

Kongress 2014

Horizonte der Islamischen Theologie

Abstract – Sektion 1, Panel 5

Referent *Suat Koca*
Thema *RETHINKING THE ROLE OF THE REPORTS IN UNDERSTANDING THE ĀYAHS WITH
SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SŪRAT AL-QALAM 68/4*

In this paper, I would like to discuss critically that the Prophet's certain statements or behaviors are associated with the interpretation of some verses/*āyahs* by some other than the Prophet's himself. In other words, a companion of the Prophet/*saḥābah* or a successor/*tābi'p* or a transmitter/*rāwī* or an exegete/*mufassir* relates the verses/*āyahs* with the sayings or behaviors of the Prophet in transmitting a statement or behavior attributed to him. Yet here the Prophet's statements are not the interpreter of the text. In this kind of interpretation (*tafsīr*), the determinative elucidation could be the critical opinion (*dirāya*) of either a companion of the Prophet/*saḥābah* or a successor/*tābi'p* or a transmitter/*rāwī* or an exegete/*mufassir*. I would like to underline that this kind of associations (between the text and the sayings of Prophet) could be deceptive and could create a difficulty in understanding the *āyahs* in reference to their historical contexts.

I would like to discuss this issue with special reference to three reports/traditions regarding to sūrat al-Qalam 68/4. Following is one of the reports I will deal with in this paper:

Anas b. Mālik (d.93/711) said to Thābit al-Bunānī (d.127/744): "I served the Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, for eleven years. He never said to me 'why don't you do like that?' and 'why did you do like that?'" Upon this Thābit said to Anas that 'O Abū Ḥamza! He was as Allah says in *wa-innaka la-'alā khuluqin 'aẓīmin* (Surely you are upon a great *khuluq*) (al-Qalam 68/4).¹

¹ Al-Kharābī, Makārim al-akhlāq wa ma,ālīhā wa maḥmūdu ṭarāṭīqihā, ed. Ayman ,Abduljābir al-Buḥayrī (Qairo: Dār al-ʿĀfāq al-,arabī, 1999), p.43 (no.72).

In this report Thābit al-Bunānī, who is a successor/*tābi‘p*, makes a connection between the verse/*āyah* and a behavior of the Prophet. Thābit interprets the verse in an ethical context. However, the question is that if this report contributes to our understanding this verse.

I have to mention that this verse (al-Qalam 68/4) is one of the main references in the context of the Prophet Muhammad and moral. But I argue that the word *khuluq* in this verse has usually been misunderstood and mistranslated in most *tafsīr* works and almost all religious literature. Contrary to the common and very popular opinion, I contend that the verse in question does not talk about the great morals and good character of the Prophet Muhammad but rather it claims that he is in a great religious tradition of a long list of prophets before him. Central to this interpretation is what the word *khuluq* really means and how it was understood by early Muslims.

Under the influence of the word’s dominant meaning as “natural disposition, character, nature and morality” in later Islamic tradition, almost all the translators of the Qur’an rendered the word *khuluq* with ‘morality’ or other words to that effect, without taking lexical and contextual evidence and early *tafsīr* reports into account. A study of classical Arabic dictionaries shows that the word *khuluq* has other meanings, most importantly ‘custom/habit/tradition’ and ‘religion.’ Majority of early exegetes seem to have chosen this meaning for al-Qalam 68/4, which appears to be more appropriate for the context. In addition, the term *khuluq* is attested in the Qur’an in another place, namely in Sūrat al-Shu‘arā’ 26/137. The word *khuluq* in this verse has clearly nothing to do with morality; rather, as most *tafsīr* scholars agree, it means ‘(religious) custom/tradition’. Al-Shu‘arā’ 26/137 thus proves a direct and clear Qur’anic evidence to determine the meaning of the word *khuluq* in Sūrat al-Qalam.

When early *tafsīr* reports are taken into consideration along with the historical, linguistic and Qur’anic context, I propose that the translation of al-Qalam 68/4 should be: “*Surely, you are upon a great religious tradition.*” In this way, the verse denotes that the Prophet Muhammad walks in a religious and traditional path that the other prophets have walked before. Accepting this meaning will also provide us with a golden opportunity to get rid of our old habit of finding solutions to the complex ethical problems with reference only to one Qur’anic verse in a naive way.