

A QUR'ĀNIC VIEW OF PATTERNS IN HISTORY

BY REV DR JOHN STRINGER

1 Introduction

This article aims to give an introduction to the theme of *historiography* in the Qur'ân and of how Muslims view history. The focus will be on how Islâm views patterns, or trends, in history. This will help us better understand the worldviews of those Muslims who endeavor to live their lives in accordance with the mind of the Qur'ân. I am aware of the 'lite' nature of this paper; it is mostly intended to introduce the theme.

We will approach this theme through the prism of three books by representative modern scholars of Islâm. These are *Stories of the Prophets from Adam to Muhammad* by the Egyptian Sunnî scholar Ahmed Bahgat, *Trends of History in the Qur'an*, by the Iraqi Shi'ite Ayatullah Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, and *History of Muslim Historiography*, by the American Arabist Franz Rosenthal.¹

2 Rosenthal and the historiography of the Qur'an

Rosenthal wrote a helpful introduction to our theme, as he begins his monumental book with a description of the historical sense in pre-

¹ Ahmed Bahgat, *Stories of the Prophets from Adam to Muhammad* (Islamic Home Publishing and Distribution, Cairo, 1997). Bahgat's book contains the *imprimatur* of al-Azhar's General Department for Research, Writing and Translation. Ayatullah Baqir al-Sadr, *Trends of History in the Qur'an* (Al-Khoei Foundation, Karachi, 1990, 1991). Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr (1935-1980) was an Iraqi Shi'a scholar. He wrote books such as *Iqtisâdunâ* (Our Economics), the first clear exposition of Islamic economics in the modern context. He was also the first to introduce the thematic approach to Qur'anic exegesis that sought to understand the Qur'ân's philosophies on societal issues facing the modern Muslim community. In 1977, he was sentenced to life in prison following uprisings in Najaf, but was released two years later due to his immense popularity. Upon his release however, he was put under house arrest. In 1980, after writing in the defense of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, Sadr was once again imprisoned, tortured, and executed by the regime of Saddam Hussein. Franz Rosenthal, *History of Muslim Historiography* (E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1968). Rosenthal taught Near Eastern languages at Yale University in New Haven (CT) in the USA.

Islamic Arabia. The two major forms of literary expression in pre-Islamic Arabia were the literature of great battles and that of genealogy. Some of that material might have been written down at times, but none of the preserved material would seem even remotely to be based upon written sources.²

The battle-day narratives were only fully accepted as historical literature by Arab historians in the 13th century; before that, these stories were seen as belonging to the realm of philology and *belle lettres*. They contained historical elements, but they 'entirely lack continuity. They are not viewed under the aspect of historical cause and effect, and they are essentially timeless'.³

Pre-Islamic genealogy among the Arabs was even less significant than the battle-day narratives as a form of historical expression, although they are indicative of some form of historical sense. Only in unusual cases did the pre-Islamic traditions of genealogies contain references to historical events. After the coming of Islam, the existent genealogies became more important, as this new religion created an interest in the genealogies of all peoples at all times. This enabled 'genealogy to activate its historical potential', according to Rosenthal.⁴

The Christians and Jews who lived in Arabia had their own Scriptural stories, but they probably did not have a better-developed historical mind than the pagan Arabs who surrounded them. 'Still, they held the key which in the person of Muḥammad opened for the Muslims the way to a historical view of life.'⁵

The religious views of Muḥammad contained important historical elements. He proclaimed that in the future, all people would be judged by Allāh for the deeds done in their lives. And that he stood in a long line of prophets who had been sent to different peoples throughout history. According to Rosenthal:

The stimulus which Muḥammad's historical ideas could give, and later on, actually did give to the occupation with history could not have been any

² Rosenthal *History of Muslim Historiography*, pp. 19-20.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

stronger. The actions of individuals, the events of the past, the circumstances of all peoples of the earth had now become matters of religious importance.⁶

A practical incentive for Muslims to study history was the abundance of pseudo-historical data in the Qur'ân. Much of that information was historically erroneous, but the Prophet of Islâm certainly planted the seeds for a wide interest in history among his followers.⁷

3 Bahgat: Life of Muhammad as yardstick

The Qur'ân itself present us with a clear sense of history. The belief that mankind lives in between creation and judgment, reflects a linear view of history. This linearity is expressed most clearly in Islâm's view of the role of prophets throughout history.

Ahmed Bahgat focuses on this role of prophets and the Qur'ânic view of those prophets. The problem Bahgat faced in writing these prophets' lives based on the Qur'ân, was that 'the Qur'an is not a history book. The incidents of the stories are not chronologically written.'⁸ This does not mean that from what the Qur'ân says about the prophets, no general view of history can be distilled.

Muḥammad was send by Allāh as a prophet 'when the light of monotheism was extinguished in the east and the west, and the intellect was lost in stark darkness'.⁹ Bahgat describes that Christianity 'had lost the language of love, pagan elements had infiltrated into some of their sects, and monotheism was inflicted with untold infidelity. The Jews had abandoned the legacy of Moses and reverted to the worship of the golden calf, and each of the sought private wealth. Paganism invaded the world, the intellect was stifled, Allah was forgotten and generations surrendered to the imposters.'¹⁰

Muslims consider Muḥammad to be the supreme and the last prophet; prophets before him had been send 'according to the need of their times',

⁶ Ibid., p. 26.

⁷ Ibid., p. 30.

⁸ Bahgat, *Stories of the Prophets from Adam to Muhammad*, p. ix.

⁹ Ibid., p. 414.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 421-2.

but Muḥammad was sent as a mercy 'for the whole universe', and as the very last prophet until the Day of Judgment.¹¹ Before the advent of Muḥammad 'humankind had not reached maturity in its surrender to Allah nor maturity in character', according to Bahgat.

The history of mankind is therefore divided in 'before Muḥammad' and 'after Muḥammad'. More precisely, the emigration (*Hijrah*) of Muḥammad to Madīnah became the dividing line in history. The *Annum Hegira* (AH) is decisive in world history, Muslims believe.

The fact that Muḥammad is seen as wholly different from all previous prophets does not mean that there is no parallelism between his mission and that of his predecessors. His life is the yardstick for the description of all prophets in the Qur'ān, possibly because Muḥammad himself tried to prove his credibility by showing the Arabs that all prophets before him paralleled the ups and downs in his life and mission.

The message of these prophets was similar to that of Muḥammad.¹² They were sent to 'prove the revelation and message of Allah or to illustrate that religion in its entirety from Adam to Muhammad comes from Allah. That all believers form one nation with Allah as their Lord and Master. That all revealed religions from the time of Adam until the time of Muhammad have one source. All the prophets brought the same message: 'there is no deity worthy of worship except Allah, Who has no partner'. The approaches the prophets used in calling people to Allah are the same. However, the prophets differed in their speech and language when addressing their respective communities.¹³

Bahgat says that in his writing of the stories of the prophets, their 'infallibility [...] was my main concern the whole time.' He rejected the 'myths and fables of the Old Testament', obviously as these stories showed the prophets as fallible human beings.¹⁴ Prophets are 'the purest of human beings'.¹⁵ Allāh selected them as 'He knew their past actions and knew that they were the purest and best. He knew that they were the best of mind and heart.'¹⁶ The prophets were perfect, says Bahgat:

¹¹ Ibid., p. 414.

¹² Ibid., pp. 414-5.

¹³ Ibid., p. 19.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. ix.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 9.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 10.

These prophets never committed mistakes concerning what Allah sent them to accomplish. They were infallible, somehow above wrongdoing. They neither committed minor sins nor major sins, either before or after their missions. They were on a level of perfection (...) a level we can never dream of attaining.¹⁷

The concept that world history consists of a sequence of prophets, and that with the coming of the prophet Muḥammad a final stage of history has been reached, is helpful for the development of a historical consciousness. The idea of consecutive prophets creates a historical 'spine' to the nebulous mass of events in the world. On the other hand, the super-human perfection of these prophets militates against writing a serious history of these individuals; its basis is so unhistorical that it places their histories outside the boundaries of critical scholarship.

The stories of the prophets illustrate the similarity in the way how their people received them: They were all met with disbelief, accusation, harm and evil.¹⁸ The life of the prophets was often difficult, as they had to stand up against the people and their rulers in order to proclaim monotheism. The prophet's stories deal with things like 'the conflict between good and evil'. These forces of darkness which are trained, organized and concentrated against the forces of goodness, which are few, scattered and beaten.¹⁹ The single threat through all prophets' stories is conflict:

No prophet starts his call without the whole world suddenly turning against him. His peace, safety and livelihood are gone and he is attacked. Before his mission the prophet lived in great peace on the outside, but lived with great worry on the inside.²⁰

'The greatest in Allah's sight is the one who suffered the most', says Bahgat.²¹ According to him, hardships are an unchangeable divine rule.²² However, in the end, Allāh blessed all prophets and they all of them were successful.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 10-11.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 17-18.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., p. 19.

In the stories of the prophets, the angel Gabriel (Jibrîl) frequently appears, as the Spirit who conveyed heavenly revelations on earth. When he appears, Allâh's mercy appears, and a prophet is sent to his people and a book from Allâh is revealed.²³ The archenemy is Iblîs, the worst creature on earth, who supports all the evils, injustices and sins committed on earth.²⁴ He is the symbol of evil.²⁵

The fact that vast spiritual forces inhabit the universe does not mean that human beings are not able to freely choose how to live. There is a 'vast scope of freedom of will. This scope includes the responsibility of choice in which there is room for questioning', says Bahgat.²⁶

4 The historical views of Ayatullah Baqir al-Sadr

Ayatullah Baqir al-Sadr, a shi'ite theologian, was known for his support for what he termed 'topical exegesis' of the Qur'ân. His definition of this shows that he actually means what in Christian theology is termed Systematic Theology. 'The topical commentator concentrates his investigations on some particular subject of life, dealt with by the Qur'ân, whether the subject is doctrinal, social or universal, and ascertains the views of the Qur'ân about it.'²⁷

Baqir's first practiced his 'topical exegesis' in writing about trends in history according to the Qur'ân. His main interest in developing his historical views based on the Qur'ân, was in order to support change in Islamic societies in accordance with the revolutionary views of the regime in Iran since 1979.

According to Baqir, the Qur'ân teaches that 'societies are governed by some fixed and unchangeable laws. The Qur'ân has laid much stress on this point.'²⁸ He mentioned three major 'categories' of Qur'ânic verses about this theme:

²³ Ibid., p. 6.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 8

²⁵ Ibid., p. 7.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 1.

²⁷ Ibid., pp. 59-60.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 10.

1. The verses which lay down a general rule – the Qur’ân says: *Every nation has a term; when it comes, they cannot put it back a single hour, nor can they put it forward.* (Q 7:34). This is a universal law of history.
2. There are other verses that refer to the consequences of injustice and oppression. One of the says: *If Allah took people to task by that which they deserve, He would not leave a single living creature on the surface of the earth; but He reprieves them to an appointed time.* (Q 35:45) Allâh gives societies respite, and one should not expect a quick change in society, for social changes have their own appointed time under the laws governing them.
3. Some verses of the Qur’ân exhort people to study historical events and carry out investigations about them. In this connection there are several verses of similar wording. One of them says: *Have they not traveled in the land to see what happened to those who were before them? Allah wiped them out. And for the disbelievers there will be the like thereof.* (Q 47:10)²⁹ From this verse it becomes clear that society is governed by fixed and unchangeable laws and norms.³⁰

This view of societies being ruled by divine laws is linked to the Islâmic concept that Allâh has sent his prophets to each nation. When nations forget Allâh and transgress against his laws, he sent prophets to call them back to Islâm. If people do not obey, they will suffer the consequences. The Qur’ân says that ‘those who violate the norms of history are bound to be punished but in due course. The quickness of the punishment of relative [but] it will come soon’.³¹

Baqir considers this trend in society as normative, because he believes this trend to be based on the historical norms of the Qur’ân. These historical norms have three basic characteristics:

²⁹ Ibid., p. 10.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 11.

³¹ Ibid., p. 25.

1. They are universal, as Q 35:43 says: *You will not find for Divine Law any substitute, nor will you find in Divine Law any change.*³²
2. The laws of society have a divine aspect, but ‘the divine method and practice passes exactly through the same channels as the system of causes and effects. The only thing is that while we accept what science says about the causative and other systems, we also believe that all systems ultimately depend on Allah.’³³
3. The laws of history are not inconsistent with human freedom. Q 13:11 says: *Allah does not change the condition of a people until they change that which is in their hearts.* It is a divine law that people will have one destiny if they do not change and stick to their old habits and customs.³⁴

These laws of history are ‘fixed and invariable’.³⁵ But as the second and third law that Baqir mentioned allow for human freedom and admit the existence of ‘natural’ causality, these ‘laws’ should encourage people to obey the messengers sent to their nations, and to follow Islām. According to Baqir:

[It] is a divine practice that if any nation or the people of any country disobey the commandment of Allah, they are destroyed. The cause of their destruction is not Allah’s sovereign power alone. They are destroyed because of their own doings.³⁶

Allāh has placed everything of the world at the disposal of man as a trust. All problems are automatically solved, when man follows that course.³⁷ When societies suffer from problems, it is because they do not follow Islām.

³² Ibid., p. 11.

³³ Ibid., pp. 11-12.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 13.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 14.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 21.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 47.

According to Baqir, declining societies, where Islâm is not followed, follow a historical cycle in four stages. It seems he describes modern secular societies here, predicting their downfall if Islâm is not adopted:

1. They may have a relative ideal, and they may obtain some positive results as far as material wealth is concerned (Q 17:18, *Whoever desires this worldly gain, We hasten for him in this world that We will and for whom We please.*)
2. After they have achieved their objective, the second stage comes, which is a stage of pause.
3. But as man may not be without an ideal for long, they choose some prominent personalities from among them as their ideal. Q 33:67 – *They say: Our Lord, we obeyed our chiefs and elders, and they misled us from the way.* As a result these leaders begin to lead a luxurious life. In order to keep their wealth and position, they resist every reform. Q 43:23 – *We never sent a warner before you (Muhammad) to any township, but its luxurious ones said...* So: whenever a prophet comes, he is first of all opposed by the very wealthy class.
4. When the wealthy class becomes so oppressive it deprives society of the fruits of civilization and destroy their resources. They create disorder, which destroys their own society.³⁸

Based on the Qur'ân, Baqir also proposes a sociology. An ideal society is the Islâmic, 'divine', society, which is blessed with the quality of homogeneity.³⁹ If a society is not Islâmic, it is 'Pharaonic'; that is a society where not Islam but the evil rulers of this world dictate. Baqir describes how that society is divided into six different classes of people. He speaks of:

1. The despised class – those people who depend on the despots. (Q 34:31)

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 38-39.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 47

2. The rulers' favorites and advisors. (Q 7:127)
3. Those with no goals or ideals, mostly illiterates, backward and poor people who need to be guided in the right direction. (Q 33:67)
4. People who understand the unjust despots but who keep quiet. (Q 4:97)
5. Those who withdraw from society; they should work to reconstruct society instead. (Q 9:34)
6. Underprivileged who stand up against the tyranny. If they rise up, they always gain victory. (Q 28:5)

This stereotyping of societies and the changes they go through seems to be an Islâmic response to the 'scientific' stratifications of society and the patterns on history as proposed by Marxism. Iran and Iraq have known strong socialist movements before Islâmism became the popular vehicle for resistance against autocratic governments.

5 Conclusions

The fact that Islâm views Allâh as the Creator in the past, as the present Sustainer of life, and as the future Judge, has created a linear view of history, and enabled the development of a 'view of history'. History is seen as a sequence of societies that are ruled by certain divine laws, and that are visited by prophets for the sake of calling these societies back to obedience to Islâm.

This view of history is part and parcel of what it means to be a Muslim. Therefore, in order to understand 'the Arab mind', more understanding of this historical aspect of their worldview is of importance. This does not only give us insight in what Muslims believe about their past, but it also shows us how they view the world they presently live in.