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The Contradictory Revelation – a Reading of Sura 27:16-44 and 34:15-21

For a Muslim believer the Qur'ān is an eternal guidance for all mankind in all times. The physical Qur'ān is a copy of God's own speech which exists eternally together with Him in heaven. At the same time it has been revealed in a concrete historical situation. Traditional qur'ānic science has always been aware of this. The 'Reasons for Revelation', *ʔasbāb an-nuzūl*, is a central part of Islamic science, which, ever since the days of Ibn Isḥāq has tried to define the concrete situation that generated a sura or some verses (Böwering, *Chronology*; Rippin, *Asbāb*; id., *Occasions*, with further ref.). A well known example is sura 111, *al-masad*, which is said to be the response to scornful criticism by the Prophet's uncle ᶜAbd al-ᶜUzzā b. al-Muṭṭalib who is identified as the man hiding behind the nickname Abū Lahab (Ibn Hishām/Ibn Isḥāq 230-233; Rubin, *Abū Lahab* 13-15). In Ibn Isḥāq's biography of the Prophet we find a series of such stories where events in the life of the Prophet are accompanied by qur'ānic verses said to have been revealed as commentaries or direct reponses to what was going on.

At a closer look, however, the *'asbāb an-nuzūl* is a problematic science. Just to take on example among many:

sura 108, *al-kawṯar*, is concluded by a verse which says: 'and your enemy is *al-'abtar'*. Apart from the fact that no one really knows the meaning of *'abtar*, it turns out that nobody even among the early commentators knew who the 'enemy', *šāni'* was either. The traditional *tafsīr*, which often refers to the *ʔasbāb an-nuzūl* tradition, gives a series of suggestions of the identity of the *šāni'*: ᶜUqba b. Abī Muᶜayt, Kaᶜb b. al-Ašraf and a group of disbelievers, Abū Lahab, thus the same man mentioned in sura 111 (Ibn Kaṯīr*: Tafsīr* ad. loc.; Birkeland, *Lord* 86-97). An anecdote is transmitted concerning Kaᶜb. He came to Mecca and Quraysh said to him: 'You are the leader of them. What do you think about this worthless man who is cut off (*butira*) from his people? He claims that he is better than us while we are the people of the place of pilgrimage , the people of the custodianship and the people who supply water to the pilgrims'. He replied: 'You all are better than him'.

The orthodoxy has chosen the identification with al-ᶜAṣī b. Wā'il who by Ibn Isḥāq (Ibn Hishām/Ibn Isḥāq 261-262) is described as an early adversary of the Prophet and is said to have scorned him when his son al-Qāsim died, calling him *'abtar*. But one does not have to read much of the *tafsīr* to realize that this explanation is not more likely than anyone of the others. The remark by ᶜAṣī reported by Ibn Isḥāq are evidently derived from the qur'ānic verse and the story probably apocryphal. From these suggestions one conclusion is fairly certain: nobody knew. Everything is pure guesswork.

The historical context of the individual revelations indicated by the early commentaors is thus problematic and often unreliable. One fact agreed upon by both the traditional

muslim commentaries and modern western scholarship is that the qur'ānic text has been created during a certain period of time. With this is connected the many salient contradictions. One example is the statements on wine. In Q 16:67 it is said that one of the things God has given man is 'the fruit of palms and grapes, from which you prepare intoxicating drink (*sakar*) and good nutrition (*rizq*); in this there is indeed a sign for people with insight'. In Q 2:219 it is said: 'They ask you about wine (*xamr*) and *maysir*. Say: in both there is great sin and also something useful for man but their sinfulness is greater than their usefulness'. In Q 4:43 it is said: 'O you who have accepted the faith! Do not come to prayer when you are drunk before you can understand what you say!' Finally, it is stated in Q 5:90: 'O you who have accepted faith! Indeed, wine, *maysir*, stone idols and arrows are an abomination, the work of *shayṭān*. Therefore, keep away from him so that you may have success'. We can here observe quite drastic contradictions in the qur'ānic view on wine among which later orthodoxy has chosen the last passage as normative. One should, however, notice that the Qur'ān does not prohibit wine. It is not *ḥarām*. One should only keep away from it: *iğtanibū*!

Quite early in the development of the *'asbāb an-nuzūl* science a basic structuring of the qur'ānic text was made, distinguishing between texts revealed in Mecca and texts revealed in Medina, thus fixing the year 622 CE as a main divider. This structuring was followed by Th. Nöldeke in his classic *Geschichte des Qorāns* (58-74) and still seems to be more or less accepted. The radical sugestions of the so-called London school of re-dating the whole Qur'ān to the early

Abbasid period (Wansborough, *Studies*1-52) has not won general support.

Nöldeke made a more advanced analysis of the Meccan texts which he divided in three groups which, according to him, represent a chronological sequence (Nöldeke, *Geschichte* 66-234). This division has to a large extent been followed by later western qur'anic scholarship. There is thus agreement between islamic and non-islamic scholarship that the qur'ānic text has originated during an extended period of time, around twenty years according to the common opinion. It has often been pointed out that Muḥammad in the earlier suras appears as visionary prophet whose language is characterised by dramatic and poetic diction, whereas in the later ones, basically those from Medina, he is a more a prosaic legislator and preacher (Nöldeke, *Geschichte* 74-75, 143-144). The medieval scholars seem to have had great tolerance for contradictions in the text and developed quite sophisticated methods to explain them. It is at least obvious that they had a clear view of the problems (Burton, *Abrogation*).

In the following, a contradiction will be commented which, as it seems, may be of considerable interest for the historical background for the rise of Islam. A major theme in the qur'ānic message is the reports about ancient peoples who have perished. Several are mentioned: ᶜAd, (Tottoli, *Ad*), Thamud (Firestone, *Thamūd*), *'aṣḥāb al-'ayka* (Nawas, *People*), *qawm tubbaᶜ* (Firestone, *Tubbaᶜ*) etc. Among these we also find Saba. In Q 34:15-21 we read how Saba, in spite of having been blessed by God with 'the two gardens' and the building of cities so that they may travel safely between them, followed *shayṭān* and turned away *('aᶜraḍū*) from God. Only a

small group of believers did not follow *shayṭān*. The others were punished by being spread out, alternatively swept away by the stream from the dam (*saylu l-ᶜarim*) which annihilated the two gardens, turning them into an arid steppe.

The mentioning of the two gardens (*al-ǧannatān*) and the use of the Sabaean word ᶜ*arim* are hints that it is the Yemeni Saba which is the subject. Archaeological investigation has shown that the large oasis at Marib in Yemen, the ancient capital of Saba where the remains of the great dam are still to be seen, in the beginning of the 7th century CE was deserted after an extensive economic and political decline during the latter half of the 6th century CE. There is, however, no evidence that this event was caused by one large catastrophe effected by the bursting of the dam. We know of three bursts of the dam at Marib, one around 350, one in 456/57 and one in 558 (de Maigret: *Arabia Felix* 248). The claim often made that the event told in sura 34 refers to a last great burst during the latter half of the 6th century has no basis in epigraphjic or archaeological evidence. The image in the Qur'ān is a telescoped picture of an extended process lasting perhaps one century. But the decline of Saba was a fact that was noticed in Arabia. It suits well into the qur'ānic message of the ruin of earlier peoples as a sign of the power of the one God and his control of the course of history. The motif of the small group, *al-farīq*, that survives the destruction also appears in other similar stories, e.g. the ones about ᶜAd and Thamūd (Q 7:72, 11:58, 41:18. Cf. 38:14, 51:42, 69:8 where the survival of some seems to be denied.).

In Q 27:16-44 Saba appears again but now the picture is completely different. It is the story of the queen of Saba who

worships the sun but is converted to the true religion at her visit to king Sulaymān. The Qur'ān presents a mutilated version of the story. The queen is standing on the glass floor in front of Sulaymān's throne, believing it to be water. When she has discovered the reality she converts to Sulaymān's religion, i.e. Islam. The Qur'ān breaks off here but later commentators have a lot to say about the continuation. She gets married to Sulaymān and their realms are united or she is married to one of the *tabābiʿa* kings from Yemen (Ibn Hishām, *Tīǧān* 162f., Thaʿlabī, *ʿArā'is* 535-536). Obviously, Saba from now on is monotheistic.

It could be argued that this story is not totally contradictory to the one in sura 34. One could imagine that Saba after the time of the queen apostated and therefore was punished later on. For a believer this is a solution of a seeming contradiction. But it is worth pointing out that this is not explicitly told anywhere. In the earliest islamic post-qur'ānic retelling of the story in Wahb b. Munabbih's book on the stories of the prophets, probably written around 720 CE, the queen is the matriarch of the royal dynasty of Himyar who evidently are monotheists (cf. Krenkow, *Books* 55-89, 204-236; Retsö, *Wahb*).

By an historian the two qur'ānic texts can be read in a less harmonizing way. The very point of the qur'ānic story about the queen is her conversion. In the parallel versions, i.e. the one found in the targum Sheni to the book of Esther, nowadays dated to roughly the same time as the Qur'ān, viz 7th to 9th century (Grossfeld, *Targums* 19-20; id. *Targum sheni* X-XI), and the Ethiopian one in *Kəbra nagast*, there are

no statements of explicit conversion. In the targum she is said to worship YWMʔ, a word of uncertain meaning (Grossfeld, *Targum Sheni* 31 l. 27). Her country, Qiṭor, is decribed as a kind of paradise, an Eden where war and violence are unknown. Nothing is said about the queen converting to the religion of Solomon even if she offers praise to his god. The Ethiopian version has the conversion motif as well as the motif of the foundation of a dynasty, viz. that of the forebears of the Christian kings of Axum (Bezold: *Kebra nagast*, chapters 27-28, 32). The conversion motif in the Qur'ān is related to the Christian tradition which, in accordance with the Jesus statement in Matthew 12:42, makes her the forerunner and the representative of the gentile church.

The fact remains that the Qur'ān tells two quite different stories about Saba. Both are related to traditional story-telling, one to the accounts of peoples who have disappeared, a motif with a long history in the folklore and mythology of the Near East, and another to the Old Testament story of the queen of Sheba and her visit to king Solomon. As usual, the Qur'ān uses traditional motifs and stories to illustrate and authorize its own message. The question is which message is intended by the two Saba-stories.

In the light of the ongoing quite dramatic discoveries in South Arabia, which are transforming our views on the pre-Islamic history in a way that until now has been largely unnoticed by most outsiders, the seeming contradiction between the two qur'ānic stories can be seen in a political context, viz. the political situation in Arabia in the beginning of the 7th century AD. During the 4th and 5th centuries AD Arabia had witnessed the growth of a domestic empire, Ḥimyar, with its

base in Yemen and its capital in the highlands (Gajda, *Royaume*). Around 500 AD this entity had, in different degrees, established its control over most of the Arabian Peninsula. Its agents clashed with the Christian Roman empire in Southern Jordan around 500 (Shahid, *Byzantium I* 127-131). The ultimate result was the invasion of Yemen by the Christian king of Axum in 525 AD and the fall of the Himyarite dynasty (see J. Beaucamp & al., ”Persécution”; Nebes, *Martyrs*; Gajda, *Royaume* 73-156). The ensuing political vacuum in Arabia seems to have created political anarchy which was one of the main factors behind the emergence of the classical Arabic literary culture. The 6th century is characterized by growing Iranian influence culminating in the conquest of Yemen around 570 and, at least a formal reestablishment of the Himyarite dynasty (Shahid, *Byzantium II* 364-372; Retsö: *Shade*; Gajda, *Royaume* 157-167; Robin, *Joseph*). The Iranian Yemen became quite independent after a while. Communications between the Fertile Crescent and South Arabia have always been difficult.

There is evidence that early Islam was pro-Roman and anti-Iranian. This is shown by e.g. sura 30:1 but also by the legend of the emigration to Ethiopia. The situation had become critical after 610 when Iran threw out Roman power from the Middle East, occupying Anatolia, Syria and Egypt. By then Ḥiǧāz with the nascent Islamic movement was surrounded. The Roman counterattack in 624 under Heraclius led to a total change: the Sassanian state was knocked out and the Romans dominated the Middle East (cf. P. Pourshariati: *Decline* 140 ff.; Kaegi: *Heraclius* 100-191). The Iranian governor in Yemen became an independent ruler together with the traditional Yemeni aristocracy (Mad^{c}aj, *Yemen* 1-23). Roman dominance in the Middle East was not to the liking of either

the Muslims in Medina or the rulers in Ṣanᶜā'. The Yemenis had had bad experience of Roman politics one century earlier which was probably still remembered. The interests of both entities suddenly coincided. Traditions tell us about delegations from Yemen to the Prophet in Medina from the late 620ies (Ibn Hishām/Ibn Isḥāq 950-957). In the battle of Ḥunayn around 630, the Muslims defeated the Hawāzin tribes around Ṭāʔif who had been traditional enemies to Himyar (Ibn Hishām/Ibn Isḥāq 840-870, cf. Kister, *Campaign*). During these events the Yemenis allied themselves with Islam.

The defeat of Hawāzin together with the alliance with Yemen created something new. All of a sudden a new power had risen in Arabia, which, in many ways, was a resurrection of the Himyarite empire. Islam could begin the march towards world dominance.

In Q 27:30 the letter which Sulaymān sent to the queen is quoted. It is introduced by the *basmala*. This is the only time this formula is found inside a qur'ānic text. Otherwise it is the caption of every sura except no. 9. The Islamic qur'ānic science has always discussed whether the *basmala* is part of the revelation or not (Graham, *Basmala*). One could claim that the appearance of the formula in Sulaymān's letter is not a coincidence. We now know that the Himyarite kingdom had a monotheistic ideology. From ca. 370 CE the old divine names disappear from the inscriptions in South Arabia. Instead a new god, RḤMN-N is invoked which dominated the inscriptions until they cease altogether in the 6th century (Robin, *Judaïsme*; Gajda, *Royaume* 223-252). This epithet is, as is well known, an integral part of the *basmala*. In later Islamic historiography it is said that the religion of Himyar was Jewish

(cf. Robin, *Judaïsme* 130-139). The Himyarite monotheism was undoubtedly a kind of Judaism even if it is difficult to ascertain to which degree rabbinism had influenced it. The parallel to the monotheists on the other side of the Bāb al-Mandab is salient. There is no doubt that monotheism was well established in Arabia. Yemen had been monotheistic for 250 years when the delegation from Ṣanᶜā' arrived in Medina and Yemen joined the Islamic movement in Western Arabia.

In this light the story in sura 27 can be seen as a political document. It gives the Yemenis an illustrious predecessor legitimizing their monotheism. Yemen has been monotheistic, even Muslim, since the days of Sulaymān. They need not to convert.

We do not know when this story was told for the first time in Yemen. The location of the queen of Sheba/Saba to Yemen is found for the first time in Philostorgius' ecclesiastical history written in the beginning of the 5th century (Philostorgios III:4). It lies near at hand to assume the the Yemeni monotheism has utilized the story as legitimization even there is no definite documentation from pre-Islamic times. What we do know is that Yemen joins the Islamic movement around 630 according to the sources we have. But it is likely that that the story of the conversion of their great ruler to the faith of Israel has been around earlier. Nöldeke dated sura 27 to the Second Meccan Period (*Geschichte* 140). It belongs to the large central corpus of qur'ānic texts, not to the visionary and not to the legislative ones. It is not unlikely that there might have been circles in Yemen who had contacts with the Muslims in Western Arabia, perhaps people who dreamed about a reestablishement of Himyar liberated from Iranian dominance. We know that thw Christians in Nağrān were in

contact with the Muslim community quite early (Ibn Hishām/Ibn Isḥāq 401-411). Iran had expanded her influence considerably after 610 and there might have been Yemenis who were worried about the Iranian advancement which could be expected to have consequences for a Yemen which had enjoyed a certain degree of independence during the years around 600 CE. At this time Islam was pro-Roman and consequently anti-Iranian. Was the Saba-story already known and told on the other side of the Red Sea? Several scholars have argued for an origin of the Ethiopian Sheba-legend in the reign of king Kaleb in the beginning of the 6th century (cf. Shahid, *Kebra nagast*). The Muslims who emigrated to Ethiopia perhaps around 615 may have found a version of the story different from the one in sura 34. The incorporation of the legend among the qur'ānic texts may have worked as a greeting to the first Yemeni Muslims: You have a great predecessor! Follow her!

In the canonic history of the early history of Islam there are many events which have been seen as crucial: the call of Muhammad, of course, the *hiğra* from Mecca to Yathrib, the battle of Badr. But the great turning point that became decisive for the spread of Islam outside Arabia was the joining of the Islamic state in Yathrib and its surroundings with Yemen. By the alliance with Yemen the new religion got military and political power which it until then did not possess. Unlike Arabia Yemen was populous and had old military traditions. It is consistent that the Yemenis played a central role in the large victory at Yarmūk in 636, a decisive turning point in world history (Nicolle: *Yarmuk*; cf. Madᶜaj, *Yemen* 64-71). The Islamic world conquest was initiated by the alliance between the Muslims in Western Arabia and the monotheists in Yemen. Only later on during the ongoing

conquest the North Arabian aristocracy take over the leadership headed by the old aristocracy of Mecca (see Rotter, *Umayyaden*). Both Yemenis and Western Arabians were marginalised.

In the *basmala* formula two divine names known from Arabia's pre-Islamic age are employed: the North Arabian Allāh and the South Arabian Raḥmān. In the qur'ānic text in sura 27 this formula stands in a context that can be read as the legitimization of the alliance between Medina and Ṣanʕāʔ. The identification of the two deities is also found in the *fātiḥa*, a text by many seen as a prayer of Jewish, Christian or Judaeao-Christian origin or, at least, belonging to the same genre as these (Graham, *Fātiḥa* 191). The central position of the *basmala* formula in Islam could be one of several testimonies of the decisive role played by Yemen during the most formative period of Islam. In the discussion about the background of the rise of Islam scholarship has always looked towards the north, searching for influences from Judaism, Christianity, and Gnosticism in Syria and Mesopotamia. Time has now come to turn towards the south. The discovery of Himyar during the last 25 years poses quite new questions about the origins of Islam and the revolution in world history it caused.

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