

*Becoming Familiar with the
Circumstances of the Revelation of the
Quran*

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Introduction: The holy Quran was revealed in the Arabian society. At the time of the mission of the Prophet (p.b.u.h) and the time of the revelation of the Quran, Arabia possessed certain characteristics which to understand the history of the revelation of the Quran, knowing them is necessary and undeniable. The characteristics of Arabian society have been extensively discussed in some sources, and the verses of the Quran more or less give important information about that society.

1- The Social and Political Order

The Arabian society before Islam was a tribal society and therefore, the dominant culture over that society was a tribal culture. Corresponding to this culture in every tribe, one person was in the forefront of the tribe, and the opinions coming from him were seen as the rule. In this situation the life and property of people were [only] safe and respected upon belonging to a tribe, and leaving that law and order resulted in the removal of peace and safety. Thus, what guaranteed the individual and social rights of people were the final agreements made among the individuals and tribes. Otherwise, the possibility of outbreak of war existed at every moment. This was the situation that the holy Quran termed as the “Jaheli [Ignorant] Society”¹.

2- The Religious Order

The religious order in Arabia, before the appearance of Islam, was an order based upon polytheism and idol worshipping. The names of some of those idols, such as “Laat”, “Uzay”, and “Manat” have been mentioned in the Quran². The verses of the Quran that emphasize on the Oneness of God and reject polytheism are numerous. From the viewpoint of some verses, any sin has the possibility of forgiveness other than the sin of polytheism³, about which the possibility of clemency does not exist. From a selection of the verses it is possible to deduce that the Arabs accepted the existence of “Allah” as the creator of the universe⁴. However, in the field of deity, they had been stricken with polytheism with regards to the uniqueness of God and unity in worship. Because of this the stance of the monotheistic verses of the Quran mostly stands at rejecting polytheism in the fields of God’s sovereignty and bountifulness⁵. Moreover, many of the

¹ Surah Al-Fath, Verse 26

² Surah an-Najm, Verses 19 and 20

³ Surah an-Nissa, Verses 48 and 116

⁴ Surah Loqman, Verse 25

⁵ Surah Hamd, Verse 2, Surah Fatir, Verse 3

verses emphasize upon “Monotheism in Action” or “Monotheism in Worship” of the “Nurturer of the Universe”⁶.

In addition to the dominant religious which was based upon polytheism and idol worship there, a few selected individuals and families existed that had complete monotheistic beliefs and were known as the “Honafaa”. Also it must be added that in those days, some Jewish tribes lived in Yemen and Medina and a group of Christians existed in the areas of Syria and Yemen, and the Arabs [of the Era of Ignorance] more or less were in contact with them.

3- The Moral Order

The Arabian society during the mission of the Prophet (*p.b.u.h*) was corrupted and degenerate. The Quran describes that society with the term “Jaheliya”⁷ [ignorant]. In that society, woman, as half of humanity, did not have any respect to the extent that they would have been buried alive upon birth or would be kept with contempt⁸, and when they grew up kept like a commodity that would be inherited or would be forced to “baghae” [prostitution]. In that society theft, drinking alcohol, gambling, spilling of blood, lying, and breaking oaths were completely normal. The result of that was the disappearance of individual and societal calmness and security. The verses of the Quran about the corruptions during the era of the Prophet’s mission are quite clear and apparent. Specifically the verses 31 to 38 of Bani Israel paint a clear picture of the social and moral order of the Bedouin Arabs during the era of the revelation of the Quran.

4- The Economic Order

The economic order of the “era of ignorance” was generally based upon trade and farming. The inhabitants of Mecca, especially the Quraish, held the occupation of merchants. In contrast, the main occupation of the

⁶ Surah Al-Anam, Verses 161 and 162

⁷ Surah Fath, Verse 26, Surah Al-Ahzab, Verse 31

⁸ Surah An-Noah, Verse 58, Surah Az-Zukhruf, Verse 17

inhabitants of Medina and the cities around it, as well as Taaef and Yemen and the Arabs dwelling regions in Syria and Iraq, were farmers. The Holy Quran informs about the trading order among the Quraish as such:

“in dealing with the Quraish, for their preparations to travel in winter and summer; let them worship the lord of this house, who feeds them against famine and secure them from fear” (The holy Quran; 106:1-4)

In these verses, the meaning of the Ilaf of Quraish is the sort of agreement or contract the elders of Quraish had made with the economic heads of different areas according to which the inhabitants of Mecca would carry their goods, in peace, to those areas and sell them. This issue began in the time of Abd Manaf, and the owners of the agreement were Hashem and his brothers, meaning i. e. Abd Shams, Mottaleb and Nofel. Incidentally, the meaning of Rihlata as-Shitaa’a wa as-Seyf was the winter journey that the Quraish made to Yemen and the summer journey they made to Syria⁹. In addition to the main occupations that were mentioned, in the era of ignorance additional occupations also existed that were the source of income for the Arabs. There were also undesirable things such as the system of usury¹⁰, forcing maids to fornicate for the purpose of making income¹¹, the spreading of fornication and prostitution among woman to the point of ordinariness, gaining wealth through gambling, and brewing wine and alcoholic drinks¹², hijacking and robbery through looting and attacking travelers and naive individuals. This was all while they considered thievery in and of itself to be a vice. Witchcraft and fortune telling were also quite common throughout that society.

In short, economic order in the Arabian Peninsula, during the era of ignorance, was a very primitive and shown way of living with widespread poverty and catastrophe. In most years famine and drought cast a shadow over society and the people lived with the bare essentials of life. So that in the words of Fatemeh Zahra (peace be upon her) to the Muhajerin and

⁹ Al Mizan, Volume 20, Page 366

¹⁰ Surah Al-Baqara, Verse 275, Surah Ale Imran, Verse 130

¹¹ Surah Noor, Verse 33

¹² Surah Al-Baqara, Verse 218, Surah Al-Maadedah, Verse 90

Ansar in comes, “Wa kontom. . . tashraboona at-taraagh wa taghtaatoon alghad”. In this statement the meaning of taraagh is the public waters that animals also drink from or in some cases urinate in, and the meaning of ghad is the untanned skins of the animals.

5- The Scientific and Cultural Order

From the above pivots it is possible to deduce the scientific and cultural order in Arabia at that time. However, for more information, it will be fair to say that before the mission of the Prophet of Islam (peace be upon him and his progeny), ignorance and illiteracy was dominant upon the Arabian Peninsula and, most of the people of that time did not have familiarity with reading and writing. The Quran refers to that society with the term Omiyoon and says:

“he is One who has dispatched a messenger from the unlettered people among themselves, to recite his verses to them and purify them and teach them the book and wisdom, even though previously they were in obvious error” (*the holy Quran ; 62:2*)

As far as the history of Arabia shows, there was not a trace of culture and civilization in that region. The only thing that historical evidence and the Quran reveal is the existence of poetry and poets in the ignorant time. Even those are from the natural inclinations and minds. However it must be said that the contents of the poetry of the era of ignorance was mostly about epics, praising the merits of those present or wine. From this aspect the Quran in the surah of Shoara describes the poets and interprets them, with the exception of believing poets, as the deviators¹³. Another point about the extent of the culture of the Arabs, is the small presence of Jewish and Christian tribes among the Arabs. They had holy Books, and were familiar with Monotheist Discourse. The Christians were mostly centered in the areas of Syria and Yemen and had limited contact with the Arabs, however the existence of a few Jewish tribes around Medina is quite clear in the history of Islam. Due to the contacts between the

¹³ Surah As-Shoara'a, Verses 224-227

Christians and the polytheists of Mecca, sometimes they would ask questions and the polytheists asked the same questions from the Muslims. That was in the situation that the Jews, before the mission of the Prophet of God (*p.b.u.h*) were waiting for the appearance of his esteemed figure. But after the appointment of the holy Prophet (*p.b.u.h*) instead of accepting his message, they chose the path of disbelief, and along with the polytheists, were the source of many plots which resulted in the confrontation of the Muslims with them in the Battles of Bani Nazir, Bani Ghorayza, ...and resulted in the end of their influence in the Arabian Peninsula.

Summary and Conclusion

This is a short recognition of the Arabian community at the time of the revelation of the Quran: A short statement about the state of the society before the mission of the Prophet of Islam (*p.b.u.h*). Naturally for more information one may refer to historical sources, or contemplate upon the collection of the verses of the Quran that refer to the history of the era of ignorance. Even though Dr. Javad Ali in the book “*Almofassal fi tarikh al Arab Ghabl al Islam*” has portrayed a positive picture of that era, but with referring to these short statements, one can become familiar with that time and analyze the revelation of the Quran, initially in Mecca, and then in Medina. It is in this way that important truths can be obtained regarding the history of the Quran. For the proofs of the future debates lie, in the first place, in the Quran and secondly, in the traditions surrounding it.