

Quraish or Qorash (Q 106): From the Perspectives of the Qur'an and the Bible

by Ercan Celik

Patricia Crone's "*Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*" is dedicated to the exploration of true state of Meccans' caravan trade before Islam as this rumored trade had discontinued after rise of Islam and also is assumed to be occasion of revelation for sūrat al-Quraish (Q 106). This sūrat generally is translated by conventional translators as:¹

*1) For the accustomed security of the Quraysh 2) Their accustomed security [in] the caravan of winter and summer 3) Let them worship the Lord of this House, 4) Who has fed them, [saving them] from hunger and made them safe, [saving them] from fear.*²

According to the traditions, this sūrat takes its name from the tribe of Quraysh (or, Quraish) in Mecca, to whom Prophet Muhammad belonged. Even if there were no mention of Mecca and Kabah by their names in the text of sūrat the literature is full of with the story of summer and winter caravan trade privileges (*ilāf*) obtained from rulers of Syria and Yemen. This "ilāf" (trade privilege/ capitulation/ benevolence) and the Kabah, which was a pagan hajj place at the time, is said to have created enormous gain for a few in Mecca who were exploiting, oppressing people, their slaves. In other words, the wealth obtained through this *ilāf* had no use for the poor. Vast income disparity among the wealthy and the poor is accepted one reason among many why the Qur'an has been revealed in this city, Mecca.

Crone claims that there was no significant trade in Mecca as glossed by post-Qur'anic sources after having scanned vast literature written before or at the emergence times of Islam; however, she does not attempt to reveal true driver of the underlying sūrat. Her evidences lead her to a short conviction: Mecca, being as a trade center or hub, is/was a questionable pretense.

Uri Rubin, in his "Meccan Trade and Qur'anic Exegesis (Qur'an 2:198)", tries to explain these caravan trades in the context of Hajj journeys by establishing a relation with Q. 2:198. He proposes that caravan journeys in Q. 106 might not have been from Mecca to outside but from neighboring places to Mecca, to Kabah by pagan Arabs with the intention of pilgrimage, the annual Hajj journeys.

These two distinguished authors somewhat hold two polar positions. One totally rejects Meccan trade discarding later traditions; the other construes it embracing later sources. In the end, both do not fully explain the inner meaning of this sūrat word by word and its theological repercussion. Both of them do not propose a brand-new reading. Needless to say, the existing translations, commentaries already harbor their fragile points. For example, why are some *ilāf* (privilege) given to pagan Meccans by God, and even is/was this *ilāf* really a favor considering potential hardships after long and harsh trade journeys? A round trip at that time, either to the South or to the North, by camels would have taken almost sixty days. Why Quraish should be called to pray for these hardship and harsh milieu? Why pagans' hajj journey and/or its benefit to wealthy leaders are presented as a praised gift? There are numerous logical and theological discrepancies in exegeses, commentaries. Meccan trade, pagans' hajj, Kabah as a pagan temple and a tribe called Quraish all do not make a consistent story.

¹ Sahih International, <http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=106&verse=1>

² The English transliteration of sūrat Quraysh (Q 106): "*l'ilāfi qurayshin ilāfihim riḥ'lata l-shitāi wal-ṣayfi falya budū rabba hādihā l-bayti alladhī aṭ'amahum min jū'in waāmanahum min khawfin.*"

All is built upon one single word Quraish. The rest is interpreted around it whether or not it is leading to a reasonable understanding. According to the Islamic tradition, Quraish was one among many tribes in Mecca. But, Meccan trade, if there is one, would have been for all, not only for Quraish. Therefore, Meccan caravan trade does not seem to be a solid basis in deciphering this sūrat.

QORASH (CYRUS) IN THE BIBLE

At the beginning, I did not discern the close relation between sūrat al-Quraish (Q. 106) and sūrat al-Fīl (Q. 105). To me, they were like two different stories. Firstly, I perceived that Q. 106 was mentioning of Jews. So I wrote my first findings on Q. 106 in the first edition of this paper without correlating a connection among them. Later, I did notice that even the previous sūrat al-Fīl (Q. 105) was about Jews. Not only both were about the Jews but also both were making a serial harmonious narrative. One was a continuation of the other. Thereafter, I published my findings on sūrat al-Fīl at 'academia.edu.'³ For this reason, it is the time to revise my first paper adding both verses' connection.

Sūrat al-Fīl, to me, is mentioning of Jews' Babylonian exile. The enigmatic word in Q. 105 was "abābīl." It was conceived to be an unbeknown bird because no one knew a bird named *abābīl*. There was no such a bird but was created imaginarily as this word was misread, misunderstood. Actually, it was a cognate of the word 'bābila' in Q. 2:102 and referring to Babylon, Babylonians. But, Babylon name had no place in an understanding that turns around Quraish. Eventually, Q. 105 was criticizing its main adversary the Jews, their empty boasting describing them as "aṣḥābil-fīl", "the companies/nation of boasting." This verse was reminding them their paganistic inclinations before Babylonian deportation so that God did penalize them sending Babylonians upon them and having their Holy Temple destroyed. This was a retribution for the Jews as a consequence of their rebellious acts against God, as prophesied by prophets. And, the next sūrat al-Quraish (Q.106), this time, was explaining of how they had been freed from Babylonian exile a result of benevolent gifts (*īlāf*) of [Persian King] Qoresh, and of both a King and an important figure.

If there is no preliminary information in our hand it is hard to know whom Q. 105 is mentioning of. Probably, early audience of the Qur'an knew very well to whom this insulting title "aṣḥābil-fīl" were referring to. It was referring to a group of people, nation; and probably they were the Jews. Already, they are hammered all over the Qur'an with many insulting words. The Qur'an gives many examples from their history how they in the past did rebel against God, His prophets, His angels and the Books. Therefore, the first nominee for "aṣḥābil-fīl" naturally must have been the Jews.

The eye-catching terms in sūrat Quraish⁴ are: *Quraish*, *īlāf*, and *Bayt [House of God]*. The rest of the story follows how these terms take on a new meaning in the history of the Jews. If we look for this strategic word Quraish in Hebrew Bible we might come across a story that possesses a cognate of name Quraish, namely Qorash, and both "īlāf" and "Holy Bayt" inside its overall story context.

The Books of Ezra/Nehemiah narrates us Jews' exodus from Babylon to Jerusalem around 538 B.C. The previous exile had occurred during the reign of Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar as signaled in Q. 105 and ended at the time of Persian King Cyrus (Qoresh, and its variant readings). Therefore, there was a close correlation between Babylonian (*abābīl*) exile in Q. 105 and the Persian savior Qoresh in Q. 106. Both were composing of a consistent running story in combination with literary-

³ See, https://www.academia.edu/19110324/S%C5%ABrat_al-F%C4%ABl_Q_105_The_Companies_of_Boasting_Haughtiness_

⁴ Actually, sūrat 106, in its text, is referring to this name as 'Quraish', not as 'al-Quraish', namely without the particle 'al' (the) in Arabic. This increases the probability that it might be a proper name.

historical traditions. Therefore, we begin our reading of Q. 106 assuming that the word *Quraish* should/might have been referring to personal name of Jews' liberator King Koresh as it already was a cognate of the word *Quraish*. The rest requires testing if this verse gives a meaningful result in a story context of Babylonian exile, and also its castings.

Qoresh (Cyrus, Kūruš, Kowresh, ko'-resh; New Persian: کوروش بزرگ, 576–530 BC): After defeating Babylonians he, Qoresh, commands the Jews to return to their homeland and to rebuild Holy Temple. The Book of Ezra 1-3 reads: “Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord ... Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing: ... The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah...” He, Qoresh, was so important figure in the history of Jews, he was accepted by some to be a Messiah in some literature and even in Bibles (i.e. Isaiah vv. 44:24,26; 45:3,13). He was non-Jewish savior of the Jews. He was a figure who had given his ‘*ilāf*’ to the Jews, namely to Ezra, in order he to rebuilt God’s Temple in Jerusalem. Therefore, the words Qoresh and *ilāf* in Q. 106:1 in the first step makes sense in the history of Jews.

Artaxerxes (The 5th King of Persia: Artaxerxes, ar-tach-shas-ta, artax[fast]): The first exodus under Ezra did not go well. Some Jews returned to their homeland together with Ezra but they did not succeed the rebuilding of God’s House (Bayt). In the second phase, after Qorash, the 5th King of Persian, namely Artaxerxes, commissioned the scribe [or prophet] Nehemiah to take in charge of the ecclesiastical and civil affairs of the Jewish nation (Neh. 2). Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem and built the temple (bayt) and city walls. He built the Holy Temple, city walls and secured people from neighboring pagans’ attacks. As a governor, Nehemiah helps and feeds people from the state treasure whom the Artaxerxes had allocated to him (Neh. 5:17). Therefore, the second non-Jew in Babylonian exodus was Artaxerxes. He gave his “*ilāf*” to the Jews. How his long foreign name metamorphosed into Arabic and which variants is a mystery. Therefore, the second person and the second ‘*ilāf*’ mentioned in Q. 106 again is consistent with Babylonian exile.

Asaph (’ā-sāp, aSaf, lə’āsāp, veaSaf, wə-’ā-sāp): The third important non-Jew figure in helping the Jews to rebuild their temple (bayt) was Asaph. The King Artaxerxes had sent Nehemiah to Jerusalem with a letter to “...**Asaph** the keeper of the king's forest, that he may give me timber to make beams for the gates of the fortress which is by the temple, for the wall of the city and for the house...-Neh. 2:8.” Asaph provides timbers of the temple (Bayt) and city walls that were very important ingredient in building, defending the city and its newly immigrated people.

Sūrat (Q 106): “*lilāfi qurayshin ilāfihim riḥ'lata l-shitāi wal-ṣayfi falya 'budū rabba hādhā l-bayti alladhī aṭ'amahum min jū'in waāmanahum min khawfin*”)

These three non-Jewish people, namely and sequentially Qoresh, Artaxerxes and Asaph, were so very important figures, some Jews perceived them to be God’s favor upon them. If a Jew wanted to thank to three non-Jew figures for their salvation, these three were sole candidates. Actually, the Jews did not do anything important for their own liberation. God had let Qorash, the Persian King, to free the Jews in order to rebuild God’s Temple. The following two continued Qoresh’s mission. The benevolent gift (*ilāf*) of these three non-Jews was the real reason in their salvation. There was no room for the Jews themselves to boast for their own liberation. In one sense, the Qur’an in previous verse (Q. 105) reproaches them, their boastful behavior calling them as “*aṣḥābil-fil*”, ‘the companies of boasting’. In the next sūrat (Q. 106), the Qur’an says that you boast but your existence was a result of the *ilāf* of these three non-Jews. If they did not help you [your ancestors] in the past then your boasting was naught.

As seen in sūrat Q 106:1, the names Qoresh, Artaxerxes and Asaph resemble to words *quraysh*, *riḥ'lata l-shitāi* and *al-ṣayfi* in their rasm, pronunciation, order and especially sound (echo) and this attracts our attention. The similarities in; *Quraish/Qoresh* and *al-ṣayfi/Asaph* are apparent but the pair *riḥ'latal-shitāi/Artachshasta* (Artaxerxes) begs some linguistic speculation considering the fact of strange metamorphosis in personal names into another language. Anyway, most of their letters, sounds are not very dissimilar. Besides, there are many apologetical explanations in literature about how the word ‘*riḥ'la*’, which literally means ‘bag’, would also be used in ‘journey’ meaning although there were many direct words to deliver that meaning. This is the only case exegetes gave journey meaning to ‘*riḥ'la*’ word. Also, ‘*al-shitāi*’ and ‘*al-ṣayfi*’, in the meaning of winter and summer, are full hapax, they have no other uses in the Qur’an to compare them. Anyway, mere words resemblances are not best approach unless having been supported with they also constitute a coherent story and theme. So, let us apply our findings into the verse.

a) Qoresh, firstly, and Artaxerxes and Asaph, secondly and respectively, helped on the rebuilding of Jerusalem Temple. In the word meaning of *ilāf*⁵ there is no confusion. Actually, *ilāf* is a gift, boon, benevolence, generosity, bounty, favor etc. given to the weak side by a powerful person, group. Namely, *ilāf* is a grace. In the first verse, the first *ilāf* is given by Quraish (or Qoresh) but not to Quraish, because “*li-ilāfi qurayshin*” literally meant; “(thanks to) favor of Qoresh.” This is very suitable with King Qoresh’s favor, *ilāf*. As a powerful person, Qoresh had given his own ‘*ilāf*’ to the weak side, the Jews. So, the first thank must go to [King] Qoresh (*li-ilāfi qurayshin [-Qoresh]*); the second thank separately goes to two persons and to their *ilāf* (*ilāfihim riḥ'lata l-shitāi wal-ṣayfi- [Artachshasta and Asaph]*). In the first verse (106:1), there are three thanks casted upon three different persons and to their three separate favors, *ilāf(s)*. The Jews are called to thank to these three non-Jews for their existence, instead of boasting themselves.

b) The remaining part of this verse goes harmonious with Babylonian exodus. Because, God had saved the Jews from fear, fear of exile and fear of attack of neighboring pagan nations around Jerusalem. If God hadn’t inspired His will upon Qoresh and later to other non-Jews, namely Artaxerxes and Asaph, the parents of current Jews couldn’t have returned and built Holy Bayt so they would not be free and safe; “*Who hath fed them against hunger and hath made them safe from fear.*” The rebuilding of Bayt and the City [Jerusalem] seems to be main driver of people’s security from all hardships during and after Babylonian exodus. For this reason, the people, namely the Jewish people, are required: “*So let them worship (the) Lord of (of) this House.*”

In sum; this sūrat (Q. 106) can be read to be a warning to boasting Jews (Q. 105) by reminding them vital roles of three non-Jews and Holy Bayt in their salvation. But, this reading is valid if and only if one does not refer to any post-Qur’anic traditions, literature and exegeses.

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⁵ Ottoman Sultans would hand out money gift to Janissaries (army personnel) after victory in a war or on special days such as their ascending the throne. This monetary gift has been called as “*ulufe*” in Ottoman Turkish, it is from the root *ilāf*. *Ulufe*, *ilāf* meant free gift, favor, mercy or blessing of someone to another. In this sense, calling trade rights, permissions as *ilāf* does not seem very convenient.