

On understanding the Islamic Concept of History: A Conceptual study

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Abstract

Islamic history is the science which informs us about our heritage, which makes us conscious of links with past; which makes aware of origin; and which provides us with a sense of direction for the future. Historical writing was a primary Islamic discipline that underwent profound elaboration over centuries, and in its early appearance portrayed a universal vision of humanity from creation until the present. 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 in Surah Ghafir Chapter number 40, Ayat number 21:

"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". In this paper, an attempt has been made to describe the concept of history in Islam by highlighting the Quranic concept of history as well as the Muslim consciousness of history.

Key-Words: History, Islamic history, Qur'an and Muslims.

1. Concept of History in Islam: An Introduction

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 Thus, the word *Tarikh* is used more often in the meaning of a date⁵ than of history.⁶ According to Ibn Khaldun, "history refers to events that are peculiar to a particular age or race".⁷

According to the classic Arabic historiographers, "it is knowledge pertaining to a country, customs and manners of people, remains of the people of yore, as well as an account of the actions of those alive".⁸

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.⁹

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”.¹⁰

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.

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.¹¹ 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.¹² 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*.

A remarkable testimony to the historical sciences of Muslim is, besides the collection of *Hadith*, their efforts in preserving the text of the *Qur’an*. It really arose from two of the teachings of the Book itself. The first of these is the doctrine of the corruption of the previous scriptures through changes or interpretations. The other is the promise that *Qur’an* shall be preserved.¹³ Thus, the historiography in the Muslim world has religious beginnings. Though the verses of the Holy *Qur’an* exercised a great influence on the early historical writings, yet the text of the *Qur’an* was itself preserved by the Muslims, which demonstrates their historical sense. Besides other sources, the religion of Islam (*Al-Qur’an*) had an ever lasting impact on the development of Muslim historiography. It gave the Muslims their historical sense, made it imperative for the Muslim theologians to undertake historical research and to lay down canons for evaluating historical data to eliminate doubts and errors. It led them to explore the traditions of religions allied to their own which had preceded the mission of the Prophet (SAAS) in point of time. Indeed, historical studies started in Islam as a necessary adjunct of theological development.¹⁴ It was therefore, necessary for the Muslims to cultivate a religious attitude towards history which could not be discarded easily. It was because of this fact that the various verses of the Holy *Qur’an* were interpreted in historical perspective and were given a historical color. Even most of the verses of the text were explained by other verses of the *Qur’an* to depict their reliability. Abu Ja’far al-Tabari while presenting the verses of the Holy *Qur’an* in historical perspective has followed the same path. Besides providing a description of various races, dynasties, civilizations and people of yore, the Holy *Qur’an* refers to the history of Prophethood, describing some of the important prophets of Islam. It also refers to the life of Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) in its various phases. The Muslim historiographers and *Sirah* writers after giving a description of the conquest of Makkah, describe the events relating to the last pilgrimage of Prophet Muhammad (SAAS), the year of deputation that came to him, the Prophet’s (SAAS) illness and death. References to all such events, especially the *Sirah* of the Prophet (SAAS) are available in the verses of the *Holy*

Qur'an.¹⁵ The *Qur'an* also describes the social evils which were present in the Arabian society during the age of ignorance. All such events when pieced together form a major component of Muslim historiography. The works of the major Muslim historians including al-Tabari and Ibn Ishaq as such can be fully authenticated by the *Qur'an* in almost all aspects. The truth is that with the thoughtful study of the holy *Qur'an*, a particular world view takes place giving birth to a particular behavior. The study of the holy *Qur'an* brings us to the conclusion that the fountain head of several sciences and disciplines is the Book itself and history is one of them.¹⁶

Thus, Islamic history acts as a discipline of knowledge which informs us about our heritage; which makes us conscious of our links with past; which makes us aware of our origin; and which provides us with a sense of direction for the future.

1.2 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".¹⁷

"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".¹⁸

"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".¹⁹

"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 them respite for a stated term: when their term expires, verily Allah has in His sight all His servants".²⁰

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.²¹ 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 Muhammad (SAAS). This speaks of the serious concern of the Muslims to have things recorded in the annals of history. The rise of the Prophet Muhammad (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.²² So long as the immediate disciples of the Prophet Muhammad (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.²³ 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).²⁴ Thus there grew up the tradition of collecting the ahadith. These writings comprised the first historic literature in Arabia.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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,²⁷ yet the consciousness of the value and significance of Muslim contribution is rare 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."²⁸

1.3 Conclusion

So we can say that the concept of history in Islam is based on the understanding of the universal message of the Qur'an which is filled with stories of the ancient past commencing with Adam (AS) down to Muhammad (SAAS) in a successive manner. Based on the understanding of the Qur'an, the purpose of studying history 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 embarked on their numerous journeys around the world and produced the historical works of outstanding nature.

References and Notes:

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- ² Al-Sakhawi, Abd al-Rahman: *Al-Élan bi al-Taubah Liman Dhamma al-Tarikh*, Baghdad, 1963, p. 29.
- ³ Franz, op. cit., p. 11.
- ⁴ Ibn Manzur: *Lisan al-Arab*, Vol. III (Cairo, 1985), p. 481.
- ⁵ Ibn Athir: *Tarikh al-Kamil*, Vol. I (Cairo, 1988), p. 4.
- ⁶ Sharief, M. M.: *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, Vol. II (Germany, 1966), p.1196.
- ⁷ Ibn Khaldun, Abd al-Rahman bin Muhammad: *Muqaddimah Ibn Khaldun*, Vol. 1, Dar al-Nahdah, Egypt, 1980, p. 50.
- ⁸ “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.
- ⁹ Al-Kafiyaji: *al-Mukhtasar fi Ilm al-Tarikh*, Delhi, 1979, p.547.
- ¹⁰ Abd al-Rahman al-Sakhawi, op. cit., pp. 31-32.
- ¹¹ Ibid, p. 261.
- ¹² Faruqi, Nisar Ahmad, op. cit., p. 134.
- ¹³ Al-Sakhawi, Abd al-Rahman, op. cit., p. 262.
- ¹⁴ Ibid.
- ¹⁵ Mohammad Tahir, *Medieval Muslim Historiography* (Delhi, 1998), p. 1.
- ¹⁶ Ibid.
- ¹⁷ Al-Quran, Surah Yusuf, 12:111.
- ¹⁸ Al-Quran, Surah Al-An’am, 6:6.
- ¹⁹ Al-Quran, Surah Arabic-Rum, 30:9.
- ²⁰ Al-Quran, Surah Fatir, 35:44-45.
- ²¹ Najibullah: *Islamic literature*, New York, 1963, p.93.

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- ²⁶ Faruqi, Nisar Ahmad, op. cit., p. 9.
- ²⁷ Margoliouth, D. S.: *Lectures on Arabic Historians*, Delhi, 1977, p.10.
- ²⁸ Franz Rosenthal, op. cit., p. 30.

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