



MISCONCEPTION AGAINST THE PROPHET AND THE QUR'ĀN IN ORIENTALIST LITERATURE

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Abstract

Islam and Muslim becomes the subject interest of western intellects and it can be seen through their writings and efforts to understand this religion. There are many sources found written by these western scholars on Islam and Muslims. However, some of the literatures seem associate with biased and sense of prejudice where Islam projected in a negative way. This may lead to misunderstanding on Islam because it portrayed in unfavourable images that threat modern civilization. This research observes some of the western documentation in order to get general ideas on claim on Islam through the eye of some well-known orientalist and analyse through the writings of Muslims scholar. The researcher found that these allegations made were untrue and miscalculated. The researcher found that the statements could lead to confusion about Islam especially between ignorant Muslim and non-Muslim. They might believe these accusations and act against Islam. Thus, the researcher suggests that Muslim should be more aware on these issues so that they will not become the victims of these propagations. This allegation does not stop but continue in different method, which is online through websites.

Keywords: Orientalist; allegation; Qur'ān

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1. INTRODUCTION

Orientalists contribute significant works on Islamic studies. Yet, it is not right to generalize all of them as a group that opposes the Qur'ān. Their aims and approaches change with time. Thus, they are divided into three major groups: The first consists of Orientalists who contribute to Islamic studies and literature with the intention to defame Islam. They criticize Islam, its prophets and the Qur'ān. The second are Orientalists who are not directly related to church missionaries. They study Islam either to know the truth or to compare with the other teachings of Semitic religions. They take part in criticizing Islam at large yet focus on intellectual criticisms with the exception of a few. The last category represents a contemporary group of Orientalists. They are concerned with academic institutions. They seem moderate towards Islam and their aim is to strive for academic excellence. Thus, this section will analyse Orientalists bring misconceptions against the Qur'ān, the first group as mentioned above.

2. MARGOLIOUTH AND THE AUTHORSHIP OF THE QURAN

One of the Orientalists named Margoliouth has a particular view on Muslim scripture. He highlights the old theory on the creation of the Qur'ān which is the Qur'ān was Prophet Muḥammad's (P.B.U.H) own writing. The reason behind this is the Qur'ān elaborates the teaching of conduct in business affairs. Thus, for him, it is an indication that Prophet Muḥammad (P.B.U.H) had a hand in its composition. For example, he chooses certain Qur'anic verses that serve the object of his reasoning. He writes that Muḥammad (P.B.U.H) at one time, commanded his follower to make offering to the poor before they addressed him, but this had to be rescinded. The verse says: "O ye who believe! When ye consult the Messenger in private, spend something in charity before your private consultation. That will be best for you, And most conducive. But if ye find not (The wherewithal), Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful"(58:12).

Explaining this verse, Abdullah Yusuf Ali articulates in his comments that the first part of this verse is actually a "private consultation" by saying that supposedly, in the kingdom of Allah, all consultation is free and open. But since human nature is weak, some people might want a private

consultation with the teacher due to several motives such as:

1. They may have special case that they are not willing to disclose to their brethren in general;
2. They may have some sense of delicacy, which can be only satisfied by private interview;
3. They may be selfish to monopolise the teacher's time. Therefore, it is recommended for them to spend something in charity for the good of their poorer brethren before they indulge in such weaknesses.

Another aspect that Abdullah Yusuf Ali further explains is about purifying the conduct of Ṣadaqah in which he says that charity is expiation for pardonable weaknesses. Thus, monetary sacrifice for poorer brethren could give them less shame, and the charity would direct their attention to the need of purifying their motives and conduct.

Another misconception about the Qur'ān claimed by Margoliouth in his book Mohammed is that Prophet Muḥammad (P.B.U.H) was sent to convey the divine message but not to take part in any open debate. If he was questioned by the unbelievers, he needed to evade the question and retire. This argument is based on his understanding of verse 6:67. Muslim scholars are however hold a different point of view regarding this. According to Ibn Kathīr, this verse explains the context of the revelation where for every news, they referred to certain time and terms. Contending Margoliouth's argument, one might need to refer to another verse in which it bears a quite similar with the one employed by Margoliouth. In this verse, Allah says: "And you shall certainly know the truth of it after a while".

Thus, this verse is deemed by Muslim scholars as an implicit threat and warning. This is the reason of why Allah says "and you will come to know". Thus, it was not the Prophet (P.B.U.H) who avoided open debate as stipulated by Margoliouth but it depends on time and the nature of the revelation. In addition, Al- Ṭabarī explains this verse by quoting a hadith narrated by Mujahid about the meaning of "For every new, there is a fact". Based on his report, every new is truth and it will be revealed either during our lifetime or in the Hereafter. Thus, if it is revealed during our lifetime, we will be able to see it, but if it appears during the Hereafter, we will only notice it. There are a few more narrations of hadith



that explain the same meaning as the first narration. The underlying point is that, it is not the Prophet (P.B.U.H) who avoided debates or lied to the unbelievers about the revelations but it was a matter of time and terms of the revelations.

3. BELL AND WATT'S CLAIM ON THE PROPHET AS A SOOTHSAYER

Another misinterpretation by the Orientalists can be found in the book composed by W. Montgomery Watt.¹ In this work, he highlights the interpretation produced by Richard Bell on the verse 73:1-8. Bell claims that the Prophet (P.B.U.H) was a soothsayer where he spoke with outside prompting. He translates the meaning of the word (*Wahy*) as "suggestion", that Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) assumed that God appeared to him and 'suggests' that he spoke to the public. Watt explains that what was revealed to the Prophet (P.B.U.H) was actually a 'suggestion' from God and Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) was the person in charge to speak about it. Watt picks up verse 53:4 to support his claims. In addition, Watt states that these considerations justify the hypothesis of Richard Bell that originally the *Wahy* was a prompting or command to speak. In other words, it is not revelation nor related to divinity. An Orientalist named Pickthall² translates this verse similarly to the translation of *Ibn Kathīr* where he interprets this verse with the translation below:

"It is only an inspiration that is inspired"

Ibn Kathīr says that Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) was not driven by his own words and desires.³ The researcher found that this verse is explained by the previous verse where the message is truly from God and not Muhammad's creation. There is similarity for the word 'inspiration', not the word 'suggestion' used by Pickthall and *Ibn Kathīr*. This similarity shows that both scholars understand the verse very well and no contradiction occur between them. Thus, the problem raised by those who misinterpret the verse is not a coincidence but with purpose. The word 'inspiration' is nearer in meaning to the word 'revelation' as mentioned

by Al-Qurtubī in his book *Tafsīr al-Qurtubī* about the truth of revelation.

Al-Qurtubī states that there are two issues within this verse [53:3-4]. Firstly, Qatādah says that the Prophet did not say anything related to the Qur'ān based on his personal desire. The next verse confirms the statement that Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) preached the revelation which is from God. Al-Qurtubī did mention from other narrators who explain that the word "'an hawa" (by desire) shares the same meaning as "bil hawa".⁴ The researcher found that there are numerous references from Islamic scholars that can be referred to to understand the verse and the revelation concept of truth. However, there are still misconceptions that project the Qur'ān and the Prophet (P.B.U.H) negatively. For example, in the work by Robert Spencer entitled *The Truth about Muhammad* he writes that the Prophet (P.B.U.H) borrowed religious teachings and tenets from Biblical texts and traditions to compose the Qur'ān. He says that there is heretical Christian material that influenced the writing of the Qur'ān; even though it was not word for word borrowing it was still considered as borrowing. According to him, verse 19:28 highlighted on the birth of Jesus and His mother Mary. He says that Islam borrows religion from Christianity; the verse shows that Muhammad (P.B.U.H) borrowed from the religion of Prophet Jesus.⁵ Duncan Black Macdonalds also proposes a similar idea in which he considers Islam as heretical of Christianity⁶.

However, according to Quranic exegesis, the interpretation of the verse is different from the statement made by Robert Spencer. Abdullah Yusuf Ali in his book⁷ mentions the meaning of the verse as "O sister of Aaron! Thy father was not a man of evil, nor thy mother of a woman unchaste!". Abdullah adds that Aaron was the brother of Moses who was the first in the line of Israelite priesthood. Mary and Elisabeth came from a priestly family. Therefore, they were called "sisters of Aaron" or "daughters of Imran", the Father of Aaron. Muhammad Asad⁸ translates this verse as, "O sister of Aaron! Thy father was not a wicked man, nor was thy mother a loose woman!". Muhammad Asad further explains that in ancient semantic usage, a

¹ Bell, Richard, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ān*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1970), 21.

² Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Qur'ān*, 699.

³ Muhammad Anīs Gād Khalīl, *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr* 2171.

⁴ Abi Abdillāh Muhammad bin Ahmad al-Ansari al-Qurtubi, *al-Jami' li ahkam al-Qur'ān*, Dar-al Hadith, Kaherah, Egypt, 1994, Vol. 9, 85.

⁵ Robert Spencer, *The Truth About Muhammad*, (Washington D.C, Regnery Publishing, 2006), 56.

⁶ Edward W.Said, *Orientalism*, 209.

⁷ Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur'ān* 750.

⁸ Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān* 460.

person's name was linked to the renowned ancestor or founder of the tribal line. Since Mary belonged to a priestly caste and descended from Aaron, the brother of Moses, she was called "sister of Aaron" which is the same for her cousin Elisabeth, the wife of Zachariah. Apart from that, *Ibn Kathīr*⁹ explains the verse with a slight difference in the usage of terminology such as "O one resembling Harun (Aaron) in worship, your father was not a man who used to commit adultery, nor your mother was an unchaste woman"; he strengthens the translation by quoting a tradition narrated by Alī bin Abī Tālib and Al-Suddi where both said, "It was said to her" referring to the brother of Musa because she was of his descendant. This is similar to the saying "O brother of Tamīmī," to one who was from the Tamīmī tribe and "O brother of Muḍar" to one who was from the Muḍari tribe. It has been said that she was related to the righteous man among them whose name was Harūn and she was comparable to him in her abstinence and worship.

4. CONCLUSION

To conclude the discussion about the theory of borrowing, Muhammad Ameen writes in his book¹⁰ the facts the Qur'ān states about Jesus, son of Mary. He describes the position of Jesus in the Qur'ān by quoting another verse that strengthens the argument that Islam is not a borrowing religion but instead Jesus is one of the Messengers of Allah sent before Prophet Muḥammad (P.B.U.H) and they brought the same message which is to worship Allah. The verse [4:171] is:

"O People of the Scripture! Do not exaggerate in your religion nor utter aught concerning Allah save the truth. The Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, was only a messenger of Allah, and His word, which he conveyed unto Mary, and Spirit from Him. So believe in Allah and His Messenger, and say not 'Three' - Cease! (it is) better for you!- Allah is only One god. Far is it removed from his transcendent majesty that he should have a son. His all that in is the Heaven and all that is in the earth. And Allah is sufficient as Defender".

Muhammad Ameen also mentions that it is not true that the Qur'ān was copied from the Bible or simply

borrowed its teachings¹¹. Furthermore, all evidence shown in the Qur'ān could not have been copied from the Bible as the Qur'ān contains information about many things that are not mentioned in the Bible.

Other than that, there are a few baseless allegations from the Orientalists against the Qur'ān and the Prophet Muhammad (P.B.U.H) recorded by Watt in his book¹² such as Gustav Weil who states that Muhammad suffered from epilepsy, Aloy Sprenger who claims that Muhammad suffered from hysteria and Muir who says that Muhammad went to Madīnah as he succumbed to the miles of *Shayṭan* and for the sake of worldly success. David Marshall writes in his book¹³ that all authors would agree that Muhammad must have known the contents of the Qur'ān, thus the Qur'ān at least reflects the stages in Muhammad's own progression of ideas. Above all, it can be concluded that these allegations aim to project the Qur'ān negatively by creating false information about the conditions of the Prophet. However, it is stated in the book of *sīrah* that Prophet Muḥammad (P.B.U.H) were free from those allegations and the Qur'ān indeed is a sacred book and a revelation.

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⁹ Isma'il ibn 'Umar., *Tafsīr Ibn Kathir (abridged)*, (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia : Darussalam, 2000), Vol 6, 252.

¹⁰ Muḥammad Ameen Cave, *Comparative religion; An Analytical Study of Christianity and Islam*, (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, 2002), 73.

¹¹ Muḥammad Ameen Cave, *Comparative religion; An Analytical Study of Christianity and Islam*, 87.

¹² Bell, Richard, *Bell's Introduction to the Qur'ān*, 17.

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