized people. The histories written by the Muslim historians were characterized by accuracy, scientific assembling of facts and their objective approach. In this research paper, an attempt has been made to describe the concept of history in Islam. It will also focus on highlighting the Qur'anic concept of history as well as the Muslim consciousness of history.

2. Concept of History in Islam: An Overview

The origin of the word *Tarikh* which is now generally used for history is very difficult to

trace.¹ Though its root form came to use in Yemen during the *Jahiliyah* period (age of ignorance)², yet in all probability it referred to time, not to history. Although the earlier meaning of the word *Tarikh* is obscure, yet some of the earlier Muslim historians have used the term *Akhbar* for history.³ The word *Tarikh* so commonly used for history is derived from the Arabic word ‘*arkh*’ which means recording the time of an event and as such *Tarikh* is actually the time when a particular event took place.⁴

According to Ibn Khaldun:

“History refers to events that are peculiar to a particular age or race”.⁵

According to the classic Arabic historiographers, “it is knowledge pertaining to a country, its customs and manners of people, remains of the people of yore, as well as an account of the actions of those alive”.⁶

Al-Kafiyaji in his *Al-Mukhtasar fi ‘Ilm al-Tarikh* defines *Tarikh* as:

Linguistically, *Tarikh* is the indication of time. In the customary usage and as a technical term, *Tarikh* is the general fixation of time, for the purpose of relating to it a time-section, either of the past, the present or the future.⁷

According to Imam Abd al-Rahman al-Sakhawi:

“*Tarikh* is the indication of time that serves for an accurate establishment of circumstances affecting the transmitters of traditions (*Ahadith*) and religious leaders. It indicates the dates of their birth and death, their soundness of mind and body, their travels and pilgrimages, their accuracy and knowledge of traditions, the degree of reliability and unreliability ascribed to them and similar matters”.⁸

¹ Franz Rosenthal: *A History of Muslim Historiography*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1952, p. 11.

² Al-Sakhawi, Abd al-Rahman: *Al-Élan bi al-Taubah Liman Dhamma al-Tarikh*, Baghdad, 1963, p. 29.

³ Franz Rosenthal: *A History of Muslim Historiography*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1952, p. 11.

⁴ Ibn Manzur: *Lisan al-Arab*, Vol. III (Cairo, 1985), p. 481.

⁵ Ibn Khaldun, Abd al-Rahman bin Muhammad: *Muqaddimah Ibn Khaldun*, Vol. 1, Dar al-Nahdah, Egypt, 1980, p. 50.

⁶ “History is the record of human events and actions which includes the culture in its different phases; it is the record of civilization in its fullest form”. Faruqi, Nisar Ahmad: *Early Muslim Historiography*, Idarah Adabiyat-i, Delhi, 1979, p. 2.

⁷ Al-Kafiyaji: *al-Mukhtasar fi Ilm al-Tarikh*, Delhi, 1979, p.547.

⁸ Al-Sakhawi, Abd al-Rahman: *Al-Élan bi al-Taubah Liman Dhamma al-Tarikh*, Baghdad, 1963, pp. 31-32

Thus, Islamic history is a branch of learning which investigates time-sections and circumstances prevailing in them, as well as the circumstances which are connected with those time-sections with a view to their fixation as to time.

2.1.1 Qur'anic Concept of History

From the historical point of view, the Holy *Qur'an* is the first and the most authentic available source of Islam.⁹ It covers various events of the life of Prophet Muhammad (SAAS), accounts of the battles fought by him and the circumstances in which certain commandments of Allah (SWT) were revealed unto him.¹⁰ The revelation of the Holy *Qur'an* to the Prophet (SAAS) directly, references to all major developments in the early period of Islam and the process of its preservation, add to the historical importance of the *Qur'an*. The holy Qur'an through the mouth and example of the Prophet (SAAS) stressed the importance of relating what has happened to nations and civilizations of the old as a warning for mankind so that historical knowledge will serve as a moral exhortations to the believers. The Qur'an states thus:

“Indeed, in their stories, there is a lesson for men of understanding. It (the Qur'an) is not a forged statement, but a confirmation of (Allah's existing Books) which were before it {i.e. (Taurat (Torah), the Injeel (Gospel) and other scriptures of Allah} and detailed explanation of everything and a guide and a mercy for the people who believe”.¹¹

“Have they not travelled in the land to see the nature of the consequence for those who disbelieved before them? They were mightier than thee in power and (in the) traces (which they) left behind them in the earth. Yet Allah seized them for their sins and they had no protector from Allah”.¹²

“Do they not travel in the land, and see what was the end of those before them? They were superior to them in strength, and they tilled the earth and populated it in greater numbers than these (pagans) have done, and there came to them their messengers with clear proofs. Surely, Allah wronged them not but they used to wrong themselves”.¹³

“Do they do not travel through the earth, and see what was the end of those before them,--

⁹ Ibid, p. 261

¹⁰ Faruqi, Nisar Ahmad: *Early Muslim Historiography*, Idarah Adabiyat-i, Delhi, 1979, p. 134.

¹¹ Al-Qur'an, Surah Yusuf, 12:111

¹² Al-Qur'an, Surah Al-Mu'min, 40: 21

¹³ Al-Quran, Surah Ar-Rum, 30: 9.

though they were superior to them in strength? Nor is Allah to be frustrated by anything whatever in the heavens or on earth: for He is all-knowing, all-powerful, if Allah were to punish men according to what they deserve, He would not leave on the back of the (earth) a single living creature: but He gives them respite for a stated term: when their term expires, verily Allah has in His sight all His servants”.¹⁴

2.2 Muslim Consciousness of History

The Arabs could have little conception of history before the advent of Islam. They even lacked a proper epic, and were people with no consciousness of history. It is, therefore, more likely that Muslims developed a sense of history from Prophet Muhammad’s (SAAS) mission and the holy Qur’an brings to the light the account of nations, their misdeeds and their destruction as a result of their misdoings:

“There is, in their stories, instruction for men endued with understanding it is not a tale invented, but a confirmation of what went before it, -- a detailed exposition of all things, and a guide and a mercy to any such as believe”.¹⁵

“See they not how many of those before them we did destroy?—Generations We had established on the earth, in strength such as We have not given to you—for whom We poured out rain from skies in abundance. And gave streams flowing beneath their (feet): yet for their sins We destroy them, and raised in their wake”.¹⁶

“Do they not travel through the earth, and see what was the end of those before them? They were superior them in strength; they tilled the soil and populated it in greater numbers than these have done. There came to them their messengers with clear (signs), (which they rejected, to their own destruction): it was not Allah who wronged them but they wronged their own souls”.¹⁷

“Do they do not travel through the earth, and see what was the end of those before them,-- though they were superior to them in strength? Nor is Allah to be frustrated by anything whatever in the heavens or on earth: for He is all-knowing, all-powerful, if Allah were to punish men according to what they deserve, He would not leave on the back of the (earth) a single living creature: but He gives

¹⁴ Al-Quran, Surah 35:44-45.

¹⁵ Al-Quran, Surah Yusuf, 12:111.

¹⁶ Al-Quran, Surah Al-An’am, 6:6.

¹⁷ Al-Quran, Surah Arabic-Rum, 30:9.

them respite for a stated term: when their term expires, verily Allah has in His sight all His servants”.¹⁸

Thus Islam claims to work in the context of history. A remarkable testimony to the historical sense of the Muslims is their success in preserving the text of the Quran.¹⁹ Another aspect of history consciousness of the Muslims is their concern to preserve, in letter and spirit, the sayings, of the Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) and to create a vast literature to cover the daily actions of the Prophet (SAAS). This speaks of the serious concern of the Muslims to have things recorded in the annals of history. The rise of the Prophet (SAAS), his consolidation of the Arabs ranks into a single nation and its subsequent impact. On human civilization represents one of the greatest events in the history of the mankind in general and that of the Muslims in particular. So long as the immediate disciples of the Prophet (SAAS) and companions were alive, this was a simple matter, but as time elapsed it was considered increasingly necessary to collect all information about him.²⁰ Where the believers could not find clear guidance from the Quran or where there was dispute in the interpretation of its text, the best authority could be the Prophet’s sayings and actions (Ahadith).²¹ Thus there grew up the tradition of collecting the ahadith. These writings comprised the first historic literature in Arabia.²² The scholars put their best efforts to collect the ahadith of the Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) from the *Sahaba* (RAA), *Tabieen* (RA) and successive generations.

The *Muhaddithin* (traditionists) introduced an unparalleled technique, *Jarah wa Ta’dil* (Science of declaring a Hadith valid or invalid) while compiling the ahadith. We do not find any evidence of this kind being employed in preserving the historical data either among the pagan Arabs or among the more civilized peoples of the neighbouring countries.²³ Thus, the Muslims brought the highest standards of objectivity into their writings and showed great enthusiasm for the discovery of true facts. Though the debt that history owes to the efforts of Muslim writers is generally recognized by Orientalists,²⁴ yet the consciousness of the value and significance of Muslim contribution is rare

¹⁸ Al-Quran, Surah Fatir, 35:44-45.

¹⁹ Najibullah: *Islamic literature*, New York, 1963, p.93.

²⁰ M. Taufiq Husayn: *Arab Historiography in the Last Hundred Years*- The Islamic Review, March, 1962, p. 24.

²¹ Francesco Gabrieli, “*Arab Historiography*”- Islamic studies, 1979, p.82.

²² Saeed Raad: ‘*Islamic contribution to the Study and Writing of History*’, Karachi, 1952, p.53.

²³ Faruqi, Nisar Ahmad: *Early Muslim Historiography*, Idarah Adabiyat-i, Delhi, 1979, p. 9.

²⁴ Margoliouth, D. S.: *Lectures on Arabic Historians*, Delhi, 1977, p.10.

among the western historians. It would not be an exaggeration to say that historiography is a Muslim science. “The development of modern historical writing seems to have gained considerably in speed and substance through the utilization of Muslim literature which enabled the western historians from the seventeenth century on, to see a large section of the world through foreign eyes. The Muslim historiography helped indirectly to shape the present day historical thinking.”²⁵

3. Conclusion

From the above discussion, it becomes crystal clear that the concept of history in Islam is based on the understanding of the universal message of *Tawhid* (unity God) of the Qur’an which is filled with stories of the ancient past commencing with the Prophet Adam (AS) down to the last Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) in a successive manner. Based on the understanding of the Qur’an, the purpose of studying history in Islam is meant for the establishment of justice and good moral standing on the surface of the earth. It was based on this purpose that the early Muslim historians and historiographers embarked on their numerous journeys around the world and produced the historical works of outstanding nature.

²⁵ Franz Rosenthal: *A History of Muslim Historiography*, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1952, p. 30.

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